i need someone like you to lighten the load

by slowklancing (notanannoyingfangirl), sunnyjolars

Summary

Another scrap of parchment shot out of the cup, a fourth scrap of parchment, which made no sense at all, and the Headmaster grabbed it from the air, unrolling it and reading it quietly.

The entirety of the Great Hall remained silent. It was as quiet as a tomb.

“Lance Álvarez?” The Headmaster whispered, and then again, louder. “Lance Álvarez.”

Wait, what?

// Lance and Keith have always been battling it out: on the Quidditch field, in the duelling club, for the best marks in Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Keith always manages to come out in the lead.

Now, the Triwizard Tournament has been announced and Lance knows that Keith is going to beat him for the only open spot, even if he pretends that he thinks otherwise. But it doesn’t quite go the way that Lance expects, and everything changes from there.
Notes

Surprise!!! Cait and I have been hinting around at the upcoming release of our Harry Potter AU for awhile, and what better way is there to celebrate Klance Month and Harry Potter Week than by announcing how thrilled I am to finally share the first chapter with everyone. This fic has been - and still is - an incredible journey. It’s officially twice the length of the other longest thing I’ve written, and at 100k we’re still only about halfway through! Thank you so much to everyone that has already supported this fic by liking and retweeting our sneak peaks on twitter, your feedback means everything to us <3.

I want to take a moment here to thank my absolutely amazing Beta Reader/Co-Author (she says that’s giving her too much credit, but whatever)/Partner-in-Crime. Cait (also known as @sunnyjolras on twitter), this fic would literally not exist without you. I’m so glad that when we were talking you asked me what my next fic idea was because I can’t even imagine trying to do this without you. You took my tiny “what if we do the scene with Harry and Cedric from Goblet of Fire but with Klance” and helped me transform it into wonderful monster that it’s become. Thank you for always encouraging me to dig deeper into the backstory and the world building, for coming up with absolutely amazing ideas for scenes for us to add, thank you for remembering plot points for the fic when I manage to offer them even when I’m the one who wrote them in the first place, for being the best-damn-riddle-writer a girl could ask for, and for helping me with dialogue when I get stuck. And I know that’s only a fraction of the things that you’ve done for me. So just... thank you, so much. I couldn’t do this without you.

Okay, mushy-ness aside! The title for this fic is lyrics taken from the song Right Hand Man from Hamilton: An American Musical. Because this fic is influenced by both Voltron Legendary Defender and Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, any recognizable dialogue/scenes/etc. belong to their respective creators. As always, I’m not claiming to own the rights to any of the characters, etc. (even if I would take better care of them...!)

I hope y’all enjoy this fic, I’ve had a blast working on it, and continue to do so. If you like it, please leave feedback in the form of comments or kudos... they are the food that sustain writers! Now, I won’t keep you any longer, so enjoy the fic (and remember - it updates every Friday!).

- slowklancing

Hi y’all! Cait here and I just want to say thank you guys for reading! We’ve worked so hard on this fic and we’re so excited to finally post it! I just want to gush a little about Kate for a second, because she’s such a beautiful writer who is giving me far too much credit, and I just want everyone to know how great she is!! She’s constantly writing even when she has classes, and even though I’m the pushiest little shit she puts up with my ideas and manages to actually write them down in such an amazing way! So thank you Kate/Ken, I love you so much and I’m so happy and proud to be your co-creator on this monstrosity. Finally, please leave kudos and comments we thrive on it and we need some good food dammit, and we’ll see you next Friday for Chapter 2 :D

- sunnyjolras <3
See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter One

A loud *crack* echoed over the quidditch pitch, louder than the cheers across the large sports arena similar to a muggle football field, as Lance slammed his bat into the Bludger, watching it with a satisfied smirk as it raced through the air in the direction of Gryffindor chaser Keith Kogane. He was sure that the hit would land this time, after all, Keith was currently distracted as he tried to keep the Quaffle out of the hands of one of the Ravenclaw chasers. So what if he had never managed to get a hit on Keith? This was Lance’s year. He was *killing it* on the quidditch pitch, and even though it was only a few weeks into the school year, Ravenclaw was already the current favorite to win the quidditch cup.

And… Keith ducked down on his broom just in time to avoid the Bludger that Lance had aimed at his side.

Of course he did.

Lance’s smirk quickly changed to a scowl as he watched the Bludger soar off until one of the Gryffindor beaters slammed their bat into it and the ball went ricocheting back towards Lance.

“And that’s another 10 points to Gryffindor!” The familiar voice of Matt Holt came over the pitch, “Although I must say that was a valiant effort on Lance Álvarez’s part to take down Keith Kogane—”

“Alright, that’s enough, Matt,” one of the teachers said. Lance was pretty sure it was Shiro, but he didn’t dare turn around to check, cutting off Matt’s rambling.

“Right, Professor, so that brings the score to Gryffindor: 50 and Ravenclaw: 30. It’s still anyone’s game. Especially Ravenclaw’s, after all they proved in their last game against Slytherin…”

“Matt!”

“Right! Sorry! Oh, and now Romelle Pollux has the Quaffle for Ravenclaw!”

Lance let his gaze travel across the field quickly, lining up his next shot. There. One of the Gryffindor chasers was closing in on Romelle, no doubt in an effort to attempt a steal.

Lance held his breath as the Bludger he had aimed towards Keith earlier continued in his direction, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. As soon as it was within reach of his bat, he slammed into it, sending the metal ball careening into the side of the Gryffindor chaser and allowing Romelle the precious time she needed to approach the Gryffindor goal.

On the other side of the field, Lance could see Keith racing towards Romelle on his Firebolt. And sure, Lance could admit that Keith could *fly*, but he was far enough back that he’d never catch up to Romelle in time.

Lance rolled his eyes before nudging his own Cleansweep Seven across the pitch, drawing up next to Keith.

“Almost had ya that time, Mullet!” Lance shouted above the wind.

“You wish!” Keith shouted back, without turning to face Lance. “We both know you can’t get a hit on me, Álvarez.”
Lance let his broom trail backwards, glaring at Keith’s stupid black mullet and stupid red quidditch robes.

“10 points to Ravenclaw on that amazing shot from Romelle Pollux!” Matt cheered, his voice magically amplified to carry across the field.

Even with the distance Lance had just put between them, he could still see the way that Keith’s shoulders tightened at the mention of Ravenclaw’s goal. All they would need was one more shot to tie up the match.

A Bludger whizzed past Lance’s face, and he mentally cursed himself for getting distracted from the game.

He leaned forward on his broom, chasing after the Bludger so he could cut it off before it slammed into Romelle. Luckily, his Cleansweep was fast enough to get him in front of the magical metal ball and Lance swooped up from below it to slam his bat against it. The ball went flying off towards the opposite side of the pitch, and Lance heard Romelle let out an audible sigh of relief from behind him.

Just like that, Lance found himself zipping across the pitch as he tried to defend his team from the Bludgers and send (almost all of them) flying back at Keith.

The score was tied, 70-70 when Lance heard an announcement that made him freeze his broom in midair.

“Gryffindor seeker Thace Marmora has just captured the snitch! I’m afraid that’s the match everyone. Although, really, no one can deny that Ravenclaw put up quite the fight.”

“Matt!”

“Right, anyways, so congratulations to Gryffindor, I guess.”

“No!” Lance groaned, flying over to Romelle. “We totally had them!”

“No thanks to you,” Romelle snorted, “I swear to god, Lance, every time we play Gryffindor all you do is try to rile up Keith.”

“That is not all I do!” Lance said, taking both arms off his broomstick to cross them defensively, “I totally saved you from that one Bludger.”

“Yes, thank you, Lance, for doing your job,” Romelle rolled her eyes. “Come on, let’s go get cleaned up. Matt’s right. It was a good match.”

“Fine,” Lance agreed, uncrossing his arms to grip his broomstick between one of his gloved hands, still holding his bat with the other.

He was halfway to the ground before the Ravenclaw seeker, Pidge Holt, caught up to him.

“Curse my stupid short arms,” they groaned. “I was this close to winning the match for us.”

“Don’t worry about it, Pidge,” Lance said, moving his broom in close enough that he could let go of his broomstick and reach over to ruffle their hair.

“Stop that!” Pidge snapped, although they sounded more teasing than annoyed as they batted
Lance’s hand away from their hair.

The pair continued down towards the locker rooms in silence, before Lance found himself compelled to break it. “You know, Pidge, you better tell that brother of yours to watch his comments when he’s announcing. I thought Shiro was gonna lose his shit.”

Pidge shrugged, “It’s not really Matt’s fault that he favors Ravenclaw, since it is his house. Professor Shirogane knows that.”

“Still,” Lance warned as his feet finally touched the ground and he climbed off his broom, “Matt’s the best quidditch announcer we’ve had. It would be, like, a total bummer if Shiro made him quit.”

Pidge opened their mouth to respond, but before they could, a black and yellow clad figure came barreling towards them.

“Dudes,” Hunk panted, as he skidded to a stop at the edge of the quidditch pitch, “that was a great game! Sucks that you lost, though,” he said as he reached out to pull both of them into a bone-cracking consolation hug.

“Ah… Hunk… buddy…” Lance gasped, “can’t… breathe…”

“Oh, sorry,” Hunk said, as he hasily set Lance and Pidge back down (Lance hadn’t even noticed that his own feet had risen off the ground, but it was no surprise that Pidge had been dangling in the air).

“So,” Lance said, as he led the way towards the locker rooms, “we totally would have kicked Gryffindor’s asses if Marmora hadn’t caught the snitch, right, buddy?”

Hunk frowned, and glanced away from his friends, “I mean… there’s no way to know for sure…” he babbled, and Lance skidded to a stop.

“You expected us to lose!” He cried, pointing a finger at Hunk dramatically. That traitor. He had probably been cheering Gryffindor on as well.

“Well, I mean, Lance, buddy, no one can get a hit on Keith. He’s the best chaser Hogwarts has seen in years,” Hunk said, as he wrapped an arm around Lance. “But it’s okay because it’s his final year. Maybe Ravenclaw can win next year.”

“Oh my god,” Lance whispered. “You don’t think that we can do it.”

“Yeah, not cool, Hunk,” Pidge added, crossing their arms across their chest. “Everyone knows that if Lance could just stop staring at Keith long enough to actually play the game that we might have a chance.”

“I do not stare at Keith!” Lance sputtered, feeling his face growing warm. “He’s my rival, I’m trying to beat him.”

“Sure, man,” Hunk said, “whatever you say.”

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“So apparently Matt said that there was going to be some kind of announcement at dinner tonight,” Pidge said as they caught up to Lance in the hallway outside of Transfiguration class.
“What kind of announcement? Oh, man, I hope we didn’t lose another Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. I actually like Shiro,” Lance sighed, as he remembered the plethora of teachers that had come and gone in his short time at the school. Shiro was the only one who had come back for a second year in a row.

“I don’t know, Matt only found out because they told all the prefects to make sure everyone goes to dinner tonight. Dad wouldn’t even tell Matt what it was about.”

“Weird,” Lance said, as he adjusted his grip on his bag. Sam Holt, Matt and Pidge’s father, was the Headmaster of Hogwarts, but apparently not even that was enough to earn the pair preferential treatment. Not that they needed it.

Still, even after five full years at Hogwarts, the school never ceased to surprise him. There was always some sort of dangerous creature or forbidden room or staircases that tried to kill you. And, while Hogwarts was easily one of Lance’s favorite places on earth, the ache in his chest from missing home and Varadero beach and his mother’s garlic knots never really went away.

“So have you finished your potions homework yet?” Pidge asked, and just like that the conversation was swept away from the latest in a long line of Hogwarts oddities and back towards safer topics.

“Of course not,” Lance replied. “We both know that I didn’t get any work done after Saturday’s quidditch match. And yesterday I had to finish my report for Care of Magical Creatures.”

“Can you believe that Professor Coran is actually going to bring in a hippogriff next week for us to study?” Pidge asked.

“Maybe he’ll let us fly on it,” Lance sighed. “Could you imagine how cool that would be?”

Pidge shuddered overdramatically. “No thanks. I’ll stick to the broom that I have full control over rather than a wild magical beast.”

“Do you want to go to the library until dinner?” Lance offered, “You can help me work on my potions assignment.”

“You mean I can write your potions assignment for you,” Pidge grumbled. “But fine. But only if you let me practice my divination tea-reading on you. It’s a waste of a class, really, but…”

Lance tried to follow along with what Pidge was talking about, but he didn’t really care about whether or not tea leaves were an effective way to predict the future. Instead, all Lance could think about was what kind of announcement could possibly be so important that Headmaster Holt had forewarned the prefects about it.

Would it be like the time pixies had gotten loose all over the castle and students had to avoid the fourth floor or risk having their hair pulled or tied in knots? Or maybe it would be like that time Peeves had gone missing (he turned up eventually).

Or maybe it really would be that they were losing yet another Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. It would hardly be surprising. It really had seemed to good to be true when Lance had strolled into Defense Against the Dark Arts two weeks ago for the first time this school year and Shiro had been writing information about stunning spells on the board.

Lance followed Pidge as they led him into the library, still babbling on about something, which earned them a sharp glare from the librarian. He had a feeling that he wouldn’t be getting a lot of homework done until after he found out what this mysterious announcement was.
“Silence!” Headmaster Holt called, raising his wand to his throat to magically amplify his voice.

Lance froze, his mouth hanging open. He was turned around in his seat to talk to Hunk at the Hufflepuff table, but he redirected his attention up to the front of the Great Hall.

“By now, I am sure that many of you will have heard that I have an announcement to make tonight,” the headmaster said, and Lance instantly straightened in his seat.

Even after mulling the news over for the better part of the afternoon, Lance still had been unable to decide what the news was going to be. A part of Lance couldn’t help but wonder if all this build-up was for nothing. Maybe the Headmaster was just super excited about getting new torches in the dungeon. Or something super lame like that.

“We have recently received word that Hogwarts is going to have the honor of hosting a time-honored tradition in the wizarding world. This event has not taken place in over a century, but after rewriting some of the rules regarding the safety of its participants, the ministry has voted to reinstate the Triwizard Tournament!”

Beside him, Pidge sucked in a gasp of air. Similar gasps and low murmurs began to spread around the Great Hall, until the room was a roar of voices.

“What’s the Triwizard Tournament?” Lance whispered.

“It’s… a contest between the different wizarding schools,” Pidge whispered back. “It’s supposed to be really dangerous.”

“For those of whom are not aware of the details of the Triwizard Tournament, allow me to explain,” Headmaster Holt continued. “The Triwizard Tournament is a contest of wit, skill, and bravery between three of Europe’s schools of wizardry; Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Beauxbatons Academy of Magic, and Durmstrang Institute. One champion will be chosen from each of the schools to compete in three magical tasks. While the Tournament was originally canceled due to the high death tolls among the contestants, our friends in the ministry and the Departments of International Magical Co-Operation and Magical Games and Sports have worked hard over the summer to guarantee that no student should find themselves in mortal danger.”

“Mortal danger? High death tolls? This is what wizards do for fun!!” Lance hissed to Pidge.

“The selection for Hogwarts’ champion will occur on Halloween, just over a month from now. It will be up to the Goblet of Fire to determine which student will be the most worthy to compete for the Triwizard Cup, the glory of their school, and a thousand galleon personal prize money.”

“That’s a lot of money,” a third voice added, and Lance glanced over to see Hunk leaning across the aisle between the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables.

“I know all of you are probably very eager to compete for the glory of your house and your school, I must inform you that as part of the safety measurements added by the ministry, there has been an age restriction placed on those who may enter the Tournament. Only our most mature students, that is to say the sixth and seventh year students currently completing their N.E.W.T.s, will be able to compete.”
“Merlin!” Pidge cried. “That’s not fair!”

Similar cries of outrage echoed around the Great Hall.

“While I know that this is disappointing to many of you,” Headmaster Holt continued, raising his voice to be heard above the noise, “the safety of our students is the most important factor we must consider. The tasks will still be incredibly difficult, and very likely dangerous. Please, do not try to enter the contest if you are a student below Sixth or Seventh year, as the Goblet of Fire will be impossible to fool.”

“Finally, the delegations from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be housed here at Hogwarts for the better part of the year. I expect all of you to extend every courtesy to our foreign guests while they are staying with us. I also encourage you to give your wholehearted support to the Hogwarts champion when they are selected. Thank you, students, for your attention. Now, if you would please return to your meal.” As he finished speaking, Headmaster Holt stepped away from the podium he had been standing at. Professor Shirogane quickly stepped up to his side and began whispering something to him. Probably something about the Tournament, Lance concluded as he turned his attention back towards his friends.

“This blows,” Pidge said, letting out a huff of air. “I’m only a fourth year. I’ll never get to compete. Dad probably designed it this way on purpose.”

“Um, dude,” Hunk said, “didn’t you hear him? The ministry is involved. I doubt your dad had much say in the matter.”

“Hunk is right,” Lance agreed, “and anyways, would you really want to participate in life-threatening tasks?”

Hunk shuddered, before giving up all pretense of sitting at the Hufflepuff table and quickly slipping on to the Ravenclaw bench beside his friends. “I know I wouldn’t.”

“You aren’t going to enter?” Lance asked Hunk, a little surprised. Sure, he knew that his friend wasn’t the bravest of the bunch, but who wouldn’t want the glory of being the Triwizard Champion?

“You are?” Hunk asked, his eyes widening.

“Of course I am,” Lance scoffed. “I’m obviously the bravest, toughest, handsomest guy at Hogwarts.”

“Handsomest is so not a word,” Pidge muttered.

“You guys are just jealous,” Lance sniffed.

Pidge rolled their eyes and Lance could practically hear the mental jealous of what? that seemed to be written on their features. And, okay, Lance knew that he wasn’t actually the bravest, toughest, handsomest guy at Hogwarts as much as he might like to pretend otherwise, but would it really kill his friends to just agree with him for once?

“So what do you think the other schools are going to be like?” Pidge asked, swiftly changing the subject.

“I’ve heard some pretty scary stories about Durmstrang,” Hunk admitted quietly, “those guys are supposed to be really intense.”
“Well I’ve heard that everyone who attends Beauxbatons is stunningly beautiful,” Matt added, making Lance jump. He hadn’t even realized that the older boy was listening to their conversation.

“Don’t start.” Pidge warned him.

“Just stating the facts,” Matt said, but the twinkle in his eye was anything but innocent. “The students are going to be staying with us here at Hogwarts almost all year, after all. Attending classes with us, sharing meals with us. There’s no shame in wanting to befriend some of them.”

“Your Dad pretty much encouraged it,” Lance added, sharing a conspiratory grin with Matt. “So who’s to say the fair ladies and gents of Beauxbatons wouldn’t be open to a little romance?”

“You two are the worst,” Pidge groaned, slamming her head down onto the table. “How did I end up with two of you?”

Lance reached across the table to give Matt a high-five.

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“Did you hear that Keith Kogane is going to enter the Triwizard Tournament?” One of the Slytherin girls sitting in front of Lance and Romelle during potions class whispered.

Trying to be subtle, Lance tilted his head forward, hoping to catch the rest of what they were saying. He was supposed to be working on a Pepperup Potion with Romelle, but, well, Romelle tended to do most of the work anyway since she didn’t trust anyone else to do it, so Lance was fairly certain that she wouldn’t mind him abandoning his work in favor of eavesdropping.

“The Goblet Of Fire will never pick him,” the second girl, a blonde that Lance recognised as Nyma, replied. “Everyone knows that his mother worked with… was a member of the Galra.”

Lance bit his lip. He had heard the rumors, of course. Everyone at Hogwarts had. It seemed to be common knowledge amongst the students how Krolia had turned against her own family when she brought information on the Dark Lord Zarkon to the Ministry of Magic. She had been instrumental in causing the collapse of Zarkon’s supporters. But that didn’t seem to matter to anyone. All that they cared about was that she had been a known member of the Galra, and now her son was forced to carry that burden as well. And maybe Lance didn’t exactly like the guy, but even he could admit that it wasn’t fair.

“But the Goblet is supposed to be an impartial judge,” the first girl whispered back. “And everyone knows that Keith has the top marks in Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

Lance wrinkled his nose. That was another thing the whole fucking school knew about Keith Kogane. It was hardly a secret that Professor Shirogane had approached Keith and offered to give him advanced private lessons. At first, it had made Lance’s blood boil. Why did Keith get such preferential treatment over the other students? What about him was so special? Sure, Keith was a year older than him and had the best marks in Defense Against the Dark Arts in his year, but so did Lance! That was, like, one of two classes that Lance studied his ass off for. And why? So Keith could get offered private lessons?

So sure, it had made Lance furious at first. And kind of jealous because he wanted Shiro’s individual attention. But then Lance had joined the duelling club, the duelling club that Keith dominated the
same way he dominated the quidditch pitch. And Keith had kicked his ass maybe more than a few
times. Which was… embarrassing, at first, except no one else could beat Keith either. And, maybe,
just maybe, Lance had realized that Keith had some kind of freakish natural talent that Shiro was
trying to harness.

So maybe he wasn’t so upset about Keith’s top marks in Defense Against the Dark Arts anymore.

“It doesn’t matter,” Nyma continued. “Headmaster Holt will never allow it. The champion will be
someone from a respectable family. Hell, it will probably be his own kid.”

“Katie isn’t old enough to enter. You really think Matt will be the Hogwarts champion?”

Lance frowned, his eyebrows creasing as the Slytherin girl used Pidge’s dead name. Not cool, man.

Nyma shrugged. “Rolo is going to enter, so of course, I hope he gets it. Slytherin deserves to have
the champion be from our house. Maybe then we would finally get the respect we deserve.”

“I heard that Lance Álvarez is going to enter, too,” the other girl said, shooting a glance back behind
her towards Lance.

Lance quickly busied himself with chopping the mandrake root needed for the potion, trying not to
look like he was listening to the girls’ conversation even though that was impossible because it was
about him.

“Really?” Nyma asked, sounding skeptical as she followed the other girl’s gaze.

Lance mentally begged himself not to blush.

“I don’t know why he’s going to bother,” the first girl continued. “Everyone knows
that muggleborns are weaker than purebloods.”

Lance felt himself bristle. He had been hearing similar comments from classmates ever since he
started at school. There wasn’t any actual differences between muggleborns and purebloods or half-
bloods. But that didn’t seem to matter to the members of purebloods families. If you were tainted by
muggle blood, then you would never be as good as them. It was a belief that Zarkon had exploited to
gain pure-blooded followers.

“Don’t listen to them,” Romelle said softly beside him.

Lance snapped his head up to look at her. “I wasn’t,” he said with a nervous chuckle.

Romelle gave him a look that seemed to imply that she knew he was full of shit.

“Thank you,” Lance said a minute later, quieter.

Romelle shook her head softly, but it looked like maybe she was smiling.

“Well I hope Rolo gets chosen,” the first girl sniffed.

“Who do you think will get chosen?” Romelle asked in a low voice, without looking over at Lance.

“Honestly?” Lance asked. “I’m not sure.”

Well that was a flat out lie, but he wasn’t about to admit that he was sure his rival would be the one
chosen.
“Well, I hope you get chosen. It would be nice for Ravenclaw to earn some respect from the other houses. But my money is on Thace Marmora. He’s Gryffindor, the most likely house to get chosen. He doesn’t have the controversial parentage like Kogane.”

“Interesting choice,” Lance agreed, perching his chin on his hand.

“There’s a betting pool going on already,” Romelle said, as she stirred their potion while Lance added the mandrake root.

“Of course there is,” Lance chuckled. “What’s the pot up to?”

“Almost a hundred galleons. Do you want in?”

“Nah. I know someone who might though,” Lance answered, sure that Pidge would have her own feelings as the most-likely to be chosen as Hogwarts’ champion.

“Sorry, class, am I interrupting your conversations?” Professor Iverson snapped from the front of the room.

Lance quickly snapped his mouth shut and turned back to add more mandrake root to the potion. Silently. The last thing he needed to do was piss off Professor Iverson. That guy was scary.

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“Hey, Kogane,” someone shouted as Lance watched Keith stroll into the mostly empty Great Hall. It was early Saturday morning, so the only people in the Great Hall were members of the Ravenclaw quidditch team before their practice and the few students who cared enough to wake up early to study.

Lance didn’t recognize the kid shouting at Keith, and apparently the mullet man didn’t either, since he didn’t even look up as he headed in the direction of the Gryffindor table.

“ Heard you want to put your name in the Goblet of Fire,” the voice continued, and Lance glanced behind him to see who was speaking.

He didn’t recognize the Hufflepuff who had spoken, they looked like they were maybe a few years younger.

“So what?” Keith snapped. “Practically all the students who can participate are planning on putting their names in.”

Lance paused with a spoonful of cereal halfway to his mouth, watching as Keith seemed to forcibly push his shoulders back before continuing on towards the Gryffindor table.

“Well most of the students aren’t the sons of known Galra,” the Hufflepuff boy shouted, drawing the attention of everyone who wasn’t already watching the exchange.

Keith froze before abruptly pivoting on his heel and stomping over to the Hufflepuff table.

“You want to say that to my face?” Keith snapped.

The Hufflepuff kid, probably a fourth or fifth year, stood and pushed away from the table.
“Filthy Galra scum shouldn’t be allowed to represent Hogwarts,” the boy said, clenching his jaw.

Keith shoved his hand into his robe and oh shit! He was reaching for his wand.

Lance jumped up from the table, his spoon clattering onto the floor as he quickly closed the distance between Keith and himself. Before Keith could draw his hand back out from his robes to reveal his wand, Lance was there, curling his fingers around Keith’s arm.

Duelling outside of the Duelling Club was strictly forbidden. Everyone knew that.

“Keith, buddy, you okay?” Lance asked, the question enough to make Keith tear his gaze away from the Hufflepuff to meet Lance’ eyes.

“Fine,” Keith managed to say through gritted teeth, even though Lance could feel the tension still hanging in the air.

“Some people just don’t know when to keep their mouths shut,” Lance muttered, as he tried to tug Keith away from the Hufflepuff table.

“That’s right!” The Hufflepuff kid cried. “Let the baby Galra and the dirty mudblood run away. That’s what you do best, isn’t it?”

Lance felt his hands clench around Keith’s arm.

Okay. That was enough.

“Why don’t you just shut the hell up?” Lance snapped, glaring at the Hufflepuff kid. “Keith can’t help who his parents are, and neither can I. But it doesn’t matter. Who fucking cares? Everyone knows that Zarkon’s organization couldn’t have been dismantled without Krolia’s intelligence, so why don’t you get off your high horse and realize that she single-handedly did what the Ministry never could. Keith has every right to enter the Triwizard Tournament. So take your petty grudges and shove them up your ass.”

“Lance,” Keith whispered, and now it was his turn to tug on Lance’s arm.

Funny.

Keith had never called him by his first name before.

Dimly, Lance was aware that the few students in the Great Hall were staring, so he let Keith tug on his arm until the giant wooden doors were closed behind them.

Lance leaned against the stone wall, suddenly grateful for the support as his legs began to shake, the full weight of his actions beginning to catch up to him.

Keith let go of his arm (Lance hadn’t even realized that he was still holding it) and took a few steps closer, resting against the stone wall beside him.

“I’m sorry for causing a scene,” Lance said quietly, not wanting to be overheard. “But I saw you going for your wand and… duelling is forbidden. You would have been in so much trouble. They probably wouldn’t have let you enter the Tournament.”

Keith let out a huff of air. “I know. It was just… instinct.”

A few seconds of silence passed between them, and it wasn’t quite comfortable but it wasn’t uncomfortable, either.
“Thank you,” Keith said at last, and when Lance glanced over he thought that he could detect a faint dusting of pink across his pale cheeks. “For... saying what you said.”

Lance rolled his eyes, eager to establish some sense of normalcy between them. “Yeah, yeah, whatever. You won’t be thanking me when I knock you off your broom in the next quidditch match.” Lance aimed his voice for light and teasing, but it came out a little more strangled than he would have liked.

Now it was Keith’s turn to roll his eyes. “You’re saying that like you’ll actually manage to get a hit on me.”

“One of these days, Mullet Man,” Lance warned.

“You need to let go of your freaky fetish with my hair,” Keith warned, but Lance could see the small smile fighting its way onto his face as they eased back into their bickering.

“You love it,” Lance countered, making Keith shake his head, the aforementioned black mullet falling into his eyes.

Lance had to fight with the urge to reach out and brush the hair off of Keith’s forehead, wrestling it back down into the dark recesses of his mind where he shoved most of the thoughts he had about Keith that weren’t directly related to their rivalry.

“Are you going to enter the Triwizard Tournament?” Keith asked, his voice suddenly turning serious once again. “I... ah... heard that you were.”

“Aw, you listen to rumors about me? I’m flattered, Kogane. And here I thought the only person you cared about was Shiro,” Lance said, his voice full of fake sincerity.

Keith scowled. “Forget it,” Keith muttered, as he started to push away from the wall. “If you’re just going to be an ass about it...”

Shit, no, rewind quickly.

“Keith, wait,” Lance said, reaching out to grab Keith’s elbow with a gentle grip. “I won’t be an ass. I promise.”

Keith raised a skeptical eyebrow, but he relaxed back against the wall.

“I am going to enter the Tournament. It’s like you said, isn’t it? That almost everyone who can enter is going to. I mean, Hunk isn’t. So obviously there are some people that don’t want the glory or the fame or to, y’know, to fight in deadly trials,” Lance cut himself off, aware that he was rambling. Self-consciously, he reached up to rub at the back of his neck.

“I want to enter, I told Shiro I would enter,” Keith said.

“You should enter,” Lance said. “You deserve the chance to be the champion of Hogwarts just as much as anybody else.”

Keith bit his lip. “Not everybody sees it that way.”

“Screw them. Not everybody thinks muggleborns should have the chance to enter, either.”

“Who said that?” Keith asked, his head snapping up to face Lance.

Lance shrugged, his shoulder dragging against the wall. “Some of the Slytherin girls. It doesn’t
matter. They don’t get to decide that for us.”

Keith let out a long breath of air. “You’re kind of alright, you know that? When you aren’t constantly trying to one-up me.”

“Don’t get used to it,” Lance warned, before clapping Keith on the shoulder. “I have to get down to the pitch. Quidditch practice started, like, ten minutes ago.”

He’s not sure, but Keith might have called something after him that sounded suspiciously like “Good luck.”

Huh, maybe Keith could be alright sometimes too.
Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

Quidditch practice is in full force as Keith and Lance's friendship blossoms. An announcement is made, new arrivals appear, and the tournament officially begins.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone,

Thank you so much to everyone who has been so supportive of our fic so far, we're really glad to see that everyone is enjoying reading it as much as we've enjoyed working on it! Special shout out to the lovely Sher (@waywardbaz on twitter) for being our number one fan, we love you so much <3

As always, thank you to my lovely beta-reader/partner Cait (and I will definitely *not* be roasted you in the author's notes because you're too nice for me to do that to).

We hope you enjoy this chapter!

- slowklancing

Lance gripped his broomstick in his hands as he trailed behind Pidge out onto the Quidditch pitch. While it wasn't an official match, the Gryffindor team had agreed to practice with them, making today more into a scrimmage than a usual practice. After their match last week, Lance supposed that was probably a good thing. They needed to come up with a defense that would be more effective against Keith. If the Bludger couldn't hit him, the chasers couldn't steal from him, and the keeper couldn't block his goals… Ravenclaw was going to have a problem.

“Remember,” Romelle said, to the members of the Ravenclaw quidditch team that were gathered around the grass of the pitch, “this is just a practice match, so I’m expecting a clean game.”

The Ravenclaw quidditch team nodded their agreement, before beginning to mount their brooms.

Lance paused, his eyes drawn across the pitch to where the Gryffindor team were mounting their own brooms and beginning to do a few laps around the pitch. Keith was still on the ground, retying the laces on one of his shoes, so Lance let his feet carry him over towards the other boy.

“Ready to face my mad beater skills?” Lance asked, once he was close enough that Keith could hear him.

Keith glanced up, before pushing off the ground. “I don’t know,” he teased, shooting a small smirk at Lance, “you really think you’re going to land a hit on me today?”

Lance scoffed. “I know I will.”
“You’re on,” Keith said, as he quickly swung a leg over his broom. “Race you to the starting positions,” he called as he quickly lifted into the sky.

“That’s cheating,” Lance called, as he swung onto his own broom and took off after Keith.

Keith was laughing from his starting position in the sky as Lance drew up across from him. Lance rolled his eyes, before he turned his attention to Romelle and Thace who were still down on the ground to release the balls into the air. Once the Bludger and the Snitch were flying around, Romelle flew back up to join her teammates. Once she was in position, Thace threw the Quaffle up in the air, starting the practice match, before he climbed onto his own broom.

Lance watched as Romelle dove for the Quaffle, Keith beating her to the ball by mere inches. And just like that, the match started.

The first few goals occurred quickly, a whirlwind of back-and-forth between Romelle and Keith. The score was 30-40 Gryffindor, when Lance finally saw an open shot against Keith.

He lined up the shot, before swinging his bat through the air, the metal bat slamming into the Bludger with enough force to shake his arm. He watched as the Bludger sailed through the air, straight on a collision course for Keith, who, of course, dipped sideways at the last possible second, allowing the Bludger to sail over his head and collide with Thace who had been behind him.

“Sorry, Thace!” Lance called, “I was aiming for Keith!”

Keith glanced down at the Quaffle he was holding in his hands for a minute, before whipping his arm back and tossing it at Lance. The large leather ball slammed into Lance’s chest, and Lance brought his hands up to catch it before it could fall to the ground.

“Like that?” Keith teased, smirking.

“Oh, it’s on,” Lance called, as he darted closer to Keith to toss the Quaffle back at him.

Keith laughed as he dodged Lance’s clumsy throw (what? He just wasn’t used to the weight of the Quaffle, okay?). The Quaffle sailed past Keith, and Romelle zipped up to catch it before it could fall to the ground.

Lance froze, sure that his quidditch captain was going to scold the two of them for joking around instead of taking the match seriously. Keith appeared to have a similar look of slight fear on his face when Lance glanced over.

“It appears some of our teammates are a little distracted, Thace,” she called to the Gryffindor captain. “It’s a good thing this isn’t a real match,” and with that, she tossed the Quaffle directly at Lance. “I hope you’re a better chaser than you are a beater, Lance,” she teased as she zipped away before Lance could retaliate for the throw.

Keith started laughing. Full on laughing. And Lance was sure it was at the shocked expression on his face.

“Not cool, Ro!” He recovered enough of his dignity to shout at her. But his attention wasn’t on his captain. Instead, it was on the way Keith’s eyes crinkled and his whole mouth seemed to hang open when he laughed.

Lance wasn’t sure that Keith had ever laughed before. At least, not while Lance was around. Surely Lance would remember the dorky sound of it, and the way that it made him seem a little more like a
kid and a little less like a stoic old man trapped in the body of a seventeen-year-old.

And half of Lance wanted to fall back into their normal rivalry, demand that Keith shut up, and toss the Quaffle at him, but the other half of Lance just wanted to give in and laugh alongside him.

So that’s what he did.

Somehow, being kinda-friends with Keith felt even better than being rivals with him. Which… was kind of a new concept, because Lance and Keith had been rivals since Lance’s second year when he first joined the quidditch team. And, sure, maybe lately it had been less fighting and more teasing, but this? Sharing smiles and laughs instead of aiming smirks and insults at each other? It was different.

But maybe different wasn’t always a bad thing.

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“Attention, students,” Headmaster Holt said during dinner a few days later. As it always was when the Headmaster spoke, the loud conversations around the Great Hall settled into quiet whispers.

Lance glanced over to Pidge, raising an eyebrow to silently ask if they knew what this was about. Pidge shrugged, looking just as confused as Lance was sure he did.

“I have just received news from the Ministry today with regards to the Triwizard Tournament. The Department of Magical Games and Sports has decided that the stress of both the Triwizard Tournament and the N.E.W.T.s will likely be too intense to allow students to safely focus on anything else. As a result of this, the Ministry has voted to cancel Hogwarts’ Quidditch Cup this year.”

Loud exclamations of disappointment echoed around the hall, and Lance felt his own jaw drop open.

“What?!” Lance heard himself exclaim. He couldn’t not play Quidditch this year. It was Keith’s final year at Hogwarts. He finally had to prove that he could take down the Mullet Master, himself. If the Quidditch season was cancelled…

“You can’t do that!” A voice boomed over all the others.

Lance followed the direction of the voice to see Keith standing at the Gryffindor table, his wand held to his throat so that his voice would be magically broadcast across the Great Hall.

“This is the seventh years’ final chance to play,” Keith continued, and wow okay. Keith definitely didn’t like to be the center of attention. If he was willing to stand up in the middle of the Great Hall and yell at the Headmaster, then he must be even more upset than Lance was.

And no surprise really, since it was actually Keith’s seventh year. This really would be his last year to play Quidditch unless he went on to play pro.

“I understand that you’re upset, Mr. Kogane,” Headmaster Holt said calmly. “But I assure you that this decision is beyond my control.”

Keith tore his wand away from his throat, crossing his arms before dropping back down into his seat at the end of the Gryffindor table. Even from the opposite side of the Great Hall, Lance could see the red flush that was steadily spreading across his face.

“I am very sorry to inform you of the Ministry’s decision. I am just as upset as many of you. However, I hope this will not affect your excitement for the Tournament itself. The other schools will
be arriving in a few weeks. I trust you will treat them with the same kindness and courtesy you would show them if the quidditch season were continuing as planned.

“This sucks,” Lance groaned, sinking down on the table to rest his chin in his hands. “This was finally going to be my chance to show Keith that I’m a better quidditch player than he is.”

Pidge stifled a chuckle, so Lance narrowed his eyes at them.

“Aren’t you upset? You’re missing out on a year of quidditch, too.”

Pidge shrugged. “The Triwizard Tournament is a once-in-a-lifetime event. I can play quidditch again next year.”

“I mean, yeah, the Tournament sounds cool,” Lance allowed. “But only one person from the school gets chosen so it’s not really the same, y’know?”

“Are you saying that if you get chosen for the Tournament you want to deal with that, and with getting ready for our N.E.W.T’s next year, and competing for the Quidditch Cup? The ministry is right, that’s too much.”

“Well, yeah” Lance agreed. “But only for the person who gets chosen.”

“Wrong,” Pidge said. “We’re all going to watch the trials, and I’m sure there’s going to be all kind of events since the other schools are visiting. This year is about to get crazy.”

“I hate it when you’re right,” Lance informed them, reaching across the table to poke Pidge on the nose.

They batted his hand away. “I’m always right.”

“Still,” Lance let his gaze wander back across the room towards the Gryffindor table. “You feel bad for the seventh years that don’t get to play Quidditch their final year here.”

Pidge followed his gaze. “Keith seemed to take it pretty hard,” they commented.

“I don’t care about Keith,” Lance said quickly. Too quickly.

“Sure you don’t,” Pidge rolled their eyes.

“I don’t, it just sucks that I won’t get the chance to prove myself against my rival. That’s all,” Lance snapped as he flickered his gaze back to face Pidge, feeling his face heat up against his will.

“Okay,” Pidge said, holding up their hands in surrender. “Sorry I said anything.”

Lance grumbled something under his breath about how annoying little fourth years could be, but he still let his eyes get drawn back across the room towards the Gryffindor table.

Laenge was walking down to his Care of Magical Creatures class when he saw Keith and the other Gryffindor seventh years emerge from the Greenhouse.

Lance slowed down, adjusting the strap of his leather school bag on his shoulder while he waited for most of the Gryffindors to pass him. Keith was, as always, by himself at the back of the group. A few of the other Gryffindor seventh years shot Lance weird looks, which made sense as he was just loitering on the grounds outside of the Herbology Greenhouse, but Lance ignored them.
“Hey there, John Stamos,” Lance greeted, falling into step beside Keith even though that meant that he was headed in the wrong direction. He had been early, anyways.

“John Stamos?” Keith echoed. “I don’t even know who that is.”

Lance waved a hand lazily. “Muggle actor. Famous for having a mullet on an old TV show.”

Keith rolled his eyes. “Of course. What do you want, Lance?”

Lance sucked in an overdramatic breath, as he placed one of his hands over his heart. “Keith, buddy, my man, why do you think that I need to want something to talk to you?”

“Because you’re supposed to be heading down to Care of Magical Creatures right now, and instead you’re walking back to the castle with me,” Keith stated.

And, wow, okay. Keith knew his schedule.

“I wanted to talk to you,” Lance said.

“There it is,” Keith nodded.

“It’s not about anything bad,” Lance snapped, feeling defensive. “I just wanted to check on you, since you seemed pretty upset yesterday.”

“Oh,” Keith said quietly, and it seemed like maybe he was blushing but it was hard to tell with his black hair hanging into his face.

“And, I mean, it totally sucks that we don’t get to play quidditch this year,” Lance continued. “Because this was finally going to be the year that I proved I could knock you off your broom.”

“You say that every year,” Keith said, but he was grinning.

“And now we’ll never know if it would have been true,” Lance mourned. “And sure, Ravenclaw will probably be able to win the Quidditch Cup next year, but it doesn’t mean anything if the only reason that we won was because you’re gone.”

Keith stopped walking, before turning to face Lance. “Do you really mean that?” He asked, and he didn’t seem like the cool-and-collected rival that Lance had come to know and expect. He sounded… almost nervous.

“Of course I do,” Lance said, slinging one of his arms around Keith’s shoulder. “Don’t let that go to your mullet though.”

Keith shook his head, before reaching up to push Lance’s arm off of him. “Go to class, you’re going to be late.”

“Like Professor Coran would care,” Lance scoffed. “I’m his favorite student.”

“Well then let me go to class,” Keith said. “Because I’m going to be late.”

“To your free period?” Lance asked, and okay, maybe he knew Keith’s schedule, too.

“Some of us have to study for our N.E.W.T.s,” Keith said, not looking all that surprised that Lance knew that he didn’t actually have another class after Herbology.

“You have all year to worry about them,” Lance said, “why start now?”
“Get to class,” Keith said again, “and leave me and my study habits alone.”

“Fine!” Lance called, as he started to walk back down the hill in the direction of the outdoor animal pens.

“Hey, Lance,” Keith called after him, causing Lance to stop in his tracks.

Lance shoved his hands into the pockets of his school robes and turned around, closing the small distance that had formed between them. “Yeah?”

“I’m gonna miss playing quidditch with you, too,” Keith admitted, kicking at the ground softly with one of his shoes.

Lance felt a smile creep over his face.

“Really?”

And he probably looked like an idiot, fucking beaming at Keith, but honestly, who cared?

“I’m not going to say it again,” Keith warned. “But yeah. Really.”

“Aw, Keith, I never knew you were such a softy,” Lance teased, but there was no malice behind it.

“Shut up,” Keith grumbled. “I’m just… not very close to a lot of people. So, you know, it was cool to, like, be friends, or whatever. You don’t have to make a big deal out of it.”

And Lance’s brain just about overloaded. Keith thought they were friends? The great Keith Kogane, quidditch star and Defense Against the Dark Arts protégée, thought that they were friends?

And sure, they hadn’t really been the enemies that Lance claimed they were since before fourth year, but Lance hadn’t realized that Keith thought of him as a friend. Let alone that he might be one of the only friends the other boy had.

Lance could be a much better friend if he actively was aware of the fact that he was said-person’s friend.

“You know, just because we can’t play quidditch anymore doesn’t mean that we can’t still be friends,” Lance offered.

Keith looked up from the ground that he had been burning holes into with his eyes. “Wait, seriously?”

“Yeah, dude, of course,” Lance said.

“Okay,” Keith said softly. “So, I’ll see you around?”

Lance chuckled, “Yeah. See you around.” Lance turned on his heel, making sure to give Keith one last little wave over his shoulder before he continued back down the hill. By now most of Ravenclaw were probably already down waiting with Professor Coran. Hell, class might have even started.

But Lance couldn’t find it in himself to care.

Keith, Keith, thought that they were friends. He wanted to be friends with Lance.

Lance found himself whistling to himself as he drew up next to Pidge, who shot him a weird look.
“What’s with the good mood?” They asked with a frown. “I thought you were, like, all bummed out about quidditch.”

“It’s a good day today,” Lance answered honestly.

The song he was whistling might have been the *Full House* theme song. Whatever.

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“Did you just see that?” Hunk asked one day while they were sitting in the courtyard playing Exploding Snap.

“Nice try, buddy,” Lance said, as he lined up his next shot. “But I’m not that easy to fool.”

“No, seriously,” Hunk said again. “Do you see that?”

“It looks like -” Pidge started, and okay, if Pidge was talking about it, then Lance knew it was legit. Lance looked up, following Hunk’s and Pidge’s gazes right up to the sky where, sure enough, something was descending from the clouds.

“No way,” Lance muttered. “It can’t be.”

And it couldn’t be, but sure enough, the flickering shapes that Hunk had spotted darting through the clouds were drawing close enough to make out their body shape: long, thin legs that ended in delicate hoofs, feathered wings spread wide and they soared closer to the castle, silver manes and tails blowing in the wind.

“- are those Pegai?” Pidge finished.

Lance pushed himself off the ground, joining the dozens of other Hogwarts students that were racing to the opposite edge of the courtyard, where the towering stone walls gave way to open-air windows that faced the Hogwarts grounds.

Because they had already been in the courtyard, Lance, Hunk, and Pidge were among the first to arrive at the windows, just in time to see the team of winged horses pull a large, majestic blue and silver carriage into view.

“Merlin’s beard,” Pidge said with a quiet whistle. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Lance hadn’t either, and the same giddy feeling erupted in his chest as it did every time he encountered something amazing and unexpected in the wizarding world. It was like being chosen by his wand at Ollivander’s, having the Sorting Hat placed on his head, and playing quidditch for the first time all at once.

“That is… crazy!” Hunk said, crowding closer so that Lance was forced to grab on to the edge of the window or risk falling out of it.

“I heard that’s the Beauxbatons student envoy,” someone said, and Lance glanced backwards just in time to see Nyma cutting her way to the front of the crowd.

“Some people know how to arrive in style,” Lance commented.

The team of winged horses swept past the window, each of the horses easily the size of an SUV. They appeared to be heading down in the direction of the grounds. Straining his eyes, Lance made out the small, ginger-haired figure of Coran as he danced across some sort of homemade runway.
with the paddles used to guide muggle aeroplanes in his hands. Ridiculous.

The pegai glided down, until their feet connected with the earth and they continued to run forward, dragging the carriage along behind them until all of its wheels were safely nestled on the ground.

The Hogwarts students around Lance let out a series of cheers, laughter, and clapping.

“Uh… everyone?” Someone, Lance was pretty sure it was Shay’s brother, Rax, said. “There’s something coming out from the lake.”

Immediately, everyone sprinted across to the opposite side of the courtyard, where the windows opened up to look down the rocky bluffs to the lake below.

Lance fought his way through the crowd of students, until he was torn away from Pidge and Hunk by a few overzealous third years.

“Hey!” Lance said, as he yanked his school robes out of their grip, “Watch it!”

He stumbled forward, colliding with the person in front of him when someone shoved him from behind.

“Sorry!” Lance apologized, but he never even saw who it was that he had bumped into because suddenly a hand was wrapped around his arm and someone was tugging him through the crowd.

“Hey! I’ll have you know that Lance Álvarez doesn’t appreciate being manhandled,” he said, just as he was yanked up onto a small stone bench set against the outer wall of the courtyard.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” a familiar voice commented dryly.

“Keith!” Lance exclaimed, finally able to actually see the person who had dragged him through the crowd. “I thought you were, like, some weird stranger.”

Keith rolled his eyes. “Of course you did. Now, turn around, or you’ll miss it.”

“Miss what?” Lance asked, but he followed Keith’s advice and turned around on the stone bench he and Keith were standing on so that he could see out of one of the windows.

The lake stretched in front of him, but it was British water, all choppy waves and navy blues, not the calm, silver waters of Lance’s childhood.

“Do you see it?” Keith asked, pointing over Lance’s shoulder to something in the distance.

Lance squinted, peering through the morning fog.

There.

Something was rising from the waves.

At first, all that could be seen was a large, brown piece of wood, like a tree without any branches. But this was shortly followed by the rest of the ship, itself, which burst from the water suddenly. Startled, Lance took a half step backwards, coming close enough to the edge of the bench that Keith reached up to grip his arm again.

The ship looked like something from a pirate movie. And the way it burst from the water was giving Lance major Pirates of the Caribbean flashbacks. Like, this ship could have definitely belonged to Davy Jones.
The ship settled back down into the waves, releasing a large white sail that curled open to reveal the image of a red dragon.

Wicked.

“Man, I don’t know which entrance was cooler,” Lance gushed, as he hopped back down from the bench. “We better get down to the Great Hall, it’s almost time for dinner. I bet the other schools will be joining us.”

“Probably,” Keith agreed, as he jumped down from the bench and landed beside Lance. “But is it really that big of a deal? It’s just more people.”

Lance laughed at the way Keith wrinkled up his nose as he spoke. *Cute,* his brain supplied unhelpfully. *Not cute,* he corrected silently. Former rivals were *not* to be found attractive.

(Okay, yes, there had been that… *thing* that Lance had for Keith back in fourth year, but he didn’t like to talk about it).

“You say that like it’s a bad thing, Mullet,” Lance said.

“Isn’t Hogwarts crowded enough? How are we even gonna fit more people into the Great Hall?”

“I guess we’ll find out,” Lance shrugged.

“Well, let’s go meet the competition, I guess,” Keith said with a sigh, as he followed Lance back into the castle.

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Keith followed Lance into the Great Hall before they had to separate to go to their separate tables. Two extra tables had been brought into the Great Hall, and they faced horizontally across the front of the room before the raised platform that contained the teacher’s table.

Lance dropped down into his usual seat on the side of the table that shared an aisle way with the Hufflepuff table so he could talk to Hunk, and he waited for the rest of his friends to arrive. Pidge, Hunk, and Shay came rushing into the room shortly after he had sat down, so Lance waved Pidge over.

“Did you see the ship?” He asked, as Pidge plopped down next to him.

Pidge nodded. “Yeah, we lost you in the crowd, though.”

Lance shrugged, “It’s okay, Keith managed to find me.”

“Oh, did he?” Pidge asked, looking entirely too pleased with the information.

Lance rolled his eyes, but he was saved from responding by Headmaster Holt stepping up to the podium at the front of the hall.

“Attention, students,” he declared. “I have some exciting news to share. Today, our friends from Beauxbatons Academy of Magic and Durmstrang Institute have arrived. So please join me in welcoming the lovely students from Beauxbatons Academy and their Headmaster Alfor Altea.” As he finished speaking, Headmaster Holt held out his hands, gesturing towards the doors to the Great Hall.

Lance turned around in his seat, leaning out into the aisle.
The doors leading into the Great Hall swung open, revealing a few dozen students wearing beautiful blue and silver silk robes. The girls were wearing dresses that ended above the knee, light cloaks tossed over their shoulders, and cute little blue pointed hats perched on their heads. The boys were wearing blue and silver buttoned waistcoats with tails over simple charcoal pants.

And the worst part? Or maybe it was the best part?

They were all stupidly attractive.

Lance instinctively found his gaze drawn to the girl walking in the front of the group. She was beautiful, her long white hair loose and flowing down to the center of her back, the color startling against the offset of her dark skin. She was stunning. None of the other Beauxbatons students managed to capture Lance’s attention in quite the same way, despite being some of the most beautiful people he had ever seen. It was like there was something about her that kept calling his attention to her.

The Beauxbatons students strolled down the center aisle way towards the front of the Great Hall, close enough that Lance got whiffs of their perfume and cologne as they swept past his table.

Once the Beauxbatons students were halfway through the Great Hall, they spread their arms open like they were wings, delicate blue butterflies springing into existence from their gloved hands. Wandless magic. Amazing.

“I think I’m in love,” Lance whispered to Pidge, as the Beauxbatons students drew to a stop at the front of the room before sweeping into low bows and curtsies.

“Of course you are,” Pidge muttered.

Trailing behind the Beauxbatons students was an older man, who looked similar to the girl that had lead the procession. He shared her dark skin and white hair, his was cut so that it hung around his shoulders, and he had a close-trimmed white beard. For being a middle-aged man, Lance had to admit that he looked pretty damn good.

“Sam,” the older man, Headmaster Alfor Altea, Lance remembered, greeted, as he stepped up to clasp Headmaster Holt’s hand.

“Alfor,” Headmaster Holt said, before gesturing towards one of the open seats at the teacher’s table. “Please, have a seat.”

Alfor gestured with his hands to his students, and the Beauxbatons students stepped up neatly to one of the open tables and sat down delicately.

“And now,” Headmaster Holt continued, “Please welcome our guests from Durmstrang Institute and Headmistress Haggar Daibazaal.”

The doors to the Great Hall swung open again, this time to reveal two neat rows of stern-faced students clad in red and black militaristic robes. Each of them was holding a tall metal staff the size of their body, and many of them were wrapped in fur cloaks.

The twin rows of students stomped into the room, sparks flying every time their staffs connected with the stone floor. They passed by the house tables without even glancing down at the Hogwarts students, keeping their eyes directly ahead.

Lance watched as they walked past him, and it was easy to see why so many Hogwarts students were already predicting that the winner of the Tournament would be a member of Durmstrang.
Two figures brought up the rear, a woman draped in so many robes that it was difficult to see her face aside from her pale hair and sharp chin, and a tall young man with long white hair and tan skin. His features were sharp and delicate, almost elfin, but the wicked grin on his face seemed to promise that there was more to him than meets the eye.

“That’s Lotor Daibazaal,” Pidge said quietly. “It’s rumored that he’s already being scouted by quidditch teams from across Europe. He’s one of the best seekers of our generation.”

The Durmstrang students reached the front of the room, and one of them, a girl with bright red hair, dropped down to her knees and pulled her wand up to her lips. Just as Lotor and the Headmistress reached the front of the room, she let out a breath and the air escaping from her lips transformed into the form of a brilliant, fiery dragon that seemed to open its mouth and roar before disappearing in a puff of smoke.

Lance clapped his hands together, joining many of the other Hogwarts students who were clapping excitedly at the magic display.

“Haggar,” Headmaster Holt greeted, stepping down from the raised platform at the front of the Great Hall to offer her his arm.

“Samuel Holt,” she returned. “It is a pleasure, as always.” The older woman took the arm that Headmaster Holt offered her, and allowed him to lead her up to her seat at the teacher’s table while the Durmstrang students settled themselves at their own table.

Once he had settled the Headmistress, Headmaster Holt returned to his podium.

“Welcome, Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students to our fine school. I hope you will enjoy your stay with us for the year, and please remember, while the Triwizard Tournament is a very exciting event, it should not interfere with your studies. We are dedicated to providing you with the best education that we can while you stay here at Hogwarts. Now, with regards to the Tournament, I have some news to share that I am sure you will all be dying to hear.”

Headmaster Holt paused, and turned to gesture for Shiro to step forwards.

Professor Shirogane raised his wand to his throat, amplifying his voice. “As many of you are already aware, only students above sixteen years of age - that is, sixth and seventh years - may participate in the Triwizard Tournament. To ensure this, the champions will be chosen by… the Goblet of Fire!”

As Professor Shirogane finished speaking, Professor Blaytz stepped into the room from the trophy room in the back of the Great Hall, levitating a large stone chalice that was emitting a soft blue flame. He carefully lowered his wand until the chalice’s base settled on the ground in between the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang tables.

“To ensure our students’ protection, the Goblet of Fire will be placed in the trophy room for any eligible students to enter. And, as an added safety measure,” Headmaster Holt said, “I have drawn an age-line of my own creation around the Goblet. Should someone underage try to fool the Goblet, there will be consequences.”

“He did that just to stop me,” Pidge mourned.

“To enter the Tournament, one must only write their name on a slip of parchment before casting it into the flame before this hour next week. But I must warn you, do not do this lightly! If chosen, there is no turning back. As from this moment, the Triwizard Tournament has officially begun.”
Lance studied the Goblet of Fire. Up close, it was easy to see how impressive it was. The Goblet, itself, was taller than he was. The blue flames flickering over the trophy room cast an eerie glow, bathing everything in the unnatural color.

“There must be a way past the age line,” Pidge was muttering, scowling as they scribbled something into a piece of parchment.

“Can I borrow a piece of that?” Lance asked, as he stole a piece of parchment and quill from Pidge’s bag. “Thanks.”

“You’re seriously gonna enter, dude?” Hunk asked, chewing on his fingernails.

“Of course!” Lance replied, as he glanced back at the Goblet. So far, none of the other students loitering in the trophy room had crossed the age-line to enter their names.

And as much as Lance liked being the center of attention, in this case, he would really rather not be the first to put his name into the creepy blue fire.

Finally, someone seemed to grow tired of waiting, because they stomped across the room and stopped right in front of the age-line.

Keith.

Of course. Of course it would be Keith to be the first to enter the Tournament. That was just so like him.

Although, they were supposed to be friends now, so maybe Lance should try to be a little more supportive.

Taking a deep breath to steel himself, Lance scribbled his name onto the corner of the parchment before ripping it off and strolling over to Keith. “Haven’t lost your nerve yet, Mullet?” He asked as he stopped so that he was standing directly next to Keith, both of their faces turned towards the Goblet.

“No,” Keith said, without turning to look at him. “I was just thinking about something that Shiro always says.”

Lance felt a pang of jealousy stab through him, but he quickly forced it down. “What does Professor Shirogane usually say?”

“‘Patience yields focus’” Keith said, in a low voice that was obviously meant to sound like Shiro, despite sounding nothing like Shiro. “He wants me… to stop rushing headfirst into everything. So I’m trying to really think about this before I put my name in. It’s like Headmaster Holt said. Once you’re chosen, you have to compete.”

“Right,” Lance agreed, “but we both know you’re gonna end up putting your name in. So I don’t think Shiro will get mad if you’re the first one to enter.”

This time, Keith did turn to look at him, raising an eyebrow. “You don’t want the glory of being the first one to enter?”

“Um… actually, I think we’re both about to lose our chance at that,” Lance muttered quietly as one of the Durmstrang students, the one that Pidge had recognised, stomped up to the edge of the age-
line with a scrap of parchment in his hand.

He lifted one of his feet carefully, and was about to cross the line, when Keith muttered “Hell no,” and stormed through the age-line before Lotor could cross.

The blue age-line flickered as it registered Keith’s presence, but it didn’t do anything to him.

Keith lifted his scrap of paper in his hands and held it gently towards the flame. Unlike normal fire, the blue flames didn’t reach out to catch the paper in their grip, instead the paper vanished entirely. Almost as if it had never been there.

Keith smiled smugly at Lotor as he spun on his heel and headed back towards Lance. Lotor frowned, but otherwise gave no indication that Keith had just beaten him to be the first to enter the Tournament as he crossed the age-line and submitted his own name.

“Okay,” Lance said, rubbing his hands together once Lotor had exited the circle created by the age-line. “Here goes nothing.”

Lance stepped forward, feeling the magic of the age-line brush against him. Once again, the blue flickered slightly as it registered his presence, but it did nothing. Maybe the anti-age line was just a joke to keep the younger students away from the Goblet.

This close, it was easy to tell that the blue fire was magical. Not only was its color unnatural, but the fire, itself, gave off no heat.

Lance lifted his scrap of paper, holding it close to the flickering flame until it vanished into thin air the way that Keith’s had.

Now, it wasn’t up to him if he would be chosen as Hogwarts’ champion. And, realistically, Lance knew that the Goblet probably wouldn’t pick him. It would pick someone who was worthy of being chosen. Someone amazing at everything they tried to do.

Someone like Keith.

But at least he had tried.

Right?
Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

Despite the age restraints placed by her father, Pidge attempts to enter the tournament. Introductions are made, experiments are performed, and the selection of the champions takes place.

Chapter Notes

Heya everyone! Cait here. I just wanted to thank you all for getting us to 500 views in the two weeks this fic has been live. The response we have had from everyone has been amazing and I just want you all to know that we appreciate you so much. I hope you enjoy this chapter, even though Kate cannot remember it for the life of her even though it's pretty important ; ) (love you boo). Don't forget to leave a comment and give us kudos! Okay see you next week!

Pidge leaned closer to Lance during their free period the next morning. “I think I might have figured out how to get past the age-line,” they whispered, keeping their voice low since they were in the library.

“Seriously?” Lance asked, raising an eyebrow skeptically. “I’m sure your dad would have thought about anything you might come up with.”

“Not so,” Pidge protested. “My dad severely underestimates me. An anti-age line.” They shook their head with a quiet scoff.

“So how are you gonna get past it?” Hunk asked, leaning across the table to join in on the whispered conversation.

“An aging potion. It’s the perfect solution. It will temporary age my body, fooling the age-line into thinking that I’m old enough to enter. I’m a genius.”

“Very humble, Pidge,” Lance said. “Do you really think your dad wouldn’t have thought of that, though?”

“The age-line is a threat. Honestly, I’ve toyed with the idea that it’s a decoy and it doesn’t actually do anything. I was thinking of asking one of the first years to try and cross it for me…” Pidge muttered, as she scribbled something onto the parchment in front of her.

“Pidge!” Shay scolded, finally looking up from her Herbology essay. “What if they got hurt?”

“That’s why I ultimately ruled it out,” Pidge confessed. “There were too many unpredictable variables.”

“You’re evil,” Lance informed her.
“An evil genius, maybe,” Pidge allowed. “So are you going to help or not?”

“Depends,” Lance shrugged. “What do you need?”

“I need some ingredients from the potions storage room. I think I’ve already found the perfect place to make the potion. There’s a girls bathroom that everyone completely avoids,” Pidge said.

“You need someone to steal ingredients from Iverson?” Lance asked, disbelief heavy in his voice. “You’re actually insane! Well, count me out!”

“Hunk,” Pidge pleaded, “you’ll help me, right?”

Hunk sighed, glancing at Shay out of the corner of his eye. “I guess,” he agreed.

“Perfect!” Pidge cackled. Literally cackled. Like a demon.

Even though they were friends and he was used to this from them, Lance shuddered. Pidge could be scary.

“Well, good luck, I guess,” Lance said, as he stole the piece of parchment from Pidge and scanned it over. A list of ingredients, notes on someone named ‘Myrtle’ who apparently frequented the bathroom they were planning on using to brew the potion, and observations on how the age-line had reacted when different students had crossed it.

Pidge snatched their parchment back, before ripping off the half of it that contained the list of ingredients and handing it across the table to Hunk. “That’s what I need. Try not to get caught. Iverson already thinks I stole ingredients earlier this year to brew hangover-relief potions.”

“You did!” Lance cried. “And you sold them to the upperclassman for ten galleons a piece! That shit was expensive. You didn’t even give me a best friend discount,” Lance pouted.

Pidge rolled their eyes. “Why would you even need a hangover relief potion, Lance? You don’t drink.”

“Well, maybe someday I’ll get invited to a super cool seventh year party. You never know, Pidge.”

“Sure, Lance,” Pidge said. “But best friend discounts only go to those who help me with my work.”

“You’re punishing me because I don’t want to steal from Iverson for you? Not cool, Pidge!”

Pidge shrugged. “Hunk is willing to help me.”

“Hunk’s crazy!” Lance exclaimed, earning their library table a sharp glare from some of the nearby students. “No offense dude.”

“I’m not crazy!” Hunk defended. “But Pidge scares me more than Iverson.”

Which... was a fair statement, actually.

Pidge pushed their glasses up on their nose. “So are you going to help me or not?”

Lance shook his head, pushing his chair away from the table. “Count me out of this one, guys. I’m heading back to the dorms.”

“Suit yourself,” Pidge said with a shrug, as they returned to their notes. “But I’ll be in the girl’s bathroom on the second floor if you decide you want to be useful for once in your life.”
Lance took a steadying breath. He loved his friends, but sometimes Pidge knew just what to say to cut him down to his core. He gave Hunk and Shay a tiny wave over his shoulder, before he scooped his school bag off of the floor and made his way towards the library exit.

The door swung open just as he was about to grab the handle, and Lance jumped back a step so that the person entering the library didn’t run him over.

It was the Durmstrang seeker, Lotor, who sneered at him as heshouldered past Lance into the room.

Lance swallowed back an audible complaint. Something about the guy seemed to promise pain to anyone who questioned him, and Lance had already had quite enough of verbal insults for one day.

Lance followed Lotor’s back as he dropped down at one of the tables that already contained a few Durmstrang students, all girls - including the red-haired one who had created the fire dragon the night before. There was a pile of textbooks on the table, although none of them were open.

One of the girls, the one with short dark hair, glanced up and narrowed his eyes when she caught his gaze.

Trying to look nonchalant, Lance quickly averted his gaze and made his way hastily out of the library.

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Lance had good intentions of returning to his dormitory, maybe finishing his Charms essay, and then meeting back up with Hunk, Shay, and the other Hufflepuff sixth years for Transfiguration. Of course, all of those good intentions went out the window when he passed an empty classroom and heard voices coming from inside.

“Your stance is good,” someone was saying, “but you need to adjust your grip on your wand. You don’t want to clutch at it like it’s a knife, you need to relax your hand.”

Lance stopped walking, backing up a few steps until he could peek through the cracked door.

Shiro and Keith were standing inside, facing each other across a mat, both of their wands raised and at the ready.

“Come at me again,” Shiro instructed, as he silently cast a shield spell. The yellow glow flickered around him, proof that even if Keith hit him with something, Shiro wouldn’t feel it.

“Flipendo!” Keith cried, as he flicked his wrist, a stream of white light shot from his wand, sparking as it collided with Shiro’s shield.

“Better,” Shiro said with a smile.

Once again, Lance felt the familiar pang of jealousy that only Shiro’s mentorship of Keith could inspire in him. He shouldn’t watch. This was obviously a private moment.

Lance leaned against the stone wall so that he could see through the small crack in the door better, he could see Shiro’s profile, and some of Keith’s.

“I just don’t understand why you’re making me practice this spell,” Keith complained. “I mastered it years ago.”

“I know it seems like a simple spell, Keith,” Shiro said calmly, “but sometimes it’s the simplest spells
that have the most effect. This could prove very useful to you in the Triwizard Tournament.’”

“You say that like you know I’m going to get in,” Keith said in a quiet voice. And wow, okay, Lance had never heard him sound so… unsure of himself.

“You’ll get in,” Shiro said. “I believe in you.”

Lance closed his eyes briefly. Keith was awesome, and yes, he deserved to have Shiro believe in him. But there he was complaining about reviewing a simple spell when dozens of other students would kill to be given private lessons from Shiro. When Lance would kill to be given private lessons from Shiro.

“But what if I don’t?” Keith asked, his voice cracking. “I want to live up to what you see inside of me, but I just… don’t see it. I’ll never be as powerful as my parents were.”

“Is that what this is about?” Shiro asked quietly. “Keith, your parents would be so proud of you. You’re doing amazing in your schooling, you want to follow in your dad’s footsteps and become an auror. How can you not see that?”

“I don’t know!” Keith cried. “I just… feel like I have something to prove. All the time.”

“Is it because of what that Hufflepuff student was saying the other day?” Shiro asked.

“How did you even hear about that? Never mind, I know you know everything that goes on here. I don’t know. Maybe it is… a little,” Keith admitted.

“Keith, your mother is a hero.”

“I know that,” Keith snapped. “But not everyone sees it that way. Is it so bad if I want to help her clear her name?”

Lance peeled himself away from the wall. This was about Keith’s past. He didn’t have any business listening to it. Sure, he had heard the stories about Keith’s parents. About how his mom had betrayed Zarkon’s trust and told Galra secrets to members of the ministry. But he didn’t need to have those stories confirmed. If Keith wanted him to know any of that stuff, he would tell him.

“Of course it isn’t,” Shiro said.

Lance swore he was about to leave when he heard Shiro start to speak again.

“I heard that Lance stopped you from fighting the Hufflepuff,” Shiro said.

That… that was his name. Professor Shirogane just said his name. While talking to Keith.

“Yes. It’s probably a good thing he was there,” Keith admitted. “I was going for my wand.”

“You can’t solve all of your problems by duelling them out of your system, so I’m glad that Lance was there. Despite your… differences, it’s nice to see that he has your back.”

“Lance is alright,” Keith replied, and Lance was suddenly struck by the wish that he had his phone, because of course Muggle technology wasn’t allowed at Hogwarts, so that he could record audio proof that Keith had just said that. “He’s been… we’re getting along better this year.”

Hold up. Go back. Rewind. Keith had just said they were getting along better this year. Implying that Shiro already knew they hadn’t gotten along in previous years.
Did Keith talk about him to Shiro?

Did Lance want Keith to talk about him to Shiro?

“I’m glad to hear that,” Shiro said with a fond smile. “I’m glad that you’re making friends.”

Despite their conversation the other day, despite the fact that Lance had agreed to be Keith’s friend... a huge part of him expected Keith to deny it.

“Me too,” Keith said, and he sounded a little hoarse.

Lance took a few hasty steps away from the door. He had already heard too much. He shouldn’t have been listening to their private conversation in the first place.

But Keith’s words echoed in his ears the whole way back to the Ravenclaw common room.

Me too. Me too. Me too.

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“This is kind of weird,” Lance whispered to Romelle as he watched Beauxbatons students file into the Charms classroom. It was his first class that he was sharing with any of the foreign students, and seeing the silver and blue uniforms mixed with the black Hogwarts school robes was jarring.

“It kind of is,” Romelle whispered back.

Lance returned his attention to the classroom door, watching the last of the students trickle in when his attention was captured by the beautiful Beauxbatons girl he couldn’t take his eyes off of in the Great Hall. The whole room seemed to collectively hold its breath as they took in her long, white curls that hung in loose tendrils around her shoulders. It seemed almost like there was a faint, silvery glow around her, but Lance was sure that he must have been imagining it.

“You’re drooling,” Romelle teased from beside him.

Lance ignored her in favor of staring at the beautiful creature as she crossed the room and… was she coming in his direction?

“Sorry,” the girl said as she stopped at the desk next to Lance’s, “is this seat taken?”

Lance put on his best grin, the one that seemed to make his teeth sparkle, as he rested his arm along the back of his chair.

“Sorry, but do you have a pencil? Because I want to erase your past and write our future,” Lance said, making sure to sound as flirty as he could, and throwing in an eyebrow-wag for good measure.

The girl paused, her hand resting on the top of the chair as if she wasn’t sure if she could pull it out or not. “Um… what’s a… pencil?” She asked, a small smirk on her face. “Is it like a quill?”

Lance groaned, dropping his face down into his hands. Stupid wizarding world. Who didn’t use pencils?

“He meant to say that the seat is open,” Romelle said, as she reached over to pat his back comfortingly.

“Thanks,” The Beauxbatons girl said, her accent pleasant to the ears.
She settled into the chair next to Lance, and he tried to recover his pride from the failed flirting attempt.

“So,” Lance said, as he sat back up and turned to offer the girl another wide grin. “The name’s Lance.”

“It’s a… pleasure to meet you.” The girl said, “My name is Allura Altea.”

“Allura?” Lance gulped. “Like the Headmaster?”

Allura nodded, “He’s my father.”

“Right. Cool. That’s cool.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Allura,” Romelle interrupted. “My name is Romelle. I hope you’re enjoying your stay at Hogwarts so far.”

“Your school is very beautiful,” Allura said, “although, I must admit, it is much colder here than back home in France.”

“Are you going to enter the Triwizard Tournament?” Romelle continued, and Lance wasn’t sure whether to be grateful for her aid with the small talk, be happy that she was obviously getting somewhere with her, or to resent her for not letting him have a conversation with Allura.

“I already have,” Allura confessed.

“I entered the Tournament, too,” Lance said, taking the opportunity to jump back into the conversation.

“Did you?” Allura asked, raising an eyebrow.

She was probably just impressed by how super-awesome he seemed. That definitely had to be it. If he thought that enough it was definitely true, right?

Lance nodded. “Of course I did.”

Allura brushed her white hair over her shoulder. “Did you enter as well?” She asked, leaning around Lance to address Romelle.

Ouch.

Romelle nodded. “Although I doubt the Goblet of Fire will select me as the champion.”

“Is there a favorite from your school? Someone expected to get chosen?”

“He’s sitting right next to you,” Lance said, but both girls ignored him.

“A lot of people think a Gryffindor student named Keith Kogane is going to be chosen as the champion,” Romelle explained.

“Traitor,” Lance hissed under his breath.

“Attention, class,” Professor Blaytz said, “we have some guests joining us today. Welcome, Beauxbatons students. I hope you’ll enjoy your time studying with us.”

Lance dutifully reached for his quill and parchment, preparing to take his notes. Even though he
would much rather spend the class staring at Allura and trying to commit her beauty to memory, he really needed to get good marks in Charms.

After all, he wanted to go on to become the next Charms Professor at Hogwarts. It was his favorite subject, and Lance had always known that he wanted to be a teacher ever since he was little. One of the perks of having lots of little nieces and nephews was that he realized pretty early on that he was good with kids.

“This semester, we will mostly be working with casting non-verbal spells,” Professor Blaytz explained, as he stepped up to one of the blackboards at the front of the room. “Does anyone know what the benefit of casting a non-verbal spell is?”

Lance shot his hand into the air, and he felt Allura’s puzzled gaze land on him before she hesitantly raised her own hand.

“Yes, Álvarez?” Professor Blaytz said.

“Non-verbal spells give you an advantage in combat because the person you’re fighting doesn’t know what to expect from you, if they can’t predict the magic you’re casting, they might not know how to defend against it.”

“Very good, ten points to Ravenclaw.”

Lance beamed.

“For now, I would like each of you to practice casting a simple spell non-verbally. To start with, we will be levitating feathers similar to the exercises we performed in your first year. However, this time I would like you to perform the spell without uttering the incantation. Feel free to begin.”

Lance pulled his wand out from his robes, pointing it at the feather sitting on his desk. If he just concentrated hard enough on this, he could prove just how cool he was to Allura.

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“Are you ready to be amazed?” Pidge asked, holding up a vial filled with a nasty-looking green liquid.

“That’s never going to work,” Matt said, his tone light and airy.

Lance raised an eyebrow, surprised that Matt agreed with him. Usually, if Matt didn’t think that something was going to work, Pidge wouldn’t go through with it, either.

“And why not?” Pidge asked, as their dropped down onto the bench next to Matt.

“Dad drew the age-line himself, you really think that someone as brilliant as our father didn’t anticipate that students would try to use aging potions?”

“But that’s why it’s brilliant!” Pidge exclaimed. “It’s so simple!”

Matt shook his head, laughing under his breath.

Lance folded his arms and leaned back against the wall. He wasn’t sure why Pidge was being so insistent on going through with this terrible plan. Was it because they were the youngest in the friend group and felt left out? Hunk and Shay weren’t entering the Tournament. Maybe it was different if you actually had the option to enter and chose not to, rather than not being allowed to enter.
“Alright,” Pidge said, as they hopped off of the bench and approached the age-line. They stopped right before it and popped the cork off of the glass vial. “Bottoms up!” They exclaimed, raising the bottle in Matt’s direction before they lifted it to their lips and drained it.

Ugh.

Almost instantaneously, Pidge seemed to sprout up a few inches. Carefully, they lifted one of their legs and stepped over the age-line. When nothing happened, they stepped over with the other leg, as well.

They turned back to face their brother and Lance, raising an eyebrow at them.

Pidge slowly closed the remaining distance between the Goblet of Fire and themself, pulling a slip of parchment out from the pocket of their robes.

Pidge lifted the parchment up to the blue flame, and it disappeared from between their fingers as if it had never existed.

“It worked!” They cried. “I told you, Matt!”

Suddenly the blue flame of the Goblet shot upwards towards the ceiling, small streaks of light darting around the room like missiles.

One of the small balls of blue light slammed into Pidge, knocking them out of the circle of the age-line. They let out a squeak of surprise, right before they landed on the stone floor.

“Pidge!” Matt cried, pushing off the bench and running over to check on them.

Pidge pushed themself up into a sitting position, reaching up to gently touch the back of their head.

Lance could do nothing but watch as Pidge’s hair slowly grew longer, the brown fading to a gray, and wrinkles, crows feet, and age spots formed across their face.

“Oh my god, Pidge!” Lance said, a breathless laugh escaping him. “I don’t think that your aging potion had the effect you wanted it to.”

“Shut up, Lance!” Pidge scowled, crossing their arms over their chest.

But the stern look on Pidge’s face only served to make Lance laugh harder, as he doubled over.

Matt helped Pidge stand, but it looked like he was stifling chuckles of his own. “Come on, Sis, let’s go to the hospital wing. I’m sure we’ll be able to get this straightened out.”

“Pidge, Pidge, I’m sorry!” Lance called after their retreating forms, he reached up to wipe the tears of laughter that were streaking down his face away.

He knew Pidge well enough to know that they were probably more upset about their failed experiment than being laughed at, but the fact that he had laughed at the failed experiment was still probably enough to earn him the silent treatment for a few days.

Lance pursed his lips. He’d bring some chocolate frogs to the hospital wing later and hopefully earn his way back on to Pidge’s good side.

“How do I miss it?” Hunk asked as he walked into the trophy room. “Pidge said they were going to try and enter the Tournament this morning.”
“Just missed it, buddy,” Lance said, walking over to clap Hunk on the shoulder. “It probably goes without saying, but it didn’t work. Matt took Pidge to the hospital wing.”

Hunk’s eyes widened. “Are they okay?”

“The aging potion was a little too effective, but I’m sure that Pidge will be fine. Headmaster Holt wouldn’t make the age-line hurt any of his students. I was gonna go steal some chocolate frogs from the Ravenclaw common room before I visit the Hospital wing.”

Hunk raised an eyebrow. “Why do you need to bribe Pidge with chocolate?”

Lance shrugged, “I might have laughed a little.”

“Lance! You know how sensitive Pidge is about their experiments,” Hunk scolded gently.

“I know,” Lance groaned. “But you should have seen it! It was so funny. And in my defense, Matt was trying not to laugh, too. I totally saw him.”

Hunk shook his head.

Ugh, Lance hated ‘disappointed Hunk’.

“I know,” Lance said, rolling his eyes at the look on Hunk’s face. “I’m going to apologize later. Once I have chocolate. And you to be my human shield.”

“So I guess Pidge isn’t going to be one of the options for Triwizard Champion, then,” Hunk said, as they made their way out of the trophy room. “Matt entered yesterday, though.”

“I was talking with Romelle in Charms yesterday and she said that she entered as well,” Lance said, recalling his conversation with Romelle and Allura.

“Some of the Gryffindors in Defense Against the Dark Arts with Shay and I were saying that Thace Marmora entered as well. It sounded like he was who they wanted to get in,” Hunk said.

“Romelle seemed to think Keith is who’s going to be chosen, at least, that’s what she told Allura,” Lance said.

“Allura?” Hunk asked, sounding confused. “Is she one of the foreign students?”

Lance nodded, “She’s from Beauxbatons. She’s beautiful and I’m in love with her.”

“Sure you are, buddy,” Hunk said, patting Lance on the back. “Now come on, let’s go find you some chocolate so you can get back onto Pidge’s good side.”

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“Attention students,” Headmaster Holt called, effectively silencing the chatter that was echoing around the Great Hall. “As all of you are aware, tonight the Goblet of Fire will be selecting the Champions for the Triwizard Tournament.”

His statement was met with claps and cheers from the six tables of students, as the excitement spread across the Great Hall.

“I can’t believe this is really happening,” Lance whispered to Romelle. Pidge was sitting across from him on the other side of the table. They had mostly gotten over their anger at Lance for laughing at them, but Lance didn’t want to push his luck. Not today, during the selection of the Champions,
when Pidge would surely still be feeling the raw hurt at being unable to enter the Tournament.

Romelle nodded, her blonde hair bouncing across her shoulders. “This is it,” she whispered back. “After this, it will all be up to however is chosen to win the Tournament for Hogwarts.”

“So without any further ado,” Headmaster Holt said, “please, Professor Blaytz, if you would be so kind.”

Professor Blaytz pushed away from his seat at the teacher’s table, making his way into the trophy room. He emerged a few minutes later with the Goblet of Fire hovering in front of him, a few inches off the floor. With a flourish, Professor Blaytz lowered his wand, allowing the Goblet to land onto the stone floor at the base of the teacher’s table.

Headmaster Holt stepped up to the Goblet of Fire, resting his hands on it briefly. From as far back as he was, Lance couldn’t tell if Headmaster Holt was casting a non-verbal spell on the Goblet, or if he was just trying to be dramatic. Maybe it was a little of both.

“Now,” Headmaster Holt said, as he took a step backwards. “The selection of the Champions.”

Lance felt as though his eyes were glued to the Goblet’s blue flickering flame, but the feeling of eyes on him was enough to make him turn around in his seat. On the other side of the Hufflepuff table, Lance could make out the Gryffindor table, and the familiar black haired boy who was staring directly at him.

“Good luck,” Keith mouthed.

Lance smiled, watching as a small grin spread across Keith’s face. “Good luck,” he mouthed back, making sure to over exaggerate the shape of the words with his mouth, as he lifted one of his hands gave Keith a thumbs up.

Keith echoed the movement, lifting one of his own hands, before turning his attention back around to face the front of the Great Hall.

Lance followed Keith’s lead, and turned back around to face the front of the room before he missed anything important.

Lance could see the professors sitting up at their table, Shiro looked like he was on the edge of his seat, a goblet clutched in his grip. Professor Smythe was chatting excited with Headmaster Altea. Professor Iverson was scowling, of course. And Headmistress Daibazaal was muttering something to herself, maybe hoping that her son would be chosen as the Durmstrang Champion.

Suddenly, with a flash and a pop, the flames changed color - abruptly glowing a brilliant red as a piece of parchment shot out from the flame.

Headmaster Holt reached up and caught the paper before it could fall to the ground, holding it up to his glasses. “The Hogwarts Champion is… Keith Kogane.”

The Gryffindor table erupted into loud cheers, the other houses clapping their hands politely, and Lance turned in his seat to wolf-whistle at Keith. There was a pang of disappointment in his chest, but Lance forced it down.

Keith looked embarrassed by the attention, a red flush spreading across his cheeks as he said something to Thace Marmora.

“Congratulations, Keith,” Headmaster Holt said. “I’m sure you’ll make Hogwarts proud.” As he
spoke, Headmaster Holt returned to the Goblet of Fire, standing in front of it.

Lance let his eyes trail back over to Keith, a part of him - a large part of him, the part of him that had declared Keith his rival back in second year - was jealous that Keith had been chosen, because it was *Keith* and it was always *Keith* and it was always going to be *Keith*. But the other part of him, the part of him that had become *friends* with Keith over the past few weeks, was proud of Keith.

The swirl of emotions in his stomach was confusing, and slightly nauseating.

Keith glanced up, pushing that impossible mullet out of his face as he caught Lance’s eye.

Lance grinned at him, “You’ve earned this,” he mouthed to him.

Keith looked relieved, some of the tension draining from his shoulders, as he mouthed back “Thank you”.

Lance glanced back towards the front of the room, surprised that another name hadn’t been announced yet. Headmaster Holt was still standing in front of the Goblet of Fire, a slight frown tugging at his usually gentle features. It looked like Headmaster Holt shared a confused glance with Professor Blaytz, just as the Goblet’s flame flickered red once more and another scrap of paper came flying out.

“The Champion from Beauxbatons Academy of Magic is… Allura Altea,” Headmaster Holt announced.

Once more, the hall burst into polite applause, with a notable lack of noisy outbursts from the Gryffindor table.

Lance glanced over to the Beauxbatons table. Allura was positively beaming in the direction of the teacher’s table, likely at her father, while the other students smiled at her.

“Congratulations, Miss Altea,” Headmaster Holt said.

Lance tore his gaze away from Allura to look back at the front of the Great Hall. Only one Champion left to select. After another lengthy pause, the flame flickered once again and the final piece of parchment flew out and into Headmaster Holt’s awaiting fingers.

“Finally, the Durmstrang Institute Champion will be… Lotor Daibazaal,” Headmaster Holt announced.

Everyone in the Great Hall clapped, although it was much less enthusiastic than Allura’s reception had been. Apparently, Lotor had done little to win friends from the other schools. In sharp contrast, the Durmstrang table stomped their feet on the ground and reached across the table to grip Lotor in what Lance assumed was some sort of congratulatory symbol.

“Excellent,” Headmaster Holt said, with an easy grin. “We now have our three Champions. If they would please rise and make their way to the trophy room.”

Allura, Lotor, and Keith all stood, pushing away from their seats at their tables to make their way to the front of the room. Headmaster Holt stopped each of them as they walked past him, shaking hands with Allura, Lotor, and finally Keith.

Headmaster Holt released his grip of Keith’s hand, turning to follow the three Champions into the trophy room when Professor Shirogane took a step forward.
“Today, three champions have been chosen,” Shiro said, and Lance thought he could hear Shiro’s pride for Keith in his voice. “But only one will go down in history as the winner of the Triwizard Tournament, and only one will hoist the vessel of victory - the Triwizard Cup.” As he finished speaking, Shiro swept a simple black sheet off an object that had been resting on the teacher’s table.

The Triwizard Cup was beautiful. It was some kind of chalice created from a shining blue glass, with twin handles resembling dragons curling around it. It was like any muggle trophy Lance had ever seen on steroids.

So much cooler than his participation trophy from the football team he had played on in primary school.

Professor Blaytz stepped up besides Shiro, raising his wand to his throat. “The Triwizard Cup was created before the first Triwizard Tournament, which was held in 1294-”

“Headmaster,” Shiro said suddenly, cutting off Professor Blaytz, sounding concerned.

Lance followed Shiro’s gaze, surprised to see the man looking once more at the Goblet of Fire.

The Headmaster paused, turning around and taking a few steps back into the Great Hall. “Shiro?”

Shiro took a few steps down, away from the teacher’s table, and the Headmaster followed his line of sight to the Goblet of Fire.

The Goblet… which was currently glowing with a red light once again.

Another scrap of parchment shot out of the cup, a fourth scrap of parchment, which made no sense at all, and the Headmaster grabbed it from the air, unrolling it and reading it quietly.

The entirety of the Great Hall remained silent. It was as quiet as a tomb.

“Lance Álvarez?” The Headmaster whispered, and then again, louder. “Lance Álvarez.”

Wait, what?
Chapter Four

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of the selection of a fourth champion has consequences for many. Accusations are made, friendships are tested, and the truth cannot be denied.

Chapter Notes

Hey, everyone! Thank you all so much for the positive feedback that you've been giving us... it means the world. We hope that you enjoy this chapter <3

- slowklancing

Lance felt as though he was frozen in shock. There was no way that Headmaster Holt had just announced his name. It just… wasn’t possible. Keith was the Hogwarts Champion. Keith.

Keith.

Not… not him.

The whole room was silent. It felt like everyone was holding their breath. Lance wasn’t entirely sure if he was breathing, himself. It was eerie. He had never heard the Great Hall this quiet before. There was always something going on, students laughing or joking, the Headmaster making some announcement or another, the ghosts scaring the students with their half-missing body parts. But there was nothing. No laughing, no whispering, no exclamations of shock or surprise. It was just… silent.

“Lance,” Romelle hissed into his ear, “Lance, you have to go.”

Lance blinked at her.

“Lance, you have to go with the other Champions. Come on,” Romelle said, as she all but pried Lance out of his seat and shoved him out into the aisle.

Lance glanced backwards at his friends. Hunk was frowning and tapping his fingers nervously against the Hufflepuff table, his head whipping back and forth between Lance and the front of the hall. Romelle used her head to subtly gesture towards the front of the room, before sharing a concerned glance with Shay. Matt had his eyes narrowed and his arms crossed across his chest, and Pidge… Pidge wouldn’t meet his gaze.

Shaking his head slightly, Lance walked down the aisle between the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables as if he was in a trance. He could hear the students murmuring and whispering, but he couldn’t tell what they were saying.

Probably nothing good.
Probably about how he didn’t deserve to get in to the Tournament. That was fair. They probably weren’t saying anything that Lance wasn’t already thinking.

The Headmaster stared at him as Lance drew closer, but he didn’t offer to shake his hand like he had done with the other students. That stung more than Lance would have liked to admit. He knew Lance. Lance had visited his house over the summer.

Lance continued past the Headmaster, making his way to the trophy room, which unfortunately meant he had to walk directly past the teacher’s table.

Headmaster Altea was frowning at him, as if he were a particularly troubling math equation. Headmistress Daibazaal openly scowled at him, but Lance was pretty sure that was just her face. Shiro had a look on his face that Lance couldn’t decipher, maybe it was disappointment that Keith wasn’t the only Hogwarts Champion, or maybe it was pity.

Professor Blaytz reached out, laying a comforting hand on Lance’s shoulder as he passed him, and Lance appreciated the word-less encouragement.

All too soon, he was pulling open the door to the trophy room and stepping inside.

Allura, Lotor, and Keith were gathered in the room. They were all standing around awkwardly, evidently none of them eager to start small talk with one another. However, they all glanced in his direction as the door squeaked open.

“Lance?” Keith asked, frowning, “What are you doing back here?”

“The... uh...” Lance started, his voice failing. He coughed weakly, before trying again. “The Goblet of Fire... I don’t know... chose me? I guess. The paper with my name on it came out.”

“What?” Keith asked quietly, but whatever else he was going to say was quickly overshadowed by Lotor, who stomped across the room and grabbed Lance by the front of his school robes, slamming him back into the stone wall.

Lance grunted at the force from the impact, his head colliding painfully with the stone.

This close, Lotor seemed much more intimidating than he originally had, his long pale hair falling forward as he narrowed his amber eyes.

“You’re lying,” Lotor said, his voice deadly calm despite the tight grip he had on the front of Lance’s school robes.

“I’m not,” Lance insisted. “The Headmaster-”

“I don’t care what your Headmaster had to say,” Lotor hissed. “It’s the Triwizard Tournament. Tri stands for three, in case you didn’t know that. Hogwarts cannot have two participants. Obviously you cheated your way into the competition.”

“I didn’t!” Lance insisted.

“Get off of him,” Keith growled, grabbing Lotor’s shoulder and hauling him away from Lance.

Lance slumped against the wall once Lotor’s weight was removed, taking some quick breaths to try and slow his racing heartbeat down.

Keith shoved Lotor away, giving him a glare, before he stomped right up to Lance.
“Thanks, buddy,” Lance said, but the rest of his words died in his throat, because Keith turned that murderous glare onto him.

“What the *fuck*, Lance,” Keith hissed.

Lance blinked in surprise. The last thing he wanted was for Keith to be mad at him. They had just started to become better friends. Keith was supposed to be the only Hogwarts champion.

Lance had resigned himself to that.

He would gladly have that now.

“I thought you had gotten over your *constant* need to prove that you could be better than me,” Keith spat. “I thought that we were past that, you said that we were friends.” Keith paused, shaking his head slightly. “I guess I was wrong.”

“Keith, no,” Lance said, desperation creeping into his voice as he grabbed onto the sleeve of Keith’s school robe. “I didn’t cheat. I promise. I was happy that you won—”

But the rest of Lance’s words were cut off by the pounding of heavy footsteps and a loud squeak as the door to the trophy room swung open and a small army of teachers piled inside.

Keith used the distraction to tug away from Lance’s grip, the smooth school robes gliding past his fingers. The expression on Keith’s face was still furious, a look that Lance hadn’t seen directed at him since his third year.

Lance swallowed, turning to watch the teachers as they entered the room instead of looking at Keith.

Headmaster Holt was leading the others, while Professor Shirogane closed the door behind everyone. Headmaster Altea and Headmistress Daibazaal both looked upset, but before they could say anything, Headmaster Holt stopped directly in front of Lance.

“Lance,” he said softly, his voice calm. “I’m going to ask you a few questions and I need you to be honest with me.”

“Of course,” Lance said with a nod, his eyes wide. He was suddenly grateful for the cool wall at his back. Otherwise, he wasn’t sure that he’d be able to remain standing.

“Did you put your name in the Goblet of Fire?” Headmaster Holt asked.

Lance nodded. “I entered right after Keith did. Pidge was there, you can ask them.”

“And did you, in any way, cheat to ensure that you would become a Champion?”

“No!” Lance exclaimed, before trying to take a deep breath and calm his erratic breathing. “No. I would never do that.”

“Headmaster,” Shiro said, stepping up beside Sam. “The Goblet of Fire is an incredibly powerful artifact. It would take a powerful Confundus Charm to fool it. Something far beyond the reaches of a sixth year student.”

“You seem to know an awful lot about that,” Haggar sneered. “Trying to ensure that your favorite student gets in, are we?”

“In case you’ve forgotten, Headmistress, my position as Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts ensures that I should have a thorough understanding of the way dark wizards think. After all, I have
to train my students to defend themselves.” Shiro’s voice was calm, but Lance watched as one of his hands clenched into a fist, his gaze darting over to Keith.

“That’s enough,” Headmaster Holt scolded. “We have larger concerns, at the moment. Once a student has been selected by the Goblet of Fire, they must compete.”

“Surely not,” Headmaster Altea insisted. “There may be a… loophole for an instance such as this.”

Headmaster Holt frowned. “The rules of the competition are clear.”

“But if the child has cheated…” Alfor said slowly.

“Father!” Allura hissed quietly.

“Obviously he cheated,” Lotor said, crossing his arms over his chest. “Or someone helped him cheat. Either way, it would not be fair to have him compete.”

“Yes, Sam,” Haggar sneered, “perhaps one of your teachers aided the boy, so that Hogwarts has a greater chance of winning the Cup.”

“Lance, did anyone, to your knowledge, aid you in ensuring you would be chosen as a Champion?” Headmaster Holt asked.

Lance shook his head, “No. No. Of course not.”

“Stop lying!” Keith shouted, and several of the teachers whipped around to stare at him. Keith wasn’t one for emotional outbursts.

“I’m not lying!” Lance shouted back, his frustration leaking into his voice.

“The chance that the boy is telling the truth and the Goblet of Fire selected four champions instead of three with zero outside influence is extremely unlikely,” the divination teacher, a tiny half-goblin named Slav, spoke up suddenly. “In this reality, there is a 0.00000008% chance that the Goblet has the error without any outside interference.”

“Shut up, Slav,” Shiro hissed, his voice harsher than Lance had ever heard it.

“If I may, Headmaster,” Professor Iverson interrupted smoothly, stepping forward. “There are ways to confirm whether or not he’s lying.”

Lance swallowed, his chest tightening. If Iverson was suggesting something, it couldn’t be good.

“He’s a child!” Shiro interrupted, “Surely there’s no need for such extreme measures.”

“I beg to differ,” Headmistress Daibazaal sniffed.

Lance let his eyes trail back over to Keith, who was standing at Shiro’s side with his arms crossed and his eyes glued to the ground. He looked pissed, but worse than that, he looked almost sad.

“I agree with the Headmistress,” Lotor said, “we cannot trust the boy without more… concrete evidence.”

“No one asked you,” Allura hissed at him, and Lance was suddenly grateful for her support. At least it didn’t seem like everyone in the room completely hated him.

“But he doesn’t deserve it!” Keith snapped suddenly, making Lance flinch.
Hearing the truth stung, even if Lance had already accepted the fact. Of course he didn’t deserve to be chosen. Did Keith really think that he didn’t already know that? Did he think that Lance really wanted to be the subject of his scorn?


“Keith,” Shiro said quietly, resting one of his hands on the other boy’s shoulder, “no one is challenging your right to compete in the competition.”

Keith shrugged off Shiro’s hand. “Hogwarts can’t have two Champions,” he insisted. “Historically, none of the schools have ever had more than one Champion. This is supposed to be my thing. I’m supposed to—”

“I’ll back out,” Lance said, surprising himself. Keith’s head shot up, his indigo eyes staring at Lance with enough force that Lance wondered if he was trying to shoot lasers out of them. “Obviously it was a mistake. I shouldn’t have been chosen. I didn’t want to be chosen as a second. So I’ll back out.”

Headmaster Holt shared a glance with Professor Blaytz, who shook his head slightly.

“You cannot simply back out of the Triwizard Tournament,” Headmaster Holt said quietly. “Once you have been selected as a Champion, it is required that you compete.”

Fuck.

“Then I’ll do… okay, I’ll do whatever Professor Iverson is talking about. The way to prove that I’m not lying. I’ll do it,” Lance said, despite the fear he could feel churning in his stomach.

Headmaster Holt looked back at Professor Iverson.

Professor Iverson nodded gruffly, “I have a bottle of Veritaserum in my stores. Wait here.”

Lance heard Keith suck in a gasp of air, but he kept his eyes trained on Iverson’s retreating back so that he didn’t have to look at the other boy again.

“Father,” Allura said softly, “you can’t possibly agree with this.”

“I see no other option, Allura,” Headmaster Altea responded just as quietly.

“Well, I, for one,” Lotor started to say, before Allura quickly cut him off.

“Don’t,” she said, her voice sharp. “Don’t even start, Lotor.”

“Headmaster,” Shiro said quietly. “Don’t you think that the use of Veritaserum seems a bit… intense for a student?”

“The boy volunteered,” Headmaster Holt answered just as quietly.

“Headmaster, it’s illegal to use Veritaserum on a student,” Shiro murmured, making Lance shudder.

“I don’t see another option. Alfor and Haggar refuse to believe the boy is innocent.”

Lance had heard of Veritaserum in potions class. It was a powerful truth serum, hardly ever used outside of official ministry business. And they thought they needed to use it against him.

It was only a few minutes until Professor Iverson reappeared, but it felt like it took ages. The teachers
filled the time with whispered conversations and arguments, but Lance tuned them out. He could see Shiro and Keith standing off in one of the corners of the room discussing something in hushed voices, continually glancing back over to him, but Lance couldn’t make out what they were saying. Lotor stood across the room, glowering at him, while Allura paced back and forth, her heeled shoes clicking on the floor.

Lance felt his legs give out from underneath him, as he slid along the stone wall until he was sitting on the floor. He drew his knees up to his chest to rest his head there, trying to zone out the arguments, the accusations and even the stilted silence spreading through the room. He merely remained sitting, not looking at anyone in fear, silently shaking.

The door to the trophy room finally opened, and Professor Iverson entered the room, a small glass vial held gently between his fingers.

Professor Iverson pressed the vial into Headmaster Holt’s awaiting hand, and Headmaster Holt took it before dropping down into a crouch in front of Lance.

“Do you know what Veritaserum is?” He asked, holding the small vial up for Lance to examine.

Lance nodded. “It’s a… we’ve learned about it in potions.”

“So you know that three drops of this are all that it will take to ensure that you are telling the truth?”

Lance nodded again.

“Oh, Headmaster Holt said, as he unscrewed the lid from the glass vial, revealing a dropper similar to the muggle droppers that Lance’s parents used to put ear-drops in his ears when he got infections from swimming underwater all the time.

Headmaster Holt held the dropper out expectantly, so Lance stuck out his tongue and let the Headmaster squeeze a few drops of the truth serum out.

It didn’t taste like anything, but Lance swallowed it just the same.

“Oh, Headmaster Holt said, “are you ready to answer a few questions for us?”

“Yes,” Lance answered honestly.

He could feel the effects of the truth- serum beginning to kick in, the urge to tell the truth burning in his chest. Words gathered behind his lips, urging to come forth. He wanted to tell Sam everything he was thinking, from his confusion and fear at this situation, to the guilt he felt about breaking a vase at his house in the summer between third and fourth year, only to blame it on their dog.

“Did you willingly enter your name into the Goblet of Fire?” Headmaster Holt asked.

“Yes,” Lance said.

“Did you take any steps to ensure that you would be chosen over any of the other Hogwarts students?”

“No, No, of course not! I don’t even know how you would go about doing that, I would never do something like that,” Lance answered, and Headmaster Holt looked relieved.

Lance thought that he heard someone let out a quiet breath of air, and it sounded suspiciously like Allura.
“Did you ask anyone to take any steps for you, to ensure you would be chosen as Hogwarts Champion?”

“Absolutely not, no, I wouldn’t do that!”

“That doesn’t prove that someone didn’t do it, anyway,” Lotor sniffed. “Just because the boy’s an idiot…”

Headmaster Holt ignored him. “Do you have reason to believe that anyone might have helped you get in without your knowledge or consent?”

Lance shook his head. “I don’t know why anyone would want me in the competition,” he answered honestly. “I’m not an outstanding student, I’m not some kind of protégée like Keith is, I’m just… I’m just Lance, a muggleborn from Varadero. If someone put me in, then it was probably just meant to be a joke,” Lance said sadly.

Headmaster Holt turned to look at Alfor and Haggar. “Do you believe the boy now?” He asked.

“I suppose we have no choice,” Alfor allowed. “It appears as though the boy is innocent.”

“Alfor is correct,” Haggar said. “It’s obvious that the boy would not willingly cheat his way into the competition. Especially since he apparently lacks the talent to cast such a complicated spell.”

Lance grimaced at what Headmistress Daibazaal was saying, but he couldn’t find it in himself to disagree with her, either. He slumped back against the wall behind him, the cool of the stone a comforting presence behind him.

“Headmaster, I’m confused,” Lance confessed. “I don’t understand why I can’t just back out of the Tournament.”

“The Goblet of Fire was created by powerful magic. And once it selects a Champion, there is no turning back. It would appear that there are going to be four Champions competing for the Triwizard Cup this year,” Headmaster Holt said, as he grabbed Lance’s arm and helped him stand.

Lance let his eyes slip past Headmaster Holt’s shoulder, catching Keith’s eye. The other boy had stayed silent while the Headmaster was questioning Lance, and he didn’t say anything now, either.

Keith was frowning, like he didn’t know what to make of the situation.

That was okay, Lance wasn’t too sure what to make of it, either.

<<<

Lance let out a sigh of relief as the door to the Ravenclaw common room shut behind him. He could feel the effects of the Veritaserum beginning to wear off, the urge to tell the truth fading.

He reached up to rub at his eyes, already exhausted despite the fact that it was barely past eight in the evening. Luckily, the common room was mostly empty, probably because everyone was still too wired up by the events of the day to imagine going to bed.

Lance took a few more steps into the room, debating whether to collapse on one of the couches or head down to the dorm room he shared with the other Ravenclaw sixth years. He was halfway to the spiral stairs that led down to the dormitories when the common room door slammed open.

Please, please, don’t let that be annoying first years.
Lance glanced over his shoulder, hoping that he wouldn’t know whoever it was that had just come into the room and that he could still escape down to his dorm to relax in the peace and quiet.

Unfortunately for Lance, it was an all-too-familiar figure that stomped through the open doorway.

Okay, he’d take the first years now, please.

“Would you care to explain what the hell is going on?” Pidge snapped as they stepped further into the common room, and Lance winced. This was definitely not a conversation that he felt like having right now.

Giving up all pretense of heading to bed for his much-needed beauty sleep, Lance turned around to face Pidge, and apparently Matt, who was following his younger sibling into the room.

“I don’t know,” Lance groaned. “No one knows what’s going on.”

“I just… I can’t believe that you wouldn’t tell me,” Pidge continued, ignoring him. “You knew how much I wanted to enter the Tournament, you knew, and when you figured out a way to make sure that you got in… you didn’t even tell me about it?”

“Pidge, what are you talking about? I didn’t figure anything out!” Lance said, throwing his hands up into the air. “I put my name in the Goblet, you saw me. That’s all I did.”

Pidge scoffed. “I was there, Lance. We all were. I heard my dad call your name.”

“Pidge,” Matt said softly, “maybe we should talk about this in the morning, when everyone’s had a chance to calm down?”

“No!” Pidge snapped. “We’re going to talk about this now. Because apparently Lance’s need for constant validation has reached a new low.”

“Fuck you, Pidge,” Lance growled, anger churning in his stomach, he could feel his hands shaking at his sides, and he clenched his fingers together to try and stop it. “You aren’t listening to me. I didn’t do anything.”

“Don’t talk to them like that,” Matt snapped, his usually calm voice sounding uncharacteristically tight.

Pidge chuckled darkly. “I heard you,” they said, “I just don’t believe you.”

“Dad will find out if he cheated, Pidge,” Matt said.

“No,” Lance said, “he already knows that I didn’t cheat. You’re one of my best friends, Pidge, why don’t you believe me?”

“I couldn’t find my way past the age-line, you laughed at me when it didn’t work. Was that because you had already figured out how to hoodwink the Goblet?”

“Hoodwink the… are you hearing yourself right now?” Lance asked, “You sound like a crazy person.”

How the hell did Pidge think that Lance had succeeded in doing something like that? When they hadn’t even been able to figure it out?

“I wouldn’t have to sound like a crazy person if you would just stop lying to me!” Pidge shouted, and Lance thought he could see tears of anger prickling in their eyes.
And maybe Lance should have let it go, Pidge was obviously upset, but he was so sick of everyone assuming that he was a liar and a cheater and a fraud.

“I’m not lying!” Lance snapped. “You’re just jealous.”

“Lance,” Matt said, “the statistical probability that the Goblet of Fire actually released four names instead of three without any outside manipulation is… slim to none.”

“Heard that one already, Matt. And guess what, I don’t care. I don’t care about the statistical probability,” Lance said, reaching up to tug angrily at his hair. “You two are my friends. You should trust me.”

“You’re making that really hard to do,” Pidge sniffed. “Seeing as you insist on sticking with your ridiculous story. There’s no way you managed to fool my dad with that crap. So what did he say? Did he kick you out of the competition?”

“No, of course he didn’t,” Lance said. “He can’t. Once the Goblet of Fire selects the champions they have to compete.”

“So you get everything you’ve ever wanted, all the fame and glory of competing in the Triwizard Cup, while I’m stuck on the sidelines. Again. Just because I’m younger than everyone else? That isn’t fair!”

“You think that this is what I wanted?” Lance asked, quieter. “I’m pretty sure Keith hates me now. And your dad… fuck. He looked so disappointed in me. The Headmasters of the other schools think I’m a fraud, and I’ll never be able to impress Allura now…”

“I’m not saying it’s a well-thought-out plan,” Pidge muttered, crossing her arms against her chest. “Maybe you just didn’t anticipate the consequences.”

“Whatever,” Lance said, spinning on his heel, “you’re obviously not listening to me, so I’m going to bed.”

“Excuse me for not wanting to listen to your lies and excuses,” Pidge said.

Lance froze, before turning back around to face them. “I’m pretty sure I’m not lying,” he said, “especially since that’s probably still impossible considering the fact that the Veritaserum hasn’t fully worn off yet.”

Matt sucked in a surprised gasp of air, twin shocked expressions on the Holt siblings’ faces.

“Dad wouldn’t use Veritaserum on a student,” Matt muttered, “its illegal.”

“I volunteered,” Lance said, “but I’m sure that you won’t believe me no matter what I say, so why don’t you just wait to talk to your dad about it. You can come back to me when you have all the facts.”

“Maybe we will,” Pidge said. They sounded like a child about to tattle on their sibling, a little threatening and a little smug, but Lance could hardly find it in himself to care.

He was so tired. All he wanted was to crawl into bed and forget that this day ever existed.

“Good!” Lance shot back, falling into the old, childish habit of bickering that he had picked up from his older siblings and mastered in his early years at school when he fought with Keith. “Maybe then you’ll realize that not everything is about my ‘constant need for validation’!” Lance said, using air
quotes to emphasize his point.

Pidge reaches up to push their wire-rim glasses further up their nose. “You wanted the attention, Lance. Don’t even try to deny it, because I know that you did. That you still do. So congratulations. The whole bloody school is talking about you.”

“No!” Pidge shrugged Matt’s hand off. “Deny it, Lance, I dare you.”

Lance opened his mouth, ready to spew off a dozen different comebacks, but his tongue felt like lead. And no matter how much he tried, he couldn’t deny that he had wanted the attention. Because he did want it. Maybe not in this way… but he still wanted it. Damn Veritaserum.

Lance snapped his mouth closed, knowing that there was nothing he could say.

“I knew it,” Pidge replied smuggly.

“So what if I wanted the attention?” Lance asked, “I didn’t want it like this.”

Pidge shrugged, “Maybe not, but I guess that doesn’t really matter anymore.”

They walked forward, brushing past Lance to head towards the spiral staircase that descended down Ravenclaw Tower to the dormitories. They paused at the top of the staircase, their hand resting on the banister. “I hope that Keith wins the first trial. Matt and I will be rooting for the real Hogwarts champion.” Satisfied with themselves, Pidge disappeared down into the staircase.

Matt followed them, but Lance reached out to stop him.

“Seriously?” Lance asked him, “You know that I didn’t cheat.”

Matt shrugged. “Pidge is family. I’ll talk to Dad tomorrow. Maybe he’ll get through to them.”

Lance lowered his hand from Matt’s shoulder, and watched as Matt disappeared down the staircase. He reached up and dragged his hands across his face, wiping at his eyes.

This day just needed to end.

Once he was sure that Pidge and Matt were in their dorms, Lance headed up the stairs to his room, slipping inside the sixth year boys room. He shared this particular room with four other Ravenclaw sixth years, but Lance had never bonded with them the way he had become friends with Pidge and Hunk. It looked like one of the boys was already in bed sleeping, but the other beds were empty.

Lance collapsed down onto his bed face-first, groaning into the pillow. Without looking, he pulled out his wand and flicked the curtains around his bed shut, adding an Imperturbable Charm to soundproof the area around his bed for good measure.

Lance rolled over so that he was staring up at the blue canopy above his bed. Everything about this day had gone all wrong. No matter what he said, the Goblet of Fire was never supposed to pick him. He was supposed to watch the trials from the audience with Pidge and Hunk, and he would complain that the Goblet had chosen Keith, and he would probably try to find a way to squeeze in a few insults about the other boy’s hair, and everything would be normal.

This wasn’t what he wanted.
In the morning, Lance cursed himself for falling asleep without doing his skincare routine and still wearing his school robes. Now, in addition to being the center of attention, he was going to look like a slob.

Great.

Lance quickly changed into his spare set of robes, tying his blue Ravenclaw tie around his neck. Luckily, he had always been a late riser, and the dormitory was already empty.

If only he could make it out of the common room without anyone noticing his puffy face or slightly red-rimmed eyes.

Of course, Lance couldn’t get that lucky.

Romelle was waiting on one of the blue loveseats in the common room, but she jumped up when she saw him.

“Lance!” She said. “Are you okay? What happened after you went back to the trophy room?”

Lance shrugged. “I’m okay. The teachers just questioned me. They wanted to know if I had found a way to force the Goblet into choosing me.”

“What did you tell them?” Romelle asked, as she led the way out of the common room and out into Hogwarts’ hallways.

“The truth,” Lance answered, already tired of the questions. “I have no idea why the Goblet chose two Hogwarts champions, let alone why it picked me,” he confessed quietly.

“But the other day you seemed so sure that it would pick you…” Romelle said, sounding confused.

Lance rolled his eyes. “Ro, come on, everyone knew that Keith was gonna be the champion. Even me.”

“So what are you going to do? Are you going to compete?” She asked.

Lance shrugged again, “Apparently I don’t have a choice. I have to.”

“They can’t make you,” Romelle protested.

“If the Goblet of Fire chooses you, then you have to compete in the Triwizard Tournament. That’s that Headmaster Holt said. But, hey, maybe I’ll surprise everyone and do really good,” Lance said, forcing a smile onto his face.

“Maybe,” Romelle agreed. “I’ll be cheering for you, at least.”

“You’ll be the only one. Well, you and Hunk. Pidge told me last night that they think Keith is the real champion.”

“I heard them talking with some of the other Ravenclaws this morning,” Romelle confessed. “They sounded pretty upset that you had gotten in.”

Lance nodded, “They think that I cheated and didn’t tell them how I did it. But I didn’t cheat! They just refuse to believe me.”
“Pidge will come around,” Romelle said sympathetically.

“Maybe,” Lance grimaced.

“You’re gonna be okay, Lance,” Romelle said softly.

Lance gave her a grateful smile. “I really hope that you’re right.”
Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

The fallout of the Champion’s selection continues on, with less-than-favorable reactions. A confrontation is made, an alliance is formed, and an apology is spoken.

Chapter Notes

Hey y'all! Cait here. Just wanted to say a massive thank you for 1000+ hits. The comments and feedback we've received from you all has been incredible, and we hope you keep them coming! This chapter was definitely influenced by all of your reactions, which I think is very cool! So thank you all, and don't forget to leave a comment and drop a kudos <3

- sunnyjolras

Lance felt like everyone in the Great Hall was staring at him as he followed Romelle over to the Ravenclaw table. There were whispered conversations echoing around the room, and Lance could hear snippets of what was being said. He felt his breath catch in his throat, his lungs constricting painfully. Was everyone looking at him?

He felt like everyone was looking at him.

“That’s him-”

“Álvarez, the Ravenclaw-”

“The muggleborn who-”

“-I heard he cheated…”

“Trying to steal the spotlight-”

“-if I were Keith, I would make him-”

Lance shook his head slightly, trying to tune them out. He dropped down onto the bench next to Romelle, grateful that he still had someone to sit with. He glanced around for Pidge or Matt, but they were both suspiciously absent from their usual seats across from him.

“So is it true?” Someone drawled, and Lance looked up to see Rolo approaching from the Slytherin table before he dropped onto the bench across from Lance.

“Is what true?” Lance asked, already having a pretty good idea as to what Rolo was hinting at.

The Slytherin boy smirked, crossing his arms across his chest. “That you still get to compete in the Triwizard Tournament.”
Lance hesitated, before nodding slowly. “It’s true.”

Rolo looked impressed. “Nice. I didn’t believe Nyma when she told me.”

“Well, it sounds like she’s already told the whole school,” Lance said, gesturing towards the Great Hall. “How did she find out, anyways?”

Rolo shrugged, “How does Nyma do anything?” He asked.

Lance scowled.

“I’m impressed,” Rolo admitted. “Didn’t think you had it in you. Maybe the sorting hat should have put you in Slytherin.”

Lance crossed his arms, “I didn’t cheat.”

“Sure, buddy, you gotta stick to your story, I get it,” Rolo said as he stood to head back to his own table.

Lance shook his head. Why wouldn’t anyone listen to him?

“Just for the record,” Rolo added, “I hope you do good in the trials. These stuffy, old traditions needed someone to shake them up.”

Lance let out a huff of air as he watched Rolo retreat back to the Slytherin table. “I’m pretty sure Rolo is the only person in the whole school who doesn’t hate me now, bar you, and maybe Hunk,” he told Romelle.

“I’m sure that’s not true,” Romelle frowned.

Lance shrugged, reaching across the table to grab a slice of toast. He buttered it generously before resting it on his plate while he filled his goblet with orange juice.

“I heard that Keith was really upset about it,” someone, one of the Ravenclaw fourth-years, said in a low voice down at the other end of the table. “The Durmstrang students were saying that he pried Lotor off of Lance just so he could yell at him.”

Lance winced. Like he needed another reminder of that particular moment.

Romelle grimaced, apparently she had heard the fourth-year as well. “Is that true?” She asked, as she poked at the scrambled eggs on her plate with a fork.

Lance nodded. “We were finally getting along, too,” he confessed, knowing that of all his friends, Romelle had been witness to the transformation from aminosity to friendly rivalry on the quidditch pitch. “Now, I’m pretty sure he hates me again. No, I’m positive that he hates me now.”

“Merlin, that sucks, but at least you don’t have to worry about playing quidditch together anymore,” Romelle offered.

Lance rolled his eyes, “You’re right. Instead I have to worry about competing against him in three deadly trials.”

“Right,” Romelle said, biting her lip. “That’s not better. Sorry.”

“At least you’re trying,” Lance said, picking up his toast and shoving it unceremoniously into his mouth.
“It will get better, Lance. It’s just... hot gossip right now. It will die down, eventually.”

Lance sighed. “I really hope that you’re right.”

“Hey, Álvarez,” someone called, and Lance looked up to see a kid from Slytherin approaching his table. “Heard you think you’re better than the Gryffindor Champion.”

“I never said that, Griffin,” Lance groaned. He recognised the kid, a seventh year who played as a Beater on the Slytherin quidditch team. They had gone toe to toe (or... broom to broom?) more times than Lance would care to admit.

James Griffin crossed his arms across his chest. “You didn’t have to. Everyone is saying it for you.”

Lance swallowed nervously. At least up in the air they were pretty evenly matched, but here... here with Lance sitting down at the table with toast crumbs still on the front of his school robes, and James towering above him with his bad haircut...

The guy was pretty freaking intimidating.

“Listen, man,” Lance said, his voice rising in pitch, “I don’t want to start any trouble.”

James scowled. “You should have thought of that before you tried to steal attention away from the real pureblood Champions.” He made some kind of motion with his hands, three other students appeared as if out of thin air, flanking James.

“We just thought that maybe you needed a reminder that muggleborn scum should stick to what they know.”

“Nope, no reminder necessary,” Lance insisted, holding up his hands in surrender. He felt his chest ache at yet another reminder that his blood made him different from most of his other classmates, that there were people in the school who wouldn’t accept him purely because of his muggle heritage.

“And maybe you should shut your mouth,” Romelle snapped.

“Aw, does the little mudblood need his girlfriend to fight his battles for him?” One of the cronies, a Gryffindor, asked. Lance thought her name was Nadia Rizavi, the tone of her voice mocking, usually she stayed quiet compared to James.

“Don’t call me that,” Lance snapped, his blood pounding underneath his skin. He clenched his hands into a fist in the pockets of his school robes, letting his nails carve crescent moons into his palm.

He half-expected Romelle to jump in with some kind of retort about how she wasn’t his girlfriend, which would undoubtedly set off another round of brutal comments, but she didn’t.

“Come on, Lance,” she said, as she stood from the table. “Let’s go to class.”

Lance followed her lead and pushed away from the table, feeling a little bit more secure now that he was the same height as James and his friends.

“Running away?” James asked. “If you’re scared of us, I’d hate to see what you have to face in the trials.”

Lance ignored him, trying to step past the four students.

One of them, the Slytherin boy standing to James’ right, stepped out into his path as Lance tried to get around him.
“Seriously?!?” Lance spat, “How old are you?”

The Slytherin boy smirked, as he stepped in front of Lance once again when he tried to step around… oh what was his name… Ryan Kinkade or something… again.

“Get out of my way,” Lance muttered, as he tried to shove past the older boy.

The boy brought his hands up, slamming them into his chest right as Lance tried to make his way past him, Lance’s own momentum working against him to send him flying backwards onto the ground.

He landed painfully on his wrists, but even the sharp stinging wasn’t enough to distract him from the laughter echoing around the Great Hall.

Romelle crouched down to help him up, but Lance shrugged her off.

He pushed himself off the ground, and glared at James and his friends.

The Great Hall was ringing with laughter, the kind of laughter only a crowd with a common enemy they’ve just seen humiliated can muster.

“Did that hurt?” The Ravenclaw girl, the Icelandic girl, Ina Leifsdottir, beside James asked with a smirk. “You might want to go the the hospital wing. Maybe you won’t be able to compete in the Triwizard Tournament…”

“We wish!” Someone from the Slytherin table hollered. “Mudbloods don’t deserve to represent Hogwarts!”

“And Álvarez doesn’t deserve to represent Ravenclaw,” one of the boys in his year added. Lance snapped his head towards the boy, his chest aching. They were roommates, he thought they were at least kind of friends. Oh Merlin, he would have to share a dorm with him afterwards.

“Yeah,” someone agreed. “We want a Champion who actually knows what he’s doing!”

“And not just a dumb, dirty cheater who faked his way into the tournament!”

“Right!” Someone at the Gryffindor table agreed, drawing Lance’s eyes across the room. He stared back at the crowd of people who looked at him with so much contempt or anger or amusement.

He didn’t realise how much everyone hated him.

“More like faked his way into this school!”

His breath shortened as he took a step back, panic beginning to cloud his vision. Why wouldn’t they all stop staring at him? He looked around the room again, eager to find a friendly face, but his eyes landed on Pidge and Matt.

They sat at the far end of the Ravenclaw table, eyes firmly looking down. Lance felt his chest ache more at the sight of two of his best friends refusing to come to his aid.

“Place your bets now everyone, mine is that he doesn’t make it five minutes in the tournament. Merlin knows he isn’t smart enough for it.”

He could hear faintly the sounds of three dissenting voices over the constant laughter, sneers and taunts. Romelle, lovely Romelle, was arguing with James. Lance found Hunk, trying to stop some of his fellow hufflepuffs from shouting more cries of ‘mudblood’ and ‘cheater’. And there was Shiro,
the only teacher present, trying to call the great hall to order again. Lance could see the anger and concern written on his face as he stomped forward, shouting at people taunting him, his gaze instinctively flicking over to the Gryffindor table.

That was the cherry on top of the cake. Lance couldn’t help the way he focused on a familiar mop of black hair that was angled down, his eyes on his empty plate in front of him. So Keith was here, too. Great. He really did despise him now. Perfect.

“Aw who cares! We all know that he’ll never amount to anything anyway, there’s no way in hell the mudblood will ever be as good as Keith.”

Okay, that was enough. Lance could feel the tears pricking in his eyes, but he fought them back. He wouldn’t.

Trying to ignore everyone, Lance shouldered past the Gryffindor girl, who stepped aside and let him past this time, as he raced from the room.

He thought that he could hear Romelle calling out for him, but with the still constant insults being thrown and Shiro shouting at the students for doing so, Lance didn’t bother to turn around to check.

<<<<<<>

A soft knocking on the door to the boys’ dormitory interrupted Lance’s peace and quiet. Lance paused, his quill resting above the potions essay he had been working on just long enough for a large blob of ink to drip down and ruin the page.

Great.

But the knocking… that was weird. Because if it was any of the other boys, they would have just stormed in.

The doorknob turned, and Lance watched as the large oak door eased open just far enough for Romelle to slip inside.

“Hey, Lance,” she said quietly, like she was speaking to a wild animal that was easily spooked. “Is it okay if I come inside?”

“Sure,” Lance answered with a shrug. He was kind of surprised to see her up here; while it wasn’t strictly forbidden for girls to be in the boys dormitory, it wasn’t exactly encouraged, either.

Still, Lance placed his ruined potions essay and quill on his nightstand, scooting over on the bed so that there was room for Romelle.

“How are you doing?” She asked, as she climbed up onto the bed and sat down gingerly on the edge. She toed off her dress shoes and brought her legs up in front of her, resting her chin on her knees. “It’s been two days, Lance.”

Lance sighed, closing his eyes as he let his head drop back against the headboard. “I know. I just… can’t, Ro. I can’t go out there and have them all laughing and staring at me.”

“You need to go to class, Lance,” Romelle said sadly. “We really have to study for our N.E.W.T’s this year, you can’t afford to let your grades slip.”

Lance chuckled darkly. “What does it matter? Apparently no one in the wizarding world even wants me here. I should just go back home to Cuba.”
“That isn’t true,” Romelle protested, “and I know that you know that isn’t true deep down inside or you would have already demanded for Headmaster Holt to let you floo home.”

Lance didn’t answer, letting the silence settle between them. It wasn’t a bad silence, not like how the silences with other people could be, where Lance would find himself rushing to fill them without thinking of the words spilling out of his mouth, but it was still taut with the tension of their subject matter. The Triwizard Tournament was looming in the room like an unwanted houseguest.

“You know,” Romelle said, after a few minutes had passed, “Professor Shirogane has really been cracking down on the people making all those mean comments about you. He gave James and his minions detention out in the Forbidden Forest. The threat of that has shut down a lot of the others.”

“For now,” Lance said. “Until I show my face again.”

“You can’t hide in here forever,” Romelle said, reaching out to place a hand on Lance’s knee. “We miss you, your friends miss you.”

“I… I’ll try,” Lance allowed at last. “I’ll go to Charms this afternoon.”

Romelle smiled, “Good.” She paused, before reaching down and producing an all-too-familiar shaped box from her school bag. “Do you want a chocolate frog?” She asked, “I thought you might need more convincing.”

“So you were going to bribe me into going to class?” Lance asked. “You know me so well!” He leaned forward, snatching the chocolate frog away from her.

“Well other than breakfast the other day, I had no idea if you’d eaten,” Romelle defended, as she climbed further up onto the bed so that she was sitting beside him against the headboard.

“It’s kind of weird, something has been bringing me food,” Lance admitted. “I never see what it is, but when I leave to go to the bathroom and come back, there’s a plate of food sitting on my bed. It’s actually pretty great.”

He unwrapped the chocolate frog, “I always feel weird eating these,” Lance confessed as the frog hopped out of the box and onto the blue blanket he and Romelle were sitting atop of.

Romelle scooped up the chocolate frog before it could escape. “Really?” She asked, “They’re my favorite.”

Lance shrugged, “I could never get over how they moved.” He shuddered as Romelle bit into the chocolate frog. “I did always like the cards, though.”

He pulled out the card that had come with the frog, tipping it from side to side. “Hey, look, it’s Headmaster Altea.”

“Allura’s dad?” Romelle asked, leaning over to look. “That’s awesome. You should show her in Charms, later.”

Lance froze. He had completely managed to forget that Allura and the other Beauxbatons students were in Charms class with him. Shit.

“Lance, it will be fine,” Romelle assured him, dropping her head down onto his shoulder. “And if it isn’t, then I will personally kick all of their asses.”

“Do you promise?” Lance asked.
Romelle grinned. “Absolutely.”

Ok, Lance thought to himself as he followed Romelle into the Charms classroom. *I can do this.*

Professor Blaytz smiled at him encouragingly as Lance dropped into his usual seat. He and Romelle had arrived early, so that hopefully they wouldn’t have to deal with all the attention of a late arrival. In fact, they were practically the first two in the classroom besides a few of the Beauxbatons students.

Lance sunk down into his usual seat, eager to avoid drawing any additional attention to himself. He pulled his Charms textbook out from his bag and flipped it open to a random page, pretending to read so that he wouldn’t have to make eye contact with anyone.

The other Ravenclaw sixth years filed into the room as it drew closer to the start of class, a few Beauxbatons students arriving as well. All too soon, the chair next to Lance was drawn away from the table, and Allura slipped into the seat she had claimed as her own.

Lance watched her out of the corner of his eye, noticing the way that her gaze flickered over to him before settling on the blackboard at the front of the room.

“Lance,” she greeted quietly, her accent rolling over the syllables of his name. “It’s good to see you.”

Lance stiffened in his seat. “It’s… uh… good to see you, too, Allura.”

Allura turned to face him, and the weight of her eyes was enough to make Lance look up from his textbook to meet her blue gaze.

“I just wanted to tell you,” Allura said, dropping her voice so that Lance was the only one who could hear her. “That I think it was wrong the way everyone else reacted. Especially Lotor,” she spat the name, and Lance found himself wondering how they obviously seemed to already know one another.

“It’s fine, Allura, you don’t have to apologize for them,” Lance said.

Allura shook her head, her pale hair falling around her shoulders. “It was unnecessary and cruel. You obviously had no control over the situation, something that you went out of your way to prove. I spoke to my father about the way that he reacted, and he wishes to extend his sincerest apologies.”

Lance felt a faint blush creeping across his cheeks at the thought of Allura talking to her dad about him. “Tell him it’s fine. Really. Out of everyone, he hardly had the worst reaction.”

Allura scowled. “Yes. I heard about what happened in the Great Hall the other day. I’m so sorry, Lance. While many of the Beauxbatons students are upset with the selection of an additional Champion, they would never be so openly cruel.”

Lance turned his eyes back down towards the book in front of him. Great, just what he needed to hear, that the other schools were unhappy with him competing.

“I, for one,” Allura continued, “am looking forward to having another person to compete with.”

Lance snapped his gaze back up to look at her. “What?” He asked, flabbergasted. “Seriously?”

“Of course,” Allura said with a small smile. “After all, that’s just one more person that I can say I
beat when I win the competition.”

Lance grinned at her, “I wouldn’t be too sure, maybe the underdog will surprise you.”

Allura wrinkled her nose. “Under… dog?” She echoed.

“The person not expected to win,” Lance explained. “So… me.”

Allura shook her head. “I would say the person not expected to win, at least from my perspective, is Lotor. I plan on taking him down as quickly as possible.”

“Do you know him?” Lance asked. “Sorry! Maybe that was too personal, you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

“You’re fine,” Allura replied. “And to answer your question, yes, I know him. My parents used to be very close with his mother, Haggar, and we were… inseparable, for a while.”

Lance studied Allura, “You mean you dated,” he supplied.

The girl shrugged, “And we did not part on the best of terms. I am looking forward to taking his pride down a few notches.”

“Want any help?” Lance offered, “I’m always down to help a pretty lady kick some ass.”

Allura smiled, “I would… appreciate the aid.”

Lance stuck out his hand, “Win or lose, Lotor comes dead last, agreed?”

Allura wrapped her fingers around his, shaking his hand. “Agreed.”

“Hey guys,” Romelle whispered, interrupting them, “if you’re done with your little teamwork strategy session, you might want to start paying attention. Professor Blaytz started class, like, ten minutes ago.”

Oops. Lance pulled out a piece of parchment and quill from his bag, quickly copying down the notes that Professor Blaytz had already added to the board.

At first, Charms class had seemed like it was going to be relatively uneventful. Sure, there was his talk with Allura, but she was cool, and they had decided to work together to take down that jackass Lotor… so that was progress!

But, of course, nothing could ever be that easy.

About halfway through class, Professor Blaytz had them split up into small groups to practice the shield charm that they were working on, and Lance ended up separated from his friends (was Allura a friend? Lance wasn’t sure, but after today, he thought that maybe she was). He was in a group with Hira, one of the Ravenclaw sixth years that he knew roomed with Romelle, and Olia, a quiet girl with glasses almost as large as her face.

“Okay,” Olia said, pulling out her wand. “Do you want to do the shield or the offensive spell first?” She asked.

Lance shrugged. “I’m fine with either.”
“Lance, you do the shield,” Hira instructed. “Olia and I will cast the offensive spells first.”

Lance took a few steps backwards so that there was enough room for them all to practice their footwork.

Lance slashed his wand through the air in front of him, “Protego!” He shouted, watching with satisfaction as a glowing blue barrier appeared in front of him.

Olia flicked her wand and muttered the incantation for the Jelly-Legs Hex, which bounced harmlessly off of Lance’s shield.

“Good job, Lance!” She said, giving him a thumbs up. “My spell couldn’t pierce your barrier.”

“Watch out,” Hira snapped, shoving Olia off to the side. She jerked her wand up, flicking it through the air. The bright blue light of a Full Body-Bind spell came streaking through the air towards Lance just as Hira shouted out “Petrificus Totalus!”

The blue energy crackled against Lance’s shield, which flickered slightly against the onslaught, but managed to maintain its shape.

“Your shield is weak,” Hira commented. “It only took two spells to weaken it considerably. Shoddy spellcasting like that is never going to hold up in the Triwizard Tournament.”

Lance blinked at her. “The shield charm is an incredibly difficult spell,” he said, confused. “Most adults can’t even cast it. I just successfully cast it on my first try and you want to complain about how it barely lasted through two spells in a row?”

“Yes.” Hira snapped. “Because you’re representing Ravenclaw now, and I don’t want you to be a complete embarrassment to our house.”

“Hira,” Olia whispered, sounding shocked.

“Our reputation is resting in the hands of this idiot,” Hira said, crossing her arms. “Excuse me for trying to make sure he’ll at least last past the first trial.”

“Well you could be a little nicer about it,” Lance snapped, anger rising up in him. It wasn’t enough for people to pick on him in the Great Hall, but now they had to do it in class, too? “Whatever,” Lance muttered, storming past her, “I’m out of here.”

He had left his school bag on his seat back at his desk, but Lance could hardly bring himself to care. Hopefully Romelle would grab it for him.

Fuck this. He shouldn’t have come to class today.

The Ravenclaws hated him for embarrassing them, the Gryffindors hated him for taking the attention away from their Champion, the other houses just hated him, the other schools hated him for giving them a disadvantage against Hogwarts. This sucked. This whole situation sucked.

“Lance!” Professor Blaytz called, “Class isn’t over for another twenty minutes!”

But Lance ignored him, slipping out the door and letting it fall shut behind him.

He traveled through the familiar hallways that led back to the Ravenclaw common room, which would at least be blissfully empty since everyone was supposed to be in class.

He could feel tears forming in his eyes, and he reached up to wipe them away before anyone could...
see them. Not that there was anyone around to see.

Lance paced the third floor hallways, heading in the direction of the stairs that would take him up to the Ravenclaw common room. He was so distracted by his own thoughts that he didn’t realize anyone else was in the hallway with him until he felt two warm hands reach out to grab onto his shoulders.

“Lance! Aren’t you supposed to be in Charms class right now?” An all-too-familiar voice asked.

Lance blinked quickly, trying to clear the remaining tears from his eyes, before he looked up to see Professor Shirogane looking down at him, a concerned expression on his face.

“I… I- uh… I was just in Charms?” Lance offered.

“Are you alright?” Shiro asked, and he sounded so genuinely concerned that Lance almost started crying again.

“I’m fine,” Lance insisted, reaching up with one of his hands to rub at his eyes.

“Lance,” Shiro said slowly, before shaking his head. “You didn’t come to class yesterday.”

Lance bit his lip. “I know.”

Shiro studied him, before sighing. “Well, come on, let’s forget about that. I’ve actually been waiting to see you. Let’s go up to my office, okay?”

Lance nodded, and he trailed behind Shiro into the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. Shiro led him up a short flight of stairs to a balcony against the far side of the room, before opening the door and letting Lance inside.

Lance had never seen Shiro’s office before. It was neat, with bookcases full of leather-bound volumes pushed against the walls. A large mahogany desk took up the middle of the room, and posters of the wand movements for defensive spells covered the walls. A cage with some kind of magical animal in it was resting on the ground near the door, and Lance wasn’t sure, but he was pretty sure it was a Niffler.

“Have a seat,” Shiro said, waving a hand towards the comfortable armchair on the front side of the desk, while he made his way around and sat on the opposite side of the desk.

Lance followed Shiro’s lead and sat down, silently praying to whatever god there was that his face wasn’t red and blotchy from crying.

“So, Lance,” Shiro said. “How are you?”

“I’m fine,” Lance lied, glancing away from Shiro’s steady gaze.

“Lance, you don’t have to pretend to be okay if you aren’t,” Shiro said.

But that wasn’t something Lance was used to. He came from a big family, and part of coming from a big family means that people are usually too distracted to notice if something is wrong with you, especially when you’re gone for nine months out of the year.

“I’m fine,” Lance insisted, making Shiro frown.

“Do you want some chocolate?” Shiro asked, pulling open one of his desk drawers and taking out a muggle chocolate bar. He pulled the wrapper down, breaking off a piece of the chocolate and
handing it to Lance.

Lance accepted the candy eagerly. It had been too long since he had chocolate that didn’t move when he tried to take a bite of it.

“So are you going to tell me how you really are?” Shiro asked, “Or are we just going to sit here in awkward silence? Because I’m fine with either.”

Lance smiled despite himself, Shiro really was the best teacher Hogwarts had ever had. “I left Charms class early,” he admitted.

“I figured as much,” Shiro said. “How come?”

Lance shrugged. “It was my first class back after… hiding… in my dorm for the past few days. And I thought it would be fine. Allura was being really nice about everything, but then Professor Blaytz had us split up into groups to work on our defensive spells. One of the girls in my year told me that I’m an embarrassment to our house. So I just… couldn’t take it anymore.”

Shiro nodded slowly, “I thought it might have been something like that, especially after what happened in the Great Hall the other day.”

“Romelle told me that you gave James detention out in the Forbidden Forest,” Lance said, biting his lip. “Thank you. For that.”

Shiro scowled, “If it were up to me I would have suspended him, but I figured detention in the Forbidden Forest was almost as good.” Shiro broke off another piece of chocolate and passed it over to Lance. “So it’s clear that you haven’t been feeling well ever since the incident in the Great Hall, then.”

“Am I that obvious?” Lance joked, but it fell flat. “Yeah, no. I’ve pretty much just been avoiding showing my face anywhere.”

“You shouldn’t have to do that, Lance, you haven’t done anything wrong.”

Lance shrugged. “I think the majority of the school would disagree with you on that one.”

“And what do you think?” Shiro asked.

Lance frowned. “What do I think about what?”

“About the Goblet of Fire choosing you.”

“I think it made a mistake,” Lance admitted. “There’s no way that I’m supposed to be the Hogwarts Champion. I mean, Keith is… Keith is Keith. He’s your star pupil, he’s gonna be an auror. Everyone knows that he was the right choice.”

“But, Lance, as much as I am loathe to agree with him, you heard what Professor Slav said. The chance that the Goblet made any kind of error is extremely slim. The Goblet of Fire chose you for a reason, Lance. It didn’t just choose Keith. It choose you as well.”

“I know,” Lance admitted.

“And is that really how you feel? That Keith deserves this more than you do?” Shiro asked, frowning slightly.

“Isn’t it?” Lance grimaced.
Shiro shook his head. “Lance, you’re one of the best students in your year when it comes to Charms and Defense Against the Dark Arts. Professor Blaytz and I have talked about whether or not you should be offered the chance for some advanced studies next year, and we both agreed that you could handle it.”

“R-Really?” Lance asked, blushing. Two of his favorite teachers had talked about him. To each other. Right. Okay. Cool.

Shiro nodded. “Really. But, with everything that’s going on with the Triwizard Tournament, I think it might be a good idea to move some of our plans up.”

“What does that mean?” Lance asked, leaning forward in his seat.

“It means I think you should join Keith and I once a week for a private session on offensive and defensive spells,” Shiro explained.

Lance sucked in a surprised breath. “I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” Shiro asked, “I think that it would be good for you, Lance.”

Lance bit his lip. He couldn’t just blurt out hey I’m pretty sure Keith hates me and if I show up to his private training session with his mentor he might actually kill me. Right? “Keith and I are competing against one another,” he finally settled on. “I’m not sure that it would be… appropriate for us to train together.”

Shiro waved one of his hands, “I’ve already spoken to Keith about it. He’s fine with the plan.”

Lance felt like his eyes were about to pop out of his head. “Oh… well… then…”

“Then you’ll come,” Shiro declared, as if Lance’s hesitation had settled the matter. He smiled, and Lance wasn’t quite sure, but he thought that the expression on Shiro’s face was almost… proud.

And there was no way that Lance would ever be able to say no to that face, so he found himself nodding. “I’ll come,” he agreed.

“Why don’t you meet Keith and I here next Monday after dinner?” Shiro asked.

“S-Sure,” Lance said, rising from his seat. “I’ll, uh, see you then.”

Lance practically shot from the room, giving Shiro a tiny wave over his shoulder, before he reached the safety of the Hogwarts corridor.

He was blushing, he could feel the heat burning his cheeks, as he stopped just outside of the classroom door and rested his back against the wall.

What the fuck.

Had he really just agreed to train with Shiro and Keith?!

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After his conversation with Shiro, Lance found that he was too restless to return to the common room. Everyone else was still in class, so he could wander the hallways in peace without the fear of anyone interrupting his quiet thoughts. Lance wasn’t typically a fan of the quiet, preferring to fill it with mindless chatter, but after the events of the last few days, it was nice to feel welcome in Hogwarts again. Even if the only people around were the enchanted portraits.
He found his feet carrying him downstairs and out of the front gate before Lance had really decided where he was going. Maybe he would wander down to Professor Coran’s hut, he hadn’t seen the older man in a while. Coran was practically an uncle to Lance at this point. Maybe he would have some friendly advice about the Triwizard Tournament and everything else that was going on…

And that’s probably what he would have done if a couple of older Hufflepuff boys on their way back to the castle from the Herbology greenhouse hadn’t stepped into his path.

“Sorry, little Ravenclaw,” one of them, who Lance recognized as Shay’s brother Rax, said in a low voice. “But we need to have a little chat.”

The other Hufflepuffs continued on towards the castle, shooting curious glances back towards Rax.

Rax crosses his arms across his chest. “Hunk has been causing some trouble in our house by defending you,” he stated simply. “My family does not approve of troublemakers. We like to avoid any additional attention.”

“So shouldn’t you be talking to Hunk?” Lance asked, “I didn’t ask him to stand up for me.”

“I have tried speaking to both your friend and my sister, but your friend is stubborn and my sister is blind to his faults,” Rax said coolly. “But make no mistake, if this behavior continues from your friend, the Balmera family will never fully accept him as Shay’s partner.”

“So you’re telling me if Hunk doesn’t back down, your family won’t let them date?” Lance asked, reeling backwards. “You’re crazy! This isn’t the eighteen-hundreds, people are allowed to date whoever they want to!”

“Maybe in your world, muggleborn,” Rax said. “But pureblooded families have different beliefs. The fact that your friend is a half-blood is already working against him. I would advise you to not cause any further trouble for him. Tell Hunk to let you handle yourself, which should be no problem for a Triwizard Champion,” Rax sneered.

“Leave Hunk and Shay alone,” Lance snapped. “I’ll tell Hunk to stay out of it.”

He would never be able to forgive himself if he was the reason that Hunk and Shay couldn’t be together...

Rax nodded, looking entirely too satisfied with himself. “Good luck in your Tournament, muggleborn, I have a feeling you may need it.”

Lance stiffened, but didn’t say anything as Rax turned and walked away.

Once the older boy wasn’t looking, Lance flipped him off. “Fuck you, Rax,” he muttered.

Ignoring the path that split off and headed down to Coran’s cottage, Lance followed the path that lead down to the lake instead.

Suddenly, he didn’t think he would be very good company.

Because this? This was almost worse than the people that were being assholes to him. He could take it, sure he might hide out in his room for a few days to avoid the worst of it, but he could take it. But threatening Hunk? Probably the nicest guy on the planet Hunk? That was an all new kind of low.

Lance dropped down onto the grass, far enough away from the edge of the water that the ground was still dry.
He pulled at the grass around him, yanking it up by its roots.

He would have to talk to Hunk about what Rax has said, he didn’t want his friend sacrificing anything on his account. But that was something he could worry about later. He had other issues on his mind right now. Like Shiro and private lessons and Keith. And the fact that those private lessons taught by Shiro were with Keith.

Lance let out a huff of air.

This was crazy. Shiro was crazy. He couldn’t have actually talked to Keith about it, there was no way that Keith would agree. Especially not after how he had reacted when the Goblet of Fire had chosen Lance as well as himself.

It just… didn’t make sense.

He could feel tears prickling in his eyes. God, this was so stupid. He should have never put his name in for the freaking Tournament.

Lance sniffled, tossing the handful of grass back down onto the ground.

He wasn’t sure how long he sat there, staring out at the surface of the lake, watching the giant squid break the surface a few times. He could feel the tears tracing paths down his cheeks, but he didn’t bother to wipe them away. It’s not like there was anyone around to see.

“Is anyone sitting here?” Someone asked, making Lance snap his head up. Crap. So apparently there were people around to see.

He wiped hastily at his eyes when he saw who had approached him without him noticing. Keith stood, awkwardly shifting his weight from one foot to the other, his hands shoved into the pockets of his school robes.

“N-No,” Lance said, hoping he didn’t sound as flustered as he felt.

Keith dropped down so that he was sitting on the grass next to Lance, just a few inches of space between them. “Are you okay?” He asked.

Lance chuckled darkly, wiping at his cheeks. “Do you even care?”


“That’s not what it seemed like the other day,” Lance said.


Lance turned his head, so that he could study the older boy. “If you’re here to shout at me some more, could you please just get it over with? I’m really not in the mood.”

“I’m not going to yell at you,” Keith said, sounding flabbergasted.

Lance raised an eyebrow.

“I’m not,” Keith insisted. “I’m here to apologize.”

Wait. What?

“What?” Lance asked aloud.
"The way I reacted the other day was... terrible," Keith said softly. "I shouldn’t have said those things."

Lance shrugged. "Why not? They were true. At least, the whole ‘Lance doesn’t deserve to be the Champion’ part."

"Actually," Keith said quietly, averting his gaze, "I actually do think that ‘Lance deserves to be a Champion’. I was pretty sure that you were going to get it."

Lance stiffened. "Seriously?" He asked, unable to tell if Keith was being serious or not.

Keith nodded. "I think that’s why I lashed out at you. Because everyone expected me to get in, but I was so sure that I wouldn’t. And then I did. But you did, too, and suddenly I didn’t know what to think. All I’ve ever wanted was to do something that would make my mom proud, and this was my chance. So when it seemed like there was a possibility that might have been taken away from me... that me being chosen was just a mistake and you were taking my place, I... I took it out on you. You didn’t deserve that, Lance. It wasn’t right or fair for me to do that. I’m sorry."

Lance shrugged. "It’s fine, Keith."

Keith whipped his head around to stare at Lance, his gaze fierce enough that it made Lance flinch. "It’s not fine!" He exclaimed. "You can’t just shrug it off like that, Lance. I was a complete *dick* to you."

"Honestly, it’s whatever," Lance said tiredly, "I’m dealing with this whole situation. You shouldn’t have to deal with the fact that I can’t withdraw from the Tournament."

Keith blinked at him. "You still want to withdraw?" He asked sounding surprised.

"I wish the Goblet had never *fucking* chose me," Lance admitted. "Everyone is right when they say that I don’t deserve it. I’m nothing special."

"Lance..." Keith said quietly, but Lance ignored him.

"I would have supported you, y’know," he admitted. "I was happy when you were chosen. And Pidge was right when they said I only entered because I wanted the attention, but... I didn’t want it like this. I didn’t want to be treated like an outsider."

"Pidge said that?" Keith asked, frowning. "I thought they were your friend."

"They were, but they’re upset with me about getting into the Tournament. Pidge and Matt both think that I cheated and that I won’t tell them how I did it."

Keith raised an eyebrow. "But you went under Veritaserum. You didn’t cheat. They’re two of your best friends, Lance, they shouldn’t doubt you like that."

"I know, but that doesn’t seem to matter to anyone," Lance said sadly. "I mean, I thought you were my friend, too, but you still thought that I had done it."

"And I can’t apologise enough for doubting you for even a second, Lance. After all, I’ve known you for years now and I know logically you would never have cheated." Keith admitted. "And," he added, "it mattered to me. That you took the Veritaserum, I mean. It made me realize how much of an idiot I was being." Keith paused for a second, looking away briefly before continuing. "Ever since we were escorted out of the room after you took it, I’ve been kicking myself. Lance, I don’t know if you could ever forgive me for how I treated you, but I just... I need you to know that I..."
didn’t mean a single word that I said. I’m so sorry.”

The look on Keith’s face was so open, so earnest. Lance wasn’t sure that he had ever seen Keith look like that before. And he had definitely never seen that kind of look directed at him.

And… besides, maybe it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world to have a friend right now.

“Look, I’d love to differ with you,” Lance teased, trying to fall back into their more comfortable banter. “But we both already know that you’re an idiot. You didn’t need to give me a speech for me to know that. I’ve known that since second year.”

“Shut up,” Keith said, but he was obviously biting his lip to keep from smiling.

“And… I accept your apology. Thanks, Keith.”

“I don’t deserve your forgiveness.”

Lance shrugged. “Maybe not, but I’m giving it to you anyway. I… I’m not saying you’re fully forgiven Keith, but I can see how much you mean what you say and what more can I ask for? You’ll just have to make it up to me, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Keith agreed, with a nod. “Okay, I can do that.”

“Okay,” Lance said, tipping his head up to look at the sky.

After a few seconds of quiet, Keith let out a long breath. “I heard about what happened today.”

Lance stiffened. “How?” It was already spreading around the school?

“Shiro told me,” Keith admitted. “After you guys talked, he saw you down here from the window in his office and thought you looked upset so he came to find me.”

Oh. Well that made sense.

“Because he thought you should apologize?” Lance asked, suddenly wondering if everything Keith had just said was because Shiro had said that he should apologize. Or maybe not everything because Lance could see that Keith wasn’t lying… but… some of it?

Keith shook his head. “Because he knew that I wanted to apologize.”

“Oh,” Lance said softly.

“And I also wanted to say that I’m sorry I didn’t step in when all those kids were picking on you in the Great Hall the other day, I just… sat there. I just sat there and let them say all of those terrible things about you. I mean, afterwards I realised what I’d done, or rather hadn’t done, and confronted Rizavi about it in the common room. She and the rest of Griffin’s cronies should never have said that stuff about you. She in particular won’t be saying much of anything else for a while.”

“What do you mean by that?” Lance exclaimed. Because no way had Keith managed to get one of the biggest assholes in Hogwarts to stop being said asshole.

“Well…” Keith paused, all of a sudden looking way too pleased with himself. “She won’t be saying anything until the langlock jinx I cast on her wears off. She tried to duel me after I politely told her to fuck off and leave you alone, as well as stop saying all of those awful things, and so I shut her up before she could start anything. It’ll only last another day or so, but she can’t go to the teachers about it because she was the one who started it.” Keith gave a small, dark chuckle, before composing
himself again. “I just… needed to get people to at least stop treating you like that. Make up for treating you like that myself in a way, I guess. Yeah.”

“That’s…” Lance couldn’t help but snort. “Keith, this apology was already enough, you didn’t need to duel a girl for my honour or anything stupidly reckless like that, you dumbass Gryffindor. Besides, it’s not like she said anything outrageous or anything. Still, thank you for sticking up for me. Looks like you’ve already been making it up to me, and I didn’t even know it.”

“What do you mean nothing outrageous?” Keith shouted, all too suddenly looking way too incensed. “That’s insane, Lance. Rizavi shouldn’t have said what she did. None of them should have.”

“I mean… they were right,” Lance said, picking at the grass next to his leg. “I should never have been chosen. No one wanted a dumb, pathetic, worthless mudblood as the Hogwarts Champion.”

Keith’s shoulders stiffened. “Never call yourself that again,” he said sternly.

Lance reached up and wiped tears away from his cheeks, he wasn’t even sure when he had started crying again. Probably at some point when he realised how genuine Keith was being. “I won’t,” he agreed, his voice cracking.

“I’m serious, Lance,” Keith said, his voice cold and dangerous. “I don’t… you shouldn’t think that about yourself. Your blood status isn’t something to… to be ashamed of. It doesn’t make you weaker. Or any of that other bullshit that people say. Okay?”

“Okay,” Lance said shakily. “I know… I know that you’re right. It’s just… people have been saying stuff like that since first year. But it was never directed at me, you know? And it feels different when people are saying it to your face, rather than whispering about you behind your back. But… I won’t say… it… again. I promise.”

Keith nodded, looking satisfied. “Good.” He pushed himself off the ground, holding out a hand to Lance.

Lance wrapped his fingers around Keith’s, letting the older boy pull him up to his feet.

“So can we go back to being friends now?” Keith asked. “I really want to be friends again. Being friends was great.”

Lance nodded. “I’d like that. I’d really, really like that.”

Friends seemed to be something he was in short supply of lately.

It wasn’t until they were almost back to the castle that Lance realized Keith still hadn’t let go of his hand.
Chapter Six

Chapter Summary

Lessons, labels and life continue on at Hogwarts, despite all the drama and happenstance. The training sessions begin, scrolls are given, and there are... buttons?

Chapter Notes

Everyone, thank you so much for reading, leaving kudos, and especially commenting. You all have a piece of our hearts for being so incredibly sweet. It's lovely to hear all of your thoughts on what's happened in the fic, as well as what's going to happen! We hope that you enjoy this chapter <3333

- @slowklancing

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lance paused outside of the door to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. Was he seriously about to go in and have a private training session with Shiro and Keith?

He took a deep breath, before pushing open the door.

He hadn’t been able to eat anything at dinner, too nervous about tonight’s private session, but at least the anticipation had been a welcome distraction from the icy treatment he was receiving from the other students. Well, things were a little better now that he and Keith were back on speaking terms, the Gryffindor students were laying off of him, at least.

It wasn’t enough, however.

He couldn’t just ignore the fiery glares, the whispered insults and the hushed conversations happening around him. Sure, no one had insulted him to his face since the Great Hall fiasco, but was this really any better?

Lance shook his head, trying to clear his mind. It was no use dwelling on that now. He had a bigger problem to deal with now.

Shiro and Keith were already inside the room, both of them in dueling stances at the front of the room, but they both dropped their stances when they noticed him.

“Lance,” Shiro greeted, “I’m glad that you came.”

“Hey,” Keith said, ever one with words.

“So, um, what are we working on today?” Lance asked, as he joined them in the front of the room, which was clear of desks and chairs.

“Since we still have no idea as to what the first trial is, Keith and I agreed that we should probably
practice some basic defensive and offensive spells.”

“We’re working on shielding in Charms,” Lance offered.

Shiro nodded. “Perfect. Lance, you work on defending then, while Keith casts offensive spells at you.”

“Sure,” Lance agreed with a nod, sliding his wand out of his robes.

He and Keith positioned themselves so that they were across from one another, while Shiro stepped off the the side so that he could observe.

“Whenever you’re ready, Lance,” Shiro said.

“Protego!” Lance exclaimed, the blue barrier flickering to life in front of him.

“Excellent!” Shiro said. “Maybe just adjust your footing, slide your back foot back and rotate it.”

Lance did as Shiro instructed, positioning himself so his body was slightly turned to the side.

“Now you’re a smaller target. Okay, Keith, let’s see what you’ve got.”

“Incendio!” Keith said, as he pointed his wand directly at Lance.

A streak of red-hot flame slammed into his shield, the energy crackling from the blow.

“Are you trying to light me on fire?!” Lance screeched.

Keith shrugged, “It’s my favorite offensive spell,” he said as if that explained everything.

“Of course it is,” Lance said, shaking his head slightly. “You’re just an insane person. Got it.”

“Maybe stick with hexes and jinxes,” Shiro said, sounding rightly concerned, “I don’t want my classroom to catch on fire.”

Keith nodded, before adjusting his grip on his wand. “Are you ready, Lance?” He asked.

“I was born ready,” Lance said, although he couldn’t help but be impressed by the fact that he was still holding up the shield.

“Flipendo!” Keith shouted, a stream of white light emerging from his wand.

The spell slammed into Lance’s shield, the force hard enough to send him skidding backwards, the shield spell dropping. “I always lose my connection on the second attack,” Lance admitted,

“That’s still really impressive, Lance,” Shiro said. “Shielding spells are incredibly difficult.”

Lance felt himself flush. “Thanks,” he said quietly, reaching up to rub at the back of his neck.

Ha, take that Hira.

“Not to mention shielding spells are usually used a a reflex against an attack,” Keith added with a shrug, “so they really only need to withstand one spell.”

“Okay,” Lance said with a small smile.

“Do you guys want to go again?” Shiro asked. “And then I’ll have you switch so Lance can practice
his offensive spells."

“Sounds good,” Keith agreed.

“Sure,” Lance nodded.

He took a deep breath. “Protego!”

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“You two did good today,” Shiro said later, when Lance and Keith were both sweaty and tired and had collapsed into twin heaps on the ground at the front of the DADA classroom.

“I’m so hungry,” Lance groaned.

“We just had dinner,” Keith said, raising an unimpressed eyebrow.

Lance shrugged. “Yeah, but I didn’t eat anything.”

“Always eat before training,” Keith said seriously. “Always.”

“Well I know that now!”

“Alright you two,” Shiro said, shaking his head. “Get out of here before you start bickering again. I can’t listen to any more of it.”

“Sure thing, Shiro,” Keith said, standing. “Come on, Lance, let’s go down to the kitchen and see if we can talk the staff into giving us food.”

“Seriously?” Lance asked, jumping up, his exhaustion forgotten.

“Seriously.”

“Bye, Shiro!” Lance called, as he followed Keith out of the room. “See you in class tomorrow!”

The door shut behind them, cutting off the sound of Shiro’s chuckles.

“I don’t know how you do that all the time,” Lance groaned, leaning against Keith. “I’m exhausted.”

Keith pushed him away. “You’re sweaty.”

“So are you,” Lance shot back.

“And you’ll get used to it,” Keith added. “The training, I mean.”

“You’re really good,” Lance admitted. “I don’t even know some of those hexes you were using.”

“Probably no one does,” Keith admitted. “Shiro created them himself.”

“Seriously?!” Lance exclaimed, his eyes widening. “That’s so cool.”

Keith nodded. “I have a training journal full of them. You can borrow it if you want to practice them.”

“That sounds incredible!” Lance said. “But, wait… you have a training journal? Is that like a diary?”

“Shut up, Lance,” Keith groaned.
“Oh my god, it totally is! Keith, you keep a diary? That is so cute,” Lance teased.

“If you keep this up, I won’t let you borrow it,” Keith warned, poking Lance.

“Fine,” Lance held up his hands in surrender.

Keith rolled his eyes. “Come on, I know a shortcut to the kitchens.”

“Seriously?” Lance asked, trailing behind Keith as the other boy led him to a portrait of a knight in full armor atop a horse. The knight bowed his head to them, and Keith reached up, tugging the portrait away from the wall to reveal a small stone staircase that descended down into the darkness.

“Lumos,” Keith whispered, his wand igniting to fill the secret passageway with light.

Lance stepped down into the staircase, shivering from the sudden chill in the air, while Keith carefully closed the portrait behind them.

“How did you find this?” Lance asked, fully aware of the fact that he sounded more than a little awed.

“I get bored, and I don’t sleep well, so I spend a lot of time exploring,” Keith said.

“And you don’t get caught?!”

“No… no. I’m really good at not being seen,” Keith said slowly.

“You must be,” Lance said with a whistle. “One time, Pidge and I tried to sneak down to the Hufflepuff dorms to hang out with Hunk but Iverson caught us and gave us detention for a week. I still shudder anytime I have to clean a cauldron.”

He thought that Keith gave a quiet chuckle, but he couldn’t be sure.

“Okay, see that crack of light in front of you?” Keith asked, suddenly much closer than he had been before, his breath ghosting across Lance’s neck.

Lance swallowed. “Yep,” he said, his voice coming out uncharacteristically high.

“That’s a tapestry, just pull it to the side and we’ll be on the basement near the kitchens. Nox,” Keith said quietly, his wand’s light disappearing, plunging them into darkness.

Lance reached down, and sure enough, he found his fingers brushing against the soft fabric of one of the many tapestries that adorned Hogwarts walls. He pushed it away from the wall just far enough to slip through, and then held it away from the secret passageway so that Keith could slip out as well.

Lance glanced around at the hallway they had just entered. Sure enough, he recognized it as being just around the corner from the kitchens and the Hufflepuff dorms.

“That is so cool,” he whispered.

“If you think that one’s cool,” Keith said, sounding smug, “you should see the one that takes you to Honeydukes.”

“Seriously?! Man, you’ve been holding out on me.”

Keith shook his head softly, his hair falling forward over his forehead, and Lance had the strangest urge to reach out and brush it back.
He shoved his hands into the pockets of his school robes instead.

Keith led Lance confidently around the corner and directly to a large, food-themed painting that was only making Lance more hungry.

Keith reached up, lightly running his finger along one of the pears in the painting.

The pear let out a soft giggle, and Lance would be surprised except that a giggling fruit was probably one of the more normal things at Hogwarts, before turning into a green handle.

“After you,” Keith said, as he pulled the door open.

“Do you need midnight snacks often?” Lance teased, as he stepped into the room.

And, wow, okay. The room that he had just entered was the same size of the Great Hall, with huge, vaulted ceilings. Five wooden tables identical to the ones in the Great Hall were placed around the room, and the opposite side of the room was almost entirely occupied by a large stone fireplace. But perhaps most surprising of all was the hundreds of little figures bush at work around the room, rolling dough, shaping pastries, cooking, or washing dishes.

“Hey, Mullet,” Lance whispered. “You mind explaining what I’m looking at right now?”

Keith blinked at him. “You’ve never seen House-Elves before?”

Lance shook his head, unable to tear his eyes away from the creatures. They came to about the height of his knee and many appeared to be dressed in rags or towels. “No,” Lance admitted. “Should I have?”

“Oh… well.. I guess not,” Keith replied. “Since you’re a muggleborn, I guess you wouldn’t have grown up around any, but House-Elves are really common in wizarding homes. They help with the cooking and cleaning and stuff.”

“I’ve been to the Holts’ house before, but they didn’t have one,” Lance said, keeping his voice quiet in case any of the weird little creatures were listening.

“Not everyone does,” Keith said, as he moved further into the room.

Lance followed him warily, flickering his eyes around to study the tiny creatures. They were kind of cute, he decided, in a weird way. Still, he almost jumped out of his skin when one stepped up beside him.

“Can Klaizap help the young masters?” The creature asked in a squeaky voice.

“They can talk?” Lance hissed to Keith.

Keith rolled his eyes. “Of course they can talk.”

Keith crouched down so that he was level with the small House-Elf. “My friend didn’t have dinner, would you mind making us something to eat?”

The creature nodded its head. “Wait here,” it instructed, before scampering off.

“Come on,” Keith said, gesturing towards one of the benches that ran along a mostly-empty table. “Klaizap will be back in a second with more food than you can imagine.”

Lance said down on the bench next to Keith. “I didn’t even know that students were allowed in the
“Strictly, I’m not sure that we are,” Keith admitted, “but the House-Elves love company.”

“This place is insane,” Lance said. “I’m never going to get used to it.”

“So you’ve seriously never seen a House-Elf before?” Keith asked, “Not even when they brought you dinner?”

Lance blinked at him. “They’re the ones who were feeding me when I wouldn’t leave my room?”

Keith nodded. “Of course.”

“Wait a second,” Lance narrowed his eyes. “How do you know that someone was bringing me food?”

Keith gave him an unimpressed look, arching one of his brows.

Keith flushed. “I… I felt bad. It’s at least partially because of me that you were hiding up there, and don’t even try to deny it, so I… um… I asked? Ugh, shut up, Lance,” Keith said, dropping his face down into his hands.

“I didn’t even say anything!” Lance protested. “And besides, I was going to say thank you. That was really cool of you.”

Keith lifted his head from his hands, his cheeks still flushed bright red. “ Seriously?”

Lance chuckled, “Yes seriously. Thank you.”

“Oh,” Keith said softly, smiling down at the table.

“I mean, dude, they were my favorite foods too! Like it was almost as good as my mamá’s cooking. Almost.”

“Oh, well, the House-Elves know what people like…” Keith said, picking at his school robes. “What, ah, what are your favorite foods?”


Keith blinked at him, “What’s an… empanada?” He asked, totally buterching the pronunciation.

“It’s, like, fried dough folded over stuffing. I didn’t even know that anyone could make them at Hogwarts, but I guess the House-Elves figured it out.”

“That’s good,” Keith said.

A few minutes pass before Klaizap scampers back over to them, carrying a tray full of pastries that look fresh from the oven.

Lance moans when the smell of cinnamon hits him, reaching for one of the fresh pastries eagerly.

“Oh my god, Klaizap, this is amazing,” he said as he took a large bite.

“Is there anything else I can get for the young masters?” The House-Elf asked.
“I’d kill for some coffee, but something tells me that you aren’t hiding a Starbucks down here,” Lance said, peeling off a layer of his cinnamon roll, the sticky goo covering his fingers.

“Starbucks?” Keith echoed quietly.

The House-Elf frowned, before smiling. “We have hot chocolate,” they offered.

“Yes!” Lance enthused. “Hot chocolate sounds perfect.”

The House-Elf scampered away, leaving them alone once more.

“What’s a Starbucks?” Keith asked, as he picked up a blueberry muffin from the tray of pastries.

“Man, you haven’t lived until you’ve been to a Starbucks,” Lance said. “I dream of Frappuccinos.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Keith admitted.

“Okay,” Lance said, “so Starbucks is, like, a chain of coffee shops that is really famous for the funky drinks they serve. A Frappuccino is, like, a frozen coffee.”

Keith nodded slowly.

“I’ll take you sometime,” Lance promised, blushing slightly.

“I can’t believe that Professor Kolivan has never mentioned it in Muggle Studies,” Keith said.

Lance blinked at him in surprise. “You.. wait, you take Muggle Studies?”

Keith nodded, his eyes lighting up.

“I didn’t know that,” Lance admitted quietly. “That’s cool. Do you, ah, do you mind if I ask why?”

“It’s just really interesting,” Keith said. “There’s this whole other world that most wizards know almost nothing about. I guess I just can’t help but be curious about it.”

“Really?” Lance asked raising an eyebrow, “But so many people in the wizarding community think that the muggle world is, I don’t know, not as important or something.”

“I think muggles are amazing!” Keith said, “The feats that they’ve accomplished without magic are insane.”

“That’s cool,” Lance said with a smile, “that you find it so interesting.”

Keith nodded. “I always try to ask Kolivan about the references you use,” he admitted quietly. “He didn’t know who John Stamos was, either.”

“You seriously pay attention to all the little muggle things I say?” Lance asked, his eyes widening.

Keith nodded, a faint blush spreading across his cheeks. “Of course I do.”

“Everyone else just tunes me out,” Lance said softly. “It’s nice to know that someone actually listens, I guess. Do you know why I say those things? The… references to my muggle life?”

Keith shook his head. “I just always thought it was habit,” he admitted.

“It makes me feel less homesick, like, at least this way I remember it. Otherwise it gets lost underneath all of the wizarding stuff,” Lance said, feeling the familiar pang in his chest that he felt
Whenever he thought of home.

Keith smiled slightly, turning in his seat slightly to make eye contact with Lance. “You know, you could tell me more about it. If you wanted to.”

Lance grinned. “Seriously?”

Keith nodded. “Sure. I’m a good listener.”

“What do you want to know?” Lance asked.

Keith shrugged. “Everything.”

<<< >>>

Keith said he wanted to know everything, so Lance told him about home, about Cuba and Varadero beach, and the ropa vieja that his grandmother made whenever he and his siblings stayed over at her house. He explained how his full first name was Leandro, but that the only one who still called him that was his mamá. He talked about how much it sucked that he couldn’t have a cellphone at Hogwarts because his family never really got used to the owls. He told Keith about how Marco taught him to play guitar, promised to play for him sometime, and how Luís taught him how to swim in the shallow ocean waves just minutes away from their house. He told him about watching trashy American television shows with Veronica, how Ronnie was the only one to indulge him with watching reruns of Friends and Full House. He told him about his twin sister, Rachel, and how Lance taught himself to braid hair so that he could do hers before her dancing competitions.

Keith didn’t get any of the pop culture references that Lance made, but that was okay, because Lance explained them carefully.

For the first time since he can remember since he came to Hogwarts, Lance didn’t feel homesick.

<<< >>>

The next day, Lance followed Romelle out into the courtyard. Romelle was supposed to be meeting up with Hunk and Shay so that they could finish a herbology assignment, and Lance had reluctantly agreed to tag along. He would rather be training with Keith and Shiro, but Shiro had gotten sucked into some kind of teacher meeting with a member from the ministry and canceled their lesson, and it wasn’t like he had anything better to do.

Not to mention he had a lot of work to catch up on after missing a few days of classes.

“Oh, Merlin,” Romelle said, “I left one of my plants down in the Greenhouse. Tell Hunk and Shay that I’ll be right back,” and with that, Romelle turned on her heel and disappeared.

Lance watched her go, before glancing around the courtyard. He couldn’t see Hunk or Shay. Although he did see Rax and some of his Hufflepuff buddies playing Exploding Snap across the way.

“Hey, Lance!” Someone called, and Lance glanced over his shoulder to see that Nyma was waving him over to where she was sitting on a stone bench with a box clutched in her hands. “Can I interest you in a button?” She asked, holding the box out in front of her.

Lance closed the distance between them. “A button?” He questioned.

Nyma nodded. “They’re enchanted. I made them.”
She shook the box slightly, drawing Lance’s eyes down to the buttons inside.

There must have been dozens. They were bright red, and proclaimed **SUPPORT KEITH KOGANE - THE REAL HOGWARTS CHAMPION** in bold letters.

He arched an eyebrow at Nyma. “I think I’m good, thanks.”

“You haven’t even seen the best part, yet,” Nyma pouted, reaching into the box. She poked one of the badges and it swiftly changed so that it was neon green with the words **ÁLVAREZ STINKS** written across it.

“Really classy, Nyma,” Lance said. “Let me guess, **all** your friends are wearing them.”

“And most of the Gryffindors,” She added. “Sure I can’t interest you in one?”

“Fuck you, Nyma,” Lance said, pivoting on his heel and stomping away from her. A few of the Slytherin girls that had been sitting nearby broke out into a chorus of giggles, followed shortly after by Nyma’s breathy laugh.

He didn’t get far before two of the Hufflepuffs that hung around Rax stopped in front of him, holding out their robes so that the buttons they were wearing (on the **ÁLVAREZ STINKS** side) were proudly displayed.

“Out of the way, Álvarez,” one of them said, as they shoved past him. The other stuck out his tongue at Lance, before following his friend.

*Ignore them. Ignore them. Ignore them.* Lance chanted silently to himself, praying that he would spot Hunk somewhere in the courtyard.

Of course, he had no such luck.

Instead, Rax abandoned his game of Exploding Snap and crossed the small courtyard to approach Lance. He was wearing a large **ÁLVAREZ STINKS** button on the front of his robes, because of course he was.

“My little sister and your little friend won’t be meeting you down here today,” he said. “Associating with a known cheat won’t be good for their reputation.”

Lance drew in a sharp breath through his nose. Forget this, he’d go find Romelle down at the Greenhouse and they’d go somewhere else to study.

He ignored Rax, spinning on his heel and making his way back towards the castle. A first year Gryffindor ran past him shouting “Keith rules!” while the Courtyard exploded into laughter.

Lance was already sick of the Triwizard Tournament and it hadn’t even started yet.

<<<>

By the end of the day, the whole school seemed to be wearing the **ÁLVAREZ STINKS** buttons (aside from Romelle, Hunk, Shay, and most likely Keith). Lance had debated whether or not to go to dinner, but Romelle had told him that she had heard from Olia who had heard from Matt who had heard from his dad that there was going to be another big announcement tonight, so Lance had figured he should probably go.

After all, it would probably be something about the *fucking* Triwizard Tournament.
Lance trailed after Romelle into the Great Hall, trying to ignore the flashing green and red buttons he could see decorating the robes of students he had once thought were his friends.

Movement at the closest end of the Ravenclaw table caught his eye, and Lance glanced over to see Matt and Pidge whispering to one another.

A bright green pin was stuck to the front of Pidge’s school robes.

Lance blinked back the tears that suddenly assaulted his eyes. He and Pidge had been friends for years, were they really willing to let their jealousy take them this far?

A few students hollered things like “Álvarez stinks!” or “Kogane is the real champion!” as Lance took his seat at the Ravenclaw table, keeping his head down. He could practically feel Romelle bristling beside him.

A quiet hush suddenly fell over the room, and Lance found himself following everyone else’s gaze.

It was Keith, strolling through the open doors of the Great Hall. Lance hadn’t seen him since they said goodbye outside of the kitchens yesterday, hadn’t seen him since he told Keith about everything that was dearest to him. He hadn’t felt vulnerable at the time, but he did now, knowing that he had basically handed Keith a fully-loaded gun. Oh, look at the pathetic, home-sick muggleborn. It was easy to trust Keith when they were alone, or when they were with Shiro, or when he was apologising, but it was harder to trust Keith like this - when it felt like the whole school was trying to tear them apart.

“Hey, Kogane!” The familiar voice of James Griffin called, and Lance turned just in time to see the boy rising from the Slytherin table. He watched as James cut through the crowded Great Hall, brushing past the red haired girl from Durmstrang who was holding hands with a girl Lance didn’t recognise, clearly on their way to their table at the front of the room.

Keith froze, scowling when he saw who had called his name, and Lance couldn’t help but wonder why James was approaching Keith.

“I got you something,” James said with a smirk, as he closed the remaining distance between them.

“This better not be something from the prank store again, Griffin. I’m not in the mood,” Keith said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I think you’ll like this one,” James said, holding out one of his hands, a familiar looking pin resting in the center of his palm, although it was set to the red SUPPORT KEITH KOGANE - THE REAL HOGWARTS CHAMPION side.

Keith arched an eyebrow. “Merlin. What is that?” He asked, his voice sharp.

“Oh, you haven’t even seen the best part!” James said, as he tapped the button and it transformed into the green ÁLVAREZ STINKS side. “The whole school is wearing them.”

“The whole school is… bloody hell,” Keith muttered, his voice dangerously low. “Where did you get this?”

James held up his hands, “Woah, cool down, man. I thought you’d think they were funny.”

“You think this is funny?” Keith asked, snatching the button out of James’ hand, tossing it down onto the ground.
“Well, yeah,” James said. “Álvarez is gonna make Hogwarts look bad, the whole school knows that, even if it wasn’t the right choice, you’re supposed to be the real champion.”

“We don’t know that,” Keith bit out.

James smirked. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure we do. Álvarez is nothing but a filthy mud-”

He never got to finish speaking, however, because Keith’s fist connected squarely with his jaw.

“Merlin’s beard,” Lance heard Romelle say softly from her place beside him, but the pounding in his ears was so loud he could barely hear her.

James reeled backwards, collapsing down onto the ground from the force of the blow.

Keith lunged forward, as if he was going to keep swinging.

That was enough to launch Lance into motion, as he quickly swung around and bolted towards Keith. He reached the older boy just before he could drop down onto James, and Lance wrapped his arms around Keith, pulling him backwards. “Keith, Keith, it’s fine. He isn’t worth it!”

Keith resisted, tugging against Lance until the words sunk in, when he finally relaxed, the tension draining from his body.

“Did you know about these things?” Keith asked quietly, never taking his eyes off of James, who was sprawled out across the floor of the Great Hall rubbing his jaw.

Lance nodded, releasing his arms from around Keith once he was sure the other boy wasn’t going to jump James again. “Yeah. I… found out about them in the Courtyard this morning, but it’s not like anyone is trying to hide them. They’re kind of hard not to notice.”

Keith frowned, but before he could reply, James jumped up from the ground.

“You’re crazy!” James spat at Keith, still rubbing at his jaw, where a bruise was already forming.

“And you’re a dick!” Keith shot back.

“Keith!” A stern voice, one that was all too familiar, called. “What have I told you about getting into fights?”

Keith raised his eyes to meet Shiro’s gaze. “Technically you told me not to duel anyone,” he offered with a slight wince.

Shiro narrowed his eyes, Lance hadn’t even noticed Shiro and some of the other teachers approaching. “I figured you would know that the same rules applied for fighting with your fists.”

“Yes,” Professor Iverson said, his voice low. “Fighting with another student. That will cost Gryffindor fifty points, young man.”

“But James started it!” Lance protested, “Keith was just trying to stand up for me!”

“And that will be ten points from Ravenclaw. Do you want to continue, Mr. Álvarez?”

“No, Sir,” Lance muttered, kicking at the ground softly with his foot.

Shiro glanced over at Iverson. “And James Griffin has just cost Slytherin thirty points for his behavior. Obviously no one was entirely innocent in this situation.”
“Well, Lance was pretty sure he hadn’t actually done anything, but at least James lost points, too.

“James, return to the Slytherin table,” Shiro instructed, not even sparing a glance for the other boy. “I need to have a chat with our Champions.”

James pouted, but he let Professor Iverson lead him back to the Slytherin table.

“Are you two okay?” Shiro asked, sounding concerned. “Lance, I’ve seen the buttons, I’ve tried to re-enchant a few of them, but it only seems to make the insults worse.”

Lance scowled. Of course. “Oh, she’s good,” he muttered under his breath.

Keith’s gaze snapped over to him. “Do you know who did this?” He demanded.

“Um…” Lance said, flickering his gaze nervously between Keith and Professor Shirogane. Sure, Nyma wasn’t his favorite person, but he wasn’t sure if he wanted to be the one to rat her out either. “We’ll talk about this later,” Lance promised Keith.

Shiro frowned, but he didn’t press. “The two of you should take your seats. Headmaster Holt has an announcement for the Champions after dinner tonight.”

Lance nodded. “I heard.”

Keith frowned. “About what?”

“It’s about the first trial,” Shiro said. “That’s partially what my meeting with the ministry was about today.”

Keith smirked. “Oh, yeah, how is Adam?”

Shiro blushed faintly, “He’s fine. Although he won’t be happy to hear that you’ve been fighting again. Go to your seats, I expect to see both of you in class tomorrow.”

With that, Shiro turned on his heel and headed back towards the teacher’s table, leaving Lance standing with Keith.

“Who’s Adam?” He asked, trailing after Keith.

Keith ignored him.


“I’ll tell you if you tell me who made the buttons,” Keith said, glaring at the Gryffindor students sitting at their table in the Great Hall, as though the green buttons on the front of their robes personally offered him. Maybe they did.

“I’ll tell you after dinner,” Lance pouted, separating from Keith so that he could make his way towards the Ravenclaw table.

<<<<>>>

Dinner passed relatively uneventfully after that, except for some quiet commotion from the Gryffindor table. When Lance had glanced over, he had seen the Gryffindor students taking off their buttons and placing them in piles on the table, Keith frowning at all of his housemates with his arms crossed over his chest.
Lance hardly ate, picking at his food as he pushed it around his plate, letting Romelle reach over and steal his dinner rolls for herself.

It seemed like dinner lasted forever, and by the time dessert finally arrived, Lance felt like he could scream.

The silence of the Ravenclaw students around him was stifling, and Lance, always one for conversations and gossip, didn’t even try to talk to Romelle, knowing that everyone around them would eavesdrop on their conversation.

Finally, finally, Headmaster Holt stepped up to the podium at the front of the Great Hall and cleared his throats. “Attention students, today I am pleased to announce that we are officially announcing the first trial of the Triwizard Tournament.”

Lance stiffened in his seat, instinctively glancing around at the other Champions.

Allura and Lotor were both sitting at the front of the room, their spines straight and their eyes locked on Headmaster Holt, but Keith was already looking at Lance. Lance raised his eyebrows, and Keith shrugged, before turning his attention back up to the front of the room.

Headmaster Holt stepped to the side, revealing four scrolls that were floating in the air behind him, each of them tied with a different colored ribbon: sky blue, purple, navy blue, and red.

Headmaster Holt cleared his throat as he wrapped his fingers around the scroll with the sky blue ribbon. “The first task will occur on November 24th, giving our Champions just a few weeks to crack the riddle inside these scrolls. Now, the riddle is a clue for the events of the first trial, and any Champions who solve the riddle will have a distinct advantage over the others.”

A riddle. Okay, Lance was a Ravenclaw, he had to solve a riddle just to get into his common room every day. He could do this.

“Allura Altea,” Headmaster Holt called.

Allura stood from her seat, smoothing down her skirt as she crossed the room and stepped up beside Headmaster Holt, accepting the scroll from him with a small smile, before she returned to her seat.

“Lotor Daibazaal.”

Lotor stood, his cape spreading out behind him dramatically as he crossed the short distance to the front of the Great Hall. He didn’t smile like Allura had, as he accepted the scroll with the purple ribbon, but Lance thought that he saw the boy’s gaze flicker towards the Beauxbatons table before he returned to his own seat at the Durmstrang table.

“Keith Kogane.”

Lance watched as Keith stood and approached Headmaster Holt. Keith didn’t look like he had just decked someone in the face, his school robes and Gryffindor-red tie smooth and neat. There wasn’t even a hair out of place in that ridiculous mullet of his.

Keith’s eyes flickered over towards the teacher’s table - Shiro - before settling back on Headmaster Holt.

Headmaster Holt grabbed the scroll with the red ribbon, offering it to Keith.

Keith wrapped his fingers around it, before turning and making his way back towards the Gryffindor
table, the serious expression on his face never wavering.

“Lance Álvarez,” Headmaster Holt called, and Lance took a deep breath to steady himself.

He felt Romelle place her hand on his knee, squeezing slightly before she released him, and Lance pushed away from the table. He could feel the eyes of everyone in the room on him, and he schooled his face into a steady expression.

The Great Hall felt longer than it ever had, and it seemed to take forever until Lance reached the raised platform at the far end of the room, stepping up the few steps to bring him level with Headmaster Holt, who offered him the scroll wrapped with the navy ribbon with a small smile.

Lance smiled gently in response as he accepted the scroll. The parchment was rough against his fingers.

Lance headed back towards his seat, keeping his eyes locked on the ground in front of him and not the flashing green buttons that seemed to surround him. Once he reached his seat, he sunk into it gratefully, running his fingers along the rough paper of the scroll.

“The Champions must solve the riddle on their own, without the aid of students who are not participating in the Tournament. Any outside help is strictly forbidden.” Headmaster Holt announced seriously. “Now,” he said, clapping his hands together, “let’s wish our Champions good luck!”

The Great Hall broke out into applause, with some hooting and hollering from the rowdier students.

Lance studied the scroll in front of him, wondering what on earth the first trial was going to be.

<<< >>>

Poison spreads throughout the water
A vile beast dead-set on slaughter
A breathless quest will take its toll
Serene beasts under its control
Beat or distract with chosen fight
To free and end your tiring plight
Weaknesses you must utilize
First to find a pearlescent prize.

Chapter End Notes

Ha! We fooled you all! While this is a Triwizard AU, we're not strictly following the events of Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire! So hopefully you'll enjoy the changes we have in store for you! (P.S. riddles are fucking hard, so pray for Cait bc she is doing the lord's work by coming up with them on her own)
Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

The scrolls demand to be opened and have their contents revealed and analysed. Books are scoured, an interview is held, and a discovery is made.

Chapter Notes

Cait here, hello! 200+ kudos’ on and we're still updating. We cannot thank you enough for the amazing support you are giving us :D Thank you to everyone who leaves a comment too, especially those leaving essay-long ones. We hope you enjoy this chapter, and let us know what you think!

-sunnyjolras

Lance followed Romelle and the other Ravenclaw students as they trickled out of the Great Hall, still running the scroll, the scroll containing the riddle for the first trial, between his fingers carefully.

A part of him couldn’t wait to get back to the privacy of his dorm room so that he could open it and try to figure out its contents, but the other half of him was terrified of what it was going to say.

Suddenly, warm fingers wrapped around his arm, and Lance felt himself get tugged backwards, away from the sea of Ravenclaws.

“Hey!” Lance protested.

“Shut up,” Keith muttered, as he tugged Lance down a side corridor. Once they were out of earshot of the other students, Keith let go of his grip on Lance’s arm. “Are you going to tell me who made the buttons now?” He demanded.

“Jesus Christ, Keith,” Lance said, rubbing at his arm. “Fine, yes. I’ll tell you who made the buttons.”

“Jesus Christ?” Keith echoed.

Lance waved a hand. “He’s from a muggle religion, and if my mamá heard me take his name in vain like that she’d stick a bar of soap in my mouth.”

Keith frowned. “Oh yeah, sorry, I remember Kolivan telling us something about that,” his eyebrows drawing together and giving him cute little wrinkles in the center of his forehead.

Not that Keith was cute… just…

Oh, nevermind, Lance had stopped pretending he didn’t find Keith attractive back in fourth year. He wasn’t blind.

Keith shook his head. “Okay, we’ll get back to that later,” he said. “Who made the buttons?”
Lance sighed. “It was Nyma.”

Keith swore softly. “Of course it was.”

Lance shrugged.

“I’ll tell her to stop,” Keith said, sounding deadly serious. “We don’t even know that I am the real Champion, they shouldn’t be putting it on buttons and passing them out for people to wear.”

“Keith, it’s fine. Nyma is going to do whatever she wants to do, and you’re not going to be able to make her stop like you did with the Gryffindors.”

Keith blushed faintly, the pale pink barely visible in the low light of the corridor. “You saw that?” He asked.

Lance nodded.

A few seconds of silence passed between them before Lance spoke up again.

“Thank you. For decking James Griffin in the face.”

Keith scowled. “He deserved it.”

“Yeah,” Lance agreed. “I’ve been trying to nail him with a Bludger since second year.”

“Just trying?” Keith asked, a small smile playing at the corners of his lips. “I’m pretty sure you’ve gotten some decent hits on him. And hey, are you trying to tell me that I’m not the only one you’ve been relentlessly trying to hit?” Keith teased.

“You know you’re the only one for me,” Lance replied, leaning back up against the wall.

Keith rolled his eyes. “In your dreams, maybe.”

And okay there had been that one time involving the quidditch pitch showers, but Lance was definitely not going to tell Keith about that.

Lance scoffed, hoping that the darkness of the hallway would hide the flush that was steadily creeping up his neck and onto his cheeks. “Whatever. So do you know what this whole riddle thing is about?” He asked, hoping to quickly change the subject.

Keith scowled. “Riddles are… not my thing. If I had known that we had to solve riddles for this contest, I might not have signed up.”

“Just trying?” Keith asked, a small smile playing at the corners of his lips. “I’m pretty sure you’ve gotten some decent hits on him. And hey, are you trying to tell me that I’m not the only one you’ve been relentlessly trying to hit?” Keith teased.

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Keith scowled. “Riddles are… not my thing. If I had known that we had to solve riddles for this contest, I might not have signed up.”

“Well it’s a good thing you have me,” Lance said, tossing one of his arms around Keith’s shoulders. “I’m great at riddles. Although,” he mused, “you kind of have to be when you have to answer one to get into your common room.”

Keith frowned. “But Headmaster Holt said that students weren’t allowed to help anyone. And why would you help me, anyways? Aren’t we supposed to be competing against one another?”

Lance shrugged, retracting his arm from Keith’s shoulders. “Actually,” he corrected, “Headmaster Holt said that students outside the contest couldn’t help. He never said that the competitors couldn’t help one another.”

“That still doesn’t explain why you would help me,” Keith said, still frowning.
Lance let out a huff of air. “Keith, buddy, my man, I probably wasn’t supposed to be chosen in the first place—”

“We don’t know that,” Keith interrupted.

“Okay, we don’t know for sure, but… even if I was actually supposed to get chosen, I’m probably not going to win. So the least I can do is help you and make sure that at least one of Hogwarts’ Champions isn’t a complete fuck-up.”

“You’re not a fuck-up, Lance,” Keith said.

Well, the whole school seemed to have a different opinion on that one, Lance mused to himself. And frankly, he was starting to believe them. He had no real right to be participating in the Triwizard Tournament, so it was the least he could do to help Keith - the real champion - out as much as he could. And sure, Keith might not like it, but what he didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him, right?

“Thanks, Mullet,” Lance said with a small smile. “That might be the nicest compliment anyone’s ever given me.”

Keith rolled his eyes. “Fine. Let’s look at the riddle.”

Lance turned his attention back down to the scroll he was still holding gingerly in his hand. He gently untied the navy blue ribbon that was sealing it closed, letting the ribbon flutter to the floor as he unrolled the fragile paper.

Keith, on the other hand, had slid his ribbon right off the end of the scroll.

There were eight lines of text flowing in beautiful calligraphy across the scroll in glistening silver ink.

Lance let his eyes roam over the riddle, as he read it silently.

Poison spreads throughout the water
A vile beast dead-set on slaughter
A breathless quest will take its toll
Serene beasts under its control
Beat or distract with chosen fight
To free and end your tiring plight
Weaknesses you must utilize
First to find a pearlescent prize.

“What the fuck?” Keith muttered, echoing Lance’s thoughts.

Lance bit his lips. “Okay. So we have, like, twenty days to figure out what this riddle is trying to tell us.”

“Do you think it’s actually about the first trial?” Keith asked, dragging his eyes away from the paper to make eye contact with Lance. “Or is it something we need to do before the trial?”

“I think it’s about the first trial,” Lance said, rereading the riddle. “See here?” He asked, reaching
over to point at the lines of the riddle on Keith’s scroll. “Where it talks about a breathless quest? And then up here? Where it talks about water? I think our first quest is going to be underwater.”

“Merlin’s beard,” Keith said, “so we have to find a way to breathe underwater?”

Lance shrugged, “Maybe. Back in fourth year I figured out how to cast a spell that could extend the amount of time I spent under the water, but I’m not sure it would be long enough…”

Keith raised an eyebrow at him.

“What?” Lance asked, uncomfortable under Keith’s undivided attention.

“You figured out a spell to increase the amount of time you could breathe underwater in fourth year?” Keith asked, sounding almost… awed?

Lance reached up to rub at the back of his neck. “Um, yeah. I really like swimming.”

Keith blinked at him. “And you still think that you don’t deserve to be one of the Champions?”

“It’s just a stupid spell,” Lance muttered, feeling embarrassed. “It wasn’t that big of a deal.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit,” Keith told him.

“So I’m thinking we’re probably going to be competing in the lake,” Lance said, trying to change the subject, uncomfortable with the praise. “That’s the largest body of water around the castle.”

Keith rolled his eyes, but didn’t press.

“So now we just have to figure out what the challenge is going to be,” Lance said, returning his attention back to the paper in his hands.

“Want to meet in the library after class tomorrow to work on it?” Keith asked. “Maybe there are some books that can help us?”

Lance nodded. “Yeah, sure, sounds good, buddy.”

“Alright,” Keith said, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow,” Lance echoed quietly, as he watched Keith’s back as the older boy walked away from him.

<<<>>>:

“Hey, wait,” Lance said as he dropped down into the seat across from Keith at the table the other boy had claimed in the library. “You never told me who Adam was. You promised me that you’d tell me if I told you who made the buttons. And I did, so spill.”

Keith rolled his eyes. “Adam is Shiro’s fiancè,” Keith explained. “He works for the Ministry in the Department of Magical Games and Sports, so he’s working on the tournament pretty heavily.”

Lance blinked at him in shock. “Shiro’s engaged?” He screeched. “How did I not know this? More importantly, how do you know this?”

Keith shook his head at Lance’s loud volume, glancing around the library as if he was afraid someone was going to come over and yell at them. “Yes, Shiro’s engaged. Because you’re an idiot, probably. And I know because I stay with Shiro during Christmas and over the summer holidays,
‘cause my mom can be away for days at a time.”

“I’m not an idiot,” Lance protested, ignoring everything else Keith said as he crossed his arms across his chest.

Keith rolled his eyes again. Didn’t he know that if he kept doing that, eventually his face would get stuck like that?

“And, anyways,” Lance continued, “that’s so cool that you get to stay with Shiro. I bet he lives somewhere super badass and has all kinds of magical creatures and… and you’re shaking your head. Why are you shaking your head?”

“Because Shiro lives in Godric’s Hollow, which is a tiny wizarding town, and he definitely doesn’t keep any magical creatures in the house because Adam would kill him.”

Lance pouted. “You’re making Shiro sound so boring. I know he’s not. He had a niffler in his office, I saw it.”

Keith arched an eyebrow. “A niffler? Yeah, Adam definitely doesn’t know about that. Besides, don’t you stay with Headmaster Holt and his family over the summer sometimes? That must be pretty cool.”

Lance rolled his eyes. “I usually stay with them for like a week before I get so bored of hearing about Technomancy that I just fly home to Cuba…” Lance said, trailing off as he remembered the last vacation he had spent with the Holts. The truth was, he loved the Holt’s towering monstrosity of a house, with the ghoul in the attic and the gnomes running wild in the yard. He loved helping explain muggle objects to Sam (he was under strict orders not to call him Headmaster Holt when they weren’t in school), playing quidditch on practice brooms out in the yard with Matt and Pidge, the itchy sweaters that Colleen knitted for him every year because he never really felt warm enough in the U.K., too used to the heat and humidity of Cuba. “I guess I’m not going to get a chance to go this year,” Lance said sadly.

Keith frowned. “I’m sure Matt and Pidge will come around,” he said.

“Yeah,” Lance said quietly, averting his gaze. “Maybe.”

“You don’t agree?” Keith questioned.

Lance shrugged. “I don’t know, Pidge made it clear where their loyalty lies. And it’s not with me.”

“What do you mean?”

“They were wearing one of Nyma’s stupid buttons,” Lance explained.

Keith scowled. “I still can’t believe she hasn’t gotten in trouble for passing those things out.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Lance said, reaching down to pull his scroll out from his bag. “Let’s just get to work on the riddle.”

“It does matter,” Keith protested. “She’s being a jerk.”

“I guess that’s one word for her,” Lance agreed. “Nyma’s been a jerk to me ever since I asked her to Hogsmeade in fifth year and she left me tied to a tree.”

Keith arched an eyebrow. “Please tell me there’s more to that story.”
“Ah, nope, nope, definitely not. It definitely didn’t take two hours for anyone to find me and cut me free.” Lance said quickly, knowing he was blushing.

“Pfft.” Keith laughed, covering his mouth with his hand. “How did she even get you tied to the tree in the first place?”

“It’s not my fault!” Lance protested. “I just thought she was, like, flirting really hard or something! I don’t know, Keith, shut up!”

“Merlin,” Keith laughed, not even bothering to try to cover it up this time. “So you actually let her tie you up to the tree?”

Lance pouted. “We’re done with this conversation now.”

Keith shook his head. “No way, I’m never letting you live this one down.”

“I regret telling you anything,” Lance said. “So come on, you must have an embarrassing story or two. Spill, that way we’re at least on even ground.”

“Uhhhh… no,” Keith said. “I’ve never done anything like that.”

“Well obviously the great Keith Kogane has never gotten himself tied up to a tree, but you’re telling me that you’ve never done something stupid to impress a girl?”

“No,” Keith said quickly. Too quickly.

“To impress a boy?” Lance tried again.

“…No,” a little less sure this time.

Lance arched an eyebrow. “That sounds like there’s a story there.”

Keith ignored him. “So you’re fine with it? That I like guys.”

“Um… yeah…” Lance said. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Keith shrugged. “Not everybody is.”

“No, I mean, why wouldn’t I be? I’m bisexual.”

Keith blinked at him. “I didn’t know that.”


“I guess not,” Keith echoed quietly.

“So anyway, what was the embarrassing thing you did to impress a boy?” Lance asked, wagging his eyebrows.

Keith shook his head. “I’m not telling you.”

“I’ll find out eventually,” Lance warned, but he decided that he would let Keith off the hook for now. “Okay, so the riddle.”

“The riddle,” Keith agreed.

“We already know that we’re probably going to be underwater. Probably in the lake.” Lance
summarized checking things off on his fingers. “Judging by this part here,” he pointed towards one of the lines, “there’s going to be some kind of monster that we have to fight.”

“And that monster has the ability to control the other creatures around it,” Keith agreed, “based on what this line says.”

Lance nodded. “So we need to find a way to defeat a mysterious, mind-controlling beast and a way to breathe underwater. In twenty days. Without any outside aid.”

“So we need to hit the books?” Keith asked.

Lance nodded. “We need to hit the books. First, I brought Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them, from my Care of Magical Creatures class. I figured that if any book is going to have clues about mysterious water monsters, it will be this one.”

Lance pulled the book out from his bag, resting it on the table between them.

“Do you know if there are any known creatures in the lake besides the giant squid?”

Keith furrowed his brows. “I’m not sure. There are rumors, of course…”

“Rumors of what?” Lance questioned.

Keith flipped through the book, eventually sliding it back across the table towards Lance.

Lance scanned the page open in front of him. “Mermaids?! There are mermaids living in the lake? Oh my god, how did I not know about this?”

“Haven’t you read Hogwarts: A History?” Keith questioned.

Lance winced. “Ahhhhh… no.”

Truthfully, he couldn’t remember much of his History of Magic classes, falling asleep in the majority of his lessons. It was a miracle he even managed to scrape an Acceptable.

Keith shook his head, his black hair falling softly over his forehead. “That’s why.”

“So you think we have to fight mermaids for the first trial?” Lance questioned.

“I think they’re probably the serene beasts,” Keith offered. “Mermaids aren’t known for being violent.”

“Okay, so then there must be something controlling them,” Lance glanced up at the books around them. “Time to start searching, I guess.”

Lance dropped his head down onto the table in front of them. He was exhausted. He and Keith had met up in the library five times already and they had little to show for it. Well, except for the towering stack of books on the table around them.

“I give up,” he said, pushing a leather-bound volume away. “I can’t look at any more words. They stopped making sense like two hours ago.”

“But we still haven’t found anything, and we’re running out of time,” Keith said, and Lance knew that he was frowning even without looking at him. “We only have fifteen days left.”
Lance picked his head back up from the table. “I know, but these books aren’t helping.”

“We just haven’t found the right one, yet,” Keith protested. “There has to be something here.”

“I bet Allura and Lotor have already figured it out,” Lance mourned.

“I doubt it, we haven’t even seen either of them in here,” Keith argued.

Lance groaned, “Their headmasters probably have their own libraries on their magically-enchanted carriage and ship.”

“We’ll figure it out, Lance,” Keith said.

Lance picked up the paper with the riddle on it, narrowing his eyes as if the words on the parchment had offended him. “We have to.”

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“Nope, useless,” Lance proclaimed, slamming the book he was reading shut.

Romelle glanced up at him. “Is everything alright, Lance?”

“No,” Lance sighed, as he picked up a sandwich from his plate. “Keith and I are having a hard time with this riddle for the first trial.”

“Oh, a riddle,” Romelle said, her eyes sparkling. “Want any help?”

“You can’t,” Lance reminded her sadly. “Students outside the competition aren’t allowed to help, and contrary to the school’s belief, I’m not a cheat.”

“Oh, right,” Romelle said, visibly deflating. “That’s stupid that other students aren’t allowed to help.”


She batted his hand away. “Use your own.”

“Come on, Ro,” Lance said, “we both know that I’m not as smart as you are.”

Romelle rolled her eyes. “That’s a load of dragon dung,” she said. “You’re smart, Lance, you’ll figure this out.”

Lance frowned, glancing away. “I hope so, considering that mine and Keith’s survival might actually rest on us figuring this out.”

“I’m sure that your life won’t actually be at risk, Lance, it’s just a competition.”

“A deadly competition,” Lance corrected.

Romelle’s frown deepened. “Everything is going to be okay, Lance.”

“I really hope you’re right,” Lance agreed.

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“Smile,” the blonde woman that Headmaster Holt had introduced to the Champions as Rita Skeeter said, as she moved in closer. There was a magical camera hovering in the air next to her, the kind
that took the moving pictures Lance had come to associate with the wizarding world.

Lance forced a grin on to his face, despite the fact that he didn’t want to be there… like at all. This was precious time he could be spending in the library with Keith trying to solve the riddle. Instead, he was posing ridiculously behind Allura, who was delicately sitting on a throne-like chair, with one of his arms around Keith, Lotor standing a few feet off to the side.

The camera flashed a few times, the light bright enough it made Lance blink in shock.

“Wonderful!” The woman cooed, clapping her hands together. “This will be the perfect picture for my piece in The Daily Prophet. Everyone wants to know all about you, but surely you’re already aware of that.” Rita Skeeter stopped in front of Allura. “All of my readers are just dying to know what sort of secrets you’re hiding behind your rosy cheeks,” she said, pinching Allura’s cheeks.

She then swept over to Lotor. “What mysteries do your muscles mask?” She asked, squeezing one of his biceps.

“What courage,” she continued, moving to stand between Keith and Lance, “lies beneath those curls?”

Curls? Lance raised an eyebrow at Keith. This lady was insane.

Keith was touching to bottom of his mullet gingerly, almost as if he expected it to spring to life.

“What makes the Champions of the Triwizard Tournament tick? Me, myself, and I want to know. Not to mention my rabid readers. So?” She asked, “Who’s feeling up to sharing?”

Lance shared a concerned glance with Keith out of the corner of his eye.

Why Headmaster Holt had allowed a reporter from The Daily Prophet into the school to interview them, Lance wasn’t sure. And, okay, it might be cool to be interviewed for the paper if it was by anyone other than Rita Skeeter. Even Lance knew that she had a… habit of stretching the truth in her articles.

“You first, dear?” She asked Lance, grabbing him by the arm as she pulled him away from the group. He looked back at Keith pleadingly, but all he was offered was a shrug.

“Have a seat,” she offered him, once they were away from the eyes and ears of the others, in an empty classroom nearby, where the tables and chairs had been transfigured into a comfortable armchair and a green velvet loveseat.

Lance sat on the loveseat, letting his arms wrap around the back of the seat, while Rita Skeeter perched on the edge of the armchair, angling herself towards him.

“So it you mind if I use my quick-quotes quill, darling?” Rita Skeeter asked Lance, producing a beautiful black quill and notepad from her purse, which she let go of so that they hung in the air next to her.

Lance eyed the quill warily. “Uh… no?”

Rita grinned at him like the Cheshire Cat. “Lovely.”

“So, let’s get started. Tell me a little bit about yourself,” she said, lacing her fingers together and resting them on her knee while the quill hovered over the notepad.
“My name is Lance Álvarez, I’m from Cuba. I’m in Ravenclaw. And I’m currently one of Hogwarts’ two Champions in the Triwizard Tournament.”

Rita Skeeter nodded. “You’re from Cuba, then? Why Hogwarts?”

“My dad had a job posting here in Britain for a few years when I was, like, ten, so I was here when my magic started kicking in. And I never knew what was going on with me when I was younger, until one day Sam Holt got in contact with my family and invited to start at his school in the fall. My parents thought that he was crazy at first.”

“Your parents are muggles, then?” Rita said, although from the way she phrased it, it clearly wasn’t a question.

Lance nodded. “And my siblings: Luís, Marco, Rachel, and Veronica.”

“The only wizard in the family? Interesting. Do you miss home?” Rita asked, pouting her lips slightly.

Lance wasn’t stupid, he knew that everything he said to this woman was going to be printed into newspapers for the whole wizarding world to read.

“Hogwarts has really become a second home to me,” he said evasively.

“Of course, of course,” she said, waving her hand in the direction of her quick-notes quill. “Now, as you’ve said, you are one of the two Hogwarts Champions. Something previously unheard of in the Triwizard Tournament. How does that make you feel?”

Lance swallowed, fighting the urge to fidget. “It’s an... honor to be chosen alongside my fellow Champions.”

“How do you get along with the other Champions? It it a competition? A friendly rivalry?”

“I get along really well with most of them, actually,” Lance said with a small grin.

“And they’re okay with the fact that there are four competitors rather than three?” She questioned.

“I think everyone had their concerns at first, but the more the merrier, right?” Lance asked with a nervous chuckle.

“I’ve heard the school hasn’t reacted as well,” she said, with that ridiculous pout.

Where did she even hear that anyway?

“That’s... true,” Lance admitted, slowly, knowing there was no way to deny it.

“That has to be hard, your friends and classmates turning against you?”

“It’s helped me realize who my real friends are, who I can really trust to stand by me,” Lance said, hoping that particular dig made it into the article and that Pidge and Matt had to read it.

“Is there anyone in particular who’s had your back? Maybe a special someone in your life?” Rita Skeeter asked, arching one of her penciled-on eyebrows suggestively.

“No,” Lance admitted with a nervous chuckle. “No, there’s no one like that.”

“Really?” Rita Skeeter asked, sounding genuinely surprised. “A handsome young boy like you,
Champion of Hogwarts, I would expect the girls to be falling all over you.”

“Well,” Lance said, reaching up to rub at the back of his neck, “I guess the girls and boys at Hogwarts just aren’t ready to handle all of this.” He tried to instill fake confidence into his voice, falling back on the bravado he had mastered over the years.

Rita Skeeter had the decency to not look surprised by his subtle correction.

“Well, Lance, I feel like I’ve gotten a pretty good idea of who you are on the surface, do you mind if I go a little deeper?”

“Well, Lance, I feel like I’ve gotten a pretty good idea of who you are on the surface, do you mind if I go a little deeper?”

“Uh, no, I guess that’s fine,” Lance said, not knowing what else to say.

“Now there are lots of rumors surrounding your involvement with the Triwizard Tournament, many believe that you cheated to earn your spot.”

“I didn’t!” Lance exclaimed, “And the Headmaster and the other teachers believe me. I wish that everyone else would too.”

Rita Skeeter glanced down at her notepad. “I think that’s all we have time for, thank you for speaking with me, Lance. Would you mind sending Keith Kogane in? I’d like to speak to him next.”

“Ah… sure,” Lance said, pushing himself off of the loveseat. “It was nice to meet you, Ms. Skeeter,” he said, giving her a wave as he exited the room because his mamá raised a polite boy.

He found Keith, Allura, and Lotor all in the trophy room, where he had left them, Allura and Lotor steadfastly avoiding each other, while Keith browsed the trophies on the shelf.

Keith snapped his head up as Lance approached. “How was the interview?” He questioned in a low voice, once Lance was close enough to hear him.

Lance shrugged. “It was okay, I guess. It felt a little invasive.”

Keith scowled. “Great.”

“She wants to see you next,” Lance said, gesturing behind him.

“I guess I better get this over with,” Keith muttered.

“You’ll be fine,” Lance said, clapping Keith on the shoulder. “What’s the worst that can happen?”

Lance reached up, running his hands down his face. It was nearing midnight, it was definitely past curfew, but he was still tucked into one of the back alcoves of the library, a pile of books next to him. He hadn’t seen Keith since the older boy had left to go have one of his training sessions with Shiro, Lance was sure that he had probably just gone to bed.

Lance sighed, grabbing yet another book from the stack beside him. He had practically searched the whole library for books on aquatic creatures and/or creatures with mind control, and while he had found out lots of cool facts about magic underwater creatures that made him a little scared to swim in the ocean now, he had yet to find anything that fit the bill of what he and Keith were looking for.

This was taking up too much time. They still had to find a way to breathe underwater for an extended period of time!
The book Lance picked up was bound in blue leather, gold writing on the front in a language he couldn’t understand.

Great.

Lance flipped through the pages of the book, frowning when he realized all the words inside were in the same foreign language. He tossed the book to the side before grabbing another from the pile.

This was useless. He was never going to find anything. Hell, maybe there wasn’t even anything to find! That would be just his luck, doing all this work when the answers weren’t even in the library.

Lance leaned back in his chair, kicking his feet up onto the table in front of him. He was exhausted, maybe he should just call it a night. He tipped his head backwards, closing his eyes. Maybe he would just…

Crash!

Lance bolted back up, glancing around for the source of the loud noise. Shit. His tower of books had fallen over. Lance pushed himself off the armchair, crouching down to collect the books and return them to the desk. This was what he got for towering them up so high. Lance studied the books in his hand. He should just go put them away, it’s not like he could read all of them in one night.

Lance grabbed as many of the books as he could fit in his arms, heading back towards the section of the library that was devoted to magical creatures.

He scanned the shelves for the notable gaps where books were missing, like the teeth missing from his youngest niece and nephews’ mouths. Pushing the images of his family out of his mind, Lance focused on shoving the books back into their rightful spots on the shelves.

He crouched down to slip one of the books back into its spot on the shelf when something caught his eye. The bottom shelf was labeled Mythological Beasts.

Maybe… just maybe…

After scouring hundreds of books on real aquatic creatures, maybe Lance needed to consider a creature that was theoretically unreal.

Lance dropped down, sitting on the floor of the library. He skimmed the titles on the bottom shelf, pulling out a few of the books that seemed promising: Mythology in the Wizarding World, Mythological Creatures of the Seas, Lakes, and Rivers, and What Muggles Got Wrong About Mythology.

He flipped open the one about sea creatures first, scanning the title page for anything that seemed helpful. The section on lakes started on page one-hundred, so Lance flipped right to that portion of the book. It appeared to be a collection of different mythical beasts organized alphabetically.

Well, it seemed more promising than anything else he had found so far.

Lance leaned back against the shelf behind him, resting the book on his knees. He flipped through the pages slowly, taking his time to study the illustrations and the details about each of the beasts, despite the late hour. He didn’t want to miss something just because he was tired.

Okay, nothing useful in the ‘A’ section. Time for the ‘B’ section.

Lance paused on the first page of the ‘B’ section, studying the illustration of a large serpentine
creature called the Baku.

According to the description, the Baku was a creature that had some sort of plant-life growing on it, and the plant-life allowed it to enchant creatures. It would then use the enchanted creatures either as a food source or to use them as a form of defense. The only other bit of information present was that it was commonly found in deep water rather than shallow water.

This had to be it!

Sure, there wasn’t a lot of information to go off of, but everything fit! This was the only creature Lance had read about that seemed to describe the creature mentioned in the riddle.

He had to tell Keith! Now that they had an idea of what the creature was, surely they would be able to find a way to beat it.
Chapter Eight

Chapter Summary

Preparations for the first trial continue as our competitors close in on the riddle's answer. A spell is performed, an article is published, and sherbet lemons are eaten.

Chapter Notes

Hey y'all! Sorry we missed our update last week, but Cait has been really sick with the flu and it's been a really stressful time at school for me so both of our lives have been very chaotic and busy lately! Thank you so much to everyone who has been reading and commenting and leaving kudos, you make Cait and I's day <3 we love you, and without further ado - here's the next chapter!

- slowklancing

Lance awoke to someone shoving at his shoulder.

“Hmmm,” he said eloquently, batting the hand away. “I’m sleeping.”

“I can see that,” someone commented dryly. “But you fell asleep on top of all our research.”

“Keith!” Lance exclaimed, bolting upward. He blinked his eyes open. Sure enough, Keith was standing near the table they had claimed in one of the back alcoves of the library.

“Good morning,” Keith said, smirking slightly. “Why are you drooling all over the library books?”

Lance reached up and wiped at his chin, and, sure enough, his chin was sticky with dried drool. Gross.

“Wait a minute,” Keith said, narrowing his eyes, “have you been here all night?”

Lance shrugged. “Yeah, I guess.”

“You aren’t supposed to be out after curfew,” Keith said, as he dropped into the chair across from Lance.

“Like you’ve never done it,” Lance snarked back, before remembering the reason he had fallen asleep in the library in the first place. “But, anyways, that doesn’t matter,” he said. “I found something.”

“Seriously? Like something that might actually be helpful?” Keith asked, sounding skeptical.

“Yes!” Lance said, grabbing the copy of *Mythological Creatures of the Seas, Lakes, and Rivers* that he had apparently fallen asleep on top of and pushed it towards Keith.
Keith skimmed the page quickly, before flipping to the cover of the book. “How do you know this is what the riddle is talking about? We don’t even know if it’s real.”

“I know,” Lance agreed, “but that’s what makes it so perfect. No one would expect this to be the monster in the trial. Plus, the way that it can mind control creatures? I haven’t been able to find anything else with that kind of power.”

“It makes sense,” Keith agreed. “Unfortunately, this isn’t very much information to go off of.”

“But it’s a start,” Lance offered.

“It’s a start,” Keith agreed.

“Did you ask Shiro about any water-breathing spells?” Lance asked.

Keith nodded, before grimacing. “And he saw right through me, he reminded me that teachers aren’t allowed to help the students and that I had to do the work on my own.”

“Crap,” Lance muttered. “I guess I’ll experiment with my spell and see if I can find a way to make it last any longer.”

“I thought maybe we could look into brewing a potion of water-breathing. There has to be something like that, right?” Keith said, drumming his fingers on the table.

“I don’t know,” Lance admitted.

“Oh, I brought you breakfast,” Keith said, pulling a muffin out of the pocket of his school robes. “I didn’t see you down there so I figured you were hungry.”

“Thanks, man,” Lance said, although he made sure to carefully inspect the chocolate chocolate-chip muffin before he ate it. Who knew what else had been in Keith’s pockets.

Keith wrinkled his nose at the crumbs that spilled onto the front of Lance’s robes, but Lance ignored him.

“Okay, so what’s the plan for today?” Lance asked.

Keith shrugged. “We go to class, go to training with Shiro, then come back here and see if we can figure out any more about this Baku… thing… I guess. Now that we actually know what it’s called, maybe we can find a weakness we can exploit.”

Lance flicked chocolate muffin crumbs off of his chest. “And we try to find a way to breathe underwater,” he added. “That will be an important step in the whole ‘defeating-the-Baku’ process.”

Keith nodded.

“Well,” Lance sighed. “At least we have a plan.”

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“So how are your preparations coming for the first task?” Allura asked as she followed Lance out of the Charms classroom.

Lance rolled his eyes. “Sorry, gorgeous, but I can’t tell you that.”

Allura rolled her eyes. “But you can tell Keith?” She asked, “Everyone’s noticed how the two of you
keep slipping away to the library together. What’s going on with that?”

Lance held up his hands, shooting Allura a quick grin. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You’re insufferable,” Allura told him.

“That’s all a part of my charm, Allura,” Lance replied.

“The only person that finds you remotely charming is your mother, I’m sure,” Allura sniffed, but it sounded almost like she was teasing him.

“Au revoir, Allura,” Lance said, splitting away from the pack of Ravenclaws and Beauxbatons students that were heading towards their next class.

“Where are you going?” She called after him. “Lance? Lance!”

Lance waved at her over his shoulder, before slipping through the hallways of the school towards the stairs that led up to the fifth floor, he jogged up them (feeling a little winded by the time he reached the top) before making his way towards the Prefect’s Bathroom.

Lance stopped in front of the door. Matt had given him the password over the summer, with a strict warning that Lance was never supposed to use it without permission.

Oops.

“Pine Fresh,” Lance said quietly, relieved when the door swung open. So no one was inside, then.

Lance slipped into the room, careful to close the door behind him, casting a few privacy spells for good measure.

The Prefect’s bathroom was beautiful. While one side of the room was lined with stalls and sinks, most of the room was taken up by a large, swimming-pool sized bathtub with dozens of golden faucets and taps along the sides.

Perfect.

Lance quickly stripped out of his school robes, so that he was only wearing the muggle swimsuit he had worn beneath his clothes. He opened his school bag, taking out a pair of goggles, before setting it carefully on the floor, far enough away from the bath that it wouldn’t get wet.

Lance crossed the room, turning the handles to either side of the main faucet.

He set his wand down next to the faucet, in a decorative dish that was probably meant to hold some kind of soap. He would need it later, but he didn’t want to get it soaking wet.

While a bathtub the size of a swimming pool should really take forever to fill, the water level rose faster than he expected it to, and by the time Lance snapped the goggles on and eased down into the water, it already came nearly up to his waist.

The water was hot, but not unpleasantly so.

While he waited for the tub to fill the rest of the way up, Lance investigated some of the other, smaller, faucets and handles around the side of the tub. Lance turned one of the handles at random, bright pink bubbles spilling out into the water. He tried another. A clear liquid sprayed out, smelling faintly of roses.
Man, the Prefects were lucky.

Eventually, the water turned off automatically, so that it was about the height of Lance’s chest.

Lance took a deep breath of air and plunged underwater.

It was weird, going underwater in hot water rather than cold. It reminded him of when he was little and his family stayed at hotels. His mamá would take Lance and his siblings down to the pool, but Veronica and Luís always made them go in the hot tub. Lance had tried swimming underwater in the hot tub but he could never get used to the heat of the water, it stung his eyes and made his skin feel flushed when he rose back up from the water.

Lance blinked his eyes open, peering around underwater through his goggles.

When had been the last time he went swimming? Over the summer at Varadero beach, probably.

Lance moved over towards the wall closest to him, he came up from underwater to grab a gasp of air, before sticking his head back underwater and pushing himself away from the wall.

He swam a few laps experimentally, free-style, and then back-stroke, and then butterfly, letting himself get used to cutting through the water.

Swimming had always been something Lance excelled at, the water always managed to feel like home.

Finally, once his limbs and lungs were burning, Lance returned to where he had left his wand.

First things first. He took a deep breath of air before plunging underwater, counting silently to himself to see how long he could stay underwater.

Almost two minutes passed before Lance’s head broke the surface.

A good time for a muggle swimmer, but nowhere near long enough for what Lance needed to do.

He grabbed his wand, quickly casting the spell he had designed back in fourth year before plunging under the water again.

Ten minutes.

Better, but still not good enough.

Finally, Lance cast a spell that he remembered learning about in Charms. It created a bubble of air around the witch or wizards’ mouth and nose. It was normally used to avoid bad smells or toxic gases but maybe… just maybe...

Lance felt the bubble of air form around his nose and mouth, pure oxygen that enabled him to breath.

He plunged back down underwater.

And… the bubble held! Yes!

Lance pushed himself off the wall again, doing a few more laps to make sure that the bubble would hold up while he was swimming.

He wasn’t sure how long he was underwater, but it was long enough that his born-to-swim body was quivering with exhaustion as he slumped up against one of the benches that ran the length of the
walls of the pool/bath/thing.

Lance waved one of his hands in front of the bubble, popping it without even needing to use his wand. Nice.

If the bubble had lasted as long as it had, it would probably hold up long enough for him and Keith to defeat the Baku monster thing. Probably. Hopefully.

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“Did you see what she wrote about me?” Keith demanded the next morning during breakfast, dropping a copy of The Daily Prophet onto the table in front of Lance. “Did you see what she fucking wrote about me!?”

Lance choked on the scrambled eggs he was eating. “The article is out?”

Keith nodded, dropping down onto the bench next to Lance.

Some of the other Ravenclaw students shifted away from him uncomfortably, but no one told Keith to leave, either.

Lance flipped the paper open, taking in the front page. His own face (as well as Keith’s, Lotor’s, and Allura’s) blinked back at him from their staged photo while ‘THE CHAMPIONS OF THE TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT’ by Rita Skeeter was written underneath it in large, bold letters. The article, itself, was smaller, broken up into columns.

Lance skimmed the article, letting his eyes run over the words.

My darling readers, today I was given the opportunity to chat with the four (yes, you read that correctly! Four!) Champions of the Triwizard Tournament. Pictured above you can see Gryffindor Champion Keith Kogane, the son of reformed-Galra member Krolia Kogane and favored Champion of Hogwarts, Ravenclaw Champion Lance Álvarez, the homesick lover-boy, Beauxbatons Champion Allura Altea, the stunning daughter of Headmaster Alfor, and Durmstrang Champion Lotor Daibazaal, the prodigy of his school and who many consider to be the most likely to win the Tournament.

First, I spoke with Lance Álvarez. The Ravenclaw Champion was the final one to be chosen by the Goblet of Fire, as as such, has faced backlash from his fellow peers and accusations of cheating to ensure his entrance to the Tournament. Lance assured me that these accusations are not true, and that he has taken steps to prove his innocence to the Headmaster and the other instructors.

However, everyone is remaining quite quiet on just what these steps have actually been… how exactly has the boy proven his innocence? Well, that remains to be seen. This seems to be a popular topic of contention within the student body. One student when asked upon said that Lance was obviously “not good enough” to represent Hogwarts as Champion, while another student added that they believe it’s entirely possible that the boy was able to cast a strong enough Confundus Charm because Lance has “always been in the top of his class for Defense Against the Dark Arts”. When I asked Lance how he felt about being chosen by the Goblet of Fire, he claimed it was an honor to be chosen alongside his fellow Champions. However, when I pushed a little deeper about the response from his peers, Lance admitted that the experience has “allowed him to see who his true friends are”.

For those of you who don’t know, Lance Álvarez is a muggleborn student who was born in Cuba, where his family still resides. From our conversation, it was clear to me that the young boy misses
home, despite his claim that Hogwarts was like a second home to him. And it’s no surprise. The boy seems to lack any sort of support system here in the United Kingdom. From numerous first hand accounts from students, many of Lance’s friends have turned against him after his entrance into the Triwizard Tournament, leaving the once well-liked boy fairly isolated. One Ravenclaw student claimed that Álvarez is willing to “do anything for attention” and a Slytherin student said that Lance “just wanted to make himself look better than he is.” My questions into his personal life were also rebuffed. Lance may claim that his single-status (yes! You heard that right, boys and girls, at least one of the Champions of the Triwizard Tournament is apparently still on the market!) is because his fellow students can’t “handle” him, but I have a feeling that there’s more to Lance than meets the eye. Many of his peers that I spoke to referred to the boy as a “flirt” and the “class clown” but his suspicious entry into the Triwizard Tournament proves that there may be more to Lance Álvarez than meets the eye. While he seemed like a perfectly nice boy, I don’t buy into his innocent school-boy act the way it seems that his professors at Hogwarts have.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Lance said, whipping his head around to look at Keith. “She might as well come out and say that she thinks I cheated!”

Keith’s scowl deepened.

It’s impossible to talk about one Hogwarts Champion without discussing the other. According to my sources, Lance Álvarez and Keith Kogane have been self-proclaimed rivals since their childhood, facing each other often on the Quidditch pitch. For my readers that have been living under a rock for the past few years, let me remind you why the name ‘Kogane’ sounds so familiar. Keith’s mother, Krolia Kogane (formerly Krolia Akira) used to be one of the Dark Lord’s top generals in the Galra order. She turned traitor to the Galra, bringing valuable information to Auror Kogane that was instrumental in dismantling Dark Lord Zarkon’s influence throughout the Wizarding World. After that, the pair of them vanished from the public eye, Krolia resurfacing eleven years later to help their son onto the Hogwarts Express, Kogane killed during one of his top-secret missions for the ministry. It came as no surprise to many that Kogane had been killed as a result of his own poor decision-making, after all, after deciding to marry a member of the Galra, it’s clear that Kogane was not the heroic auror we all believed him to be.

As the son of a reformed member of the Galra, Keith Kogane undoubtedly feels as though he has something to prove during this Triwizard Tournament, although he was silent on the subject when I asked him. In fact, Keith spent most of our interview in silence, his arms crossed over his chest and his signature scowl on his face. I wasn’t quite sure what to make of the boy, the boy whom many deem to be the rightful Champion of Hogwarts. As the protégée of Durmstrang alumni turned Hogwarts professor, Takashi Shirogane, it’s no surprise that he was chosen to compete in the Triwizard Tournament. But the boy I met was standoffish and cold, seemingly uninterested in the glory and popularity that winning could bring him. The only two words I could manage to crack out of him were “no comment”. But fear not, dear readers! I have managed to get quite the scoop on Kogane even without his input. Many of the students I spoke with agreed with my perception of Keith Kogane, even his fellow Gryffindors allowed that he can “be quick to anger”. He sounds a bit like an impulsive hothead, perhaps one not to be messed with, and it seems he truly is his mother’s son. The question that remains, I suppose, is whether he’ll live up to the high expectations placed on him as a direct result of who his parents and mentor are, or whether he’ll crack under the pressure.

While many members of the other houses have rallied around Keith’s position as the Hogwarts Champion, they admit that they have their reservations about the boy. He spends most of his time at Hogwarts in relative isolation, when I asked around, students informed me that Kogane has never been romantically connected with any of his fellow classmates. “I’ve never seen him talking to anyone other than Thace,” one Gryffindor student said, meaning, of course, Thace Marmora, the captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Allura Altea admitted she didn’t know Keith well enough
to have an opinion on him, while Lotor Daibazaal simply scorned the idea that Keith would be any sort of competition for him. Apparently he takes after his mother - Krolia Kogane was never very good at making friends, either. Is Krolia Kogane and her parenting style responsible for Keith’s sour attitude? Tut, tut, tut… what would his father have to say?

The final two Champions, Allura Altea and Lotor Daibaazal, of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, respectively, have also been linked together. The two, whose parents Headmaster Alfor Altea and Headmistress Haggar Daibazaal, were once inseparable, sources from their schools claim. While close throughout their childhood, it appears the pair dated for some years before parting on less-than-friendly terms…

Lance had seen enough. “Keith,” he said quietly, “I’m so sorry she said all this stuff about you and your family.”

Keith picked at a string on his school robes. “That’s all she wrote about. She didn’t focus on anything else about me. Just that my mother helped to take down Zarkon and that I don’t have a lot of friends. Oh, and the fact that I have anger issues. I don’t have anger issues.”

“Weeeeeeellllll,” Lance said, drawing out the word. “You did just punch Griffin in the face the other day. Which was in defense of me and was totally awesome of you,” Lance added when Keith narrowed his eyes at him. “But punching people isn’t exactly always the best way to make friends.”

Keith slumped forward, “You think James talked to her?”

Lance nodded, “What other Slytherin would say that I ‘just wanted to make myself look better than I am’?” Lance asked, making air quotes with his fingers.

“Nyma?” Keith offered with a small shrug.

Shit, he wasn’t wrong.

“Maybe,” Lance allowed.

“I just… I can’t believe that Headmaster Holt even let her interview us. Everyone knows all Rita Skeeter is good for is gossiping and spreading lies.”

Lance shrugged, “They’re not lies though. At least, not about me,” he added quickly. “Everyone really believes what they’re saying about me. And as much as it sucks, they believe what they’re saying about you. It’s so wrong, ugh, but I just… there’s nothing we can do but prove them wrong, right?”

Keith let out a huff of hair, blowing his bangs away from his face. “This is stupid. I don’t want to even think about this stupid article anymore. Fuck Rita Skeeter. I need to get out of here. Want to go flying?”

“What about class?” Lance asked, but he was already reaching underneath the table to grab his bags.

“It’s just Potions. I’ll catch up later.”

“Okay, fine,” Lance agreed, “but it means you have to help me with my Transfiguration essay later.”

“Deal,” Keith said, pushing away from the table. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

Lance left the copy of the Daily Prophet lying on the table.
“Lance,” Headmaster Holt said, “I hope you don’t mind that I asked you to sit down with me.”

“No, no,” Lance said, shaking his head as he eased down into the armchair across from Headmaster Holt’s desk. “It’s fine, Sa-Headmaster Holt.”

Headmaster Holt smiled, picking up a glass bowl from the table and holding it out towards Lance. “Sherbet lemon?” He asked.

Lance gingerly took one of the candies from the dish and popped it in his mouth, the familiar tang of lemon flooding his senses. At least sherbet lemons were muggle candies so he knew what he was getting. Wizarding candies were extremely unpredictable.

“I wanted to talk to you about the Triwizard Tournament,” Headmaster Holt said, “I know we haven’t had a chance to speak about it since you were chosen.”

Lance sucked on the candy, letting the fizzy powder spill out across his tongue. “I know,” he said finally. “I… ah… wasn’t sure if you’d want to talk to me. I mean, obviously I know that you believed me once I took the Veritaserum, but…”

“Lance,” Headmaster Holt said calmly, “breathe.”

Lance stopped talked and sucked in a huge gulp of air, releasing it slowly through his nose.

“I never believed that you cheated to enter the Triwizard Tournament, Lance,” Headmaster Holt said, and Lance felt a weight lift from his shoulders. “I, of course, had to prove to the other Headmasters that you weren’t, but… I know you, Lance. You’re a good kid.”

“Y-You believed me?” Lance blurted out, unable to stop himself.

Headmaster Holt nodded. “Of course I did, Lance. You’re the same kid that comes over every summer and tells Colleen that her homemade **empanadas** that she makes for you are delicious even when we all know they’re terrible. You’ve never been much of a liar, kid.”

Lance blushed. *Damn.* He hadn’t realized any of the Holts has realized that, while Colleen tried, she wasn’t very good at cooking. “I thought… with the Veritaserum… and…”

Headmaster Holt sighed. “The Veritaserum was unfortunately a necessary step to take to assure Headmaster Altea and Headmistress Daibazaal of your innocence. Although, I’m disappointed that it hasn’t had the same effect on the students.”

Lance shrugged half-heartedly, reaching for another candy. “They think that Keith is the rightful Champion and they’re angry at me for trying to take the attention away from him. I don’t really think that they care whether or not the Goblet of Fire actually chose me. All that they care about is that I’m not good enough to represent Ravenclaw or even Hogwarts.”

Headmaster Holt pursed his lips. “I’ve heard about the… incidents… you and Keith have been involved in. Professor Shiro and Professor Iverson both gave me reports on what happened in the Great Hall with James Griffin. While normally physical assault would be grounds for expulsion, Shiro and I both agree that Keith was reacting to James’ verbal abuse and that he shouldn’t be punished for doing so.”

Lance let out a breath of air. “So that’s why Keith never got in trouble for punching James besides losing the House Points?”
Headmaster Holt nodded. “Additionally, I’ve taken steps to track down the creator of the nasty buttons quite a few students have been wearing. I’m not sure of the creator’s identity yet, but I assure you we will shut the production down.”

“Why don’t you just ask your children where the got them,” Lance commented, before wincing. *Shit.* He hadn’t wanted to say anything about Matt and Pidge’s involvement to their dad.

Headmaster Holt blinked at him. “Excuse me?”

Lance dropped his head down, refusing to meet Headmaster Holt’s eyes. “Pidge and Matt have been wearing the buttons too. Pidge is mad at me because they think I cheated and won’t tell them how I did it. Matt’s just going along with it to be loyal, but he’s still going along with it.”

Headmaster Holt frowned. “I’m going to have a serious conversation with my children about this. You all have been friends for a long time, Lance. This is… deeply concerning to me that they’re willing to act this way.”

Lance snapped his head back up. “Please don’t tell them I told you!” He cried. “I don’t want it to look like I was upset and went crying to their dad to fix everything. That will just make it worse.”

“I’ll leave you out of it,” Headmaster Holt promised.

“Good,” Lance, and then quieter, “good.”

“Lance,” Headmaster Holt said, “you’re a good kid. You don’t deserve the treatment that you’re receiving. For whatever part I, or my family, have played in bringing it about, I want to apologize.”

“But you haven’t done anything!” Lance said, confused.

Headmaster Holt gave him a wry grin. “Maybe not directly, but I haven’t supported you as much as I should have. The school should not be doubting your innocence when we all know that you took Veritaserum and proved it. But apparently my word of your innocence is not enough for people to believe it to be true.”

“Sa-Headmaster Holt, it’s okay. Really. It just… feels good to know that you believed me even without the truth serum.”

Headmaster Holt nodded, and it seemed like he was probably going to say goodbye or something to end the conversation, but Lance cut him off before he could speak.

“Why do you think I got chosen as the fourth? I still don’t understand…”

“Honestly?” Headmaster Holt said, “I’m still not sure. We have no way of knowing if the Goblet of Fire was tampered with or not, but I don’t know who would do such a thing. Maybe it was an ill-thought prank, maybe it was a random attack, however we also need to consider if this a more serious matter. But, it’s entirely possible that the Goblet of Fire couldn’t decide between you or Keith and so it chose you both.”

Lance tapped his fingers along the arm of the chair he was sitting in. “You make it sound so simple.”

“Maybe it is,” Headmaster Holt said with a small smile before growing serious once more. “But whatever the reason, I don’t want you to have to worry about it. Focus on the trials, prove yourself. Professor Shirogane and I have been working closely with a member from the ministry to determine the cause for your selection and we will continue to do so. But, Lance, you don’t have anything to worry about other than solving the riddle and preparing for next week’s trial.”
Lance gave him an easy grin, “I’ve already figured it out,” he said smugly.

Headmaster Holt smiled at him, “Then I look forward to seeing what you come up with.”

“And, Lance,” the Headmaster added. “Don’t be surprised if there’s a little more security around Hogwarts during the trials. The Ministry is insisting on increased security given some of the unfortunate rumors we’ve been hearing. With any luck, they’re just that… but we can never be too careful with the lives of our students.”

Lance swallowed heavily. “Rumors about what, Headmaster?” He asked, unable to stop himself.

“I don’t want to worry you,” Headmaster Hold said with a frown, “but… there have been rumors that the Dark Lord has crawled back from whatever dark hole he’s been hiding in.”

Lance felt a chill race down his spine. “Zarkon’s back?” He knew some of what the Dark Lord had been trying to accomplish, wanting to rid the wizarding world of muggleborns, wanting to uphold the dominance of ‘purebloods’ over them, to create a horrid hierarchy… the fraction of information that Lance knew from passing conversations, sensationalist articles (not unlike the abhorrent article Rita Skeeter wrote about Keith) and the few documented facts was enough to make him want to run away and never come back. To flee before Zarkon ever had the chance to find him.

“I highly doubt it. It’s likely just some of his old followers causing trouble, which I’m sure the Galra investigative team within the Department of Magical Law Enforcement can sort by themselves, but in any case, the Ministry would feel more comfortable with some additional witches and wizards to be around, the kind of witches and wizards specialized in dealing with some of these things,” Headmaster Holt explained.

“You mean Aurors,” Lance guessed.

“Mostly… yes,” Headmaster Holt admitted. “But, please, keep this information to yourself. There’s likely no reason to worry your fellow students.”

Lance let out a huff of air, “Okay, I won’t say anything. But, uh, why did you tell me, then?”

“I wanted you to be aware of the situation,” Headmaster Holt said, “giving the escalating tensions between the purebloods and muggleborns such as yourself as a result of the Triwizard Tournament.”


“Now, Lance, I do believe you had better be getting to class,” Headmaster Holt said with a small grin, as he picked up another Sherbert Lemon from the tray on his desk.

Sensing the dismissal for what it was, Lance pushed his way out of the seat, snagging another candy from Headmaster Holt’s desk as he did so. “Hey, Headmaster;” he said, pausing to swing his school bag over his arm. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Why did you let Rita Skeeter come to the school to interview us? Just… all she’s really known for is writing gossip. Surely there are other reporters from The Daily Prophet that could cover the Triwizard Tournament…”

Headmaster Holt scowled. “She wasn’t my choice. And she wasn’t Adam Sharma’s, the member of the Ministry’s Department of Magical Games and Sports, choice either. The higher-ups at the Ministry demanded it. I couldn’t tell them no.”
Lance nodded. “I understand. I was just curious.”

“Just to give you a warning, she’s covering the whole Tournament. Which unfortunately means that she’ll be attending the first trial.”

Lance groaned. “Of course she is. Okay, well, thanks for the talk, Headmaster.”

Headmaster Holt nodded. “Anytime, Lance.”

Lance crossed the office quickly, reaching forward and pulling open the door. He slipped through, and descended the spiral staircase two steps at a time, before he stepped out into the corridor.

Behind him, the statue slid back into place.

“Out of my way, boy,” a raspy voice said, making Lance jump.

Headmistress Haggar Daibazaal was standing in the hallway just a few feet away from him, her eyes piercing and dark underneath the shade of her cloak.

Lance swallowed nervously, stepping to the side and pressing himself up against the stone wall of the corridor.

“Toffee Eclair,” the Headmistress said, addressing the statue, apparently deciding to ignore Lance’s presence.

The statue moved out of place, once again revealing the spiral staircase leading to Headmaster Holt’s office.

Headmistress Daibazaal stepped forward onto the staircase, disappearing from Lance’s view.

Lance let out a huff of air, slumping against the wall.

That lady seriously freaked him out.

Lance strolled into the library, making his way towards the back alcove that he and Keith had claimed as their own. His shoes were still squishy with mud from the hike back from Professor Coran’s hut down on the castle grounds, but Lance had opted to come straight here rather than stopping at his room to change, he knew he was already late for his meeting with Keith.

“You’re late,” Keith said without looking up when Lance finally drew closer.

Lance ignored him, slamming the large leather-bound book that he was carrying down onto the table in front of Keith. The table shook slightly from the force, Keith’s ink pot tipping precariously, before it straightened.

“What on earth is that?” Keith asked, eyeing the book warily.

“A book on mythological monsters, I… um… borrowed it from Professor Coran.”

“Did you steal this?” Keith gaped at him.

“No!” Lance said quickly. “It’s just that teacher’s aren’t officially allowed to help us, so I kind of convinced Coran that it was for fun reading?”
“And he believed you?” Keith asked, as Lance dropped down into the seat across from him.

“Hey! Who wouldn’t believe this face?” Lance asked, waving a hand in front of his face.

Keith raised an unimpressed eyebrow. “I have literally never seen you read a book for fun.”

“Ooooooohhh, have you been watching me, Mullet?” Lance teased, wagging his eyebrows dramatically.

Keith flushed. “Shut up. That’s not what I meant. I just…”

“You just… what?” Lance asked, leaning forward.

Keith rolled his eyes. “Let’s just look at the book. What did you want to show me?”

“Subtle topic change,” Lance commented, as he slid the book over towards himself so he could flip it open to the page he had been reading earlier. “Here.”

Keith skimmed the page that Lance held open. “You found more information on the Baku?” He asked, sounding surprised.

“You’re lack of faith in me is wounding, Keith,” Lance said, placing his hands dramatically over his chest. “But yes, I found more information on the Baku. And! And the author of this book actually thinks it’s incredibly possible that they’re real.”

“So the reason that no one has ever seen one is because they have a natural camouflage?” Keith said, as he read from the book.

Lance nodded. “So now we know what we’re gonna be looking for. We need to find some sort of large plant growth that seems out of place compared to the rest of whatever is in the lake.”

“Lance!” Keith laughed breathlessly, running his hand through his hair. “Now that we know this, we’re definitely going to have a head start against Allura and Lotor. We actually know what we’re looking for,” Keith glanced up at Lance, his indigo eyes shining. “We could win the trial.”

“Of course we’re gonna win,” Lance said confidently, reaching across the table to give Keith a fist-bump, “We’re Keith and Lance, red and blue, the best quidditch players Hogwarts has ever seen. Allura and Lotor don’t stand a chance.”

Keith stared at the first as though it was an alien, making Lance groan. “Seriously? No one has ever given you a fist bump before?”

Keith looked so confused it was adorable, his eyebrows drawing together and his mouth tipping into a frown. “A what?” He asked.

“A fist bump, it’s like, when you do something cool,” Lance said, reached across to grab Keith’s hand. He curled the other boy’s fingers down into a fist and lightly bumped their hands together.

“But what’s the point?” Keith asked, still looking at their hands.

“What’s the… I don’t know, Keith, it’s just a thing that friends do!” Lance said, tossing his hands up into the air. “It’s like a high five.”

“A high five?” Keith echoed.

“Oh my god,” Lance groaned. “What does Professor Kolivan even teach in Muggle Studies if he
doesn’t cover the basics like high fives and fist bumps?”

“He usually sticks to Muggle history lessons,” Keith admitted.

“Fuck that,” Lance said, waving his hand, “someone needs to educate you in the ways of pop culture.”

“Are you offering?” Keith asked.

“Of course! I’m, like, the master of pop culture knowledge. But that can wait, because first we need to make our plan for the first trial. It’s in three days, Keith, *three!*” Lance said, tapping the book in front of him. “We have three days to figure out how to fight this thing. Not to mention how to rescue the mermaids *and*, don’t forget, how to fight them as well.”

Keith furrowed his brow, leaning forward on the table.

Lance stared at Keith expectantly.

“How good are your stunning spells?” Keith asked slowly.

Lance shrugged. “They’re decent. Why?”

“I might have an idea,” he said slowly.
Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

The morning of the first trial arrives, and our champions are feeling the heat. Breakfast is eaten, plans are finalized and questions are asked.

Chapter Notes

Whaddup yall it me, ya boi. The support we get from everyone each week is always so overwhelming, and we're so thankful. Next chapter is a big one, way longer than any other chapter thus far, so I hope you're excited! Please remember to leave a comment and some kudos' as we thrive on them. Thank you everyone <33 - Cait

On the morning of the first trial, Lance awoke to someone shaking his shoulder. He blinked his eyes open slowly, before bolting upright. “Jesus Christ, Ro, are you trying to kill me?”

Romelle blinked at him, the picture of innocence with her long blonde hair spilling across her shoulders. “It’s the first trial today, Lance.”

“Yeah, I know, I couldn't fall asleep last night,” Lance said, reaching up to scrub at his eyes. When his hands dropped back down they were covered in the green goo from his cucumber face mask. Gross.

Romelle wrinkled her nose. “We were afraid you would oversleep, come on, you don't want to miss breakfast today.”

“I don’t think I can eat today,” Lance mourned, as he climbed out of bed, shoving his feet into his blue slippers and grabbing his blue robe to tie around his bare chest. It perfectly matched his blue and silver plaid pajama pants. He liked to sleep comfortably, sue him.

“Breakfast is the most important meal of the day, and you need your strength,” Romelle informed him, as she grabbed Lance’s hand and dragged him out of the room. “Come on, go get dressed so we can be seen in public.”

“You’re starting to sound like Hunk,” Lance rolled his eyes, but he followed her instructions and headed to the bathroom to scrub his face mask off and change into his school robes.

When Lance emerged from the bathroom with his shiny-perfect skin and his Ravenclaw tie settled neatly against his chest, Romelle was still waiting for him.

“I don’t need a babysitter,” he told her.

“Agree to disagree,” she smirked. “Come on, let’s go down to the Great Hall,” she said wiggling her fingers at him.

Lance grabbed her hand with his own, and allowed Romelle to lead him from the room.
The walk to the Great Hall didn’t take long, and Lance was grateful to see that it was early enough that the room was still fairly empty. He wasn’t sure that he could take everyone’s attention right now, with the trial looming over him. He spied Keith sitting over at the Gryffindor table, picking at a piece of toast, so Lance waved. Keith gave him a tiny wave back, before his gaze flickered down, his eyes widened slightly and his easy grin dipped into a frown, before he turned his attention back down to his half-eaten toast. Weird.

“Lance!” An all too familiar voice called, and Lance turned to immediately be engulfed in a trademark-Hunk hug.

“Can’t… breathe…” Lance gasped, as he felt Hunk crack all of his ribs before setting him back down onto the ground.

“Are you ready for the trial, buddy?” Hunk asked, patting Lance’s shoulder.

“I hope so,” Lance replied. “If I’m not, then I’m pretty much screwed.”

Hunk frowned, but before he could say anything, Shay spoke up. Lance hadn’t even noticed her standing beside his friend. “We wanted to wish you good luck, Lance.”

Hunk nodded enthusiastically, “That’s right! Oh, and we wanted to show you these!”

He held out the front of his school robes, a blue pin with the words GO LANCE! written in silver letters. He tapped it and the words changed to GO LANCE AND KEITH! on a purple background.

“You made buttons?” Lance sniffed, feeling tears well in his eyes.

“We couldn’t figure out how to un-enchant the other ones,” Hunk admitted, rubbing the back of his neck, “so we thought we’d just make our own.”

“You guys,” Lance blinked tears out of his eyes, tossing his arms around Shay and Hunk so that he could hug both of them at the same time. “You’re the best.”

Hunk patted Lance’s back. “We’ve got you, buddy.”

Lance let go of his friends, taking a step backwards and trying to subtly wipe the tears out of his eyes. “You guys are gonna come watch the trial, right?”

“Of course,” Hunk said, “we couldn’t miss it.”

“We’re all gonna be cheering you on,” Romelle agreed, sitting down at the mostly-empty Ravenclaw table. Hunk and Shay glanced toward the teacher’s table where Professor Slav sat, his nose practically pressed to the pages of his book before they sat at the Ravenclaw table, too.

Lance followed their lead and sat down, grabbing a plate. He glanced at the food spread across the table and finally settled for grabbing a piece of rye toast and picking it apart.

“So do you have a plan?” Hunk asked, scooping a pile of hash browns onto his plate.

Lance nodded. “Yeah, Keith and I have a plan. We’ve only been working on it non-stop for, like, a month. We’ve totally got this. We’re gonna kick this trial’s ass,” Lance said, trying to fill his voice with more confidence than he was really feeling.

“You guys have been working really hard on it, squirreled away in the library all the time,” Romelle commented, “I feel like I hardly see you outside of class anymore.”
“Seconded!” Hunk teased as he tore a piece off of his pastry.

“Sorry,” Lance said, wincing slightly. “I’m not trying to ghost you, I promise.”

“I’m only teasing, I know the trial is important,” Romelle said.

“Not to mention it isn’t only working in the library! Keith and I have our private lessons with Shiro as well.” Lance added, tearing another corner off his toast. Giving up on food, he filled his goblet with pumpkin juice and took a hesitant sip. Ugh. He missed regular old fashioned apple juice sometimes.

“Oooohhh,” Hunk teased, “Private lessons with Shiro.”

Lance rolled his eyes. “Shiro’s great. Hey, did you guys know that he has some fiancé that works for the Ministry?”

Hunk’s eyes bugged out of his head. “Seriously? I didn’t even think teachers were allowed to have a personal life.”

“Hunk, we go to Headmaster Holt’s house every summer,” Lance reminded him.

“But Headmaster Holt is old and married. Shiro is so young and cool. What’s this guy like?”

Lance shrugged, “I don’t know. His name is Adam and he works for the Department of Magical Games and Sports. I think he’s actually involved with the Triwizard Tournament from something that Headmaster Holt said the other day.”

“Maybe he’ll be at the Tournament,” Romelle said, resting her chin in her palm. “How did you find out about this, anyway?”

“Huh? Oh, Keith told me,” Lance said offhand.

Romelle raised one of her perfectly shaped brows. “You and Keith gossip?” She asked, sounding impressed.

“It wasn’t gossip,” Lance insisted, taking another sip of his pumpkin juice. “I was there when Shiro and Keith were talking about some guy named Adam so I convinced Keith to tell me who it was.”

“And how did you manage to do that?” Romelle asked, dipping her voice suggestively.

“Shut up, Ro,” Lance said, hating the flush that crept across his face. “I just told him who was making the stupid buttons.”

Romelle cackled. “Oh, Lance, your face,” she teased, “I didn’t even say anything.”

“You didn’t have to,” Lance grumbled.

“You’re too cute,” she said, reaching over to pinch his cheeks.

Lance batted her hands away, “And you’re evil,” he informed her.

He picked up his torn-apart piece of toast, shoving part of it into his mouth.

“But I got you to eat, so I’m pretty sure that I’m the winner here,” Romelle said, sipping at a cup of tea.
Huh, Lance looked down at the toast in his hand. He hadn’t even realized that he’d started to eat it. The nauseous feeling he had woken up to had passed, and he actually felt kind of **hungry**.

Lance abandoned the toast in favor of scooping some bacon and hashbrowns onto his plate. Romelle was right, he would need his strength for later.

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Keith caught up with him while Lance and his friends were walking out of the Great Hall, the light pressure of Keith’s hand on his elbow enough to stop Lance completely. Romelle shot him a look over her shoulder, but Lance waved for her to go on ahead with Hunk and Shay.

“What’s up?” Lance asked, noticing that Keith was scowling again.

Keith quickly schooled his expression back into a neutral one. “Hey, the Champions are supposed to head down to the lake. I guess there’s some place to get ready down there.”

“I heard,” Lance nodded. “Was there… anything else?”

“Um,” Keith paused. “Um, y-yeah, I thought maybe we could go over the plan one more time on our way down to the lake,” Keith said, taking a few steps forward.

Lance fell into step beside him. “Sure.”

“So we know that we’re dealing with a mythological monster that no one thought was real called the Baku which may or may not have the ability to control creatures with the power of its mind,” Keith said.

Lance nodded, “And we know that the trial takes place underwater. So it’s a good thing I learned the Bubble Head charm because I have a feeling being able to breathe for who knows how long will be important.”

“And it’s a good thing you taught it to me,” Keith added.

“Right,” Lance agreed. “Now, if the evil-underwater-creature-thing is using mind control on other creatures in the lake, we’re going to stun them with the spells you and Shiro have been teaching me, nothing serious to permanently injure them, but enough that we’ll be able to hold them off.”

“And then we have to defeat the Baku which will reveal the prize that we’re supposed to be looking for,” Keith finished. “And we know the Baku has a natural camouflage that allows it to blend in with the plant life of the lake.”

“But hopefully, those offensive spells you’ve shown me and all those lessons have paid off, and we can find whatever weakness this thing has. I’m pretty sure that covers it!” Lance said with a grin, “And it only took us a month to come up with!”

And as long as everything went according to plan, Keith would win the trial. And everything would be fine.

Keith scowled. “I wish there was more.”

Lance patted his back in what he hoped was a comforting manner, “Sometimes, you have to just do things on the fly, my dude. You should be pretty good at that, right?.”

Keith seemingly ignored that last part. “I know,” Keith agreed, “but I feel like there should be more
of a plan given how long we’ve been working on it.”

Lance shrugged, pushing open the castle’s doors and stepping outside. He help the door open for Keith before letting it swing closed.

“There isn’t really anything we can do about it now,” he said with a small shrug, switching his school bag so that it was hanging from his other arm. *What?* It was because his shoulder was sore. It totally had nothing to do with the fact that now his hand could brush against Keith’s as they walked. Nothing. Nope. Zip.

“I guess,” Keith allowed.

“So are you nervous?” Lance asked, mainly just to keep the conversation going.

“I guess,” Keith said. “This is still really overwhelming. I mean, we have no idea what we’re getting ourselves into. This is uncharted territory.”

“Well, we’re in the same boat. I’m just glad I managed to eat this morning.”

“I couldn’t, bar a little bit of bread,” Keith admitted. “But I snuck down to the kitchens and got a ton of food for afterwards.”

“How did you manage to do that?” Lance questioned. “You keep managing to sneak off everywhere all the time and you’re never caught. Seriously, teach me your ways or something.”

Keith ignored him, the older boy’s attention having been caught by something in the distance.

“Oh wow.”

Lance followed Keith’s line of sight.

It appeared as though a wooden pier had been constructed overnight along the edges of the lake. Tall wooden bleachers for fans to sit in ran along them, broken only by the occasional towering structure that must be for the teachers and ministry officials. Four long docks stretched out into the water.

“Jesus,” Lance swore softly, “this *definitely* wasn’t here yesterday.”

“I think that’s where we’re supposed to go,” Keith said, pointing towards a large white tent that was slightly offset from the pier.

“How is anyone going to see what’s going on if we’re underwater?” Lance mused as he followed Keith downhill.

Keith raised an unimpressed eyebrow at him.


“So are your parents going to be watching? Or the rest of your family?” Keith asked conversationally, but the question was enough to completely stop Lance in his tracks.

“What?” He said, feeling dumb. “Of course not. My family’s in Cuba.”

“Well I wasn’t sure if you would invite them,” Keith said, blushing faintly. “You talk about them a lot and I know you really miss them, plus I was kind of hoping to…” Keith trailed off, glancing at the ground. “I invited my mom,” he tacked on, seemingly as an afterthought.
Lance blinked at him in shock. “Seriously?!” He asked. “Is that… is she going to be safe?”

Keith nodded, gesturing towards one of the towers. “She’s going to sit with the ministry officials up there. None of the other students will even know that she’s here.”

“That’s so cool, man,” Lance said.

Keith nodded, his dark eyes sparkling. “She’s really excited to watch. She never gets to come to any of my school functions or see me play quidditch, so… I don’t know… I guess this is finally her chance to feel like a part of my Hogwarts life. If that makes any sense.”

“It does,” Lance said quietly, nodding.

He understood the feeling that your school and home lives were separate. At school, he was a wizard and he could do magic and he played on the quidditch team. At home, he was the youngest with four older siblings, he wasn’t allowed to do magic, and his whole family tried to pretend like he wasn’t different than them but Lance knew that they all thought he was. It wasn’t anyone’s fault, but it was hard to fit back into normal life on Varadero beach after living in Scotland for nine months out of the year.

“So you really didn’t invite your family?” Keith asked, frowning. “I thought you’d jump at the chance to show off in front of them.”

“Honestly…” Lance said slowly, letting out a huff of air, he paused, unsure whether he wanted to continue speaking, before deciding that… yes, he did want to tell Keith the thought that he barely even wanted to admit to himself. What he had been putting off even thinking of.

“I haven’t even told my family about the Triwizard Tournament.”

Keith shook at him. “What?” He asked. “You never told them?”

Lance shook his head. “No,” he said, his voice cracking in the word. “At first it just, I don’t know, slipped my mind? Everything was so hectic and weird and I didn’t want to tell them what everyone’s been saying about me. But then… then I think I didn’t tell them because I didn’t want to tell them. If that makes sense? Because if I tell them about it… that makes it real, Keith. That makes it really fucking real. And I don’t… want this to be real.”

Keith cocked his head. “You don’t want this to be real?” He echoed, sounding almost sad.

“I mean,” Lance took a deep breath trying again. “Parts of this have been really cool, like working with you, but most of it? Most of its really sucked. And on top of all the sucky-ness, now I have to compete in some deadly trial that may or may not literally kill me? Yeah, I’d rather just let my family believe that I’m peacefully attending classes and learning to levitate feathers. Plus they’re muggles, Keith, they don’t understand any of this. I mean, I don’t even think muggles can see Hogwarts so?”

“Merlin, when you put it like that…” Keith said. “I’m sorry I brought it up. I didn’t know.”

Lance swung one of his arms over Keith’s shoulder. “How could you have, buddy?”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, Shiro told me that Adam is rooting for you because he ‘likes a good underdog’,” Keith mumbled.

Lance let go of Keith’s shoulder to ruffle his mullet. “It actually kind of does, thanks buddy.”

Keith batted Lance’s hand away from his hair. “You’re welcome, or whatever,” he said, so quietly
that Lance almost didn’t catch it.

Lance bit back a grin. “Let’s go, Red.”

“Hey, a nickname that isn’t a jab at my hair. I didn’t know you were capable of those,” Keith teased.

“Aw, babe, boo bear, honey bunches, snickerdoodle, love bug, you have no idea how capable I am,” Lance said, smirking.

“You’re insufferable,” Keith informed him.

“You love it,” Lance countered, delighting in the red flush that crept across Keith’s face.

As they drew closer to the white tent that was set up for the Champions to get ready in, Lance noticed Lotor standing in front of the tent with the girls that he frequently hung out with. Two of them were off to the side slightly, talking quietly to each other, the taller girl with her arm wrapped around the red-haired girl’s shoulders. The third girl, on the other hand, was standing close to Lotor.

She pressed something into Lotor’s palm before spinning on her heel and strolling away, brushing past Lance and Keith. Lotor made his way into the tent, not even bothering to say goodbye to the girls.

The third girl gestured to her friends. The red haired one reached up, pressing a kiss to the taller girl’s cheek, before skipping over to her friend’s side. The taller girl trailed behind the pair slowly.

The girl who had been speaking with Lotor brushed past Lance and Keith, barely giving them enough time to hop out of her way. Her chin-length bob was died a dark blue, almost purple, really, making her look a little bit like Raven from *Teen Titans*. Lance said as much to Keith once he was sure that the girl wasn’t within ear-shot.

“What’s *Teen Titans*?” Keith asked, arching a brow.

“It’s a cartoon, you know, like a kid’s show? I grew up watching *Teen Titans* and *Avatar the Last Airbender* with Mark and Luis. Veronica always tried to make me watch *Totally Spies*. Which was actually pretty good, but you aren’t allowed to tell her I told you that,” Lance warned.

“Are you even speaking in English right now?” Keith asked. “Because I didn’t understand a word of what you just said. Muggles are so weird. Why doesn’t Professor Kolivan tell us any of this?”

Lance shrugged, “He totally should,” he agreed. “Pop culture is so much more interesting than muggle history. And, anyway, si no estuviera hablando inglés lo sabrías.”

“Okay that definitely wasn’t English,” Keith said, blinking slowly.

Lance laughed. “No. That wasn’t English.”

Lance stepped to the side, holding open the tent flap for Keith before following the older boy inside. And… wow… okay. This wasn’t exactly what Lance had been expecting.

The tent felt like it was bigger on the inside than it was on the outside, there was a fully furnished kitchenette and living room, as well as a hallway that appeared to lead off in the direction of multiple bedrooms.

“Okay, are we in the Tardis right now?” Lance muttered, letting his gaze flicker around the inside of
the tent.

“That’s from Doctor Who,” Keith said, eyes brightening. “I got that reference.”

“Of course that’s the one muggle reference that you get,” Lance laughed. “So, what, do we just, like, wait in here for someone to show up and tell us what to do?”


“He went to go change,” someone else piped up, making Lance jump.

“Jesus Christ, Allura, maybe announce your presence next time?”

Allura arched a brow, looking up from the book she was reading on the couch, her legs twisted at the ankle and resting on the coffee table. “There are swimsuits on the table for each of us.”

Sure enough, Allura was wearing a shimmery blue one-piece bathing suit that contrasted sharply with her warm brown skin and long legs. Her silver-blonde hair was tied into a bun at the nape of her neck.

“Don’t,” Allura warned Lance, turning her attention back to the book she was reading. “Just go get dressed, Lance.”

“I didn’t even say anything,” Lance said, holding up his hands in surrender.

“You didn’t have to,” Allura said without looking up.

Lance rolled his eyes, following Keith over to the table in the kitchen. Sure enough, there was a pair of blue swim trunks and a pair of red swim trunks carefully folded on the table.

Lance picked up the blue pair. There was a tiny Ravenclaw House crest in the lower corner of the shorts. Cute.

Lance headed in the direction of the bedrooms, hearing Keith’s footsteps behind him. The first bedroom door they passed was closed, probably where Lotor was changing, so Lance slipped into the next room.

He quickly stripped out of his school robes and slipped on the swim trunks, leaving his school robes folded neatly on the dresser.

The swimsuit was comforting, it reminded Lance of summer days at Varadero, splashing with his nieces and nephews in the shallow waves or going surfing with Veronica.

Lance fussed with his hair in the mirror hanging above the dresser, more out of habit than anything else, before exiting the room. Lotor had apparently finished getting dressed as well, and he was leaning against the fridge, some green plant in his hand.

Lance ignored him, dropping down onto the couch next to Allura, trying to stealing a glimpse of the book that she was reading. “Transfiguration?” He asked, confused. “Why are you reading about Transfiguration?”

“None of your business,” Allura sniffed, flipping a page.

Lance rolled his eyes, kicking his legs up onto the coffee table next to hers. He tossed one of his arms over his eyes, tipping his head back.
All too soon, he would be underwater fighting some giant monster.

But they had a plan. Focus on the plan. As long as they followed the plan, Keith would win. Keith would win the trial and everything would be fine. If Lance had to be in the tournament, fine, but the true Hogwarts champion would win. He would make sure of it.

Lance took a few steadying breaths through his nose, before dropping his arm back down and blinking his eyes open.

Keith stood in the hallway, his chest bare. And… wow… those training sessions with Shiro must seriously be working for him, because Keith was ripped. Sure he was pasty as fuck and Lance was fairly certain that Keith had never seen a day in the sun, but he still managed to look great. Which really wasn’t fair. He had abs! Like, clearly defined abs. Oh God. And his arms. Wow. His arms were so defined it looked like he could carry Lance without any difficulty. Lance swallowed. And he would let Keith carry him. Or pin him against a wall. Or… do pretty much anything to him, really.

Oh, fuck. He was so screwed.

Keith took a few steps into the room, and was Lance imagining it or was Keith staring at him?

He was pretty sure that Keith was staring at him.

Keith crouched down, perching on the wooden steps that led from the kitchen down into the living room. He reached up, gathering his black hair into his hands, tying it into a short ponytail.

His arms flexed as he did, and Lance swallowed.

Oh my god.

Keith was actually trying to kill him.

This is how Lance Álvarez dies. At the hands of a cute guy.

Well, there were worse ways to go.

Terrifying mind controlling lake monster was probably one.

“Why are you reading a book on Transfiguration?” Keith asked Allura, and was it Lance’s imagination or did Keith’s voice sound deeper than it usually did?

“Why does everyone keep asking me that?” Allura muttered, flipping another page.

Keith glanced over at Lance, raising an eyebrow. Lance shrugged.

And okay, Keith’s eyes definitely lingered on him that time. In fact, Lance was almost certain that Keith’s gaze was caught on his… collarbones?

Did he have something on him? Ah, did he not get all of his face mask off this morning? Lance’s gaze flickered down to his own chest, expecting to see leftover splatters from his cucumber face mask, but his chest was bare. Just the familiar tan skin and freckles.

Before Lance had any more time to analyze Keith’s actions, the flap of the tent was pushed open and a familiar head of blonde hair poked its way in.

“Lance!” Romelle hissed, as she slipped into the tent.
Lance bolted up from the couch. “Hey, Ro, uh… what are you doing here? Isn’t this tent only for Champions?”

“I just came to make sure that you were okay,” she said. “And to remind you that you just have to concentrate. After that, all you have to do is—”

“Survive underwater for an unidentifiable amount of time?” Lance asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Merlin,” Romelle said, “promise me you’ll be careful!” And that was all the warning Lance got before she tossed herself into his arms.

Lance staggered back a step, not expecting the sudden weight, before he wrapped his arms around her. “I promise,” he said.

A sudden flash of bright light accompanied by a popping sound startled him, and he almost dropped Romelle back down onto the ground.

“Ah, young love,” Rita Skeeter cooed.

Lance and Romelle jumped apart, sharing uneasy glances with one another.

“How… invigorating,” Rita said, as she swept into the room, a man carrying a large wizarding camera behind her. Her quick-quotes quill was hovering in the air beside her, already jotting something down onto a floating piece of parchment. “I thought you told me you were single, you naughty boy,” she said as she reached forward and pinched Lance’s cheek.

Lance leaned backwards to try to get away from her, frowning in disgust.

“If everything goes terribly wrong today… you two might even make the front page,” Rita continued, smirking. “Two young lovers torn apart by fate. It has quite a ring to it, doesn’t it?”

“We’re not a—” Romelle started to say, but Rita cut her off.

“How does it feel to be dating one of the Champions of Hogwarts?” Rita asked her. “Are you afraid for his safety? How long have you been together? Since before he was chosen or after?”

“You don’t have any business being here,” Keith snapped, pushing up from the floor and crossing the room to step up into Rita Skeeter’s space. “This tent is for the Champions. And,” he gaze flickered over to Romelle, his eyes narrowed, “friends of the Champions.” It sounded a little like he had to force the last part out, and Lance thought he saw his fists clench.

“I’m fairly certain that this young lady here is more than just a friend of a Champion,” Rita said, raising one of her over-plucked blonde eyebrows. “Can I get an official statement from you about that?”

“I’m not his girlfriend,” Romelle finally managed to get out, taking advantage of the momentary silence brewing between Rita Skeeter and Keith.

“What?” Rita Skeeter and Keith both said simultaneously.

“I’m not his girlfriend,” Romelle echoed. “I’m never going to be his girlfriend. I’m a lesbian.”

Keith blinked at her, while Rita waved one of her hands towards her quick-quotes quill.

“I told you I was single,” Lance mumbled under his breath.
“And Lance is great and all,” Romelle continued, “he’s my best friend, and yes, I’m very concerned for his safety especially considering these tasks can be deadly. But, yeah, no. We’re not a couple. He’s really not my type.”

Lance swung one of his arms around her shoulders. “You’re the only person that could say that to me and not hurt my feelings,” he informed her.

Romelle rolled her eyes.

“You two aren’t a couple?” Keith finally sputtered.

Lance raised an unimpressed eyebrow at him. “Dude… did you really think that we were?”

“I… kind of,” Keith admitted. “It’s just that… you two were holding hands and stuff. I don’t know. What was I supposed to think?”

“Wait,” Lance said slowly. “How long have you thought that me and Ro were dating?”

Keith shifted on his feet, his gaze flickering away and settling on some point over Lance’s shoulder. “Just since this morning, I guess, I mean, you never brought it up or anything… but you were holding hands so I thought… well, you know.”

Lance shared a glance with Romelle. “Did you realize we gave people this kind of vibe?” He asked her.

Romelle crossed her arms over her chest. “No,” she huffed. “I love you, Lance, but I don’t want you to ruin my chances of finally getting a girlfriend.”

“Well I didn’t think you two were a couple,” Allura piped up from her position on the couch, finally dragging her nose out of her Transfiguration book. “But that’s partially because Lance hits on me any chance he gets.”

“Hey, I didn’t say anything about your bathing suit today!” Lance protested.

Romelle followed Lance’s gaze over to Allura, and Lance chuckled to himself when her eyes widened slightly.

“You didn’t have to,” Allura muttered, rolling her eyes.

“You actually resisted saying anything about… that?” Romelle hissed, her voice low enough that only Lance (and maybe Keith) could hear her.

“Oh so is there a romance brewing between fellow Champions, then, hmmm?” Rita Skeeter said, startling all of them.

Jesus. Lance had almost forgotten she was there.

“What are you still doing here?!” Keith snapped, all but pushing Rita and her camera man out of the tent’s front flaps. “Get out.”

“Fine,” she sniffed, “we got what we came for, anyways.”

“Oh thank god,” Lance sighed, once the tent had fallen closed behind her. “That woman is atrocious.”

“I didn’t know you knew words that big,” Keith smirked.
“Hey!” Lance protested. “I am in Ravenclaw, aren’t I?”

“You do always make me answer the riddles for the common room door, though,” Romelle mused.

“You are both a traitor and a liar,” Lance hissed. “I’ll tell Allura that you think she looks hot in her bathing suit.”

Romelle reached over to pinch at Lance’s exposed side. “You will not!” She insisted.

“Ow!” Lance exclaimed, batting her hand away. “What happened to you being worried about my safety?”

“I decided you were too annoying. Keith, you can keep him,” Romelle said.

Keith raised an eyebrow. “Nevermind. I don’t think you two are dating anymore.”

Romelle blinked at him. “Obviously. I literally just told you that I was a lesbian.”

“I know that,” Keith groaned. “But I mean your dynamic. It makes more sense now.”

“Welcome to having friends, Kogane,” Romelle said, reaching over to pat Keith’s arm. “Since you and Lance are friends now, that means the rest of the friend group is going to adopt you.”

“I can’t wait,” Keith said dryly.

“Okay, I better get going before anyone catches me in here,” Romelle said, making her way towards the front of the tent.

However, before she could slip out, the flaps spread open as Headmaster Holt and an unfamiliar man pushed their way inside.

“Champions!” Headmaster Holt greeted warmly, “... and Miss Pollux,” he added, sounding a little confused at Romelle’s presence.

“I’m leaving!” Romelle said quickly, ducking under Headmaster Holt’s outstretched arm to slip out of the tent. “Sorry! Good luck, Lance!” She called over her shoulder. “Uh, you too, Keith! And Allura! But not you, Lotor, because you suck!”

And with that Romelle disappeared from sight.

Lance hid his snickers under his breath and Headmaster Holt turned his attention back to the Champions.

“I hope you’re all prepared for your first task,” Headmaster Holt said. “I’ve brought Adam Sharma, a member of the Ministry’s Department of Magical Games and Sports to explain the rules.”

“That’s Adam?” Lance asked Keith, keeping his voice quiet.

Keith nodded, “Yeah that’s Adam.”

Adam, the ministry member and Shiro’s fiancé looked up, catching them whispering. His short brown hair hung over his forehead, silver glasses slipping down his nose. He raised one of his hands in a tiny wave towards Keith, which Keith returned, before turning his attention back to the group as a whole.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Champions. Also, Keith, congratulations on being chosen, I’m not sure
if Takashi passed my message along,” Adam said.

Keith flushed. “Uh, yeah, he… he passed it along.”

“Good,” Adam said, nodding.

“So, Champions, today is the first trial. In case you haven’t figured the riddle out, here is a brief summary. You will be venturing down into the waters of the lake where there are four hidden objects, one for each of you, that contain the clue for the next trial. More importantly, these objects will only appear for you once you have completed the specifications of the task detailed in the riddle. I will say they are being closely guarded to make sure of that, and each of you will have a role to play in overcoming the obstacles presented. There is no time limit, but we do believe that the task should not take you any longer than two hours. The winner of this task will be the first champion to collect their prize and then return to the surface.”

Lance glanced over at Keith from the corner of his eye.

So all he had to do was make sure that he didn’t surface before Keith, right?.

How hard could that be?

“It should also be noted that you may, and most likely should, surface as soon as you can collect your prize, regardless of what is going on around you. The rankings will be determined by the order in which you complete the task, with extra points, which are awarded for exceptional merit or outstanding performances, being allocated by a judging panel. Should any of you fail to complete the task, you will automatically be ranked last. Should any of you feel the need to withdraw from the task, red sparks should be fired from your wand, but you will be automatically ranked last. You will be monitored for both your safety and also filmed for the spectators watching on the big screen. Do you all understand?”

Lance shared a glance with Keith before nodding.

So, around two hours.

The Bubble Head Charm had to last for around two hours.

“If the Champions would please follow me, we’ll get you settled into your starting places,” Headmaster Holt said, stepping out of the tent.

Allura and Lotor immediately followed him, but Adam stopped Lance and Keith before they could exit.

“Good luck, you two,” Adam said with a small smile. “I’m technically not supposed to be voting for anyone to win the Tournament, but, well… I’m partial towards Takashi’s favorite students as well.”

Lance felt a warm flush creep across his face. He was one of Shiro’s favorite students? Score.

“It’s really nice to meet you, Mr. Sharma,” Lance said, sticking out his hand for Adam to shake. What? His mamá raised a polite young man.

Adam shook his hand, but chuckled softly, “You can just call me Adam, Lance.”

“Uh, sure, can do,” Lance said, nodding.

“Anyways, you two probably need to get to your starting positions,” Adam said, holding open the
flap of the tent for them.

Lance exited, keeping an eye of where Headmaster Holt was leading Allura and Lotor so he knew where to go, but he could still hear Adam and Keith speaking quietly behind him.

And he tried not to eavesdrop because he respects Keith’s privacy, but, well, they weren’t exactly being quiet.

“Takashi and I really are proud of you, Keith,” Adam said. “You’ve come a long way.”

“Thanks, Adam. That… means a lot.” Keith replied.

It was quiet for a few seconds before Keith spoke up again.

“Have you seen my mom?”

“She’s here, I actually just spoke with her. Great woman, Krolia. It’s a shame that so many people don’t see it. When I left, she and Takashi were catching up.”

“I hope I have time to see her after the trial,” Keith said, sounding a little sad.

“I’ll make sure of it,” Adam promised. “You know she’ll want to meet your friend, too.”

“Shut up,” Keith groaned.

Wait. Keith’s friend… they had to be talking about him! As far as Lance knew, Keith didn’t have any other people he even remotely considered to be ‘friends’.

“I’m just saying, you’ve never had a friend before, Keith.”

“I’ve had friends,” Keith grumbled.

“Oh, yeah? Name one,” Adam challenged.

“I… and… what about… okay, fine, I’ve got nothing,” Keith admitted with a huff of air.

“So what makes this guy different?”

Okay, so maybe Lance felt a little guilty for eavesdropping, but they were talking about him! What was he going to do? Not listen?

Yeah, Keith. What makes this guy different?

“Lance… is just… Lance,” Keith said.

Very enlightening.

“He kind of… sticks around whether you want him to or not. In a good way though! He’s probably the only person that’s actually dealt with me long enough to become my friend. No matter how hard I tried to push him away, he was always still there, you know?”

Well, it was good to see that Lance’s ability to be annoyingly persistent was apparently good for something.

“Sounds like he’s good for you, kid,” Adam said.

“Yeah,” Keith said quietly. “I think that he is.”
“Alright, I have to go join the other ministry members. Follow Headmaster Holt to your dock,”
Adam said, “and good luck, Keith.”

“Thanks, Adam,” Keith said softly.

A few seconds later, Lance heard Keith’s footsteps approaching him fairly quickly, the older boy
slowing as he drew up beside Lance.

“Are you ready for this?” Keith asked.

Lance studied the wooden pier in front of him, the bleachers that were already mostly full.
Headmaster Holt has stopped with Allura and Lotor at the edge of a long wooden dock that stretched
out over the surface of the lake, apparently waiting for them.

“I guess I have to be,” Lance said, glancing at Keith out of the corner of his eye.
Keith’s expression was serious, his indigo eyes dark.

“Good luck, Lance,” he said seriously, as they made their way out onto the pier in the direction of
the dock. “I guess I’ll see you down there.”

“See you down there,” Lance echoed, trying to ignore the feeling of hundreds of eyes on him.
“Good luck, Keith.”

“Are all of the Contestants ready?” Headmaster Holt asked, his voice magically amplified, once
Lance and Keith had fallen in line beside Allura and Lotor.

Lance nodded, sure that the others were doing the same, ignoring the cheers echoing around him.

“Mr. Sharma, would you do the honors?” Headmaster Holt said.

Lance turned, craning his neck. He could barely see Adam up at the top of one of the wooden
towers. But Lance didn’t let his gaze linger, instead he turned his attention back down to the water.

“Let the first task… begin!” Adam called, his voice echoing over the roars of the crowd.

Lance took a deep breath before slipping his wand out of the convenient pocket in his swimsuit and
quickly casting the Bubble Head charm. He glanced over, sharing the smallest nod with Keith,
before diving down into the water.
Chapter Ten

Chapter Summary

The first trial begins, happens, and ends. That's the chapter. It's a long one. We're sorry.

Chapter Notes

this chapter is a long one. It's seriously 3 times as long as a normal chapter. We didn't want to split this chapter up though! We hope you enjoy it regardless. Please remember to leave a comment and some kudos <3 ily all! Also, thank you so much for 3000 hits! You guys are the best :D <3 - cait

The water should have been freezing, was Lance’s first thought as his body cut through the surface of the lake. It was nearing the end of November, they were lucky that it wasn’t snowing, but the water felt as though it was almost warm. Magic. Right.

Lance blinked his eyes open, thankful that years of swimming had gotten him used to having his eyes open underwater. The murky water stung, but nowhere near as bad as salt water did. He glanced around, looking for Keith. All of the Champions had dove into the water together… he had to be somewhere around here.

The vegetation in the lake rose around him, taller than Lance, himself, in some places. Green stalks of plant life twisted around him, wrapping around his legs. Lance tore himself free, glaring at the underwater growth. Disgusting. He much preferred the ocean.

Something brushed past him, and Lance instinctively flinched away, but it was only a school of glistening silver fish, that darted away as soon as his movement startled them.

Lance shook his head. He was too jumpy. The trial had just started and he was already freaking himself out.

He needed to find Keith.

Lance took another breath of air from the bubble around his mouth and nose, before starting to swim freestyle through the water. The shore was behind him, so if he went forward, he should end up towards the middle of the lake. That had to be where the Baku was.

Abruptly, the ground beneath him fell away, dropping down into a deep cliff, thick vegetation obscuring whatever was down there from view.

Right. Guess he better go down then.

The feeling of slimy fingers on his shoulder made Lance jump, and he instinctively pulled out his wand as he turned to face whoever was behind him.

Keith narrowed his eyes at him, reaching over to push Lance’s wand down. He pointed down, down
down past the cliff, nodding his head.

Lance wrinkled his nose, but nodded back, trying not to notice the way that Keith’s dark hair floated around his head in the water. There were more important things to worry about right now. Like survival.

Keith slid his hand down, so that it was resting on Lance’s elbow as he pulled Lance forward through the water.

Did they really have to go down into the creepy underwater seaweed forest? Maybe the clue for the second trial wasn’t even that important.

Lance sighed into his bubble mask. Of course it would be important. Besides, Keith needed to get it.

Lance followed Keith down, the pressure of the water making his ears pop. His gaze kept flickering around the dark seaweed forest they were swimming through, sure that every twitch of the plants would be a sign of an attack from the Baku, but there was never anything there. It was just Lance’s overactive imagination playing tricks on him.

 Barely ten minutes had passed since the beginning of the trial, and it was already getting darker under the water. Lance raised his wand and silently cast _lumos_, the thin yellow light breaking through the plant life and casting long shadows. Great. Even creepier. But at least they could see.

Keith followed his lead and slipped out his wand, but didn’t cast anything. Preparing to cast offensive spells, then. Well, that was… comforting.

Through the shadows up ahead, Lance saw a dark shape dart through the growth. He stifled a scream, although it wasn’t like Keith could hear him, anyways. Lance’s free hand reached over, seemingly of its own accord to wrap around Keith’s arm. He tugged on Keith, nodding towards where he had seen the movement.

Whatever Keith saw in his face made his dark eyes widen, and his head snapped back around to follow Lance’s gaze into the darkness.

They continued forward slowly. Lance could have covered the distance in a much shorter amount of time, but it was clear that Keith wasn’t much of a swimmer, especially the deeper they went into the water.

There!

Another flicker through the vegetation up ahead, something that seemed vaguely humanoid shaped.

Lance swallowed.

Something humanoid was probably not what he and Keith wanted to bump into while they were looking for a creature that could literally use mind control.

Unless…

… well, no, even if it was something as amazing as a mermaid, that would still be bad.

Lance tipped his head to the side, swimming away from whatever they had just noticed. There was no reason to find out what it was if they didn’t have to. He cut down through the water, glancing over his shoulder every so often to make sure that Keith was still following him.
The older boy had fallen behind slightly, so Lance slowed his pace until Keith had drawn up beside him. He reached over, grabbing one of Keith’s hands and wrapping it around his ankle.

Keith raised an eyebrow, but he didn’t remove his hand.

Once Lance was sure that he was ready, his kicked back down. Keith’s grip on his ankle was a comforting reminder that he wasn’t alone down here in the seemingly endless expanse of water and disgusting plant growth.

Yuck.

He definitely preferred the ocean.

Suddenly, almost abruptly, they came to the bottom of the lake. The plant life and vegetation gave way to murk and mud. Lance set one of his feet down tentatively, the muck reaching up almost to his shins. He tugged his leg free and shook it through the water, riding himself of the mud. Again. Gross.

So walking wasn’t exactly an option.

Lance glanced around them, it was black as pitch, but the vegetation had cleared away slightly. Hopefully if they continued along the bottom of the lake they would be able to find some clues as to where the Baku might be.

Keith suddenly popped up beside Lance, shaking his shoulder.

Lance startled, his fingers instinctively tightening over his wand.

Keith held one of his fingers up in front of his mouth, nodding his head towards the area over Lance’s shoulder.

Lance turned slowly, holding his breath without realising what he was doing.

There, just at the edge of the dim light from Lance’s wand was a shadowy figure. It appeared to be human from the waist up, with the upper form of a pretty female and long pink hair that floated behind her softly through the water. But the creature had a long yellow tail with pink markings, almost like a fish. That was… definitely a mermaid.

Lance had always wanted to see a mermaid in real life.

The mermaid had its back to them, and it was reaching up to pick at a floating batch of seaweed.

Lance tore his eyes away to glance at Keith.

Keith nodded his head in the direction away from the mermaid, tugging on Lance’s arm as if to say let’s get away from this thing as soon as possible.

Lance glanced back over at the mermaid. Maybe she was friendly.

Keith shook his shoulder, giving him a sharp look that clearly said are you certifiably insane?

Lance gave Keith his best pleading-let-me-handle-this look, tugging free of Keith’s hand. He swam a
little closer to the mermaid. Maybe she could help them.

As he drew closer, the light from his wand spread far enough that Lance could get a glimpse of the plant life she was picking, some kind of basket woven from underwater plant life dangling from her arm. That was hornwort, he could tell from the large feathery leaves. Herbology hadn’t totally failed him and mermaids weren’t known to eat hornwort.

Lance stilled, suddenly nervous about approaching any closer.

The mermaid continued mechanically plucking pieces of the hornwort and placing it in the basket, apparently not even disturbed by the light from Lance’s wand.

Keith’s hand wrapped around his shoulder again, and this time Lance let him pull him backwards and away from the mermaid. Only once she had completely vanished from view did Lance relax.

Something had definitely not been right with that mermaid.

She had to be under the mind control of the Baku.

Now he just had to find some way to communicate that to Keith… he tried to do it wordlessly with his hands, making a series of complicated hand gestures that he hoped Keith could understand.

Keith frowned at him, obviously confused, holding up his hands.

Lance shook his head, making the hand motions again. This time, he couldn’t shake the feeling like someone was watching him. He let his gaze flicker around the nearby area, just barely catching a glimpse of silver. Oh, right. The cameras.

_The mermaids are being mind controlled_ he mouthed, being sure to over-exaggerate the pronunciation, unable to actually say the words. For emphasis, he raised his finger to point at his head and twirled it slowly.

Keith still looked confused, before his eyes widened in understanding, and he jerked his head back in the direction of the mermaid and echoed the motion with his own finger. He nodded.

Whew. At least Keith hopefully had some idea of what was going on.

Certain they were both on the same page, Lance stuck up one of his legs, offering his ankle to Keith. Keith wrapped his fingers around it and Lance took off through the water once more.

Without being able to see more than a few feet ahead of him, it was difficult to tell where he was going. Hopefully he was going towards the center of the lake, since Lance had a feeling that would be where the Baku was, but with no distinctive landmarks to help guide the way, Lance was swimming blind.

He almost gave up hope, and had started to turn around to try a different direction when a flash of light from up ahead caught Lance’s eye. It looked like a streak of red through the water, _like the red of a stunning spell._

Lance reached back, tugging on Keith to get his attention and pointing in the direction of the flash of light.

Keith drew up beside him, following his gaze.

There it was again! An angry streak of red cutting through the murky water.
Keith took off swimming towards the light as soon as he saw it, so Lance followed him. It didn’t take Lance long to catch up to Keith, and he quickly drew up in front of him, although he was careful not to go too fast. He didn’t want to lose his friend, and with the dark water all around them, losing Keith would be only too easy.

As they drew closer to a dense patch of underwater vegetation, Lance could see figures darting through the stalks of seaweed. Three of them were similar to the mermaid he had seen earlier, although these ones seemed to be male and were holding large, dangerous looking tridents. Facing off against them, her bare legs kicking softly to keep her still in the water, was Allura, her wand held out in front of her. At least, Lance knew that it had to be Allura based on the shimmering silver swimsuit, but it certainly didn’t look like Allura. Because where Allura normally had a calm face and a mess of wavy white-blonde hair, there was now the head of a shark.

Well, at least now Lance knew what she had been reading the Transfiguration book.

One of the mermen darted forward, poking at Allura with his trident, whilst she wordlessly cast another stunning spell, the flash of red lights slamming into the center of the creatures chest. How she was able to cast spells at all with her head transfigured into a shark, Lance wasn’t sure, but he didn’t plan on sticking around to find out, either.

Further back in the water, Lance could make out the silhouettes of other figures floating through the water, but they seemed undisturbed by the fight happening just a few feet away from them. They were almost perfectly motionless, weapons gripped tightly in hand. That was eerie.

Lance reached backwards, wrapping a hand around Keith’s wrist, pulling the other boy into the vegetation. Hopefully they could skirt around Allura and her new friends unseen. After all, she appeared to have a pretty good handle on the situation.

Lance and Keith slipped through the seaweed, which frankly felt a little too much like hands grabbing at his legs for Lance’s comfort, thank you very much. If they staying in the cover of the vegetation, maybe nothing would see them…

Okay, so maybe he had thought that a little too soon, Lance thought as he abruptly found himself face to face with the mermaid that he and Keith had seen serenely plucking plants earlier.

She blinked her large dark eyes at them, before calmly lifting a shell that Lance hadn’t noticed was hanging around her neck to her lips. Lance couldn’t hear the sound it released, but, well, he was pretty sure that it wasn’t actually meant for him to hear.

Lance spared Keith a wide, panicked glance before whipping out his wand and aiming it at the pretty mermaid.

She’s being mind controlled, Lance silently reminded himself. It doesn’t matter how innocent she looks with her pink hair and yellow fin. She’s probably evil.

The mermaid cocked her head, before grinning at them, and whatever thoughts Lance had about her looking cute and innocent immediately vanished.

Because her mouth was filled with three neat rows of razor sharp teeth, giving her a shark-like appearance. And if there was one thing an ocean boy was afraid of, it was coming across a shark in the water.

Keith reached over Lance’s shoulder, firing a stunning spell, the movement enough to shock Lance into motion.
Right. The plan. Focus on the plan.

Stun any creatures that were mind controlled by the Baku to incapacitate them, find and defeat the Baku, claim the prize, return to the surface, make sure Keith’s victorious.

The red light of the stunning spell arched towards the mermaid but she swiftly dodged out of the way. Damn. She was fast.

And… apparently she wasn’t as alone as they thought she was.

Two large mermen with blue tails and tridents emerged from the seaweed forest, flanking the female mermaid on either side.

Lance followed Keith’s lead and launched into action, flinging a series of charms at the merman directly in front of him. Luckily, one of them managed to hit, freezing a portion of his torso in a block of ice.

Directly to his side, Keith was sending a series of charms, jinxes, and hexes through the water in the direction of the other merman. A few of them, the fire spells that Keith preferred, fizzled out before they even left the tip of his wand. No fire underwater, apparently not even magical flames.

The female mermaid darted forward, grabbing onto Lance’s free arm and clamping her mouth around hit.

He cried out soundless in pain as dozens of needle-like teeth pierced his flesh. Lance instinctively tore his arm away from her, causing even further damage to the ripped flesh of his arm. Blood trickled softly out of the wound, filling the water around him with a red cloud.

He thought that Keith might have been soundlessly calling his name, but he wasn’t sure.

Lance pressed his wand down to the ruined skin, thinking *Episkey* as strongly as he could. He winced as the ruined flesh knit itself back together but at least his messy healing spell had stopped the bleeding.

Lance swam backwards until he bumped into Keith, positioning them so they were back to back while the two merpeople swam in lazy circles around them, poking towards Lance with their tridents every so often, the one that Lance had partially frozen was still hanging still in the water.

The stunning spells didn’t seem to be as effective as Lance and Keith had hoped they would be, but at least the ice spell had worked. The mermaid who had bit him paused in front of Lance, seemingly preparing for another attack.

Well *fuck* that.

Lance flicked his wand towards her, watching as a block of ice formed around her chest, freezing her arms to her sides.

*Suck on that, mermaid.*

Lance glanced behind him, pleased to see that Keith had hit the merman with the tickling charm, and that the merman was currently doubled over in laughter.

Lance reached over, grabbing Keith’s wrist and pulling him away from the three merpeople. They needed to get out of here.
Lance pulled them deeper into the seaweed forest, if they could just put enough space between the merpeople and themselves…

The forest of underwater vegetation seemed to close in around them, long stalks wrapping around Lance’s arms and legs as he pushed his way through. How much time had passed since the beginning of the trial? A half an hour? Longer? It was impossible to tell.

Lance pushed past what was practically a wall of seaweed, slightly relieved when the plant life began to clear away to reveal towering stone structures. They were crumbling and half-constructed, like ruins of an old castle or citadel. Maybe there would be some place to find cover down there.

Lance tugged on Keith’s wrist, pointing down towards the ruins.

Keith shrugged.

Well, at least he hadn’t said no.

Lance kicked down towards the ruins, cutting through the water. Up close, he could see that the ruins weren’t as big as he had thought that they were, probably just an old one-story building. The stone walls were covered with green algae that Lance was careful not to touch as he slipped between a stone archway that probably used to be a doorway.

It was darker inside the ruins, the half-walls causing shadows to loom across the water.

It was basically creepy as fuck.

Lance slowed to a stop once the ruins covered them from the sight of any nearby prying eyes, taking a moment to let Keith catch his breath.

Keith slumped up against the stone wall behind him, shooting Lance a grateful glance. For as fit as he was, Lance could tell that Keith was struggling with the swimming. Well, when the scroll said it was going to be a breathless quest, it really wasn’t kidding.

Hell, Lance was almost struggling with the swimming too, taking a few deep breaths to try and get himself back up to swimming quickly. Lance pressed down quickly on the half-healed bite wound to assess how bad it was, before moving it to check how well he’d be able to swim. Luckily, his half-assed healing spell had worked better than he thought it did.

Lance held his illuminated wand over the wound, wincing slightly when he saw the jagged scars left behind. Shit. His mamá would kill him when she saw those.

Keith took a few more deep breaths, before nodding his head and pushing away from the wall. He drifted slowly over to where Lance was, gently picking up Lance’s injured arm and twisting it so that he could see the bite marks. He frowned at the sight of the scars, his eyebrows drawing together, wrinkling his forehead. Keith ran his fingers gently over the puckered skin, before looking back up to meet Lance’s gaze.

“Are you okay?” He mouthed, and although Lance couldn’t hear him, he could feel the concern in Keith’s voice. “Does it hurt?”

Lance shook his head. “I’m fine,” he mouthed back.

Keith nodded, although he still didn’t look happy as he let go of his grip on Lance’s arm.

Lance took his turn to study Keith, making sure that the older boy was ready to keep going before
offering Keith his hand.

Keith wrapped his own hand around Lance’s, intertwining their fingers.

Lance tried not to think about how their hands fit together perfectly. They had bigger problems right now.

Lance pushed off again, slipping out of a hole between the stones of the ruin’s wall that was just big enough for the two of them to fit through.

Okay. If you were a giant underwater mind-controlling lake monster… where would you hide?

Lance glanced around, behind the ruins stretched the wall of seaweed and plant life that they had emerged from. So probably not that way, then.

Lance turned the other way. In front of the ruins stretched a large open expanse of mud dotted with other stone structures. Oh god. It was like there was an entire village down there. It probably was.

Lance swam a little closer towards the back of the ruin they were currently at, sticking close to the stone walls (hopefully they would offer some sort of cover).

The ground sloped down gently, so Lance and Keith actually had a fairly good vantage point over most of the ruins below them. The water was murky, which made it hard to see, but where the rest of the lake had been pitch black, the village was glowing brightly. Dozens of bioluminescent plants clung to the sides of the ruins, giving the village the appearance of having streetlights.

As if glowing stone ruins weren’t scary enough, Lance could see dozens of merpeople glittering about down below.

Keith tugged on his hand, and Lance turned to look at him. Keith pointed towards something in the distance, and Lance squinted his eyes, trying to make out what he was looking at.

… oh.

A huge underwater… garden seemed to take up a large portion of the right side of the village. It was mostly some kind of green moss but it seemed to be glowing with an unnatural purple light. The same unnatural purple glow possessed by most of the bioluminescent plants lining the walls of the village.

What the fuck?

That had to be where the Baku was hiding.

Lance kicked off, about to sneak down into the village, but Keith tugged him backwards.

The momentum of the pull sent Lance flying backwards through the water and he collided with Keith’s bare chest.

Keith reached up to steady him, holding Lance carefully against him as he pointed down towards the creepy garden thing again.

Trying to focus on the mission at hand and not how warm Keith was compared to the cool water, Lance’s eyes followed Keith’s figure, straining to see what Keith was trying to point out to him.

There were two figures approaching the Baku, both mermaids by the looks of them. One of them was blue, with large circular loops projecting from her head instead of hair, while the other was…
the yellow and pink mermaid that had bit Lance earlier! The blue mermaid hung back while the yellow mermaid swam forward.

Okay if this garden thing is home to a dangerous magical beast, the mermaids should probably not swim right towards it.

The yellow mermaid stopped suddenly, glancing back at the blue one. The blue mermaid darted forward, grabbing the yellow one’s arm and propelling her roughly towards the garden.

“Oh my god,” Lance said, the words muffled by the bubble around his lower face.

He watched in horror as the blue mermaid let go of the yellow mermaid, all but shoving her down into the garden.

The yellow mermaid only hesitated for a second before she swam the rest of the way down on her own, disappearing into the green moss-like substance.

A few seconds later, there was a flash of bright purple light.

Lance felt like he was going to be sick.

That mermaid had attacked him earlier, but even so, Lance was pretty sure he had just watched her get eaten by that Baku thing. That was… not right.

Lance glanced over at Keith, not surprised to notice that Keith was already looking at him with wide eyes.

They had to stop this thing.

This time, when Lance kicked off towards the village, Keith didn’t try to stop him.

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Lance pressed himself up against one of the walls of the stone buildings about halfway to the Baku garden. Of course, the garden had to be well into the mermaid village, meaning that if Lance and Keith wanted to get close, they were going to have to go through the mermaids to get to it.

So far, everything was going well. They had avoided being spotted by anything or anyone so far, keeping to the outskirts of the village as they circled around towards the Baku.

They were now approaching one of the more populated areas of the village, some kind of outdoor market place where mermaids and mermen were drifting back and forth almost aimlessly.

Lance shared a concerned glance with Keith. How on earth were they going to get past this? It would take forever to try and go around, time that they didn’t have. But if they tried to go through the square, the merpeople would definitely spot them. Either way, it was a risk.

Lance was about to tug on Keith, hopefully to draw him away from the marketplace, when Keith abruptly darted forward.

Because of course he did.

Impulsive little bastard.

Lance groaned before darting out into the marketplace after Keith, already pulling out his wand.
Almost immediately, the merpeople in the marketplace turned to look at them. The mermen pulled tridents off their backs while the mermaids flashed their… gulp… very sharp teeth at them.

But Keith wasn’t planning on giving them time to react. He was already firing a series of stunning spells from his wand, streaks of red light flying through the water.

The merpeople dodged out of the way of most of the spells, but they were still forced to fall backwards after some of the stunning spells brushed past them.

Damn. They were fast.

It had been hard enough to fight against the three they encountered earlier, Lance had no idea how they would be able to fight off the dozen in the square.

Lance raised his arm over Keith’s shoulder, a blast of ice slamming into one of the mermaids. One run in with those teeth was quite enough, thank you very much.

Keith hit one of the mermen with the *Eublio* jinx, causing a giant bubble to form around him. The bubble then started to drift up towards the surface, and under any other circumstance, the sight of a blue merman pressing his hands against the side of a giant bubble as he floated towards the surface would have startled a laugh out of Lance, but as it was, he could barely spare the bizarre sight a second glance before he turned his attention back to the fight at hand.

Stupid Keith.

Having to engage with every possible enemy at once.

Hadin’t he ever heard that you have to choose your battles?

“*Flipendo!*” Lance said, the words swallowed, but the spell still effective as it sent one of the nearby mermen slamming backwards into the ruins behind him.

Still, for every merperson that they incapacitated, it seemed like there were two more.

Keith drifted backwards until he and Lance were drifting shoulder-to-shoulder in the water. He fired off a few more jinxes in quick succession, wincing as one of the merpeople disappeared down into the ground. Damn. How did Keith even know the *Orbis* jinx?

Nope, nope, nope. Focus, Lance. There’s a scary ass mermaid chick in front of you, Lance chanted to himself. He tore his eyes away from Keith to focus on the purple mermaid that was inching closer to him, all three rows of her teeth visible.

Lance swallowed, before launching a tickling hex at her.

The mermaid halted, wrapping her arms around herself as she doubled over in laughter, her expression shifting into one that was almost peaceful. Definitely not the murderous creature she had been a second ago.

Lance took advantage of the distraction and quickly launched another spell at her, freezing her torso into a solid chunk of ice.

But it wasn’t enough, more merpeople were pouring into the marketplace, and immediately started to split into two groups; the group attacking Keith and the group attacking Lance. And for every one that Lance froze or Keith sucked into the ground, another one drew closer.
Shit. Shit. Shit.

Okay, there had to be something they could do. The needed some kind of distraction or…

A large blast of blue energy erupted somewhere off to the right, not enough to distract the merpeople directly in front of Keith and Lance, but enough to draw away some of the ones lingering towards the back of the marketplace.

Well… that would work.

Taking advantage of the momentary confusion, Lance pushed forward, quickly freezing two more of the merpeople in front of him.

Keith appeared to have a similar idea as a few more merpeople drifted past Lance trapped inside giant bubbles.

Suddenly, a figure cut through the water. An all too familiar figure in a shimmery silver swimsuit with the head of a shark.

“Allura!” Lance cried, pumping one of his hands through the water even though he knew that she couldn’t hear him.

Allura streaked last them, flinging spells through the water towards the merpeople in the marketplace. As her spells collided with them, a few of the merpeople’s heads dropped down to their chest, their eyes fluttering shut. Sleeping charms! Of course!

Allura paused in the water above them, waving her hand towards them.

Frankly, it was a terrifying sight: a human body with the head of a great white shark waving towards them, but Lance wasn’t about to turn down help.

He reached over, tugging on Keith to get his attention, but Keith was already nodding.

Lance kicked away from the ground, tugging both himself and Keith up so that they were level with Allura, looking down at the marketplace below them.

The merpeople below were in a state of confusion, many of them trapped in bubbles, sleeping, or frozen solid. A few of them were half-trapped in the murky ground, their upper bodies thrashing like zombies in b-list horror movies.

Lance glance behind him, wondering if Allura has been the one to set off the blast of energy, but he didn’t see anything looking unusually out of place among the ruins. But it was impossible to tell whether the ruins were collapsed because something had exploded or as a result of age and wear.

The half a dozen merpeople who weren’t incapacitated seemed to regroup, gathering together before darting up towards Keith, Allura, and Lance.

The mermaids split up into two groups, flanking around the trio. Lance glanced between Keith and Allura, hoping that the three of them would be able to take on the remaining merpeople.

They probably would… right?

Keith and Allura spun so that the three of them were floating back to back. Lance forced himself to run through a list of hexes and jinxes that he knew while he watched the merpeople drift closer. He could feel the cameras watching them again, and shot off a stunning spell to dodge a mermaid who
lunged for Keith beside him. He ducked to the right to let Keith hit another with a tickling hex, but then narrowly avoided getting slashed with one mermaid’s claws, only to be nicked in the forehead on her backswing.

This… wasn’t good.

Lance let his gaze flicker over towards Keith, who was frowning in concentration as he flicked his wand between the three merpeople pushing towards him. A quick glance to his other side revealed that Allura was in a similar position. Huh. Weird. Even though the three of them were back to back, the merpeople were actually only approaching from two sides, leaving the water directly in front of Lance completely open. They kept attacking the same people, splitting into groups that way.

It didn’t fit with the mindless attacks that Lance had expected.

Instead, it seemed almost like the merpeople were specifically… targeting Keith and Allura right now. Lance was only really being attacked when he got in their crossfire.

The merpeople must have specific champions that they were supposed to attack!

That explained why the merpeople had been so vicious against him earlier, and why these ones weren’t paying him any attention.

The ones who had targeted Lance were still encased in ice.

Deciding to test his theory, Lance drifted down, leaving the space between Keith and Allura empty. If he could take advantage of the fact that merpeople weren’t paying him any attention, maybe he could sneak around behind them and hit them with spells while they were distracted.

None of the merpeople even spared him a glance as Lance carefully drifted down towards the murky ground. Keith and Allura didn’t appear to notice his disappearance either, as they were both busy fending off three merpeople each.

Once Lance had put some space between the merpeople and himself, he shot off a few more of the ice spells, and he probably would have froze one of the mermen in front of Keith into a solid slab of ice if something large hadn’t slammed into his side, knocking him off balance and sending his spell off target, the streak of blue wildly missing the merman in front of Keith.

Lance grunted from the force of the impact, although his momentum was slowed by the water around him.

He spun, checking to see what had knocked him over, his legs kicking through the water.

Behind him was one of the large mermen that had attacked him and Keith earlier, a blue one with a face similar to a walrus.

No wonder it felt like Lance just got slammed into by a backliner from one of the American Football teams that Luís was obsessed with. The guy was huge. And as if that wasn’t bad enough, there was another one drawing closer behind him.

Shit. He never should have separated from Allura and Keith. He was such an idiot. This was bad. This was very, very bad.

Instinctively, Lance swam backwards through the water, eager to put some distance between himself and the two beefcake mermen.
But he wasn’t fast enough.

The merman who had just slammed into him reached out quicker than he had any right to move, wrapping his cold and slimy fingers around Lance’s ankle. He pulled, hard, and for half a second, Lance was convinced that the merman had yanked his leg out of its socket, before the momentum of the pull yanked Lance forward.

The other merman appeared on Lance’s other side, grabbing onto Lance’s shoulders. Lance wiggled every way he could, but their grip was steady on him, and he couldn’t get free. Thanks to the hold on his shoulders, he couldn’t get his wand up to hit either of them.

He glanced up towards where Allura and Keith were still standing their ground (metaphorically since they were actually floating in the water) against the merpeople targeting them.

As Lance watched, Keith chanced a look over his shoulder, seemingly confused when he noticed that Lance wasn’t behind him. Keith fired a stunning spell at one of the mermaids without looking, as his gaze continued to flicker around looking for Lance.

Finally, finally, he glanced down - noticing Lance being grabbed by the two mermen.

Wordlessly, Lance tried to call for help, even though logically he knew that Keith couldn’t hear him.

Keith turned in the water, like he was going to dive down for Lance, but one of the mermaids got a grip on his arm, her claws digging into his skin. In the split second it took for Keith to turn and stun her, the mermen carrying Lance had dragged him into an alleyway between two of the ruins.

Shit.

Okay, okay. Lance looked around desperately, trying to figure out a plan. The alleyway was narrow, he wouldn’t be able to move a lot, and he still couldn’t get his wand. Looking around he couldn’t see a way out of the alleyway bar where he just came from and whatever was behind him.

Well, Lance thought, guess the only way out is backwards.

Taking a deep breath to compose himself, Lance kicked upwards and made himself almost horizontal, before pushing himself off the alleyway wall and shouldering the merman gripping his side against the other wall. Luckily, as he had blindly hoped, the merman let go long enough for him to grip his wand and hex the merman clutching his foot. He quickly swam to make some distance between himself and the two mermen, but noticed that the one he had hit with his shoulder was holding a shell up to his mouth.

Great, just when Lance had thought things couldn’t get any worse.

As soon as Lance could see through the murky water that there were a group of mermaids approaching the end of the alleyway, he turned and sprinted as fast as he could.

The ruins seemed to grow darker around him, less crumbling walls and more towering stone structures. It appeared the heart of the underwater city was more preserved than the rest of it.

Lance’s heart was pounding in his chest. There was no way he could double back now, he was afraid to so much as glance over his shoulder, sure that the mermaids would be closing in on him. Hopefully Keith and Allura were able to fight those merpeople off on their own and meet back up with him later, because there was no way that Lance would be able to make his way back to them.
He was struggling to catch his breath and his limbs were aching, but he had to keep pushing forward. He felt something scratch his leg and he gasped, before facing behind him to fire off two quick stunning spells. He could see more merpeople approaching but he had to keep going on.

Minutes upon minutes passed like this, with Lance casting quick sleeping charms and ice spells to keep the merpeople at bay, because if he didn’t he was assaulted by more cuts that were stinging due to the murky water. Ugh. This water was so gross. He was probably going to get an infection and die as a result of this stupid trial. That was, if the merpeople didn’t get him first.

Finally, after a few minutes of desperate swimming, the sounds of pursuit quieted, and when Lance risked a glance behind him, the alleyway was empty.

Phew.

The only light around Lance was coming from the bioluminescent plants, faint purple light pulsing from the weird moss that was clinging to the sides of the stone ruins. Remembering that he hadn’t relit his wand, Lance pulled it out in front of him, muttering *Lumos* under his breath.

The bright light from his wand illuminated the ruins around him, revealing carvings in the walls depicting scenes of mermaids and mermen. They were beautiful, shells and fish bones used to creature mosaics.

Lance reached out, letting his fingers run gently across one of the walls.

How had a people with such a beautiful culture been reduced to the mindless monsters that they were now?

It had to be a result of the Baku.

Tearing his attention away from the murals, Lance studied the alleyway in front of him. It seemed like he was coming to a T-shaped intersection, with passages continuing to both the left and right. Shit. He had gotten so twisted around from being dragged into the alley and his wild race away from the merpeople that he wasn’t sure which direction he needed to go into to reach the garden that he and Keith had seen from above.

Lance turned towards the left branch of the alleyway, then the right, but they looked almost identical. Both had the same stone walls and same glowing purple moss. The right passageway was broken up by the occasional archway, like the ruins were small houses. Taking a leap of faith, Lance turned to the right. If it wasn’t the right path, he could always double back, although it would suck to lose a large chunk of time like that. Who knew how much longer his oxygen bubble would last.

Lance swam down the alleyway he had randomly chosen, pleasantly surprised to realize that there weren’t any merpeople waiting to jump out at him from the shadows of the ruins.

The pathway he had chosen twisted around, a few smaller passages splitting off from it, but Lance ignored them. The glowing purple moss seemed to be getting thicker on the buildings, until the light that it was letting off was bright enough that Lance dispelled the light on his wand.

He had to be getting close now.

Sure enough, the stone walls slowly opened up to reveal the large garden that Lance and Keith had seen from up above. It was a beautiful collection of underwater plants: green hornwort and the purple moss with orange specks and dozens of other plants that Lance didn’t recognize. Underneath all of it, there was a warm purple glow that seemed almost inviting. And if Lance hadn’t seen the yellow mermaid swim in and never swim out, he might have been tempted to swim into it himself.
He was certain now that this was definitely the Baku, that this garden was home to the mythical creature responsible for the change in the merpeople.

According to the riddle, he had to find some sort of prize that the Baku would be protecting. But first, he needed to actually figure out where the hell the beast was. It would be suicide to just swim into the garden. He needed the beast to come for him.

“Na-na na-na boo boo” Lance taunted, even though he logically knew the Baku couldn’t actually hear him, as he waved his arms through the water furiously, like when he went to summer camp and all the boys tried to rope the whole class into doing the Wave. He was always one of the best, Marco could never manage to get his arms to bend the right way.

He kicked his feet through the water, just enough to make sure that he could make a quick escape if he needed to.

Surely if he taunted the Baku long enough, it would decide to try and eat him… right?

After a few more minutes of the arm wave not working, Lance gave up and pulled out his wand, aiming it at the purple moss.

What spell would annoy the Baku the most?

In quick succession, Lance fired off a few stunning and tickling spells, tossing in a bat-bogey hex for good measure (even though he was fairly certain it wouldn’t work).

Ugh. Nothing.

He shoved his wand back into the pocket of his swim trunks, so that he could swim easier, before he inched closer to the garden.

Maybe the only way to defeat the thing would be to go inside of the garden. He just had to be stronger than that yellow mermaid. Oh man, he so wished that Keith was here right now so he wouldn’t have to face this thing alone.

Up closer, Lance could see that there were small, brightly colored flowers dotting the purple moss. They were orange and had large petals, like the lilies that his mamá grew in her garden back home.

Lance reached forward, letting one of his fingers brush against the leaves of the flower. It was silky and smooth, and achingly familiar. Lance remembered Veronica plucking lilies from their mamá’s garden and letting Lance braid them into her hair, he remembered stealing one of the flowers and sticking it behind his ear, running off before V could catch him. He remembered pulling off petals of the flower as he chanted she loves me she loves me not while thinking of the pretty girl who shared crayons with him in preschool.

He was so preoccupied with his memories, that Lance almost didn’t notice the faint orange powder that floated off of the flower and drifted into the water.

Lance rubbed his fingers together. They felt weird. Like he had just gotten stung by a bee and now they were swelling. Lance studied them, they didn’t look like anything weird was happening to them. In fact, they just looked… normal.

He ran his hands together, ha, that felt funny. Almost ticklish.
Delighted, Lance ran his hands together again.

Wait. He was supposed to be doing something important right now wasn’t he?

No, he was just basking in the pale glow of the pretty purple moss. And the way that he couldn’t help but feel… feel good.

Safe and warm.

Lance looked back up at the garden in front of him.

Oh, right.

He was supposed to be looking at the flowers.

He leaned in closer to one of the lily-like blooms, so close that its petals were brushing against his oxygen bubble.

Ugh.

Stupid oxygen bubble. It was getting in his way of smelling the pretty flower.

Maybe he should get rid of it. He didn’t really need it, after all. It was so safe and warm down here. Nothing bad would ever happen.

He smiled, a sense of calmness washing over him. He couldn’t feel any of the stinging cuts, or the aching pain in his forearm, or the tightness in his chest. He felt nothing.

What was he doing here again?

It didn’t really matter.

The flowers were so pretty. That was obviously much more important than whatever had brought him down here in the first place.

He drifted closer to the garden. Why hadn’t he gone inside already? It was probably really pretty inside, with even more flowers. And the purple glow looked so safe and warm and inviting.

Lance drifted closer to the entrance to the garden. Letting the green hornwort brush against him softly as he parted it. Inside the garden was safe and warm, the plant life overhead giving him the feeling that he was wrapped in a cocoon. Like a butterfly, Lance giggled. He loved butterflies.

The purple glow was brighter here, the weird purple moss lining the ground beneath him.

Lance swam down, letting his bare feet brush against the moss.

Heh. Squishy.

He poked his toes down into the moss, delighting in the feeling of it seeping between his toes.

In an instant, he grew bored, so Lance kicked away from the ground and swam deeper into the garden.

Soon after, the green Hornwort gave way to slick green walls that seemed to pulse when Lance rested his hand against it.
So cool.
Lance knocked his knuckles against the green wall, laughing. Maybe you just need to knock, he thought as he doubled over in laughter.

As if in response to his knock, the walls rumbled.
Awww, it was talking to him.
Lance straightened, looking around for the source of the rumbling. Maybe there was something else down here with him. Lance shook his head, no. It was safe and warm down here.

He was just being silly.
Lance turned his attention back to the wall in front of him, except… he cocked his head in confusion… it wasn’t a wall anymore. Instead he was looking at a wide, toothy maw that split into four parts. Like the demogorgon from Stranger Things.
Lance giggled to himself. That’s crazy. The demogorgon couldn’t breathe underwater.

He was so silly.
He stretched one of his hands forward, intending to maybe try and pet the creature. It was kind of cute, if he squinted, like the snake that his friend Gabriel had brought to show and tell when they were little. He wondered if it would be as slick and slimy as that snake had been.

But he never got the chance to find out, because something grabbed him around his torso, yanking him backwards.
Lance thrashed against the body that was behind him, trying to free himself so that he could go pet the snake-thing. It looked so safe and the purple glow surrounding it was so warm.

He kicked out with his leg, slamming into the calf of the person holding him hard enough that their grip on him grew slack. Lance took advantage of their momentary distraction, and tried to wiggle loose from their arms. He twisted and turned, squirming, as he propelled himself through the water. He had almost succeeded in getting entirely free, too, before their grip on him tightened once more (although their arms were now locked around his legs rather than his torso).
Lance felt them pull him back down, shifting their grip on him, before something sharp and stick-like, like a stick, was being pointed at his face. Lance instinctively closed his eyes, twisting his head away from the object. No no no no no no no. He didn’t like it.
He felt a probing into his mind, like someone was trying to root around in his brain. Lance craned his head away, almost as if he could physically kick the person out of his brain.
Eventually, the invasive feeling stopped.
Lance relaxed, forgetting for a second that he was supposed to be trying to escape from the person holding him. Now that they weren’t fighting against him, it felt almost… nice. They felt safe and warm.
And slightly ticklish.
Lance started giggling, reaching around him to see what was ticking him, laughing even harder when his fingers brushed against someone’s solid chest.
He let his fingers brush against the warm skin, giggling when the arms around him tightened, before one let go.

Fingers reached up, pressing on his cheek until Lance was forced to look over and see who was holding him.

“Keith,” he mouthed, the stupid bubble eating his words.

Oh, right.

He wanted to get rid of the bubble. It kept getting in his way.

He tore one of his hands away from Keith’s chest, poking at the bubble around his face. Maybe if he hit it hard enough, it would pop.

The fingers that were resting against his head quickly let go, snatching his wrist instead.

Lance pouted, trying to pry his hand free. He wanted to pop the bubble.

The fingers stayed firm around his wrist, dragging his attention away from the bubble and back to Keith.

Keith, who was looking at him with his wide, dark, indigo eyes that were soft with an expression Lance couldn’t remember the name of.

Concern!

That was the name!

But why was Keith concerned? Didn’t he realise that Lance was safe and warm?

Lance twisted around completely in Keith’s grip, but this time instead of trying to escape, Lance brought his legs up to wrap them around Keith’s hips.

Keith’s stupid black mullet was drifting in the water around them, longer than it had any right to be. Lance reached up with his free hand, twisting the black locks around one of his fingers.

Keith tugged on his wrist, drawing Lance’s attention back to his face.

Keith was frowning, why was he frowning? He should be smiling. Weren’t they having fun?

His mouth was forming words, and Lance tried to focus on them, really he did, but the bubble in front of Keith’s mouth was distracting and Lance couldn’t tell what he was trying to say. He giggled again, Keith was so silly, couldn’t he see the stupid bubble was hiding his voice?

Keith’s other arm unwrapped from around his waist, so Lance instinctively tightened his legs’ grip on Keith’s hips. Keith slowly brought the arm not clutching Lance’s wrist up to Lance’s line of sight, revealing the pointy-stick-thing from earlier.

Lance instinctively flinched backwards, remembering the way that thing had caused someone to get inside his head. He didn’t like the stick. It was an evil stick.

But Keith held the hand up to his side, in the universal symbol of surrender, so Lance slowly relaxed. This was Keith. Keith wouldn’t do anything to hurt him.

Lance closed his eyes, dropping his head forward so that he was resting against Keith’s shoulder. He
turned so that his nose was pressed into Keith’s throat, or it would have been if the stupid bubble wasn’t in the way.

While Keith did whatever he was doing, Lance tried to bring his free hand up to his face, poking at the bubble.

Heh. Squishy.

No, Lance, he chided himself. Focus on popping the bubble.

He felt something pointy press into the back of his head, but he ignored it in favor of poking at the bubble again.

Suddenly, it was like someone had dumped a bucket of ice water on him, and Lance bolted upright, his head almost colliding with Keith’s.

Wait.

Keith’s?

What was Keith doing here? The last thing that Lance remembered, he had been approaching the Baku garden and he saw the orange flowers that reminded him of lilies…

Lance blinked down at Keith in confusion, taking in the older boy’s wide eyes, the obviously worried expression twisting his lips down into a frown. He was breathing heavily, and Lance could tell he was almost shaking due to the twitches of the hand on his waist.

Wait, what?

Lance glanced down, making sure he wasn’t imagining things, but sure enough, one of Keith’s hands was steadying his waist. His waist. Which was attached to his legs. Which were clinging to Keith’s hips.

Wait, what?

OH GOD.

Lance felt a red flush creeping across his face.

What the hell had just happened?!

Lance quickly jumped backwards, unwrapping his legs from Keith, but he didn’t go far. He could see how obviously upset Keith was, and that was more important than Lance’s aching need to go die somewhere before Keith realized what he had been doing.

Lance reached up, resting his hands on Keith’s cheeks. “Are you okay?” He mouthed.

Keith raised an eyebrow at him, looking at Lance like he was an idiot. Which, okay, was probably fair, given that Lance had no memory of whatever had just happened. “Are you okay?” Keith mouthed back to him.

Without a tone, Lance couldn’t tell if Keith was genuinely wondering if he was okay or if he was mocking Lance.

“I’m fine?” Lance mouthed back, glancing down at himself just to make sure it was true. He felt fine, and there were no markings or anything on him, but Keith was still staring at him like he had
sprouted a second head.

Keith raised one of his fingers up to his head, rotating it slowly in a circle around his temple.

Was Keith calling him cuckoo crazy? Rude.

Wait. They had used that same motion earlier when talking about the mermaids being under mind control.

Was Keith saying that he was being mind controlled?!

Lance felt his eyes practically bug out of his head, and Keith nodded his head quickly, obviously relieved that Lance had understood what he was trying to say.

Lance repeated the gesture, before pointing at his own chest, just to double check.

Keith nodded quickly again, and Lance let out a puff of breath.

Shit, he had been mind controlled and he didn't even realise it.

“I don’t remember.” Lance mouthed. He felt his breath pick up, beginning to panic. How was there just a whole chunk of time that was missing from his memory?

The thought never occurred to them that the Baku might be able to control the Champions as well as the creatures in the lake.

“You don’t remember?” Keith mouthed back, before frowning.

Lance shook his head, before glancing around them.

Where the hell were they anyway?

Looking around, it was clear that they were somewhere inside the garden he and Keith had seen from above. They were in a hollow spot between particularly a few particularly dense patches of Hornwort and other underwater vegetation, a sea of faintly glowing purple moss beneath their feet.

“Where are we?” Lance asked.

Keith glanced around, before shrugging. “Hiding from the Baku,” he mouthed.

Lance felt his eyes bulge again. They had actually found the Baku? “We found the Baku?” He mouthed.

“You found the Baku,” Keith mouthed back, pointing at Lance, “I saved you.”

Lance crossed his arms over his chest, rolling his eyes slightly. Sure, that was Keith’s story now, showing up just in time to save the day like a freaking hero on a white horse, but Lance would find out the truth later. The cameras had probably captured everything anyway…

Holy shit. The cameras.

Lance groaned.

Oh man, they probably had footage of him looking like a complete idiot while he was under the control of that… thing.
“Do you remember anything?” Keith mouthed, drawing Lance’s attention back to him.

Lance shook his head, before abruptly pausing. “I remember flowers,” he mouthed.

“Flowers?” Keith echoed, like he wasn’t sure that he had understood Lance.

Lance shook his head eagerly, glancing around the garden. “Orange,” he explained. “Oh! Like this!” He swam down, towards where one of the orange flowers was clinging to a patch of purple moss on the ground.

Keith reached forward, as if he was going to touch the plant, but Lance quickly batted his hand away.

He made the crazy hand motion before pointing back towards the flower.

Keith nodded slowly, like he understood, and he swam backwards so that there was a safe distance between himself and the flower.

Lance swam back over to where Keith was. “So… the Baku?” He asked, gesturing towards the plants around them.

Keith got a steely look in his eye, as he nodded.

“Okay, cool, um….” Lance mouthed, flickering his gaze away from Keith. “The way out?” Realizing that not looking at Keith meant they couldn’t communicate, Lance forced himself to make eye contact again. Keith was really just lucky that Lance was so good at reading lips from watching the movies Marco watched with his headphones in while he was supposed to be sleeping.

Keith reached up to rub at his neck, before slowly shaking his head. “Sorry. Distracted.”

Lance arched an eyebrow, a comment about being distracted by his handsome good looks on the tip of his tongue, but for some reason, he got the feeling that Keith wasn’t exactly in the mood to joke around.

“By me?” He settled for.

Keith nodded, “You kind of… fed yourself. To the Baku.”

Lance let out a slow puff of air. Of course that had been what he was trying to do. Hadn’t that been what they watched the yellow mermaid do? But still, the thought made him shudder.

“Let’s kill this creepy thing?” Lance asked, relieved when Keith nodded.

Lance thought about offering Keith his hand so that they wouldn’t get separated again, but the feeling of Keith’s warm chest pressed against his, his legs latched around Keith’s hips, still felt too fresh in his mind. Any more physical contact between them, and Lance would probably wish that the Baku had actually eaten him just so he didn’t die of embarrassment first.

“Let’s go,” Keith mouthed, kicking off in the direction that they had apparently come from.

Not knowing what else to do, Lance followed him.

Lance peered through the Hornwort that Keith was holding off to the side, leaving a gap just big enough for them to peek their heads through.
At first, Lance couldn’t make out the Baku, because apparently it’s natural camouflage was doing its job, but then it shifted and… oh.

That thing had almost eaten him.

**THAT THING HAD ALMOST EATEN HIM.**

It was like something out of a freaking horror movie. As Lance watched, it slithered past, meters of coiled muscle underneath a sleek, reptilian body. It was long, like a snake or an eel, and didn’t appear to have any legs. In fact, it didn’t really have any defining features. Even it’s head was deceptively plain, with no eyes or ears or anything to distinguish it from the rest of the body, really, except for the line where its mouth was.

Lance turned back to face Keith, who was already looking at him with wide eyes.

“How do we do this?” Lance mouthed to him.

Keith shrugged, pulling out his wand.

Which, okay, yes. *Clearly* they were going to have to use magic. Thank you, Captain Obvious.

Lance rolled his eyes, but he slid his own wand out of the pocket of his pants. Thank god he hasn’t lost it while he was under the mind control of that… thing.

Maybe they could attack the thing with the stunning spells that they had used on the merpeople? Or maybe Lance could try to freeze it? He was pretty sure Keith’s ground-sucky spells wouldn’t work on it, but maybe it was worth a try?

Lance groaned.

They would need a small army to take on this thing.

Suddenly, Lance felt Keith’s fingers wrap around his shoulder, and he turned to notice Keith pointing down at something.

Lance strained his eyes, the faint purple glow from the moss bright enough for him to see… oh my god… was that Lotor?

It was!

Lotor was swimming through the water, nearing the creature. But he didn’t have a shark head like Allura or a air bubble like Keith and Lance. Instead, he appeared to have found someway to give himself the ability to breath underwater… along with… were those webbed hands and feet? If they all survived, Lance was never going to let Lotor hear the end of this one.

Lance and Keith watched as Lotor swam closer to the Baku, obviously having some sort of plan in mind, judging by the way he was holding his wand. But whatever his plan was, they never found out, because about halfway to the creature, one of Lotor’s feet brushed against the orange flowers that Lance had noticed earlier. Almost immediately, Lotor slowed to a stop, beginning to float lazily around in the water.

Oh my god. He was really being mind controlled.

Was that what Lance had looked like?

Lance wrinkled his nose as Lotor started to swim in the direction of the Baku. Yep. That was
probably exactly what he had looked like.

Man, they really couldn’t let Lotor sacrifice himself to the underwater monster, could they? Even though he was a jerk, he still didn’t deserve to get eaten.

Lance glanced over at Keith, who (somewhat reluctantly) nodded his head. Turning his attention back to Lotor and the Baku, Lance kicked off so that he was quickly closing the distance between himself and the beast.

But apparently, he shouldn’t have bothered.

Because Allura, silver bathing suit and shark head, Allura was cutting through the water right in Lotor’s direction faster than even Lance could swim (she had to be magically enhancing her speed, because she definitely wasn’t moving that quickly earlier). When she caught up to Lotor, Allura angled herself so that she was in front of Lotor, kicking backwards with her leg. When it collided with his chest, Lotor went flying back through the water, a safe distance away from the Baku.

The Baku… which was currently opening its mouth. And… oh man, that thing had totally tried to eat him earlier. It’s mouth split open into four parts, all lined with sharp rows of teeth. So the Baku wasn’t a snake, it was the freaking demogorgon from Stranger Things. Great, because, you know, Lance didn’t have enough nightmares already.

Allura positioned herself in between Lotor and the Baku, looking like she was going to try and hold the beast off on her own.

But Lance wasn’t about to make her do that.

And apparently Keith had the same idea, since Lance felt Keith draw up beside him, their shoulders brushing.

Lance flashed an ice spell towards the Baku, watching as a potion of its body was trapped in a block of solid ice, but it snapped its tail forward, slamming the ice off of itself. The Baku turned, rearing its head in Lance and Keith’s direction.

Shit shit shit shit shit.

Keith fired a quick series of stunning spells at the creature, the flashes of red light bouncing harmlessly off its thick hide.

Allura appeared to be trying to hit it with hexes and jinxes, but all of them to no effect. The Bat-Bogey hex didn’t really work that well when the creature you’re fighting against didn’t have a nose.

Lance ran through the riddle again in his mind. There had to be some sort of clue, there, right?

Poison spreads throughout the water

A vile beast dead-set on slaughter

Okay well that was obviously the Baku, so there wasn’t much to help him there.

Keith darted closer to the beast, wordlessly casting a spell that Lance didn’t recognize. But whatever it was, it at least appeared to have an effect on the Baku, cutting large gashes into its side, blood seeping into the water around them.

The Baku let out a roar, which echoed throughout the water, as it twisted and thrashed, trying to get
away from Keith. If he could have, Lance would have hollered out a “nice job!” to Keith, but as it was, he settled for pumping a fist through the water.

As the Baku moved away from Keith, Lance got a glimpse of something underneath of it. From here, it was too far away to confidently be able to tell what it was, but it had to be the prizes they were looking for.

_A breathless quest will take its toll_

_Serene beasts under its control_

The merpeople. That was easy to see. Keith fired off another of the cutting spell, but his shot went wide as the creature’s tale slammed into him, knocking him backwards.

Lance craned his neck, making sure that Keith was okay before turning his attention back to the creature. Keith was panting, one hand gingerly pressed to his ribs, but he waved off Lance’s concern, as he pointed his own wand down at his chest.

Oh god, was he setting his own ribs with magic? Lance winced, he couldn’t watch.

Instead, Lance focused on blasting more ice spells at the creature. They weren’t as effective as the cutting spell Keith was using, but, well, the ice could at least slow the creature down.

The creature was _fast_. Faster than anything that size had a right to be. Fast enough that most of the spells he and Allura were aiming at it went wide.

They needed a way to make sure that they could actually hit the Baku, Lance thought as one of his ice spells slamming into the very end of the creature’s tail, missing most of its body.

Wait.

That was part of the problem.

He and Allura were aiming at where the creature already _was_, when they needed to be aiming at where the creature _was going_ to be.

Lance watched as Allura shot off another spell, and when the creature dodged, he quickly cast an ice spell towards the spot where it was headed.

The blue stream of light from his wand slammed into the creatures face, freezing it solid! Yes! It worked!

The creature thrashed against the ice, slamming its tail forward in an effort to free itself. But then Keith was there, firing the cutting spell at it again, even more red blood forming clouds in the water.

_Beat or distract with chosen fight_

_To free and end your tiring plight_

Lance eased forward, maybe they could sneak down past the Baku while it was distracted and grab the prizes without it noticing. After all, hadn’t the riddle said something about beating the beast _or_ distracting it.

Allura and Keith still seemed distracted by firing offensive spells at the creature, so Lance kept low as he swam down towards where he had noticed what he thought were the prizes.
Sure enough, as he drew closer, Lance saw that there was a large, pearly white clam shell half buried under mud and purple moss. It was easily the size of his beanbag chair back home.

All he had to do was get a little closer…

Suddenly, three shapes separated from the plants surrounding the shell, positioning themselves protectively in front of it.

Not more merpeople, Lance groaned.

The trio in front of him looked slightly different than the other merpeople they had fought, they had what seemed to be… jellyfish pulled over their heads, obscuring their facial features from view.

Lance waved at them, swimming a little closer. “Don’t mind me,” he mouthed, as he tried to move around them. “I’m just gonna…”

The female mermaid reached out, wrapping her webbed fingers around his arm.

“I’m afraid we can’t let you do that,” she said, her voice bubbly from speaking underwater.

Wait a second. Speaking? The merpeople could talk?!

“You must complete the task before you can claim your prize,” one of the mermen added.

Lance’s shock must have shown on his face, because the mermaid let go of her grip on his wrist.

“My name is Plaxum, and these are Blumfump and Swirn. You have seen what became of the rest of our people. Until you and your friends free the merpeople from the Baku’s control, you cannot claim your prize. Each of you must play your own role in the destruction of the beast.”

“The Baku has been mind controlling the others for generations,” the merman named Blumfump added helpfully. “We learned to wear these jellyfish on our heads to hide our brains so that it can’t affect us.”

Lance narrowed his eyes. “The mind control comes from the flowers,” he mouthed, pointing towards a patch of the orange not-quite-lilies.

“The flowers?” Blumfump echoed, rubbing his chin. “Well… maybe…”

And, okay, at any other time, Lance would be super stoked to talk to actual merpeople, but he kind of had a job to do right now, so he gave the trio a (slightly sarcastic) wave goodbye before heading back in the direction of the Baku.

**Weaknesses you must utilize**

*First to find a pearlescent prize*

A weakness. That’s what he needed to find, Lance mused as he swam back towards where Keith and Allura were still holding their own against the Baku. He ran through all of the spells he had learned while at Hogwarts. There were a lot of them, but one of them had to be more effective than the others…

Keith’s slashing, knife, cutting spell seemed to be working pretty well, but Lance didn’t even know the name of that spell (let alone how to cast it!).

Allura’s hexes and jinxes weren’t super effective, and obviously Lotor had some kind of plan, but
there was no way of knowing what it was.

What would Hunk do if he were here right now? Or Romelle? Or even Pidge?

Pidge would probably find some way to exploit its natural biology against it. It was similar to a snake… maybe that played a part? Snakes were susceptible to cold, right? Because they were cold-blooded, so when they got cold they got lazy and lethargic… maybe the same would be true for the Baku…

Romelle would probably try the opposite. The creature lived down in the bottom of an underwater lake. So it was potentially susceptible to the opposite of water: fire. But Lance had already seen Keith’s attempts at fire spells fizzle out, so that wasn’t much help...

Hunk would try and find a way to use the plants around them, at least one of them was probably useful, but Lance was never as good at remembering the magical uses of plants. Still, maybe he could try to cast some spells on them anyway. If he could find a way to turn the plants into rope-like vines that would wrap around the creature and incapacitate it… maybe like that Devil’s Snare that he had to fight free from during his Herbology O.W.L (which had been traumatizing enough that Lance decided not to take it for his N.E.W.T.s.)

… Wait.

Wait a second.

Devil’s Snare.

The way that Lance had defeated the Devil’s Snare was with sunlight… he hadn’t been able to stay calm enough to let the vines suck him down, and all of his violent thrashing just made it choke him faster. The only way he had managed to get free was by creating a bright burst of sunlight with his wand.

The Baku was a seemingly blind creature that lived at the bottom of a deep, very dark lake. Sunlight, that had to be it! That was how he could beat the creature.

Lance kept close to the murky ground, sliding underneath the creature’s tail. If he wanted his attack to be effective, he should target the face, which meant joining back up with Keith and Allura.

The Baku’s tail swept over Lance’s head, and he squished his eyes closed for a second, fully prepared for the tail to slam into his chest like it had with Keith. But the attack never came. Lance eased his eyes back open, the Baku still swimming above him.

Whew. False alarm. It hadn’t noticed him yet.

Picking up speed, Lance quickly closed the remaining distance between himself, Keith, and Allura, rotating about halfway there so that he was swimming backwards, still facing the Baku.

Keith’s fingers wrapped onto Lance’s shoulder, pulling him backwards.

Lance turned to glance at Keith, who was scowling.

“Where did you go?” He mouthed, crossing his arms across his chest.

Lance pointed down towards the shell and the three merpeople, although they were difficult to see from here.
Keith scowled again, and, if possible, it was even deeper this time. “Stop disappearing on me,” he scolded, and Lance didn’t even need to hear his voice to imagine the heavy disapproval in it.

“I know how to beat it,” Lance mouthed back, ignoring Keith’s request. It was hardly his fault that he had been the only one to notice the clam shell.

“How?” Keith asked, his mouth forming a giant ‘O’.

Lance nodded towards his wand, hoping Keith understood the ‘I-totally-have-this-handled’ gesture for what it was.

Keith rolled his eyes, but nodded, gesturing his head in the other direction.

Lance nodded, and Keith separated from him to flank around the creature.

Lance glanced towards Allura, but she was no longer slinging hexes at the Baku. She was staring behind her (which, given the shark head, had to be slightly terrifying) at Lotor, who had brought his hands up to his head. When he took them back down, he looked around seeming slightly confused.

So apparently the mind control wore off after enough time had passed. That was good to know.

Well, he couldn’t really worry about Lotor right now, Lance kind of had bigger fish to fry.

Lance swam up, positioning himself so that he had a clean shot at the Baku’s creepy-ass Venus Flytrap like face.

Okay, Lance, what was the sunlight spell again?

“Lumos Solem!” Lance cried, pointing his wand at the creature.

A beam of bright white light, nearly blinding in the dark depths of the water, shot out from Lance’s wand, slamming directly into the creature’s face.

The Baku thrashed, its head slamming down into the ground in its effort to escape from the light.

Holy shit. It had worked. His plan had actually, kind of, worked.

Lance kept the beam of sunlight trained onto the Baku’s face, as it thrashed and rolled around on the murky ground like a fish that had been taken out of the water.

While he had the creature pinned down into the dirt, he could see Keith firing the cutting spell at the creature’s exposed underbelly.

Similarly, Allura appeared to have gotten over her shock at seeing Lotor recovered and was firing tiny blue fireballs down at the creature. Huh. None of Keith’s fire spells had worked, Lance wondered how Allura knew one. Nonetheless, it didn’t seem to be affecting the Baku at all, the flames harmlessly flickering against its side. So sunlight was its only weakness.

Well, that was good to know, at least.

Too soon, Lance’s sunlight spell began to wane, before disappearing completely. As soon as the light vanished, the Baku flashed back up, cutting through the water like nothing had happened to it.

Lance glanced over towards Keith, could see that Keith was mouthing words to him, but he couldn’t make out what he was trying to say.
Probably ‘try that again, loser’.

“*Lumos Solem!*” Lance cried again, aiming for the side of the Baku’s head, where its eyes would be if it had any. The beam of brilliant light filled the water, slamming into the creature.

The Baku’s tale instinctively lashed out, catching Allura, who went flying back through the water, colliding with Lotor, who had been casting spells at rapid fire.

The Baku backed away from the light, its body hanging over the clam shell and the three merpeople Lance had spoken to earlier. Shit. He didn’t want them to get hurt. Lance abruptly cut off the spell, if he hurt the thing any more and it collapsed down onto them… ughhhhhhh.

Lance swam in a little closer, he needed to lure the Baku away from Plaxum, Blumfump and Swirn. Falling into the habit that Lance had long used to convince people to pay attention to him instead of others, often on the quidditch pitch, Lance waved his arms and cried “Hey, ugly! Look over here!” But since the Baku couldn’t actually hear him, Lance tossed in a few extra stunning spells for good measure.

The Baku flickered its head towards him, its mouth splitting open into four parts as it roared. It streaked forward towards him quickly, looking like it had every intention of swallowing him whole, and it was only years of swimming experience that allowed Lance to cut through the water fast enough to avoid the creature’s lunge.

The Baku streaked past him, its green and brown body seemingly impossibly long as it sailed past Lance. Lance watched the Baku pass him by like a bullfighter with a bull, already positioning himself for the counterattack.

The Baku twisted around in the water, looking like it was ready to make another pass at him. Shit, he hadn’t really thought this far ahead.

Lance snapped his hand up, “*Lumos Solem!*” He cried again, the bolt of bright light streaking forward to slam into the Baku’s mouth.

Nice! A direct hit!

Lance pumped his free arm in victory while making sure to keep his aim true, the bright sunlight burning the inside of the Baku’s throat and mouth.

The Baku gave up on trying to avoid the light, and instead, it launched into motion, its mouth snapping shut as it charged him.

Too late, Lance realized what it was trying to do, and he didn’t have enough time to get out of the way before the Baku’s head slammed into his chest.

Lance let off a gust of air, as the Baku reared its head back and Lance all but slid down the back of its neck, winded.

Oh, that was definitely going to leave a mark.

Lance brought one of his hands up to his chest, wincing when his fingers brushed against the tender skin, trying to ignore that he was currently resting against the Baku’s slimy back.

Wait.
He was on the Baku’s back.

Lance brought his legs down, scrambling for purchase against the Baku’s scaly hide as he spun around so that he was facing the back of the Baku’s head.

He could see Keith just a few meters away, casting the cutting spell at the Baku’s right side, obviously trying to distract the Baku from Lance’s presence on his back. Luckily, it seemed to be working.

Lance aimed his wand at the back of the Baku’s head, “*Lumos Solem!*” He cried, the stream of white light colliding with the back of the Baku’s head.

The beast let out a ferocious roar, as it began trying to buck Lance off of it’s back.

In response, Lance tightened his grip with his legs, even though he could feel the hard scales of the Baku’s back digging into his calves.

Just… a… few… more… seconds…

The spell flickered out, and almost immediately the Baku seemed to regain enough of its strength the toss its head backwards with enough force to send Lance flying off of the beast.

He spun through the water, doing enough somersaults to make him nauseous (which was impressive because Lance had once down fifteen somersaults in a row, challenging Marco’s record of thirteen).

Once his momentum slowed enough that Lance was able to straighten himself so that he was floating upright in the water, Lance was shocked to realise that he had ended up near the giant clam shell and Plaxum and her friends.

Lance lined up another shot at the Baku’s face, waiting until all four of its mandibles were flared open, before letting out another stream of bright sunlight. The blast connected squarely with one of the mandibles, completely severing it from the rest of the beast. There was a flash of gold light bursting from the creature’s mouth, before it faded and the near-darkness of the lake consumed them all once more.

The creature thrashed in pain, spinning around in an effort to protect its face from Lance’s attacks.

Damn, that was gross.

Lance shook his head slightly, trying to fight off the impending headache he could feel forming from being so dizzy as Plaxum swam up to him.

“Look,” he tried to say, “I really need to get back to my friends, right now,”

Plaxum wrapped her hand around his wrist, her fingers cold and slimy. She tugged on Lance, surprising stronger than she looked, pulling him along behind her towards the giant white clam shell.

“Champion Lance,” she said, in her weird, soft and bubbly voice. “You have completed your portion of the first trial and done your part to defeat the Baku that is controlling my people.”

“What do you mean, ‘my part’?” Lance asked, using air quotes with his fingers.

“All four champions must exploit the Baku’s weakness in order to defeat it and free the merpeople from its control,” Plaxum explained, “the spell that you used was detrimental to the Baku’s health and weakened the creature, completing your portion of the trial. It now can only be defeated by the
other champions. It is now time for you to claim your prize and return to the surface so that you may be crowned victor of the task,” she said, sweeping a hand down towards the giant clamshell.

Lance’s eyes followed the movement.

The clamshell pulsed with a bright light, before slowly cracking open.

Plaxum reached over, pushing the shell the rest of the way open. Inside were four oyster shells about the size of Lance’s palms, the same colors that the ribbons wrapped around the scrolls containing the riddle had been. Pale blue for Allura, purple for Lotor, red for Keith, and navy blue for him.

Plaxum reached inside, pulling out the navy blue oyster shell and gently cupping it in her hands. She offered it to Lance.

Lance plucked it from her hands, inspecting it briefly before shoving it into the pocket of his swimsuit. “Wait a second,” Lance mouthed to Plaxum, “so basically you’re saying that I can just leave even though the Baku hasn’t actually been defeated yet?” He asked. “That doesn’t seem right.”

“You have completed what was expected of you,” Plaxum said. “You have earned your prize.”

But, the thing was, it didn’t really matter that he had won his prize. Because if Lance went up right now with the oyster and let Adam Sharma “crown” him the victor of the trial, then that meant that he won. He won, not Keith. And he had made up his mind before entering the water that he was going to do everything he could to help Keith win.

The trial was over when they surfaced, right?

Well, he just had to make sure that he didn't surface yet, then.

“Thanks for the prize,” he said to Plaxum, “but I can’t leave yet. I still have some business down here.”

With that, Lance kicked away from Plaxum and the mermen, heading back in the direction of where Keith and Allura were fighting against the Baku. Actually, make that Keith, Allura, and Lotor.

Lance drew up next to Keith, who jumped a little at his sudden appearance.

“Where did you go now?” Keith asked, firing a spell off towards the Baku. He punctuated his statement with a glare at Lance, obviously not impressed.

In response, Lance slipped the navy blue oyster out of his pocket to show it to Keith.

Keith’s eyes practically bugged out of his head. “You got the prize?” He asked, looking impressed, though it quickly shifted to a look of confusion. “What are you doing here?”

Lance shrugged. “Helping you,” he said, pointing towards Keith for emphasis. “It’s light.”

“What’s light?”

“Light. Sunlight. That’s the weakness.”

Understanding dawned in Keith’s eyes, and he nodded.

“The sunlight charm,” Keith muttered, apparently to himself, judging from how he had turned slightly away from Lance.
Lance nodded eagerly, anyway.

Keith turned back to him. “Tell Allura,” he instructed, “I’ll be right back.”

Lance nodded, watching as Keith swam closer to the Baku before he turned and cut through the water towards Allura.

Once he was close enough that Allura could read his lips, Lance focused on saying “sunlight” as clearly as he could, not sure how good Allura’s understanding was with her half-transfigured shark head.

After he repeated himself a few times, Allura nodded.

Lance spun around, just in time to see Keith launch a stream of bright light towards the Baku, Lotor launching what appeared to be darker curses at the Baku’s other side while it backed away from Keith’s light.

Man, that guy was intense.

Lance swam after Allura, adding a few of his ice spells to the mix, hoping to keep the Baku distracted until Keith had done enough damage to it to complete his part of the trial.

Allura stuck to her fireball spell at first, but after watching Keith for a minute, she caught on to what he was doing and launched her own beam of sunlight towards the creature, so that it was being assaulted from both the side and the front.

The Baku lashed out with its tail, and it’s mouth opened, rows of teeth flashing in the bright light.

The stream of sunlight coming from Keith flickered out, shortly followed by the spell from Allura, before both of them regrouped for another attack. Lance mainly stayed back, offering support when needed.

The Baku thrashed about wildly, its tail slamming into the ground.

Keith fired off a third burst of light, which collided directly with one of the creature’s mantibles. Similar to what had happened when Lance had struck the creature, the mantible was completely severed from the creature’s head, a puff of gold hovering in the water for a few seconds before dissipating.

Allura followed Keith’s lead, aiming her attack directly at one of the two remaining mantibles, severing it with ease. Another puff of gold followed.

Abruptly, Keith’s stream of light cut off. And a few seconds later, Plaxum appeared, dragging Keith along behind her. She reached out, grabbing Allura’s wrist as well, pulling both of them after her in the direction of the giant clam.

Lance trailed after them, although he made sure to keep the Baku and Lotor in his line of sight.

Plaxum lead both Keith and Allura over to the clamshell.

“Champions Keith and Allura,” she said. “You have both proven yourselves against the Baku. It is now time for you to claim your prizes.”

The clamshell flashed with the same light that it had earlier, before cracking open. Once again, Plaxum pushed the shell the rest of the way open, repeating much of what was said to Lance earlier,
pulling out the red oyster shell and offering it to Keith. Once Keith had taken the shell from her, she turned back to the clam, pulling out the pale blue shell and offering it to Allura.

“You have completed what was required of you,” Plaxum said, “and you may return to the surface now.”

As Plaxum finished speaking, a dark shadow fell over them, blocking out even most of the pale purple light from the glowing moss.

Lance slowly glanced up, already dreading what he would see.

The Baku was swimming in the water over them, apparently having been forced backwards by Lotor’s attacks.

Instinctively, Lance darted over to Keith’s side, tugging on the older boy’s arm. “We have to get out of here,” he mouthed.

Keith nodded, shoving his oyster shell into his pocket, before wrapping his hand around Lance’s own.

Lance kicked away from the ground, pulling Keith along behind him. He had to get Keith to the surface, all he had to do was get Keith to the surface.

Lance glanced backwards, Keith was still swimming just behind him, Allura following them.

Lotor was casting the sunlight charm again at the Baku, the large, serpent-like creature writhed in obvious pain. It struck out with its tail, the mass of muscle and smooth, scaly skin slamming towards Lance, Keith, and Allura.

Lance managed to just barely duck out of the way, but Keith and Allura weren’t so lucky. Lance felt Keith’s hand get yanked out of his own. He spun, trying to make sure that the older boy was okay. Keith and Allura were both drifting through the water, apparently stunned by the hit, and Lance could do nothing but watch as they landed on the ground below… in a small patch of bright orange flowers.

*Shit.*

Lance dove down after them.

He reached Keith’s side just as the older boy struggled back into a sitting position.

“Are you okay?” Lance mouthed.

Keith looked at him with wide eyes, nodding his head quickly. Too quickly.

Keith reached up, running his fingers gently across Lance’s cheek.

Trying not to blush, knowing that Keith wasn’t in control of his actions, Lance reached up to grab Keith’s hand and lower it from his face.

Keeping his fingers interlaced with Keith’s, Lance swam over towards where Allura was struggling to free herself from the flowers.

Careful to keep himself floating in the water above the flowers, Lance reached down and grabbed Allura’s wrist as well, yanking her through the water and tearing her free from the flowers.
Lance dragged Allura and Keith along behind him, cutting through the water in the direction of what he hoped was the entrance to the Baku garden.

Behind them, Lotor was still fighting against the creature, and every once in awhile, Keith or Allura tugged towards that direction like they wanted to approach the Baku. Because of course they did, they probably wanted to feed themselves to it. Luckily, they were easily distracted.

Allura kept running her fingers across the pale blue oyster she was still holding in her hand. Lance shot another glance back at her just in time to watch as Allura let go of the shell, the blue flashing almost silver as it began to drift through the water.

No. No no no no. They had worked way too hard to earn these stupid things. Letting go of his grip on Allura’s wrist, Lance shot out his hand and snatched the shell. Turning to hand it back to Allura, he groaned when he realized the girl was beginning to swim back in the direction of the Baku.

God, this was worse than babysitting his niece and nephew.

Lance dragged Keith back over towards Allura, shoving the shell back into her hands and wrapping his hand around her wrist. The blank look in the shark eyes was disturbing. Lance shook his head, quickly looking away from her as he dragged both of them through the water.

Slowly, achingly slowly, the plant life began to disappear around them until they were on the fringes of the Baku garden. Lance glanced backwards, but he could no longer make out Lotor or the Baku through the dense vegetation.

Okay.

Lance let go of Allura to pull his wand out of his pocket. Keith had, like, been able to undo the mind control with a spell, right?

Maybe Lance would be able to figure it out to.

Lance carefully aimed his wand at Keith’s head.

Oh god. What if he messed up? What if he turned Keith’s brain to mush? He always called Keith an idiot but Keith was actually really smart and Keith knew how to use magic to fix people but Lance didn’t know any healing magic. What if he accidentally made it worse?

And Keith wasn’t helping, because he was currently fucking grinning at Lance, and Lance had never seen such a genuinely happy expression on Keith’s face. Because when he wasn’t trying to restrain his emotions, Keith’s grin was all wide white teeth, and wrinkles around the corners of his eyes, and… was that a dimple? Man, that just wasn’t fair.

But Keith’s indigo eyes were clouded, not the sharp, expressive look that Lance was used to seeing in them.

Keith reached up with one of his hands, his finger ghosting across Lance’s cheekbones.

Lance shivered involuntarily.

Didn’t Keith realise how unfair this was?

Here he was, looking all cute as he pursed his lips behind the bubble around his mouth, and he was running his finger along Lance’s cheek, and this was, like, something out of Lance’s dreams, but Keith wasn’t himself, and it wasn’t right.
Lance glanced back behind him, just to make sure that Allura wasn’t trying to feed herself to the Baku and was pleased to see that she was just twirling and spinning slowly through the water, like she was slow dancing with a partner that he couldn’t see.

Keith tugging his other arm away from Lance’s grip, drew his attention back to the older boy.

Keith was poking at the bubble around his face, apparently trying to pop it.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Lance said, wrapping his hands around both of Keith’s wrists so that he could pull the other boy’s hands away from the bubble around his mouth. “You need to breathe.”

But Keith couldn’t hear him, and tugged against Lance’s grip.

Well, Lance mused, at least he wasn’t the only one to make a fool out of himself on camera. Apparently, being under mind control meant you just tried to embarrass yourself as much as possible.

Okay, he had to snap Keith out of this.

Lance tried literally snapping his fingers in front of Keith’s face, but the water slightly ruined the effect, and it didn’t seem to work, anyway.

Right, well, magic it was then.

Eh…. the only spell that Lance knew that affected the mind was the Confundus charm. And making Keith more confused was probably a bad idea.

Fuck.

Lance lowered his wand. He wasn’t sure how Keith had freed him from the mind control. Lotor had apparently come out of it after a while, Lance would just have to help Keith and Allura along until they snapped out of it.

With that in mind, Lance switched his grip on Keith so that he could hold him with one hand before swimming over towards Allura and grabbing onto her.

Okay, he just needed to get them to the surface, right?

Lance looked up.

They were down so deep that he couldn’t even see any light streaming into the water. Great. Well, the only way to go was up.

Lance kicked up, hauling Keith and Allura with him. They were pretty much dead weight, making the ascent much harder than it needed to be.

Suddenly, Lance felt Keith get jerked down, and he pulled him back up to overcompensate for the movement. Lance glanced down, wondering what had caused Keith to pull away from his grip, and swore when he saw the mermaid that had her arms wrapped around Keith’s ankle.

More merpeople, really? Couldn’t this freaking trial be over already?

Lance let go of Allura, pushing her up so that she was drifting lazily towards the surface, his now-free hand fumbling for his wand.

He fired an ice spell at the mermaid, her torso freezing into a solid block of ice, the added weight forcing her to sink through the water.
But behind her were two more of the large mermen and another mermaid. Great, just great.

They were far enough away that Lance had time to reach back down and grab Keith, pulling him up.

Wait a second.

Did the bubble around Keith’s face look smaller?

Lance reached up with the hand holding his wand, poking at the edges of his own bubble. It was smaller. Goddammit. The Bubble Head charm was running out.

Keith didn’t seem concerned by him impending lack of oxygen, as he giggled softly to himself and ran his fingers across the angles of Lance’s collarbone.

“Sorry, buddy,” Lance mouthed, before putting as much of his effort into pushing Keith up towards the surface as he could.

Once he was sure that Keith and Allura were both drifting slowly up towards the surface, Lance turned his attention back to the merpeople beneath him.

Lance released a series of quick stunning spells towards the ones that were farther away, hoping to slow them, before shooting another ice spell at the closest merman.

The merman froze, his arms trapped in a block of ice.

But the stunning spells didn’t slow down the mermaid and the other merman, both of whom were now closer than Lance was comfortable with.

The merman stabbed at him with a trident, and Lance flinched away, unintentionally sending himself into the range of the mermaid.

The mermaid reached out, and her claws scraped along his calves as Lance struggled to swim up through the water away from her.

He let out a scream of pain that was swallowed by the bubble around his mouth, as his red blood trickled out into the water, staining it red. The gashes from her claws were jagged and deep, and very, very bloody.

Lance swallowed back bile, as he aimed his wand at her.

The familiar blue streak of the ice spell arched out, and Lance felt entirely too satisfied when her head froze into a solid block of ice.

He needed to get out of here. And fast.

Wait. Fast.

Lance glanced back up towards where Keith and Allura were still drifting slowly through the water above him.

Okay, he could do this.

Lance fired off another stunning spell at the merman below him, just enough to buy him the extra time he would need.

As soon as he released the spell, Lance snapped into motion. He kicked his legs through the water,
wincing at the stinging wounds along his legs, trying to drag himself forward with his arms as much as he could with the friction of the water working against him.

It wasn’t long before he caught up to Keith and Allura, since neither of them had gotten very far. He reached forward, wrapping his hands around both of their ankles, his wand was pressed up against Allura’s calf. Hopefully that wouldn’t affect his spell.

“Ascendio!” Lance cried, and he could feel the effects instantaneously.

It felt like there was a geyser of water forming beneath him, propelling him up and towards the surface, pushing Keith and Allura ahead in front of him.

Keith has to surface first to win, Lance reminded himself, pulling down on Allura so that he was holding her around her thighs, keeping her low enough that Keith would clearly be the first to break through the water.

Keith has to surface first, Keith has to surface first.

The bubble of air around Lance’s mouth and nose, popped with a quick huff of air, barely giving him enough time to take a deep breath of the last of the oxygen before he had to hold his breath.

God, he hoped Keith was holding his breath.

He felt, rather than saw, Keith break the surface of the water. A few seconds later, the water propelling Lance upwards pushed him out of the water, and Lance took an eager gasp of oxygen before blinking his eyes open.

At some point, he had let go of Keith, who was a few feet away gasping for air, but he still had a hold on Allura, whose shark head slowly transformed back to her human one.

She and Keith both still looked out of it, but Lance glanced around. They weren’t actually far from the wooden stands, where he could see the students and faculty were cheering, the roar of the crowd reaching his ears.

They had made it.
Chapter Eleven

Chapter Summary

The champions have completed the first task, injured as they may be, and return to land. A reunion is seen, an apology is made and the results are announced.

Chapter Notes

Hey y'all,

Thank you so much for all of your incredible feedback on the last chapter! We hope this chapter is just as satisfying :)

- slowklancing

Lance sucked in a grateful gasp of air, but was unable to prevent a hiss of pain, as the adrenaline drained from his body and the pain finally registered. His leg stung like a *bitch*.

“And surfacing third, we have Lance Álvarez!” An announcer called, but Lance barely registered the voice.

He let go of Allura once he was sure that she was in enough control of herself to stay floating, reaching down to gingerly apply pressure to his calf, pulling on his bad arm.

“Fuck,” he hissed softly, as his fingers wrapped around the wounds.

He needed to get someone to look at this.

Lance looked up, relieved to see a wooden rowboat cutting through the water in their direction. He didn’t recognize the person sitting in it, probably a ministry official, but that didn’t stop Lance from letting out a sigh of relief as the boat stopped beside Keith, the ministry official pulling Keith into the boat and wrapping him in a thermal blanket.

At least they didn’t have to swim all the way back to the shore.

It didn’t take long for the boat to reach him and Allura. Lance helped Allura up onto the boat before he let the ministry official pull him up. He clenched his teeth, trying not to scream as his forearm ached in protest, the hard grip of the ministry official placing too much pressure on his half-assed healing job.

The air was cold against his soaked body, and Lance was grateful for the thermal blanket that Keith held open in invitation.

Lance dropped down beside him, gently stretching his leg out in front of him.

This time, he wasn’t able to stop the scream that bubbled up in his chest as he took in the mess of
torn flesh and blood that his left calf had become.

He felt Keith’s arm tighten around him, pulling on his head so that his gaze was torn away from the wound, and Keith let Lance press his face into the joint between Keith’s neck and shoulder.

Lance took a few deep, calming breaths. His pulse like the beat of a drum in his ear.

In fact, his pulse was so loud, that by the time he realized Keith was speaking, he had missed the first half of the sentence.

“gonna be okay, Lance. You can fix this, right?” Keith snapped, obviously not addressing Lance anymore.

Lance tuned out whatever the ministry official said, focusing on slowing his breathing. Wizard healing spells were powerful. They’d probably take him to the infirmary and he’d be good in no time. Brand new. They’d probably fix the botched healing job on his arm, too.

He felt a warm burning on his leg, followed by the tell-tale sting of skin knitting itself back together with magic, but Lance focused on the smell of the lake water on Keith’s neck and the way Keith’s stupid black mullet ticked his nose.


Lance nodded, his nose brushing against Keith’s pulse-point, before he slowly straightened back up to a sitting position.

“Wait,” Lance said, still resisting looking down at his leg. “You’re talking to me. You’re okay? You aren’t being mind controlled any more?”

“No, no, I’m not being mind controlled anymore,” Keith said with a soft chuckle. “The, uh, ministry guy cast some spell on me and it cleared away the last of the effects.”

“Good,” Lance said quietly, “good. I was really worried about you. It was… wrong to see you like that.”

“It was wrong to see you like that too,” Keith countered. “And I saw you like that before we realised we could even be mind controlled,” Keith reminded him.

“I’m sorry,” Lance said, “that must have been really scary.”

“It was. Lance, you were acting so weird and I didn’t know what was wrong with you-” Keith broke off, his voice cracking slightly. “Before that, you had just vanished, and I didn’t know where you went, and when I finally spotted you, you were being hauled away by those merpeople. And then just now you just hauled yourself up onto the boat covered in blood and I didn’t remember what happened or how I even got here…”

“Hey, buddy, I’m fine,” Lance said. “We all made it out.”

“But we never would have if you hadn’t figured out the Baku’s weakness,” Keith let off a slow hiss of air. “Lance, that was amazing. Later, you’re telling me all about how you figured it out.”

Lance felt himself blush, “I will,” he promised. “But in return, you have to teach me that spell you were using to fight the Baku. Keith, I’ve never seen someone as good at offensive spells as you.”

Now it was Keith’s turn to blush, the red staining his cheeks and creeping down his neck.
“And you figured out how to free me from the mind control, I still don’t know how you managed to do that. I tried to snap you out of it and couldn’t figure it out,” Lance added.

“I’ll tell you later,” Keith promised, before he leaned over and let his head drop down onto Lance’s shoulder. “But right now I feel like I could sleep for a week.”

Lance let his own head drop down to rest against the top of Keith’s. “Agreed.”

“Hey, guys,” a soft voice said, snapping Lance out of the not-quite-asleep state that he had fallen into. “We’re at the pier.”

Lance blinked his eyes open. Allura was crouching in front of him and Keith, one of her hands gently resting on Lance’s good shoulder.

“Oh, right,” Lance said, shaking Keith awake.

Keith blinked his eyes open, looking confused for a second, before his eyes sharpened with focus.

Allura offered her hand to Lance, so Lance let the girl pull him carefully to his feet, grateful not to have to put all of his weight onto his injured foot.

He glanced down at it while Keith stood, wincing at the jagged scars running up and down the length of it, but compared to the mess it had been when he climbed onto the boat, Lance wasn’t about to complain.

Lance felt Keith gently grab his arm, and Lance looked over just in time to see that Keith was slinging Lance’s arm around his shoulders so that he could bear most of Lance’s weight.

Together, they carefully climbed over the edge of the rowboat and onto the wooden pier. Lance’s legs buckled slightly, a combination of his half-healed wound and the exhaustion of swimming for over two hours finally setting in, but Keith managed to keep him upright.

Lance wasn’t sure how Keith was managing to do so when he had his own wounds (Lance was pretty sure that the Baku’s tail had at least cracked Keith’s ribs), but Keith didn’t even flinch under Lance’s weight.

Almost as soon as they climbed onto the wooden pier constructed along the edges of the lake, they were surrounded by a small group of photographers and students. The ministry official followed them out of the boat and tried to push the crowd back, giving them some space, but not much.

“Merlin, Lance!” A voice called, as a familiar blonde head ducked under the ministry’s official’s arm, dragging a larger, equally familiar form along behind her.

“Romelle! Hunk!” Lance cried as his friend reached him.

Hunk swept him up into a huge hug, crushing Lance to his chest.

While the physical affection was nice, Lance’s already aching body protested at the tight grip. “Hey, buddy,” Lance said, patting his hand against Hunk’s back, “I’m, um, a little injured right now. Maybe we can save the hugs for later?”

“Sorry, man,” Hunk said, letting go of Lance. “We were just really worried about you.”

“Are you all okay?” Romelle asked, her gaze flickering nervously between Lance, Keith, and Allura.
“We watched the whole trial on some sort of magical… projection thing. It looked intense.”

Lance’s gaze instinctively flickered down to his leg before glancing over at Keith, who was already looking at him.

“I’ve been better,” Lance admitted.

Keith nodded. “The ministry official just set my ribs on the rowboat,” he winced slightly. “Or, rather, he fixed my attempt to set them. It was… not pleasant.”

“I’m okay,” Allura admitted. “Scrapes and bruises everywhere, but nothing broken or even sprained. Although I’m rather confused how we ended up at the surface. Last thing I remember, I was struck by the Baku’s tail.”

“It was the flowers,” Lance explained. “They made you fall under the Baku’s mind control. I managed to get you two back to the surface before you fed yourself to it.”

Allura blanched.

“I think I had better sit down,” Allura said weakly as she settled down onto the pier, tightening her thermal blanket around her shoulders.

Romelle frowned at Allura’s profile, before turning back to Lance. “Lance, I am so proud of you. You did amazing.” She reached up, wrapping her arms carefully around his shoulders and pressing a kiss to his cheek.

“Thanks, Ro,” he whispered.

Romelle pulled away and turned to Keith. “Thanks for watching Lance’s back.”

Keith blushed. “Well, yeah, of course,” he stammered.

Romelle reached over, lightly setting a hand against Keith’s shoulder, before pulling away and crouching down in front of Allura.

“Yeah, man,” Hunk said, smacking Keith’s shoulder. “You guys were both pretty impressive out there.”

“Thanks, buddy,” Lance said with the best overconfident smirk he could muster. “We totally knew that we had this thing.”

“That’s not true,” Keith muttered. “I thought I was going to die, like, three times.”

“But we didn’t die,” Lance countered, “and I think that deserves a celebration.”

Hunk cocked his head in consideration. “Butterbeer at The Three Broomsticks this weekend?” He offered.

Lance nodded quickly. “Yes! You’ll come, won’t you, Keith?”

Keith glanced uncertainty between Lance and Hunk before slowly nodding. “Sure, I’ll come.”

“It appears our fourth and final champion has just emerged!” The announcer’s voice (that sounded suspiciously like Adam) said, the voice obviously magically amplified.

Lance turned out towards the lake, where, sure enough, he could see a figure that had to be Lotor
bobbing in the water.

“I guess he finally managed to defeat the Baku,” Lance muttered to Keith.

“I guess so,” Keith replied.

They watched as the ministry official who had pulled them from the water climbed back into the rowboat and paddled out towards Lotor.

Romelle helped Allura stand back up. “They’re probably going to announce the winner of the trial soon,” she said, glancing up towards the large wooden tower with the ministry officials.

“Good,” Lance groaned, “then I can go get my leg patched up.”

“And we can put on dry clothes,” Keith added, shivering slightly as he tugged the thermal blanket tighter around their shoulders.

“And we can find something to eat,” Lance said with a quiet moan. “I’m starving.”

“They were selling popcorn in the stands,” Hunk said, “it wasn’t as good as the caramel corn they give out at Halloween, but it was still pretty decent. I bet I could go find some for you.”

“That’s okay, buddy,” Lance chuckled weakly, “I’ll wait for some real food.”

“ATTENTION,” Adam’s voice boomed over the pier. “We now have the rankings for all of the champions.”

Silence fell over the crowd, as everyone waited with bated breath to hear the rankings of the Champions. Lance curled in on himself slightly, his nerves picking up again tenfold.

“In fourth place, with a total of six points, is Lotor Daibazaal, who was awarded one bonus point for the way that he handled the hypnotic octopus that attacked him early in the trial.”

The crowd clapped politely, but it was lacking the usual enthusiasm. Lotor stood off to the side with his arms crossed over his chest, obviously not happy with the ranking he had received.

“In third place, with a total of twelve points, with two bonus points having been awarded for their excellent use of transfiguration, is Allura Altea.”

The cheers were a little louder this time, and Lance reached over to grab Allura’s arm. “Good job, ‘Lura.” But he couldn’t help feeling confused. He had surfaced third, hadn’t he? So logically, he should have been in third place, not Allura? Adam had said something about bonus points… maybe it had to do with that?

Allura nodded, “Thank you, Lance.”

“I thought that the points were based off of who surfaced first,” Lance whispered to Keith. “I should have gotten third.”

“That’s weird,” Keith agreed. “Maybe you got extra points for helping Allura and I?”

“In second place, with a total of nineteen points is Keith Kogane.”

Wait a second.

What?
The crowd erupted into loud roars and enthusiastic clapping. But Lance felt frozen. Keith wasn’t supposed to get second place. Keith was supposed to have won. Keith was supposed to have won. That was the whole point of this stupid trial. There was no way that Lance won. He did everything possible to make sure that Keith would surface first.

Keith had surfaced first.

There was some kind of mistake. There had to be.

“He was awarded two bonus points for the amazing fighting skills he displayed against the Baku, as well as an additional two points for discovering how to heal fellow champion, Lance Álvarez, from the Baku’s mind control,” Adam continued speaking, but Lance could barely hear it over the pounding in his ears.

Keith’s grip around Lance’s shoulders tightened.

‘He’s gonna be mad. He’s going to remember that he’s supposed to be the Hogwarts Champion and not you,’ Lance’s brain whispered to him. ‘He’s going to think you stole his spotlight.’

“Lance, you won,” Keith whispered, but he didn’t sound angry.

Lance risked a glance over at Keith, Keith who was grinning at him, clutching excitedly at Lance’s uninjured arm.

“But… but…” Lance said uselessly. “That’s not possible.”

“Not possible? Lance, you did more work in this trial than the rest of us combined. You earned this,” Keith said seriously.

“I…” but whatever Lance was trying to say, and he wasn’t even sure what it was going to be, but it didn’t matter because it was cut off by Adam speaking again.

“And, in first place, with a grand total of thirty-four points is Lance Álvarez.”

Thirty-four points.

How the hell had he gotten thirty-four points?

The crowd erupted into cheers and screams, louder than they had been for any of the other Champions. Lance let his gaze travel over the crowd. Were they really cheering for him?

“After earning twenty points for coming in first place and being the first to successfully defeat the Baku and earn his prize, Lance earned an extra ten points for staying to aid fellow Champions Keith Kogane and Allura Altea in not only defeating the Baku, but for helping them surface under the Baku’s influence. He also earned an additional two points for being the first to discover the Baku’s weakness and two points for his exceptional performance in the trial.”

It was based on who got the shell first. The stupid trial was based on who got the fucking shell first.

Lance had won without even realizing it.

“Congratulations, you two,” Hunk said loudly, pulling Keith and Lance into a group hug.

“Congratulations,” Allura agreed, offering her hand after Hunk released them. “It was an honor to compete alongside the two of you.”
Keith shook her hand, and Lance followed his lead.

“Same to you,” Keith said.

“You’re welcome for saving your ass,” Lance added with an overdramatic wink.

“Maybe I’ll return the favor in the second trial. If you’ll excuse me, I want to find my father,” Allura said politely, before she headed off in the direction of the wooden tower the teachers watched from.

“Congratulations, Lance,” Romelle said, reaching up to gingerly give him a hug. “You deserve this.”

“Thanks, Ro,” Lance whispered against her blonde hair.

Romelle pulled away and grabbed Hunk’s arm, “We should probably let Lance and Keith get to the infirmary tent.”

“There’s an infirmary tent?” Lance asked with a grateful sigh. “Come on, Keith, let’s get out of here. I actually want to walk again.”

Keith nodded, “I think the infirmary tent was back by the tent we got ready in,” Keith said as he started to lead them in the direction of the tents behind the wooden pier.

Once they were away from the prying eyes of their friends, Lance let out a quiet sigh.

“I’m sorry that I won,” he said, locking his eyes onto the grass tickling his bare toes.

Keith froze. “You’re sorry that you won? Why would you say that?”

“Well, I mean, I wasn’t supposed to, right? I mean, I’m not even supposed to be here! Aren’t you, like, mad at me for stealing your spotlight?” Lance asked, stealing a glance at Keith out of the corner of his eye.

“Lance, are you talking about what I said back when you were chosen?” Keith asked, his voice soft and quiet.

“Maybe a little,” Lance admitted, digging his toes into the soft ground. This close to the lake it was muddy and soft, cool soil squishing between his toes. “I just… I spent the whole trial trying to make sure that you won, and it didn’t matter.”

“What do you mean, you were trying to make sure that I won?” Keith asked, sounding confused. “Lance… please don’t tell me that you’ve been thinking that you shouldn’t have a chance at winning… that you’ve just been helping me from the beginning,” Keith said, his voice turning desperate. “Lance!”

Lance tore his gaze away from the ground to meet Keith’s eyes, but he didn’t have it in him to try and deny it.

“Have you been trying to get me to win? Lance, why would you do that?”

“It’s like I told you before, I wasn’t really supposed to be chosen, so I thought that at least I could help the Hogwarts student that actually was,” Lance said.

“I thought you were joking when you said that. Lance, I don’t want you to help me win,” Keith said.

Lance stiffened. Great. Another thing he did wrong. Keith didn’t even want his help anymore.
“Because I want you to try and beat me,” Keith continued.

Wait… huh?

“You want me to try and beat you?” Lance echoed.

Keith nodded. “That’s always what we’ve been best at, isn’t it? Competing against one another? So come on, show me what you’ve got. I want to actually face against you, Lance. Like we used to do in quidditch.”

Lance let out a relieved huff of air. “Okay. You’re going down, Kogane.”

“I beg to differ, Álvarez.”

Lance hissed as the ministry’s healer pulled their wand away from his leg, the fresh scars slowly smoothing into faded, white lines. He was currently sitting on one of the cots in the infirmary tent that had been set up near the lake so the Champions didn’t have to go all the way back to the castle to be healed.

It was convenient, really.

“Are you alright?” Keith asked, perchng on the edge of Lance’s cot.

“You’re supposed to be resting,” Lance scolded him. “You had four cracked ribs.”

Keith shrugged. “They feel fine now,” he said, glancing down at his own chest. “It didn’t even bruise.”

Lance leaned back on the pillows behind him, stretching out his injured leg in front of him, keeping his other knee pulled into his chest.

“And anyways,” Keith continued, “you didn’t answer my question.”

Lance rolled his eyes. “I’ve been better,” he allowed, glancing at the white scars that contrasted sharply with the tan of the skin on his calf. “Some people are, like, super into scars right?”

A surprised chuckle slipped out of Keith’s mouth, “That’s what you’re worried about?” He asked, arching a brow.

Lance shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Lance,” Keith said, his voice dropping into a gentler tone.

“Forget it,” Lance brushed him off, “I was just joking.”

“No you weren’t,” Keith said, reaching over so that his hand was hovering over the scars on Lance’s calf. Almost like he was going to touch them, but restrained himself.

“Keith,” Lance said, reaching over to grab Keith’s hand with his own, tugging it away from his leg. “Really, I’m okay.”

Keith didn’t look convinced, but he nodded. “So now you get to tell me about what I missed while I was under the mind control. How did you get Allura and I up to the surface?”
“There’s not much to tell, really,” Lance said. “I grabbed the two of you and dragged you away from Lotor and the Baku. Once we were in the clear, I tried to use magic to snap you out of it. Only, I didn’t know which spell you had used, so that wasn’t really effective. I tried dragging you and Allura up towards the surface of the water, but a mermaid grabbed your leg and was trying to drag you down. I froze her and pushed you and Allura up so that you floated towards the surface while I held off the merpeople.” Lance paused to grimace, “That’s how I got this,” he said, sweeping one hand towards his leg. “But I managed to hold off the merpeople long enough to grab you and Allura and cast the ascendition charm to get us to the surface.”

Keith nodded slowly. “I remember waking up on the rowboat. I was so confused.”

Lance snorted. “I bet. I know I was.”

“Wait, so you don’t remember anything, either?”

Lance shook his head. “Nope,” he said, popping the ‘P’. “It’s all a big blank.”

“But… we had a bonding moment,” Keith said, his voice cracking slightly. “I cradled you in my arms!”

“Nope, don’t remember, didn’t happen,” Lance said, closing his eyes and shaking his head.

Keith let out an annoyed huff of air.

Lance cracked one of his eyes open. “It’s not my fault that I was under the Baku’s mind control!”

“Well,” Keith countered. “It kind of is. You shouldn’t have touched the flower.”

“Oh my god,” Lance groaned. “Get off of my bed.” He kicked at Keith lightly with his uninjured leg.

Keith laughed, and responded by flopping backwards so that he was laying on even more of the bed.

“Keith!” An unfamiliar voice called, making Keith sit back up.

Lance glanced over in the direction of the front flap of the tent just in time to see an unfamiliar woman pushing through. She had the same pale skin and dark hair as Keith, along with a slim and athletic build that made her look a lot younger than she probably was.

“Mom!” Keith replied. He looked like he was going to push off the bed and rush over to her, but thought better of the motion halfway through, waiting for her to come over to him, instead.

So this was the woman that Lance had heard so many stories about. To hear some people speak, she had almost single-handedly brought down the Dark Lord. To others, she was just a pawn in a much larger game that he was playing, waiting for the right time to strike again. Looking at her, Lance had a hard time picturing her as a member of the Galra. She just looked like a concerned mom.

Keith’s mom crossed the room quickly, sweeping her son into her arms.

Lance felt a familiar pang in his own chest as he imagined his own Mamá rushing into the room to fuss over his wounds. But that couldn’t happen, because Lance still hadn’t told his family about being in the Triwizard Tournament.

“Are you okay?” Keith’s mom asked, pulling back just far enough to inspect her son.

“Mom, I’m fine. Really. I had a few cracked ribs but the healers fixed me up,” Keith insisted.
Keith’s mom reached up, placing one of her hands on his cheeks. “You were very brave today,” she told him.

“Mom,” Keith groaned.

“Okay, fine, I’ll stop,” she agreed, finally releasing Keith.

“How did you even get in here? I thought you were trying not to let anyone see you here?” Keith questioned.

His mom waved one of her hands. “It was fine, Shiro and Adam made sure that no one saw me.”

Keith nodded slowly.

“Now, are you going to introduce me to your friend?” Krolia questioned, obviously studying Lance.

Lance shifted under her gaze, flushing slightly.

“Oh, right. Lance, this is my mom, Krolia Kogane. Mom, this is Lance,” Keith said, waving between them.

“It’s really nice to meet you, Mrs Kogane” Lance said, offering Krolia his hand.

“Krolia is fine,” she insisted, as she shook his hand with a firm handshake. “Thank you for helping my son in the tournament today.”

“Oh, that was nothing.” Lance said, resting his head back against the pillow behind him.

“It’s something you’re never going to do again,” Keith added, narrowing his eyes.

“I know, I know,” Lance agreed. “From now on, we’ll compete against one another. I heard you earlier.”

Krolia shook her head at the two of them.

It was hard to picture her as the mysterious Galra operative that Lance had always imagined her to be. She just seemed so normal. Back when Lance had first heard about how Keith’s mom had turned on her upbringing and family in order to bring down the Dark Lord herself, becoming a vital inside operative for the ministry, he had thought of a solemn brooding woman solely devoted to ridding the wizarding world of the Galra. But in reality she was much more real and animated.

“Hey, you two,” a familiar voice said as they made their way into the tent.

“Hey, Shiro!” Lance called, waving to his teacher.

Shiro made his way over to them, Adam following along behind him, their hands loosely clasped together.

“That was a nice use of Sectumsempra against the Baku, Keith,” Shiro said, placing his free hand on Keith’s shoulder.

“Thanks, Shiro,” Keith said with a nod.

“I knew I didn’t recognize that spell! It was one of the ones that you designed, wasn’t it?” Lance asked, addressing Shiro. “It was badass.”
Shiro chuckled, “Thanks, Lance.”

“The two of you both did extraordinary,” Adam added. “The ministry was very impressed.”

Keith grinned.

“And congratulations on your win, Lance,” Adam added. “You did an amazing job of figuring out the Baku’s weakness.”

Lance felt his blush deepen. “Thank you, Adam.”

“Alright,” Shiro said, “we’ll leave you two to get some rest. I’ll see both of you in class on Monday.”

“Bye, Shiro. Bye, Adam. It was nice to meet you,” Lance said, giving them a wave.

Keith stood and gave both of them a stiff hug, bidding them goodbye, before they exited the tent, Krolia following behind them slowly.

“Write more,” she instructed Keith before pulling him into a tight hug.

Keith nodded, patting his mom’s back. “I will,” he promised.

Krolia smoothed Keith’s hair back from his face, before pressing a soft kiss to his forehead.

Keith shut the tent flap closed behind her, before he limped slowly back over to Lance’s bed and dropped back down at the end of it.

“Hey, how come Allura and Lotor aren’t in here?” Lance asked, glancing around at the now-almost-completely-empty infirmary tent.

“Allura went with her father back to the Beauxbatons carriage. I’m not sure what happened to Lotor,” Keith shrugged.

“Your mom seems nice,” Lance said.

“She’s great,” Keith agreed. “A little overprotective sometimes.”

“Was she upset when you joined the tournament?” Lance asked, knowing that if his mother had found out he was in a deadly tournament, she would probably literally kill him herself.

“No really, she knew it was something I had to do,” Keith said. “Have you decided if you’re going to tell your family yet?”

“I don’t know,” Lance admitted. “I feel bad keeping it from them, but I don’t want them to worry.”

Keith nodded.

Lance closed his eyes, “Don’t be offended if I fall asleep,” he warned Keith. “I’m exhausted.”

“Me too,” Keith admitted. “I don’t even want to move.”

“So don’t,” Lance mumbled into his pillow. He stretched out one of his arms, grabbing onto Keith’s arm and tugging him down.

“Lance!” Keith laughed, tugging away half-heartedly. “This is your bed, there’s like four other cots in here. We don’t have to try and squish onto a twin-sized bed.”
“S’fine,” Lance said, succeeding in tugging Keith down onto the bed next to him so that they were sharing a pillow.

“This pillow is really soft,” Keith said quietly.

“I know,” Lance agreed. “Can we sleep now?”

“Sure,” Keith agreed.

Lance cracked his eyes open, watching as Keith’s fluttered shut. His black hair spilled out against the white pillowcase.

His breathing slowly evened out, huffs of warm air tickling Lance’s nose.

Lance reached over, tucking a tendril of black hair back behind Keith’s ear.

He wasn’t really as tired as he had claimed to be, but he had remembered how Keith was practically falling asleep on his shoulder in the rowboat and didn’t really feel bad about lying so that Keith would get some much needed rest.

Although, Keith’s breathing was really even. And the pillow was really soft. Maybe he would close his eyes just for a few minutes.

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“He’s sleeping, we should come back later,” someone whispered. Loudly.

Lance turned, pressing his face further into the pillow he was currently sleeping on, not exactly eager to see whoever was talking. He was still so tired and the blanket was so warm.

“Maybe I’ll just wait until he wakes up,” another voice replied, loud enough that Lance knew he wouldn’t be able to fall back asleep.

Accepting his fate, Lance blinked his eyes open. It was dim in the tent, but the low light was still enough to make him squint. There were two blurry figures sitting in chairs pulled up next to his bed, and Lance blinked until they came into focus.

When they did, he almost wished that he had pretended to still be asleep.

“Lance!” Pidge said, leaning forward in their chair. “You’re awake!”

In the chair to Pidge’s left, Matt uncrossed his arms.

“I am now,” Lance grumbled, pushing himself up into a sitting position, letting the soft white cotton blanket pool around his waist.

Oh right, he was still in his now-mostly-dry swimsuit.

“What do you want, Pidge?” Lance asked. He really wasn’t in the mood to get yelled at by Pidge again. Hadn’t they already done enough of that? What else could Pidge possibly have to say? Especially that couldn’t wait until he was actually back at the castle?

“How’s your leg? And your arm? Are they okay?” Pidge asked, their voice coming out in a rush. “I spoke to Madam Pomfrey and she said that you’ll be fine, but that you’ll have some scarring and-”

Lance reached over, grabbing Pidge’s arm as they waved it around wildly.
“What do you want, Pidge?” Lance asked tiredly. “What are you doing here?”

“I just… needed to make sure that you were okay,” Pidge said quietly.

“That’s funny,” Lance said with a dry huff of laughter that really didn’t sound amused at all. “Given just how concerned you’ve been about me lately.”

“I recognize that I’ve been a pretty shitty friend,” Pidge said, reaching up to tug at their short hair. “I mean, I really thought that you were lying and hiding something from me, so my reaction wasn’t totally unwarranted,” they said, babbling. “But… in the end… I was a jerk,” they admitted.

Lance closed his eyes, tipping his head back against the pillow. “That might be the understatement of the year,” he informed them.

“I really am sorry,” Pidge said. “And I know that it sucks that it took me watching you get a chunk of your arm bitten out to realise it. As someone who prides myself on my intelligence… I’ve been acting pretty stupid.”

“You know, Pidge, I get why you were mad at me if you really thought that I was lying. I do. But did you really seriously believe that I would have cheated? Come on, Pidge, I have a moral crisis when you let me copy your homework. Like, are you just here because I got hurt and you feel bad that we weren’t speaking? Or are you here because you’re actually apologising?” Lance asked, tearing his gaze away from the ceiling to face Pidge.

“I’m really here to apologize,” they insisted. “I just… really miss my friend.”

“I miss my friend, too. I’ve been missing my friend,” Lance said, shaking his head. “And you know, I was really hurt because of the comments that you made, but we could have gotten through that.”

“I-I know-”

“But when I saw you and Matt walking around wearing those fucking buttons? That stung, Pidge. I really needed my friends. And you just abandoned me. You abandoned me when I needed you the most!” Lance knew that he was practically yelling, could feel tears welling in his eyes, but he couldn’t help himself. “This year so far has seriously sucked. And I needed your support. These have been some of the worst few months of my life, and you didn’t do anything to make it better. In fact, you made it worse.”

“Lance,” Matt said, reaching out as if he was going to try and calm Lance down.

“Don’t!” Lance snapped at him. “You don’t get to speak, either. I’m mad at you, too.”

Matt nodded, sitting back down into his chair.

“Hey, Lance, is everything okay?”

Lance glanced over in the direction of the new voice and blinked in surprise when he saw Keith sitting up in the bed on his other side. He hadn’t even realised that the other boy was still in the infirmary. Idly, Lance wondered when Keith had changed beds. Had he moved in the middle of the night? Or did one of the healers move him?

“Yeah, yeah, everything’s fine,” Lance said, even though it was clear that he was lying.

“Cause that sounded believable,” Keith muttered.
Keith slid off of his bed, wrapping his blanket around his bare shoulders as he closed the distance between them.

“Oh,” he said, stopping when he registered Pidge and Matt’s presence. He turned to look at Lance. “What are they doing here?”

“Apologising, apparently,” Lance said, pulling up his legs so that Keith could perch on the end of his bed.

“It’s a bit late for that, don’t you think, Lance?” Keith asked, arching his brow.

“Better late than never?” Pidge offered in a small voice.

Lance snorted.

“Are you serious?” Keith asked, sounding incredulous. “Are they serious?” He asked Lance.

“Pidge is almost always serious,” Lance said dryly.

“You think that you can just treat Lance like trash for months and then come crawling back once he’s proved himself? That’s pathetic,” Keith said, crossing his arms over his chest. Although between the blanket and his adorable pout, he looked more silly than serious.

“I’m not crawling back because he proved himself!” Pidge snapped. “I just had to watch my friend get hurt on a giant projected screen and there was nothing I could do about it. I couldn’t even ask him if he was okay!”

“So you can come back in now and act like everything’s fine and that nothing happened, but I’ve been the one to be there for Lance these past few weeks. I’ve been the one to see how distraught he’s been. I’ve been helping him deal with assholes like James Griffin, and I’ve been there for him when he was upset. Meanwhile, you’ve been sitting on your high horse wearing those fucking buttons that Nyma made,” Keith said, his voice low with anger.

When he sounded like that, Keith sounded downright scary.

“Keith,” Lance said quietly, reaching out to lay a hand on Keith’s forearm.

Pidge’s eyes seemed glued to their movements, before they let out a quiet sigh. “The buttons were stupid,” they agreed. “I felt guilty the whole time I was wearing one, and I only wore it for one night. I just… I don’t know how to explain my actions. But I am sorry.”

Keith relaxed slightly, but only slightly. Like, if he were a wolf, he’d be putting his hackles down.

“I know that you didn’t cheat, Lance. That’s not who you are. It’s who I am,” Pidge commented dryly. “But I shouldn’t project feelings about myself or what I would do on to you, because that isn’t fair. And I really did feel bad about what everyone was saying about you. It was horrible of me that I joined in, and I’ll never forgive myself for doing it. I promise.”

“I’m not going to say that it’s okay,” Lance told them, “because it’s really not. But I’ll consider forgiving you,” Lance told Pidge.


“I’m going to hold you to that,” Lance said. “And just because I’m considering forgiving you doesn’t mean that I have. I’m still really hurt by what you did, but… I also miss you. I don’t want our
friendship to be over because of this stupid tournament. So… I’ll consider forgiving you, but you are going to owe me, like, so many favors,” Lance said.

“How many favors?” Pidge questioned, but Lance could already tell that they were going to accept.

“At least twenty good ones,” Lance informed them.

“Okay, I-”

“And about another thirty small favors. So many favors,” Lance said, wiggling his eyebrows in a joking manner.

Pidge rolled their eyes. “I… fine. Fifty favors. So… we’re okay?”

“Yeah, Pidgy, we’re okay,” Lance said, reaching over to ruffle their hair. “Just don’t do this shit again.”

“I hate it when you call me that,” they said, but they were smiling.

“I now reserve the right to call you Pidgy for the rest of your life,” Lance warned them.

“And I hope you know that I’m sorry, too,” Matt said, leaning forward. “I know that I told you before that I had to side with Pidge, but that wasn't true. I could have stuck up for you, and I should have.”

“I’ll consider forgiving you, too, Matt. But that will cost you fifteen favors,” Lance warned him.

“Deal,” Matt said with an easy grin. “Well, we should leave you to your rest, come on, Pidge.”

Pidge nodded, hopping to their feet. They paused at the foot of Lance’s bed. “You’re really okay?” They asked, their voice small. They sounded so young, sometimes it was easy to forget that Pidge was younger.

“I’m a little sore,” Lance admitted. “But I’ll be okay after some rest. It was pretty brutal.”

“I was so stupid,” Pidge said, coming back to Lance’s side and throwing their arms around his shoulders and giving him a careful hug. “I thought I wanted into the Tournament, but after watching you two compete…” they shuddered slightly. “I’m really glad that I never figured out how to get in. I never should have been mad at you in the first place.”

Lance reached up and ruffled their hair again. “I’m gonna be okay, Pidge.”

“Okay,” Pidge sniffed. “I don’t know how you go in to the Tournament, but whoever forced your name to be selected must really have it out for you. But, damn it, from now on I’m going to be helping you.”

“That’s cheating,” Lance reminded her softly, “outside students aren’t allowed to help the Champions.”

“Well I never had a problem with letting you copy my potions essays,” Pidge said, pulling away and wiping at her nose.

Lance laughed, “Don’t let Professor Iverson hear you saying that,” he warned her.

“I won’t,” Pidge said with a wet chuckle.
“And, hey, Pidge,” Lance said. “When you see Hunk, tell him that we made up. You know how fighting makes him stress out.”

“Is that the first favor?” Pidge joked.

“Sure,” Lance agreed.

“One down, forty-nine to go,” Pidge said, “and then we’re even.”

“And then we’re even,” Lance agreed.

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The hospital wing was cold, Lance thought as he pulled his blanket up higher. That morning, he had been taken to the hospital wing rather than the makeshift infirmary tent so that Madam Pomfrey could finish healing his leg. Keith, Allura, and Lotor had all been dismissed back to their regular dorms: Allura and Lotor hadn’t really been injured to begin with, and Keith’s ribs were fully healed already. According to Madam Pomfrey, bones were easier to heal than flesh and tissue. You just had to snap the bones back into place, she had said, but flesh and tissue were delicate.

Which meant that Lance was alone in the hospital wing for the night.

Which was still better than the bottle of Skele-Gro that Keith had to chug before he was dismissed, so really, Lance wasn’t going to complain about it.

But he’d been spending so much time sleeping off his wounds that now his sleep schedule was thrown off, it was almost two in the morning and he was still wide awake.

Lance reached over towards the table on the left side of his hospital bed, scooping up the navy blue oyster shell that was sitting there and examining it. This thing had to be important for something, right? After all the work that they had done to win it.

It was an oyster shell, right… so it should open?

Lance turned the shell in his hands, trying to pry it open. But it was like someone had superglued the thing shut! There was no way he could force it open with his bare hands.

Maybe… maybe there was some kind of clasp on it?

Lance held the shell up close to his face, twisting and turning it to see if there was any kind of locking mechanism keeping the thing closed.

Nothing.

It just looked like a normal oyster shell.

Well, how was he supposed to get it open then?

Oh, right. Magic.

Lance grabbed his wand from where it had been resting on his small nightstand and pointed it at the oyster, firing off every unlocking spell that he knew (and adding in a few more powerful spells that he thought might force it open for good measure).

Nothing.
Ugh. Lance threw the oyster shell back down onto the nightstand. This was pointless.

Maybe it wasn’t even meant to open. Maybe it was just some stupid prize they had to get to win the first Trial and that was it. That would be his luck, wouldn’t it?

Well, whatever it was, Lance could worry about it in the morning.
The first thing that Lance registered as he walked into the Great Hall the next morning was that everyone was staring at him. But, where before it had been hostile glares and casually-tossed insults, flashing buttons and scowls, today everyone was looking at him with wide-eyed gazes and soft smiles. There was no insults being tossed his way, just calls of congratulations.

Well, that was different.

“Good job at the Trial, Lance!” One of the Gryffindor girls called as he passed, while her friends blushed.

Lance glanced subtly behind him just in case there happened to be some other kid named Lance who had competed in a similarly-named Trial, because there was no way the girl was talking to him.

Except there was no one behind him.

“Um, thanks,” he said, giving her a small, tight smile, before moving towards the Ravenclaw table.

“Hey, Álvarez,” one of his dorm-mates said as Lance sat down at the table beside Romelle, Pidge and Matt already back in their old usual spots on the other side of the table.

“Um, hey,” Lance responded elegantly.

“You were really impressive in the Trial. How’s the leg? Must be a mess, right? I mean, you just got cleared from Madam Pomfrey…” the boy said, looking way too interested in the conversation.

“Oh, it’s fine. A lot better,” Lance said.

“How did you figure out the Baku’s weakness?” One of the girls sitting near Pidge asked. “That was genius, I never would have figured it out. Well, maybe I would have eventually, but it would have taken loads longer.”

“I just… remembered something from my Herbology O.W.L. about Devil’s Snare. I mean, the Baku
was pretty much just a glorified plant but, y’know, with teeth, so...” Lance said, before turning to press his lips to Romelle’s ear. “What is happening?” He hissed. “Why is everyone being so nice to me?”

“I think they were all really impressed by your actions in the Trial,” Romelle whispered back. “You have to admit, it’s a nice change.”

“I don’t trust it,” Lance whispered back, before pulling away.

“A plant, of course,” the Ravenclaw girl nodded. “That makes so much sense.”

“Hey, Lance,” one of the other boys from his dorm spoke up, “what was the spell you used to breathe underwater? It looked like the Bubble Head Charm, that’s what it was, right? Chris and I had a bet going…”

Lance let out a small huff of air. Hadn’t it just been a few days ago that these kids were saying that he was dumb and that he didn’t deserve to be in their house? And now they were acting like they were all best friends? What kind of sick cosmic joke was this?

“Um, yeah, it was the Bubble Head Charm,” Lance answered.

“Thanks, man, you just earned me ten galleons,” the kid said, before turning to someone else, presumably Chris, and demanding their money.

The screeching of owls interrupted the conversations echoing around the Great Hall, and Lance looked up gratefully. He wasn’t sure that he had ever been happier for the mail to arrive. At least this should be some kind of distraction. The owls sailed by overhead, dropping their packages down onto the tables below.

A copy of The Daily Prophet landed in Lance’s eggs.

He wrinkled his nose at the mess, but he picked up the newspaper and shook it out, revealing the front page. The picture caught his eye first, it was all four of the Champions with their backs to the camera, dressed in swimsuits standing at the edge of the wooden pier getting ready to jump into the water.

Great. They had made the front page again.

Lance let his eyes flicker up to the headline, already dreading what he was going to read.

THE TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT’S FIRST TRIAL: AN UNDERWATER ADVENTURE

Defensive spells, shocking alliances, twisted love affairs. This school event had them all.

Written by Rita Skeeter

“Oh god,” Lance groaned, angling the paper so that Romelle could read over his shoulder. “What did she write about now?”

My darling readers, I come to you today from the front lines of the Triwizard Tournament, where I was given the opportunity to watch the First Trial. For those of you who were unable to attend, let me assure you that you missed an absolutely stellar show! But before we get ahead of ourselves, the real fun started before the Trial, when I had a chance to speak to the Champions.
“Of course she had to write about that,” Lance groaned.

Romelle ignored him, so that she could keep reading the article.

Upon my entrance to the tent they were using to get ready in, I found Ravenclaw Champion Lance Álvarez locked in a passionate embrace with a young woman I later learned was named Romelle Pollux, the captain of the Ravenclaw quidditch team and one of Álvarez’s oldest friends. When I questioned the pair about their relationship, both denied that they were romantically involved, and Pollux insisted that she is not interested in a relationship with him or anyone of that variety. However, even fellow Champion Keith Kogane had apparently believed the pair to be in a relationship and seemed surprised to learn that it apparently was not true.

“That bitch!” Romelle spat.

“Seconded,” Lance agreed.

“She’s making me seem like I’m lying about being a lesbian, Merlin! How messed up is that?!” Romelle said loudly.

“It’s messed up,” Lance said, tapping his fingers angrily against the table. “Who does something like that?”

In fact, only Beauxbatons Champion Allura Altea seemed to believe the pair. “I knew you weren’t a couple,” she had said, “but that’s only because Lance hits on me every chance he gets.” Hm. Sounds like Álvarez is quite the ladies man. Could trouble be brewing in paradise? It smells like a love triangle to this author.

“A ladies man? I’ll have you know that both men and women find me irresistible,” Lance sniffed. “And, Ro, I would never cheat on you with Allura. I hope you know that.”

“This is why people think we’re a couple,” Romelle said dryly, eyes widening like she had an epiphany. “Oh, I get it now. I don’t like it. We’re so annoying, we need to stop.”

After I finished speaking with the Champions, I returned to my seat, eager for the show to begin.

“You were kicked out of the tent by Keith, but okay,” Lance muttered.

The Trial got off to an exciting start, with all of the Champions having to find a way to breathe underwater for an extended period of time. Lotor Daibazaal, the Durmstrang Champion, chose to use Gillyweed, while Allura Altea transfigured herself into a shark… or, at least, a portion of herself. It really was quite terrifying. Both Hogwarts Champions chose to use the Bubble Head Charm. Funny, that they both had the same idea. It seems a little suspicious to be a coincidence.

Lance skimmed over the rest of the article. Most of what she was talking about he already knew, how Lotor got attacked by octopi, how Allura tangled with those merpeople in the beginning. She talked about how he and Keith had teamed up, and the sight of his own name made Lance pay more attention to what she was saying.

Hogwarts Champions Álvarez and Kogane proved unlikely allies, teaming up fairly early into the trial. I say unlikely allies given, of course, Álvarez’s muggleborn background and Kogane’s own Galra background. It’s surprising that the son of a prominent Galra member would willingly choose to work with a muggleborn. Is this a political statement on Kogane’s part? Or merely an effort to prove that he can deny his Galra roots? Only time will tell.

Oh god.
“Do you see what she wrote about Keith?” Lance asked, pointing out the portion to Romelle.

“That’s horrible,” Romelle said softly. “I hope he’s okay after seeing this.”

Rita Skeeter then went back to talking about Lotor and Allura for a section of the article, which Lance skipped over. He could read the full thing later, but for now…

Álvarez was the first Champion to fall victim to the hallucinogenic flowers that caused the Champions to fall into a state I’m informed by the Ministry is called “mind swishing”. While in this state, Álvarez was quite out of it, attempting to sacrifice himself to the creature the Champions were battling, an underwater beast known as a Baku. Luckily for him, Kogane showed up just in time to stop Álvarez. After this, the pair was quite… physical with their affection for one another. Perhaps another reason for Kogane’s unnecessarily aggressive behavior towards me when I implied that Álvarez and Pollux were romantically involved.

“Oh, god,” Lance sighed. “What did I do while I was all space-y?”

Romelle smirked. “I have been waiting for you to ask.” She started to giggle, before composing herself once more. “You were all out of it, trying to sacrifice yourself to the Baku and pop your bubble that let you breathe, so Keith grabbed you from behind and you kept twisting around and thrashing in his grip,” Romelle exclaimed, smiling wickedly. “Eventually you saw who was holding you and calmed down. Literally, you got all ‘heart-eyes’ and melted into actual goo in his arms.”

Romelle flopped over dramatically, resting her head on Lance’s shoulders and looking up at him. “Then, apparently, you had the bright idea to wrap your legs around his waist, because, y’know, that happened. And you two stared into each other’s eyes, and then you leaned forward and practically made out with Keith’s neck while he tried to heal you.”

“What?” Lance screeched.

“Okay, so you didn’t actually make out with his neck, but that’s totally what it looked like,” Romelle said, straightening back up in her seat. “Honestly, it’s amazing that you two didn’t just start making out in the middle of that trial. I thought I was gonna die from all the second-hand sexual tension.”

Lance felt himself flush bright red. “Ro!” He hissed.

“Oh, Lance, calm down,” she sighed. “But seriously, the cameras we were watching through weren’t the best, but you were just really giggly and smiley. I’m pretty sure you touched Keith’s hair.”

No.

No.

He did not act like a complete… lovesick idiot while on camera for the entire school to see.

He couldn’t have.

Not, that, he was… y’know, actually lovesick or anything, obviously those flowers really messed with his head.

“Oh, man,” Lance sighed. “So basically I acted like a complete fool… on camera… for the whole school to see.”

“A lovesick fool,” Romelle added helpfully before turning back to the article.
“Even better,” Lance muttered.

The rest of the article was mostly straight-forward, describing how they had defeated the Baku, implying that Keith learned the darker curses he was using from his Galra mother, implying once again that there were romantic feelings between Lance and Keith or Allura and that was why he saved them. Apparently, Rita couldn’t decide which of the two, or three if he counted the bullshit ‘relationship’ Rita was pushing between Romelle and himself, he was in love with.

Lance wasn’t quite as conflicted. Sure, he liked to flirt with Allura, she was pretty, sue him, but that didn’t mean that it meant anything.

It was different with Keith.

“Okay, this is ridiculous,” Lance said, tossing the paper down onto the table. “I need to go find Keith.”

“Okay,” Romelle said, rescuing the paper before anything else happened to it. “What?” She asked, when Lance arched a brow at her. “I’m going to save the front picture for you.”

Lance rolled his eyes. “Of course you are,” he said, as he pushed away from the table.

He leaned over and dropped a kiss to the top of her head, “Thanks, Ro.”

“Stop it,” she told him. “Now I know this is why people think we’re a couple. I’m trying to get a girlfriend, here.”

“Allura already knows you’re single,” Lance said, as he scooped up his bag. “So I think you’re fine.”

“Shut up,” Romelle sputtered, blushing. “You don’t know anything, it’s not like that! We have hardly even spoken outside of class, I definitely do not have a crush, no sir. That’s just crazy. And besides have you seen her?”

“Sure thing, Jan.”

“What does that mean? I’m not Jan, you know this, Lance dammit don’t walk away from me.” Romelle called after him.

Lance turned in the direction of the Gryffindor table, but paused when he realized Keith wasn’t sitting in his normal spot. Weird. Where would the other boy go?

Lance pivoted on his heel, heading off in the direction of the doors instead. Maybe Keith was down in the kitchens having breakfast far, far away from everyone else…

But before he could walk more than five feet he was stopped by a towering figure in Hufflepuff yellow and black.

“Oh, hey, Rax,” Lance said, wincing slightly. *Please don’t pummel me for still being friends with Hunk and Shay.*

“Lance,” the older boy greeted gruffly. “I wanted to… apologize for my previous behavior. It was unwarranted.”

“Oh, uh, thanks,” Lance said, caught off guard. “I appreciate the apology. I wasn’t expecting one, but, um, yeah. Thanks, I guess.”
“And please tell Hunk that I have no concerns about his relationship with my sister.”

Lance nodded. “Um, yeah… okay. I’ll pass that along.”

He slipped around Rax, after quietly excusing himself from the conversation, only to be stopped by a Gryffindor girl who wanted to hear a first-hand account of his battle against the Baku.

And then a Slytherin boy who wanted to know if he had figured out what the shell was yet.

And a Ravenclaw girl who asked him to Hogsmeade that weekend.

(Okay that last one had actually made Lance pause because she was really cute, but he was a man on a mission, dammit! He needed to go find Keith! And none of these fake people who praised him today while hiding their ÁLVAREZ STINKS buttons could stand in his way).

Well, they could literally stand in his way since that’s what most of them were doing. But metaphorically… none of them would stand in his way!

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Turns out, literally standing in someone’s way was a lot more inconvenient than metaphorically standing in their way.

It took Lance almost twenty minutes just to cross the Great Hall.

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It turned out that Keith wasn’t in the kitchens. Or the empty Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. Or Shiro’s office. Or the library. In fact, Lance had searched pretty much the whole castle and he couldn’t find Keith anywhere.

He was just about to give up when he literally crashed into the older boy on his way back to the Ravenclaw dorms.

“Keith!” Lance exclaimed, reaching out and using Keith’s shoulders to steady him. “I’ve been looking all over for you!”

Keith blinked at him. “Oh, hey, Lance. Sorry, I was thinking. And the Astronomy tower is a good place for that.”

“Because you read The Daily Prophet?” Lance asked, wrinkling his nose, falling into step beside Keith.

Keith nodded. “Yeah. Did you see what she wrote about my mom again? I just… can’t believe that woman,” he groaned.

“I know,” Lance agreed. “Like, your mom is super nice. I don’t know why Rita Skeeter keeps trying to make her out to be some kind of villain.”

“Exactly!” Keith agreed, reaching up to fiddle with his red tie. “Anyways, why were you looking for me? Aren’t you supposed to be on your way to Potions right now?”

Lance shrugged. “I just wanted to make sure that you were okay. When I read that article at Breakfast… I dunno, I just wanted to come check on you.”

“Oh,” Keith said, blushing faintly. “That’s, uh, nice of you. Lance.”
And Lance felt his traitorous heart pound in his chest. He liked the way that Keith said his name like that. Like it was its own sentence.

“Yeah, yeah, no problem,” Lance said, reaching up to rub at the back of his neck.

The pair fell silent for a minute, but Lance was never one to let silences linger so he started babbling again before he could stop himself.

“I mean, according to Rita Skeeter I’m not a very nice person. Did you see that whole section of the article where she basically said that Ro was lying about being a lesbian and is in love with me but that I’m, like, cheating on her with Allura, and cheating on Allura with you? I mean come on,” Lance said animatedly, waving his hands around. “I would never cheat on anyone like that!”

Keith barked out a laugh, seeming startled by the noise coming from himself. “Yeah, I saw that part.”

“I mean, I’m surprised that Rita Skeeter hasn’t tried to imply that Lotor is in love with me since apparently everyone else is. Ro, Allura, you. Various girls at Hogwarts. I mean, I know that my dashing good looks and winning personality are a great combo, but not even I am vain enough to think that you’re all in love with me.”

“Right, yeah, of course not,” Keith said, his voice quieter. “That would be crazy.”

“And I mean, Allura and Romelle are obviously interested in one another, I don’t know how Rita Skeeter managed to miss that one,” Lance barreled on.

“Well at least everyone loves you,” Keith countered. “According to Rita Skeeter, we’re only friends because I’m using you to, like, improve the public’s opinion of me or whatever.”

“Which is crazy!” Lance agreed. “Obviously our friendship grew out of our rivalry which had existed for years before this stupid Triwizard Tournament thing.”

“Exactly!” Keith said, throwing his hands up into the air. “And you’re, like, my only friend beside Shiro. So I mean, why would I use my only friend just to, like, impress the public? Or convince them that I’m not a fucking Gal- whatever. I don’t even care about them!”

“Hey, buddy, I hate to break it to you but I don’t think I’m your only friend anymore. By being my friend, you basically get stuck with Ro, Hunk, Shay, Pidge, and Matt by extension. You’re now officially a part of a friend group.”

“Oh Merlin,” Keith said with an overdramatic sigh.

“But, hey, being my friend is all the rage now, I hear,” Lance continued.

Keith blinked at him. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, it’s crazy! All those people that were telling me how much they hate me and how dumb I am and all that stuff last week? They’re all dying to talk to me and congratulate me. It’s giving me whiplash. But at least the ÁLVAREZ STINKS buttons are a thing of the past.”

“You’re kidding me,” Keith said dryly.

“I wish. It’s a little overwhelming,” Lance admitted. “I didn't like being a social outcast, but I’m not sure I like the fame, either. Everything was so much easier last year.”
Keith nodded. “When all we had to worry about was winning the Quidditch Cup.”

“Simpler times,” Lance said. “Speaking of winning… have you figured out how to open the oyster shell yet?”

Keith rolled his eyes. “We’re actually going to compete against each other in this trial. That means we’re not working together anymore,” he reminded Lance. “You’re actually supposed to try and beat me this time.”

“Well I beat you without trying last time, so this time you must really be going down,” Lance teased.

“You had the advantage of this trial being underwater, but I’m guessing that the next trial will be on an even playing field,” Keith said with a smirk.

Lance skidded to a stop. “How do you know that?” He asked, but Keith just kept walking. “Hey! Keith!” He called after him. “Did you figure out the shell?” Lance took off into a jog, trailing after Keith. “Come on, Keith, tell me!”

Keith just shook his head, glancing back over his shoulder towards Lance. “No way,” he said with a grin.

“I thought that you don’t like riddles, Keith. What are you going to do without me if there’s another one? Huh, bet you haven’t thought about that!”

“I guess I’ll just have to figure it out,” Keith replied. “Besides, we don’t even know for sure that we have to get them open, seeing as we haven’t actually been told anything yet.”

“You’re no fun,” Lance informed him.

“Stop badgering me and go to Potions. You’re going to make me late for Transfiguration.”

“Nerd!” Lance said, but he slowed to a stop. Keith was right, he really did have to get to Potions before Professor Iverson took away all of their house points.

Lance pressed his quill down onto the sheet of parchment in from of him. The library was quiet, it was mid-afternoon on a Friday so all of his classes were finished and he could save all of his homework for Sunday night.

It was the perfect time to write his letter home telling them everything that was going on.

But he couldn’t find the words.

How do you tell your parents, your siblings, your little nieces and nephews ‘oh hey I might not come home from school this year because I’m competing in a series of deadly trials which may or may not actually kill me and very nearly have already’.

Dear Mamá and Papá

I’m sorry that I haven’t written in a while. I know I promised over the summer that I would write more often this year, but things have been really crazy. I’ve been studying like crazy for my N.E.W.T. exams next year, and I even got asked to take private lessons with the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Shirogane, and one of the other top students!

Uh, things have been good other than that. I’ve been hanging out with Romelle a lot. Pidge and I
got into a little fight but we made up! And everything is fine now. Maybe. Hopefully. Man I’m tired
Mamá, I wish I could come home. Hunk and Shay are still together, and are still just as cute. They
both said hi by the way, and Hunk is after your cheesecake recipe for some reason. And I’m in a
deadly tournament that may or may not cost me my life!

Anyway, how are you all? How did Nadia’s recital go? I know in my heart she was amazing and I
want you to tell her that because I may not make it back home alive to tell her myself. Did Marco
end up getting a second date? I bet he didn’t and I bet it was funny and I bet Luis owes me money
now because I bet I won our bet. And how is my favorite boy Sylvio doing? Is he doing okay in
school and getting his homework done? He’s such a freaking good dude. Veronica! How did your
conference at the Garrison go, and did you get that promotion? I’m sure you did, you’re the
best communications officer they’ve ever seen! I miss you so much Ronnie, and I know you don’t like
the owls because they’re a bit creepy and it’s weird to get an owl around the Garrison, but I’d love
to hear from you more.

I need to write to you guys more. I should write to you guys more. I wanted to write you guys more
but I’m so afraid that you’ll think I’m an idiot like everyo

… okay there’s a reason I haven’t written to you in awhile.

The truth is, the school is putting on a special event this year called the Triwizard Tournament. It’s
basically three events called Trials where three four kids compete to try and win the Triwizard Cup.
Two other schools are here for the competition, Durmstrang Institute and Beauxbatons Academy of
Magic. Then there are two Champions from Hogwarts competing. Even though there was only
supposed to be one. And I’m one of them. Surprise! I didn’t know how to tell you because the Trials
can be really scary and dangerous, I didn’t want to worry any of you. We just had the first Trial last
week, though, and everything turned out okay! I got a few… minor injuries to my leg and arm, but
Madam Pomfrey fixed me up and I was out of the Hospital Wing in no time! Tell Sylvio that I’ll let
him see the scar when I get home. I actually ended up winning first place in the trial, which was
pretty cool! I’ll tell you all about it in my next letter, but there were mermaids and a mind controlling
monster, so that was...yeah an experience.

Now that the first trial is done, there are only two to go. I promise that I’ll be more careful and try
not to get hurt anymore. And I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you about the Tournament back when I first
submitted my name. I never thought in a million years that I would actually be chosen, and once I
was I thought that it was some kind of mistake. You see, the other Hogwarts Champion, Keith is
really the one who is supposed to be competing... not me. But once the Goblet of Fire chose me, I
didn’t have a choice.

But then I was talking to Keith and he told me how his mom came to watch him compete and he was
wondering if you guys were coming and I just... I knew that I had to tell you the truth. It was awful
of me to keep it from you for this long.

I’m really, really sorry.

Your loving son,

Lance

P.S. please don’t ground me for not telling you, I promise I only did it because I didn’t want to
worry you!

Lance set his quill down on the table next to his letter. It wasn’t perfect, but it would have to do. Oh
god, his mamá was going to kill him the next time he was in Cuba.
That is, if the Triwizard Tournament didn’t kill him first.

Lance swallowed heavily.

“Hey, Lance,” Pidge greeted, dropping down into the seat at the table across from him.

“Oh, hey, Pidge,” Lance replied, trying to fill his voice with fake cheer.

“Hey, is everything okay?” Pidge asked, frowning.

“Uh, yeah,” Lance replied with a shrug. “I was just writing a letter to my family.”

“Oh,” Pidge pursed their lips. “And it’s making you miss home? It’s okay to be homesick, Lance.”

Lance chuckled. “I’m always homesick. No, uh, this one was hard because I had to tell them that I’m participating in the Triwizard Tournament.”

“You haven’t told them yet?” Pidge asked, their eyes bugging out of their head.

“…. no,” Lance admitted.

“Lance,” Pidge scolded gently. “They’re your family. They deserved to know.”

“I know that,” Lance said with a huff. “I just wasn’t sure how to tell them. I don’t want to worry them, you know? And magic freaks Mamá out enough anyway, she’s always worried that I’m going to, like, lose control of a fire spell and burn my eyebrows off or something. I don’t know, it was just easier not to face them.”

“So what made you change your mind?” Pidge asked, never one to let something go without digging further into it.

“Well I was talking to Keith about his mom and—”

“Ohhhhhh,” Pidge cut him off, wiggling their eyebrows suggestively. “So Keith managed to talk some common sense into you.”

“Shut up,” Lance told them, reaching across the table to flick them in the forehead. “Stop doing that… thing with your eyebrows.”

Pidge wiggled their eyebrows again in open rebellion.

“You want to fill me in on when you and Keith got all buddy-buddy?” They asked with a smirk.

“It’s not like that,” Lance insisted, although he could feel himself blushing. “We’re just friends.”

“Does he know that you’ve been in love with him since Fourth Year?” Pidge asked, innocently inspecting their nails.

“Wait, what?!” Lance screeched. “How do you know about that.”

“Well I didn’t know for sure… but thanks for the confirmation,” Pidge said with a smirk.

Lance groaned in frustration, dropping his head down onto the table.

Pidge would never let him hear the end of this. They would lord it over him and probably find some way to use it as blackmail to their advantage. That’s what Pidge did best.
Wait.

“Hey,” Lance said, picking his head up off the table. “You owe me, like, fifty favors.”

Pidge nodded slowly… carefully.

“Well here’s the first one,” Lance said. “You are never, ever allowed to use the fact that I have a crush on Keith against me at all.”

Pidge pouted. “That’s no fun.”

“Fifty favors,” Lance reminded them sternly. “Because you were an asshole.”

“Technically it’s only forty-nine, cause you used your first one the day of the trial, but I understand that you’re embellishing for dramatic effect. Okay fine, I won’t use it against you. So two down, forty-eight to go.”

Lance let out a sigh of relief. So he had to use one of his favors Pidge owed him to ensure their silence, it would definitely be worth it given how Pidge had reacted when they first found out that Lance had a crush on Nyma. Or how Pidge had reacted once they heard about his Hogsmeade date with Nyma where he ended up tied to a tree. He would never get to live that one down.

“So why are you hiding all alone in the library, then, anyways?” Pidge asked, stealing a scrap of parchment from Lance.

Lance let out a quiet huff of air. “The common room is… a bit much right now. Everyone keeps coming up to me and telling me how proud they are of me and how I’m so smart for figuring out the first trial. A few weeks ago, those same kids were calling me dumb and saying that I don’t even deserve to go to school here, you included. I’d rather just avoid all of it.”

Pidge nodded slowly. “They are behaving drastically different than they did before you entered the contest, Matt and I noticed. But, Lance, that doesn’t have to mean that it’s a bad thing. I mean, look at it this way, people were upset when you were chosen because they didn’t think that you deserved the Champion’s spot over Keith, right? Well, Lance, you proved yourself in that trial. No one can deny how good you are anymore. All this attention doesn’t have to be a bad thing.”

“You’re right, partially,” Lance admitted. “But it sucks because I shouldn’t have had to prove myself in the first place.”

“I’m always right,” Pidge said, pushing their glasses up further on their nose.

“Usually!” Pidge amended. “I’m usually always right!”

“Attention, Students,” Headmaster Holt said towards the end of dinner later that night. “We have a few announcements tonight regarding the Triwizard Tournament,” as he spoke he gestured beside him, where Adam was standing with his hands clasped behind his back. “We wanted to give the Champions time to rest and recover before announcing the date of the next trial. The Second Task will occur on February twenty-fourth, giving the Champions plenty of time to figure out how to open their oyster shell from the First Task and reveal the clue inside.”

“I told Keith we had to figure out how to get that shell open,” Lance hissed to Pidge.
“However,” Headmaster Holt continued, “we also have some more news that we think you all might find exciting.”

“Given the events of the Triwizard Tournament that are occurring this year,” Adam said, clearing his voice with a slight cough, “we would highly prefer for everyone to remain here at Hogwarts over winter break. The Beauxbatons students and Durmstrang students will be staying as well so that all three schools can attend the Yule Ball here on Christmas night. The Yule Ball is a longstanding tradition of the Triwizard Tournament and will be open to Fourth Year students and above. However, a younger student may attend if accompanied by an older student. The ball is traditionally opened by the Champions and their partners in the Champions’ Waltz, and Headmaster Holt has assured me he will be holding dance lessons here at the school so that everyone learns the proper steps.” Adam glanced over at Headmaster Holt. “I believe that concludes our announcements.”

“Yes, thank you, Adam,” Headmaster Holt said, clapping his hands together. “So please, write home, order some dancing robes, and find yourself a date because the Yule Ball is in just under a month!”

“A ball!” Romelle squealed, “This is so exciting!”

“And another puzzle to solve,” Lance groaned. “The ball should be fun, though! I haven’t had an excuse to get all dressed up and party since my sister Rachel’s Quinceañera the summer before our fifth year.”

“It kind of sucks that we can’t go home for the Holidays, though,” Pidge added with a frown.

“Oh,” Lance said, the realisation that he wouldn’t get to see his family for Christmas this year slowly sinking in. He had never not spent Christmas with his family. Christmas was his one chance during the school year to go home, have his mamá’s cooking, play guitar and sing with Marco, go to the mall with Rachel, watch cheesy sitcoms with Veronica, play with Sylvio and Nadia and all the new toys they got for Christmas, visit with Luís and Lisa, go fishing with his Papá.

The family always, always got together on Christmas morning to go to mass, no matter what else anyone had going on, before going back for a big lunch that Mamá had probably spent days preparing.

The family always made sure to get together on Christmas.

How could Lance just… not go home?

“Are you okay, Lance?” Romelle whispered.

Lance nodded, plastering a fake smile onto his face. “Yeah,” he said, although he could tell that it sounded strained. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Romelle didn’t look convinced, but she let the subject drop.

“I mean, dances are always kind of lame, though? Right?” Pidge said. “Like, they always have cheesy music and bad outfits.”

“Dances are fun!” Matt protested from beside his sister. “They’re a time for you to let loose and hang out with your friends. Dad is probably doing this so that we all bond with the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students.”

“Well,” Pidge wrinkled their nose. “I don’t know if I’m going to go.”
“Suit yourself,” Matt shrugged. “But you’ll miss your chance to see The Weird Sisters live. Dad already booked them to play the dance.”

“Seriously?!” Pidge exclaimed. “How did he do that?”

Matt shrugged. “I have no idea.”

“Who are The Weird Sisters?” Lance asked Romelle quietly.

“They’re a wizarding band,” Romelle whispered back. “Punk rock. Very popular. I’m surprised Headmaster Holt was able to book them.”


“So who are you going to go with?” Romelle asked, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively.

“I don’t know yet,” Lance said, shoving at her shoulder lightly.

“Uh huh,” Romelle said, not sounding very convinced.

“Well who are you going with?” Lance countered.

Romelle blushed. “I don’t know yet,” she said.

“Uh huh,” Lance mocked.

Romelle rolled her eyes. “I guess this means that I need to order some dress robes,” she said.

“Oh, yeah, I guess I’m going to need a suit,” Lance mused. “I’ll have to write home again.”

“You wrote home?” Romelle asked, turning her full attention to Lance. “Did you tell them about the Triwizard Tournament?”

Lance nodded.

“Only because Keith told him to,” Pidge said, before Matt’s elbow slammed into her side.

Lance whipped around to level a glare at them.

“Right. 48 favors.” Pidge nodded. “Forget I said anything.”

“Hey, Matt,” Lance said. “Here’s your first favor for me. If Pidge ever, ever says anything about Keith and I make sure to shut them up.”

Matt nodded, ruffling his little sister’s hair. “Deal,” he said.

“You’re so touchy, Lance,” Romelle teased, resting her chin in her hand. “Is there something you want to talk about?”

Lance crossed his arms over his chest. “Nope. Definitely not. Oh look, I think it’s time to go back to the dorms. I have a new puzzle to try and figure out, after all. I’ll see you all later,” Lance said, pushing away from the table and scooping up his school bag from the floor.

“You have until February to figure it out!” Pidge called after him, but Lance ignored them.

It probably wouldn’t hurt to get a head start on the puzzle, right?
Especially since he was on his own this time.
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Summary

Letters upon letters fly into Hogwarts, as Lance tells his family about the tournament. A request a declined, an enemy is unchanged and some dress robes are mocked.

Chapter Notes

Hey y'all, sorry this update is a day late! It's my busiest time of year right now, with the upcoming holidays and the last few weeks of school. Don't accuse Cait, it's not her fault for the late upload, and she would like to not be associated with my "mess" jk jk jk. Just a little warning, there is some spanish in used in this chapter, and neither Cait nor I are fluent in the language, so if there are any mistakes... blame google translate. (And let us know so that we can fix them!) As always, thank you for your kind words and encouragement! If you enjoy this chapter, please feel free to leave a comment or kudos, as they always make our week!

- slowklancing

“Headmaster, please,” Lance begged. “I have to go home for Christmas.”

“I’m really sorry, Lance, but it’s the rules of the Triwizard Tournament. The Champions are required to attend the ball and perform the opening waltz,” Headmaster Holt said with a frown.

“But I always spend Christmas with my family, it’s, like, the only holiday that we really care about! My parents will kill me if I can’t come home!”

“Lance, this isn’t meant to be a punishment,” Headmaster Holt said softly, patting Lance’s shoulder. “The Yule Ball is supposed to be a celebration, a break from the stress of the Triwizard Tournament. It’s a time for the three schools to come together.”

“I don’t care!” Lance said loudly. “I just want to go home.”

“Lance,” Headmaster Holt said softly.

“You can’t let me. I know, I heard,” Lance sighed, throwing his hands up into the air.

“I wish there was something I could do,” Headmaster Holt said.

Yeah, Lance thought bitterly, I wish there was something you could do, too.

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“Oh no,” Lance swallowed heavily a few days later at breakfast in the Great Hall.

“What is it?” Pidge asked, tearing their nose out of the autobiography on Newt Scamander that they
“I got a letter from home,” Lance said, rubbing his palms against his pants. He could already feel sweat forming on his brow.

“That’s good news, right?” Pidge asked, their eyebrows crinkling together.

“It says on the return address that it’s from Veronica,” Lance said with a wince. “I almost don’t want to open this.”

Still, he tore the envelope open and slid out the sheet of paper that was neatly folded inside.

Veronica’s neat script filled the paper, but the lines were dark like she had pressed down too hard on the pen. And as if that wasn’t enough of a warning sign, parts of it were underlined with thick black ink. And it was short. So short. Oh, he was so dead.

Querido Leandro,

*No puedo creererte!* *If it were not for the laws of this land, the fact that you’re over four-thousand miles away and across an ocean, and the fact that you’re in a fucking magic school... I would have murdered you.*

*Con amor,*

*Veronica*

“Oh she is so mad,” Lance said in a low voice. “Three lines. She only sent me three lines. *Three.* For Veronica, that’s like... the equivalent of responding to a text with ‘k’.”

“A text?” Romelle asked, arching a brow. “Is that something to do with the fellytone or whatever? I think you’ve mentioned it before?”

Lance waved one of his hands in dismissal. He didn’t need to deal with Romelle’s dismal understanding of muggles. “Don’t worry about it. And she used my full name. Normally only Mamá uses my full name. This is *not* good.”

He let his eyes skim over Veronica’s letter again. It didn’t sound any less angry the second time. Maybe it was a good thing he wasn’t going home for Christmas, because he was pretty sure that Veronica might *actually* kill him if he did. And she would know how to hide a body.

Oh, fuck, he had to tell them that he couldn’t go home for Christmas.

Lance dropped his face down into his hands.

“I didn’t know your full name was Leandro,” Romelle commented, and Lance peeked through his fingers just in time to see her glancing at the letter still sitting on the table.

“Oh, uh, yeah. Everyone just calls me Lance, though. They have for as long as I can remember.”

Romelle hummed thoughtfully.

“I better answer this,” Lance said, pulling out a scrap of parchment and a quill. “The longer I wait the angrier she’ll get.”

Lance pressed the tip of his quill down to the parchment. Once again, he found himself not really knowing where to start.
Dear Veronica,

I’m really sorry that I didn’t tell any of you. Is Mamá upset? Tell her not to worry. I never want to make her worry. I know that you’re probably really mad at me for not telling you because we always tell each other everything, but I didn’t know how to tell you about this. You’re all so far away. There’s really nothing that you can do about it, so it seemed cruel to tell you about it when there was nothing you could do to help. But I know that was stupid of me.

I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but… there’s more. They just told us that there’s going to be a celebration here called the Yule Ball. Which means the Champions (like me) aren’t allowed to come home for Christmas.

And I know, I know, that I’ve never missed the holidays before. Not in all my years away at school. But I don’t have a choice. The Champions apparently have to open the dance with some kind of waltz. Anyways, it doesn’t really matter. Don’t worry about telling Mamá and Papá, I’m going to write them another letter later, but I wanted to answer you.

Ronnie, I know you’re mad that I didn’t tell you… but I was so scared. I am so scared. And I couldn’t tell Mamá and Papá that. I just couldn’t. Don’t you remember how scared Mamá was about me going to school here in the first place? But Ronnie, we agreed a long time ago that we were never going to lie to one another.

Don’t tell anyone else about this, okay? Pinky swear? But the trials are even worse than I let on. And the truth is, I got really hurt. And I could get really hurt again. And there’s nothing that I can do about it. Once the Goblet of Fire chooses you, you have to compete. I’m not totally alone, though. Two of the other Champions (Keith and Allura) are actually really nice and even though we’re technically competing against one another, we have each other’s backs.

Please don’t be mad.

Lance (Leandro)

P.s since when do you call me that, Ronnie? You sound way too much like Mamá.

Lance set his quill back down, waving the parchment through the air so that the ink would dry faster.

“I’m going to take this up to the owlery,” he said to Pidge and Romelle.

Pidge didn’t even look up from their book.

“Want company?” Romelle asked.

Lance shook his head. “Nah, you’re fine. Finish your breakfast.”

Romelle nodded.

Lance pushed away from the table, grabbing his bag, but he was careful to keep his letter in front of him so that the ink wouldn’t smear.

“Where are you going so fast, Álvarez?” A voice called out, and Lance winced inwardly.

Not again.

Not him.

Anyone but that fucktard James Griffin.
“Just, you know, places to go, people to see, Griffin,” Lance said.

The Slytherin stopped halfway through the doorway to the Great Hall, effectively cutting off Lance’s path.

“What’s this?” James asked, snatching the paper from Lance’s hand.

“Hey! Give that back, asshole!” Lance said, reaching for the paper.

But James held it up high enough into the air that he could read it, using his other arm to hold Lance back. “Aw, who’s Veronica, Álvarez?” James asked.

“She’s my sister, dumbass,” Lance snapped, finally succeeding in snatching the letter back from James. It helped that he had just under two inches on the other boy.

“Aww does little Lance have to write home and tell them all about how he won the trial?” James asked, his voice sickly sweet.

“You don’t even know what you’re talking about,” Lance said, trying to shoulder past him.

As if out of thin air, Ryan Kinkade materialized behind James, giving one of his usual monosyllabic grunts.

“You know,” Lance said, taking half a step back, “two against one really isn’t a fair fight.”

The pair ignored him.

“You know, Álvarez, if you knew what was good for you, you would just give up. Stop trying so hard to prove that muggleborns are just as good as everyone else and take yourself out of the Tournament.”

“I already tried that,” Lance snapped. “They won’t let me. If the Goblet of Fire chooses you, then you have to compete. Now, if you’ll excuse me,” Lance sidestepped around the pair.

Both Griffin and Kinkade watched him as he passed, but made no move to stop him.

Well, at least some people’s opinion of him hadn’t changed.

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“Hey, Lance,” Romelle said the next morning, as the owls flew by overhead and dropped off letters. “Isn’t it a bit soon for Veronica to have replied to your letter?”

“Yeah, I just sent Kaltenecker off yesterday. He probably hasn’t even reached Cuba yet,” Lance replied a bit absentmindedly. “Why?”

“Because another letter addressed to you just landed in my butter,” Romelle said, gingerly picking up the letter and passing it over to him.

Lance turned the letter over in his hands, sure enough it was addressed to him, Veronica’s name in the corner.

It’s a follow up letter, Lance realised. Veronica probably realised how harsh her other letter had sounded and written an apology.

He slid the letter open, spreading the parchment out in front of him.
It was… not an apology letter.

Mi querido hermano, Leandro,

So that last letter was a little bit brash and a little bit short and a lot angry. And yes, Mamá has shouted at me relentlessly since I wrote it for swearing. So, with that in mind, let me elaborate a little. You are a punk ass bitch and Mamá can’t stop me from writing this since I’m at work and you can bet your ass that if I was magic, I would make this into one of those letters you told us about that shout at you because seriously, WHAT THE FUCK LANCE YOU ABSOLUTE IDIOT.

First of all, how dare you enter a magical tournament where you may or may not actually die? What were you fucking thinking? And then to write like everything is normal and fine and you can just ask about my job and Nadia’s recital and Marco’s date? FUCK THAT.

Mamá and Papá have no idea what to do with you right now. If they could, I’m fairly certain they would fly over to the U.K. just to drag you home. Luís has no idea what to tell the kids. Nadia and Sylvio ask after you all the time. What is he going to tell them if you don’t come home? But we aren’t even going to talk about that, because you are GOING TO COME HOME.

I don’t care how you do it, Leandro, but you are COMING HOME. Do you hear me?

It’s not even a question.

You’re coming home so that I can kill you myself, Leandro Miguel Diaz-Álvarez. Mark my word.

Te veremos pronto,

Veronica

“Oh man,” Lance said, letting his head drop down onto the table in front of him. “She hasn’t even gotten my letter about not coming home for Christmas yet.”

“I’m so sorry, Lance,” Romelle said quietly. “I know how much you were looking forward to going home.”

“I just…” Lance coughed to clear his throat slightly. “I miss them,” he admitted.

Romelle frowned, laying her head on his shoulder. “We’ll have a really nice Christmas, Lance,” she said. “I promise.”

“It isn’t the same,” Lance said quietly, folding up Veronica’s letter and slipping it into the pocket of his school robes. There was no use answering it, not when his other letter to her was already on its way, not when he was sure to hear back from her in a few days yelling at him for not coming home for Christmas.

“I know it isn’t,” Romelle agreed. “I miss my family too.”

“You never talk about them,” Lance said.

Romelle picked her head up off of his shoulder. “There isn’t much to say, really. My parents died when I was young. I have a little brother who was born a squib and isn’t allowed to attend Hogwarts. I miss him. All of the time.”

“You have a brother?” Lance asked. “Tell me about him.”

“His name is Bandor. He loves magic, but, since he can’t use it himself, has turned to muggle
“I have two brothers,” Lance said. “And two sisters.”

“What are their names?” Romelle asked with a soft smile.

“My eldest brother is Luís. He’s married and has two kids, Nadia and Sylvio. They’re adorable. Then there’s Marco, he’s the favorite child. My dad named him after my mom. Her name is Marcia. My older sister is named Veronica. Obviously,” Lance said, patting his pocket where the letter from his sister was. “And I have a twin sister named Rachel.”

“I didn’t know you were a twin,” Romelle said, poking his cheek.

“I guess I don’t talk about my family a lot, either,” Lance commented.

“You miss them,” Romelle said, dropping her head back down to his shoulder.

“Yeah,” Lance agreed. “I miss them.”

“It’s weird being the only wizard in a muggle family. They don’t understand a lot of it. And they never got used to the owls. So it makes it hard to write to them. They don’t get what magic is about, or understand the politics of the wizarding world. They think it’s fake, half the time. And I’m four thousand miles away. I can’t wait ‘til we learn how to apparate. Sometimes, I think back to when Professor Blaytz showed up at my house just after my eleventh birthday to let my family know that all the weird shit that happened around me was actually because I’m a wizard. As soon as the words came out of his mouth, my parents knew that I was never going to have a normal life, that my future was never going to be the one they had wanted and planned for me. I don’t think that they’re over that. I mean, how do you get over that? And they’re scared, which I understand. But I wish that they tried to understand my new world instead of just wanting me to come back home and act like nothing’s changed, you know?” Lance said, the words all coming out in a rush.

Romelle hummed softly.

“Nevermind,” Lance said, “it’s stupid.”

“It’s not stupid,” Romelle said, reaching over and finding Lance’s hand under the table, tangling their fingers together. She squeezed Lance’s hand softly. “Bandor is the same way, but opposite. Growing up, it was hard for him to be the only non-magical one in a magical family. So, I get it. And it isn’t stupid.”

“Thanks, Ro,” Lance said.

Romelle smiled softly at him. “I know it’s not the same, but we’re kind of your family, too, Lance,” she said, gesturing across the table to where Pidge and Matt were playing a game of Exploding Snap. “And you have Hunk and Shay,” Romelle continued. And even Keith too, Lance added silently.

Maybe Romelle was right. Sure, it sucked that he couldn’t go home to see his family for Christmas, but he still had his friends. They would have a nice holiday, even if it wasn’t the kind that Lance had been looking forward to.

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Romelle followed his gaze up towards the ceiling, where the usual flood of owls fluttered by,
dropping off presents and letters before heading back to the owlery.

“Is that Kaltenecker?” She asked, pointing towards the brown barn owl.

“You named your owl Kaltenecker?” Keith, who had sat at the Ravenclaw table, along with Hunk and Shay, that morning asked.

Lance nodded. “Yeah, and look! He has two letters with him. Did Ronnie really have to send two different letters yelling at me?”

Kaltenecker flew by overhead, dropping the two letters he had been struggling under the weight of. Luckily, since Lance and Romelle had seen the owl coming, they managed to snag both of the letters before they landed in any of the food.

Romelle handed the letter she grabbed from the air and pressed it into Lance’s open hand.

Lance flipped them over, checking the addresses. Sure enough, one of them was addressed from Veronica. The other, though, was addressed from his parents. “Oh no,” Lance swallowed. “It’s Mamá and Papá. Oh, I think I would have rather had both letters be from Ronnie.”

“You finally told your family about being in the Triwizard Tournament?” Keith asked, although from the tone of his voice it wasn’t really a question.

“Dude,” Hunk said disapprovingly, tearing his attention away from the game of Wizarding Chess he was playing with Pidge. “You hadn’t told your parents about the Tournament yet?”

Lance nodded. “And so far all that Veronica has done is yell at me.”

“She does it ‘cause she loves you, man,” Hunk said, reaching over the table to pat Lance’s shoulder.

“Well, I know,” Lance said, “but that doesn’t make “I’ll kill you if you don’t die first” any easier to hear.”

“She doesn’t mean it, man,” Hunk said. “She’s just overprotective.”

“I guess, buddy,” Lance said. “Big sisters, right?”

His friends all stared blankly at him.

“I’m the only one with an older sister? Seriously?” Lance asked, arching a brow.

“Only child,” Keith said with a nod.

“I just have Matt,” Pidge said, pointing towards their brother.

“I have an older brother too,” Hunk offered with a shrug.

“Just Bandor,” Romelle said with a nod.

“Seriously?!” Lance said again. “I’m the youngest of five. My own twin sister was born thirty minutes before I was. And she never lets me forget it.”

“Luís, Veronica, you and Rachel,” Hunk said, counting on his fingers. “That’s four.”

“You forgot Marco,” Keith told him.
“Right, right,” Hunk said with a quick nod. “Wow. Five kids. That’s a lot.”

Lance hid a smile behind his hands. He didn’t talk about his family that often, it was nice to hear that his friends actually listened well enough to remember their names.

“Are you going to open the letters?” Romelle asked him, drawing Lance’s attention back down to the two letters he was still holding.

“I guess I better, yeah,” Lance said, flipping the top letter over and tearing it open, sliding the sheet of paper out from inside.

Querido Lance,

So Mamá found out about that last letter somehow. Are you sure that you didn’t get your magical abilities from her? Well, she really tore into me for being so rough with you, but she’s right. I need to write you a proper letter. Because the truth is, I miss you too, a lot. And we just got your reply and we really need to talk, don’t we?

I knew that there was more to your injury than you were letting on in your letter to Mamá and Papá, so let me start by asking you if you’re okay. What happened? And I don’t want any vague responses. You are going to send me another letter that is a detailed description of everything that happened at this “Trial”. You said you spent a few nights in the Hospital Wing… how many nights? Can’t they normally just fix everything up with magic? What the hell happened to you, hermanito?

As for missing Christmas… Lance, we don’t care about missing Christmas. We just miss you. We just want you to come home. But we understand that there isn’t anything that you can do about it. So write more, I promise I’ll write back. And I won’t even get mad when Kaltenecker shows up at work and scares the shit out of my co-workers. Although the look on Admiral Sanda’s face is just, priceless, every time.

I’m glad that you have people looking out for you, at least, and helping you out with these trials. Keith and Allura? Send them my thanks. Also… isn’t Keith the guy with the mullet that you’ve been ranting about for years now? The guy you always said was your ‘rival’? You’re such a little mentiroso, Leandro. Es tierno? You can’t leave your big sister hanging like this. You know how much I love to gossip with you.

Te echo de memoria,

Veronica

P.S. write Mamá and Papá soon. They miss you.

Lance smiled down at the letter from his sister, although he felt himself blush as he read the final paragraph.

“You’re smiling,” Romelle commented. “She’s not yelling at you anymore?”

Lance folded up the letter and slipped it into his school bag. “Not really, that was actually a pretty nice letter for Ronnie.”

“So what did she say?” Keith asked.

“None of your business, mullet.” Lance teased.

Keith blinked at him. “You can’t just read a letter right in front of us and then not tell us what it
“Watch me,” Lance said with a smirk as he slid the second letter open.

**Leandro, Mijo**

*Your Papá and I wanted to write to you after we heard about the letter you sent to Veronica... and after the first letter you sent to us. We should have known that something was going on with you, Mijo, you never wait that long to write to us. Veronica tells us that you did not want to worry us, but, Leandro, you know that I always worry about you - whether you are here in Cuba where I can keep an eye on you or whether you are many miles away in the U.K. where I have to trust that you can take after yourself.*

*You worry that we will be mad at you for keeping the truth from us, I can tell from your letter. You always write the way you talk. You think we cannot read what you are saying beneath thick black lines of ink? We know there are things you are not telling us, Mijo. But your Papá and I are not mad at you, we love you far too much for that. How can we be mad at you when Veronica tells us you had to spend nights in the Hospital Wing after the trial, when we know you were in pain and we could do nothing to help you. Your hermana is upset with you for not telling us the truth, I know that she writes you angry letters that she thinks I won’t find out about, but Veronica has always been a girl filled with enfado.*

*Marco and Luís both said to tell you that they know you’ll be okay. You won the first trial, they said, our little brother is going to win the Tournament.*

*We have decided not to tell Sylvio and Nadia, they’re too young to understand what you are going through, and Lisa sees no reason to worry the children until we have more information. Information we trust you are going to give to us, Mijo, no more of this lying and keeping secrets. And no more fighting with your friends, that isn’t like you.*

*Veronica tells us that she’s going to ask you for more information about this “Tournament” so your father and I will trust that you’ll tell her. We’re your family, Mijo, we want to support you.*

**Todo mi corazón,**

*Mamá*

Lance felt tears welling in his eyes as he read over the words in his mother’s familiar handwriting, and he blinked them back before they could fall.

“Is everything alright, Lance?” Keith asked softly.

“Oh, yeah, yeah,” Lance said, his voice thick. “Everything’s fine. I just… really miss them.”

“There’s more writing on the back,” Keith said.

Lance flipped the paper over in his palms. Sure enough, there was a few paragraphs written on the back of the parchment, in another achingly familiar handwriting.

“It’s from Rachel,” Lance said aloud, his gaze flickering to the name underneath the writing. “She must have added it on after Mamá finished.”

**Lance,**

*Veronica told us about your injury. I should have known something was going on with you. I had a*
feeling the other day... promise me you’ll be careful.

Mamá was a little distracted by the news in your last letter that she forgot to respond to, like, half of it - so I stole her response before she could send it back with Kaltenecker so I could answer them for you! Everyone seems to be forgetting that you miss us as much as we miss you.

Nadia’s recital was beautiful, she’s the star of the dance squad - I swear. Seeing her in that little pink tutu? There’s never been a more adorable ballerina in all of Cuba. She said that she’s going to show Tío Leo all of her best moves when he gets home.

Marco did not get a second date. Marco has never gotten a second date in his life, and if he keeps advertising himself as the “Cuban Bachelor” then he’s never going to.

Luís says that he’ll pay you when you come home.

Sylvio is doing good, but he misses you. His mom enrolled him in an after school tutoring program that specializes in ADHD and ever since then, he’s been doing much better in school!

Veronica’s conference at the Garrison went great and she did get the promotion! (But don’t tell her I told you or she might actually kill me).

I’m only slightly offended that you didn’t ask after me in your letter, but I assume it’s because you would just know if anything important had happened. But, because I am the most important person in your life, let me tell you about me. I got into a fight with Maria Gomez at school the other day - not a physical fight, of course, but now she says she won’t let me work at her father’s ice cream stand in the mall over the summer anymore. Which totally blows, because I loved that job. But, she called me a little puta for going on a date with her boyfriend (they had been broken up! I swear, how was I supposed to know that they would get back together two days later?) so I guess maybe it’s a good thing that we won’t have to work together anymore. I’ve been spending most of my free time babysitting for Luís and Lisa - he’s been working longer shifts so they can save up enough money to afford that cottage down by the beach? And Lisa decided to go back to work now that Sylvio and Nadia are both in school. So I pick them up in the afternoons and watch them until Lisa gets home. But I don’t mind really, they’re good kids, and sometimes Marco comes with me so I don’t have to watch both of them by myself.

Of the two, I know Sylvio is your favorite, but I much prefer Nadia. I love doing her hair all fancy and letting her borrow my high heeled shoes so she can pretend she’s a grown-up. It’s adorable.

Okay, I’m running out of room on the back of the paper so I’m going to stop there. Marco says to tell you hi and that you’re his favorite brother (but don’t tell Luís). If Veronica asks, you haven’t heard from me.

Love you,

Rach

“Oh my god,” Lance said, shaking his head. “I can’t believe her.”

“Why? Did she yell at you, too?” Keith asked. “I know it wasn’t cool of you to not tell them, but they don’t all need to be so mad at you.”

“No, no,” Lance said, cutting him off. “She’s not mad at me. I think it’s actually physically impossible for Rachel and I to get mad at each other.”

“Oh,” Keith said, some of the tension draining out of his shoulders. “So what did she say, then?”
“She just told me about what’s been going on with the family, what’s been going on with her. She’s actually the only one that’s still treating me normally.”

“So that’s good, right?” Keith asked, pursing his lips in confusion.

Lance chuckled at the adorable expression on his face. “Yes. Yeah, it’s… pretty great, actually.”

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“These are all horrible,” Romelle sighed, flipping over on Lance’s bed. She was holding some sort of wizarding fashion magazine above her head, her blonde hair spilling out across his comforter.

“What are?” Lance asked, tearing his attention away from the letter he was writing in response to his parents and Rachel.

“Dress robes,” Romelle said, flipping to the next page of the magazine. “I have no idea what I’m going to wear to the Yule Ball, because it certainly isn’t any of these,” she said with a scowl.

“I’m sure they’re not that bad,” Lance assured her, twisting around on his chair so that he could lean over and peek at the magazine.

He stifled a laugh, smothering it so that it came out more like a choke. “They’re not that bad,” he says, but it’s so clearly a lie that he probably shouldn’t have even bothered.

The truth is… they’re horrible. The moving pictures across the magazine Romelle is holding in her hands are probably wearing some of the ugliest clothes that Lance had ever seen in his entire life. They weren’t quite the suits and dresses preferred by muggles for formal occasions and they weren’t quite simple wizarding robes like the kind they wore around school. Instead, they seemed to be some horrifying mix of the two.

Ruffles. Too many ruffles.

“Well you can wear them then,” Romelle sniffed. “I’m going to wear a dress.”

Lance snorted. “I think I’ll stick with a suit, thanks.”

“…a suit?” Romelle questioned, flicking the magazine closed and abandoning it on Lance’s bed.

“Yeah a suit,” Lance said, then paused. “Oh no, Romelle?! Do you not know what a suit is? This is getting ridiculous. But yeah, that’s what I’m writing my parents about. I’m asking if they can send me one. I mean, it will probably be one of Luis or Marco’s old ones, but still…I’m going to write down my measurements anyway in hope they’ll be able to get me a new, tailored one.”

“So a suit is, like, the muggle equivalent of dress robes?” Romelle asked.

Lance nodded. “They look kinda like dress robes, just… without the actual robe part.”

“ Weird,” Romelle said, nodding slowly. “You’ll probably be the only boy not in dress robes. Certainly the only champion not in dress robes.”

“And I’ll be the best dressed person there,” Lance said. “And besides, I’m already opening the ball. Why not make a statement?”

“Have you thought about who you’re going to go with yet?” Romelle asked him.

“Well,” Lance said slowly, “I kind of wanted to talk to you about that. How would you feel about
going together?"

“Oh, Lance, I’d love to,” Romelle said, but despite her words, her tone was soft and almost sad. “But I can’t.”

“You can’t?” Lance echoed. “Oh, do you already have a date? Sorry, Ro, I didn’t know!”

Romelle smiled shyly, curling in on herself a little. “Yeah… Allura asked me if I would be interested in being her escort.”

“Ro, that’s great!” Lance said. “But… wait… how come you didn’t tell me? We always tell each other this stuff,” Lance said, his voice sounding small and confused even to his own ears.

Romelle tore her gaze away from his, picking at a stray string on the blanket. “I know,” she said. “I just… wanted to keep it to myself for a little while. Sorry. That sounds so stupid.”

“No, it doesn’t sound stupid,” Lance said. “It sounds romantic. And a little cheesy. But it’s not stupid.”

“But I should have told you!” Romelle insisted. “I mean, you’re my best friend.”

“So why didn’t you?” Lance asked, unable to stop himself.

“I don’t know,” Romelle said with a huff of air.

“It’s okay that you didn’t tell me,” Lance told her, eyeing the defensive set of Romelle’s shoulders as she pushed herself up into a sitting position. After just having a huge fight with Pidge, the last thing he wanted was to get into a fight with Ro. And, yes, he was hurt that she hadn’t trusted him enough to tell him about Allura, but he wasn’t going to press her about it either. Romelle would talk when she was ready. That was one of the things about her that had been hard for Lance to learn, she had to do things in her own time and in her own way.

“I am sorry I can’t go to the ball with you,” Romelle said, tossing herself back down onto the bed. “Do you have anyone else you could go with?”

“I guess I could ask Pidge,” Lance said, wrinkling his nose, “but I don’t think they’d be very good to slow dance with. Plus I’m still slightly mad at them, so.”

“You’ll find someone to go with, you’re a Champion of Hogwarts. I’m sure girls - and boys - will be lining up to go with you,” Romelle told him.

“I doubt it,” Lance said, turning back towards his letter. “But I’m sure I’ll figure something out.”

“You always do,” Romelle said.

Lance quickly jotted down his measurements, adding them to the end of the letter he had been writing. He had decided to send a letter to his parents explaining why he wouldn’t be able to make it home for Christmas, not wanting to leave that entirely up to Veronica to have to tell them. They deserved to hear it from him.

But he couldn’t lie, it was hard to focus on the letter when his mind was busy replaying the conversation with Romelle. Sure, he might have said that he would be able to figure something out, but he couldn’t help but have his doubts.

He would much rather fight underwater mermaids again than deal with actually trying to find a date
for this stupid ball.
Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Summary

With the yule ball coming very quickly, preparations need to be made. A dance is performed, a proposal is accepted and a package arrives.

This is a really cute chapter, coming a day early, before s8. It's been an honour flying with you all.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, Cait here, coming at you a whole day early. We wanted to upload before s8 so we hope you all enjoy. We hope you all stick around for the fanon klance content. Ily all, and please don't forget to leave a comment and some kudos'. See you all on the other side, and don't forget, kick. <333

“I can’t believe that we have to take dancing lessons,” Pidge muttered to Lance.

Lance, who actually was rather fond of dancing and was currently extremely amused by the sight of Professor Blaytz spinning Hira around the abandoned classroom they were using as a practice room, shook his head. “This is the best thing to come out of the Triwizard Tournament,” he said.

“Speak for yourself,” Pidge grumbled, crossing their arms over their chest. “I have two left feet.”

Lance reached over and ruffled their hair. “Then don’t lead and you’ll be fine,” he told them.

“You have Romelle as your practice partner,” Pidge said, waving their hand towards where the blonde girl was chatting animatedly with Matt. “I’m stuck with my brother. Have you ever seen Matt try to dance? It’s not pretty.”

“Just watch Romelle and I, and try to copy what we do,” Lance told Pidge. “Hey, Ro, wanna show these beginners how it’s done?”

Romelle nodded, pulling her blonde hair up into a high ponytail and abandoning her conversation to step up to Lance.

He held out one of his hands, and Romelle delicately placed her palm in his. She brought her free hand up to rest on his shoulder, Lance placed his free hand on the small of her back, and they both glanced down at their feet to make sure they were in position.

Romelle nodded, a tiny, barely noticeable movement, but it was the only signal Lance needed to start moving.

Lance started by just leading their feet through the steps, counting the positions silently.

One, two, three. One, two, three. One, two, three.
Once he was sure that he and Romelle were moving at the same pace, he started to step into the box step that Professor Blaytz had been demonstrating earlier. It was just a simple combination of six steps resembling a square on the floor.

Nothing too complicated.

Sure, it was a little different than the dances Lance had grown up practicing with Rachel while Marco danced with Veronica, but it was simple enough that Lance was fairly confident in his ability.

“See?” He said, glancing over at where Pidge and Matt were hesitantly holding on to each other. “It’s really not that bad.”

“You’re actually… doing okay?” Pidge said, sounding surprised.

One. Step forward with the left foot.
Two. Step forward with the right foot so that the feet are parallel.
Three. Bring the left foot to the right foot.
Four. Step back with the right foot.
Five. Step back with the left foot so that the feet are parallel again.
Six. Bring the right foot to the left foot.
Repeat.

“Want to try stepping forward?” Lance asked Romelle.

Romelle nodded, gracefully following Lance’s lead as he stepped forward, pushing her backwards.

“Hey, we’re pretty good,” Romelle said, as they fell back into the box steps.

Lance grinned at her, stepping back and lifting his arm up and spinning Romelle out before pulling her back in.

“Lance!” Professor Blaytz called. “That was not a part of the traditional Champion’s Waltz.”

Lance stifled a laugh at the stern expression on Professor Blaytz’s face. Didn’t he know that dancing was supposed to be fun? “Sorry, professor!” He said.

Romelle laughed as she took the lead and directed Lance for a few steps while he got himself back under control. “Where did you learn how to do that?”

“My mamá taught all of us to dance when we were children, it was a requirement in the Álvarez household. I mean, obviously I didn’t learn how to do ballroom dancing like they’re teaching us here, but I can mambo with the best of them. What about you?” Lance asked.

“What about me?” Romelle echoed.

“Where did you learn to dance? You just started leading on your own, it’s clear you know what you’re doing.”

“Oh, yeah, my dad taught me,” Romelle said, pausing in the dance so that Lance could start leading again.
Lance stumbled slightly on one of the steps when Romelle stepped out to do a series of complicated footwork, but with everyone else’s gazes trained on their own feet, no one noticed his slight misstep.

“Okay I give up!” Pidge said, throwing up their hands. “We’re switching partners.”

“Pidge, what are you-” Lance started before Pidge tugged him and Romelle apart.

“I can’t dance with my brother anymore,” Pidge said seriously. “If I have to, I might actually kill him. So one of you is dancing with him instead.”

“I’ll handle it,” Romelle said with a soft smile, letting go of Lance.

“Guess it’s you and me, Pidgey,” Lance said, grabbing their arms, even though the height difference was almost comical.

“Don’t call me that,” Pidge groaned as they started to follow Lance’s lead.

“You owe me,” Lance reminded them, eyebrow twitching. “48 favors. I can call you whatever I want to.”

Pidge rolled their eyes. “I liked it better when we were fighting.”

“No you didn’t,” Lance said, spinning Pidge the same way he had just gotten yelled at for spinning Romelle.

Pidge was giggling as Lance pulled them back to his side.

“No, I didn’t,” they agreed.

“Lance!” Professor Blaytz called. “Please, at least, pretend to be listening to what I tell you.”

“Sorry, Professor!” Lance called.

But he wasn’t sorry. Not really.

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“Oh come on,” Lance groaned as the Beauxbatons girl that he had been trying to talk to on his way down to Care of Magical Creatures totally brushed him off.

He was never going to get a date at this point. This was the third girl who had been totally not interested when he tried to ask them about going to the Yule Ball together.

Christmas kept creeping closer, and he was still so pathetically single. Which, normally wouldn’t have bothered Lance. He would just go stag and flirt with anyone who had gotten abandoned by their asshole dates halfway through the night or whatever. But he was a Champion. He had to open the whole-freaking-ball with some kind of ceremonial dance. So he was pretty sure that he needed an actual date.

And sure, there were the creepy fangirls that had asked him out after he had won the first trial, but Lance was keeping them as a last resort. A critical failure last resort. He really didn’t want to go to the ball with someone who would, like, spend the whole night trying to stalk him or something.

“Did another girl resist your “infallible charms”?” Pidge asked, pushing their glasses further up their nose as they drew up next to Lance.
“What are you doing down here?” Lance asked, ignoring their question. “You aren’t in Care of Magical Creatures with me.”

“Nope,” Pidge said, popping the ‘P’. “But you left your textbook on the table in the Great Hall. I figured you might need it.”

They held out the fur-covered textbook, which Lance accepted gingerly. This particular textbook scared the crap out of him after it nearly bit off his fingers the first time he tried to open it, so he wasn’t really surprised he had accidentally left it behind. He hated when Coran made them bring it.

“Thanks,” he said, tucking the textbook securely under his arm.

“So you still haven’t found someone to go to the ball with you?” Pidge asked, returning to their earlier line of questioning.

“No,” Lance admitted. “It’s harder than I thought it would be.”

“You know, there is one person that you could ask,” Pidge said wagging their eyebrows. “Someone really obvious.”

Lance skidded to a stop, bending down so that they were eye-level. “Pidge, my lifesaver, are you saying that you’ll go to the ball with me?”

Pidge let out a squeak of embarrassment. “No!”

“No?” Lance asked, rocking back on his heels, deflating.

“No, I didn’t mean myself,” Pidge continued. “God, you’re really dense, you know that?”

“Thank you, darling, that means a lot,” Lance said, rolling his eyes.

“Besides,” Pidge continued, “I’m probably not even going to the ball. Or I’ll show up late just to see The Weird Sisters, I haven’t decided yet.”

“Wait, so if you didn’t mean yourself, then who do you think I should ask?” Lance said, poking Pidge in the arm.

Pidge raised an eyebrow, a slight smirk on their lips. “I’m not allowed to say, you’ve sworn me to silence.”

Lance cocked his head, wondering who Pidge was referring. Who had he…

… oh, oh.

Oh.

There was only one person he had forbidden Pidge to speak about.

No. Absolutely not. No way.

Pidge couldn’t mean him.

“No! No! Pidge, I literally cannot do that. That’s the worst idea I’ve ever heard,” Lance said, shaking his head quickly. “He’d never want to go with me.”

“That is so not true,” Pidge said. “I think he’d be thrilled to go with you.”
“And I think you’re crazy,” Lance told them.

“Fine,” Pidge said, holding up their hands.

“And you’re going to the ball,” Lance said seriously. “Even if I have to call in one of my favors to make it happen.”

“Fine,” Pidge agreed. “I’ll go to the ball. Only forty-seven favors left to go. You had better pace yourself, Lance, at this rate you’ll run out of favors before the end of the school year.”

“Oh, I have another one!” Lance said, clapping his hands together. “Transfigure your hair a bright green for the ball!”

Pidge blanched, face paling, before they rolled their eyes. “Seriously? Is this payback for me implying that you should go to the ball with-”

“Hey!”

“I wasn’t going to say his name!” Pidge protested. “But fine. I’ll transfigure my hair green-”

“Ah, ah, ah,” Lance interrupted them. “Bright green.”

“You’re very demanding, you know that? This is what I get for bringing you your book. Next time, I’ll just leave it in the Great Hall.”

“Love you too, Pidgey,” Lance called as Pidge spun on their heel and headed back into the direction of the castle.

Pidge raised their middle finger behind their back.

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“Oh, sorry!” Lance said, pausing with his arm half raised as he attempted to slide the book he had been reading back onto the library shelf.

The girl he had just bumped into without noticing just blinked at him.

“Um, can I help you with something?” Lance asked, letting go of the book and brushing his hands on his school robes. So far, he hadn’t been able to find any information about magic oyster shells and all he’d manage to do was make his allergies act up from the amount of dust he stirred up as he flipped through the old books.

“I’m looking for the Ancient Runes section,” the girl finally said, cocking her hip and placing her hand on it. “I need to finish an essay for Professor Trigal.”

“Sure,” Lance said. “Uh, just follow me.”

He led the girl further back into the library, glancing at her again over his shoulder. “You’re from Durmstrang, right?” He asked, trying to think of the least awkward way to make small talk. “I think I’ve seen you hanging out with Lotor.”

The girl nodded, making her red ponytail (spelled so that the tips were currently a bright pink) bounce. “Yeah, totally! I’ve known Lotor since I was, like, eleven. We’ve gone to school together our whole lives. Durmstrang is great, a lot different than Hogwarts though. Durmstrang is so dark, and creepy. There’s spiders everywhere. And we don’t let in muggleborns. Sometimes, I swear, I hear Hogwarts students talking and I have no idea what they’re talking about. So Hogwarts is, like,
the complete opposite. Except it rains a lot here. Which is totally bad for my hair. But, I mean, I like it here! The castle is, like, super pretty.”

“Okaaaayyyyyy,” Lance said slowly. “Here,” he said, sweeping an arm towards the bookcase they had stopped in front of. “Most of the books on Ancient Runes are here. There are some more further back, because not a lot of people read them, but, uh, obviously you do, so that’s cool.”

“Thanks,” the girl said. “These look great! You’re the best!”

“I’m Lance,” Lance said, offering the girl one of his hands.

The girl didn’t even hesitate before reaching out and shaking it, her grip surprisingly strong given her slight frame. “Ezor.”

“Right, well it was nice to meet you, Ezor,” Lance said, shoving his hands into the pockets of his school robes. “I’ll, uh, leave you to it.”

Lance stepped around her, intending to head back towards the section of the library that he had been frequenting lately, but the girl reached out and stopped him with a hand on his arm.

Oh, hey, by the way,” she said, “you were, like, super impressive in the First Trial. I was kinda surprised. I totally wasn’t expecting you to win, but those spells you were using? Seriously impressive.”

“Oh,” Lance swallowed. “Um, thanks?” He thought it was supposed to be a compliment, but he wasn’t sure.

“But don’t you think that the Bubble-Head Charm was a risky move given the extended time limit you had to deal with? I totally would have been paranoid that I would run out of air.” the girl continued, pursing her lips. “It would have been a safer bet to use Gillyweed. The effects last longer. Tastes like garbage though.”

“That’s what Lotor used, right?” Lance asked. “It’s what gave him gills?”

The girl nodded. “Yeah! Lotor’s super smart about it, I’m pretty sure he managed to charm the pants off some teacher, or whatever.”

“Well, thanks. If there’s another underwater trial, I’ll keep that in mind,” Lance told her.

The girl released her grip on his arm, turning to face the bookcase.

“Hey,” Lance said, the words tumbling out of his mouth before he could stop himself. “You wouldn’t happen to be interested in going to the Yule Ball together, would you?”

The girl blinked at him, and Lance thought that she might have been blushing. Maybe.

“Oh, that’s so sweet! I would if I could, but I’m actually going with my girlfriend. Zethrid, you might have seen her around, she’s, like, super tall. And pretty. Oh my god, she’s so pretty,” she said with a dreamy sigh, reaching up to tighten her ponytail. “And I can’t even convince Acxa to go with you, because she’s going with Lotor. But you’re cuter than Lotor. Don’t tell him I said that.”

“Right, yeah, of course,” Lance said, shaking his head slightly. “Forget I asked.”

Stupid.

What was he thinking, asking one of Lotor’s cronies anyway?
Lance spun on his heel and headed away from the Ancient Runes section of the library before the
girl had a chance to say anything else. On second thought, maybe he would just go back to the
common room.

Lance let out a sigh. At this rate, he was never going to find a date for the ball.

“Hey, what are you doing out here?”

Lance looked up, pausing with his hand around a fist-full of brown, dead grass.

Keith was standing over him, his arms crossed over his chest, but while the action would look
defensive on anyone else, on Keith it just looked natural.

“Just taking in the view,” Lance responded, turning his attention back to the lake in front of him.

“In negative one degree weather?” Keith asked, dropping down next to Lance. “It’s freezing.”

Lance shrugged.

“What’s bothering you?” Keith asked, reaching up to brush his bangs out of his face even though the
winter breeze blew them back down.

Lance shrugged again. “It’s almost Christmas and I can’t go home and it’s almost the Yule Ball and I
can’t find a date. It’s stupid, I guess.”

Keith flopped back down onto the grass so that he was laying on the hill with his school robes spread
out around him. “It isn’t stupid,” Keith tells him.

Lance follows his lead and leans backwards so that they’re side by side on the grass.

They’re lucky it hasn’t started snowing yet. Global warming and all, Lance knew it was going to
snow before the Yule Ball arrived. It had to. If he’s not going to get to go home for Christmas, then
the least it could do was fucking snow so he can experience a white Christmas for once in his life.

“You always say that,” Keith said a minute later.

“What?” Lance asked, turning onto his side so that he could look at Keith.

“Say that things are stupid when they aren’t. If it’s bothering you that much, then it isn’t stupid.”

“Oh,” Lance said softly.

Keith turned, and Lance suddenly realised that their faces were much too close, Keith’s indigo eyes
too wide and too soft.

“And I’m sure that plenty of people haven’t found dates yet,” Keith told him.

Lance rolled his eyes. “Yeah, sure.”

“Well, I haven’t,” Keith said with a slight wince. “But that’s not really surprising, is it? How did you
describe me? As being ‘socially challenged’? Didn’t you say that my haircut would drive away
anyone who got within ten feet of me back in fourth year?”

“That was literally years ago, and your mullet used to be even longer back then,” Lance dismissed
the statement with a wave of his hand. But then the rest of what Keith was saying registered and Lance felt his eyes widen. “You don’t have a date yet?”

Why wouldn’t anyone want to go to the ball with Keith? Didn’t they realise how handsome Keith was? And how nice he was once you broke past his rough exterior? And how he was so, so brave? Probably the bravest person Lance had ever met. And... and... and...

“We should go together,” Lance said quickly, sitting up.

Oh shit.

Oh shit. Oh shit. Oh shit.

Had he really just said that out loud?

Abort mission, abort mission, abort mission.

Keith was going to think he was being, like, super weird or something.

He truly was the biggest idiot in the world.

Keith blinked at him. “Seriously?” He asked, following Lance’s lead and pushing up into a sitting position.

Shit. Should he back out now? Play it off, like ‘nah, man, it was just a joke’?

But that would probably look even weirder.

Fuck.

Lance nodded, feeling a blush spreading across his cheeks. “Yeah! I mean, we have to go because we’re the Champions and we have to do that stupid waltz anyway. And we’re friends so that’s better than going with random strangers. I remember one time, my cousin, Anna, was getting married. And Marco brought the girl he was seeing to the wedding and she was in all the pictures but a week later they broke up. Anna was pissed that some random girl no one even cared about ended up in all the pictures. This way, we don’t have to worry about photoshopping random people out of the pictures!” He could feel himself spiraling, could hear the words spilling out of his mouth without his permission. That’s what he always did when he was nervous, filled the silence with as many words as he could.

“Of course,” Lance continued, “you probably don’t even want to go with me. And that’s fine! I don’t want to like, pressure you or anything. You probably have someone that you already want to go with, right? And that’s cool. I mean, you can just, like, forget that I asked. It’s not a big deal, or whatever.”

Keith blinked at him while he spoke, a pale pink flush on his cheeks. “I only understood about half of the words you just said,” Keith told him.

Lance waved one of his hands through the air. “Well, what do you think?”

Oh my god, what was he going to say? What did Lance even want him to say?

He honestly wasn’t sure.

“I think... it sounds like a good idea,” Keith said slowly. “Let’s go together.”
Rewind. Hold up. Had those words really just come out of Keith’s mouth? Did Pidge’s stupid plan actually just work? Shit. Now he would have to tell Pidge that they were right. Damnit.

“Seriously?” Lance asked, echoing Keith’s earlier statement.

Keith nodded.

Holy shit. Holy shit.

He had actually agreed to go.

For a second, Lance felt like he was going to throw up. Oh god. This meant that he was actually had to go to the ball with Keith.

Holy shit, he was going to the ball with Keith.

“So, I guess we’re going to the ball together, then,” Keith said, a slightly dazed look on his face, like he didn’t entirely understand what had just happened either.

Lance grinned at him, his full-megawatt, unabashedly happy grin.

Keith smiled back at him, smaller and slower.

“So what are you wearing,” Lance asked, flopping back down onto the grass. His heart was pounding in his chest, loud enough that he was sure Keith would be able to hear it.

“Dress robes, the same as everyone else,” Keith replied.

Lance wrinkled his nose.

“What’s wrong with dress robes?” Keith asked, sounding defensive.

Lance peeked up at Keith.

He was still sitting up, and he was scowling down at Lance.

“Dress robes are terrible,” Lance informed him.

“Dress robes are… dress robes,” Keith said helplessly. “If you hate them so much, what are you going to wear?”

“A suit,” Lance replied smuggly.

“A suit?” Keith echoed.

Lance nodded. “Muggle equivalent. Much more fashionable.”

Keith rolled his eyes.

“And I hope you know how to waltz,” Lance continued. “I don’t want to be embarrassed in front of everyone because you don’t know how to dance.”

“I can dance,” Keith grumbled. “They had a lesson to teach us.”

“Oh I know, trust me, I had to watch Pidge and Matt stumble around. It wasn’t enough for everyone,” Lance said, smirking as he remembered the Holt siblings tripping over their own feet. “Turns out, there is something the Holts can’t do.”
“I’ll be fine,” Keith insisted.

“Alright, Mullet-Man,” Lance said.

Keith rolled his eyes.

“So what’s Photoshop?” He asked.

“What?” Lance asked, confused by the sudden change of topic.

“When you were talking about Marco bringing that girl to the wedding. You said they had to
Photoshop her out of the pictures. What’s Photoshop?”

“Oh,” Lance said, “it’s a computer program that can be used to doctor photos.”

“Wait,” Keith said slowly. “Why are the photos sick?”

“No, no,” Lance stifled a chuckle. “I mean, you can use the program to change the way that pictures
look.”

“Oh,” Keith said. “That makes more sense.”

“So we just used the computer program to erase Marissa from the photos and everything turned out
fine. I think Marco kept one of the original copies with her in it, though.”

“Muggles are weird,” Keith told him.

“Wizards are weird,” Lance countered.

“This suit thing that you’re going to wear better not be crazy looking,” Keith said. “We don’t need to
draw any more attention to ourselves.”

“I’ll be the most normal person there,” Lance promised.

Keith arched an eyebrow.

“Okay, relatively. I’m sure some of the other muggleborns are going to wear suits, too,” Lance said.
“After Ro showed me the pictures of dress robes? Man, am I glad that I can have my parents send a
suit to me.”

Keith shook his head. “Dress robes are traditional.”

“And traditional is boring,” Lance said with a groan. “Sometimes you have to break from tradition,
Keith.”

Keith shook his head, pushing away from the ground and offering a hand to Lance. “Whatever.
Come on, it’s freezing. Let’s go back inside.”

“Sure,” Lance agreed, letting Keith pull him up.

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Lance dropped onto the ground, panting for air.

He and Keith had just finished a particularly vigorous training session with Shiro, who had excused
himself as soon as they were finished with the claim that he had to attend an important meeting with
the Ministry. But Keith and Lance both knew that it was really just code for he was going to meet with Adam.

“I’m exhausted,” Keith declared as he sat next to Lance, close enough that their arms were brushing.

“You’re exhausted?” Lance asked, “you’re not the one who got flung onto their ass, like, ten times in a row.”

Keith smirked. “You’re defensive stance wasn’t steady enough, that’s not my fault.”

“Not your fault my ass,” Lance muttered.

Lance pushed himself up so that he was standing, offering Keith his hand.

“Why are we standing?” Keith asked, as he let Lance haul him to his feet.

“We’re not just standing, we’re dancing,” Lance said, adjusting his grip on Keith’s hand and placing his other hand on Keith’s waist.

“No way,” Keith said, shaking his head, he stepped backwards, trying to tug away, but Lance’s grip on his palm was strong.

“Keeeeeiiitttthhhh,” Lance whined, “we have to practice. We’re going to have to dance in front of the whole school. I’d rather not look like a complete idiot.”

“Too late,” Keith said with a smirk.


“Fine,” Keith groaned, stepping back into Lance’s personal space. “But I’m leading. I only got taught how to lead.”

“That’s fine,” Lance said, adjusting his grip from Keith’s waist to his shoulder. “I know how to follow. When we were practicing, Ro made me for a while. I think she’s planning on leading for Allura.”

Keith reached forward, resting his hand lightly on the small of Lance’s back.

Lance tried not to focus on the steady weight of it, the way that he can feel the heat of Keith’s fingers burning through his school robes. Because if he focused on it too much, he was pretty sure he might actually explode.

As it was, he was fairly certain that he was bright red.

“Okay,” Keith said. “Are you ready?”

There wasn’t any music, but Lance nodded anyway. He was the one who had suggested it in the first place, so it seemed silly to backtrack and say that they needed music now.

“Okay,” Keith said again, taking a small step forward. “One, two, three. One, two, three,” he said quietly as he guided Lance through the simplest dance steps they had been taught.

Lance bit back a smile.

It was kind of cute, how Keith was counting out the steps for them. Like he was afraid that if he
didn’t they would lose track of what they were doing or something.

Eventually, he warmed up enough to lead them in the (only slightly) more complicated box step.

And Keith wasn’t a great dancer, he spent too much time looking down at his feet and he never stopped counting, but he had the potential to be. His movements were slow but steady. It was like he knew what he wanted to do, and he knew how to do it, but he kept second guessing himself, his teeth were worrying at his lip, hard enough that Lance was slightly worried about them drawing blood.

“Hey,” Lance said softly, just enough to draw Keith’s attention back towards his face. “We’ve got this.”

Keith nodded. “Right,” he said, even as his eyes were already trailing back down towards their feet.

“Keith,” Lance said, “just look at me, okay? We’re not going to mess up. You never think about your steps when you’re fighting. You just do it, right? And you never second guess yourself. You always look really graceful when you’re fighting,” Lance said, feeling a steady flush creeping up his neck, but he powered through anyway. “It’s the same with dancing.”

Keith nodded, his face as red as his Gryffindor tie. “Th-thanks, Lance,” he said.

“Yeah, course,” Lance answered, willing his pulse to return to its normal rate. “Let’s try again, okay?”

Keith swallowed, but he dragged his eyes upward. He was still biting his lip in concentration, and it seemed like it was taking every fiber of his being to keep his gaze locked on some point over Lance’s shoulder, but…it was progress.

Lance wasn’t sure how long they stayed like that, just shuffling back and forth in a small square to no music, the only sound being Keith’s quiet counting. But he knew it was a while.

Long enough for him to get a little restless, to want to do something more challenging.

When Keith wasn’t paying attention, Lance suddenly lifted their arms, ducking under them slightly to spin out and then using Keith’s own arm against him to pull himself back to Keith’s side, resuming their boring shuffling.

“What was that?” Keith demanded with a frown.

“What?” Lance blinked at him innocently.

“That… that… that spin thing that you just did? Is that part of the dance? I didn’t learn how to do that.”

“Keith, relax,” Lance said with a soft chuckle. “It was just a little improv. It was fun, wasn’t it?”

“I guess,” Keith allowed. “But you know that you aren’t actually allowed to do that during the real dance?”

“Yes, Keith, I know,” Lance responded seriously, before lifting his arm and spinning Keith in against him. “Sometimes you just do things because they’re fun,” he whispered into Keith’s ear, before pushing on the other boy’s shoulder slightly, spinning him out to the side. He drew Keith back in, and adjusted their grip to the earlier positions.
“You told me I could lead,” Keith said with a soft pout, but the laughter in his voice gave him away.

“So lead.” Lance said with a wry grin.

Keith lifted his arm for Lance to duck under.

That was all the invitation that Lance needed.

He ducked under their connected hands, letting Keith spin him in place long enough that he started to feel dizzy with it. He wasn’t sure what was making him feel more light-headed, the walls spinning around him, the warm pressure of Keith’s hand in his, or the intoxicating sound of Keith’s laughter as Lance staggered back into his side.

“You’re making me dizzy,” Lance said, poking Keith’s chest with his finger.

“You’re cute,” Keith said, and then promptly turned bright red. “I mean it’s cute. Yeah, it’s cute. That you, uh, know how to dance like this.”

And a really, really big part of Lance wanted to lean in and demand what, exactly, Keith means by ‘you’re cute’ but Keith looked really uncomfortable, and Keith was always so good about knowing what Lance needed, so… he let the topic change without comment.

“Can you teach me?” Keith asked suddenly, jolting Lance back into the present.

“Teach you what?” Lance asked.

“Teach me how to spin you out to the side like that,” Keith asked.

“Keith, you know that’s not part of the approved dance, don’t you?” Lance asked, purposefully pitching his voice low.

“I know, but… sometimes you have to do things just ‘cause they’re fun, right?” Keith offered with a shrug.

“I wonder who told you that,” Lance said with a smirk.

“Just some guy,” Keith replied, but he was smiling as well.

“Sure,” Lance said. “I’ll teach you. Just hold your hand out like this.”

Lance wasn’t sure how much time they spent in the abandoned classroom, flickering back and forth between the official Champion’s Waltz and the much more fun dances that Lance preferred. He knew it was late enough that they were missing dinner, but… after hearing Keith’s unrestrained laughter, he couldn’t really find it in himself to care.

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That night, Lance flopped down on to his bed, the curtains drawn closed around him. He could still feel the phantom warmth of Keith’s fingers around his own, Keith’s shoulder underneath his hand, Keith’s laughter still ringing in his ears.

Oh god.

He was actually going to the Yule Ball with Keith.

They were going to slow dance together in front of the entire school. Everyone would see how
Lance looked at Keith and then everyone would know.

This was a terrible idea.

Lance rolled over and buried his face in his pillow, willing the warm flush he could feel creeping up his neck back down.

What had made him think that asking Keith to go to the Yule Ball together was a good idea? He was so stupid.

But Keith had been laughing, Lance reminded himself. Keith had been having fun. And Keith wasn’t the type of person to have fun at things like school dances.

Maybe he likes you too, one half of his mind whispered. But that sounded too good to be true.

Lance let out a groan into the pillow, before flipping back over, staring up at the ceiling.

He had a feeling that was what he would be doing all night.

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“My suit is here!” Lance exclaimed, slapping Romelle’s shoulder animatedly and pointing to where four large barn owls were struggling under the weight of a large package - Kaltenecker flying in the front with his talons wrapped around the ribbon dangling from the package, as if he were pretending to do actual work.

“It’s about time,” Romelle said, “my dress came almost a week ago.”

( Lance remembered, he had been sitting at breakfast with her when the delicately-wrapped pink package had been dropped into her lap. She had opened it immediately, layers of sparkling pink fabric and tulle exploding out around them. There were tiny pink and blue flowers at top of the sleeves that would manage to keep her shoulders bare, as well as around the waist of the dress, and even a few scattered amidst the volume of the skirt. It was pretty, if a little over the top, but Romelle had never been one to do one by halves.

“The blue flowers match Allura’s dress,” Romelle had explained, running one of the silk petals through her fingers. )

“Well my family had to send it all the way from Cuba,” Lance said, returning his attention to the present.

He watched the owls struggle with the package until they were directly overhead, when they drifted down and set it down carefully onto the table. The barn owls flew off immediately, but Kaltenecker lingered.

Lance reached forward and brushed his fingers against Kaltenecker’s head, the tiny owl shutting her eyes as she turned into Lance’s touch.

“Thanks, buddy,” Lance whispered to the owl, picking up a piece of his toast and offering it to her.

Kaltenecker accepted the toast eagerly, only nipping at Lance’s fingers slightly before she batted her wings and flew off in the direction of the other owls.

“Are you going to open it?” Romelle asked, leaning forward in her seat. “I can’t wait to see what a muggle suit looks like.”
“No way,” Lance said, clutching the package to his chest. “You’re going to have to wait until the ball with everyone else,” he told her.

“I showed you my dress!” Romelle said, batting her eyelashes.

“Nope,” Lance said, pushing away from the table, leaving his breakfast half eaten. “It’s going to be a surprise.”


“I will,” Lance smirked.

On his way out of the Great Hall, Lance caught Keith’s eye, waving his package with a pointed raise of his eyebrows.

Keith smiled, and Lance thought he might have been chuckling.

Once he was out of the Great Hall and away from the eyes of any teachers, Lance took off into a sprint towards the Ravenclaw common room. He took the stairs of the spiral staircases two at a time, almost stumbling over one of the false steps in his rush.

Once he made it back to his common room, he dropped down onto the bed, eagerly ripping the package open. It was sealed with what seemed like an insane amount of tape, and eventually Lance gave up on using his hands and grabbed his wand, a few simple spells making quick work of the packaging.

He flipped the sides of the package open, a letter sitting atop a pile of tissue paper.

He slipped the letter out of the envelope, it was short, barely anything.

Mijo,

Have fun (and tell us all about the ball)

Con Amor,

Mamá

Lance set the letter carefully off to the side, before pulling the tissue paper out of the package and tossing it to the floor.

Inside the box, carefully folded and still sealed in a clear plastic bag was a navy blue suit.

The color was distinctive, nothing like what Mark or Luís had ever worn to weddings or quinceañeras or even funerals.

It was a brand new suit.

Lance felt tears welling in his eyes, he hadn’t really expected for his Mamá to go out and get him something new like this. He couldn’t help but feel special as he lifted the suit out of the box and split open the plastic bag.

It was checkered, he hadn’t noticed at first, but there was a lighter blue pattern running across the navy jacket. It was wool, too, he could tell by the weight of it underneath his fingers. This had to have cost his family a small fortune.
Lance set the jacket to the side, pulling out a gray waistcoat with blue buttons. It was also checkered, matching the pattern of the jacket.

Next came a white dress shirt and a glistening silver tie.

Lance set them aside, pulling the trousers out of the bag. They were the same navy blue as the jacket, but without the checkered print.

Lance peeked into the box, curious if there had been anything under the suit.

Sure enough, there were a pair of brown leather shoes still in the box.

Lance pulled the shoes out of the box, resting them in his lap.

This was too much.

Something inside one of the shoes caught Lance’s attention, and he reached in, pulling out a small blue bag.

He pulled the ribbons open, dumping the bag’s contents onto the bed.

A folded up piece of paper spilled out, along with a bottle of moisturizer, a container of foundation, a compact bronze highlighter, what appeared to be a clear lipgloss and a mascara tube, and a travel-sized blue-ish eyeshadow palette.

Lance picked up the note, already knowing who it would be from.

*I know we’re both already naturally beautiful, but sometimes a little artificial help is fun, too! Have fun at the ball and be sure to be back by midnight, Cinderella.*

Rachel

Lance packed the makeup back into his bag, before checking the toe of the other shoe.

There was a small box in this one, like the boxes that used to contain expensive earrings and necklaces that his papá got his mamá for her birthday.

Lance flicked the small box open, a small note stuck to whatever was inside, concealing it from view.

*I miss spoiling you, Mijo*

Mamá

Lance gingerly picked up the note, revealing what was underneath. A set of glistening silver cuff links sparkled in the low light of the dorm, a small blue crystal pressed into the center of each of them.

They were beautiful.

Lance watched as a droplet of water landed on his bed. He reached up, brushing a hand against his face, startled to realise that he was crying.

This was so sweet, probably one of the nicest things his family had ever done for him. He couldn’t go home for Christmas and instead of getting upset, they did their best to make sure he looked perfect for the ball.
Lance brushed away his tears, picking up the suit jacket again.

Well, after all the work his family went through to pick this suit out for him, the least that he could do was make sure that it fit.

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It fit. And he looked perfect.
Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Summary

It's the Yule Ball. Merry Christmas everyone.

Chapter Notes

And we're back with our last update of 2018! As a little Merry Christmas to everyone, please enjoy the Yule Ball, both Cait and I have been looking forward to letting you read this chapter for a long time! And it seems appropriate following the release of season eight. As always, thank you for reading and commenting and giving kudos as they literally make our week!

(BTWs you can see what everyone is wearing by clicking here! https://twitter.com/sunnyjolras/status/1075891157350133760 )

- slowklancing

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lance smoothed his hands down over the lapels of his suit, checking himself one last time in the mirror. He looked… really good.

“Are you ready to head down to the Great Hall?” Romelle asked, peeking her head into the boys’ dormitory.

Lance turned to look at her, watching the way that her eyes widened as she took in his appearance.

“Oh, Lance,” Romelle said, blinking at him, her gaze sweeping across his body. If it were anyone other than Romelle, it would have made Lance flush. “You look great,” she told him.

“You think so?” Lance asked, turning back to his reflection in the mirror.

The blue plaid suit fit him perfectly, clinging to his broad shoulders before narrowing down to a tapered waist. His gray waistcoat peeking through, his silver tie tucked neatly behind it.

His brown hair was perfectly styled so that it hung over his forehead in short, messy curls. He had used the makeup that Rachel had sent him to highlight his facial features, nothing crazy, just a dusting of blue eyeshadow matching the color of his suit on his eyelids, a ghost of bronze highlighter across his cheekbones. Mascara emphasised his already-long eyelashes, and a dab of lip gloss made his lips look perfectly kissable.

Not that he was planning on kissing anyone or anything.

He totally didn’t want to kiss anyone tonight.

Totally not.
The silver cufflinks his mamá had given him were secured to his dress shirt, his brown leather shoes already on and laced up.

“Yes!” Romelle said. “Muggle suits are so much better than dress robes, damn, why aren’t we up on this trend?”

Lance turned back around, craning his neck to try and get a glimpse of Romelle’s own outfit. “Well, come on, let’s see your dress.”

Romelle grinned at him, before pushing the door open.

She looked stunning.

The pale pink of the dress perfectly offset her fair skin and blonde hair. She kept her hair pulled up into some kind of elaborate braided updo to emphasise how the dress left her shoulders bare while still having sheer sleeves that looked like something out of a Disney movie. There was a dusting of gold glitter across her cheeks, pale pink eyeshadow, and some kind of nude lipstick on her lips.

“You look beautiful,” Lance told her sincerely.

Romelle giggled, and spun around, the dress flying out around her. “Ready to go find our dates?” She asked.

Lance nodded, offering her his arm. “Let’s go.”

The Ravenclaw common room, the hallways of the school, everywhere that Lance looked seemed to be filled with couples slipping into high-heeled shoes or walking arm in arm. He could feel their eyes on him as he passed by, knew that they were comparing his fitted suit and trousers to their dress robes. Lance tried to ignore the weight of the stares, tried not to wonder if they were appreciative or judging.

The castle was beautifully decorated, Lance could already tell. Twinkling white lights, candles floating in the air on their own, and loops of pine garlands wrapped around the banisters of the staircases.

They’re not far from the Great Hall when they literally bump into Allura.

“Oh, good!” Allura exclaimed, steadying herself with a hand on Romelle’s arm. “I was just heading up to the Ravenclaw dorms to look for you!” She took half a step back, letting her gaze sweep over Romelle’s figure. “You look…” Allura paused, swallowing once. “You look absolutely stunning.”

“Thanks,” Romelle said, a pink flush sweeping across her cheeks. “So do you, I mean, you look beautiful.”

Now it was Allura’s turn to blush.

Romelle was right, though. Allura really did look amazing.

She was wearing a dress that was such a pale blue it almost seemed silver that clung to every inch of her curves. It was sleeveless, but the sleek design of the dress was offset by the matching cape that draped around Allura’s shoulders. Her long, pale hair was loose and curled, small blue flowers braided into the waves. Like Romelle, she had a dusting of pale pink glitter across her cheekbones, as well as blue-ish eyeshadow and nude lipstick. Obviously she and Romelle had coordinated their outfits.
“You both look amazing,” Lance told them. “Wow.”

“As do you,” Allura said with a small smile, her gaze sweeping up and down Lance’s body, obviously hesitating on the suit jacket. “I’ve never seen such a… unique outfit.”

Lance chuckled at her obvious struggle over what to say.

“Do you mind if I steal my date?” Allura asked teasingly, holding her arm for Romelle to take.

“Of course not!” Lance said, releasing his grip on Romelle’s arm.

Romelle slipped her arm through Allura’s and let the other girl lead her back down the stairs, shooting one last grin at Lance over her shoulder.

Lance waved to her, lingering at the top of the staircase. He would let them make their grand entrance.

He could hear the low sounds of conversation drifting up from the staircase, but it fell quiet as Allura and Romelle stepped down the staircase, a hushed silence filling the air.

The silence didn’t last long before Lance heard the whispers start up again, and Lance could just barely make out the sounds of people telling Allura and Romelle how good they looked, what a cute couple they made, asking where they got their dresses.

Once a minute or two had passed, long enough for them to have reached the bottom of the staircase, Lance took a deep breath and stepped down onto the stairs himself and took a deep breath, preparing himself for what was about to happen.

The staircase that led down to the Great Hall, which he walked every single day, seemed impossibly bigger as he stood at the top and looked down.

There was a small crowd gathered at the base of the stairs, lingering outside the doors that led into the Great Hall.

The weight of their gazes felt heavy to Lance, and he instinctively glanced around for a familiar face to lock onto. But Allura and Romelle were both standing with their backs to him, talking to another couple that Lance recognised as being Beauxbatons students.

Oh, god, everyone was staring at him. Everyone was staring at him, and Lance couldn’t find a friendly face anywhere in the crowd.

Wait.

There.

Keith was standing in the corner of the room, near the bottom of the stairs, obviously trying to keep himself out of the way of the other students. His gaze was locked onto the floor. He looked bored. Or maybe annoyed. It was hard to tell with Keith, sometimes.

But at the sound of footsteps on the stairs, Keith glanced up. His eyes flickered over Romelle and Allura briefly before they landed on Lance and, huh, suddenly his bored expression shifted, his eyes widened and his mouth popped open into a small ‘O’.

Lance felt a shiver race down his spine at the knowledge that he had to have put that stunned expression on Keith’s face.
Because… this was Keith. The guy was hardly ever fazed by anything. Like that time when all the third and fourth years were in duelling club and a spell went wrong and Keith ended up breaking his arm. He hadn’t even flinched. But here he was, staring up at Lance with a look in his eyes that Lance couldn’t quite identify.

And Keith… he was **Keith**.

He looked good. Of *course* he looked good. Lance could tell even from halfway up the stairs.

The dress robes looked pretty awkward on everyone else, but they managed to look great on Keith. He was wearing a classic set, the kind that resemble a tux and bow tie with robes instead of a jacket. But the colors were different than many of the other sets that Lance had seen on his walk down the the Great Hall. Rather than just being black and white, Keith’s set were black with a dark red dress shirt. And his hair was hardly styled, but it still managed to look perfect anyways.

Some part of Lance was aware that the crowd below him was being way, way too quiet, but he couldn’t focus on it over the roaring of blood in his ears.

It felt like it took him years to walk down the staircase, slowly so that he wouldn’t trip, because that would be beyond embarrassing, a process that was made even slower by trying to maintain eye contact with Keith, but eventually Lance found himself towards the bottom.

Before he could take the last few steps, though, Keith pushed himself away from the wall, the crowd parting to allow him to come to a stop in front of Lance.

He nodded his head in a slight bow, as traditional wizarding etiquette dictated, before straightening and offering Lance his arm.

Lance slipped his fingers around Keith’s arm.

“Hey,” he whispered, the sound already sounding too loud in the silence.


“Thank you,” Lance said, his grin widening even as he felt his face flush. Luckily, it probably wouldn’t show through the foundation he was wearing. “You look handsome, too.”

Keith flushed, his cheeks darkening to the same color as his dress shirt.

This close, Lance could make out gold detailing on Keith’s dress robes. The lapels were lined with gold and there was some kind of swirly, gold pattern on the black bow tie.

“Is everyone ready for the ball to begin?” Someone asked, as they slipped through the doors of the Great Hall.

Reluctantly, Lance tore his eyes away from Keith to focus on Shiro.

He thought he saw Shiro wink at him, but he wasn’t sure.

Either way, Keith’s grip on his arm tightened.

“Champions, please wait out here, everyone else, you’re welcome to head inside,” Shiro said, stepping aside to let the other students file past him and into the Great Hall.
“I, um, really like your muggle suit,” Keith said, his voice still quiet despite the resumed chatter of the other students as they made their way into the Great Hall. “It’s not quite what I was expecting.”

“Oh,” Lance said, running his free hand over his jacket. “Do you think it’s okay?”

“Yeah! Yeah,” Keith said quickly. “I wasn’t saying that was a bad thing. It’s… you look good. Really good.”

“Oh,” Lance said quietly, reaching up to rub at the back of his neck. “So do you. I mean, not that there was any question about it because you always look good, but… yeah,” Lance finished awkwardly.

Keith arched a brow at him. “I ‘always look good’?” He echoed.

“Well, yeah,” Lance said, wishing that the ground would open up beneath him and swallow him whole.

“Oh,” Keith said, his gaze flickering towards the floor, before he took a deep breath and returned his attention to Lance. “Just… for the record… you always look good, too.”


“Can the Champions line up?” Shiro called over to them. “We’re going to have you walk in one pair at a time.”

Lance shot a glance over at Keith, who swallowed nervously, but they fell in line behind Allura and Romelle.

Lance could see Lotor and the purple-haired girl, Acxa, standing in front of them, both of them dressed in all black. It looked more like they were going to a funeral than a dance. He hadn’t even noticed them arrive.

“Oh, Merlin,” Keith muttered. “We’re going to mess up.”

“We’re not going to mess up,” Lance replied, filling his voice with as much confidence as he could muster.

“It’s going to be terrible,” Keith insisted.

“It’s not going to be terrible. We practiced and you were taught how to lead perfectly well, and if that fails I can always lead for us. Just focus on the music. And focus on me, or something.” Lance reminded him, leaning over to force Keith to meet his gaze.

“Just like duelling?” Keith asked, his voice barely a whisper.

“Just like duelling,” Lance said with a nod. Although hopefully with happier outcomes than a broken arm. “You’re going to be great. We’re going to be great. I believe in us.”

Keith let out a long, low huff of air. “Okay,” he said with a nod. “Okay, we can do this.”

Shiro opened one of the doors to the Great Hall, a swell of music rushing over them. Harps and strings and the sound of every slow dance Lance has ever watched on TV spilled over them. Shiro pushed the other door open, and oh.

Overnight the Great Hall had been transformed into a winter wonderland.
Lance wasn’t sure what to focus on first. The three (three) Christmas trees at the far end of the hall sparkling with yellow lights and frosted branches, the center tree easily over twenty feet tall. The real icicles dripping from the ceiling like crystal stalactites. The gleaming dance floor that seemed to look like a frozen pond or an ice-skating rink. The dozens of circular tables covered with white tablecloths, an ice sculpture centerpiece resting on each of them. It was easily the most beautiful thing Lance had ever seen.

The Champions started to shuffle forward, Lotor and Axca leading the way. Lance shifted closer to Keith as they walked forward, getting a better grip on the other boy’s arm.

The crowd of students lined up on either side of the aisle-way in their brightly colored gowns and dress robes were intimidating, but they were all clapping and smiling brightly as the Champions made their way towards the dance floor at the center of the room.

Lance tried to keep a smile plastered to his face, something which became easier when he caught sight of Hunk and Shay in the crowd and waved to them with his free hand.

A few of the kids in the crowd wrinkled their noses at Lance’s muggle suit, but for every one that seemed upset by the muggle fashion, three more gave him small smiles or subtle thumbs up. Lance thought he even saw a few other students wearing muggle suits and tuxedos.

Eventually, he and Keith found themselves stepping onto the frozen-lake dance floor.

The music slowed to a stop as the Champions and their dates arranged themselves.

“Are you ready for this?” Lance whispered to Keith, as he rested his hand on Keith’s shoulder.

Keith nodded, bringing his own hand to rest on the small of Lance’s back, holding his other in the air so that Lance could wrap his fingers around it.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Keith whispered back.

The music slowly began again, and then they were moving. It was the same waltz that he and Keith had spent hours practicing in the empty classroom but with the formal clothing and the twinkling lights and the music and the smell of pine in the air, it felt different. It felt magical.

Keith’s hand on his back was a comforting presence, one that was used to pull Lance closer or push him away depending on what the dance called for, and it was easy for Lance to forget that there was anyone else in the room except for him and Keith when Keith was looking at him with wide indigo eyes, his lips set into a slight frown of concentration as their feet moved them through the steps.

Keith let go of his grip on Lance’s hand, resting both of his hands around Lance’s waist, and in return, Lance placed both his hands on Keith’s shoulders just in time for Keith to lift him into the air.

For a moment, Lance was weightless, breathless, floating through the air before his feet connected with the ground once more and his fingers found Keith’s again.

Effortless.

And maybe, just maybe, Lance finds it impressive that Keith can just lift him up like that. Because Lance may be thin, but he’s tall, taller than Keith at least even if it is only be a small margin, and Keith just spun him around like he weighed nothing.

And maybe, just maybe, Lance let himself think that it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world to fall in love with Keith. Just for a minute.
Between his thoughts and the warm pressure of Keith’s hand on his waist, Lance found meeting Keith’s eyes a little difficult, so he cast his gaze around the dance floor.

Allura and Romelle were spinning together, Romelle’s dress spilling out like pink cotton candy.

Lotor and Acxa both had their gazes turned away from one another, looking unnecessarily solemn for the way they smoothly transferred from one step of the dance to another.

As Lance glanced around, he saw Headmaster Holt offering his hand to the woman beside him, (actually, was that Colleen?) and the two of them stepped out onto the dance floor.

Headmaster Holt and Colleen seemed to break the dam holding everyone else back, and more couple stepped out onto the dance floor.

Shiro and Adam.

Hunk and Shay.

Ezor and her girlfriend. Lance thought her name was Zethrid?

James and Ina Leifsdottir.

Coran and Allura’s father.

Lance felt his lips quirk up into a grin at that odd pairing, before turning his attention back to Keith.

Keith, who was smiling softly, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Hey,” Lance whispered to him.

“Hey,” Keith echoed.

Eventually, the music slowed to a stop and the couples paused.

Lance panted for air, feeling breathless and he wasn’t sure whether it was from Keith’s gaze or the exertion of the dance. Keith seemed similarly affected, so it was probably the dancing.

But Keith caught Lance’s eye and he broke out into a wide grin, one Lance was unable to stop himself from returning.

“We did it!” Keith said, sounding excited.

“See?” Lance said, “You’re a good lead, Keith.”

“Well,” Keith paused, appearing to contemplate what he was going to say next, before shyly smiling. “I guess I have to show them that I can be a great one,” Keith replied.

“What are you talking-” Lance started to say, but he cut himself off as Keith stepped back into his personal space, taking his hand back with his own. “Oh.”

The music picked up again, and then Keith swept Lance back into motion, sending them spinning across the dance floor again.

They only stopped dancing when Headmaster Holt announced that it was time for dinner to be
served, finding a place at one of the tables up front with the other champions.

“You looked great out there,” Romelle told them as Lance pulled out the chair next to hers and the one next to his, so that Keith could sit down first. Once Keith was seated, Lance dropped into his own chair.

“Thanks,” he said with a grin, “so did you two.”

“We’re not the ones who couldn’t stop talking!” Romelle said, leaning forward and resting her chin on her hands. “What was so funny, anyway?”

Lance glanced over and shared a shrug with Keith. “We were just talking.”

Allura leaned over, draping her arm across the back of Romelle’s chair. “You two danced so well together. Did you practice?”

“A bit,” Keith answered before Lance could speak. “We, um, didn’t practice the lifting part though, that was improvised. Stupid wizard dances.”

“We didn’t need to practice it,” Lance countered. “You’re strong enough that it didn’t matter.”

Keith flushed.

“How many times did you lift me up out there?” Lance asked, even though he knows the answer (it was eleven, he kept count). “That was crazy. You were amazing.”

“It’s not that big of a deal, Lance,” Keith protested.

“But it was so cool!” Lance insisted. “You’re so strong!”

A big part of Lance, a really, really big part of him, wanted to reach over and feel those biceps - wondering if Keith would feel as muscular as Lance thought he would.

Keith rolled his eyes, “I’m really not. Besides, you managed to lift me a few times just fine when you led for a while.”

“Still!” Lance exclaimed, grinning.

Keith just shook his head fondly, before turning his attention to the food that was magically appearing on the plates in front of them.

But, all impressive physical feats of strength aside, the last hour or so had actually been really fun. Way more fun than Lance had expected it to be. While he and Keith were dancing, they had passed the time by roasting the other dancers’ outfits and (poor) dancing skills, Lance had made Keith laugh with stories of weddings and birthday parties he attended when he was younger or over the summers, complaining about how Marco always embarrassed the family with his poor dancing skills or how Rachel always got caught getting a little too friendly (emphasized with a dramatic eyebrow raise) on the dance floor. In turn, Keith had told him about important ministry parties that he had attended with his mother, how the stiff, formal affairs always seemed to end with someone getting a little too drunk and falling into a fountain or a pond or the punch bowl.

“Keith, hey Keith,” Lance said, poking Keith’s arm until the other boy turned his attention back to him.

“What?” Keith asked, but instead of sounding snap-ish, it sounded soft and fond. Which made sense,
as they had spent the better part of the evening talking to one another.

“You should tell Ro and Allura the story about the time you saw the Minister of Magic get totally wasted at that party your mom took you to.”

Keith rolled his eyes again, but he launched into the story anyways.

Lance added his own comments, echoes of what he had said to Keith earlier, and before long he and Keith are doubled over in laughter again, Romelle and Allura staring at them in amused confusion.

Dinner continued the same way, with giggles in between bites and long rambling stories resulting in more laughter. It was contagious in the sense that Romelle and Allura also started mindlessly laughing throughout the feast (although Lotor, who Lance was sure had not smiled a day in his life, remained remarkably stone-faced)

After dinner, the Weird Sisters came out to pump up the crowd and play heavier music that it was impossible to slow dance too. Instead, the crowd started some kind of make-shift mosh pit where everyone was just jumping up and down. Lance and Keith stayed on the outskirts of the crowd, where they exchanged more stories, where they had more drinks, where Lance spun Keith around and vice versa, both of them flushed and laughing.

Lance was pretty sure he saw Pidge (in all of their green-haired glory) trying to climb their way onstage.

All in all, it was pretty much a perfect evening.

Eventually, the Weird Sisters abandoned the stage, and the harp players and string players started playing songs again.

Lance assumed this meant that it was late, but he had been having so much fun that he hadn’t even noticed how much time had passed. But, luckily, the fun continued, as Keith pulled Lance back on to the dancefloor to start dancing again (damn did Keith have enviable stamina).

The whole routine started again, with the pair now incorporating their fun, stupid spins. Lance could see his fellow classmates having equally as much fun, with Hunk having dragged Pidge onto the dancefloor whilst Shay went to get a drink, Matt seemed to have started dancing with a girl in his year which was...surprising, and Lance couldn’t hold back a snort when he saw Coran try to start a jig in the middle of the dancefloor. As Keith spun Lance out quickly, Lance could see the entire crowd having fun dancing with them.

As the night grew on, slower songs made their mark. The low, deep notes of the cellos harmonising with the the mellow violins. So the spinning stopped, the laughter ceased, and a quiet conversation began. They talked about anything as they danced around the room, from their favourite foods to muggle contraptions, from family memories to future dreams.

And Lance wasn’t sure how it happened, wasn’t sure that there was an exact point to pinpoint it on, but at some point over the hours they had been on the dancefloor, the slow dancing had shifted from waltzing to shuffling to swaying.

It’s the kind of slow dancing that you see in movies about middle school, with the couples just barely moving back and forth in place. Lance had never seen the appeal in it before, it always seemed so…
so… cheesy, but resting his head on Keith’s shoulder so that he can press his nose into Keith’s neck feels right. And Keith’s arms were wrapped tightly around him, and they’re so close that Lance isn’t entirely sure where Keith ends and he begins.

The crowd had begun to thin out slightly, students either sitting at the tables lining the room or ditching the dance entirely to head back to the Common Rooms. Lance assumed that there are probably a thousand different after-parties going on around the castle right now, but he didn’t even care that he was missing them.

“I’m really glad I asked you to come to the Yule Ball with me,” he whispered into Keith’s ear.

“I’m really glad you did too. Tonight has been… so amazing,” Keith replied breathlessly, tightening his arms around Lance’s waist and drawing them even closer together.

Lance could feel his heartbeat pick up even more from the lightning fast speed it was already at. His hands, which were placed on Keith’s arms (which, score, all his dreams had come alive, they were as strong and muscular as he had thought about), gripped a little tighter. He never wanted this to end, this was all just so wonderful. He was slow dancing with his crush, could smell his cologne and he could feel his pulse. “Yeah?”

“You know what I meant,” Keith paused to take a deep breath, and Lance could feel him adjust his hand placement on his waist. “I didn’t expect to enjoy tonight as much as I have.” Then he could feel Keith still. “I-I mean, not that I didn’t think I was going to have fun with you tonight, I always have a good time when you’re around, I-”

“Keith, Keith.” Lance laughed, pressing his nose further into Keith’s neck. Lance could have sworn he heard Keith’s breath catch, but he almost felt drunk with how dizzy he was so he could have imagined it. “I got what you meant.”

“Yeah, I just, I never like these parties. But tonight, I really enjoyed. I’m so glad I’m here with you, Lance.”

“I-I”

“It’s just been really, really good.” Keith rambled on, his voice dropping. “We’re here and we’re really good at dancing and you look really nice in blue. It makes your eyes seem even brighter. Did you know that? You probably already knew that. And the eyeshadow too,” Keith let out a soft sigh. He reached up with one of his hands, sweeping his fingers across Lance’s cheek.

He didn’t say anything stupid, like “you look better without makeup” because Lance always hated when people said things like that. He liked wearing makeup. It was fun. It was that simple.

Instead, Keith said. “I really like it. It’s really cool you can do that and it looks so amazing. And the sparkly stuff? On your cheeks? I like that too. I like all of it. You look so… so beautiful, Lance.”

Lance pulled back slightly, not far, but far enough that he could lift his head and let his forehead drop down so that it was resting against Keith’s.

“Hey,” he whispered, only getting mildly distracted by Keith’s eyes. They were a combination of slate gray and pale purple. Lance had never seen eyes that color before. Doubted he ever would again.

“Hey,” Keith replied, letting out a breathy chuckle. That was very attractive, and Lance could feel his face heating up.
“Thank you.” Lance whispered, closing his eyes. “That’s-” He inhaled shakily, “That’s really nice. I could say all the same about you, you know? You’re incredible, Keith.”

Keith bowed his head slightly, his hair tipping forward into his eyes.

“I’ve never met anyone else like you,” Lance whispered.

Keith snorted, “I doubt that. Besides I don’t have anything on you.”

Lance started to protest but Keith cut him off. “It’s the truth. You, with your muggle suit and your hair all styled like that. Just you. You easily outshine everyone here.”

“My hair?” Lance asked, feeling his lips quirk up into a smirk.

Keith flushed. “Yeah, it’s… it’s curly.” As if to emphasize his point, the hand that had been resting on Lance’s cheek before he moved his head, reached up to sweep back into Lance’s hair, Keith’s fingers brushing through the short curls.

“It is.” Lance breathed out. That felt really good. He leaned slightly into the hand instinctively.

“Yeah, I just… yeah.” Keith sighed, closing his eyes. Lance studied Keith’s face with half-shut eyes, looking at the older boy with his heart racing, his blood pumping loud enough that he could hear it.

And Lance knew in that moment that he had one-hundred-percent fallen in love with Keith. Like, deep in love. Like, he was totally fucked love. Like, undeniably in love.

And he had never been more okay with that fact.

“Keith.” Lance whispered, biting his lip ever so slightly.

“Lance.” Keith replied, cracking his eyes open once more, his gaze flickering down to where Lance was biting his lip. Lance couldn’t deal with this anymore. He needed to do something, he had to do something. Anything.

He was actually going to have a Keith-inflicted heart attack if he didn’t.

“Keith?” Lance repeated, now rephrasing it as a question.

“Yeah?” Keith asked. Lance could feel his grip on Lance’s waist tighten, bringing him impossibly closer.

Was this it?

“Can I-”

“Hey Álvarez,” someone slurred, interrupting their moment.

Lance groaned, letting his eyes flicker shut for the briefest of seconds, before opening them and tearing away from Keith to see who he was about to murder.

“What do you want, Griffin?” He snapped.

As if he didn’t have enough reasons to hate that kid already.

James crossed his arms cover his chest, swaying a little on his feet.
Oh god, was he drunk?

Great, just what Lance needed to deal with right now. A drunk James Griffin.

“Nice suit, Álvarez, where you geddit from? Your little muggle family?” James asked, waving his hand in front of Lance’s face.

Lance batted James’ hand away. “Fuck off, James.”

“James,” someone else said, and Lance blinked when he realised that Ina Leifsdottir and Nadia Rizavi had approached without his realizing it. “There is a very high probability that you are incredibly intoxicated right now. The best solution would be to sleep it off,” Leifsdottir said, resting her hand on James’ forearm.

“Don’ worry, ‘m fine, Ina,” James protested. “Jus’ tryna have a little chat with little Lancey here.”

“Well the conversation is over,” Keith snapped, stepping forward so that he was standing between Lance and Griffin. “So why don’t you just leave.”


“At least one of them knew how to properly dress,” James whispered to Ina Leifsdottir. Loudly. “I guess when you're one of Hogwarts’ Champions, you can get away with looking like a muggle.” James wrinkled his nose.

“And what’s so wrong with looking like a muggle?” Lance asked, pushing past Keith and stepping closer to James. “There isn’t anything wrong with that.”

“Sure, if you wanna look like some kind of freak. How they’ve survived this long without magic, I’ll never know.”

“Maybe they don’t need magic,” Lance shot back. “Just because you can do some tricks with a wand doesn’t mean that you’re better than them.”

“Better than us, you mean. We all know where you really belong, Álvarez. You’re just a filthy mudblood.”

“Don’t call him that,” Keith said, stomping forward as though he was planning on decking James in the face again.

“Whatever,” Lance said, taking a step backward, grabbing Keith’s wrist. “Come on.”

“Aw, Álvarez, it’s just a joke!” James called after him with a snicker, but Lance ignored the older boy.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said to Keith.

Keith nodded in agreement, letting Lance haul him off of the dance floor and out of the now-mostly-empty Great Hall.

They passed Adam and Shiro slow dancing, and Shiro looked at them in concern until Keith waved a hand towards James in explanation. Keith and Shiro seemed to have an entire conversation with their eyebrows, before Shiro relaxed back against Adam.

Lance led them out of the Great Hall, through the school’s passageways, until they burst through the front doors of the castle.
The cold wind slapping against his face was a welcome relief.

There was a thin layer of snow on the ground, which… Lance had been going to Hogwarts long enough that he had seen snow before (although it was quite a shock to his little, first-year self) but it was technically Christmas Eve and he’d never had a white Christmas before.

Actually, it was late enough now that it probably was Christmas.

Keith pressed close to Lance’s side, probably in an effort to preserve body heat.

Almost like his body was on autopilot, Lance found himself winding down the familiar path towards the lake.

Snow was drifting down from the night sky, perfect flakes that Lance couldn’t resist trying to catch on his tongue.

“What are you?” Keith asked, shivering slightly. “Twelve?”

“Out of ten,” Lance replied with a smirk.

It was enough to startle a laugh out of Keith, draining him of the lingering tension from the…

conversation with James.

“I’m sorry James ruined our evening,” Lance said at last, after a soft silence had settled between them.

“He didn’t ruin our evening,” Keith replied with a shrug. “He just… altered it. A little.”

Lance grinned at him for a moment. “Still,” he said, the grin dropping. “We had to leave the dance early.”

“Everyone else was almost already gone, we were some of the last ones there,” Keith said, shivering slightly.

“Are you cold?” Lance asked. “Sorry, we could go back inside if you want to.”

“I’m fine,” Keith insisted.

“Oh, wait, here,” Lance said, starting to shrug out of his suit jacket. “You can have my jacket.”

Keith blinked at him. “Then you’re going to be freezing.”

Lance paused with his jacket halfway off. “Fine,” he agreed, “then get in here,” he said, opening his arms.

“What?” Keith asked, staring at Lance as though he had grown a second head.

“If you won’t go inside and you won’t take my jacket, then at least come over here so I can warm you up,” Lance said, fighting the blush he could feel creeping up his neck.

Keith shuffled over toward him, reluctantly stepping up into Lance’s space.

Lance wrapped his arms around Keith, running his hands up and down the boy’s back in an effort to warm him up.

“Better?” He asked.
“A little,” Keith admitted, shifting so that his head was resting on Lance’s shoulder.

“You know,” Lance said, clearing his throat, “this whole Tournament thing pretty much sucks, but I think it might have been worth it just for tonight.”

“Really?” Keith asked, his voice sounding small.

“Really,” Lance said. “Yeah, this was… yeah, this was definitely one of the best nights of my life. And I wouldn’t have had it if I wasn’t chosen. It makes up for a lot of the bullshit I had before the first trial.”

“I’m still sorry for that,” Keith said, pressing in closer to Lance.

“Why are you sorry? You hardly did anything,” Lance let his head drop down to that it was resting on top of Keith’s.

“But I could have made things easier for you, in the beginning, if I could just get over my need to prove myself,” Keith said.

“You just want to make things easier for your mom, I get it. If someone came at my Mamá, I would probably react the exact same way,” Lance said, remembering meeting Krolia after the first trial. How anyone could accuse her of still working for Zarkon was beyond him.

“But it’s less about that and more like… I just don’t want to be associated with the Galra anymore,” Keith admitted into the darkness. “My mom… she… she did a lot of stupid things when she was younger. She didn’t know any better, I mean, she was raised that way. By the time she realised that what she was doing was wrong, it was already too late. A lot of people already made up their minds about what type of person she is. She made a mistake and can never redeem herself, even after all the work she did in taking Zarkon down and her ministry work. Is it selfish for me to wish that I didn’t have to deal with the consequences of her actions? I was never raised with those values. I hate the Galra, and everything they stand for. I just want people to know that… that I’m not my mom.”

“That doesn’t make you selfish,” Lance said, tipping his head and pressing a soft kiss into Keith’s hair. So soft he wasn’t even sure if the other boy would feel it. “That’s like… would you say that I’m selfish for wanting people to see me as more than a muggleborn? I love my family, I would never change anything about them, but… my life would be a lot easier if I had been born into a wizarding family.”

Keith let out a huff of air. “That’s just because people like James Griffin are idiots.”

“They are,” Lance agreed, “and so are the people that say that shit about your mom.”

“Yeah,” Keith said. “But I still could have reacted better when you were first chosen.”

Lance shrugged, the movement causing Keith to move as well. “Yeah, well, no one could have predicted that.”

“I could have,” Keith protested, “I thought that you would get chosen.”

“I think you were the only one,” Lance said with a wry grin. “Still,” he continued, the grin slipping from his face. “I really do wonder who put my name in and tricked the cup into choosing me.”

“We don’t know that it was your name that was… spelled or whatever. It could have been mine,” Keith insisted, pulling away just far enough to make eye contact.
His eyes were annoyingly earnest.

Lance snorted. “That’s ridiculous, my name came out last,” he insisted, “but,” he continued, drawing Keith back into his side, “I appreciate the thought.”

“I’m just saying,” Keith muttered, but he let his head drop down onto Lance’s shoulder.

Lance shifted, so that Keith was tucked into his side, letting his gaze wander up towards the sky.

“Thanks for tonight,” he said, keeping his eyes on the sky.

“Hey, Lance?” Keith said. “Earlier… were you going to…?” he trailed off.

“Was I going to…?” Lance echoed, despite knowing perfectly well what Keith was going to ask him.

“Nevermind,” Keith said, shaking his head. “It’s stupid.”

Lance ducked his head down, trying to meet Keith’s gaze. “It isn’t stupid.” He said.

“It’s just…” Keith paused, swallowed, his gaze flickering towards Lance’s lips.

Lance found himself licking them in anticipation, not even realizing what he had done until he saw Keith’s pupils dilate.

When had they gotten so close?

“I thought maybe…”

Lance leaned in even closer, close enough that his nose brushed against Keith’s. Close enough that it would hardly take any effort to lean down the rest of the way and close the remaining instance between them.

So, so close.

Lance closed his eyes.

“Keith! Lance! Are you out here?”

At the sound of Shiro’s voice, the two boys sprung apart like shrapnel.

“Um, y-yeah, we’re here!” Keith called back, clearing his throat awkwardly.

Shiro crested the hill they were standing on, coming into view.

“I wanted to come check on you after what happened with Griffin. Are you two alright?” He asked, his gaze flickering between the two of them.

And he sounded so sincere that Lance found it hard to hate Shiro at that particular moment, even though he really, really wanted to.

Lance risked a glance over at Keith, who was pointedly glaring daggers into the ground.

Okay, so no help there.

“But, yeah,” Lance said, hating the way his voice came out two octaves too high. “Yeah, although… it’s getting pretty late… haha, yeah it’s like, past curfew right? Haha, yeah, well I, for one, don’t
want a lecture, so I should probably be getting back to the dorms.” As he spoke Lance started backpedaling in the direction of the castle. “So, um, Merry Christmas to both of you. And, um, bye!” Lance gave a little wave before quickly spinning in his heel and walking as quickly as he could without it looking suspicious back towards the castle.

Oh, god.

Just as he was almost out of earshot, Lance heard what sounded like an angry shout, but it was impossible to make out what they were saying.

Well… that hadn’t exactly gone according to plan.

Not that there had been a plan, or anything.

No, not at all.

Chapter End Notes

We had some cute moments, but then James Griffin arrived like Voltron season eight. Fuck Voltron season eight.
Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Summary

The magic of the Yule Ball has passed, and the consequences need to be faced. People are avoided, a shell is unbreakable and a potion is brewed.

Chapter Notes

HEY GUYS, hope you all had a happy chrysler and or festive period and that the new year is treating you well. Firstly, we want to thank you all for 6000 hits and 650 kudos’, you guys are the best. Secondly, whoever nominated us for the collection we are now a part of gets our entire uwu's. We love you so much, thank you for thinking of our fic. Please leave a kudos or a comment, or even live tweet your reactions on twitter (we're @sunnyjolras and @slowklancing tag us uwu). Hope you enjoy this chapter and that you don't hate us too much. See you next week <3
-cait

It was almost noon the next morning when Romelle and Hunk found Lance tucked away in a corner of the library, where he had settled in earlier in the morning under the pretense of doing homework.

“Why are you hiding in the library?” Romelle asked, Hunk trailing behind her as they pulled out the chairs across from Lance.

“I’m not hiding!” Lance protested quickly. Too quickly.

“Dude,” Hunk said, “you didn’t even come to breakfast this morning.”

“I overslept,” Lance lied, “the ball went really late last night.”

“Lance, I saw you leave the common room at, like, eight,” Romelle said. “I was sitting right by the door and you totally ignored me.”

Shit.

He totally hadn’t seen her there this morning.

Lance slumped forward, pressing his face against the Charms assignment Professor Blaytz had given them before break, even though he was probably completely covering himself with wet ink.

“Okay, fine,” he groaned. “I’m hiding.”

Well, hiding was maybe a strong word for what he was doing. He was just… avoiding certain people. Until he knew how to act around them. You know, without being a complete pining mess around them. That was all. There was nothing weird about that. It was totally normal. He didn’t know what Romelle was talking about.

“We know, idiot.” Romelle said, and Lance could practically hear the eye roll in her voice.
“We just want to make sure that you’re okay,” Hunk added. “Did… did something happen with you and Keith last night? You were still dancing when Shay and I left to go to the Hufflepuff Holiday Party.”

“Nothing happened,” Lance said, his voice squeaking traitorously.

Romelle and Hunk both narrowed their eyes at him.

“Nothing happened,” Lance insisted. “Well… James Griffin was an asshole, but that’s nothing new,” Lance said. It wasn’t the whole truth, but hopefully it would be enough to keep his friends off of his back.

Romelle pursed her lips, while Hunk shook his head softly.

“How did it go with Keith, though?” Romelle asked. “The last I saw, you two were, like, five seconds from snogging.”

“It went fine,” Lance said, picking his head up off of the table to glare at his friends. “And we weren’t about to snog.” Lance added, putting on a mock-British accent that was probably horribly offensive.

Romelle snorted.

God, Lance wished that Pidge were here right now because at least then he could use one of his favors to shut them up.

“How did it go with Allura?” Lance asked, eager to avoid any more talking about Keith and also out of pure curiosity.

Romelle rolled her eyes at his obvious topic change, but she took mercy on him. “It went great. We ended up heading back to a Beauxbatons after-party where she introduced me to all of her friends.”

“Sounds nice,” Lance nodded.

“It was nice,” Romelle agreed, sighing wistfully. “I just wish that we could have hung out just by ourselves, you know? Cause, like, I hardly get to see her anyways…”

“By yourselves?” Lance echoed, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

Romelle flushed bright red. “Shut up, Lance!”

“Did you go to any of the after-parties, Lance?” Hunk interrupted, always the peacekeeper.

“Um, no,” Lance shook his head. “Although the Ravenclaw party was still going strong when I passed through the dorm on my way to bed. Matt was totally wasted. He truly is the most useless prefect.”

“So if you didn’t go to any after-parties and you were out late last night, you must have been at the ball after almost everyone else left,” Hunk mused. “So what were you and Keith up to, hm?” Hunk smirked, obviously proud of himself for figuring out whatever he had figured out.

That traitor. Wasn’t Hunk supposed to be the nice one?

“You’re both being far too logical for how much you must have had to drink at the parties last night,” Lance grumbled. “Can’t you just, like, go be hungover somewhere else and leave me in peace?”
“You know I can handle my alcohol, buddy,” Hunk said, clapping him on his shoulder. “It’s not like that time we snuck into Sam’s office with Pidge and stole that bottle of Firewhiskey. Man, you could not stop throwing up.”

“Ugh, thanks for reminding me,” Lance groaned.

“And all Allura and I had was some wine,” Romelle said, “so I’m fine.”

“That’s annoying,” Lance informed both of them. “How am I the only one from the friend group that ends up super hungover if they drink?”

“Because you have no self control when it comes to the actual drinking part,” Hunk informed him. “Mixed drinks are deadly, man.”

Lance shook his head. “Okay, we’re done here. Bye.” Lance said, making the shoo-ing motion with his hands. “I have Charms homework to finish.”

Hunk and Romelle shared an exasperated look.

“You’re really not going to tell us what all happened last night?” Romelle asked, as she pushed away from the library table.

Lance shook his head. “Nope. Definitely not.”

“You realise that leaves the potential of what happened up to our imaginations, right? You never know what kind of crazy ideas we could come up with.”

“Ugh, fine,” Lance groaned. “But you’re annoying and I hate you.”

“I’m endearing and you love me, but continue,” Romelle said, dropping back down into her seat.

He took a deep breath. “So, we were dancing and stuff I guess and he was looking really good and being super sweet and I think we might have almost kissed, but then James came over like an asshole and I went outside in the snow and ugh he’s so cute but anyway we were talking and then we were just about to kiss again, I think, when Shiro came out and interrupted us and ugh it got so awkward so quickly so I hightailed it back to the dorms, okay?”

Lance said quickly, the words jumbling together.

Romelle and Hunk both blinked at him.

“Seriously?! Ugh, he ruined the perfect moment. Now you two are both going to be all awkward and weird,” Romelle complained. “You were so close, dammit.”

Lance arched a brow at her. “Why do you care so much?”

“Lance, you’ve been pining for Keith since, like, fourth year,” Hunk said. “We’re all just looking out for you.”

“I told you that in confidence!” Lance screeched. “You weren’t supposed to tell anyone else about that.”

“Oh, please, Hunk didn’t need to tell me,” Romelle said, nonchalantly. “But good to know you told him and not me, even if I’ve known for ages.”

Lance blinked at her, feeling a warm flush creeping up his neck. “He didn’t?”
“No,” Romelle said, chuckling slightly at whatever she saw on Lance’s face. “It was super obvious. And then Keith got all weird when he thought we were a couple, so that pretty much cleared it up for me.”

“You mean you think that Keith was jealous?” Lance asked.

“You literally just told me that you guys almost kissed twice last night,” Romelle said bluntly. “Yeah, idiot, he was jealous.”

“Oh,” Lance said softly, rocking backwards in his chair. Huh, that was not something he had considered. Huh.

“Oh my god, just go talk to one another,” Romelle instructed.

“Maybe,” Lance allowed.

“And stop hiding in the library,” Hunk added.

“No promises,” Lance said, turning back towards his Charms homework.

“And wipe that ink off your cheek,” Romelle instructed, pushing out her chair.

Lance reached up, scrubbing at his cheek where it had been pressed to the paper. Sure enough his fingers came away black and wet. Stupid quills, why couldn’t wizards just use pens?

He wasn’t sure, but he thought that Romelle and Hunk were rolling their eyes.

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Contrary to the ‘maybe’ that he had told his friends, Lance did not go talk to Keith. In fact, he successfully avoided Keith for almost a week.

And, at first, Lance thought that he would just wait for the awkwardness to die down (and maybe wait until he could look Shiro in the eye again), but after a few days, he realised that he actually wasn’t having to try very hard to avoid Keith. In fact, it was almost like the other boy was avoiding him as well.

That didn’t feel very good.

As much as Lance was dreading their confrontation, he missed Keith. And he felt a little guilty for avoiding Keith after talking about so much personal stuff together.

So, with a conflicting churning of feelings in his stomach, Lance set off to try and find the older boy.

Keith wasn’t in any of his usual haunts. The astronomy tower was empty. The house-elves in the kitchen hadn’t seen him. The empty classroom where they practiced with Shiro was still set up from their last lesson, all the desks and chairs were pushed to the side so that they could practice dancing, and looked like it hadn’t been touched.

He had no way of knowing if Keith was inside the Gryffindor common room.

He was just about to give up on trying to find the older boy completely when he spotted an all-too-familiar mullet at the end of the corridor.

“Hey! Hey, Keith!” Lance called, breaking out into a jog to catch up to him.
Keith stilled, freezing in place long enough for Lance to reach out and wrap his fingers around Keith’s elbow.

“Hey, I was looking for you,” Lance said. Suddenly, meeting Keith’s steely gaze seemed a little difficult. “I mean, you weren’t at the astronomy tower. Or the kitchens. So I thought maybe… but here you are.”

“Here I am,” Keith agreed, his tone dangerous close to neutral.

“Anyways, it’s just, I don’t know, I feel like we haven’t seen each other in a few days.”

Five days, to be precise. Not that Lance was counting, or anything.

Keith blushed, locking his gaze to a spot on the ground. “Yeah… it’s… uh… been awhile.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Lance said, reaching up to rub at the back of his neck. “I’ve had, like, an insane amount of homework.”

“Homework, right,” Keith deadpanned. “We’re still on break. Classes haven’t even started yet.”

“Right, right, I just mean… I got a lot of homework assigned before break,” Lance said with a nod. “Yeah. Ha.”

That was a half-truth. He did have a few essays still left to do but he had managed to complete most of his homework in the times he would normally spend with Keith.

“So….” Lance said, trailing off, now that he was standing in front of Keith, he wasn’t actually sure what he wanted to say. “The Yule Ball was fun… yeah?”

“Oh, um, yeah,” Keith replied, his blush deepening.

What did that mean? Were Romelle and Hunk right? Was that a sign that Keith liked him? Or was Keith avoiding him really his way of showing that everything that had happened at the Yule Ball had just been because of the fancy costumes and the music and… and… and, like, lowered inhibitions or some shit.

Maybe Keith was avoiding him because he didn’t want to, like, lead Lance on or something. Maybe Keith was trying to give Lance some space, trying to let him down easy or something.

Shit, shit, shit.

What did this all mean? Why did it all have to be so complicated?

Lance could feel his own face heating up. “I guess Romelle and Allura ended up going to some kind of Beauxbatons after-party,” Lance said quickly, trying to fill the silence between them. “And Hunk and Shay went to the Hufflepuff one.”

“That’s… cool, I guess,” Keith mumbled.

Why did this have to be so uncomfortable? Normally, Keith was so easy to talk to. But right now? Lance would rather let Pidge practice their stunning spells on him than try to make Keith talk to him.

“I know there was a party raging in the Ravenclaw dormitory when I got back,” Lance said, desperately searching for something that he could talk about without talking about their own
awkward encounter down by the lake. “I bet Gryffindor was the same way, right?”

“Um, yeah, I guess,” Keith said.

Was that all he knew how to say?

“Matt was totally wasted,” Lance said, his voice sounding high and frantic to his own ears. “I mean, he tried to hit on Hira. Like, come on. Even he could do better.”

“Was there something you needed, Lance?” Keith interrupted him, sounding tired.

Lance rocked back on his heels. “Um, no, not really?” He said, trying to ignore the stinging pain in his chest. “I, uh, I just wanted to talk to you.”

“Well, I’m supposed to be meeting Shiro? So, uh…” Keith said, gesturing vaguely in the direction of the corridor in front of him.

Wow, Lance couldn’t stop himself from thinking. He must really regret everything that happened down by the lake. Now he doesn’t even want to talk to me.

“Right, right,” Lance said, nodding quickly. “Of course. Um… tell him I said hi. And, uh, maybe we can hang out before school starts? Like go flying or something? I mean, you’re my friend. I just miss spending time with you, you know? Like, I like hanging out with my friends.”

“Maybe, Lance,” Keith said, brushing Lance’s hand off of his elbow. “Anyways, I have to go.”

“Yeah, of course,” Lance said, stepping to the side so that Keith could swept past him.

Lance kept his eyes trained on the older boy until he disappeared around a corner.

Lance leaned back against the wall. Shit. That had gone terribly. Now he was even more confused than he had been a few days ago. Just talk to Keith… what had Romelle and Hunk been thinking?

Not only did Keith obviously regret everything that had happened between them, but now he didn’t even want to be friends anymore. Oh god, why did Lance always have to fuck everything up?

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Lance tossed himself face-first onto his bed. It had been the first day back to classes, and he was already exhausted. He reached up, fumbling for the letters from his family in the drawer of his dresser, rereading the mindless gossip from Rachel sounded really appealing right now. Instead of finding the letters, his fingers wrapped around the oyster shell from the first trial.

Shit.

He still hadn’t figured out how to open the damn thing.

Lance grabbed the navy blue oyster shell and pulled it out, flipping over so that he could look up at it.

Maybe he could try to figure out how to open it. It had to be a spell right?

Lance slid his wand out from the pocket of his robes, pointing it towards the shell.

Unlocking charms had proven ineffective, so Lance decided to try some offensive spells instead.
“Finestra!” Lance said, hoping that the shattering spell might break the shell.

But the spell slammed into the shell and seemed to be… almost absorbed by it.

Lance had never encountered anything like it.

He sat up, placing the shell onto his bed in front of him.

Maybe he should spend a few more days in the library. And this time he wouldn’t be there just to hide from Keith. Well, not intentionally. But Lance was still trying to avoid Keith after their disastrous conversation in the hallway. He didn’t even think he could look Keith in the eye right now, let alone talk to him.

“Confringo!” Lance said, trying another offensive spell from the arsenal he had collected over the years.

Again, the spell seemed to be absorbed into the surface of the shell.

Lance tossed his wand over onto the dresser next to his bed.

Useless.

Okay, maybe it wasn’t a spell, then.

Or it was a very, very specific spell.

But if it wasn’t a spell then there had to be some other way to open the shell.

And he was running out of time to figure it out.

It was already the new year, somehow January had crept up on Lance without him knowing it.

And the second trial was in the middle of February. Which meant that Lance had a month and a half to figure out how the hell to open this thing and figure out whatever was inside.

Lance tossed the shell back onto his dresser. It was hopeless, he was never going to figure it out.

He was going to fail the second trial and then everyone would know that it was just a fluke that he had won the first one.

Maybe he had only been able to win the first trial because he had Keith’s help. And without it, he was just useless.

He flopped back onto his bed, letting out a frustrating huff of air. Between preparing for his N.E.W.T’s, trying to solve these puzzles for the trials, and figuring out a way to get back to his normal relationship with Keith, Lance was overwhelmed. And exhausted. He didn’t know what to focus on first.

And… speaking of Keith, Lance had yet to go to any of their private lessons with Shiro. He was supposed to have gone yesterday but he blew it off to study with Hunk. Facing Keith was bad enough knowing that he… that he… regretted what they had done (or, rather, what they hadn’t done, or almost done really), but having to face Shiro and Keith at the same time? No way, Lance was not about to force himself to do that.

It was bad enough having to avoid Shiro’s questioning gaze in class.
This sucked.

Lance pushed open the door to the potions classroom. It was after dinner so it should be empty. And hopefully Professor Iverson had gone back to his office. He probably wasn’t supposed to be in here, but… well, frankly Lance was running out of options. He had to figure out how to open the stupid shell thing and none of the spells he had tried were working. In a stroke of rare genius (or maybe stupidity) in the middle of the night, Lance had wondered if maybe it wasn’t a spell that he needed to find, but a potion that would, like, dissolve the shell or something.

So here he was, sneaking into the potions room.

He eased the door open just far enough for him to slip through before shutting it behind him. The hinges squealed loudly, because the universe apparently hates Lance. Lance winced instinctively, turning to look if Iverson was inside the room and about to give him a week’s worth of detention.

Iverson wasn’t in the room, but the person sitting on one of the stools with a boiling caldron in front of them might actually be worse.

Because it was Keith.

It was Keith, who had currently paused with his one of his hands in the air, obviously in the process of chopping some sort of potion ingredients based on the wicked looking knife he was holding. Well, hopefully he was chopping potion ingredients.

And, yeah, Lance suddenly had a very vivid image of that knife sticking itself into his gut.

“Um, hey,” he said, lifting one of his waves in a half-hearted attempt at a wave. “Wasn’t expecting to see you here.”

Keith blinked at him.

“Of course,” Lance rambled, “I wasn’t expecting to see anyone here. And neither were you, probably. I mean, you’re obviously busy, so I can just…” Lance trailed off, pointing over his shoulder.

The motion seemed to snap Keith out of whatever trance he was in.

“No!” He said quickly. “No, stay. I… um… I actually kinda wanted to talk to you.”

Lance took a few steps into the room, and when Keith didn’t become hostile or, like, throw the knife at him or anything, he crossed the rest of the distance and pulled out one of the stools on the opposite side of the table from Keith.

“So, um, what are you up to?” Lance asked, after Keith made no move to start talking. “Studying for your N.E.W.T’s?”

Keith nodded. “Uh, yeah..”

“Cool, cool, cool, cool,” Lance said, kicking his feet under the table softly.

“I have to make a really difficult potion perfectly for my N.E.W.T homework, and Professor Iverson assigned them randomly. Really, I’m lucky that I don’t have to brew Felix Felicis. Now that’s a really difficult potion, so I’m almost lucky to get the one I have even though my past five attempts
have been disastrous but I think I’ve done it right this time so-


Keith took a deep breath of air, flushing slightly. “Sorry, um, I’m a little nervous.”

“Why?” Lance asked, leaning forward to look at Keith’s potion. It was shining and looked like the pearls he and Rachel would try to find on the beach when they were little, swirls of faint steam trickling off of it. “Your potion looks great. It definitely looks right, whatever it is. It looks better than anything I ever end up brewing in potions. Somehow mine all end up looking like swamp water.”

Keith stared at him, his flush deeping a little. Absentmindedly he added whatever he had been chopping into the pot.

It flashed bright purple for a second, before settling back into the mother-of-pearl color from before.

“Oh, right,” Lance nodded. “Me.”

“Yeah,” Keith said softly. “Listen, um, about the other day…”

As he spoke, Keith gathered the next ingredients (some kind of purple flower?) and started to crush them with a mortar and pestle, his eyes intently glued to his hands.

“It’s fine,” Lance said, trying to cut Keith off, but Keith continued anyways.

“It’s not fine. Don’t say that. I hate that,” Keith muttered, crushing the delicate flower petals angrily.

“Hate what?” Lance asked, unable to stop himself.

“I hate how you let people treat you like shit and then you try to play it off like everything is fine,” Keith snapped. “It’s not fine. I was an asshole. Let me apologize.”

Lance blinked at him, rocking back on the stool. “Okay,” he said, not sure what else he should say. He had a feeling that ‘it’s fine’ wouldn’t go over well.

“I’m really sorry that I just brushed you off. I was, um, dealing with some stuff and I took it out on you and you didn’t deserve it. And then you didn’t come to our lesson with Shiro and I realised that I fucked up. So… I’m sorry,” Keith said, keeping his eyes on his cauldron as he added the purple flowers to the liquid.

“Oh,” Lance said, “I accept your apology. I just miss you, man. I feel like I’ve hardly seen you since…”

“Yeah,” Keith agreed, stirring the potion counter-clockwise. “Um, if the offer is still available, I’d like to go flying sometime.”

Lance felt himself grin. “Yeah, that would be great!”

Anything would be great. Lance was just relieved that Keith didn’t hate him.

“So, um, what are you doing in here anyways?” Keith asked. “I mean… shit. That came out wrong. It’s fine that you’re here, but… why are you here?”

“Oh,” Lance said, realizing that while he had been talking to Keith he had completely forgotten the original reason he had come to the potions classroom. “I was going to see if I could figure out how to brew a potion that would, like, dissolve the shell or something to get it to open. Nothing’s working
and I’m getting desperate.”

Keith smirked, pausing in his stirring to switch directions. “I don’t think there is,” he said, after a moment of silence.

“See,” Lance pouted, “it would be so much easier if we were working together like we did last time.”

“No way, last time you were trying to *let* me win. This time it’s going to be a fair fight,” Keith insisted. “I can’t trust you not to try and help me disproportionately, you’re way too nice and selfless for that. I want you to try and win this time.”

“Well apparently I won *without* trying to last time,” Lance said smugly. “Imagine how many points I’ll get now that I’m actively trying to beat your ass. You won’t stand a chance.”

“I’m counting on it,” Keith said.

Lance let the silence linger between them, while he watched Keith pull his stirring stick out of the cauldron and set it to the side.

“Is it done?” Lance questioned, pushing himself forward to look at the potion.

Keith nodded.

The steam rolling off of the caldron smelled *amazing*. Wait a minute… was that? It was.

“Keith,” Lance said, crossing his arms across his chest. “You lied to me.”

“Well apparently I won without trying to last time,” Lance said smugly. “Imagine how many points I’ll get now that I’m actively trying to beat your ass. You won’t stand a chance.”

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It was.

“Keith,” Lance said, crossing his arms across his chest. “You lied to me.”

“What?!?” Keith said, throwing his hands in air.

“You made it sound like you were brewing some super special potion or whatever, but this is just the cologne you were wearing at the Yule Ball! Why didn’t you say that you were just brewing your own cologne? You didn’t have to tell me that you were working on your N.E.W.T.s, I mean, where did you learn how to do this anyways? It’s not in the textbook, is it?” Lance felt his eyes widen, as he leaned forward on his stool. “That’s actually really cool. Do you think you could brew a batch for me? I need to learn how to brew my own beauty products. Rachel would be *amazed*. Wait, why are you looking at me like that?”

“You… uh… you’re smelling my cologne?” Keith choked out.

“Um… yeah?” Lance replied. “Oh, oh no! Was it not supposed to be your cologne… did you mess up?”

“Uh…” Keith floundered. And… oh my god was he blushing? Maybe he *did* mess up the potion. Oh man, Lance was going to feel so guilty if he made Keith mess up his homework.

“I mean, I…” Lance leaned forward, getting another whiff of the potion. This time, it didn’t smell like Keith’s cologne. It smelled like roasted marshmallows, so good that Lance could practically *taste* it. “Actually, it doesn’t just smell like your cologne,” he said. “It smells like marshmallows. Like, you know, s’mores or something, by a campfire.”

He leaned closer to the potion, trying to get another whiff. It was *amazing*.

“Oh… oh wow,” Keith said.
“Is that good?” Lance asked, “is it supposed to smell like s’mores?”

“Um, yeah, I guess,” Keith said with a shrug. “The potion smells differently to everyone.”

Lance took another deep breath of the potion, and this time, the scent of salt and seawater filled his nostrils. He blinked suddenly at the tears that formed in his eyes from the familiar scent. It smelled like home.

“Wait, so what are you smelling, then?” Lance asked.

Keith leaned forward, “um… I smell parchment. Like, the old paper of the books in the library.”

“Nerd,” Lance muttered.

“And I smell broomstick polish,” he said, a slight smile on his face.

Lance could imagine the scent, how many times had Keith polished his broom, breathing in the smell of fresh wood? Probably a lot. More than Lance, anyways. Lance hardly ever remembered to polish his broom.

“And, um,” Keith’s flush deepened, “wildberries.”

Wildberries?

Huh.

That was weird.

“Those are all really nice scents,” Lance said, resting his arms on the table. “Especially wildberries! Haha, I always use this wild berry scented line of lotions and skin care products that come when my family send care packages.”

“Oh, yeah,” Keith said, grabbing a glass vial and filling it with the potion. “I’ve noticed. You tend to smell like it a lot.”

And wait, hold up a second.

Keith noticed what he smelled like?

Well, that wasn’t making his heart beat faster at all.

“Oh… well, I can’t believe that this potion smells differently for everyone. Does it, like smell like what you’re thinking of or something?”

That would make sense. He was talking to Keith, so of course he would be thinking about Keith. And he was always thinking about home. But… he wasn’t thinking about marshmallows.

And was Keith really just sitting here thinking about quidditch and old books and wildberries while he worked on this potion?

“Um, or something,” Keith replied, biting his lips.

Lance hated himself for the ways his eyes seemed glued to the movement.

“It’s supposed to smell like a few things that you like,” Keith said, shifting on his stool before leaning forward slightly. “So I guess you must really like the scent of my cologne, huh?”
Lance felt himself blush, and hoped that it wasn’t visible. He reached up, rubbing at the back of his neck. “Um, yeah, it was really… nice.”

Keith smirked slightly, leaning back, apparently satisfied by whatever he saw on Lance’s face. He produced a few more glass vials, bottling more of the potion.

Lance felt like his face was on fire. Like, sure, Keith’s cologne had smelled great, but it was one of his favorite scents, apparently? Well, that was more than a little bit embarrassing.

He found himself leaning forward to get another whiff of the potion. This time, he could smell all of the scents at once, which should have been disgusting, but it was actually really nice. Marshmallows and the beach and Keith. Marshmallows at the beach with Keith. Wow, that suddenly made it sound way too appealing.

Lance dropped his chin down into one of his hands. “So, wait,” he said. “You’re telling me that one of your favorite scents is fucking broom polish?”

Keith paused, one of the glass vials half submerged in the potion. “Um, yeah,” he said with a shrug. “But that stuff stinks!” Lance sputtered. “That’s why I never polish my broom!”

Keith snorted, stifling a laugh.

“Oh, that is so not what I meant!” Lance said, pointing a finger at him. “You need to get your mind out of the gutter.”

“What?” Keith blinked at him, his expression smoothing into one of mock-innocence, but the slight smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth gave him away. “What the fuck did you just say?”

“Oh, that is so not what I meant!” Lance said, pointing a finger at him. “You need to get your mind out of the gutter.”

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“Um,” Lance stammered, hating the way that his face flushed. “N-Nothing. Forget it.”

Keith leaned forward, “What does it mean, Lance?” He pressed, and that was definitely a smirk rising on his face.

“It’s just a stupid muggle saying, I guess,” Lance said, wondering if the earth could possibly open up underneath him and swallow him whole. That would be great.

“You always explain your muggle sayings to me,” Keith said, arching a brow. “What’s different about this one?”

“It just… means that you took something the wrong way,” Lance said, leaning back in his seat.

Keith blinked at him, somehow still the picture of innocence. “And what do you think I took the wrong way?” He asked, arching a brow.

Lance stood abruptly, taking a few steps backwards and putting some much-needed space between himself and Keith.

Otherwise he was going to do something really stupid.

Like grab the front of Keith’s school robes and kiss him senseless right here in the potions classroom. God knows he only just managed to repair their friendship after everything that happened earlier.

“Right,” Lance said, his voice squeaking. “Um, you know what, I just remembered that I have to go talk to… Hunk about something. So, you know what, I better get going. Um, see you around,”
Lance said, making his way towards the door to the classroom.

“Um, Lance,” Keith said, a self-satisfied grin on his face as he turned back towards his potion. What was he so happy about, anyways? “You never tried to see if any potions would work on the shell.” Keith patted his own pocket of his school robes, apparently in reference to the shell. “Did you forget?”

Huh, he must keep his shell in the pocket of his school robes. Good to know.

“Well, it was a stupid idea, anyways,” Lance said, continuing to back up. “I’ll see you at our lesson tomorrow with Shiro? Okay, bye!” He said, slipping through the door and letting it fall closed behind him.

He slumped against the closed door, unable to completely process everything that had just happened. Talk about an emotional whirlwind. Not to mention that he was fairly certain that he could hear Keith’s laughter, muffled slightly by the thick slab of wood between them.

He wasn’t any closer to figuring out how to open the shell, and if it was possible, Lance was more confused than ever about where he stood with Keith. It was better than avoidance and not talking, he guessed, but it was still weird. That whole encounter had been weird, right?

Definitely weird.
Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Summary

Without knowing so, Lance's admission in the potions classroom has caused a change to begin in their relationship. A journal is dropped, a tower is climbed and a book is scoured.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so, so much to everyone who has been reading and commenting and live-tweeting this fic!!! All of your kind words have been much, much appreciated - I know we haven't responded to all of the comments, but I promise that we read all of them and that they mean so much to us, they really do keep us motivated :) and special shoutout to those of you over on twitter who have been live-tweeting us because those tweets literally make our day! If you want to join in the fun follow us on twitter @sunnyjolras and @slowklancing for updates about the fic and fun behind-the-scenes content like things we say while editing or really bad photos of us on skype. As far as a little bit of housekeeping, you might have noticed a change in the description, Cait and I have decided to switch out uploading schedule to be every other Friday so that we have more time to write new chapters for y'all! Hope you enjoy this chapter - slowklancing

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lance scooped up the leftover pieces from the game of Exploding Snap he and Pidge had been playing before his younger friend had remembered that they left their Divination assignment in the common room and had to abandon their game to have time to grab it before class. Apparently Professor Slav had foreseen in his crystal ball that one of the students would fail to turn in the assignment and Pidge was determined not to be that student.

The game of Exploding Snap was an effort to distract him, Lance knew, something that Pidge had thought might keep his mind off of the shell that he still couldn’t figure out how to open. If it also happened to take his mind off of the weird encounter with Keith down in the potions classroom the other day… then Lance wasn’t exactly about to complain.

He hadn’t seen Keith since, not because they were still actively avoiding each other, just because Lance had been practically holed up in the library trying to, and failing to, figure out how to open the shell. But all that time made it easy for Lance to get caught up in his head. To replay the conversation with Keith over and over. Because it had definitely been weird.

Right?

Like, he wasn’t imagining the way that Keith had seemed… different towards the end of their conversation?

So the break from the constant thoughts in his head and the never-ending stacks of books was nice.
Even if it meant sitting out in the barren courtyard to avoid the prying eyes of the other Ravenclaws.

The Courtyard was mostly empty, since it was cold and snowy outside, but that meant there were less people watching what he was doing, so Lance had found that the cool weather didn’t really bother him.

He slipped the game pieces back into his school bag. He had Charms next, so he should probably get to class.

Lance cast a quick drying spell on his robes so that he wouldn’t drip melted snow all over the castle, before heading inside.

He cut up one of the short-cuts that Keith had shown him (seriously how did he know so many shortcuts?); a staircase hidden behind a tapestry of medieval knights that shouted insults at you as you passed by them, stepping out onto the third floor. Okay, well, technically he had to push a portrait to the side before he stepped out onto the third floor, but… you know… logistics.

The hallway was empty when Lance stepped out into it, so he paused to lean against the wall. He was running a little early to Charms because Pidge bailed on him, and he didn’t relish being the first one to an empty classroom. He pulled the journal that Keith had loaned him ages ago with the special spells Shiro had designed, wondering idly if one of them would work against the magic shell.

Probably not, since there wouldn’t be a way for Allura or Lotor to figure it out, but maybe it was a loophole?

He flipped past the slashing spell that Keith had used against the Baku, and past some recipe for a ‘dragon-breathing’ potion and… huh, that actually sounded amazing, Lance would have to try and brew that at some point.

Some part of Lance dimly registered the sound of footsteps approaching, but he didn’t think anything of it until a hand came up to rest on the stone wall next to his head.

Startled, Lance dropped the book he was holding, finding himself face to face with…

“Sorry,” Keith said, not looking at all sorry, a smirk playing at the corners of his lips. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Well you shouldn’t sneak up on people,” Lance mumbled, an embarrassed flush filling his cheeks.

And, wow, okay they were really close.

Close enough that Lance could make out the slightest swirls of indigo in Keith’s grey eyes. Like, really, really close.

Like, did-Keith-have-any-idea-what-personal-space-meant close.

Because Keith’s arm was stretched out, pressing into the wall over Lance’s shoulder, while he leaned forward, effectively boxing Lance in.

And he was definitely wearing the cologne from the Yule Ball, because Lance could smell it really clearly when they were this close together and it still made Keith smell even better than usual.

Which was just… extremely unfair.

Especially considering that Keith never used to wear cologne before. Hm. When had that changed?
Now that he was thinking about it, Lance couldn’t remember Keith wearing cologne at all. Ever. At least… not until the Yule Ball.

“I think you dropped something,” Keith said, his gaze flickering down towards the book on the ground, his eyes widening slightly when he realised what it was.

Shit, he had promised to take extra care when handling Shiro’s journals.

Lance felt himself blushing even harder, even though he wasn’t really sure why. It wasn’t like Keith had caught him writing in his diary or anything. Keith was the one who had given him the freaking journal in the first place.

“Right, yeah,” Lance said, swallowing past the sudden lump in his throat. He used his foot to push the book closer to himself, but he didn’t lean down to pick it up. He felt frozen by the weight of Keith’s gaze. There was something heavy there, something a little darker but new and exciting, that hadn’t been there before.

Lance couldn’t place it.

“You know,” Keith said, his voice dropping even lower. “I never really thanked you for helping me figure out the first riddle.”

Lance wrinkled his nose, recalling how he and Keith had puzzled over the first riddle together. “No,” he said indignantly. “You just yelled at me for trying to let you win.” He sassed back, starting to cross his arms over his chest before giving up and letting them hang limply at his side.

“Well, you shouldn’t have tried to let me win, you’re better than that, we’ve been over this dumbass,” Keith said, his voice rising before seeming to drop down an octave. “But… thank you, Lance. For everything.”

Lance swallowed again, and he felt Keith’s eyes track the movement of his Adam’s apple. “Well, you… you’re welcome,” he said, feeling like his mouth was, like, super dry. Seriously, when was the last time he had some water.

“So, I want to pay you back,” Keith continued with a smirk, leaning in even closer.

Lance stiffened at the sudden lack of space between them, before forcing himself to relax. He had to be cool. He could totally be cool. Right?

Lance arched an eyebrow. “Um… how are you planning on, um, doing that? Exactly?” He heard himself ask, his voice breaking slightly. And, oh, that did not sound cool.

“Well, you know,” Keith whispered, tilting his head so that his lips were brushing against the shell of Lance’s ear. His breath was warm, and Lance felt shivers race down his spine at the contact. He held his breath, waiting to hear what Keith was going to say. Something about the Yule Ball, maybe. Finally. Something about whatever had... happened between them that night. Or maybe something about whatever that potion was the other day, because Lance still hadn’t figured out what kind of potion that was. Or maybe something like...

“The Astronomy tower can be a really good place to do some thinking. Especially at night.”

Huh?

Lance blinked in confusion. “What?” He said aloud, “Keith, you’re, uh, you’re not making any
sense.”

That was not even in the realm of possibilities of what he thought Keith was going to say.

“Just,” Keith pulled back slightly, just far enough that Lance could no longer make out the flecks of indigo in his eyes, “bring your shell with you. The clear air can be... illuminating.”

Then Keith pulled away, his arm dropping down from its place on the wall. He leaned down, scooping the leather journal off the ground and pressed it against Lance’s chest. “Try not to drop it next time,” he warned.

Lance instinctively wrapped one of his free hands around the book, keeping it pressed against his chest.

“Right,” Lance said. “I, um, I won’t.”

“Remember what I said,” Keith said, smirking. “Anyways, I have to get to class.”

“Right,” Lance said again, as Keith pulled away and headed in the direction of the staircases.

Once Lance was completely sure that the older boy was out of sight, Lance slumped against the wall, his knees giving out from underneath him.

It was so unfair. Not only did Keith smell great and have really pretty eyes, he had great arms too! Lance felt a little faint, like one of the characters in Rachel’s romance novels. As in, he was actually breathless. Was Keith even aware of the power that he held over him? Probably not.

What the fuck had just happened?

<<<<>

This was stupid, Lance thought as he wrapped his cloak tighter around himself. It was hours after curfew later that day and he was halfway up the stairs to the top of the astronomy tower and it was already freezing.

And it was all stupid Keith’s fault.

Why did Keith have to be all vague about telling Lance to go to the top of the astronomy tower with the shell? Like, what the hell did that even mean?

Lance slipped his hand into the pocket of his school robe, double-checking that the navy blue shell was actually inside. Which it was. Just like the three other times that Lance had checked.

Shaking his head slightly at himself, Lance reached the top of the tower.

Up this high, the air was bitter cold, the wind making it even worse. At least it wasn’t snowing.

Lance stopped at the top of the astronomy tower, looking around. He had only been up here a few times for classes, but astronomy wasn’t exactly his specialization, so he didn’t really have a lot of reasons for making the trip up to Hogwarts’ tallest tower. It was the perfect place to see the stars from, with a large telescope taking up most of the tower. The tower didn’t have walls, just a few pillars supporting the ceiling and a low railing to keep students from falling over.

Outside, the night sky was a swirl of black and fading purple from the sunset, the stars twinkling brightly. A crescent moon hung in the sky. The Hogwarts grounds were snowcovered, the moonlight reflecting off of them, giving the illusion of daylight, broken only by the black blur of the forbidden
forest in the distance.

Okay, he was here.

He was here with the shell.

He was here, in the astronomy tower, with the shell.

What the fuck was he supposed to do now?

God, why couldn’t Keith have given him some more specific instructions?

You know, instead of pinning him against a wall and giving him enough material to fantasise about for the next decade.

Lance let out a puff of air.

He couldn’t think about that right now, couldn’t allow himself to be distracted by how flustered Keith had made him, he had important things to do.

Lance padded out to the center of the tower, dropping down into a sitting position. He slipped the navy blue shell out of his pocket, running his fingers across the surface.

Almost instantaneously, the shell released with a quiet hiss of air, popping open slightly.

What the fuck?

This seemed way too easy.

Was it specifically the astronomy tower that caused the latch to release? Or the height? Or the air? Or the time of day?

Lance wasn’t entirely sure.

He pushed the shell the rest of the way open, revealing a small piece of parchment tied with a dark blue ribbon.

Another riddle.

Of course.

His life didn’t need to be easy, no sir, not even for one second.

Lance slipped the tiny scroll out from the shell, slipping the ribbon off of it with one hand while he pulled out his wand with the other.

“Lumos,” he whispered, a soft light beginning to glow at the end of his wand.

He held his wand against the parchment, so that he could make out the writing. The ink shimmered in the wandlight, making it hard to read for a second, before clearing out.

Beasts and men, a free-for-all fight

A trial by fire at such a height

Crystal hidden and volatile
Navigate confined straits with guile
A creature’s storm from which you hide
A beast fills space unoccupied
Beat the menagerie global
Find the prize of metal noble

Lance wrinkled his nose. That made absolutely no sense.

What the hell was this?

This riddle seemed even harder than the first one. Hidden crystals? A creature that could summon a storm? And what the fuck was the menagerie global?

Of course, to add more fuel to the fire, Keith wasn’t even going to help him this time.

Not to mention all of the other shit that was going on in his life. Making up with Pidge, dealing with Romelle ooh-ing and aah-ing over Allura, homework, James motherfucking Griffin, and whatever the fuck his situation was with Keith now ever since Christmas.

And nobody could help him with any of it.

He was completely alone.

He tipped his head back, looking up towards the glass widows set into the roof of the Astronomy Tower, watching a few wandering clouds pass by and obscuring the constellations he was beginning to count, wondering idly if there was someone up in the heavens laughing at him.

That had to be it, right?

He was just some kind of cosmic joke to the universe.

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The researching process wasn’t off to a great start, Lance mused a day later, as he slipped his books back into his school bag. It had been a fairly uneventful day of research in the library. He still had no idea what the “hidden crystals” the riddle referred to could be, despite spending most of the afternoon in the geology section of the library (which was, admittedly, a very small section of the library, stupid wizards and their irrational hatred of science).

“Going somewhere?” An all-too-familiar voice asked.

Lance hated the way he felt himself jump. “Keith!” He said, his voice coming out a little too high pitched. Okay, so maybe he hadn’t totally recovered from their encounter in the school hallway the other day.

Keith gave him a tiny wave of his hand, as he leaned against the bookshelf beside him.

“Oh, um, yeah, I was just going back to the Common Room,” Lance said, shrugging helplessly. “I couldn’t find anything useful today, so…”

Keith glanced around, apparently just registering what section of the library they were in.
Which was silly, because surely he had come to work on the riddle as well, right? It wasn’t like he was just wondering around the library looking for Lance…right?

“Working on the riddle?” Keith asked, arching one of his brows.

“Yeah,” Lance said, scowling and crossing his arms over his chest, “and you could have just told me that going up to the Astronomy Tower would open the shell, like a normal person, instead of being all vague and cryptic!”

“But my way was much more fun,” Keith replied, smirking.

“More fun? More fun?!” Lance screeched, “I felt like such an idiot just hanging out up there in the dark waiting for something to happen.”

Keith shrugged. “I stand by what I said.”

“It was freezing!” Lance continued, “And snowing and the middle of the night. I could have been caught and got sentenced to detention! I could have gotten hypothermia! I could have died! What would you have done, then?”

Keith rolled his eyes, “You wouldn’t have died, moron. Besides, I didn’t make you go up in the middle of the night.”

“There was absolutely zero way I was getting up the tower during the day idiot. Not unless you want Allura and Lotor to know too, or for one of the teachers to question where I’m sneaking off to.”

Lance implored, looking at Keith and trying to get across just how obvious he felt his points were.

“You just need to find a way to move around the castle unseen,” Keith said. “That way you can go wherever you want, whenever you want.”

And, as if in a direct contrast to how obvious Lance was being, there Keith had to go again, being as cryptic as ever.

“Oh, like you know how to do that,” Lance said, frowning. “Invisibility spells are, like, super hard.”

“Who said I needed a spell?” Keith asked.

Lance scoffed, “How else are you getting around unseen? It’s not like you can apparate. Apparition lessons aren’t until March. Plus, I don’t think you can even do that here.”

Keith’s eyes gleamed. “That’s for me to know, and you to find out later.”

Lance shook his head, “That’s just what you’re saying because you’re lying. You don’t have some secret way to get around the castle and we both know it.”

But, now that Lance was thinking about it, if Keith did have a secret way to get around, that would make a lot of sense. After all, how else had he learned about the secret tunnels and passageways all around the castle? Lance could recall him mentioning some secret path to Honeydukes, how on earth could he have gotten to Hogsmeade without getting caught? How did he seem to appear out of thin air wherever Lance was?

Keith rolled his eyes, “You can believe whatever you want to, Lance. I know what I’m talking about.”

“So, Mr.I-Know-Everything,” Lance said, sidling up to Keith, “have you figured out the riddle,
yet?”

For a brief moment, he was hopeful, hopeful that Keith would put aside the events of the first trial and realise that they’d both have a much easier time if they worked together, if they figured out the riddle as a team.

“Even if I have, I wouldn’t tell you about it, we agreed that we were going to solve this one separately. We’re supposed to be **competing** against one another,” Keith reminded him. “I’m not letting you pull anything this time.”

“You’re no fun,” Lance groaned. *There goes that plan*, he thought.

Keith raised an eyebrow, a glint appearing in his eyes that Lance didn’t know how to identify.

“I’ll have you know,” Keith said, his voice dropping lower as he leaned in closer. “That I can be very fun.”

Lance swallowed, taken aback by the sudden intensity in Keith’s gaze.

And… oh god… Keith was **definitely** wearing that cologne again.

Lance could swear that he had never noticed Keith wearing it before the Yule Ball, but it seemed like he was wearing it all the freaking time now.

It was like he was wearing it with the sole purpose of torturing Lance.

But that was crazy, because Keith had absolutely no way of knowing what it did to him. No way of knowing just how much he loved it, even if Lance had told him he kinda liked it in the potions classroom a few days before. But surely that wasn’t enough for Keith to pull a complete 180 on his grooming habits.

Lance wasn’t that obvious, was he?

“Um, hey, Keith,” Lance said, swallowing past the lump that had appeared in his throat. “You’re, um, you’re wearing that cologne again. That’s um, that’s cool. Yeah. Cool.”

Keith smirked, and god, what was *with* him? Lance had never seen him smile like this before… before… well, since a few days ago. Maybe since before the Yule Ball?

Did it have something to do with that?

“I am,” Keith nodded.

“It’s, um, nice,” Lance said lamely.

Maybe it was some kind of drug or something. That would explain why his head was spinning and he felt like he was maybe about to throw up. Drugs could increase your heart rate right? That was a thing, right?

“I wear it every day,” Keith said, pulling back just slightly.

“You never used to,” Lance said, the words out of his mouth before his brain could filter them. “I mean, I don’t think you used to. And I think I would have noticed. I mean, not that I like, spend a lot of time smelling you or anything because that would be creepy, but…”

“Lance,” Keith cut him off, looking amused. He was smiling, a smile that was so genuinely amused
and fond that Lance wasn’t sure he had ever seen it before, like Keith was in on something that he wasn’t.

Lance snapped his mouth closed.

“I’m just teasing.” He chuckled, his smile still so, so warm. Lance could feel his heartbeat pounding in his head now, and it wasn’t helping him to think at all. “It’s new,” Keith said. “I got it specially for the Yule Ball.”

“Right,” Lance nodded. “That, um, that makes sense.”

“You know, special occasion and all that.”

“Yeah, uh, yeah. Totally.”

“I’m glad that you seem to like it so much, though,” Keith said, raising his eyebrows. “Guess I made a good selection.”

“Y-you did,” Lance agreed, nodding. A little too vigorously, maybe, like he was a fucking bobblehead or something. God, he was an embarrassment. Sorry Marco, maybe Lance would be giving him a run for his money for the title of Eternal Cuban Bachelor.

“But now that I know you like it so much, I might have to make a point to wear it more often,” Keith said, biting his lip. His smile became smaller, more earnest, and Lance had no clue what to do anymore because apparently his life had become one confusing twist after another.

Oh, god, could lightning strike him or the ground open up underneath him or really anything so that he could stop having this conversation with Keith?

Where was the universe with a grudge when you needed it?

Couldn’t the people laughing at him from Up Above maybe throw him a bone for once?

“Anyways,” Lance said, starting to shift desperately past Keith, clutching his school bag to his chest. He tried averting his eyes, getting as far away as possible from Keith without being blatantly rude. “I, um, should probably get going. I mean, unless you want to change your mind and help me?” Lance turned, determined to try and save some of his dignity and act nonchalant.

“I’m not helping you with the riddle,” Keith said, rolling his eyes. “No way you’re changing my mind on that. But, if you want to, we could work on our Defense Against the Dark Arts essays together. Shiro’s having the sixth and seventh years both study werewolves right now. I could use a hand.”

Lance mentally debated it. He had already started the essay and he had some other school work that was probably more important, not to mention the riddle that he still had to solve, but on the other hand… he wasn’t about to turn up an opportunity to study with Keith.

He couldn’t really refuse Keith anything, if he was being honest.

“Sure,” Lance said, resigning himself to his fate, sitting back down at the small table he had just abandoned, pulling his half-completed essay from his bag. “Get over here, mullet.” He teased, trying to restore some balance to the universe by making fun of Keith’s hair, like what was the usual before the whole tournament fiasco. “I’ve got a head start so you better get writing.”

Keith smiled, pulling out the chair across from Lance and dropping down into it, pulling out his own
school supplies. "No need to turn this into another competition. Just show me what you’ve got so far, you massive nerd."

And Lance might have imagined it, but he thought that he could feel Keith’s foot pressed against his underneath the table. He wasn’t imagining how much he liked it.

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Two days later, Lance flipped through one of the books on crystals that he had found in the library and taken back to his dorm room. It was late enough at night that all of his roommates were already asleep, but the curtains around his bed were spelled so that none of the dim light from his wand could escape. So far, none of them seemed to be the “volatile” crystals that the riddle described. In fact, Lance wasn’t even sure what a “volatile” crystal would entail.

According to Pidge, crystals were ‘solid materials whose constituents were arranged in a highly ordered microscopic structure’ but that wasn’t very helpful. Or really entirely understandable. Or English, quite frankly. Science was not his strong point. Huh, maybe that’s why he was a wizard. Either that or his education had failed him, and he wasn’t sure which reason he would prefer.

Anyway, Lance did know that a lot of things in the world could technically be considered crystals: snowflakes, diamonds, and even table salt. But he had a feeling the riddle wasn’t referring to table salt.

He flipped past another page, already nearing the end of the book.

Wait.

Hold up.

Lance flipped back to the page he had just left.

Xanthorium crystals.

He let his eyes skim over the short paragraph about them, looking for the words that had caught his attention in the first place.

There.

Xanthorium crystals are an invisible highly explosive mineral high in nitrate salts.

Okay, none of the other crystals referred to in this book had been labeled as “highly explosive” and exploding rocks definitely had to fall under the “volatile” category. Plus they were invisible. He was pretty sure that invisible had to equal hidden.

Lance reread the paragraph about the crystals. It was short, obviously there wasn’t much information on them. Chemical composition, magical properties and uses. But from what Lance could gather, they definitely sounded like what the riddle was talking about.

Lance folded down the corner of the page so that he wouldn’t lose track of it, slipping the riddle out of the pocket of his school robes.

Beasts and men, a free-for-all fight
A trial by fire at such a height
Crystal hidden and volatile
Navigate confined straits with guile
A creature’s storm from which you hide
A beast fills space unoccupied
Defeat the menagerie global
Find the prize of metal noble

So the Xanthorium crystals had to be the hidden crystals from the third line, which probably meant they wouldn’t be easy to avoid. And if they really were invisible, then that meant that he had to find some way to make them visible. And, frankly, Lance wasn’t even really sure where to start with that.

The first line seemed to be implying that not only were there going to be monsters that the Champions would have to battle against, but that they might be battling one another as well. That was bound to be a problem. The other three champions had been chosen by the goblet because they were competent. He couldn’t underestimate them. Keith had been the best in the duelling club, nearly unbeatable. And Lance didn’t even want to think about how skilled Allura and Lotor had to be. They had to be at least on par, right?

Lance made a mental note to pay far more attention in his lessons with Shiro. Speaking of which, now that he and Keith were somewhat back to normal, he could actually start attending those again. Hopefully Shiro wasn’t too mad, or anything.

The second line talked about the trial being at a height, Lance wasn’t quite sure what to make of that. The last trial had been underwater so maybe this trial would be up in the air? Or… maybe on top of something really tall? Although the “navigate confined straits” line sounded kind of like some sort of cave system…

But navigate could also be referring to some sort of maze? If the champions had to find something, it would make sense for it to be at the center of a maze? Like those experiments with mice and cheese. Only the champions were the mice and some metal thing was the cheese. That didn’t sound like it would taste very good. Or be easy to eat. And Lance wasn’t really appreciating the fact that he was comparing himself to a mouse. It wasn’t exactly a vote of confidence.

Maybe the crystals were a part of the confined straits, maybe he had to travel through an invisible, completely explosive maze. Or maybe they were just obstacles inside an already constructed place. There were so many variables, too many things to even begin theorising about. He may be a Ravenclaw, but he didn’t know if he was that smart. It was all a little overwhelming.

And Lance had no idea what types of beasts he would be fighting against this time. Did he know of any creatures that could creature a storm? There was a thunderbird, but that tended to only be found in the United States… and they were solitary creatures, definitely not the “menagerie global” the riddle talked about. He probably had a Care of Magical Creatures book lying around somewhere that he could use. Or he could use it as an excuse to go visit Coran, he hadn’t been to visit him since all this trial stuff started, and he usually made it a point to stop by for tea every once in awhile.

Lance reached over, setting both the library book and the riddle onto his dresser, before flopping back onto his bed and spreading out like a starfish. He stared up at the canopy, knowing that his mind would be buzzing with too many thoughts to have any hope of finding sleep tonight.

Hardly anything had changed in the past few days. On top of the trial, he still had his normal homework, and Keith had recruited him into helping him study for the upcoming N.E.W.T.s, with him being the year above and all. And it made sense, seeing as they spent so much time together in the library anyways.

So yeah, school was stressful enough as it was, but now… with the second trial seeming even more
real, now that Lance had a tangible riddle to solve…

Lance closed his eyes, turning to bury his face in his pillow, and trying to block out thoughts of invisible mazes and exploding crystals and duels and mice and cheese and Keith’s smirking face as he had pinned him against the wall and that smile from a few days ago that Lance had never seen on Keith before.

Lance felt himself drifting closer to the edge of unconsciousness, as he tried to recall every detail of Keith’s face. Every indigo speck in his eyes, the way the grey seemed darkest right around his irises. The way he flushed when embarrassed, gryffindor red staining his cheeks. How his brow furrowed when incensed, the way his hands clenched when nervous, the care-free, wind swept smile that graced his face as he flew. Every interaction, every passing glance and meaningful smile from the past few months came to the forefront of his mind.

Lance’s mind might have been in utter turmoil with all of his tumultuous thoughts, but Keith felt like he was the oasis in the desert, the eye of the storm, a breath of fresh air. Like he was the wind and the salt spray from the ocean along the Malecón back home in Havana.

And, sure, maybe Lance felt alone sometimes, felt helpless with all of the things he had to complete and the never-ending problems he faced, but maybe it didn’t matter if Keith kept smiling at him like that. If he had Keith to come back to when it all became too much.

He may not know exactly where he and Keith stood, or where they were going, but he had a feeling this was at least something in his life that was truly, painfully, right.

As he began to drift off, he couldn’t help but wonder, idly, if Keith; beautiful, amazing, strong-willed Keith, had solved any of the riddle yet.

Chapter End Notes

This whole fic started a long, long time ago when I messaged Cait and said "hey wouldn’t it be cool to write a klance fic based on the scene in Goblet of Fire where Cedric tells Harry how to open the golden egg" and now over 100k later, here we are! Also everyone tell Cait what a good job she did with this riddle bc she's amazing and I don’t deserve the amount of work that she puts in to making sure that every aspect of the riddle is perfect <3
Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Summary

The riddle is revealed and the race to solve it is on. An article is published, some help is given, and a date is set.

Chapter Notes

well hello there! I’m so happy to see that we’ve passed 8000 hits and 800 kudos’. You are all the best!! Fun fact: Kate and I panic wrote half this chapter, but we still think you’ll enjoy it!! Let us know what you think either here or on twitter. Please leaves us some kudos’ or a comment, or tag us in a livetweet! Thank you all, we love you so much <3
-cait

The door to the spare classroom that Shiro used for his private training squeaked when it opened. Which, really, in a school full of wizards, Lance was pretty sure that there was something they could do about it. But instead the hinges seemed to shriek as Lance pushed the door open, announcing his presence to the two people that he already knew would be inside. Like he wasn’t worried enough about showing up tonight as it was.

As he had thought, Keith and Shiro were already inside the room, Keith’s wand halfway through the motions for some spell, but he froze in place as soon as Lance slipped through the door.

“Lance,” Shiro said, something like surprise in his voice, as he crossed his arms over his chest and shifted his weight on his feet. “We haven’t seen you in awhile.”

Lance didn’t like the underlying accusation there.

He bit his lip. “Yeah, I know. Sorry about that, Shiro.”

And he was sorry, but he also wasn’t sure how to explain to Shiro that it had seemed like Keith was avoiding him. That he was kind of avoiding Keith. That they were avoiding each other. You know, at least not without sounding like some kind of over-dramatic teenager.

Shiro nodding, accepting the apology and not prying. That was what Lance liked about Shiro. He was a good listener, and part of being a good listener meant knowing when people didn’t want to talk about something. Shiro’s gaze slid over to Keith, and when Keith gave him a slight nod, Shiro turned his attention back to Lance.

“Well, alright then, Lance. Today we were working on non-verbal spell casting. Specifically for duelling. How are your nonverbal spells?”

“Not great,” Lance admitted, crossing the room quickly to take up his normal position across from Keith.
But nonverbal casting, especially if they were focusing on dueling spells. They could give him an
element of surprise during the second trial, especially if Allura and Lotor didn’t know that he could
cast nonverbally. Of course, that was assuming that he would be able to learn some of the spells. But
Shiro had never failed him before, and Lance didn’t really see why that should start now, no matter
how incompetent he could prove to be.

“With nonverbal spells,” Shiro said, “it’s best to pick a spell that you’re already very familiar with
casting. And simpler spells are better. Especially for beginners. Just focus on your intention, on your
wand movements. And concentrate. Your concentration is the most important part.”


“Sixth years usually start learning how to cast nonverbally later in the year, so Keith will have a bit
of an advantage on you. At least until you get the hang of it,” Shiro warned. “I mean,” Shiro sucked
in a deep breath. “I’m not saying that Keith is a better spellcaster than you, it’s just that he’s already
been working on nonverbal casting for months and-”

“Shiro,” Lance cut him off, with a chuckle. “Relax. It’s fine, I knew what you meant.”

Shiro looked relieved, and he gestured for both of them to get their wands ready.

Lance made sure that his feet were squared off, before raising his wand. Keith would be offensive
right off the bat, he always launched in head first. Which meant that Lance could practice casting a
shielding spell nonverbally. He was familiar enough with shielding spells that it shouldn’t really be
that difficult. At least, not in theory.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Shiro said, stepping back so he wouldn’t be hit by a stray spell.

Keith flicked his wrist, and as soon as Lance caught sight of the tiny motion he concentrated as hard
as he could on projecting a shield in front of him. There was a faint spark of silver light at the tip of
his wand, it fluttered in the air in front of him for a moment before dissolving in a soft puff of silver
light. Lance wasn’t entirely sure where he had gone wrong, but he didn’t have much time to think
about it, either.

Barely a second later, Keith’s spell slammed into his chest, sending him flying through the air.

Lance’s back connected with the ground, knocking the wind from his lungs, and his head connected
with the stone a second later.

Ow.

He reached up, gingerly touching the back of his head, but before he could sit up, there were hands
pressing against his shoulders.

“Merlin,” Keith said, his face swimming in front of Lance. “Are you okay?”

“M’alright,” Lance said, letting Keith help him into a sitting position. “But there should definitely be
mats on these floors. And the walls. No stone, fuck stone.”

“Well you weren’t supposed to let me hit you,” Keith pointed out, and Lance felt his hand slide up
his neck to run over the back of his scalp gently. “But you’re okay?”

“I’m okay, really,” Lance promised.

Keith didn’t look convinced. “You don’t want to go to Madam Pomfrey’s? Just to be safe?”
Lance shook his head. Sure, he could feel a headache forming, but he doubted it was a concussion. The stone floor had hurt like a bitch, but it had nothing on the rough-housing he had used to do with his two older brothers. Or even Veronica, for that matter. He was fine.

He felt Keith’s fingers tighten their grip on his hair, before relaxing slightly, smoothing it down instead. “If you’re sure,” Keith said slowly, even though he still looked concerned.

“It was just the Knockback Jinx, Keith,” Lance said, “I’ve had worse injuries from my siblings, really, and they’re muggles. No fancy magic involved. I’m fine.”

“Okay,” Keith allowed, sitting back on his heels. “I’ll stick to the disarming charm next time, I promise.”

“Next time my freaking shield charm is going to work,” Lance said confidently, as he let Keith haul them both off the ground. “So it won’t matter.”

“Nonverbal shielding spells are difficult,” Keith pointed out, not letting go of his grip on Lance’s arm. “Do you want to try and go on the offensive?”

Lance considered the offer. Nonverbal offensive spells would probably be better for getting the drop on the other Champions… “Yeah, okay, let’s switch for a bit. But I’m definitely going to master nonverbal shielding spells before the second trial.”

“Confident much?” Keith asked, a smirk playing at the corner of his mouth. “I’m pretty sure you were literally laying on the floor two seconds ago.”

Lance waved his hand lazily. “That was one time, Keith. Just wait, my nonverbal shielding spells will put yours to shame.”

Keith rolled his eyes. “I’ll believe it when I see it, Álvarez.”

“Is that a challenge, Mullet?” Lance asked, leaning in closer to Keith.

“Enough with your freaky fetish with my hair,” Keith grumbled, but shifted closer as he said it so he couldn’t have been too offended.

“I was not petting you!” Keith sputtered, his face turning bright red. “I was just checking to make sure you hadn’t gone and injured yourself. Again. And, you just… your hair is really soft.” The last part was mumbled under Keith’s breath, so quiet that Lance could barely hear it.

“Alright, enough you two,” Shiro said, stepping up. “Lance, are you okay?”

“I’m fine, really. We can get back to training,” Lance said, turning to look at his Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.

Shiro nodded, but his attention was no longer aimed towards Lance. Instead, it was fixed on Keith, with his eyebrows raised. Some sort of silent conversation passing between them, one that Lance didn’t know how to read.

Keith narrowed his eyes into a glare, and then Shiro broke his gaze away and shook his head softly. “Adam is not going to believe this,” he muttered under his breath. “He owes me ten galleons.”

“Uh… You alright, Shiro?” Lance questioned, wondering if maybe it was Shiro who had hit his
“What? Yeah, I’m fine, Lance.” Shiro shook his head slightly, “Alright. Let’s get back to it. Lance, that was a good attempt at the charm, but I think Keith is right. You should go on the offensive this time, stick to easier spells that you’ve known for years. Keith, you go on the defensive this time. Ready? Let’s try this again.”

The rest of the training session passed in a blur of nonverbal disarming charms, some of which were actually pretty successful by the end. They didn’t pierce Keith’s shield charms, but Shiro had said that they were good enough attempts at nonverbal casting that he was confident Lance would have it down by the time the second trial rolled around.

So Lance couldn’t really help the small grin that was playing on his lips as he scooped his school bag off the floor and made to follow Keith out the door.

But he was stopped by the strong presence of Shiro’s hand landing on his shoulder.

“You did good today, Lance,” Shiro told him. “How have you been?”

“Good,” Lance said. “Busy, you know, working on the second trial stuff.”

Shiro nodded. “I’m glad that you and Keith have worked out whatever it was that was going on, it’s nice to have you back.”

He clapped Lance on the shoulder, studying Lance carefully, before he slipped out the door, leaving Lance to stare after his form. At least until Keith stopped in the middle of the hallway and turned back to look for him, seeming confused to realise that Lance wasn’t right behind him.

“Are you coming?” He hollered impatiently.

Lance nodded, slipping into a jog so that he could catch up to Keith. “Yeah, sorry.”

“Do you want to go down to the kitchens?” Keith asked, “I’m starving.”

“That sounds perfect,” Lance said, and if he sounded a little breathless, well, he could always just blame the exercise.

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“Are you drinking that?” Lance asked, dropping down across the table from Pidge, and eyeing their mug of coffee appreciatively.

Pidge wrinkled their nose. “Yes. I need caffeine to wake up in the morning, you know that. Not to mention, I was up all night working on this assignment for Ancient Runes…”

Lance yawned. “Ugh, boring.”

“Actually, it’s really interesting. I mean when you think about how wizards used to use runes as a way of communicating…”

“Dude,” Hunk said, dropping down into the seat next to Lance at the Ravenclaw table. “Even I think that sounds boring.”

“See!” Lance pointed out triumphantly. “Even Hunk agrees with me!”

“Hunk is a traitor,” Pidge pouted. “A dirty, dirty traitor who isn’t allowed to work on my
“Sorry, bud,” Hunk said, sounding genuinely sorry, as he piled sticky buns onto a plate, slipping a few of them to Lance. “I thought that if I crossed the wires…”

“You could cause the whole thing to short out? I know, it worked,” Pidge rolled their eyes.

“Woah, man, what did you do to Pidge?” Lance questioned, ripping off part of the sticky bun and tossing it into his mouth.

“Hunk caused a minor explosion,” Pidge grumbled, “and ruined months of work. But it’s fine. It’s totally fine.” Pidge’s eyebrow twitched, betraying just how very-much-not-fine it actually was.

Lance raised his eyebrows. “I missed an explosion? And no one thought to tell me about it?”

“A minor explosion,” Hunk pointed out.

“A minor explosion is still an explosion, buddy,” Lance said.

“But, I mean, it didn’t even singe Pidge’s eyebrows off like last time, so I really don’t think that it counts,” Hunk protested.

“Morning, everyone,” Romelle greeted cheerfully, sliding into the seat next to Pidge. “What are we talking about?”

“Apparently Hunk and Pidge caused a minor explosion yesterday,” Lance informed her. “Which is a complete and utter betrayal. Because I could have sworn that we agreed the explosions would only happen when I’m around to witness them. Instead I just get to see Pidge and Hunk arguing over whether or not they should use the red wire or the yellow wire for hours.”

“Well it was Hunk’s use of the yellow wire that caused all of this,” Pidge scowled, “if he would have just listened to me and-”

“Ugh! Enough! If I have to hear about those wires any more, I might actually start crying,” Lance told them seriously. “You two totally distracted me from my Care of Magical Creatures homework the other day.”

“Coran doesn’t even care if you do the essays,” Pidge pointed out. “Because you’re, like, his favorite.”

“I know,” Lance said with a hint of pride. But actually, he hadn’t been down to visit Coran in ages. And he normally made it a habit to stop by for tea every once in a while, since Coran was kind of like his only family here in the U.K. He really should visit him soon. He kept saying he would.

“Oh, here come the owls!” Romelle pointed out, as letters and packages began to get dropped down towards the tables.

A copy of the Daily Prophet landed on Romelle’s plate of scrambled eggs and toast, effectively staining a good portion of it with butter.

Seriously, wizards must have realised by now that owls are not the most efficient postal delivery service.

Romelle shook out the paper and scanned the front page. “It’s the article about the Yule Ball,” Romelle said groaning as she shook out the paper and slid it across the table so that Lance could look
“Do I even want to know what that bitch said this time?” Lance asked.

Most of the front page was taken up by a moving picture of the champions mid-waltz, and Lance resolved that even if the rest of the article was terrible, he would cut out that picture. Maybe he could send it home to Rachel, she would appreciate seeing the result of her handiwork, no doubt.

THE TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT’S YULE BALL: THE EVENT OF THE SEASON

Elegant Dances, Shocking Couples, and a Christmas Season Unlike Any Other!

Written by Rita Skeeter

Come the winter holidays, most students would be packing their trunks and planning to return home. But not so for the students of Hogwarts, Durmstrang, and Beauxbatons. For one of the traditional events accompanying the Triwizard Tournament is the Yule Ball, a festive celebration of school unity. The Triwizard Champions, of course, take center stage at the celebration, opening the dance with a waltz, before the dance floor is opened to the rest of the students. In addition to the dancing, there is also an elegant dinner, before the classic and timeless dancing gives way to what apparently is a concert from the Weird Sisters.

The champions and their dates were the very pictures of elegance, as can be seen in the picture above, even given some of the more questionable fashion choices. Lance Álvarez opted for formal muggle fashion instead of dress robes, while Allura Altea and Romelle Pollux both wore muggle-inspired dresses. Luckily, some wizards know how to keep tradition alive, and Keith Kogane, Lotor Daibazaal, and Acxa Sincline all wore traditional dress robes. Altea attended the dance with Pollux, Kogane with Álvarez, and Daibazaal with Sincline.

Other notable couplings included Hogwarts’ Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher Takashi Shirogane, who attended the dance with his fiance, Adam Sharma, a member of the ministry who has been instrumental in the design of this year’s Triwizard Tournament. And no school event would be complete without the headmasters! Hogwarts Headmaster Samuel Holt attended with his wife, Colleen. Beauxbatons Headmaster Alfor Altea was spotted socializing with the Hogwarts’ Care of Magical Creatures teacher. Only Durmstrang Headmistress Haggar Daibazaal attended alone, and refused to comment when I asked her whether or not Lotor’s father was still in the picture. The notoriously private Daibazaal family has refused to meet with me multiple times, as well as other reporters who were interested in telling the story of their family. Whether this is because they’re truly just private people or have something to hide is anyone’s guess.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

Lance looked up just in time to watch Keith drop down onto the table’s bench next to him.

“Well,” Pidge interrupted before Lance could even speak. “Hunk crossed the wrong wires on our technomancy experiment the other day and he made it explode.”

“That wasn’t my fault!” Hunk cried. “Stop bringing it up!”

Keith raised an eyebrow, turning to shoot a confused look towards Lance.

But all Lance could do was shrug.

“Are you sure that you weren’t working with Lance?” Keith asked Pidge, his voice light and teasing, as he nudged Lance with his elbow. There was something in his voice Lance couldn’t quite place,
but it sounded fond. “Did he ever tell you about the time he tried to non-verbally cast Incendio and it blew up in his face? I thought he was going to burn his eyebrows off.”

At any other time, Lance would have had some sort of biting remark, maybe a counter story about a time when Keith had done something wrong in training. But, Lance couldn’t bring himself to look up from the news article he was scanning.

“Wait,” Keith said, leaning in closer, as if he could sense how distracted Lance was, ignoring how Pidge was now laughing in the background. “Is that a Rita Skeeter article?” He paused briefly, obviously reading the headline, and then scowled. “When the fuck was she at the Yule Ball? I didn’t even see her.”

“I didn’t either,” Lance admitted. “But she hasn’t said anything too bad yet. See, right here, she’s kind of going after Lotor’s family. So at least it’s not me again.”

“Uh, Lance,” Romelle interrupted, pointing down to a spot further down in the article.

Well, that had been nice while it lasted.

Romelle slid the newspaper over so that Lance was holding it, making it easier for Keith to lean in and read it over Lance’s shoulder. He leaned in close enough that Lance could feel Keith pressed against every inch of his body, from his shoulder down to his feet.

Lance felt himself stiffen in response, before slowly relaxing in to the warmth of Keith’s body.

No one was surprised that Daibazaal had attended the dance with Sincline, as the pair have been spotted together multiple times. The coupling of Altea and Pollux was much more surprising, but none so much as the coupling of Kogane and Álvarez, both of whom are competing against one another in the Triwizard Tournament, which must spark the question of why the pair would attend together. It seems unlikely that two such eligible young bachelors would be unable to find other dates, so was it a stunt to draw attention, perhaps? Or maybe there is something more complex here, the stress of the tournament causing feelings to arise where they wouldn’t have formed before. Of course, from his Galran heritage, Kogane no doubt has practice in coming across as innocent despite his true intentions. By choosing to masquerade with the victor of the first trial, Kogane is no doubt able to boost his own image. Or perhaps he’s merely trying to protect his muggle-born competitor, given his pureblood status. No matter the cause of this tentative friendship, it appears obvious that it grew out of the Triwizard Tournament. Other Hogwarts students have confirmed that Kogane and Álvarez were nothing more than Quidditch rivals in previous years. So it seems, then, that whatever relationship has arised between them has no real roots.

Allura Altea’s date, Romelle Pollux is a…

She really didn’t know any boundaries did she?

Lance stopped reading. “God, I can’t believe Headmaster Holt let her come to the Yule Ball. I mean, right?” He asked, turning to look at Keith.

Keith, who was still reading the article, barely glanced up at Lance. “Yeah, it’s really…” He trailed off, his lips twitching down into a frown. He shifted in his seat, just slightly, but it was enough that he was no longer pressed against Lance. Not at the feet or the legs or the shoulders or anywhere.

“I just remembered,” Keith declared suddenly, standing fast enough that his knee hit the table and caused the goblets to shake, “I’m supposed to meet with Shiro, I’ll see you guys later.”

“Hey, Keith, are you alright?” Lance asked, turning around in his seat to face the older boy.
Keith bit his lip, before nodding slowly. His eyebrows were furrowed and tense, and Lance was struck by the sudden urge to reach up and smooth them out. “Yeah, yeah, I just don’t want Shiro to think I forgot to meet with him.”

Lance narrowed his eyes. “Do you want me to come with you?”

“No,” Keith said quickly. “No, that’s fine.” Then he relaxed slightly, some of the tension draining from his shoulders. “I’ll see you later, Lance.”


“I will,” Keith promised, taking a few steps backwards. “Try not to let Pidge blow anything up today.”

“No promises,” Lance said, unfortunately sincere.

A smile twitched at the edges of Keith’s lips, “How did I know that was what you were going to say?”

“Because you know me really well?” Lance offered with a half shrug.

“Yeah… Yeah, I guess I do,” Keith said, a flash of something Lance couldn’t identity in his eyes. He seemed to pause. And then he turned around and was gone.

Leaving Pidge to scream “It was Hunk you asshole!” at his retreating back.

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“Hey, there you are,” Lance said, it was close enough to dinner that everyone else was heading down to the dining hall, but Keith hadn’t shown up for lunch, so Lance had a sneaking suspicion that Keith wouldn’t be coming to dinner either.

It hadn’t taken long to find him, tucked away in the Arithmancy section of the library.

Keith whipped his head up, before relaxing slightly as he realised who it was that was pulling out the chair across from him. “Oh, hey, Lance.”

“You didn’t come to lunch,” Lance told him, as if Keith didn’t already know that. “Have you been here the whole time?”

“Um, yeah,” Keith admitted, gesturing to the books spread out across the table in front of him. Most of them were books on defensive and offensive dueling spells, but a few of them were Transfiguration and Charms books, like Keith had been working on his homework as well as Trial preparations.

“How was your meeting with Shiro?” Lance asked.

“What?” Keith blinked at him. “Oh, oh, yeah it was good. Fine.”

Lance raised an eyebrow. Downgrading from good to fine? Not to mention how squirmy Keith was being. Like there had never been a meeting with Shiro in the first place.

“You know you could tell me if anything was bothering you, right?” Lance asked, tapping his foot against Keith’s underneath the table.

“Yeah,” Keith nodded, “yeah, I know, Lance.”
“Okay, just checking,” Lance said, reaching over and grabbing one of the books on offensive spells.

“What are you doing?” Keith asked, watching as Lance flipped through the book.

“I figured I’d keep you company while you finish your work. Then we can go down to the kitchens together and grab dinner. Deal?” Lance asked.

“Deal,” Keith agreed. And this time it was his foot pressing up against Lance’s underneath the table.

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Somehow, the next week seemed to pass by Lance in a blur spending most of his time in the library trying to solve the riddle and studying for his classes and helping Keith study for his N.E.W.T.s. It felt like he blinked, and January was behind him and he was still no closer to solving anything.

Lance shivered, shoving his dragonhide-glove-covered hands under his armpits. It was freezing outside, but Coran had insisted that they have class out in the animal pens because he “had something really cool to show them” which was pretty much just code for “something incredibly dangerous”.

The trial was rapidly approaching, but Lance’s classes were proving to be a much needed distraction. At least today, anyway. Whatever Coran had planned would definitely be worth being outside on an early February morning.

However Lance’s fellow Ravenclaws looked unhappy to be forced out into the winter snow. Romelle was shivering, buried under a pile of blanket-like winter robes, Matt’s glasses were so fogged up he couldn’t see, and Hira was frowning (but that wasn’t abnormal, because Hira was always frowning).

“Alright, students,” Coran said, clapping his hands together excitedly. “Today, I have a very special treat for all of you.”

Unlike his students, Coran appeared unaffected by the cold except for the occasional twitch of his mustache.

“We’re going to be studying the Thestrals that pull the Hogwarts carriages.”

Lance blinked at him, sharing a confused glance with Romelle.

“Um, Professor,” he said slowly, once no one else made any move to speak. “Nothing pulls the carriages.”

Coran burst into laughter. “Lance, my boy, surely you don't mean that. Do you think the carriages just pull themselves?”

Lance shared another wary glance with Romelle. “Um, yeah? I thought they were magic?”

You know, like everything else at this school.

“Not true,” Coran said, shaking his head. “The carriages are pulled by Thestrals, skeletal creatures with a leathery hide and black wings.”

Okay, Coran had officially lost it.

Lance had always known this day would be coming (especially after that time in first year when Coran had tried to adopt a baby dragon and Lance and Hunk had to smuggle it to Hunk’s older
brother - who was a dragon tamer - so that Coran wouldn’t get in trouble). But he had always hoped it would be after he graduated.

“Um, Professor,” Romelle said, tightening her robes around her, “wouldn’t we see the, uh, Thestrals, then?”

“Not so,” Coran said, holding up one of his fingers, “Thestrals are invisible to everyone except those who have experienced great loss in front of them. So it’s not unusual that many of you see nothing in the animal pens in front of us, despite the fact that there are dozens of Thestrals there.”

Lance felt like his eyes were going to pop out of his head.

There were dozens of invisible creatures in the pens in front of him? That he couldn’t see? And that pulled the Hogwarts carriages that he rode in every September? It sounded too crazy to be real, and Lance had seen some pretty crazy things.

“Did you know about this?” He asked Romelle quietly, while Coran stepped into the pen and seemed to start petting the thin air.

“No,” Romelle whispered back, “I always thought that the carriages were enchanted to pull themselves.”

“That’s what I always thought,” Lance hissed back to her.

The rest of Care of Magical Creatures passed mostly uneventfully. Coran tried to convince the class to feed the Thestrals, but apparently they ate raw meat which Lance found completely disgusting. Most of the class seemed to share his point of view.

After class, Lance lingered to help Coran clean up, hauling buckets of leftover meat back to his cabin.

Which was… totally gross.

Lance set the bucket on the porch of Coran’s cabin, brushing his hands off on the front of his school robes.

“Lance, my boy,” Coran said, setting down his own bucket, “would you like to come inside for some tea and biscuits?”

Lance hesitated.

Coran was great, but his food wasn’t always edible for human consumption.

“Sure,” Lance said at last. He had hardly visited Professor Coran at all this year due to the stress of the Triwizard Tournament and his classes, and he felt kind of guilty about it. He had been saying all the past fortnight that he would go visit, but still had neglected to actually do anything about it.

Now seemed like a good time to make up for that.

Coran led the way into his tiny cabin on the grounds. The main room of the cabin was a joint kitchen and living room, and Lance made himself comfortable on the lumpy sofa while Coran set a kettle to boil and pulled out a stack of hard, rock-like biscuits.

Coran offered the plate of biscuits to Lance with a smile, so Lance forced himself to take one. He didn’t try to eat it, there was really no use until there was tea to soak it in unless you wanted to chip a
“So this Tournament business is downright nasty,” Coran commented, pulling out two mugs from his cabinet.

Lance shifted, turning to look at him over the back of the couch. “Um, yeah,” he said, “and the second trial is coming up really soon.”

“Have you figured out how to open the shell yet?” Coran asked, tugging on his mustache.

Lance nodded. “Yeah.”

“Oh, there’s a smart young man. Always knew you were a true Ravenclaw. Are you nervous? Oh, what am I saying, of course you’re nervous. After all, the reason the Tournament got canceled in the first place was because of the deaths and serious injuries it caused.”

Lance swallowed, trying to force his nerves down. Like he needed any more reminders that the Tournament was dangerous after his own injury.

“I tried to see you after the first trial but you were sleeping, not sure if anyone told you that,” Coran asked, his hands busy pouring the steaming water from the kettle into the teacups.

Lance felt a sudden rush of affection for the older man. Coran has always been around for him, especially when he was younger and even more homesick than he was now. Really, he was less like a teacher and more like an uncle or something.

Coran was really the only reason that Lance even took Care of Magical Creatures, he just couldn’t bring himself to drop the class knowing how it would disappoint Coran.

“Really?” Lance asked, accepting the chipped teacup that Coran offered him. “That was really nice of you, Coran.”

(He was under strict orders not to call Coran ‘Professor’ when they weren’t in class).

“Well, I had to check on my favorite student, didn’t I?” Coran asked.

Lance smiled into his teacup, feeling a warm feeling spreading through his stomach that had nothing to do with the nasty tea he was sipping and everything to do with the warm delight in knowing that you were someone’s favorite.

“You should have come back when I was awake, Pidge got me a ton of candy to make up for our fight. You could have eaten all the nasty-flavored Bertie Botts’ Flavored Beans for me,” Lance said, dunking his biscuit into the tea to soften it.

“Ho,” Coran laughed, “the pepper ones are actually quite good, if you give them a chance. But I didn’t ask you to tea to talk about candy. I wanted to talk to you about the second trial.”

Lance bit half-heartedly into the soggy biscuit, speaking around a mouthful crumbs, “but teachers aren’t allowed to help the competitors.”

Coran waved a hand through the air. “That’s what they say, but I know the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang headmasters have been helping their students. Someone has to look out for you,” Coran said, reaching over to ruffle Lance’s hair.

“I don’t want to get into any trouble,” Lance said, biting his lip, but he couldn’t help but admit to
himself that he was intrigued. What if Coran really knew something that could help him?

“Well,” Coran mused, his eyes twinkling, “I wouldn’t tell you anything, then, but if you should happen to wander down to the Forbidden Forest this Wednesday while I’m overseeing some of the preparations for the second trial… well I can’t stop you.”

Lance bit his lip to keep from smiling. “Well, that would be quite the coincidence,” he said, taking another sip of the horrible tea.

Coran smiled, dunking his biscuit into his tea.

Lance tapped his hands against his leg, debating his next course of action. Coran hadn’t given him any more information other than casually mentioning that he would be heading down to the Forbidden Forest at nine thirty, which would be cutting it pretty close to the ten o’clock curfew students had. If Lance was a prefect, he wouldn’t have had to worry about it, but as it was… he was going to need to find a way to get back to the castle unseen.

And there was only one person he knew who seemed to imply that they had a way to sneak around the castle undetected.

Keith.

Not to mention, after Keith had tipped him off about how to open the shell, Lance kind of felt like he owed the older boy one.

But Keith had been adamant about Lance not trying to help him win.

Thus Lance’s dilemma. Did he ask Keith to sneak down to the Forbidden Forest with him and risk the older boy getting mad at him for helping him? Or did he keep whatever information he would learn to himself and probably get detentions until the end of the school year when he was caught skulking around after curfew by Professor Iverson or one of the other teachers?

Lance let out a huff of frustration, pushing his wooden chair backwards so it was tipping on two legs and he could rest his feet on the table.

“You’re going to fall,” someone commented from behind him, startling Lance and making him lose his balance.

The chair tipped precariously, before Lance planted his feet back down on the ground and kept himself from falling backwards.

“Maybe don’t sneak up on a guy like that,” Lance grumbled, narrowing his eyes at Keith. “You almost made me fall over!”

Keith shrugged, “You shouldn’t sit in chairs like that,” he said, slipping his school bag off of his shoulder and pulling out the chair across from Lance’s. “You don’t have the coordination for it.”

“Rude,” Lance sniffed, “I have great coordination after years of flying on a broom and playing quidditch.”

“I’m not even going to touch that one,” Keith said, leaning forward. “So, what’s with the super secret meeting in the…” he paused, glancing at the bookshelves around them, “…cooking section of the library?”
“I didn’t want to be overheard,” Lance whispered, “and the castle has ears everywhere.”

“That’s what you said in your note,” Keith nodded, waving the piece of parchment that Lance had folded into a paper airplane and enchanted to find Keith. It was a design that he and Pidge had created two years ago after Sam took them to a meeting at the Ministry of Magic, basing their own spells on the interdepartmental memos used in the Ministry. It was one of their better creations, and having a way to send private messages could be great at a place without modern technology like Hogwarts.

Lance nodded, while Keith slipped the note back into the pocket of his school robes.

“I have… a proposition for you,” Lance said slowly.

Keith arched one of his brows, but the confidence of the action was offset by the sudden blush spreading across his cheeks. “What?” He said, clearly flustered.

“No *that* kind of proposition! Oh Jesus, not that kind.” Lance said quickly, feeling his face burn. “About the second trial.”

“Oh,” Keith said, and was it Lance’s imagination or did he look almost… disappointed? Nah, it had to be his imagination. There was no way that Keith…

No way.

“So, um, what about the second trial?” Keith asked.

“Well,” Lance said, reaching up to rub at his neck. “Professor Smythe *might* have let it slip that some magical creatures would be being delivered to the Forbidden Forest this week. Around the time of curfew. But there’s always a small chance that some students might be out wandering the grounds.”

“And why are you telling me this?” Keith asked, “We agreed that we were both in it to win it this time.”

“And we both still are!” Lance said quickly. “But I know that you have a way to get around the castle without being seen. You practically admitted to me that you do, at least, you’ve hinted about it a few times.”

“I might,” Keith admitted slowly, nodding after his hesitation.

“And I have the date of when the creatures are being delivered,” Lance leaned forward, “this could be mutually beneficial.”

“Mutually beneficial?” Keith echoed, tapping his chin thoughtfully. “You aren’t trying to help me win again?”

“No,” Lance said, shaking his head vigorously. “Definitely not. You just seemed like the guy to talk to about skulking around unseen.”

“I do not skulk,” Keith insisted, pouting slightly.

“Um, you know about *all* of the secret passages, you don’t discover those by accident,” Lance said, arching a brow.

Keith slinked down in his seat, “I explore.”

“Same difference,” Lance said, rolling his eyes. “So what do you say? Are you in?”
Keith bit his lip, obviously thinking it over, before abruptly pushing back up in his seat. “Alright,” he said, nodding. “I’m in.”

“Okay, great!” Lance smiled, relieved. “The creatures are being delivered Wednesday. How are we going to get down to see them?”

“I have it covered,” Keith said, waving a hand through the air. “Just meet me outside of the Great Hall before curfew.”

“You’re going to keep me in suspense? Not cool, man,” Lance groaned. “At least I told you it would be Wednesday!”

Keith smirked. “You’ll just have to wait,” he said, shrugging.


“It’s a date,” Keith said, pushing away from the table.

Lance choked.

“Um, right, right, yeah,” he said, trying to fight the red blush that he could feel creeping up his neck down. “I’ll, um, see you then.”

What, exactly did Keith mean by ‘date’? He didn’t actually mean that it was, like, a date date… right?

He was so distracted by his thoughts that he barely noticed Keith sweeping his school bag up off the floor and heading off in the direction of the library entrance.

His mind was replaying Keith’s voice saying “it’s a date” over and over.
Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Summary

Wednesday comes along with arrivals to the Forbidden Forest. Creatures are found, an outing is arranged and cookies are shared.

Happy Valentine's Day!

Chapter Notes

Happy Valentine's Day <3 thank you all so much for your likes and comments on the last chapter! And thank you so much for getting the hits up to almost 9,000! That’s insane! We hope you enjoy this chapter, and if you do, feel free to drop a comment down below. Or livetweet us and tag us on twitter - we love following along with what y'all are thinking!
- slowklancing

It was Wednesday, and Keith was supposed to be meeting Lance any second now. If anything, the older boy was running a little late. Late enough that Lance couldn’t help but worry that Keith had decided not to come after all.

Shit, why hadn’t that occured to Lance earlier?

It was risky, sneaking down to the Forbidden Forest. Plus, it was technically cheating since professors weren’t supposed to help the students. So it would make sense if Keith had decided the risk wasn’t worth whatever knowledge might be gained.

Even if that didn’t really sound like Keith.

Like, at all, if he was being honest.

Lance shifted his weight anxiously. There was hardly any time left until Curfew, and if Iverson or one of the other professors caught him lurking around outside of the Great Hall, he’d be stuck in detention for, like, a week.

Keith had better show up like he promised to.

Lance crossed his arms over his chest, and then uncrossed them.

He felt restless, antsy.

If Keith didn’t how up soon, Lance was going to have to head down without him.

He tapped a finger against his wrist, where he had worn his blue plastic breakfast-cereal box watch until he outgrew the cartoon fish and sharks on the band.
God, why didn’t Hogwarts allow cell phones? At least then he could text Keith and find out what was taking him so long.

Keith was probably blowing him off.

Of course, that meant that he wouldn’t get to see the creatures… except Lance had told Keith where they were. Maybe he had decided to go by himself. After all, what did he really need Lance for?

Lance shook his head, trying to clear the thoughts. Keith wouldn’t do that to him.

“Sorry I’m late,” a voice said, making Lance jump. That being, of course, because there was literally no one else in the hallway.

He was completely alone.

“Who’s there?” He asked, his gaze darting around the hallway, “Peeves, if that’s you, I’m going to kick your ass.”

“It’s not-” the voice continued, and then Lance could see a hand that looked like it was floating in thin air.

The fingers wrapped around something that Lance couldn’t see, pulling it away, and then Keith was standing in front of him, holding some weird colored… blanket in his hand. “It’s me,” Keith said. “Are you ready to go?”

“Jesus, Keith! You scared the shit out of me.”

“Well how am I supposed to reveal myself and not scare the shit out of you?” Keith responded, having the nerve to look indignant.

“I don’t know, give me a warning or something next time!” Lance placed his hand over his heart, and breathed out heavily, purposefully overdramatic. “You almost gave me a heart attack,” Lance grumbled. “How did you do that, anyway?”

Keith shook the thing he was holding in his hand, smiling, “It’s an invisibility cloak,” he said. “My mom gave it to me. Now come on, we don’t want to be seen.”

He lifted the cloak, draping half of it over his own shoulders, which promptly vanished, holding the cloak out towards Lance.

Lance swallowed back a sudden wave of nervousness. There wasn’t exactly a whole lot of room underneath that cloak. He and Keith were going to be really close together.

He ducked his head down as he stepped into Keith’s personal space, and Keith settled the robe on top of Lance’s head, using his hands to hold it in place.

Lance shuffled even closer to Keith, ducking down to bring himself level with the older boy.

“Oh, this works a lot better with one,” Keith said, glancing down towards their feet. “You need to get closer.”

“I am closer!” Lance hissed, but he shuffled even closer to Keith anyways, bringing up one of his arms to wrap it around Keith’s waist so he wouldn’t lose his balance.

He felt Keith stiffen under his touch, before he relaxed, some of the tension draining from his shoulders.
“Okay,” Keith said, adjusting the robe so that it fell and covered their feet. “I think we’re good.”

“Alright,” Lance said, “let’s go see how well this invisible-robe-thing works.”

“It works,” Keith muttered under his breath, “and it’s an invisibility cloak.”

Lance chose to ignore him.

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“Keith!” Lance hissed, “Stop stepping on my toes!”

“I’m not!” Keith protested, “You keep walking where I’m trying to go!”

“Because we’re going to the same place!”

Lance turned his head in towards Keith just in time to watch Keith roll his eyes at him. And to catch a whiff of Keith’s intoxicating, seemingly-now-always-present, cologne. Which was… very distracting.

“Lance! You just stepped on the cloak! Be careful,” Keith said, sounding exasperated.

Lance winced slightly. The last thing he wanted to do was ruin Keith’s super special invisible bathrobe. “Sorry,” he said, turning his attention back towards his feet so he could pay attention to what he was stepping on.

But it was almost pitch dark outside, turning the path away from the castle towards the Forbidden Forest into a series of pitfalls and loose stones just waiting for someone to trip over them.

“Do you know where in the Forest we’re supposed to go?” Keith asked.

“Um, no,” Lance admitted, “Coran just said that he would be overseeing some of the preparations Wednesday night around curfew. I guess they probably didn’t want any students to see what they were doing.”

“So no one would tell the Champions,” Keith replied, nodding. “I guess Professor Smythe really can’t keep a secret.”

“Nah, it’s not that,” Lance said, “he just really likes me. He treats me like I’m his nephew or something.”

“I didn’t know you were that close,” Keith admitted. “I mean, I knew that you said you were his favorite student… it’s good that you have someone here that reminds you of family.”

“Yeah,” Lance said, smiling fondly. “Coran is great, especially when I was younger and I was homesick all the time. He would invite Hunk and I over to his cottage and we would have tea and biscuits. I mean, they were always disgusting and you couldn’t eat them, but it was still really sweet.”

Lance wasn’t sure, but he thought that Keith was smiling.

“But,” Lance continued, “I haven’t gotten to see him as much this year, you know, because of the trial and everything else, which totally sucks. I feel awful about it.”

“That does suck,” Keith agreed, his smile slipping.

“Although, I have gotten into a lot less trouble,” Lance mused. “Did you know that in first year
Hunk and I had to help him smuggle a baby dragon off of the castle grounds? We had to find a way to get it to Hunk’s brother, who’s a dragon tamer, so that Coran wouldn’t get in trouble with Headmaster Holt! Oh! Or there was the time in second year where James Griffin was a complete dick and he turned Hunk and I in for being out after curfew while we were down visiting Coran and all three of us had to serve detention in the Forbidden Forest and I got to meet a centaur. Griffin was a total chicken, he screamed like a banshee everytime we saw something moving.”

“In second year?” Keith looked aghast. “And, I’m sorry but did you just say baby dragon?”

Lance nodded. “Yeah, his name was Norbert. He was super cute. Except he had a habit of setting Coran’s mustache on fire.”

Keith stared at Lance in silence for a second, before shaking his head softly. “You’re crazy,” he said, his voice hushed. “No one else would do that for a teacher. Even one they really, really liked.”

Lance felt a flush creep across his face, and he was grateful that Keith probably couldn’t see it in the dark. “It wasn't really that big of a deal.”

“You literally smuggled a baby dragon to Hunk’s older brother,” Keith said slowly. “You’re being modest.”

Lance wanted to reach up and rub at the back of his neck, but he didn’t want to mess up the invisibility cloak, so he fought that urge. “It really wasn’t that big of a deal. Coran is like family to me now, he even writes me letters over the summer. And besides, we never got caught even though Norbert tried to set the owlery on fire and Professor Iverson nearly ran into us. Now, what I’m surprised about is that you’re not asking more about how I almost died by being trampled by a hoard of centaurs while I was trying to save Griffin after he literally fainted from the fear.”

Keith cackled, the sudden laughter seeming to startle him. “I would have killed to see that,” he admitted, “and, besides, you left out all of the best details of that story.”

Lance shrugged. “Remind me about it when we aren’t skulking across the school grounds and I’ll tell you the whole story,” he promised.

“I’m holding you to that,” Keith said.

A few seconds of silence passed, before Lance found his mouth moving of its own accord. “Hey, wait, how did you know that I’m Coran’s favorite student?” He asked.

“You told me,” Keith said, sounding confused. “Right after quidditch was canceled? We were talking outside of the Herbology greenhouse. Don’t you remember?”

“Oh, yeah, I remember,” Lance said, thinking back to that day. The day Keith had called them ‘friends’. The details of that conversation were pretty much seared into his brain. “I’m just surprised you do. It was just a passing comment.”

Keith shrugged. “I have a good memory,” he said simply.

“You have a good memory?” Lance echoed.

“Yep,” Keith said. “Oh, hey, look. I think I see Professor Smythe.”

Lance rolled his eyes at the obvious attempt to change the subject, but he followed Keith’s gaze and, sure enough, a familiar ginger-haired figure was emerging from the cabin. Followed by another figure.
“Hey,” Lance hissed, tugging on Keith’s school robes with the hand around his waist, “is that Headmaster Altea with him? Allura’s dad?”

“Yeah,” Keith whispered back, “I think it is.”

“You know,” Lance mused, his voice dropping even lower as they approached the teachers, “I did see them slow dancing together at the Yule Ball.”

“Do you think that they’re… like dating or something?” Keith asked.

“Maybe,” Lance said thoughtfully. “Oh, god, we’re totally crashing their date aren’t we? We’re terrible.”

“We’re not terrible,” Keith said, rolling his eyes, “Professor Smythe invited you to come.”

“But I didn’t know it was a date, it just feels wrong now. Like, this is almost as bad as the time I caught Rachel making out with Rafael Vazquez on our front porch,” Lance said, wrinkling his nose.

“I don’t think that it’s quite the same,” Keith said.

“Oh, shhhh!” Lance hissed, “They’ll hear us!”

With all of the talking, Lance hadn’t noticed just how close he and Keith had gotten to the pair in question, close enough that if they weren’t quiet enough, Headmaster Altea would definitely be able to hear them.

“You’re the one who was talking!” Keith grumbled.

“Shut up!” Lance hissed back.

Keith shook his head softly, but he fell quiet as they followed Coran and Headmaster Altea into the Forbidden Forest.

The trees grew taller around them, and it was almost pitch black in the forest aside from the pale candle light stemming from the hooded lantern in Coran’s hand.

“It’s too quiet,” Lance whispered to Keith, “normally the forest is full of noise, like, from the centaurs, unicorns, and werewolves.”

“There are actually werewolves in here?” Keith asked in a low voice, “I always thought that was just a myth.”

“Well, I don’t know,” Lance admitted. “It might be.”

“But they’re humans at any time other than the full moon,” Keith pointed out, “so I really don’t think there are any werewolves running around these woods.”

Lance rolled his eyes. “Don’t be such a buzzkill.”

Keith shook his head softly, but fell silent as they continued to walk deeper into the Forbidden Forest.

“Hey,” Keith said a few minutes later, “what’s that?”

Lance strained his eyes to see what Keith was talking about, it was hard to tell in the near darkness,
but it looked like there were cages up ahead, the kind of large cages that were used to hold circus animals.

Coran and Headmaster Altea had slowed to a stop, so Lance and Keith crept closer, trying to peer around the two adults.

Coran reached forward, pushing some branches away and… oh.

Those were definitely cages up ahead.

There was a large clearing on the other side of the shrubbery that Coran was pushing to the side, with three large cages that could easily fit a creature the size of an elephant constructed around it.

Human figures, probably ministry members, were pacing around the clearing.

“Can you see what’s in the cages?” Keith whispered, his breath ghosting across Lance’s ear, making Lance shiver. Hopefully Keith would just think that it was from the cold.

“We need to get closer, come on,” Lance tugged on Keith’s waist.

Lance slipped past Coran out into the clearing, he was pretty sure that he brushed against Coran’s arm, but the older man didn’t say anything to give them away.

He and Keith made their way slowly towards the closest cage. There wasn’t much light to illuminate the area, and if anyone caught them sneaking around, they’d probably get kicked out of the contest, so they couldn’t risk using their wands. But it wasn’t like Headmaster Altea wouldn’t tell his daughter what she would be facing. And Lance was sure that Lotor would find a way to figure it out, as well.

“Oh my god,” Lance hissed when he could make out what was in the cage, his arm tightened instinctively around Keith’s waist, and one of Keith’s arms fell and wrapped around his shoulders.

There were five large, serpent-like creatures in the cage - each of them with a pair of purple feathery wings. The creatures were like the colorful wyrm from the adventure books Lance had read as a kid, with their iridescent blue scales. The creatures were nipping and snapping at one another while they flew around the cage, obviously not pleased at having to share such close quarters.

“What are they?” Keith whispered.

They watched as one of the creatures shrunk down to half of its previous size so that it could fit into one of the bird-like nests that lined the bottom on the cage.

“Occamys, I think,” Lance whispered back. “They’re from India and the Far East, they can grow or shrink to fit the size of the container they’re kept in. Oh! That makes sense with the line from the riddle. What was it? Um… “a creature fills space unoccupied” or something?”

“A beast,” Keith corrected. “Creature would be too many syllables. Are Occamys dangerous?”

“They’re aggressive to anyone who approaches them,” Lance said, a frown tugging on his lips. “They’re known to, like, hurt people who get too close. Especially if they have eggs or chicks. Plus they can fly and get pretty big so…”

The Occamys were beautiful, he couldn’t imagine trying to fight them.

“What’s in the other cages?” Keith asked, nodding with his head.
Lance led their way around the outskirts of the clearing. The second cage that they came to had another five Occamys inside of it.

“Ten Occamys?” Keith muttered as they passed by the cage, “That seems like a lot.”

“But they’re for all of us,” Lance offered. “And there were way more than ten mermaids.”

“I remember,” Keith said, narrowing his eyes. Lance could have sworn he shuddered a little, but that could have just been his imagination.

“And, I mean, sure, mermaids are smaller and human-sized, but they were still vicious-” Lance said, before abruptly cutting himself off. “Oh, that’s beautiful.”

“What…” Keith started to say, before falling silent.

The creature curled up in the third and final cage was one of the most amazing things Lance had ever seen. Its feathers glistened like liquid gold, three folded sets of wings rustling against its side. Almost as if it could sense their presence, the creature picked up its head and turned its obsidian eyes on them. It had a head like an eagle, or maybe a hippogriff, and stared at the spot where they were standing for a full minute before it rested its head back down onto its paws.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Keith whispered.

“Me either,” Lance said, his voice coming out a little breathless. “It’s a Thunderbird. You can tell cause of the patterns on its wings, see how they look like clouds? They’re native to North America. They’re amazing creatures… they have the power to summon storms. I never thought I’d get to see one in person.”

“How do you know all this stuff?” Keith asked.

“One of the first things I did when I realized that the magical world was real was to read and re-read Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them to the point where I nearly memorised the contents. I couldn’t believe that all these things I had thought were… just… imaginary were actually real. Not to mention, Care of Magical Creatures is pretty much my favorite class, bar Charms, since Coran teaches it. Charms is just a little bit cooler though.”

Across the clearing, Lance saw Coran step up and start talking to one of the ministry officials. Headmaster Altea was nowhere to be seen.

Huh, so apparently Coran was even worse at keeping secrets than Lance thought he was. Not only had he helped Lance (and, kind of, Keith) by giving Lance the heads up about the creatures, but he had apparently gone behind the Ministry’s back by bringing Headmaster Altea as well.

“We should get out of here before anyone notices us,” Lance whispered.

Keith nodded in agreement, “Let’s go.”

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The walk back to the castle was quiet, both of them walking in comfortable silence. Keith’s waist was warm under Lance’s arm, and the older boy’s arm was still half draped over Lance’s shoulders so that he could hold the cloak high enough that it covered both of them.

Before long, the pair found themselves in front of the door to Ravenclaw Tower.
“Okay,” Keith whispered, glancing around the empty corridor. “I’ll, um, see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” Lance whispered back, reaching up to grab the edge of the invisibility cloak. “See you tomorrow.”

“Hey, Lance,” Keith said, reaching out to wrap his fingers lightly around Lance’s wrist. “Thank you. For telling me about the creatures.”

“Thanks for bringing the invisibility cloak,” Lance said, a grin tugging at the corner of his lips. “And, besides, I owed you one. But don’t think for a second that I won’t be using this against you. I remember you saying that you had a way to Honeydukes, and I’m definitely going to cash in on that.”

Keith laughed. “I think that can be arranged.”

Lance would never get tired of hearing Keith laugh, open and carefree in a way that the older boy seldom was.

The invitation was open and vague enough that Lance could make a joke and they’d both forget about it by the morning. But Lance didn’t want that to happen. Maybe he could…

“What about this weekend?”

“What?” Lance asked, blinking. He had been so caught up in staring at the way Keith’s eyes crinkled when he smiled that he had barely noticed that the other boy had started speaking.

“What about this weekend?” Keith tried again, smiling faintly, and was that a blush spreading across his cheeks? It was too dark to tell. “We could go to Honeydukes together, and we wouldn’t even have to sneak out because it’s a Hogsmeade weekend. You know, just the two of us, that would be nice, right? What do you think?”

“Um, yeah,” Lance said, reaching up to rub at the back of his neck (which was difficult given the invisibility cloak still draped over his head). “That sounds great, actually.”

Keith’s small smile broke out into a full grin. “Great!”

Lance shifted slightly, slipping the invisibility cloak off and pulling away from the warmth of Keith’s body. He shivered involuntarily at the sudden chill in the air.

For a second, the space where Keith should have been standing next to him looked totally empty (which was spooky), before a hand appeared in thin air and pulled the cloak down far enough to reveal Keith’s head and shoulders.

Which… was possibly even creepier.

“Keith!” Lance hissed. “You can’t be seen! It’s Ravenclaw Tower so I can just say I couldn’t figure out the riddle, wouldn’t be the first time that’s happened, but if someone sees you up here, you could get in a lot of trouble!”

One of Keith’s hands poked free of the cloak and waved through the air lazily. “It will be fine. I just want to make sure you get in okay.”

“The common room is right here,” Lance rolled his eyes. “I think I’ll be fine.”

“You literally just said that you’ve gotten locked out of the common room before because you
couldn’t answer the riddle,” Keith replied, arching a brow and looking completely unimpressed.

“In First Year!” Lance protested. And Fourth Year, but Keith didn’t need to know about that.

“I’ll wait,” Keith said, “I don’t mind.”

“Ohay…” Lance drawled. “If you’re sure.”

He turned to the door in front of him, grabbing the ring hanging from the bronze knocker in the shape of an eagle.

The eagle opened its mouth, and a disembodied voice filled the air.

“Which came first… the Phoenix or the flame?”

Lance rolled his eyes. Okay, so not a difficult one today. In fact, it was way too common. It would have looked pretty bad if he had actually had to lie to someone and say that he had gotten locked out.

The door seemed to love variations on the “which came first, the chicken or the egg” question.

“But how can you tell which one came first?” Keith questioned, stepping forward so that he was next to Lance. “I mean, you aren’t given any proof or… Lance… why are you laughing?”

Lance reached up, wiping tears away from his eyes, “Sorry,” he said, as another burst of laughter tore through his chest. “It’s just… you’re taking this so seriously.”

“Why aren’t you?” Keith pouted, “You’re the one who has to solve it to get into your dorm room.”

“I know, but…” Lance said, waving a hand through the air, “the door loves these kinds of questions. Asks them all the time, just changes the nouns. The first thing you learn as a first year is how to answer them.”

“Oh,” Keith said, blushing slightly. “So, um, what’s the answer, then?”

Lance turned back so that he was facing the knocker. “A circle has no beginning and no end,” he said clearly.

The lock mechanism on the door released with a quiet click, and Lance pushed the door open a quarter of an inch.

“So what do you do if you can’t figure the riddle out?” Keith asked. “Like, do you just sleep in the hallway?”

“Well,” Lance said, turning his attention back to Keith. “As long as you’re not out after curfew it’s not a problem, ‘cause someone else will usually come along and help you out. But, I’m not gonna lie, I’ve had to crash in the hallway before. Teachers aren’t allowed to give detention to Ravenclaw students out here after curfew because they understand the struggle. Sometimes, they’ll even help you out and try to solve the riddle for you.”

Keith shook his head softly, his black hair falling forward into his face.

Lance wanted to reach out and tuck it behind Keith’s ear, but he clenched his fingers into his school robe instead.

“That’s ridiculous,” Keith said. “Students shouldn’t have to sleep in the hallway.”
“It’s not good for your back,” Lance agreed. “Anyways,” Lance said, pushing the door open wider. “I should get going. You still have to get back to Gryffindor Tower.”

“Right,” Keith nodded. But instead of pulling his cloak back on and vanishing into thin air, he stepped closer.

And… oh…

Lance stiffened as Keith awkwardly wrapped his arms around Lance’s waist.

Was… was Keith hugging him right now? Was that a thing that they did now?

Slowly, he brought his own arms up, slipping them under Keith’s arm so that they rested against his back. He felt himself relax, and some of the tension seemed to seep from Keith’s arms.

Maybe hugging was a thing they did now.

Keith’s head was tucked against Lance’s shoulder, his black hair tickling Lance’s nose.

And he still smelled unfairly good. Because of course he did. Fuck that cologne, and fuck whatever inspired Keith to suddenly wear it way more often.

After a few heartbeats or an eternity or however long it was, Keith pulled back.

There was definitely a red flush across his cheeks, but Keith was smiling, so Lance smiled back at him.

“Goodnight, Lance,” Keith said, taking half a step backwards. “I’m, um, looking forward to this weekend.”

“Me too,” Lance said, “and, um, goodnight, Keith.”

Lance shot one look back at Keith as he slipped into the common room, waving over his shoulder.

Keith waved back, smiling widely, before tugging the invisibility cloak over his head and disappearing from view.

Lance shut the door, and leaned against it, letting his head tip back to rest against the wood. He let his eyes flutter shut, replaying the feeling of Keith’s arms around his waist.

“Hey, Lance,” someone called out. “Everything alright?”

Lance practically jumped out of his skin, his eyes widening. He hadn’t realised anyone was in the dark common room.

“Who’s there?”

“Lumos,” the voice said, and a wand burst into light on the opposite side of the room, revealing Matt Holt, who was grinning wickedly. He waved his fingers at Lance.

“Oh, Matt,” Lance said, letting out a relieved breath of air. “You scared me, you can’t just turn the lights on like that.”

“Well I tried to warn you.”

“Fuck…” Lance sighed. “For a second there, I thought you were someone else.”
“Oh yeah? You mean like the Ravenclaw prefect?” Matt asked, tapping his prefect badge.

Lance felt his eyes widen as the realization slammed into him. Shit. *Shit.*

He had actually just been caught sneaking back into the dorms after curfew by the Ravenclaw Prefect. And sure, maybe Matt was his friend, but he also had his responsibilities.

If Matt decided to turn him in, Lance would be enchanting blackboard erasers for a month.

“Um…” Lance trailed off, rubbing his neck awkwardly, trying to play it off.

“It’s fine, I won’t tell anyone you snuck out to go on a date,” Matt said, leaning forward, “but only if you tell me who it was with.”

“It wasn’t a date,” Lance protested, feeling hot. “It was Keith.”

“Oh, Keith,” Matt replied knowingly. “So it was a date, then.”

“I just told you that it wasn’t,” Lance rolled his eyes, but felt his cheeks grow warm.

“Lance, you can tell me the truth,” Matt said, batting his eyes dramatically. “We all know that you and Kogane are obsessed with each other.”

“It’s… it’s not like that!” Lance protested weakly.

“Ugh, you’re no fun,” Matt said, turning back to the book resting in his lap.

Had he been reading in the dark?

“I’m going to bed,” Lance declared, heading in the direction of the spiral staircase that led to the dorm rooms. “Goodnight, Matt.”

“Night, loverboy!” Matt called after him.

Great, Matt was *never* going to let this go.

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“This is amazing,” Hunk moaned around a mouthful of chocolate-chip cookie. “How have we never known about this before?”

“I know, right?” Lance agreed, splitting his cookie in half so he could dunk it into the mug of hot chocolate that was sitting on the table in front of him. “I didn’t even know students were allowed into the kitchen until Keith brought me.”

“I mean, I always knew the house elves were great,” Hunk nodded, “but baking us fresh cookies and making us hot chocolate?” Hunk took another bite of his cookie. “This is pretty much what I always imagined heaven to look like.”

Lance shot a glance over to the other half of the kitchen, where dozens of house elves were baking bread and preparing some kind of roast for dinner. He saw the one that he had spoken to with Keith, Klaizap, as well as the one that had brought the hot chocolate and cookies over to the table that he and Hunk were sitting at and introduced themself as Moontow.

“They’re almost as good as the ones my Mamá makes,” Lance agreed as he grabbed another cookie from the plate in the center of the table.
(They were, maybe, *maybe*, better than the ones his Mamá would make, but Lance was sure that was because of magic and he would never admit it, not even to Hunk).

“So Keith brought you down here?” Hunk questioned, sounding deceivingly nonchalant.

Lance narrowed his eyes. “Yeah, we came down after one of our training sessions with Shiro.”

“Mm hm,” Hunk hummed around a mouthful of cookie, not looking very convinced. “You two have been spending a lot of time together recently.”

“Yeah, ‘cause we’re friends,” Lance said. “We hang out. Nothing more.”

“You used to hate each other, you said he was your ‘rival’, when you were still deluding yourself about your crush you said you would never voluntarily hang out with him,” Hunk said, making air quotes with his fingers on the word rival.

Lance rolled his eyes. “Well, that was before we had to try not to die together. It’s amazing what that can do for a friendship.”

“Or a relationship,” Hunk pointed out.

Lance choked on his hot chocolate. “I just said that it *literally* isn’t like that.”

Hunk shook his head and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like “denial” under his breath.

“So, anyways,” Lance said quickly, eager to change the subject. “How’s Shay?”

“She’s good,” Hunk said, smiling at the mention of his girlfriend.

A sure-fire way to get Hunk off your back about something was to bring up Shay, it was physically impossible for him to not gush about her. “We’re actually going to Hogsmeade together this weekend. I was going to take her to Madam Puddifoot’s Tea Shop. They go all out there for Valentine’s Day, I thought it would be cute.”

“Oh! I guess Keith and I will see you around, then,” Lance said, dunking another chunk of cookie into his hot chocolate. “We’re going to Honeydukes.”

Hunk blinked at him. “You and Keith are going to Hogsmeade together this weekend?”

“Um, yeah?” Lance said, pulling his cookie out of his drink and shoving it in his mouth.

“This weekend?” Hunk asked, leaning across the table.

“Yes, this weekend,” Lance nodded.

“You and Keith? *This* weekend?”

“Uh, yeah? You okay, buddy? You look like your eyes are going to fall out of your head.”

“Lance…” Hunk said slowly. “You do realise what this weekend is, right?”

“Um…” Lance tried to recall the date. “No? What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Lance, buddy,” Hunk said, “it’s Valentine’s Day this Saturday.”
“Oh…” Lance said softly, his breath escaping him in a quiet hiss. “Oh.”

“And yet you keep saying that you and Keith are ‘just friends’,” Hunk frowned. “Are you sure about that?”

“Yes!” Lance said quickly. Too quickly. “I just told Keith that I wanted to go to Honeydukes and he said that we could go this weekend. I’m sure that he didn’t realise that it was Valentine’s Day either.”

There was no way Keith had actually realized that it was Valentine’s Day.

Right?!

“Lance, dude, just admit that you have a date!” Hunk pleaded, “Please, put Pidge, Romelle and I out of our misery.”

“You guys have talked about this?” Lance exclaimed, betrayed.

Hunk nodded, not even having the decency to look embarrassed. “You two are so oblivious.”

“We… we’re not oblivious!” Lance sputtered, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Ugh,” Hunk groaned, dropping his head onto the table. “You’re impossible.”

“Thank you,” Lance said, reaching over to steal the last cookie from the plate in the middle of the table while Hunk wasn’t looking.

Served him right for implying that… that this Hogsmeade outing with Keith was, like, a… a date or something. Because it totally wasn’t.

There was no way that Keith had asked him to Hogsmeade knowing it was Valentine’s Day. That just… didn’t make sense. Especially given how he had reacted after the Yule Ball. How he had reacted to them… almost… and how he had acted afterwards.

Hunk was just reading too much into this.

Lance shook his head softly, he wouldn’t read too much into this trip to Hogsmeade with Keith. The last thing he needed was to get his hopes up that high again.

“Hey,” Hunk said, his voice slightly muffled from the table. “Did you just take the last cookie?”

“Maybe,” Lance shrugged, as he dunked the cookie into his hot chocolate.

“Rude,” Hunk said, obviously pouting.

Lance smirked to himself as he broke off a piece of the cookie and stuck it in his mouth. “That’s what you get for trying to pry into my love life.”

“So you admit that Keith is part of your love life!” Hunk said, sitting back up and grinning triumphantly.

“That’s not what I meant!” Lance protested.

Hunk laughed at whatever he saw on Lance’s face, and before long, Lance found himself joining in.

It was, like, physically impossible to not laugh when Hunk was laughing.
But the question of whether or not the trip to Hogsmeade with Keith was a date or not lingered in the back of Lance’s mind for the rest of the evening.

Lance studied the four outfits he had laid out across his bed. He wasn’t sure what he should wear for his trip to Hogsmeade with Keith. Like, obviously it wasn’t a date, so he really shouldn’t be putting this much effort into it, anyways, but he should want to look as nice as possible to try and wow Keith, right?

Right?

His school robes, and three dressier muggle outfits that he had luckily thought to pack stared up at him.

Lance pursed his lips.

No one wore their school robes to Hogsmeade. The muggleborns and half-bloods tended to wear muggle clothing while the purebloods preferred casual sets of robes.

Lance couldn’t help but wonder what Keith would be wearing. He couldn’t imagine Keith in muggle clothes, but he couldn’t imagine the older boy in the stuffy robes that purebloods like James Griffin walked around in, either.

And it’s not like it really mattered what Keith was wearing. Because it wasn’t a date.

Groaning, Lance scooped up his school robes and dropped them back into his trunk.

Those were definitely a no-go.

Which left him with the three muggle outfits. Two pairs of nearly identical blue-jeans and one darker pair, a soft blue sweater that his Mamá had knit for him so he wouldn’t be cold up in the North, a plain white button-up shirt, and a short-sleeved blue button-up with lighter blue polka-dots.

He immediately ruled out the short sleeve shirt. It was more of a summer shirt, and even with a jacket he would be freezing in the February chill.

Instead, he picked up the white button-up shirt. Maybe he could wear it with his school tie?

No.

That would be too similar to wearing his school robes.

Wait… maybe he could…

Lance quickly tugged off his flannel pajamas and slipped into the darker pair of jeans. He paired the dark jeans with the white button-up shirt, before slipping the blue sweater on overtop to complete the look. He pushed the sleeves of his sweater up to his elbows so that he could cuff the sleeves of his white button-up over the sweater and pull the collar up so it peaked through the neckline of the sweater.

Perfect.

Lance glanced down at himself to make sure the outfit looked alright, and grinned in satisfaction.

Now he just had to grab his boots and his black wool jacket and he would be ready to go.
Go... on a trip to Hogsmeade with Keith.

On Valentine’s Day.

For what could not, one hundred percent, possibly be a date.

Right?
Chapter Twenty

Chapter Summary

Valentine's day has arrived and Lance is considerably confused. Sweets are bought, butterbeer is drank, and books are discussed.

Chapter Notes

hey yall! almost 10k hits and i am not okay. the amount of support we get from you guys is insane. this chapter was originally longer but we split it in half, so please let us know what you think in the comments, as well as leaving kudos'. alternatively, please tag us if you do a live tweet on twitter. we love you all sm uwu <3

- cait (@sunnyjolras)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keith was waiting for him with the rest of the group that had gathered outside of the Great Hall. But the entryway was so crowded with… with… couples everywhere that Lance looked that he almost didn’t notice him at first.

Seriously, why were there so many couples? Like, sure, it was Valentine’s Day, or whatever, but it was also a regular Hogsmeade weekend. Surely some people must just be going to get out of the castle, spend time with friends…

Just because it was Valentine’s Day didn’t mean that the trip to Hogsmeade had to be a date.

Did it?

Otherwise… he and Keith?

No, impossible.

Keith was pressed against the wall, his arms crossed across his chest. One of his feet was tapping against the floor, his eyes flickering around impatiently.

He looked… good.

Better than good.

He looked great.

Keith was, thankfully, not wearing an ostentatious pair of robes like many of the other students scattered around. Instead, he was wearing a simple pair of dark trousers, remarkably similar to muggle dress pants. A black pea-coat hugged his shoulders, the buttons unclasped to reveal a Gryffindor Quidditch sweater underneath.
Keith’s eyes widened, obviously registering Lance’s presence.

Lance lifted one of his hands in a small wave, which Keith returned before he peeled himself off the wall and headed over in Lance’s direction.

“Hey, man,” Lance greeted once Keith was close enough to address over the roar of conversation around them.

“Hey,” Keith returned with a small grin.

“Guess a lot of people had the same idea,” Lance said, gesturing to the crowd of people around them.

He didn’t see Hunk or Shay, yet, but he did see Matt chatting with a person who had long, shoulder-length silver hair. Romelle and Allura were standing on the far side of the room, and when Ro caught his eye, shock, suspicion, confusion, and determination crossed her face so quickly Lance almost didn’t have time to recognize the emotions, before her gaze pointedly flickered between Lance, himself, and Keith. She was obviously demanding some kind of explanation that Lance couldn’t give her.

He doubted she would be as easily placated as Hunk.

Lance waved at her, giving her his best ‘I’ll explain later’ look.

Romelle rolled her eyes, turning to whisper something to Allura and then Allura’s gaze was on the both of them, as well.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Keith said. “Everyone’s probably just sick of the cold weather.”

And, oh…

Lance knew he should have expected this, but he still felt his heart sink anyways.

Keith must have had no idea that it was Valentine’s Day.

“Right,” Lance said, nodding. “Right, right.”

Lance tried not to let the disappointment sting. It shouldn’t be a big deal, it wasn’t a big deal. Obviously he didn’t really care whether or not Keith knew that it was Valentine’s Day. It’s not like he had wanted this to be a date, or anything, it was just two friends hanging out. Two bros just being bros. Totally casual. No big deal.

“Not to mention that it happens to be Valentine’s Day,” Keith added dryly.

Lance felt his heart slam into his rib cage. So Keith did know about the holiday. And he wanted to go to Hogsmeade with Lance anyways. On Valentine’s day.

It’s not a date, Lance mentally chided himself, but, he couldn’t help the sudden feeling of hope that blossomed in his chest.

Because what if there was a chance that it… was?

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“So what do you want to do first?” Lance asked, rubbing his hands together as his gaze flickered around the village. Usually quiet, it was currently bustling with Hogwarts students, who strolled
through the streets with their hands clasped and scarves wrapped around their necks.

A thin layer of snow clung to the ground, not enough for anything exciting like snowball fights or snowmen, but enough that it had made Lance’s eyes widen in glee.

“Well,” Keith said slowly, “I did promise you a trip to Honeydukes.”

Lance smiled, thinking about the wizarding candy that lined the store. Some, like Chocolate Frogs, were a taste that Lance never quite managed to acquire. But there were others that Lance had found he liked almost as much as muggle candy. Like Sugar Quills or Liquorice Wands or the special no-melt ice cream. Although, no-melt ice cream was really better when it was hot enough outside to warrant it. It wasn’t like regular, muggle ice cream would melt in snowy, February weather.

“What are you thinking about?” Keith asked, a small smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

Lance shook himself out of his candy-filled thoughts. “Whether it’s too cold for no-melt ice cream,” he admitted.

“It’s definitely too cold for no-melt ice cream,” Keith said seriously, turning his head to properly stare down Lance. “I think hot chocolate would be more appropriate.”

Lance rubbed his hands together, wishing that he had thought to bring gloves in addition to the Ravenclaw scarf that he had added to his outfit at the last minute.

Keith glanced over at him, his eyes flickering between Lance’s face and his hands.

“Are you cold?” He asked.

Lance shook his head. “No, I’m fine,” he said, despite the slight chattering of his teeth giving him away.

Keith rolled his eyes, “You’re turning blue.”

“No I’m not!” Lance cried, reaching up to touch his lips. They did feel a little cold to the touch. “Okay, so maybe I’m a little cold. Sue me, I’m from Cuba.”

Keith rolled his eyes again, but he stepped closer to Lance, holding out one of his hands into the space between them.

Lance blinked down at it. “Um…” He said, dumbly, unable to find any words. There was a rushing in his ears, and Lance couldn’t tell if it was his blood pounding underneath his skin or his brain forgetting how to function entirely.

Surely Keith didn’t mean for them to…

Keith wiggled his fingers. “Come on. You forgot to bring gloves, you idiot. Dragonhide gloves are super warm, just…” he cut himself off, blushing slightly, tipping his head so his hair covered his eyes from Lance’s view.

Lance felt his own flush creeping across his face, but he reached down and tangled his fingers with Keith’s.

Keith was right, the Dragonhide gloves were really warm.

Lance glanced around them, all around were couples strolling hand in hand. Now, he and Keith blended in with everyone else who was here for Valentine’s Day. And… Lance couldn’t ignore the
part of him that was whispering that maybe that wasn’t an accident.

Maybe… maybe this was a date.

He didn’t know if he’d be able to cope if this was a date.

Lance glanced over at Keith, surprised to see that the older boy was already looking at him.

Keith flushed from being caught staring, and tore his gaze away, but his fingers tightened their grip around Lance’s own.

In fact, the walk was so enjoyable that Lance was almost disappointed when they stopped in front of the door to Honeydukes.

Lance made sure to open the door for Keith like a gentlemen (some of his mother’s lessons on manners had managed to sink in, after all). It was completely worth it as Keith smiled at him shyly as he stepped into the store, the bell above the door jingling, the cheerful tinkling resonating within Lance’s chest.

Lance missed the connection of their fingers as he let the door close behind them, but there wasn’t much of an excuse to hold hands inside the store.

Keith paused in the entryway, pulling his gloves off and shoving them into his pockets. Lance unwound his scarf from around his neck, letting it fall limply rather than be tied so tight it was almost suffocating him.

“So what are you looking for?” Lance asked, glancing around the store.

Already, the heavenly scent of chocolate was filling his nose. Lance took a deep breath. There really wasn’t anything like the smell of warm chocolate as the workers behind the counter poured it into molds shaped like different animals before slipping it into the small fridges behind them.

The small shop was crammed with shelves and shelves of delicious looking candy and treats. There were honey colored toffees that tasted like butterscotch, hundreds of different kinds of chocolate lined in neat rows, in one corner was a large wooden barrel filled with Every Flavour Beans, and dozens of other candies that Lance couldn’t name but knew were delicious.

“I was thinking to buy some Chocolate Cauldrons,” Keith said, “or maybe some Pumpkin Pastries.”

Lance wrinkled his nose. “What is it with wizards and pumpkins?” He asked. “Pumpkins are gross.”

Keith pursed his lips, but seemed to consider the statement. “You know, I don’t really know why everything is pumpkin flavored.”

“I think I’ll stick with sugar quills,” Lance said, shuddering overdramatically.

Keith rolled his eyes as he led his way into the store, Lance trailing behind him.

“Acid Pop?” Keith asked, plucking one of the lollipops from the display and holding it out towards Lance.

“And have a hole burned into my tongue? No thanks,” Lance said, plucking the lollipop from Keith’s hand and sliding it back into its slot on the display. Why would anyone willingly eat acid?

“What about a Fizzing Whizzbee?” Keith tried again, holding out one of the sweets.
Lance slapped his hand away. “Stop trying to get me to eat weird things,” he grumbled. “I still can’t get used to your stupid wizard sweets. They all end up making me have really weird reactions.”

“They have that effect on everyone,” Keith nodded, as he piled Jelly Slugs and Ice Mice into his arms.

Lance didn’t think that was something to be particularly proud of.

He wrinkled his nose at the display of Chocolate Frogs, tugging Keith away from it before he could grab more than one.

“You food should not be able to move,” Lance insisted, as he stopped in front of the Liquorice Wands, scooping a few of them up. “See, Liquorice Wands are something I can get behind.”

“You only like the boring candy,” Keith said, rolling his eyes as he added a collection of Chocolate Cauldrons to the ever-growing pile of candy in his arms.

“It’s not boring just because it doesn’t burn holes in your flesh or come alive in your stomach,” Lance insisted, as he grabbed a few Sugar Quills. Sugar Quills were great, you could eat them during class without the teacher knowing since they looked so similar to regular quills.

Thankfully, Keith bypassed the display of Pumpkin Pastries, but he did insist on filling a bag with Bertie Botts Every Flavoured Beans, as well as pick out an assortment of random sweets, most of which Lance didn’t recognize, for the two of them.

(“They’re so risky,” Lance had said in regards to the jellybeans, plucking out a yellow and white jellybean. Was it buttered popcorn or earwax? He hesitantly placed it into his mouth. Ugh. Earwax).

“Alright,” Lance said, rubbing his hands together as the lady behind the counter put their candy into bags and Keith paid with a stack of gold coins. “So what’s the next stop on our list?”

Keith shrugged, pocketing his change. “The Three Broomsticks?” He asked.

Lance nodded. “Sure! I could go for a Butterbeer.”

“Have a nice day,” the woman worker said, smiling brightly. Dressed in her candy-cane striped outfit, she looked exactly like what Lance had always imagined a candy store worker to look like.

“Thanks!” Lance called, waving as he tightened his scarf.

Keith pulled his gloves out of his pockets and slipped them on, taking just long enough for Lance to jump in front of him and push open the door.

A blast of cold air greeted them.

“Ugh,” Lance wrinkled his nose as he held the door open for Keith. “This weather is disgusting, how do people actually live like this?”

“Some people like it,” Keith commented dryly, switching his bag of candy to his other arm.

Lance’s mouth suddenly felt too dry. What if Keith offered to hold his hand again?

But he didn’t.

Keith just used his now free hand to reach into the bag of candy, and Lance forced the rejection down before it could even fully form.
Keith had just offered to hold his hand to keep him warm, anyways. It wasn’t like it had meant something.

“Blood-flavored lollipop?” Keith asked, drawing, sure enough, a dark red flavored lollipop out of the bag.

“Dude! Why would you even buy that? It sounds disgusting!”

“They are,” Keith agreed with an absolutely wicked grin. “I just wanted to see if I could get you to eat one. They’re actually for vampires, I think. Ah well, my fault for telling you what it was beforehand.”

“Ugh, you’re the worst,” Lance said, but it sounded half-hearted even to his own ears. “What else do you have in there?”

“Jelly Slugs?” Keith offered, pulling out a bag. These Lance could get behind.

“You mean Gummy Worms, sure, those are good.”

“Wait, muggles have these too? Never mind then,” Keith said, shoving the bag of Jelly Slugs away. “I’m trying to broaden your horizons.”

“My horizons don’t need broadening,” Lance pouted. “They’re perfectly broad.”

Keith ignored him.

“Fudge flies?” He asked.

“Why is all wizarding candy enchanted to seem alive? No way, man, that’s just not right.”

“Um… what about a Glacial Snowflake?” Keith asked, pulling out a box of what seemed to be some kind of normal sugary candy.

“It isn’t going to, like, freeze me solid or anything… right?” Lance asked as he hesitantly held out a hand.

Keith just rolled his eyes at him.

“It isn’t, right? Keith?” Lance asked again, his voice squeaking slightly.

“Just eat it,” Keith ordered, placing a small white candy into Lance’s hand.

Lance tossed it into his mouth before he could think too much about it, pleasantly surprised when it dissolved in his mouth, leaving the sweet taste of peppermint behind.

“That was pretty good, actually,” he said, reaching for another one. “What else do you have in that magic bag?”

“Here,” Keith said, breaking a piece of chocolate off a bar and handing it to Lance. “Try this.”

Lance tossed the chocolate into his mouth, startled when it began to burn. It was spicy. Which, Lance could totally handle spicy food. He just… wasn’t expecting it.

“That was not regular chocolate,” Lance said, narrowing his eyes at Keith.
“Don’t you need a drink or something?” Keith asked, his eyes widen slightly. He looked almost… impressed.

“Um, dude, no. It was spicy, sure, but nothing compared to the stuff my family makes. You should try my abuela’s *arroz moro*. I mean, she doesn’t use hot peppers, but the amount of garlic and onions she uses? Oh man,” Lance grinned at the memory of the home-cooked Cuban meal. “It’s definitely spicier than this stuff.”

“And I can’t even handle more than a few bites of Shock-O-Choc,” Keith said, shaking his head softly. “Okay, try this.”

He handed something to Lance that looked vaguely like a combination of a chocolate truffle and a Starbucks cake pop. Lance bit into it hesitantly, a little nervous after the stunt that Keith had just pulled. But the thing was delicious, a hard chocolate outer shell gave way to a heavy filling of cream and strawberry mousse.

Lance moaned as the taste of the desert filled his mouth, a sound reserved for only the very best of Hunk’s chocolate chip cookies or his mama’s garlic knots. “Okay, that was delicious.” He popped the rest of the treat into his mouth and glanced over at Keith, who was flushing bright red for some reason.

“Hey,” Lance said, “are you okay?”

Keith practically jumped out of his skin. “Yeah, yeah, I’m fine,” he said hurriedly, but he made no effort to try to hand any other wizarding candies over to Lance for the rest of their walk over to The Three Broomsticks.

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The Three Broomsticks was surprisingly empty for it being a trip to Hogsmeade for the Hogwarts students, only a few students stood around drinking Butterbeer, the local regulars up at the bar nursing much stronger drinks. But the inside of the inn was warm thanks to the fire roaring at the far end of the room.

“You want to find a table?” Lance asked Keith, “I’ll go get us drinks.” He gestured towards the bar over his shoulder.

“Sure,” Keith said, unwinding his Gryffindor scarf from his neck and pulling off his Dragonhide gloves.

Lance pulled his own Ravenclaw scarf off as he wandered over towards the bar, slinging it over his arm.

“S’cuse me, can I get two butterbeers, please?” He asked, flashing his most charming grin.

Madam Rosmerta grinned at him. “Lance! Good to see you, where are your friends?”

“Hunk’s on a date with Shay,” Lance said, his smile growing, “and Pidge decided to opt out of the Valentine’s Day fun this year. We’ll bring them out one year, hopefully.”

Madam Rosmerta shook her head. “Of course they did. Tell them both that I said hello, will ya?”

“Of course,” Lance replied.

Madam Rosmerta started to fill two glasses with Butterbeer. “So,” she said, her voice dropping into a
Lance felt himself flush. “Uh, Keith,” he said, pointing back over his shoulder to where Keith was currently draping his coat and scarf across the back of an empty chair.

“Oho? You two been together long?” Madam Rosmerta asked, her eyes twinkling.

“Uh… no…” Lance stammered. “We’re… not together. I mean, obviously we came here together but we’re not… together.”

“You’re not together, got it,” Madam Rosmerta echoed, although disbelief was heavy in her voice. She winked as she slid two glasses of Butterbeer across the bar to him.

Lance felt himself flush, as he caught the glasses before they could slide off the bar and spill onto the floor. “Right, thanks, Madam Rosmerta,” he said, beginning to back away. “I’m just gonna… go now.”

“Have fun,” Madam Rosmerta said, still smiling as she turned to help one of the other men waiting by the bar.

Lance took the chance to escape and scampered back over to the table that Keith had claimed. He set both glasses of Butterbeer down, before dropping into the chair across from Keith, taking in his cold-flushed face and gentle smile.

“Thanks,” Keith said, lifting the drink.

“No problem,” Lance said as he quickly shrugged out of his jacket and hung it over the back of his chair, draping his scarf over as well so it wouldn’t fall onto the floor.

Lance picked up his own cup, letting the warmth seep into his skin. The cold, bottled Butterbeer that was sold on the Hogwarts Express trolly really had nothing on the real thing.

Keith hesitantly took a sip of the warm drink, so Lance followed suit, raising the mug to his lips. The familiar taste of liquid butterscotch filled his mouth, the drink the perfect temperature for a cold day.

“I love Butterbeer,” Lance declared, as he set his drink down. “I think it’s like, my favorite thing about the Wizarding World. Screw charms, this is all I care about.”

Keith smiled gently, his eyes lingering on Lance’s face. Slowly, the smile disappeared, a knowing glint appearing in Keith’s eyes.

“Um, hey Lance,” Keith said, smirking. “You, ah, have something on your lip.”

Lance pursed his lips dramatically, pretending to look down at what he was sure was an impressive foam mustache. “Really?” He asked, “I don’t see anything. Are you sure, Keith?”

“Oh my god, you’re like five,” Keith groaned, but there was a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “Just… hold still.”

Lance froze as Keith leaned across the table, dragging his thumb across Lance’s upper lip.

For a moment, it felt like time stood completely still, Keith’s finger a warm presence against Lance’s lip. But, all too quickly, Keith’s hand pulled away and he leaned back in his chair.

“I told you there was foam on your lip,” Keith said, he holding up his thumb as proof.
Lance rolled his eyes, hoping that he wasn’t blushing as much as he was afraid that he was.

A cold blast of air spilled over them as the inn’s door was pushed open.

Lance glanced over just in time to see a man dressed in ministry robes stroll into the building. He paused when his gaze landed on Lance and Keith, and his paused in his walk towards the bar to approach them.

“Mr Álvarez, Mr Kogane, pleasure to see you. I’ve had the privilege of overseeing the preparations for the Trials. You,” he said, clearly turning his attention to Lance, “in particular, displayed impressive skills in the First Trial. We’re eagerly awaiting to see what you both come up with for the Second Trial.”

Fuck, Lance was eager to see what he could come up with for the second trial, too, probably more than anyone else. He had no idea what he was going to do yet, and he felt a sudden wave of nausea at the reminder that February was rapidly slipping away from him.

Keith’s foot tapped against Lance’s shin under the table, whether in congratulations or as a way to get his attention, Lance couldn’t tell, but it made Lance start, as he realized that the ministry official was probably waiting for an answer.

“Um, thanks,” he said, reaching up to rub at the back of his neck awkwardly.

It seemed to appease the ministry official, who beamed at both of them, before scampering off towards the bar.

Lance let out a long huff of air, dropping his forehead down onto the table.

“You okay?” Keith asked, sounding faintly amused.

“Fine,” Lance said, picking his head up off the table, “but I actually managed to forget about the Second Trial for, like, two seconds, and now I’m thinking about it again.”

Keith nodded. “I know what you mean.”

To be brutally honest, Lance had been so busy worrying about this trip to Hogsmeade with Keith on top of trying to complete schoolwork and keep his charms grades at the top of the class that he had yet to look up any of the information on the magical creatures that he and Keith had seen when they snuck out to the animal pens.

And the Second Trial was drawing closer every day.

“Do you want to-”

“Nope,” Keith said, popping the ‘p’. “We agreed that we’re doing this one separately. That means no more working together.”

Lance rolled his eyes, “Right. Because we haven’t worked together on this trial at all.”

“Right,” Keith said, taking a swig of his drink. “Exchanging favors is different than working together, Lance.”

“Sure,” Lance said slowly. “That’s totally how that works.”

Keith hid his smirk behind the lip of his Butterbeer.
“I just…” Lance started, “I kind of miss working together, you know? Like, after Quidditch was cancelled, it was nice to still get to spend so much time with you. And now we have to work separately and it’s just… it’s boring!”

“Lance,” Keith said quietly, the smirk falling from his lips. “I didn’t…” he cut himself off, dragging a hand through his hair. He seemed genuinely frustrated, maybe even upset by it. “I didn’t know that you felt that strongly about it,” he said, sounding a little breathless.

Lance shrugged, “Well, I just miss you, man! Other than sneaking down to the Forbidden Forest, we haven’t spent that much time together. And… you’re kind of… like… one of my best friends.”

“Lance,” Keith sucked in a sharp breath.

Lance tore his gaze up from where it had settled on the table to look at Keith. There was a faint dusting of pink spread across his cheeks. A slow smile was spreading across his features.

“You’re my best friend, too.”

Lance let out a breath that he hadn’t realised he was holding, letting his own smile spread across his face.

“Cool,” he said.

Keith nodded. “Very.”

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“So what else is on our agenda for the day?” Lance asked, trailing after Keith as the pair left The Three Broomsticks.

“I thought we could stop in at Tomes and Scrolls, I could use a new book or two,” Keith shrugged. “Then maybe we could just walk around for a bit?”

“Sounds perfect,” Lance said, slinging his arm over Keith’s shoulder. “So what kind of book are we looking for?”

Keith shrugged, a faint flush spreading across his cheeks, but Lance couldn’t tell if it was from the cold or their topic of conversation. “Just… whatever.”

“Mm hm,” Lance hummed, unconvinced, but he let Keith lead them in the direction of Tomes and Scrolls, anyways.

The door to the bookstore opened with a gust of warm air and the scent of leather and parchment. Lance took a deep breath, shrugging out of his outer layers, while Keith did the same. They hung their jackets and scarves up on the hooks near the door, before turning their attention to the bookshop in front of them.

The shop was small and crowded with shelves, a set of stairs in the back that led up to a second story which was presumably just as crowded with books as the first.

Lance rubbed his hands together eagerly. “Alright, where to first? Nonfiction? You seem like the type to read nonfiction,” Lance rambled as Keith took off towards the staircase at the back of the shop, obviously knowing where he was going. “Do you, like, read novels on wizarding conspiracy theories? Do wizards even have conspiracy theories?”
“Lance,” Keith said, huffing out a small laugh. “You don’t have to follow me, you can go look at whatever you want.”

“Nah, I’m good,” Lance said, waving a hand. “I have to see what the great Keith Kogane reads in his spare time.”

He couldn’t see Keith’s face, since the other boy was leading him up the stairs, but he was pretty sure that Keith was rolling his eyes.

“Okay,” Keith said, stopping in front of one of the shelves pushed so that it’s back was against the wall of the building. “Here.”

Lance leaned over his shoulder to take in the books on the shelf. They were small, paperbacks, and in various shades of bright colors.

Lance grabbed one at random, inspecting the cover.

A man in a pair of tight-fitting black leather pants and a loose white shirt that clung to his chest was in the process of stepping out of a pool of water, the water dripping down the chiseled lines of his chest, forming as droplets in the ends of his hair, a wand clutched in one of his hands, the hand not holding the wand reaching up to push his wet hair away from his forehead, endlessly repeating the motion as the picture moved.

Lance could feel his smile widening as he took it in.

“Oh my god,” Lance said, grinning. “Is this the wizarding equivalent of a romance-novel section? Please say yes.”

Keith shrugged, scanning the shelf. “Um, yeah, I guess.”

“You read romance novels?” Lance asked, unable to stop himself, unable to hide the disbelief in his tone.

“So what if I do?” Keith snapped. “There’s nothing embarrassing about it.”

Lance held up his hand in surrender. “No, no, romance novels are great. You just didn’t strike me as the type.”

“If you don’t like them, you don’t have to read them,” Keith grumbled, snatching the book from Lance’s hand and sliding it back onto the shelf.

“Wait, Keith, don’t be mad,” Lance pleaded. “I think it’s sweet that you read romance novels. I didn’t know you were a softy underneath that greasy mullet of yours.”

Keith rolled his eyes, but the annoyed expression left his face. “You can go look at other books if you want. I’m just looking for the next book in a series I’ve been reading…”

“Oh my god, no way, I have to get some of these for Rachel. She loves romance novels,” Lance said (and… well, maybe, just maybe, he would read them before he sent them off with Kaltenecker).

Keith ignored him, reaching up and pulling a book off one of the higher shelves.

Lance leaned over, trying to get a glimpse of the cover of the novel. Two men in regency-era clothes were sprawled across a couch together. One’s leg was tapping against the ground, while the other swept a hand through his hair.
“Spellbound Devotion,” Lance read the elegant script of the title. “Sounds juicy. What’s it about?”

“It’s the third book in the trilogy, and each book focuses on a different character from the family. This one is about the youngest son who gives up his claim to the family fortune for a ministry position. While there, he ends up being sent to protect a powerful muggleborn alchemist who is being targeted by a group of dark wizards, I’ve been waiting for months for it to come out. I’m a little nervous about this one, though, because what if the author just makes all the dark wizards seem like stereotypical Galra members? Like, I don’t want to read that shit.” Keith said, tucking the book under his arm.

“Yeah, neither would I.” Lance agreed, nodding his head sagely.

“But the last book ended on such a good cliffhanger. I have to see what happens. One of the characters is being targeted relentlessly, but I think there might be more to it than that. Like, I don’t know, a giant ruse, or something. I don’t think the partner is as safe as people believe. So if she does something like that, then I think it will be good!” Keith enthused.

“So you used me to take you here,” Lance pouted, completely in the wrong position to debate with Keith about the book considering he hadn’t read it. “I see how it is, Keith. I’m just a pawn so you don’t look sad trying to buy romance novels.”

“Well we were already coming to Hogsmeade,” Keith said, smiling slightly. “So I thought I could pick it up since we were going to be here anyway.”

Lance rolled his eyes. “I see how it is. Wait, so if that’s the third book, which one is the first one?”

Keith reached up, slipping a book off the shelf and handing it to Lance.

Lance tucked it under his arm, not even bothering to glance at the title, before glancing over the rest of the titles on the shelf.

“What are you doing?” Keith asked, his brows furrowed.

“I’m buying the book. If you’re that excited about the new one, it must be good. Now help me find one for Rachel.”

Keith turned his attention back to the bookshelf, scanning the titles. A few seconds of silence passed while he looked. Lance took the opportunity to read the backs of a few of the books. For the most part, they seemed fairly similar to muggle romance novels. There were some modern, urban ones (including a promising one about the forbidden romance between a witch and a werewolf), some historical ones from different eras, and there were even a few that claimed to be set in the ‘muggle world’.

Lance was about to grab one of the latter ones, when Keith stopped him by holding out a book into the space between them.

“Here,” he said, “I think Rachel would like this one.”

Lance grabbed the book, flipping it over to read the description. Apparently it was the story of a young witch who, after a series of tragic events, left the wizarding world to live amongst muggles, where she fell in love with the woman living in the apartment across the hall from her.

“This looks cute,” Lance said, “good choice, Keith.”

“Whatever,” Keith said, “just… let me know if she likes it.”
Lance smiled as he tucked the book under his arm with the one he had already picked out for himself.

“Anything else you want to look for?” Lance asked as Keith started to lead him back downstairs.

“I don’t think so?” Keith said, “Once we pay, then we should be good to go?”


Lance skidded to a stop. “Wait, hey, Keith, I’m going to look at these books for a second?”

Keith looked at the row of shelves that Lance had stopped at, raising an eyebrow. “Doing some prep work for the second trial?” Keith asked archly.

Lance shrugged, “Might as well, since we’re here.”

Keith followed Lance into the aisle labeled Magical Creatures. It was a small aisle, and Lance recognised most of the books as various textbooks they had used in Care of Magical Creatures throughout the years.

Keith reached out and plucked a book off the shelf, flipping it open. Based on the cover, it looked like the textbook Lance had used in fifth year.

Lance crouched down, letting his eyes skim over the books tucked away on the bottom shelf.

Most of them seemed relatively useless. But…

There.

*Magical Creatures of the Air, Sky, and Heavens*

Lance slipped the thin book out from where it was tucked between a book on Nifflers and what looked like some kind of adventurer’s journal.

The book that Lance had found was bound in leather that was dyed a pale blue, silver calligraphy swirling across the front. Maybe it would have some useful information in it.

Lance tucked the book under his armpit with the other two books he had already decided to buy.

“Alright,” he said, pushing himself up off the ground. “I’m ready now.”

Keith flipped the book that he had been idly flipping through shut before slipping it back onto the shelf.

“What did you find?” He asked.

Lance shook his head. “Nuh uh. If we aren’t working together, than you aren’t allowed to know that I found. Check and mate.”

Keith shook his head softly, his hair falling into his eyes.

Lance closed the distance between them, letting his arm brush against Keith’s. “That was your decision, after all, Mullet.”
“And I stand by it,” Keith said with a nod.

Lance rolled his eyes, “Alright, enough about you disliking my past choices, come on then.”

However they only made it a few feet before Keith was skidding to a stop.

Lance slammed into Keith’s back, not prepared for the boy to stop so suddenly. “Oof,” he grunted from the impact, bracing himself on Keith’s shoulder. “Hey, give a guy some warning.”


Lance peered around Keith’s shoulder, trying to see what had captured the other boy’s attention.

“Is that… a muggle section?” Lance asked. “Oh my god!” He darted around Keith and approached the bookshelf, eager to see what books were deemed important enough to be read even by wizards.

He recognised almost all of the titles. Classic American literature like *The Great Gatsby* and *Grapes of Wrath*. British literature like *Pride and Prejudice*, the complete works of William Shakespeare, and *Oliver Twist*. Even Russian literature like *Anna Karenina*. Mostly they were books that would have been assigned as summer reading for his siblings that they would usually conveniently forget about.

But some of the books… some of them were titles that Lance recognised from his childhood.

“This is amazing!” Lance said, “I had no idea that wizards read muggle literature.”

“They don’t… usually,” Keith said, stepping closer to Lance and reaching forward to run his fingers along the spines of the books. “I’m surprised that this section even exists.”

“Oh my god, I loved this series as a kid,” Lance said, slipping out a copy of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. I always pretended that I was Edmund, and Rachel pretended that she was Lucy. Sometimes we could even convince Veronica and Marco to pretend that they were Peter and Susan. Luis sucked and never played.”

Keith leaned over, close enough that his hair brushed against Lance’s neck as he looked at the book. “We should get it,” he said, his breath warm, making a shiver race down Lance’s spine.

Lance whipped his head around to look at him. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, why not? You got the other book because I recommended it. So I’ll get this one. Maybe I’ll learn more about muggles,” Keith was blushing faintly, his gaze firmly locked on the book.

Lance felt a smile tugging on his lips. “Okay, let’s get it.”

“Um, are there any other muggle books I should read?” Keith asked, biting his lip. “I mean, maybe I could, like, get extra credit in my Muggle Studies class or something,” he added, seemingly as an afterthought.

“Definitely,” Lance said, leaning forward. “I’ll introduce you to *all* the classics.”

<<<<<>

“I can’t believe you convinced me to buy so many books,” Keith groaned, obviously struggling under the weight of the Tomes and Scrolls bags that were hanging off his arms.
“Um, I seem to remember you practically foaming at the mouth and begging me for recommendations,” Lance said, holding up one of his fingers.

“But they weigh, like, a thousand pounds.”

“Well it’s not my fault that you wanted to buy the Lord of the Rings box set. I just told you to get the first one.”

“It’s cheaper that way,” Keith grumbled, “since I’m sure I’ll end up reading them all eventually.”

“But you already got the Chronicles of Narnia box set and that collection of Jane Austen novels,” Lance pointed out.

“You said that Rachel told you she’s the mother of the romance genre! Of course I had to get the complete collection of her books!” Keith cried.

“Oh god, how are you still standing under the weight of all those books?” Lance asked, reaching over and grabbing one of the bags from Keith’s arms. He pretended to stagger under the sudden weight of the books. “I think I just broke my back trying to carry this thing.”

“How do you think I feel?” Keith said, shifting the weight of his remaining bag. “I’ve been carrying it around for, like, an hour.”

“It is getting pretty dark out,” Lance agreed, letting his gaze trail to where the sun was slowly sinking into the horizon. “Maybe we should start heading back towards the castle?”

“Let’s just stay out a little longer,” Keith said, bumping Lance’s shoulder with his own.

Lance, turning to look at Keith, couldn’t help but smile softly. “Okay,” Lance agreed. “Maybe just a little bit longer.”

A soft, slow smile stretched out across Keith’s lips as he turned away, his cheeks pink. But they were close enough together now that their hands were brushing as they walked, and Lance decided that maybe he wouldn’t really mind missing curfew. Not if he could stay with Keith just a little bit longer.

Chapter End Notes

count all the tropes we used, we're honestly curious

The cover of the romance novel that Lance picks up is inspired by the cover of Wilde in Love by Eloisa James. The cover of the romance novel that Keith picks up is inspired by The Lawrence Browne Affair by Cat Sebastian.
Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Summary

The Valentine's day potentially-a-date-but-who-knows continues on. Snow is thrown, events are discussed, and a passageway is opened.

Chapter Notes

Happy much-belated Valentine's Day and an early Saint Patrick's Day to everyone! We hope that you enjoy this chapter as much as we enjoyed writing it, and be sure to leave your reactions in the comments down below :) thank you so much for reading and helping this fic be what it is! It's so amazing that we've hit 1,000 kudos and Cait and I are shook. Thank you so, so much!!!
-slowklancing

The cold wind was biting into Lance’s exposed ears, his nose, his fingers. Lance tightened his scarf from where it was hanging around his neck, he probably should have taken more care to wrap it around his mouth, but it had been deceptively warm inside the shops.

The day had been cloudy before, but there was now a soft, lazy sort of snow falling from the sky, and Lance stretched his tongue out to try and catch them.

“What are you doing?” Keith asked, sounding amused.

“We don’t get a lot of snow in Cuba,” Lance answered, sticking his tongue back out. “I like it.”

“Are you sure?” Keith arched a brow. “Because you look freezing.”

“Well, I don’t know if you know this, Keith, but snow is cold,” Lance commented dryly.

“Ha ha,” Keith said, sarcasm dripping from his tone. He bent down and scooped a handful of snow off the ground.

“What… What do you think you’re doing with that?” Lance asked, he felt his eyes widen in realization, and he quickly began to take a few steps away. Lance lifted his hands, holding them in front of himself defensively. “Keith, Keith, no, come on!”

Keith advanced quickly, grabbing Lance’s arm with his free hand and tugging him forward.

“Don’t you dare!” Lance hissed, trying to squirm out of Keith’s grip.

Keith just laughed, shoving the snow down the back of Lance’s jacket.

The snow was freezing against Lance’s back, trapped between his shirt and his jacket, quickly melting into ice-cold water. “You’re gonna pay for that, Mullet!” Lance shrieked, shaking out his jacket in an effort to rid himself of the snow. “That was freezing!”
Keith, however, didn’t seem fazed by the threats, he was doubled over in laughter. “Well I don’t know if you know, Lance,” He asked, in between bursts of laughter. “But snow is cold.”

Lance turned around to fully face Keith, keeping his face carefully blank. “Oh, it’s on, Cariño,” he said sharply, reaching down to scoop up his own handful of snow. He dropped his bags down onto the mostly clear sidewalk so that he could use both hands to hold the snow.

Keith dodged Lance’s clumsy attempt at a snowball easily, the snow breaking apart and just scattering in the air, rather than holding its shape.

“You have to pack the snow, Beach Boy,” Keith said, following Lance’s lead and setting his own bag of books down onto the sidewalk. “Don’t they teach that in Cuba?”

“Beach Boy?” Lance questioned. “That’s terrible. That’s like… Sharkboy and Lavagirl levels of bad. You make me sound like I’m some kind of low-budget superhero.”

“I don’t understand anything you just said,” Keith declared solemnly.

Taking advantage of Keith’s confusion, Lance scooped up another handful of snow and tossed it towards the older boy. Unlike his first attempt, this attempt was partially successful. The snow still refused to hold its shape, but at least this time the wind blew it directly into Keith’s face.

Lance laughed as Keith reached up to wipe his eyes and flick the snow out of his hair.

“You’re terrible at snowball fights,” Keith commented.

“There’s something wrong with the snow,” Lance insisted.

“There’s nothing wrong with the snow,” Keith shook his head, brushing his now-damp bangs away from his face. “You’re just a moron.”

“Rude.” Lance rolled his eyes. “Whatever, that was payback. So we’re even now.”

“Fine, yes, we’re even,” Keith agreed.

Lance reached over, poking Keith’s nose, which was now red with cold. “And now you look just as cold as I do.”

Keith batted Lance’s hand away from his face. “Well you’re right about that, at least.” He glanced around. They were on a path meandering around outside of Hogsmeade now, the lights coming on in the village behind them as the sun slowly began to sink down towards the horizon. “I have an idea,” Keith said suddenly, holding out his hand and wiggling his fingers. “Come on.”

Lance reached over and tangled their fingers together, letting Keith pull him off the path, his shoes sinking into the thin layer of snow. “Where are we going?” He asked, then realization hit him. “Keith, Keith, wait we forgot the books!”

Keith paused. “Oh shit! Go grab them!”

“I’m not grabbing your ninety pounds of books,” Lance insisted. “They were heavy.”

Keith rolled his eyes. “Fine. I’ll let you carry the candy.”

“Are you going to tell me where we’re going?” Lance asked, bouncing on his heels.

“You’ll see,” Keith insisted.
“The Shrieking Shack? You brought me to the *Shrieking Shack*?” Lance squeaked.

“What?” Keith asked, sounding unimpressed. “You aren’t afraid of a little dark, are you?”

“It’s not the dark I have a problem with,” Lance muttered. “Have you even seen the state of the wood? It looks like it could collapse at any moment!”

Keith rolled his eyes. “It’s fine, I promise.”

Lance eyed the ramshackle wooden house suspiciously. The windows and the doors were mostly covered by wooden boards, and it looked like every abandoned building that Lance’s mother had told he and Marco not to play in when they were children.

“Whatever you say,” Lance finally said, following Keith as the older boy led him around the back of the building, to a door that, unlike the one on the front of the house, was not blocked by wooden boards.

“*Alohomora*,” Keith whispered, tapping his wand to the lock. It unlatched with a satisfying *click*.

Keith eased the door open, revealing a very dim, dusty room. The old, faded floral wallpaper was peeling away from the walls. What little furniture remained was broken and smashed, leaving nothing but splinters of wood and ripped fabric. It was dark, since all the windows were boarded and there were no fires glowing in any of the lamps.

“This feels exactly like the kind of place where we *shouldn’t* go,” Lance whispered, as he followed Keith into the room.

“Why are you whispering?” Keith asked, his voice at its usual volume.

“Because this feels like the kind of place where you should be whispering,” Lance hissed back. “Maybe I’ve watched too many horror movies, but this looks like the kind of place where a demon would possess your child and brutally murder your entire family.”

“What?!?” Keith exclaimed. “Movies are entertainment, right? People would watch something like that for *fun*?!”

“Oh yeah, man,” Lance said, stepping around the room and looking around. He ran one finger across the mantle and wrinkled his nose when it came away covered in dust. “You get a bowl of popcorn and you go to the movies with all your friends and then you scream like a little girl when the monster inevitably jumps out at the screen. It’s great.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Keith said skeptically. “Anyways I don’t think that anyone was murdered here, but the villagers did say that they used to hear screaming.”

Lance shuddered. “So not comforting, dude.”

Keith dropped down onto the ground, pressing his back to the wall.

“What are you doing?” Lance asked, raising an eyebrow.

Keith ignored him in favor of searching through his pile of bags.

“Keith,” Lance whined, dropping down next to him. “Do we really need to sit on the floor? I really don’t want to get an infection or something off a splinter.”
“Lumos,” Keith hissed, his wand bursting into light, making Lance blink. “I thought,” he said, as he reached back into one of his bags. “Ah ha!” He pulled out one of the books from the bag. “I thought,” he continued, “that we could read.”

Lance leaned in closer to see which book Keith had selected as his chosen reading material. The cover was blue, with golden calligraphy and the image of a lampost covered in snow embossed into the soft leather of the cover.

“The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,” Lance nodded. “A classic.”

Keith flipped through the pages, so Lance reached into his own bag, pulling out the books he had purchased.

He flipped open the first one he had grabbed, which opened onto a page with a moving picture of a griffin, or maybe a hippogriff, soaring through the air. There was a broken chain trailing from one of its legs, and the brief description claimed that the creature had escaped from magizoologists who were trying to study it.

Whatever the creature was, it had enough similarities to the Thunderbird that Lance had seen in the Forbidden Forest that he couldn’t help but imagine what those claws or beaks could do to his flesh if given the chance. The creature had been strong enough to break a metal chain, to flee from professionally trained magizoologists…

What good would sixth-year defensive spells do against something like that?

Lance slammed the book shut, tossing it onto the ground in front of him. The book collided with the wooden floorboards with a soft smack, releasing a puff of dust up into the air.

Keith stiffened at the noise, and turned to face Lance. His eyebrows were drawn together in confusion, “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” Lance answered automatically. “No. I don’t know.”

Keith’s eyes caught on the front of the book, and he frowned. “Are you thinking about the second trial?” He asked.

“I mean… yeah,” Lance admitted softly. “I guess I am. It’s just… it’s really, really soon.”

Keith nodded. “I know, I can’t really stop thinking about it either. I kind of think Shiro is sick of listening to me try and talk about it with him.”

“If only you had someone else you could talk about the trial with,” Lance teased, nudging Keith gently with his elbow.

Keith rolled his eyes. “But seriously, Lance, are you okay?”


“I mean, it’s been months since the selection and nothing has been cleared up. It’s just all really confusing, I guess. Like, has the ministry even investigated why the Goblet of Fire chose four names instead of three? Because they said that they would, and then… I never heard anything about it. But maybe I’m the only one who’s still thinking about it. I mean, it doesn’t seem like anyone else is thinking about it, it seems like they can’t even remember.”
“I don’t think that they ever found anything,” Keith said, picking at a thread on his quidditch sweater. “Otherwise Adam would have told Shiro.”

Lance leaned backwards, letting his head knock against the wall. “No one knows what’s happening to me,” Lance whispered. “This whole tournament is just… I wish I knew why I was here.”

“Maybe you’re here because you’re meant to be, Lance,” Keith said gently.

Lance snorted.

“I mean it! I mean, don’t you think the ministry would know if someone had tampered with the Goblet? Maybe you should just accept that the Goblet chose you for a reason. Just like it chose me, and Allura, and Lotor. I mean, when you think about it, why did it choose any of us?”

“Well, I have no idea why it chose Lotor,” Lance said, feeling the hints of a smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

“You’re definitely the better choice than Lotor,” Keith said, reaching over and placing his hand on Lance’s knee.

“If Lotor was the best choice for Durmstrang, then god help whatever the rest of the school is like,” Lance joked, feeling his face flush at the warm pressure of Keith’s hand against his leg.

Keith nodded in agreement. “Didn’t the Headmaster tell you that it might have been because the Goblet couldn’t choose between the two of us? I mean, that sounds like pretty good logic.”

Lance nodded. “I mean, yeah, I guess that makes sense.”

“But you feel like the Goblet wouldn’t have chosen you at all?” Keith guessed, studying Lance’s face carefully.

“I mean… yeah. Sometimes. A lot of the time,” Lance admitted.

Keith shifted even closer, resting his head on Lance’s shoulder. “You have to believe in yourself, Lance. You’re top of your year in Charms and Defense Against the Dark Arts. Why wouldn’t the Goblet pick you?”

“I don’t know,” Lance sighed.

“You shouldn’t worry so much about it,” Keith said. “I have a feeling that everything is going to be fine.”

“Oh, taken up divination, have you?” Lance asked, rolling his eyes as he remembered how Slav had tried to make them read tea leaves and crystal balls back in third year.

“Shut up,” Keith said, without any real heat behind it. “But seriously, Lance, you should stop doubting yourself. You’ve already proved that you deserve your place in the tournament in the first trial, no one else is questioning why you were chosen anymore. You shouldn’t either.”

Lance let out a puff of air. “You’re right. I’m probably just overthinking things.”

“I’m always right,” Keith said. “It’s good that you’re finally beginning to understand that.”

Now it was Lance’s turn to say “Shut up,” as he elbowed Keith lightly.

Keith dodged the playful blow easily. “Hey, if you keep trying to hit me then I’m not going to share
any more of my candy with you.”

Lance reached forward to poke through Keith’s remaining bags. “Do you still have anything good? Because I keep telling you that I don’t want any of your moving candy. It’s just not right.”

“I bought some sugar quills, so stop complaining,” Keith said, producing a package of the treats.

“Yes!” Lance snatched them from Keith’s grip and tore the box open.

Keith shook his head, as he settled back against Lance’s shoulder. “Hey, Lance?” He asked, leaning forward to scoop his book off of the ground.

“Yeah?” Lance asked, as he stuck the tip of a sugar quill into his mouth.

“Will you read to me?” Keith asked, offering up his copy of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

Lance’s fingers closed around the leather binding of the book. He set the box of sugar quills off to the side so that he wouldn’t ruin Keith’s new book. “Um, yeah, sure. Let’s see if I can remember the voices my papa used to do when he read it to me and Rachel.”

Lance flipped the book open to the first page, and cleared his throat. “Once there were four children whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy. This story is about something that happens to them…”

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Lance blinked his eyes open, not entirely sure when they had fallen shut. He reached up sleepily, wiping sleep from his eyes. As he moved, his elbow collided with something warm and solid, that shifted and stirred.

What the *fuck*?

Lance glanced over to his side, trying to remember the last thing that had happened before he fell asleep.

Oh right.

The Shrieking Shack.

Reading.

*Keith.*

That was undeniably who the lump pressed up against his shoulder was, even though it was dark enough that Lance couldn’t make out the older boy’s features.

Wait, the Shrieking Shack was dim, dusty, and a little old and creepy, but it wasn’t normally this dark.

There was no light streaming in through the boarded up, dirty, tiny glass windows. Which meant that there was no longer any light outside.

Which meant it was definitely some time after curfew.

*Fuck.*
“Keith, Keith,” Lance shook the older boy’s shoulder. “Keith, wake up, we fell asleep.”

Keith blinked his eyes open groggily, reaching up to wipe at his eyes. “What?” He asked, his voice cracking slightly.

“We fell asleep,” Lance hissed, “in the Shrieking Shack. While we were reading. It’s pitch black outside, so we must have missed curfew. Now the castle doors will be locked, how are we gonna get inside?” Lance said mournfully, looking up at the ceiling in exasperation.

Keith sat up fully, lifting his head from where it had dropped down onto Lance’s shoulder. He dragged his hand across his mouth.

Ew, gross. Had Keith drooled on his shoulder?

“I have an idea,” Keith said, pushing himself off the ground and holding out one of his hands (thankfully not the one he just wiped his mouth with) out to Lance.

Lance picked up Keith’s new copy of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* from his lap, before grabbing Keith’s hand and letting the other boy pull him to his feet.

It didn’t take long for them to cross the snow-covered fields back in the direction of… Hogsmeade? Keith wasn’t even leading them in the direction of the castle! How was this supposed to help them get insi-

Oh!

The secret passageway.

Sure enough, Keith skidded to a stop in front of Honeydukes. He shared a quick grin with Lance before he slipped his wand out of the pocket of his robes, pressing it to the lock.

“Alohomora,” Keith whispered, the lock sliding open with a quiet click.

“Is this okay?” Lance asked, worriedly. “I mean… what if they catch us breaking in and we get in trouble?”

“We won’t get in caught if you stop talking,” Keith hissed, reaching back to grab Lance’s arm and pull him into the shop.

Lance clamped his mouth shut, letting Keith drag him past the aisles of candy they had been captivated by earlier, in the direction of the door behind the counter.

“I really don’t think we’re supposed to be back here,” Lance said, glancing over his shoulder to see if anyone had noticed them (not that there was anyone around this late at night).

“Do you want to get back to the castle before morning?” Keith asked. “If the teachers find out we were at Hogsmeade this whole time, we’ll definitely lose house points. A lot of house points.”

Lance let out a quiet huff of air, annoyed that Keith was right.

“Alohomora.”

The ‘Staff Only’ door behind the counter released, and Keith pushed it the rest of way open.

The kitchen was dark, or at least, it was until Keith lifted his wand and quietly whispered “Lumos,” causing a sudden burst of bright light to fill the space.
“Where are we going?” Lance whispered, unable to stop himself.

Keith ignored him, leading them past racks of pastries and refrigerators that were surely full of cooling chocolate. Despite the large amounts of sweets they had already eaten, Lance felt his stomach grumble at the sight of the food, earning him an incredulous look from Keith.

“We literally ate a whole bag of candy earlier, how can you possibly still be hungry?” Keith hissed.

Lance merely shrugged. “That was hours ago.”

“Well you have to wait for breakfast,” Keith said, tugging on Lance’s wrist before he could reach up and grab one of the cooling pastries. “Because we’re not going to steal something.”

“I wasn’t gonna steal anything,” Lance pouted.

Keith ignored him, tugging Lance through the kitchen and opening a door that revealed a set of stairs disappearing down into the darkness.

“The secret passageway is in the cellar,” Keith whispered, nodding towards the stairs. “Just… watch your step.”

Lance followed Keith’s lead, the dim light from Keith’s wand the only thing keeping Lance from tripping over his own two feet and tumbling face-first down the creaky, wooden stairs. Luckily, the flight of stairs was short, giving way to a dusty floor.

The cellar was small, crowded with wooden crates and boxes. And no way out.

“Uh, Keith, I hate to break this to you, but there’s literally nothing down here,” Lance whispered.

It was dark, but Lance was pretty sure that Keith rolled his eyes before dropping down to his knees and beginning to feel around for something on the floor.

“Okay, now you’re fucking with me,” Lance said, crossing his arms. “You look like Velma when she loses her glasses. Come on, Keith, we need to get back to the-”

“Got it!” Keith said, triumphantly, pulling on something that Lance couldn’t see, a trapdoor swinging open. He turned, flashing a quick grin at Lance. “And to think, you doubted me.”

“How was I supposed to know there was a secret trapdoor in the floor?!” Lance exclaimed, as Keith dropped down into the now-revealed hole and disappeared from sight.

“Maybe it should have clued you in when I told you it was a secret passageway, obviously it’s gonna be hidden,” Keith’s voice drifted up from the dark hole.

Lance inched closer, it didn’t look like it was that far of a drop, a small tunnel disappearing into darkness. Keith was standing with his back to one of the stone walls.

“Just jump,” Keith told him, “it’s not that far.”

Lance, ignoring Keith’s advise, dropped down so that he was sitting on the lip of the trapdoor, before pushing himself down like he was pushing himself into a pool of water.

Keith was right, it really wasn’t far of a drop, but the impact still pulsed through his shins. He glanced up towards the trapdoor, just in time to watch it swing shut. Well… guess there was only one way to go.
The stone passage that Keith led him down twisted and turned, more like the burrow of some kind of wild animal than anything else. Together, they hurried along it, although Lance stumbled every now and again on the uneven floor. After a while, the ground began to slope steadily upwards, growing so steep that Lance was forced to brace himself on the wall.

“God, Keith,” Lance panted, “why does it feel like we’re walking up a slide?”

Keith winced. “Because we… are? This secret passage is really only designed to go one way.”

“Great,” Lance let out a puff of air. “Are we even going to be able to get out?”

“I think so?” Keith offered with a shrug. “I don’t see why not.”

“Well, that makes me feel great,” Lance said, shaking his head.

Lance wasn’t sure how long they were pulling themselves up the steep incline, but it was long enough for thin beads of sweat to form along his forehead, despite the freezing chill in the air of the tunnel.

And as if the going wasn’t hard enough already, the bags of books and half-eaten candies made it difficult to find solid purchase on the wall. More than once, Lance felt his feet begin to slip out from underneath him.

Finally, finally, an end point came into sight - a wall of unbroken stone.

“Tell me… there’s… a secret door,” Lance panted, as he braced himself against the wall so he wouldn’t go sliding all the way back down to the bottom.

“There’s a secret door,” Keith said, as he tapped the stone with his wand. “Dissendium,” Keith said, and a portion of the wall split away, easing open with the soft sound of stone grinding together. “After you,” he said, gesturing for Lance to slip through the now-exposed doorway.

Lance braced himself on either side of the doorway, pulling himself through and stumbling out into the castle corridor.

A few seconds later, Keith pulled himself out, stumbling enough that Lance reached out instinctively to steady him.

A statue of a one-eyed witch eased back into place, effectively closing off the passageway that they had just emerged from.

“Where are we?” Lance whispered, suddenly aware of his death grip on Keith’s arm.

“Third floor corridor,” Keith whispered back.

Lance released his grip on Keith’s robes, fighting the blush that was steadily working its way across his face, as he adjusted the shopping bag hanging from his arm. “Um, so, we should probably get back to the dorms, right? Since it’s so late.”

“Yeah, we’ll have to be careful to get back though, come on, I’ll walk you back to your common room, it is really late.”

Suddenly, Keith stiffened, his muscles tensing. “Wait, do you hear that?” Keith asked, his voice quiet.

Lance froze, straining his ears. “Um… no?”
“I swore that I heard…” Keith paused, cocking his head to the side. “Merlin, come on,” Keith muttered, grabbing Lance’s arm and pulling him down the hallway, ducking into one of the small alcoves that was mostly concealed by a tapestry.

The space was tiny, barely big enough for both of them to fit, and Lance had to actively try not to focus on how Keith’s legs were tangled with his own, how close Keith’s chest was to his, how Keith’s hair brushed his cheek as the older boy reached over to pull the tapestry just far enough back to peak out of it.

There was a distant laugh, and Lance felt his breath catch. He knew that laugh, and it wasn’t good. Really wasn’t good.

“Shit,” Keith hissed, his breath ghosting over the shell of Lance’s ear.

Lance shivered involuntarily, before finishing Keith’s sentence. “It’s Peeves.”

Peeves was the poltergeist that haunted the halls of Hogwarts singing terrible rhymes and causing all sorts of unmanageable mischief. No one had ever figured out a way to get rid of him, so Peeves just hung around the castle creating messes like breaking vases and upending bookcases. And turning in students who were caught sneaking around where they shouldn’t be.

Well, there went the house points he thought he had saved.

“Wandering around at midnight? Tut, tut, tut,” Peeves was sing-singing in his awful voice. “Naughty, naughty, you’ll get caughty.”

“What are we-” Lance started to say, before a hand clamped over his mouth, effectively cutting off whatever he was going to say. His head rest against the wall behind him, and he looked at Keith to try and gather some semblance of what to do.

Keith raised his other hand, holding his pointer finger to his lips, the universal symbol for ‘don’t talk’.

Lance nodded, but Keith didn’t remove his hand from covering Lance’s mouth, as if he didn’t trust him not to speak.

“What was that?” Peeves said, his voice squeaking. “Do we have students out of bed?”

The sound of grinding stone filled the hallway, and Lance couldn’t be sure, but it sounded like Peeves was checking the secret passage he and Keith had just emerged from.

Okay. Maybe Peeves would think they had snuck out to Hogsmeade. Maybe he wouldn’t come looking for them.

Lance relaxed slightly. Okay. Maybe Peeves wouldn’t notice them. Maybe this would all be fine, totally fine, and he wouldn’t lose a million house points.

Keith followed his lead, shifting slightly as he relaxed, letting his bag of books rest on the floor, making sure they made no noise. Lance rested his own bags down lightly so that his arms were free.

Keith eased his hand away from Lance’s mouth, now that there was no need to be so silent, but it didn’t go far. His fingers brushed across Lance’s cheekbone, trailing over his freckles.

Lance felt a small smile break out over his face, unable to stop it, as he leaned into the pressure of Keith’s touch. A small, quiet giggle bubbled in his chest. This was just… the whole situation was so
utterly ridiculous.

Today had been one of the weirdest days of his life, but Lance didn’t think he would have it any other way. Things with Keith had never been traditional, so why should a day like today be any different?

A small smile played at the edge of Keith’s lips, his fingers stilling against the edge of Lance’s smile. Lance felt his gaze flicker down towards Keith’s lips, they were close enough that Lance could feel Keith’s breath, and he felt his mouth go dry.

Whether from nerves or anticipation, he wasn’t sure.

“I didn’t know you had dimples,” Keith mouthed, interrupting Lance’s thoughts. Lance could feel his face flush slightly, and let his smile widen. He opened his mouth to respond.

Suddenly the tapestry concealing their hiding place was snatched away, replaced by a grinning face, a brightly colored jester’s hat, and a bright orange bow tie. “Well, well, well, what do we have here?” Peeves said. “A few lovebirdies on a midnight tryst?”

Lance stilled, feeling Keith’s hand instantly drop away from his face.

If they could have jumped apart, they probably would have, but as it was… there was nowhere for them to go.

Lance hadn’t thought it to be possible, but he was suddenly even more aware of just how tightly he and Keith were pressed together than he had been just seconds ago.

“Well, well, well,” Peeves said happily, clapping his hands together. “If it isn’t the two champions sitting in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love, then comes detention, then you two can have fun cleaning the trophy room!” Peeves cackled, floating a few inches higher off the ground from sheer delight.

That… didn’t even rhyme...

“Peeves,” Keith hissed, his eyes wide. “Can’t you just pretend that you never saw us? We promise to go back to our rooms right away.”

Peeves cocked his head, as if he was actually considering it. “Do you promise you’re doing something incredibly sneaky?” Peeves asked, his grin shifting into more of a smirk.

“Yes,” Keith replied seriously, with no hesitation.

“Keith,” Lance groaned, tipping his head forward and hiding his flushed face in Keith’s shoulder.

“He admits it! He admits it!” Peeves crowed. His cackling laugh filled the hallway. “Dirty, dirty wizards,” he said, shaking a finger at them.

“Keith, what have you done?” Lance whispered, as Peeves let out another way of cackling laughter.

“I have a plan,” Keith hissed back, “just go along with it.” And with that, Keith reached over, tangling their fingers together and giving Lance’s hand a comforting squeeze. “Peeves, please, please don’t tell anyone. No one really knows yet. It was only our first date tonight, and we hardly ever get to see each other now that we’re competing against one another in the Triwizard Tournament.”

Merlin, what was he doing?
Miraculously, Peeves raised one of his hands and pretended to zip his lips closed. “Your secret is safe with me, lovebirdies. In fact, I didn’t even see you this evening.” Peeves clapped his hands together. He dropped his voice to a whisper as he leaned in conspiratorially. “But if I happen to... distract some of the teachers that are patrolling the hallways, well, it would be quite easy for you to get back to bed. That would probably serve your needs much better than this dusty alcove,” Peeves added pointedly, with a wink in their direction, right before he replaced the tapestry, sealing the two of them in darkness once more.

Lance felt like his face was on fire.

He would never be able to live this down with Peeves, and he knew it.

“Oh my god,” Lance said quietly. “Keith, buddy, my man, how on earth did that possibly just work?”

Keith shrugged, forcing Lance’s head to move with his shoulder. “Peeves likes being the first one to know gossip. I figured he would like that even better than getting us in trouble.”

Lance finally pulled his head off of Keith’s shoulder. “That was a pretty big risk.”

Keith shrugged. “It kept us out of detention, didn’t it?”

“And what if Peeves goes around telling the whole school now?” Lance asked.

“So what if he does, it’s Peeves! No one believes half the stuff that he says. Like two weeks ago he told the entire school that he saw those two Durmstrang girls making out in the potions cabinet. Although... that one might be true, actually.” Keith mused.

Lance rolled his eyes. “Alright, come on, let’s get out of here before Peeves gets bored of distracting the teachers.”

Keith reached down, scooping up the bags of books from the ground. “Alright, let’s go.”

Lance untangled himself from Keith, tripping slightly as he spilled out of the alcove and into the corridor.

Keith followed him (although he didn’t trip), smirking as Lance caught himself.

“That was totally on purpose,” Lance told him, striking an over-dramatic pose.

Keith snorted. “Sure it was.”

Lance bounced back over to Keith’s side, taking one of the bags of books and swinging it onto his own arm. “I can’t believe that you just got us out of that,” he said, looping his arm though Keith’s the way that he used to do with his siblings.

“What if you doubt me?” Keith asked, his voice light and teasing.

“Only a little,” Lance replied, letting Keith tug him in the direction of the stairs. “Mainly if we’re talking about good hairstyle choices.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my hair,” Keith protested.

“You look like Billy Ray Cyrus,” Lance informed him.

“You can’t insult me by calling me people I don’t know,” Keith pouted. “I can’t defend myself.”
“That’s the point,” Lance said, letting go of Keith’s arm and hopping over the disappearing step at the bottom of the staircase.

They made it to the top of the staircase quickly, spilling out onto the landing.

Lance let out a huff of laughter as Keith started to head down the hallway, reaching out and stopping the other boy by grabbing his wrist and tugging him in the opposite direction. “We have to go up one more flight of stairs,” Lance said with a chuckle.

Keith blinked at him. “Right.”

Lance tugged on Keith’s wrist, pulling him along behind him.

Keith tugged his wrist free, and Lance was about to turn around and ask if everything was okay when Keith’s fingers threaded through his own.

Oh.

Okay.

Keith’s hand was clammy, but Lance didn’t mind. The warmth was nice, he decided.

The walk back to Ravenclaw Tower was quiet, broken only by the occasional giggle as one of them pulled the other into shadows and out of sight as a ghost swept past, but, true to Peeves’ word, they didn’t come across any teachers.

Lance could feel the warm flush that was steadily building in his cheeks, but that didn’t distract from the warm, giddy feeling in his chest. He wasn’t sure whether it was from Keith’s continued presence, the events of the day, or their narrow brush with Peeves, but Lance felt almost slap-happy as he lead Keith through the corridors in the direction of Ravenclaw Tower.

Their steps had slowed from a jog to a slow walk as they drew closer to the door leading to the Ravenclaw common room, as if neither of them was ready for the night to end.

“Well,” Lance said slowly, as they stopped in front of the door. “I guess this is it.”

“I guess so,” Keith agreed, although he made no move to tug his hand free from Lance’s.

“I, uh, had a lot of fun tonight. Yesterday? In Hogsmeade with you, I mean,” Lance said.

Keith smiled at him, swinging their joined hands together softly. “I had a lot of fun tonight, too,” he said.

Lance froze, not really sure what he was supposed to do now. It felt wrong to just go inside to the common room and leave Keith here. But… he wasn’t sure if he should… even though he wanted to…

“I got you something.” Keith said suddenly, reaching into his bag and pulling something out. It was a small, cream colored teddy bear, with a pointed wizard hat sewn onto its head. “Here,” he said, thrusting it forward.

Lance untangled his hand from Keith’s to reach up and grab the bear with both of his hands, holding it in front of him as he stared down at it. “T-Thank you,” he said, coughing slightly to clear his throat.

“And, um,” Keith started again.
Lance tore his eyes away from the cream teddy bear to focus on Keith. Keith, whose face was positively glowing red.


“Um, you too,” Lance said faintly, his voice giving out slightly.

Keith backed up slowly, giving Lance a tiny wave. He paused, like he was going to say something, before he shook his head softly, turning on his heel and rounding the corner of the corridor, disappearing from view all too quickly.

Lance slumped backwards against the door behind him, the bronze knocker digging into his back uncomfortably. He tore his gaze away from where Keith had disappeared, letting it settle back down onto the bear he was still clutching with both hands like it was his lifeline, unable to stop the cheesy grin that was slowly spreading across his face.

Okay, that was totally, one hundred percent, undeniably a date, wasn’t it?
Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Summary

Valentine's day has passed, and now Lance must come to terms with relationships and trials alike. A rumor is spread, a paper is published, and an idea is thought.

Chapter Notes

hello lovelies. thank you so much for all your kudos' and comments, and all of your live tweets. please please PLEASE keep them coming its all that sustains me. kate wants me to tell you that there's a gilmore girls reference this chapter ;) thank you all so much for your support, and we'll see you next update <33
- cait :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I think I’m dating Keith,” Lance declared, as he dropped down into the seat at the library table across from Hunk.

Hunk raised an eyebrow at him. “You think?”

“Well, I’m not sure,” Lance admitted. “But I think I am.”

“Isn’t that… the kind of thing you usually, you know, know?” Hunk asked, setting his quill down as if sensing he wasn’t going to get any more work done while Lance was talking. Especially not with this whole scenario. Lance could see how it would be a distraction, considering he himself knew wholeheartedly that it was ridiculous.

“I know!” Lance exclaimed, throwing his arms up into the air. “Like… if we were dating, I would know… right?”

Hunk narrowed his eyes. “… Right?” He echoed slowly.

“But I mean, he gave me a teddy bear! We went shopping for books and chocolates! That has to mean something,” Lance said. “I mean, we literally went to Hogsmeade together on Valentine’s Day. Just friends don’t do that, do they?”

“Not usually,” Hunk deadpanned.

“So we’re dating. Right? We’re dating? Lance questioned desperately.

“Sounds like dating to me, man,” Hunk said with a sage nod.

Lance rocked back in his chair. “Then why hasn’t he asked me out? Why isn’t it official?!”

“You know,” Hunk commented, “I never actually thought I’d see the day when you were admitting to be interested in a relationship, let alone with Keith, of all people.”
“Shut up,” Lance snapped, feeling his cheeks flush.

Hunk had the dignity to change the subject, at least. “Maybe he’s just nervous,” Hunk offered. “I don’t think… has Keith even dated anyone before?”

Lance wrinkled his nose, as he thought back on everything he knew about Keith from years of being his rival. “I don’t think so.”

“So maybe he just wants to take it slow,” Hunk offered. “Besides, couldn’t you just ask him out?”

Lance cocked his head. “I mean… technically… yes. But that goes against everything Luís and Marco have ever taught me about dating.”

“Marco the eternal bachelor?” Hunk questioned. “I don’t think I’d take relationship advice from him over the advice of me, one of your best friends, who’s actually in a healthy long-term relationship.”

Lance rolled his eyes. “No one knows how you and Shay finally got over your mutual pining and got together. That stress took, like, a year off my life.”

Hunk rolled his eyes. “We’re not as bad as you and Keith. You’ve had, like, the biggest crush on him since second year.”

“I did not!” Lance protested immediately, reflexively, before remembering what topic of conversation they were currently having. He relented. “But… if I did…damn it, how do people even know that?! There’s no way I could have been that obvious!”

Now it was Hunk’s turn to roll his eyes. “Dude, the whole ‘rivalry’ thing was not subtle. Pretty sure the only person that didn’t figure it out was Keith, and that’s just because he’s just as oblivious as you are.”

“First of all, rude,” Lance sniffed. “And second of all, the rivalry was real. I didn’t even realise that I… you know… liked him until like fourth year, and only wanted to kinda be with him this year, so your logic is flawed.”

Hunk muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like denial not being just a river in Egypt, but Lance ignored him.

“So should I wait and see what Keith says the next time I see him? I should, right? Yeah, yeah, that’s what I’m gonna do,” Lance mumbled to himself. “I mean, the second trial is coming up, so it’s not really like either of us can actually do anything about it even if we wanted to. I mean, I still need to work on this riddle. And on coming up with a gameplan. And, like, other trial stuff. And I’m sure Keith does too. We don’t really have the time to be sorting out… whatever this is. I need to focus on this trial. Otherwise I’ll be sorry later once I’m fatally injured on the field.” He snorted, before turning to pull the book that he had purchased from the bookstore in Hogsmeade out of his school bag and placed it on the table in front of him.

Hunk raised an eyebrow at the title of the book. “Homework for Coran’s class?”

“Nope,” Lance responded, popping the ‘p’. “Just some… research for the second trial.”

“Do you know what you’re facing?” Hunk asked, leaning forward and dropping his voice to a whisper.

Lance nodded, flipping open the book and scanning the table of context for one of the creatures that he and Keith had seen. Oh, there, Thunderbird. Page 274.
Lance flipped to the right page, sliding the book over so that Hunk could see.

Hunk sucked in a shocked gasp. “Seriously?”

“Yeah,” Lance whispered back. “I’m hoping I can find a weakness or something.”

*The Thunderbird is a large, avian creature native to North America, and most commonly found in Arizona in the southwestern United States. A close relative of the Phoenix, the Thunderbird can create storms as it flies and is highly sensitive to danger. A house at Ilvermorny School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is named after this creature.*

The Thunderbird is described as having a head that is "similar to that of an eagle"; or, in the wizarding world, "similar to that of a Hippogriff". They possess three pairs of powerful wings, and have feathers that shimmer with cloud-like patterns. The Thunderbird is known to change colours as it summons storms, its iridescent feathers shifting from various shades of gold to electrifying blue, to grey and silver, to white, and even to deep navy.

The Thunderbird can also sense danger and creates storms as it flies.

*A Thunderbird’s tail feather can be used as a core in a magic wand, with this type of wand being difficult to master, but powerful and skilled in transfiguration work. They too are also able to sense danger, much like their donors, also being able to cast curses on their own.*

There was also a beautiful image of a Thunderbird flying through a midnight sky. But it was nothing compared to the actual creature that Lance had seen.

But no mentions of any known weaknesses.

Lance flipped back to the table of contexts, checking for any mention of the Occamy.

Page 179.

Lance flipped to the page, skimming the words.

*The Occamy is a winged serpentine beast native to Asia.*

*It is a plumed, two-legged serpentine-bodied creature with wings that reached up to fifteen feet in height. The Occamy is extremely aggressive to anyone who approached it, and lives off of insects, rats, birds, and occasionally monkeys. It is extremely protective of its eggs, which are made of the most pure and soft silver. It is found in the Far East and India.*

The Occamy is known to be choranaptyxic, meaning it grows or shrinks in order to fit available space.

It was the eggs.

It had to be the eggs. The Occamy’s weak point had to be its eggs. There was a large emphasis on how protective the bird-like creatures were of their eggs. And according to this book, the eggs were made of silver. Didn’t the riddle say something about the prize being a precious metal or something? There was no way that was a coincidence.

So somehow they had to figure out how to steal an egg from an extremely territorial bird of prey.

Great. Perfect. Not a problem at all.
“Have you heard?” Nyma whispered in potions later that week.

Lance tried to make it look like he wasn’t eavesdropping, pretending to be completely engrossed in chopping some weird purple root into cubes.

“Yeah,” the other slytherin girl (Lance really needed to learn her name) whispered back. “People are talking about how Galra operations seem like they’ve started up again.”

Lance felt his head snap up, almost of his own volition, luckily the girls were too engrossed in their conversation to pay him any attention.

“My mom said that her mark started glowing again,” Nyma added, in a much lower voice, Lance really had to strain to hear.

“My dad said the same,” the other girl added. “What… what do you think it means?”

Nyma shrugged. “Someone is trying to resume Galra operations. Or, activated their marks, at least. My mom says a lot of former members are skeptical, they think it might be some kind of ministry trap. Or even some kind of… prank. I don’t know who would do something like that, but I wouldn’t put it past some of the ex-Galra members,” she said with a huff.

Lance forced himself to look back down at the task in front of him, but he saw that Romelle’s quill had paused over her parchment, as if she was listening to conversation in front of them as well.

“That… that makes a lot of sense,” the other girl said, nodding. “It probably just is some trick of the ministry.”

“Try not to worry about it, your dad will be fine,” Nyma said, briefly resting her hand on the girl’s arm, before turning back to the work. “He was cleared by the ministry, he won’t do anything to jeopardize your family’s position. Our parents know better than to go back to serving the Galra.”

Something pressed against Lance’s foot, and he glanced over to see Romelle staring at him, her eyebrows raised. Once she saw that she had his attention, she nodded in the direction of Nyma and her friend, obviously asking if Lance had overheard their conversation.

Lance nodded.

Romelle narrowed her eyes and shook her head softly, before turning back down to the paper if front of her. So she evidently didn’t trust Nyma. Which… was fair.

But the words had sent a chill down Lance’s spine. After all, what if it was true? What if the Galra really were beginning to be active again? If they came to power, that would be the end of muggleborns. They would see to it. The Galra had wanted to exterminate them, had nearly murdered hundreds of muggleborns the last time. Now, he’d be in danger. Mortal danger.

The kind of danger that was different than magical beasts in an arena supervised by dozens of Ministry officials.

Or what if what Nyma was saying was right, and it was some kind of Ministry trap? Was the Ministry taking an active role against ex-Galra members? Why now?

Lance shook his head softly. It was silly to think like that. The Galra had been defeated before. The ministry would be able to stop them from rising again. And there was a good probability that it was
just a ministry trap to catch any remaining members they hadn’t already rounded up. A precaution, probably. Nothing more.

Lance felt some of the tension drain from his shoulders. That was what it was. Of course it was. That made sense. Nothing to freak out about.

Everything was fine.

Lance flipped open The Daily Prophet a few days later, taking a break from reading more into the Xanthorium crystals and potential ways to get around them, intending to head right to the wizarding-equivalent of the entertainment section. Apparently there was some new band that was making waves on the Wizarding Wireless Network that Romelle couldn’t stop raving about, and there was supposed to be an interview with them in today’s Prophet.

But whether or not that was true, Lance never found out.

Because the headline splashed across the front of the page and the moving photograph underneath it immediately captured his attention. The picture was of a figure that Lance recognized immediately, even though it had been months since he had seen her.

Krolia Kogane being escorted out of a building by two large guards. And they were probably there for her protection, but… the picture combined with the headline didn’t look good. Lance started reading the article immediately. No doubt it had to do with what Nyma was talking about the other day.

**Ex-Galra Members Seen Leaving the Ministry on the Twentieth Anniversary Of Zarkon’s Defeat**

Written by Rita Skeeter

*Today marks, approximately, the twentieth anniversary of the defeat of the Dark Lord known as Zarkon after a string of ministry operations successfully dismantled his organization, the Galra. But today, which should be a day of celebration for the Wizarding World, is marred by dark news. Half a dozen former Galra members, including Galra-member-turned-ministry-informant Krolia Kogane, have reported the reactivation of their marks. As our readers are no doubt aware, members of the Galra were branded by the Dark Lord, some reportedly unwillingly, allowing him to call them to his side. After his defeat, these marks turned grey. But now, many years later, they have begun to glow purple yet again.*

*What does this mean for the ministry? Is the Dark Lord really returning to power? After all, no one has seen him since he was presumed dead (although no body was ever found). Why, twenty years later, would he choose to make his return? Or perhaps someone new has taken up the mantle of the Dark Lord, an heir of sorts. High ranking members of the ministry have their speculations, but at this time they have refused to comment.*

*The exception to this is Krolia Kogane. Every wizard alive remembers the story of how Krolia, raised in a prominent, pure-blood Galra family, turned against her own family members, delivering invaluable information about the inner-workings of the Galra organization to a ministry auror, whom she later married and had a child with before he was killed in the field of duty. Now, Krolia continues to work with the ministry on dismantling the Galra organization, but can she really be trusted? After all, while it is true that the woman once chose a man over her own family, it is undeniable that family ties run deep. Can we be expected to believe that she is truly unbiased in her*
work against the Galra? I, for one, find it highly suspicious that she was the first to report the glowing of her mark. Perhaps it is Kogane, herself, who is striving to re-establish the Galra Order after she took it apart herself. And if it is, there can be little doubt that her son will be her right hand.

Keith Kogane, on his part, is currently one of the two (yes, two) Hogwarts champions competing in the Triwizard Tournament. Kogane came in second place in the first trial, and many expect him to continue to prove himself. First place, by a large margin of points, went to muggleborn Lance Álvarez, a friend of Kogane’s. Inside sources say that it appeared the two boys were working together, an interesting loophole as participants in the Triwizard Tournament are not allowed to receive outside help during the trials. However, in a situation such as the Triwizard Tournament, friendships never come without strings. Is there a darker reason that Kogane has befriended the muggleborn Álvarez? With his mother’s ties to the Galra, it makes sense for Kogane to wish to distance himself from pure-blood elitist ideology. And muggleborn Álvarez makes an easy target, after most of the school turned against him after his… certainly unusual entrance into the Triwizard Tournament. It would make all too much sense if Kogane was only using Álvarez to make an example of, wouldn’t it?. While I’ve covered this topic more in depth in my article following the events of the First Trial, I can’t help but think about the two boys again as rumors of the a second Galra uprising begin to circulate.

What do these events mean? Could there be more to the story than what the ministry, and Krolia Kogane, have to say? I certainly think so. We can’t trust a woman who used to be a member of the Galra to be the one in charge of preventing any potential threats to the Wizarding World. If you agree with me, write to the ministry requesting the removal of Krolia Kogane from her position. We need people in places of authority that we can trust to be unbiased. No one is denying that Krolia Kogane has invaluable information regarding the ways in which the Galra organisation operated, but a woman with her ties to the organisation can not be trusted to ensure that they never come to power again.

Nothing good can come from the reactivation of the Galra marks, but only time will tell whether the Galra organisation is truly on the rise again or if this is nothing more than an elaborate hoax. However, I suspect that there is a good chance we’ll begin to see new Galra marks appearing all too soon.

Lance tore his eyes away from the page, feeling the familiar burn of anger churning in his stomach. He felt sick. How could Rita Skeeter go so far as to insinuate that Keith, Keith, and his mom would be rebuilding the Galra order together? It just…

That wasn’t fair. Keith wouldn’t do something like that, Lance knew that he wouldn’t. And trying (again!) to insinuate that the only reason he and Keith were friends was because… because Keith was using him as… as some kind of cover story.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Lance said, pushing The Daily Prophet towards Romelle. “I need to go find Keith.”

Romelle glanced down towards the article, no doubt to see what had gotten Lance so upset, but Lance was hardly paying her any attention, as he let his gaze flicker around the Great Hall, as he searched for Keith.

But the older boy was nowhere to be found.
Lance scooped his school bag off the ground. He had to find Keith. And it was practically a snowstorm outside, so there was really only one other place the other boy could be.

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Why there had to be so many steps up to the astronomy tower, Lance would never know, but he was panting by the time he arrived at the top. After all of that sprinting, Lance really, really hoped that Keith was up there.

He had seen Keith a couple times over the past few days, mostly in passing between their various classes or when they shared meals in the Great Hall, but they had all been short, passing conversations. Nothing deep or emotional. Like Lance had thought, there simply wasn’t time. Not with the second trial approaching as quickly as it was. Certainly not enough time to sort out what was happening between them. He barely had enough time to get through his library books.

He slowed his pace, not wanting to barrel up to the top like a madman in case anyone other than Keith was up there. This high, and close to the open air of the astronomy tower, it was freezing. Lance rubbed his hands together, glancing around to see if he could see Keith.

Sure enough, there was a bundle of black robes and an untucked white dress shirt leaning forward, resting their arms on the railing surrounding the edge of the tower.

Keith didn’t look up as Lance drew closer, even though Lance knew that Keith knew he was there. Lance stepped up beside Keith, resting his forearms against the (freezing-cold) metal railing.

“I’m so sorry about what that article said about you and your mom, Keith,” Lance said, once the silence between them had grown too much for him to handle.

Keith scoffed. “I can’t believe the nerve of that woman.”

“I just… I can’t even imagine what you’re going through right now, and I mean, I’ve heard the rumors about the Galra marks activating again, but I don’t understand how anyone could be crazy enough to believe that your mom was behind it. I mean, your mom is, like, the nicest person ever,” Lance babbled, knowing that he was babbling but not knowing how to stop. It was what he always did when he was nervous.

And he was definitely nervous right now.

He had been so caught up in needing to find Keith, that now that he had found him, he didn’t know what to say to him. “And like, all that bullshit about you liking me for show, I’ll be the first person in line to say how false that is, ‘cause if you hated me at this point I would have had way more detentions than I should have had and way less time spent sneaking around Hogwarts and I… I know that it’s a lie. And no one is going to believe Rita Skeeter, anyways, I mean… she’s, like, a gossip writer. She’s got, like, the worst reputation ever. Everyone is going to know that it’s complete nonsense. I mean… oh god please say something I need to stop rambling say something please I-”

Keith had turned towards him while Lance had babbled, and he felt his face flush under the intensity of Keith’s gaze.

And his eyes were shining. Well, shining more than they usually were.

All Lance could do was watch as Keith’s face crumpled, tears starting to fall from his eyes, and then Keith was tipping sideways, burying his face in Lance’s shoulder. Lance shifted away from the railing, turning so that he could pull Keith into his arms, into a proper embrace.
He could feel his shoulder growing wet from where Keith was sobbing into it, but Lance couldn’t bring it in himself to care as he tightened his arms around the older boy. From the way Keith stiffened for a second before relaxing, Lance could tell that he wasn’t used to physical affection.

Lance wasn’t sure how long they stood like that, his hands rubbing circles against Keith’s back in what he hoped was a comforting gesture, while Keith’s sobs shifted to quiet sniffles.

Eventually, after minutes or hours or eons, Keith pulled back slightly, reaching up to rub the last of the tears from his eyes. His nose was red, and his eyes were puffy from crying, and he looked… achingly human.

Lance reached up, resting his palms against Keith’s cheeks as he swept his fingers across the cool skin, wiping away the last of the tear tracks.

“Keith,” Lance said quietly, his voice breaking slightly. “I…” Lance started before breaking off. He wasn’t sure what he was supposed to say.

“How dare she?” Keith said, his voice thick, as he pulled away from Lance. “How… how can she do this to my family? We… we’re good people. We’re good people! We don’t deserve to be… and my dad… he… he doesn’t deserve,” Keith cut himself off, scowling, as he paced across the floor of the observatory.

“And my mom!” Keith said, his voice cracking slightly. “I… this…claiming that she’s, like, behind it or something? Doesn’t anyone realise how… how *fucked* up that is? Like, my mom could lose her job if people believe this crap. Or screw losing her job, my mom could be at serious risk. I mean… it wouldn’t be the first time that people threatened her. People in the ministry think she’s a risk, that she might be leaking their secrets, and Galra supporters hate her for turning against Zar- … against the Dark Lord in the first place. I mean, there’s a reason why she can’t really come around Hogwarts and why I… why I spend the holidays with Shiro and Adam and I… I’m so *sick* of this.”

“Keith,” Lance, reaching over and tugging on the sleeve of Keith’s robe, pulling the older boy closer.

Keith let Lance hold him still, reaching up with his other hand to scrub at his eyes.

Lance slumped down to the ground, pulling Keith down with him. The stone floor was cold through the thin material of Lance’s robes, but he ignored it in favor of pressing closer to Keith, wrapping an arm around Keith’s shoulders.

Keith shifted, pressing his nose into Lance’s neck, his breath warm. “I’m scared, Lance,” he whispered, almost like he was afraid someone would overhear them. “I’m *so* fucking scared.”

Lance felt himself stiffen at the admission. Keith was… Keith didn’t get scared. Keith was always the person who rushed into danger first, he was impulsive and reckless and maybe a little bit of an idiot. But he wasn’t the type of person to get scared.

“For your mom’s safety?” Lance asked, keeping his voice low.

Keith nodded, his hair brushing against Lance’s chin. “Yeah, but it’s… it’s more than that. Those rumors that have been going around? About the… the Galra marks reactivating? They’re *true.”*
“I mean… my mom’s reactivated. And it’s not some trick that the ministry is doing. She wrote to me to warn me,” Keith explained. He shifted, dropping his head down onto Lance’s shoulder, his hands digging into his robes. “The ministry has already questioned her, and I mean, obviously they know that she doesn’t have anything to do with it, but all this speculation… it’s enough to make people paranoid enough that all the veritaserum in the world can’t fix it.”

“Is Krolia going to be okay? Does she need to, I don’t know, go somewhere safe or something?” Lance asked.

“No, no… she wants to stay and work with the ministry. If it is Zar- the Dark Lord, then she wants to help take him down for good this time,” Keith said.

“Your mom is really brave,” Lance told him.

“Yeah,” Keith responded, biting his lip. “She really is.”

“I think that’s where you get it from,” Lance said, reaching over with his free hand to pull Keith’s hands free from where they were twisting in his robes.

Keith snorted. “Yeah, right. Didn’t you hear anything that I just said?”

“I did, but, Keith, being scared doesn’t change the fact that you’re still the bravest, most impulsive, reckless, amazing idiot that I’ve ever met,” Lance said seriously, pulling away just far enough to look Keith in the eyes. “Do you hear me? It’s okay to worry about your mom. And it’s okay if all this… Galra stuff freaks you out. I mean, it scares the shit out of me. It’s terrifying. And the next trial is only a few days away, and that’s scary, too. You don’t have to be strong all the time. It’s just me.”

Keith’s eyes softened. He turned his hand over in Lance’s, tangling their fingers together. “Thank you.”

“For what?” Lance asked.

“Just… being you, I guess. For listening to me. And calming me down. I mean, maybe I’m freaking out for nothing. My mom is worried, but she worries about a lot of things. It still might not be anything. And thank you for just being here,” Keith said, punctuating his statements by squeezing Lance’s hand. “I mean, I don’t even know how you managed to find me.”

“I just remembered that you said you came up here to think, and I figured you would be doing some thinking,” Lance said. “And you don’t need to thank me, Keith, I wanted to… I wanted to be here for you.”

“Maybe I don’t need to, but I want to,” Keith insisted. He leaned in closer, and Lance could do nothing except blink in shock as Keith’s face swam closer to his.

He felt Keith’s more-than-slightly chapped lips brush against the smooth skin of his cheek, before the older boy was pulling away. “Thank you,” Keith said again, a faint pink blush spreading across his cheeks.

Lance swallowed thickly. “You’re welcome,” he managed to say.

Keith relaxed, settling back against him and letting his head drop down onto Lance’s shoulder. Neither of them moved for a long time.

<<< >>>
Lance flipped through the journals of Shiro’s that he had borrowed from Keith ages ago and forgotten to return. He was currently reading a section of notes that Shiro had apparently taken on binding spells, which Lance supposed could potentially be useful in subduing the magical beasts. If he was able to interfere with their ability to fly, then they probably wouldn’t be able to actively chase him, right? Maybe a full body bind… although Lance had to admit that he would feel slightly guilty if the occamys started falling from the sky like rocks. The Baku and the merfolk may have been terrifying, but the occamys and the Thunderbird were beautiful. Lance wasn’t sure that he would be able to bring himself to actually hurt them.

The words of the trial echoed through his mind again, the scroll bearing them pressed against the table underneath Shiro’s journal.

*Beasts and men, a free-for-all fight*

*A trial by fire at such a height*

*Crystal hidden and volatile*

*Navigate confined straits with guile*

*A creature’s storm from which you hide*

*A beast fills space unoccupied*

*Beat the menagerie global*

*Find the prize of metal noble*

He already knew what the prize would be, since he and Keith had been able to figure out that the beasts mentioned were occamys and a Thunderbird, Lance had no doubt that the prize would be a silver occamy egg. He just needed to figure out how to get it...

He wasn’t concerned about the storm that the riddle mentioned, since that was probably why the Thunderbird had been chosen as one of the beasts. Hopefully, it was just there to make the terrain difficult to navigate and the champions wouldn’t actually have to fight it.

But Lance was more than a little concerned about the fact that it seemed like he would have to be fighting against the other champions. He might have had some kind of alliance with Keith and Allura in the first trial, but Lance couldn’t count on that being true for this trial. Sure, he didn’t think that Keith would go out of his way to hurt him, but they had both agreed to seriously compete in the trial this time.

Lance really didn’t want to have to fight against Keith.

Luckily, he had no such qualms about having to go toe-to-toe with Lotor.

Although Lance had to admit that he was glad he had been having the private training with Shiro and Keith, otherwise he wasn’t sure that he would be confident enough in his dueling ability to even consider going toe-to-toe with the son of the Durmstrang headmistress.

And the riddle said that the trial would be taking place at a height. So that meant that Lance needed to find some way to stay up in the air. Or maybe that the trial was going to be up on like a super high pillar or something.

And what was up with these “confined straits” that the riddle mentioned? He still hadn’t properly
figured that one out. Because that made it sound like they would be dealing with some sort of cave system. But that didn’t make sense if they were up in the air. His best guess was that it was going to be a chasm of some kind.

Lance didn’t know any spells that would allow him to do something crazy like fly. And he sure as hell didn’t have time to learn any. At this point, he was pretty much stuck just hoping that there would be some kind of actual surface for the champions to stand on. Otherwise, he was going to prove to everyone that it really had been a fluke that he had won the first trial.

The last thing that Lance wanted to do was make a fool of himself.

God, the trial was tomorrow and Lance was so far from prepared that it wasn’t even funny.

If only he could, like, summon his broom to him, or something. Lance had no doubt that he would be able to outfly the occamys if he had his broom.

Lance slammed the journal in front of him closed in excitement at the sudden realization.

No one had ever said that the Champions couldn’t summon things to help them. Why couldn’t Lance summon his broom? Or even his beater’s bat? Maybe this whole trial would just end up being one giant game of quidditch.

And Lance was good at quidditch.

Sure, flying around the pitch and trying to find a prize was usually the job of a seeker, but the description of the trial was close enough to a game of quidditch that if Lance could figure out a way to make this work… he might actually have a chance of winning this trial as well.

And, sure, he had never been able to get a hit on Keith during their actual quidditch games, but maybe this would be a chance for Lance to redeem himself.

Tossing Shiro’s journal to the side, Lance pushed himself away from the table.

First things first, he needed to read up on some pretty powerful summoning spells.

Chapter End Notes

Just so you all know, descriptions of the beasts are taken from their respective Harry Potter Wiki pages!!!
Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Summary

The morning of the second trial arrives and Lance doesn't feel completely prepared. A conversation is overheard, a threat is made, and a plan is finalized.

Chapter Notes

First of all - thank y'all so much for 12,000 hits!!!! That is literally INSANE!!! And for giving us over 1000 kudos! Y'all are the best readers two girls could ask for! As always, feel free to live tweet us over on twitter, leave comments, and kudos - we can't reply to all of it, but we live for that shit. I promise we read each and every one and they always make our day. And now, for the chapter
- slowklancing

Lance speared a sausage onto his fork, unlike before the last trial when Lance had felt so sick he wasn’t sure that he would be able to eat, he found that he was **starving** before this one. Almost like his body already knew what to expect and was preparing to make up for it.

Of course, it might have helped that Lance woke up hours early. So early that the dining hall was still practically empty.

But, where the silence would usually bother Lance, make him feel out of place and uncomfortable, he found himself embracing it. It felt good to be away from the eyes and ears of his peers. He knew that everyone was waiting to see what he’ll do. To see if he does as well in the second trial as he had done in the first, or if the first trial was nothing but a fluke. A mistake.

Maybe that **was** all the first trial had been.

It made sense, seeing as Lance hadn’t even been trying to win.

Lance shook his head softly, he shouldn’t be thinking like that. Not on the morning of the trial. He had bigger things to worry about. Like whether or not his summoning spell would work. If it didn’t, Lance supposed that the trial would probably be over rather quickly.

Lance took another bite of his breakfast, glancing around the hall. He had slipped out before any of his friends awoke, and knew that it probably wouldn’t be long before Romelle, Pidge, and Matt came looking for him. But he had wanted some time to himself. Time to finalise his plans, spend some last few minutes going over the offensive and defensive spells in Shiro’s journals, flip through the information on the occamys and the Thunderbird, so that everything would be fresh in his mind.

Which was exactly what Lance was doing, as he flipped to the next page of Shiro’s journals. His teacher’s handwriting was terrible, he couldn’t help but notice, as he read over the descriptions of different jinxes that could be used to slow opponents down without seriously injuring them.
Because, while it was true that this was a deadly contest, Lance still didn’t want to be responsible for Keith or Allura getting hurt.

Lotor… well, he didn’t care about hurting Lotor so much, but he still didn’t want to do any lasting damage to the Durmstrang champion. He didn’t want that shit on his conscience.

Lance flipped the journal closed, shoving it to the side. If he didn’t know the spells by now, then he probably wouldn’t be able to use them. It wasn’t like Lance could teach himself any new spells given the small handful of hours he had remaining. But he was pretty confident in the spells that he already knew. Sure, he would have to focus on using different spells depending on what he was fighting, since it wasn’t like he would want to use the same kinds of spells against the occamys, the Thunderbird, whatever other creatures might be present, and the other champions.

Once Lance was sure that the journal was safely out of the way of any potential maple-syrup-related danger, he grabbed the book about the magical creatures. This was probably the more important information to remember, anyways, since it wasn’t as seared into his brain as spells and flying techniques were.

Blah, blah, blah, the Thunderbird is native to Arizona. Blah, blah, blah. These books needed to spend less time describing the creatures, and more time talking about how to fight or capture them. Maybe then, they would actually be mildly useful for this trial.

Lance flipped towards the back of the book, where the section on occamys was. Thankfully, the portion of the book on the occamys was slightly more thorough than the section on the Thunderbird had been.

“‘Occamys are usually non-aggressive creatures,’ Lance mumbled to himself, ‘unless their eggs are threatened, in that case, they can be quite deadly. Occamys are very protective of their young. Many adventures have tried to make a fortune through silver occamy eggs only to meet a swift demise from the parent occamy, who rarely goes far from the nest.’ Great. Not too much of a threat until the end then.”

“What are you saying, there, buddy?” Hunk asked, dropping down onto the bench beside Lance.

Lance’s gaze snapped up from the book, not expecting the sudden presence of his Hufflepuff friend. “Hunk! You’re up early,” Lance noted, narrowing his eyes slightly. “How did you know where to find me?”

“I didn’t,” Hunk shrugged, “I was just hungry.”

Lance shook his head fondly.

“Are you ready for the trial today?” Hunk asked, grabbing a chocolate-chocolate-chip muffin from a basket that was sitting in the middle of the table.

“I guess I have to be,” Lance said, picking up his knife and cutting up the pancake he had scooped onto his plate awhile ago. “I mean, it’s a little late if I’m not ready, you know? The trial is going to happen whether I’m ready or not, so I might as well embrace it.”

“I think you’re gonna do great,” Hunk said in a bright tone, the same tone that he always used when he was trying to be encouraging about something.

“Thanks, man,” Lance said, shoving a bite of pancake into his mouth and clapping Hunk on the shoulder.
He appreciated the support, even if Hunk was kind of infringing on his preparation time.

“So what are you looking at?” Hunk asked, leaning over to see the book that Lance had open on the table.

Lance swatted him away. “Preparations, Hunk! I kind of need to, you know, concentrate. Plus, you aren’t allowed to know any of this stuff.”

“Oh yeah,” Hunk said, pouting slightly. “You can’t even give me a hint of what to expect later?”

Lance narrowed his eyes, pointing at Hunk with his fork. “Definitely not. Now, you have to be quiet so I can finish reading this section, okay?”

“Okay,” Hunk agreed.

Lance stared at his friend for another long second, before turning his attention back to the book, taking advantage of the quiet to continue reading about occamys.

The quiet didn’t last.

Lance had barely made it through another paragraph when he felt arms wrap around his neck, someone hugging him from behind.

“What’s that?” Romelle asked, her voice way too close to Lance’s ear. She reached forward with one of her hands, pointing to the illustration of the occamy.

Lance snapped the book shut. “I’m going to the library,” he declared. “I’ll see you guys after the trial. I need to focus, unless you want me to end up as mince meat.”

At the last second, Lance thought to reach forward and grab his plate with his half-eaten breakfast. He loved his friends, but he seriously needed to use this time to hole up in the library for some last-minute preparation.

“Good luck!” Romelle called after him, as Lance waved over his shoulder.

After all, there was nothing like an upcoming deadline to force you to buckle down and get some work done.

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Lance was tucked into the back corner of the library, his empty plate resting precariously atop a stack of books, while he used his robes as a sort of makeshift blanket as he read about flying techniques that were usually used by seekers to capture snitches, but Lance reasoned that they would probably be useful for snatching up silver eggs, as well.

And, well, he hadn’t meant to eavesdrop on anyone.

Honest.

But an all too familiar voice spoke quietly, their voice obviously coming from the other side of the shelf closest to Lance.

“I don’t care what my mother told you,” Lotor hissed. “I have the situation under control. I don’t need your help.”

“That’s not what you said before the first trial,” another voice answered him. Acxa.
“Asking you to steal some stupid plant from that complete nitwit of a potions teacher is different than showing you the riddle, Acxa. I can win this trial without your aid.”

Lance felt himself freeze. Lotor… Lotor had just admitted to stealing. And not just stealing, but stealing from Iverson. Lance could feel his eyes widen in disbelief that Lotor was still alive to tell the tale. Iverson was not someone Lance wanted to cross.

“Because that worked out so well for you in the first trial,” Acxa snorted.

“The first trial was a joke,” Lotor sniffed. “A hypnotic octopus. Utterly ridiculous. None of the other champions had to deal with one, it’s like the trial was rigged.”

“Or you just didn’t know what you were supposed to be doing,” Acxa muttered. “But, fine, Lotor. If you don’t want my help, then good luck competing in this trial. Just try not to come in last place again, you’re making Durmstrang look bad.”

“Like you could have done any better. I’ll do better this time, mother will see,” Lotor said. “I’ll prove myself in this trial, and everyone will regret underestimating Durmstrang.”

“I hope you’re right,” Acxa said. “Your mother doesn’t tolerate failure.”

“My mother needs to learn when to trust her son,” Lotor insisted. “She has too little faith in me.”

“Well,” Acxa started, sounding smug, “who can blame her after the mess you made with that Altea girl.”

There was a loud bang, as if someone had slammed their hand against the bookshelf.

“Don’t speak of her,” Lotor hissed, his voice low and deadly.

Despite not being the person on the receiving end of the words, Lance shivered.

“Predictable as always, Lotor,” Acxa said, sounding bored. Lance couldn’t be sure, but it seemed like her voice was getting farther away. “Your mother is waiting for you down by the entrance hall. I wouldn’t advise making her wait. You know how impatient she gets.”

The sound of a single set of footsteps padding through the library followed this statement, and then there was nothing but quiet.

Lance glanced over towards the shelf that was all that separated him from Lotor. If Lotor had been anyone else… Lance probably would have gone over to comfort them. But it wasn’t just anyone, it was Lotor. Lance was a pretty nice guy, but even he wasn’t that nice.

Still...

Acxa had mentioned that Headmistress Daibaazal was waiting down in the entrance hall to talk to Lotor about something, and after the conversation that he had just overheard… Lance couldn’t help but be curious as to what the Headmistress had to say.

Was it possible she had learned something that would be helpful in the trial?

Lance stood slowly, slipping his robe back on, and grabbing Shiro’s journals from the stack of books on the tables. The other ones didn’t really matter anymore, it wasn’t like he would need them after today anyways.
Maybe… maybe he should follow Lotor. Just to hear what Headmistress Daibaazal was saying.

If Lotor did plan on pulling any funny stunts during this trial, if he was going to do anything that would ensure his win, Lance needed to know what they were.

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Thankfully, Lotor was distracted enough that he didn’t notice Lance following him through the halls.

Lance was careful to follow the rules that he remembered from muggle spy movies, staying far enough back that Lotor hopefully wouldn’t see or hear him, but close enough to see which corners Lotor turned around. Of course, it probably helped that Lance already knew where Lotor was going. It was pretty hard to get lost on your way to the entrance hall.

Lotor kept up a brisk pace, like he didn’t want to keep his mother waiting, which thankfully gave Lance an excuse not to think too hard about his actions, otherwise he might have talked himself out of it.

All too soon, the entrance hall came into view.

Headmistress Daibaazal, true to what Acxa had said, was waiting near the door, clothed in swaths of black fabric that practically made it impossible to make out any of her features. For such a tiny lady, she had a seriously intimidating presence.

The Headmistress barely glanced up as her son strolled up to her, just fell into step beside him, and together they stepped through the main doors of Hogwarts, no doubt heading to wherever the second trial was taking place.

Which… now that Lance was thinking about it, he wasn’t entirely sure where the second trial was taking place. No doubt it had been announced at breakfast that morning, but, well, he had left rather quickly…

Well, no matter, he could just follow Lotor and Headmistress Daibaazal. Which is what he had been planning on doing anyways.

Lance slipped out the doors behind them, just before they could shut all the way. If they noticed him following them, he could always just say that he was making his way towards the second trial. It’s not like he could possibly be going anywhere else. Right, yeah, he could do that. That didn’t seem too suspicious.

He wished that there was a way for him to get closer, for him to be able to make out what was being said, because outside, with the wind roaring and the distance that Lance was maintaining in an effort to look casual, he could only make out fragments of what they were saying.

“-better not make any more foolish mistakes,” Headmistress Daibaazal said, her voice quiet, which somehow made the words sound deadlier than if she had screamed them.

Whatever Lotor’s reply was, it was captured by the wind.

“You’re making a joke out of our family name,” the Headmistress continued, like Lotor hadn’t spoken at all. “Your father would be ashamed of you.”

Lance watched Lotor stiffen. He scanned through his memory, trying to remember if any of the Rita Skeeter articles had ever mentioned Lotor’s father, but he didn’t think they had. It felt like something he would have remembered.
“I don’t see you doing anything to help, hag,” Lotor spat. Which, really, who talked to their *mother* like that? Sure, Headmistress Daibaazal was creepy as fuck, but… she was still his mom? If Lance ever spoke to his mamá like that, she would wash his mouth out with soap.

“-constantly refuse my aid,” Headmistress Daibaazal said angrily, her voice rising in pitch, but still quiet enough that Lance missed the first half of the sentence.

“Oh, and you could have prevented me from getting hypnotised, could you?” Lotor asked. He crossed his arms. “I was the only champion who had to deal with that… creature.”

“Because you *went the wrong way*,” Headmistress Daibaazal hissed. “What did I do to deserve to be stuck with such a useless son?”

*Wow,* Lance couldn’t help thinking. *What a lovely family.*

*This relationship is truly not messed up at all.*

“Please, mother,” Lotor said, throwing one of his arms out to the side dramatically. “Feel free to compete in the trial for me, if you think you would be any more successful. Though I doubt it.”

“You let a muggleborn win,” Headmistress Daibaazal said darkly, disdain dripping off the word. “There is no greater shame than that.”

“It won’t happen again,” Lotor promised, his voice losing most of the sarcasm that had tainted it. “I know what to expect this time, I have a plan. I’ll make sure that the mudblood regrets the day his name was chosen from the Goblet of Fire. I’ll make him regret that he was ever born.”

Lance felt his blood run cold at the pure *threat* in Lotor’s voice. Whatever Lotor was planning for this trial… he was going to do whatever he had to so that Lance would lose.

And Lance had a feeling that Lotor didn’t fret about playing by the rules.

Lotor and Headmistress Daibaazal continued to walk, and Lance realized that he had stopped moving. He had just frozen in place until they were too far away that he couldn’t make out what they were saying.

Shit.

Lance started moving again, maybe a little too quickly, his shoes scuffing against the pebbles that lined the path down towards Professor Coran’s hut and the Herbology Greenhouse.

*Where on earth was this trial even taking place?*

Headmistress Daibaazal drew to a stop, reaching out like she was going to rest her hand on Lotor’s shoulder before immediately retracting it.

Lotor just kept walking.

The Headmistress stared after him for a second, before spinning on her heel, faster than Lance could think to react.

To her credit, she didn’t seem startled by Lance’s presence behind her, just continued to walk towards him.

Maybe it really did just look like he was walking down towards the trial. Maybe he was being more inconspicuous than he had thought he was being.
“The little Ravenclaw champion,” Headmistress Daibaazal cooed, her voice too rough to be considered gentle. “I hope you’ve prepared as well for this trial as you have for the first one,” she reached out, wrapping her cold, boney fingers around Lance’s arm. “Your plan was quite impressive. I never would have expected it from a muggleborn. Your… people should be very proud of you.”

From her tone of voice, it was clear that the Headmistress didn’t mean her words as a compliment, and Lance didn’t take it as one.

Lance felt a red streak of anger stab through him. Who did this lady think she was? Talking about muggleborns as though they were an entirely different species or something. Like… like they weren’t even wizards. Like she wasn’t even sure if they were human.

“You aren’t what I expected the Goblet to choose for the Hogwarts champion,” she mused, her nails digging into Lance’s skin.

“I thought that you believed I cheated?” Lance said before he could stop himself, the words spilling out. “That I wasn’t really chosen by the Goblet at all.”

The Headmistress started slightly, like she hadn’t expected him to talk back to her. “Yes, well, obviously that proved not to be the case,” she said smoothly. “Apparently… Fate has something in store for you, little eagle. I’ll look forward to seeing what it is.”

“Is that everything?” Lance asked, pulling away from her, but the Headmistress’ grip on his arm didn’t loosen.

“I’ve heard this trial is supposed to be more dangerous than the first one,” Headmistress Daibaazal continued, like she hadn’t just spent the last five minutes insulting the very fiber of his being. “It would be a shame if anything unfortunate were to happen when the Tournament is just getting interesting.”

The second threat in five minutes.

Today was definitely his day.

“I’ll be careful,” Lance said, swallowing nervously.

Well, what else was he supposed to say?!

He wasn’t exactly sure what the etiquette was for responding to threats.

“Good,” Headmistress Daibaazal said, grinning. Somehow, her smile made her seem even creepier than she already was. She squeezed his arms before releasing it. “I look forward to watching you today, little eagle. I’m sure it will be a true spectacle. Tell the little lion that he has my regards.”

Lance swallowed again, his mouth feeling suddenly dry.

Headmistress Daibaazal tucked her hands into the sleeves of her robe, like she was tucking them into a muff to protect them from the cool, late winter air. “Best of luck,” she said, “I’ll wish for you to come in a deserved second place. After my son, of course.”

She brushed past Lance without another word, disappearing back in the direction of the castle.

Like she wasn’t even planning on attending the trial.
Lance shoved his own hands deeper into the pockets of his school robes.

He needed to find Keith.

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In the end, Lance didn’t see Keith until he strolled into the Champions’ tent shortly before the trial was scheduled to begin.

It turned out that the second trial was apparently taking place down on the quidditch pitch (which Lance was only able to figure out by following Lotor’s tiny, disappearing figure in the distance until the familiar towering bleachers rose into view). Similar to the set-up around the lake, there were two tents assembled a good distance away from the quidditch pitch. The smaller one was probably another medical tent, in case of any injuries, which given what had happened last time, would no doubt be necessary by the end of the trial. Which meant that the larger tent was probably where the champions were meant to be getting ready.

Even from the top of the hill leading down towards the quidditch pitch, Lance could tell that the tops of the stands were obscured in some sort of thick, magical fog. Probably so that the champions couldn’t sneak any peaks before the trial actually started.

Lance cut down the hillside quickly, managing to slip into the Champions’ tent right on Lotor’s heels, although the older boy gave no sign of noticing his presence.

The tent appeared to be the same tent that had been used during the first trial, and, like before, Lance couldn’t help but be taken aback at how much bigger the inside of the tent was compared to the (still admittedly spacious) exterior. The kitchenette and living room were both empty when he and Lotor walked in, meaning that either Allura and Keith hadn’t arrived yet, or that they were changing.

Which… speaking of changing, last time there had been swimsuits for them to wear. Lance glanced down at his school robes self-consciously. Hopefully there was something that would be more appropriate for the trial to wear.

Lance ignored Lotor, choosing to wander over in the kitchen instead. Sure enough, there was a small wooden table with stacks of dark robes on them. From a first glance, they appeared similar to quidditch robes.

Lance grabbed a pair, shaking them out. The sleeves of the robes were a pale blue, Allura’s then. He quickly tossed Allura’s robes back onto the table, grabbing the pair that had been underneath them. Lance let out a sigh of relief when the sleeves of these robes were dark blue. His pair.

Lance shook the robes open, taking in their appearance. Like he had thought, they were similar to quidditch robes. They were long, but with long slits cut in the legs so that there would be freedom of motion. And Lance hadn’t noticed them at first, but there was a matching pair of trousers tucked into the robes (now almost falling to the ground as a result of all the shaking). The front of the robes dipped into a low ‘v’ so that the blue color could be seen. Four matching, almost identical, sets of black boots were resting on the ground underneath the table.

Lance scooped up one of the pairs of boots, the pair that seemed like they were probably the right size, deciding to go change quickly. Hopefully, by the time he was done, someone other than Lotor would have arrived.

The bedrooms looked exactly like Lance remembered, sparsely decorated, so Lance didn’t waste any time in looking around, choosing instead to strip down quickly and pull on the clothing for the trial.
They fit him like a glove, probably aided by magic in some way, and his last name was stitched across the back of the jacket in blue thread. There was a pair of fingerless black gloves in the pocket of the jacket, which Lance only hesitated for a moment before pulling on. They were a little edgy for his taste, but, well, they were probably given gloves for a reason.

Lance bundled his school robes up, placing them carefully on the dresser so that he could change back after the trial, assuming he didn’t get sent to the infirmary tent again.

Oh, shit, wait. His book on summoning spells was in the pocket of his robes. Lance quickly retrieved the book, since Allura and Keith didn’t seem to be here yet, he might have some time to do some last minute research before the start of the trial. He did his best work under pressure anyways. That was why he always procrastinated on his homework.

Lance tucked the book under his arm, making his way back out towards the lounge of the tent. The rest of the tent was completely empty, meaning that Lotor had probably disappeared to go get changed and that Allura and Keith still hadn’t arrived.

They were cutting it awfully close to the start of the trial.

Lance dropped down onto the couch, propping his boot-clad feet up onto the coffee table. He had left his bookmark about halfway through, so he flipped the book open to the page he had marked. It was the portion of the chapter specifically about summoning broomsticks for Quidditch, which was basically what he needed to know how to do.

He had barely gotten through the next paragraph (a portion of text explaining the effect that summoning could have on the wood of the broom, which Lance wasn’t really interested in) when the front flap of the tent was pushed open and Keith walked in.

Suddenly, Lance was incredibly nervous about seeing Keith. He hadn’t seen the older boy since the other night in the astronomy tower. Keith had taken some time to himself, laying low and waiting for the rumours to die down, and with the trial preparations it had been futile to try and arrange anything, anyways. Would it be awkward to see Keith now? After all, he had seen Keith in an incredible vulnerable state. And Keith wasn’t exactly known for being vulnerable. Would he be upset that Lance had seen him like that? Not to mention there was the fact that Lance still had no idea where they stood with one another. Whether they were… whether they were, like, dating or not.

“Hey, man!” Lance called, waving Keith over to him and hoping that his voice sounded normal. After all, he probably only had a few minutes before Lotor finished changing, and he wanted to tell Keith what he had overheard the creepy scumbag talking about with Headmistress Daibaazal, whether or not Keith acted weird about what had happened on the astronomy tower.

Keith blinked at him in confusion, before giving Lance a small smile and picking his way over towards the couch. “Hey, Lance,” he said, pausing right by the arm of the couch. “Is that what we have to wear for the trial?”

Thankfully, Keith both sounded and looked normal. Lance let out a breath he hadn’t realised he was holding.

Lance glanced down at his chest, following Keith’s gaze. “Yeah, they’re over on the table in the kitchen, but - hey don’t walk away just yet I’m still talking asshole,” he added lightly, when Keith started to turn as if he were going to head in to the kitchen. “Look, I need to talk to you first.”

“About what?” Keith asked, instantly looking wary, but he perched on the arm of the couch carefully. “This isn’t about you trying to let me win again, is it? Because the trial is literally about to
Lance rolled his eyes. “No, no, don’t worry, it’s not about that. It’s just… well,” Lance said, automatically dropping his voice down into a whisper so that Lotor wouldn’t overhear them. “On my way down here, I kind of… maybe… followed Lotor and his mom to hear what they were talking about?”

“Are you serious?” Keith hissed, his eyes narrowing. “Lance, they’re both really powerful. Especially the Headmistress. And I doubt that they would take kindly to you eavesdropping on them. What were you thinking?!”

“That maybe they would know something useful about the trial, I don’t know,” Lance sighed, reaching up to tug at his hair. “But instead of scolding me, don’t you want to know what I heard?”

“What did you hear?” Keith asked, crossing his arms over his chest, failing to hide his curiosity.

“Nothing good,” Lance said, pursing his lips. “Lotor seems to have some kind of personal vendetta against me this time. And his mom? She’s terrifying. She said to tell you hello. And I don’t think she meant it to be friendly.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about Headmistress Daibazaal, I mean, she’s a teacher. She might not like us very much, she might want her son to win, but when it comes down to it, there isn’t much that she can do. Lotor on the other hand… we can’t underestimate Lotor during this trial, you know, just because he did so badly in the first one,” Keith warned. “He’s supposedly the most powerful wizard at Durmstrang. Lance, if he tries to do something to you in this trial…”

“I can handle Lotor,” Lance promised. “You and Shiro have made sure of that. My defensive spells are the best they’ve ever been. She scared me more, Keith, you didn’t hear what she said. She called you a ‘little lion’ and then called me a ‘little eagle’. It was creepy as fuck.”

Keith wrinkled his nose. “Well I don’t know how much I like being compared to animals, but, Lance, she just wants to get inside your head. You can’t let her get to you like that.”

Lance let out a puff of air. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. Of course you’re right.”

“I’m always right,” Keith said, the corner of his lips twitching up in a grin.

“Don’t let this go to your head,” Lance warned.

“Never,” Keith agreed seriously. “Okay. Are you good? Because I need to go get changed before this trial starts, but if you still…”

“No, it’s fine,” Lance interrupted him. “I’m good. Don’t worry about me. Seriously.”

“Okay,” Keith said, though he didn’t look quite convinced, as he reached over and placed his hand on Lance’s shoulder, squeezing slightly. But he didn’t pull away, instead he let his fingers linger, his thumb rubbing almost absentmindedly over Lance’s collarbone.

“How are you holding up?” Lance asked. He couldn’t help but think about the last time he and Keith had been this close to one another. Albeit under slightly worse circumstances. Even just remembering how upset Keith had been, how he had looked with red-rimmed eyes, made Lance want to pull Keith closer to him. Which… there really wasn’t anything stopping him. There was no one around, and he and Keith were… something. He could… if he wanted…

Lance reached up to place one of his hands over Keith’s. The stupid fingerless gloves got in the way,
so that Lance couldn’t really feel the warmth of Keith’s hand beneath his own, but…

“I’m okay,” Keith said.

Lance leveled his best ‘I-am-in-no-way-buying-that’ stare at him.

Keith deflated slightly, his shoulders slumping. “I’ve been better. It’s been a long week, between the article about my mom, and now the trial? Just… I’m ready for this thing to be over already.”

“I know, I am too,” Lance agreed, “but seriously, what’s going on with your mom and everything?”

Keith shrugged. “Nothing, really. It doesn’t seem like anything else has happened, and the Ministry hasn’t been able to dig anything up. It seems like it was probably just an old member trying to get the Galra back together. Who knows why, but,” Keith shrugged. “Since it was reported, it’s doubtful that any known Galra would willingly risk the Ministry’s wrath. So everything is going to be fine, I think. At least the speculations about my mom being involved have died down.”

“That’s good,” Lance said, using his grip on Keith’s hand to tug the other boy forward so that he slid off the arm of the couch and onto the couch. But Keith wasn’t expecting the sudden motion, which of course meant that he ended up sitting half way on Lance’s lap.

Lance watched as Keith flushed bright red, the older boy squirming slightly as he tried to get into a more comfortable position on the couch.

“Lance,” Keith said, his voice dangerously close to a whine. “I need to go get changed.”

Lance reached over to tug at Keith’s collar. “I think you look fine,”

“You have to say that,” Keith said, trying to push himself off of the couch.

Lance blinked at him in confusion. What did Keith mean by that? Why did Lance have to say that he looked fine?

“Besides I can’t go to the trial in my school robes,” Keith continued, either choosing to ignore Lance’s confusion, or not noticing it.

“No, no, don’t go;” Lance pleaded, feeling a laugh slip out of him as he pulled Keith back down onto the couch.

“Lance,” Keith replied, obviously trying to sound exasperated despite the laughter in his voice. “You have to let go.”

Lance just rolled his eyes. “Allura isn’t even here yet, there’s plenty of time before the trial starts. Just, come on, five more minutes? I haven’t seen you all day.”

Keith’s face softened, “Lance, it’s, like, ten in the morning.”

“So?” Lance pouted.

“You’re ridiculous,” Keith said fondly, reaching up with one hand to trace the freckles on Lance’s cheek with his finger. “You know, Lance, I wanted to tell you-”

“Am I interrupting something?” An amused sounding voice asked from behind him.

Lance whipped his head around so quickly he was mildly surprised that his neck didn’t snap, just in time to see Allura pushing her way through the tent’s flap.
Keith instantly straightened, unfortunately pulling away from Lance in the process.

“Hi, Allura,” Keith said, his voice sounding slightly strained, as he started to inch his way towards the kitchen area where the pile of clothes was still stacked on the table. “Um, I was just about to go get changed,” he said, gesturing over his shoulder, before grabbing one of the sets of clothes and quickly disappearing into one of the bedrooms.

Lance dragged his attention back over to Allura, who was watching Keith’s retreating form with a raised eyebrow.

“Are you going to tell me what that just was?” Allura asked, still sounding amused.

“Um… no?” Lance offered with a slight wince. Mainly because he wasn’t entirely sure what had just happened himself, but he wasn’t about to tell Allura that.

Allura shook her head softly before moving towards the kitchen. “Oh, Lance,” she said softly. So softly, Lance wasn’t entirely sure she had meant for him to hear at all.

By the time Keith finished changing and emerged from the bedroom, Lance had already finished skimming another chapter on summoning spells.

Even Allura had beaten Keith out to the living room of the tent, she and Lotor standing on opposite sides of the room and staunchly avoiding the other one’s gaze.

Lance wasn’t sure why Keith was taking so long, trying to tame that ridiculous mullet, maybe. Or maybe he had some kind of top secret plan that he hadn’t told Lance about. Which would make since, seeing as they had agreed to actually compete against each other this time.

Lance tapped his fingers against his leg, running through the lines of the riddle that he had memorized weeks ago.

Beasts and men, a free-for-all fight

Okay, so the champions would be actively competing against not only the monsters, but also each other. That part of the riddle was easy enough to figure out.

A trial by fire at such a height

Okay, the height part was easy enough to figure out. It was taking place up in the air. But hopefully the ‘trial by fire’ bit wasn’t meant in a literal sense.

Crystal hidden and volatile

That would be the Xanthorium crystals. The highly explosive Xanthorium crystals. The highly explosive invisible Xanthorium crystals.

Navigate confined straits with guile

Well… presumably the arena they were competing in was going to consist of some narrow corridors, but Lance hadn’t really given much thought as to how that might affect his flying. He was good in the air, on a broom… but was he good enough to take tight corners and dives at high speeds? Lance swallowed. He had to be.
A creature’s storm from which you hide

The Thunderbird. Which hopefully meant that it was just going to be there for a distraction, rather than as a foe for them to fight.

A beast fills space unoccupied

That would be the occamies. And there was no telling what size they would be.

Beat the menagerie global

Lance had done as much research on the magical creatures as he could manage, teaching himself about their habitats and their diets and how they used magic for their survival in the wild. He had even tried to do as much research into fighting them as he could, although there wasn’t as much information available concerning that, given most wizards supported magical conservation and didn’t encourage the hunting of such magnificent beasts. Nonetheless, he could expect some surprises.

Find the prize of metal noble

The occamies’ silver eggs. That was what he would need to find. None of the rest of it would matter if he couldn’t manage to get his hands on one of the eggs. No doubt they contained a vital clue about the final trial. And he needed to get out of the arena as soon as he grabbed one, because of the occamies’ territorial streak.

“You look deep in thought about something,” Keith commented.

Lance snapped his head up. He had been so busy thinking about the trial, he hadn’t even noticed Keith’s return to the room. “Just thinking about the trial,” he replied honestly. “I’m starting to get a little nervous.”

Keith reached over, flipping the book that Lance was still holding in his hands closed so that he could see the front cover. “Summoning spells? What are you planning on using summoning spells for?” He asked.

“I don’t know that I should tell you,” Lance teased, “since we’re competing against each other. You know, arch-enemies and all that business.”

Keith just rolled his eyes. “Well, it’s a little too late now for any of us to change our plans, isn’t it?”

Lance pursed his lips. “Well, when you put it like that,” he said. “I’m going to use a summoning spell to summon my broom. Figured taking on the occamies might be a little like quidditch.”

Keith snorted, a sudden sound that seemed to take himself by surprise. “No, no, no, Lance,” Keith rushed to say, placing one of his hands on Lance’s shoulder. “I’m sure you’ll be able to outfly them, you’re great on a broom. I was just laughing because that’s literally what I was planning on doing. I guess great minds think alike.”

“Well, we have to see if I’m able to summon the broom at all, first. I don’t have a lot of practice,”
Lance admitted.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine, summoning spells are more difficult in theory than in practice. It’s a good plan, Lance. I wouldn’t be surprised if you manage to win this trial, too,” Keith said with a smile.

“Maybe this will finally be the quidditch match where I get a hit on you, Kogane, since we don’t get to play in the cup against each other this year,” Lance teased, even though the days of his quidditch rivalry with Keith already felt like years ago.

“I don’t know that bludgers are going to be involved in this trial,” Keith replied. “I would concentrate more on avoiding the crystals and occamies than on trying to hit things in my direction.”

“You’re forgetting that it’s a free for all fight,” Lance pointed out. “And there’s no way I’m going easy on you just because we’re… because you’re… um, there’s no way I’m going easy on you.”

“If your offensive and defensive spellcasting are anything like they were in duelling club, I’m not worried,” Keith teased, his tone light.

“I’ve literally been training with you and Shiro. You know that isn’t true,” Lance protested. “And my spells in duelling club were never that bad. I held my own. The only person that I couldn’t beat was you. And I now know you’ve had the unfair advantage of special training all these years. Let’s see how it is now that we have an even playing field.”

“I’m not sure having to deal with Lotor and Allura, as well as a handful of occamies and a Thunderbird and whatever else they decide to throw at us, really counts as an ‘even playing field,’ Lance,” Keith pointed out.

“If you’re afraid to take me on, you can just say so, Mullet,” Lance said. “I promise I won’t hold it against you.”

“I’m pretty sure I can handle it,” Keith replied. And okay, wow, was it Lance, or had his voice just dropped down an octave?

Lance opened his mouth to reply, not entirely sure what he was going to say, but it didn’t matter, because the front flap of the tent was pushed open, effectively cutting off whatever he would have said.

The first figure to enter the tent was someone Lance instantly recognised. Adam, Shiro’s fiancé, who was wearing his ministry robes, the silver buttons gleaming, his brown hair swooping over his forehead. Lance didn’t recognise the man and woman who followed Adam into tent, both of whom were wearing thick, protective leathers over their robes.

“Champions,” Adam greeted warmly, shooting a quick, private smile in the direction of Keith (and by extension, Lance). “As you are well aware, today is the second trial. For those of you who haven’t completed the riddle, today’s trial requires you to steal something from the beasts which are guarding it, similar to the first trial. However, unlike the first trial, this trial is not taking place underwater. It is taking place in the air. Many skills will be tested, your proficiency with offensive and defensive spells, your ability to not only strategize, but also to improvise. I have full faith that all of you will be successful. Those of you who have solved the riddle might have an advantage over the other Champions, as you know the types of some of the creatures, as well as the type of object which you will be looking for. Also unlike the first trial, there are no requirements for you to reveal the objects, you must simply retrieve them and return to the starting position with your prize. As with the last trial, there is no time limit. We anticipate this trial to be shorter than the first one, and it shouldn’t take you more than an hour to successfully retrieve your prize. The winner of this trial will
be the first Champion to retrieve their prize and return to the starting position.”

“Assuming you don’t give out ridiculous bonus points,” Lotor muttered.

Adam ignored him. “Here with me are Lahn Shield and Ladnok Naxzela, two of our most highly-skilled magizoologists in the ministry. They’re here to explain some brief safety rules regarding the magical creatures involved in the trial.”

Lance studied the man and woman standing behind Adam, taking in their appearance for the first time. The man, Lahn Shield, was tall, ridiculously tall, and slender, with horrible facial hair and a mohawk that made him look like he belonged at some hipster college or a skate park. The woman, Ladnok Naxzela, was broad and muscular with long dark hair that was tied in rope-like braids.

“The beasts that you will be battling against today are ministry property,” Ladnok said, her voice low and serious. Lance instantly stiffened. She sounded like a teacher on the brink of giving all of her students a detention. “And while you are encouraged to test your strength by battling them, stunning them, and using other jinxes and hexes, we’d like to remind you that the use of unforgivable curses is forbidden. Meaning that, under no circumstances, should the creatures that you are battling be killed.”

“Additionally, some of the creatures that you’re battling are very territorial and possessive,” Lahn added. “Meaning as soon as you have retrieved your object, you should fly back to the starting area as soon as possible. The beasts will otherwise be very angry with you for stealing their property, and are likely to become increasingly violent. Unlike the previous trial, there are no secret additional points to be awarded after you have retrieved your prize, so there is no benefit to you remaining in the arena. While the fight against the Baku also assessed your willingness to work as a team, this trial is about your strength as individuals and your combat abilities. Take your prize and get out. We don’t want any of you to get hurt by these beasts, and as long as you follow the rules of the trial, everything should be fine.”

Lance shared a glance with Keith out of the corner of his eye, no doubt both of them recalling how Lance had lingered after retrieving his prize in the first trial to help Keith and Allura. Guess he wasn’t supposed to do that again.

“Now,” Adam said, clapping his hands together, “since this trial takes place up in the air, I’m imagining that you’re all going to be needing brooms.”

Wait. They were being provided brooms? So Lance had been reading up on summoning spells for nothing?!

Lance blanched. All that time that he had wasted, when he could have been researching other things...

He had a really bad feeling about this trial.
The sound of the crowd was nothing but a dull roar. Adam had led them down to the locker rooms of the quidditch pitch, the smell of broom polish still lingering in the air despite the fact that no one had played quidditch in months.

Instinctively, Lance flexed his grip on the Cleansweep that he had always preferred. Keith, Allura, and Lotor were all currently holding Cleansweeps as well, borrowed from the school’s supply of extra brooms for the quidditch players that couldn’t afford their own. Like Lance. Before leading them to the locker rooms, Adam had taken them to the broom cupboard, allowing them each to choose one of the Cleansweeps. Lance hadn’t paused to pick up the one he used regularly for quidditch matches. Lotor was currently eying his with distrust, like he thought that maybe it wouldn’t be able to fly at all. Lance stifled the urge to roll his eyes. Sure, the Cleansweeps weren’t the best brooms, but they would be able to stay airborne for the duration of the trial.

“Are you ready?” Keith asked quietly.

Lance glanced over at him, unsurprised to find Keith’s gaze fixed on the exit to the quidditch pitch in front of them. There was supposed to be some kind of signal in a few minutes, letting them know that it was time to make their way onto the pitch. But the announcers needed time to explain the rules of the trial to the audience, which meant that the Champions were forced to wait nervously until the trial could actually start.

“I’m as ready as I can be,” Lance replied, flexing his fingers again, testing the leather gloves that he had been given. It wasn’t really much of an answer, but it was enough to drag Keith’s eyes away from the door and towards Lance’s face.

“You’re going to do great,” Keith said, his eyes softening.

Lance reached up, clamping his free hand onto Keith’s shoulder. “Hey,” he said, twisting his fingers into the fabric of Keith’s robes. “So are you,” he said, trying to let as much honesty spill into his voice as possible.
He knew that Keith was trying to hide it, but the other boy was nervous. He could tell. “This trial is, like, tailor made for you, Keith. There’s no way that you’re not going to do well.”

“Just like quidditch, right?” Keith said, his gaze drifting back towards the door to the pitch.

How many times had Lance waited behind these doors before the start of a match, feeling the nervous butterflies fluttering in his stomach at the thought that maybe, just maybe that would finally be the match where he knocked Keith Kogane off his broom.

That was nothing compared to how he felt right now.

“Just like quidditch,” Lance echoed, letting his hand slip from Keith’s shoulder, sliding it down Keith’s arm so that he could tangle their fingers together.

Keith squeezed his hand lightly, the pressure barely lasting for a second, but Lance couldn’t help the flood of reassurance that it send pulsing through him.

Even though he and Keith were supposed to be competing against one another, he knew that neither of them could actually do anything to hurt the other one.

“Good luck,” Keith whispered, tightening his grip on Lance’s fingers once more.

“Right back at ya,” Lance replied, “Mullet.”

“Are you ever going to let go of that stupid nickname?” Keith asked, his shoulders shaking slightly with suppressed laughter.

“Only when you give me something better to call you,” Lance replied, before feeling his face flush as the implication of what he just said hit him.

“Shut up,” Keith replied, but there was no real heat behind it. And it looked like maybe he was blushing too.

Lance had the impossible urge to reach up and push Keith’s previously-mentioned mullet away from his forehead, but he paused with his hand raised about halfway up, letting it dangle back to his side uselessly.

Keith’s eyes tracked the movement, the same what he tracked the presence of the quaffle on the quidditch field. His eyes slightly narrowed, his lips pursed. “Lance, I… I, um,” Keith started to say, looking tense, before his shoulders slumped with something like disappointment. At what, Lance wasn’t entirely sure. Himself, maybe. “I’ll see you on the other side,” Keith finally said. “I kind of want to talk to you about something?”

“About what?” Lance asked automatically, which was ridiculous because Keith had already obviously decided not to tell him.

“Just… find me after the trial, okay? Promise?” Keith asked.

“I promise,” Lance replied. He had never been able to deny Keith anything.

Keith smiled, barely a twitch of his lips, before turning his attention back to the door leading out to the pitch.

Lance squeezed his fingers once, before releasing his grip on Keith’s hand so that he could hold his broom with both hands.
“Witches and Wizards,” Adam’s voice suddenly boomed, loud enough that Lance could hear it even through the thick doors of the locker room.

Slowly, the door to the quidditch pitch began to inch open, moved by some unseen force.

“Let the second Triwizard Tournament Task… begin!”

The broom was practically vibrating under Lance’s palms. He and the other champions had kicked off into the sky without a problem, soaring over the quidditch pitch.

Except… it didn’t look like the quidditch pitch that Lance remembered. The green grass was completely obscured by a thick white fog that would make it difficult to see more than a few feet in any direction. Although some portions of it seemed to be thicker than others, almost like it was hiding something. Thick slabs of concrete were enchanted by magic, forming something akin to a maze in the air, some forming walls, others forming hollow tubes and tunnels. There were enough different entrances and pathways to choose from, that the Champions had already split up. Keith had flown to the right, Allura and Lotor off to the left, and Lance had flown straight up, hoping to get some kind of idea as to what was going on. From Lance’s current vantage point, above most of the action, he could just barely make out the dark figures of Allura and Lotor already cutting through one of the pathways. He couldn’t see Keith at all.

From the direction of the stands (which were packed with more people than Lance had ever seen, all decked out in blue - Beauxbatons students, black - Durmstrang students, or red and navy - the Hogwarts students, decked out to show which Champion they were supporting, protected from the potential danger occurring just feet away from their faces by a glistening purple protego totalum charm) came a loud horn. At this distance, Lance couldn’t be sure who was blowing into it, but he had a sneaking suspicion that it was Adam. The sound of the horn echoed across the quidditch pitch, bouncing off the concrete walls.

And across the way, there began to be a flurry of motion. Lance hadn’t had time to notice them before, but now he could see that the cages from the Forbidden Forest had been moved - just barely poking through the thick fog that obscured the green of the pitch from view. The cages had been assembled beneath the goal posts on the other side of the field, and the only reason that Lance could see them was because he was so high in the air he could practically taste the clouds. Allura, Lotor, and Keith probably had no idea what was going on.

Lance watched, motionless, as tiny, distant, human-shaped figures lifted their arms, the cages sliding open to release the creatures trapped inside. The snake-like occamy were the first to slide through, their serpentine bodies twisting as their feathered wings lifted them into the air. The occamy wasted no time, darting off into the thickest patch of fog and disappearing from Lance’s view. Obviously they knew where they were supposed to be going.

The Thunderbird was slower to exit its cage, the white and gold of its feathers serving as the perfect camouflage given the fog around it. It didn’t seem to be doing too much of anything (at least, not yet), so Lance let his attention drift back over to the magizoologists, who were fiddling with smaller cages that Lance definitely hadn’t noticed on his trip to the Forbidden Forest. Great. He hated surprises. At least he had known about the occamies and Thunderbird beforehand.

Who knew what were in those smaller cages, it was too far for Lance to see what the magizoologists were freeing, and he didn’t have the time to sit around and find out.

He needed to head in the same direction of those occamies.
Lance leaned down, low over his broom, darting back down towards the direction that he had seen the occamys fly in. If he needed to find an occamy egg… there had to be a nest somewhere.

The wind whipped at his face, stinging his eyes, but Lance ignored it. He had played quidditch in much colder weather, a little February wind chill wouldn’t kill him.

But that might.

Lance quickly pulled back on his broom, practically skidding to a stop right before a large concrete wall that had seemed to appear out of nowhere. If he had been going any faster, he would have slammed into it without realizing. He would have to be more careful about where he was flying now that he had entered the thick fog surrounding the concrete maze.

Welp.

Left or right? Or down, maybe, but that might bring Lance a little closer to the Thunderbird than he wanted to be. Wasn’t there someone who said that when you were in a maze, you should always go right? Well… he needed to go straight, right? So, he could always just… fly over…

Lance tightened his grip on his broom, rising through the air until he was high enough to crest the concrete slab. Lance eased his broom over the slab, which wasn’t very thick, now that he was able to look down on it from above. A few inches maybe. Thin enough that Lance could maybe blast them apart with a well-placed spell if he needed to…

Something cool and hard brushed against Lance’s arm, startling Lance from his thoughts of half-formed strategies. What the fuck?

A bright flash, and then he was pushed to the side.

Holy fuck was that an explosion?

Oh shit! Shit, shit, shit. He had completely forgotten about the motherfucking Xanthorium crystals.

Lance blinked away flashes of white from his eyes, trying to restore his vision after the sudden burst of bright light.

Of course, by the time that Lance could see again there was nothing to see. Because the Xanthorium crystals were invisible. Of course. How could he be so stupid? God. He needed some sort of way to reveal the crystals, otherwise he would just be bouncing from one explosion to the next for the whole duration of the trial.

Lance let go of his broom with one hand, reaching into the pocket of his robes and fumbling for his wand. “Aparecium,” he shouted, once he had successfully pulled his wand from his pocket and pointed it at the wide, open space in front of him. The revealing charm had to be what would get rid of the crystal’s invisibility… right?

But the spell bounced harmlessly off one of the concrete slabs looming in the distance, revealing nothing. Of course it couldn’t be that easy. He was going to have to be a little more creative with his spellcasting.

Lance quickly ran through the spells that had been in Shiro’s journal, as he slowly inched his broom forward. There was the cutting spell that Keith had used during the first trial, a spell that hauled someone upside down and held them by their ankles, a healing spell specifically designed to
counteract the cutting spell, a spell to prevent someone from speaking, as well as one to prevent
eavesdroppers… had there been anything else? Anything that might be useful?

Well, all of the spells that Shiro had been teaching him were pretty complicated. What Lance really
needed was something simple. Something so simple that it had probably been overlooked by
whoever had set up the maze and enchanted the crystals. Something like… something like…

Something like the Color Change Charm!

Lance lifted his wand, pointing it in front of him. “Colovaria!” he said, a stream of light streaking
away from his wand, slamming into something and bursting into bright purple. Lance blinked in
shock, almost unable to process the purple crystal hanging in the air barely six feet away from him. If
he had kept flying straight, he would have collided with it head on.

Welp. Good to know.

Lance eased his broom down, slipping underneath the crystal, shooting a couple more Color Change
Charms off in front of him just to make sure he wouldn’t have any more unexpected surprises. His
charms revealed two more crystals (painting them pink and baby blue, respectively), which Lance
avoided easily, continuing his path towards where the occamies had gone.

The concrete walls began to narrow around him, forming some kind of passageway that ended in a
dead end. Or, what would have been a dead end except for the small dark tunnel running through it.
Great. Just great. Lance swept up, hopefully he could just fly past this wall and avoid the creepy,
terrifying, likely death-causing tunnel, casting the Color Change Charm at the area directly above
him. The charm slammed into something, a yellow crystal appearing just inches from Lance’s head.
Shit.

Lance drifted down a couple of inches.

Okay, if he couldn’t go above… maybe he could go below.

Lance shifted, angling his broom downward, casting the Color Change Charm in the direction of the
area below the cement walls. His spell slammed into something, which rippled before turning violet.
Another crystal. They were trapping him in. Unless he wanted to blow one up (a bad idea) or waste
precious time by doubling back (also a bad idea), Lance was going to have to go through the creepy
tunnel (also a bad idea).

Why, why did he only have bad ideas? He could really use a good idea right about now.

Lance took a deep breath, easing his broom in the direction of the tunnel. It wasn’t very big, but it
was big enough for him to fit. But it was dark, impossible to see how long the tunnel was, or if there
was anything waiting for him inside. Well, that wasn’t completely true, Lance mused, tossing off a
few Color Change Charms into the darkness, just in case there were any crystals waiting for him.
There weren’t.

Just… use lumos and go through the tunnel, idiot, Lance scolded himself silently, holding out his
wand in front of him.

“Lumos,” he whispered, the bright light glowing at the end of his wand now giving him a way to see
into the tunnel. The tunnel was smooth concrete, man-made, and it turned left up ahead. But there
wasn’t anything nasty waiting for him inside, so Lance eased his way into the tunnel, watching as his
shadow twisted in the light from his wand.

Sure enough, before long, the tunnel cut sharply to the left, continuing for what seemed to be a few
feet, before turning back to the right. And there didn’t seem to be anything in the tunnel, but… just to be safe…

Lance let his lumos spell drop so that he could fire a few Color Change Charms into the space. The sudden dark was oppressive, seeming to almost weigh down on Lance’s shoulders. But it would just be for a few seconds, Lance reasoned, firing off the first Color Change Charm. The brief burst of light illuminated the space, crashing against the wall and turning a portion of some dark color, but then the light faded and Lance was tossed back into darkness. Okay, just one or two more charms to make sure there weren’t any hidden surprises…

Lance fired off a second Color Change Charm, expecting it to slam into the wall the same way that the first spell had, but instead it collided with something floating in the air about halfway down the tunnel. Something very small, and vaguely humanoid shaped, that flashed sunset orange, before the darkness closed in around them.

Oh… oh no… that was definitely not a crystal…

There was a sharp tugging at Lance’s hair, hard enough to make him yelp. “Stop that!” He screeched, batting at the area above his head, trying to knock the pesky little things away from him. He knew what these were. Pixies, tiny creatures that delighted in causing mischief. Coran had accidentally let some loose during third year, and Lance and Romelle had to collect all of them after all the other students bailed. They were a pain in the ass.

As if in agreement with his thoughts, another pixie tugged at Lance’s hair. Luckily, because of that incident, Lance could clearly remember the spell that he needed.

Lance lifted his wand, trying to point it at the space above his head, one blast of peskipiksi pesternomi should be enough to get rid of these little pests.

“Peskipiksi-” Lance started to say, only to get cut off by a pair of time hands tugging his wand out of his grip. “Hey! Give that back! Don’t play with it, it’s dangerous.”

The pixie just laughed, swinging the wand back and forth in front of Lance’s face. Elsewhere, it’s friend had stopped tugging on his hair in favor of pinching his cheeks with its sharp little nails. He winced at the scratches undoubtedly causing him to bleed lightly. Well that was just annoying.

“Stop that!” Lance hissed, batting the pixie away from his face with one hand, while he grabbed at his wand with the other one. “And you, you could, like, put someone’s eye out with that.”

The pixie holding his wand shook it, a burst of magical energy shooting down towards the ground. Laughing maniacally, the pixie swung the wand up wildly, letting loose another blast of magical energy. There was a startled squeak, and a pixie that Lance hadn’t noticed dropped down from the ceiling, falling to the floor with a thud, where it lay in shock, twitching slightly. The first pixie, the orange one that Lance had accidentally colored, watched it with wide eyes.

“See!” Lance shrieked, jerking his broom backwards. “That’s dangerous. Give it back,” He reached up, tugging the wand away from the pixie, who let go with a pout. “That’s what I thought.”

The other pixie regrouped, flying right up to his ear and sticking it’s tiny, dirty fingers towards his eardrum.

“Ugh, enough,” Lance smacked it away, pointing his wand in their direction. Screw the pixie repulsion charm. He was freezing these little buggers.
“Immobulus,” Lance said, smirking in satisfaction when the spell collided with the pixies and they froze in the air, drifting lazily, although Lance swore that the pixie he had accidentally colored orange winked at him. “Now, don’t mind me,” he muttered, ducking underneath them.

Of course there had to be freaking pixies.

Luckily, right around the corner, the tunnel opened into a wide exit, letting in whatever watery sunlight was able to pierce the thick fog.

Lance eased his broom forward, taking in what was in front of him, a wide open space where multiple paths seemed to be converging. Hopefully that meant he was getting closer to the occamies’ nest.

Unfortunately, it also meant that Lance had to pick a direction to go. There were two paths that seemed to be going in the direction that the occamies had gone, as well as three paths coming in from the side that were probably connected to the other routes that the other Champions had taken.

Well, he could avoid those three paths, at least.

Lance fired a few color changing charms into the wide, open space, making sure that it was clear of crystals before he flew into it. There were a few crystals close to the exits, but they could be easily avoided. Thankfully.

There was no need to rush.

A shock of color, a flash of black and blue, whipped past Lance, close enough that a breeze slapped against Lance’s face.

Whoever, or whatever, it was skidded to a sudden stop in the center of the open space, pivoting back to look at him.

It was Allura, her long white hair pulled back into a fierce braid to keep it out of her face while she was flying, a steely glint in her eye as she noticed Lance hovering just a few feet away.

“Lance,” she greeted, her accent rolling over the vowels of his name. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“Um, yeah, what a surprise,” Lance agreed, unsure whether he should be grabbing for his wand or not. The Champions were technically allowed to fight one another this time, and just because he and Allura had kind of been temporary allies against Lotor didn’t necessarily mean…

“Stupefy!” Allura shouted, making up his mind for him. Where had her wand even come from?

Lance fumbled for his own wand, just barely able to toss a shield charm up in time to block the hit from knocking him off his broom. “Not cool, Allura!” Lance called, aiming a tickling charm at her.

Allura dodged the spell expertly, sweeping her broom out of the way. Oh, she definitely played chaser in quidditch.

“Expelliarmus!” Allura shouted, and oh no. Lance was not losing his wand for the second time today. That was so not happening.

“Protego!” Lance said, a shimmering white shield appearing in front, suddenly he was incredibly grateful that Shiro had spent so much time making him work on his shielding spells. Allura’s spell slammed into the shield, which rippled under the pressure, but absorbed the spell before it could make Lance drop his wand.
Thank god.

Allura looked momentarily stunned that her spell that hadn’t worked, which was all the opening that Lance needed.

“Flipendo!”

The knockback jinx slammed into Allura’s chest, sending her flying backwards through the air. Luckily she seemed to keep her grip on her broom (because Lance might be dueling her, but he didn’t want to see Allura get seriously hurt just because of this stupid trial), but she was… she was soaring right in the direction of a crystal that had bloomed bright cyan when Lance hit it with the color changing spell earlier.

Shit.

Lance started forward instinctively, even though it was already too late, there was nothing he could do. “Allura!” He cried, “Watch out for the-”

Allura’s broom slammed against the crystal, letting out a pitiful cracking sound, and for a second nothing happened. Then there was a burst of white light as the crystal detonated, the force of the explosion strong enough to almost knock Lance off of his broom.

By the time he had righted himself, Lance was blinking stars from his eyes. “Allura!” He cried again, glancing around to see where the older girl had ended up.

Allura was a few feet away, clinging to her broom like it was a lifeline, but as Lance watched, she pulled herself back up into a sitting position, darting off down the corridor closest to her. Which… Lance couldn’t really blame her for.

“Sorry!” Lance called after her, even though he had a feeling that she couldn’t hear him. “I promise that was an accide-”

A loud roar from behind him cut off whatever else Lance had been about to say.

Lance swallowed thickly, turning around slowly.

Looming behind him was a creature that was some combination of eagle and lion, with a glistening golden beak and sharp, razor-like talons. But it’s body looked bulky, like there should be no way that its wings could actually keep it in the air.

Oh. Oh.

So that was what Allura was running from.

Well that made a little bit more sense.

Lance swallowed heavily, sudden movements were probably a bad idea, right?

The creature swung its head around, its black eyes glistening like ebony. Another loud screech echoed through the open space, despite the fact that the creature in front of him hadn’t opened its mouth. So it had a friend. Well that was just great.

Lance knew what they were, too. Griffins. He had learned about them in Care of Magical Creatures. Fierce, deadly creatures that wizards had learned how to tame to serve as guards. But this one didn’t look particularly tame. In fact, it kind of looked like it might enjoy taking a large bite out of him.
The griffin in front of him lifted its head, opening its mouth to echo the other’s call, which was the only invitation Lance needed to duck down low on his broom and sweep underneath it’s legs in the direction of the path on the other side of it. The path that he was pretty sure led to the occamies’ nest.

The creature twisted around in confusion above him, its talons flashing dangerously close to Lance’s face. But Lance didn’t let himself look backwards to see whether the griffin was trying to pursue him, just turned around a curve, letting the concrete walls guide him forward.

It takes him longer than it should to remember to fire off a few color-changing charms, distracted as he was by the very-likely possibility that a griffin was chasing after him.

So, really, it was a small miracle that Lance avoided hitting a crystal for as long as he did.

As Lance soared through air, he felt something brush against his arm. And shit, shit, shit. Had he really forgotten about the crystals again?

Okay, well he just had to keep flying… maybe he could outfly the blast…

The crystal exploded, a burst of energy slamming into him, tossing Lance through the air. There was a loud screech from somewhere behind him, but Lance couldn’t focus on it. Couldn’t focus on anything other than the way he felt all of his breath get pushed from his body as his broom collided with the concrete wall. His elbow throbbed with pain, but Lance didn’t let himself dwell on it, kicking his broom into motion.

But this time, he would remember to cast the color changing charm in front of him.

Shit, that had hurt.

The path that he had chosen kept twisting and turning, but it was heading in the general direction that Lance suspected the occamies had gone, so he was content to let it lead him for now. If it dead ended, or something, he was probably screwed, but… well… he didn’t have a whole lot of other options at the moment.

Eventually, the path spilled out into an intersection, crossing over with another route. Should he keep going forward? Or turn to the right? Both ways would probably take him in the direction of the occamies, but which way would be faster? He didn’t have time to think, he just needed to choose.

There was another screech from somewhere behind him, but it sounded further away than Lance had expected it to, and he let out a small breath that he hadn’t realized he was holding.

Maybe the griffin hadn’t pursued him after all.

Lance let his gaze flicker over the pathways in front of him. Allura had vanished, and he had no idea where Lotor or Keith were. Had someone already beaten him to the occamies’ nest? He would know if someone had already won, right? Surely there would be some kind of announcement…

Ugh. He should just keep going forward, he had to reach the occamy nest eventually. Lance kicked his broom back into motion, darting off down the corridor. At the very least, he would be putting more distance between himself and the griffins.

He was only a few feet down the corridor when Lance caught sight of the tail of a broom sweeping around a corner. Lotor or Keith? There was no way it was Allura, so it had to be one of them.

He should double back, choose one of the other paths. Avoid whoever it was.
But Lance found himself moving forward, rounding the corner to see who was in front of him. He wasn’t sure who he was hoping that it would be. Lotor? So that he wouldn’t have to fight Keith? Or Keith, so that he could finally show the older boy that he was serious about wanting to win this time.

There was a familiar figure just a few feet ahead of him, a black mullet that Lance would recognize anywhere. Across crowded school corridors or quidditch pitches or oceans or deserts.

Lance was surprised that he had managed to catch up so quickly, until he noticed what, exactly, Keith was looking at. A concrete wall. A dead end.

The freaking path was a dead end.

Keith’s head was cocked to the side, like he was considering maybe trying to blast the wall apart.

Lance could turn around right now, go back the way he came, pretend that he had never saw Keith.

It would be so, so easy.

Lance tightened his grip on his wand. Was he really about to do this? Attacking Keith from behind, when the older boy didn’t know that he was there, seemed a little cowardly. But, at the same time, if he wanted to win…

Keith had wanted him to really, really try to win.

“\textit{Rictusempra}!” Lance shouted, settling for an attack that wasn’t very serious. He didn’t want to accidentally hurt Keith the same way he had pushed Allura into that crystal. Sure, he might be trying to duel with Keith, but that didn't mean that he wanted any harm to come to him. It was just like duelling club, like training with Shiro. Except not really. Not really at all.

And for the first, and only, time in probably his entire life, Lance managed to land a hit on Keith Kogane while they were both flying in the air.

Keith’s shoulders stiffened, and Lance could hear the faintest sound of Keith’s laughter as the older boy doubled over in laughter.

It only lasted for a few seconds before Keith straightened, whipping around to see who had just attacked him, his eyes narrowing when they landed on Lance.

“\textit{Seriously}?!” Keith asked, incredulous. “The \textit{tickling charm}?!”

Lance shrugged. “Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

Keith rolled his eyes, slipping his wand out of his pocket and waving it in Lance’s direction. “\textit{Stupefy}!” Keith called, but Lance had already anticipated the move.

Keith almost \textit{always} opened a duel with a stunning spell. He was kind of predictable about that, like someone who always chooses rock in the first round of rock, paper, scissors.

“\textit{Rictusempra}!” Lance called out again, laughing to himself as he swept to the side so that Keith’s stunning spell bounces harmlessly off an invisible crystal behind him.

The tickling spell caught Keith on the arm, and Keith burst into startled laughter, which heavily contrasted with the annoyed expression on his face.

“I don’t know, man,” Lance said, sweeping back to his former position directly in front of Keith.
“Keith, buddy, the tickling charm seems to be working pretty well on you.”

“**Langlock!**” Keith countered, smirking slightly. “Has anyone ever told you that you talk too much?”

Lance opened his mouth to reply, maybe, or cast a defensive spell, but it was too late. Keith’s spell slammed into his chest, and Lance felt his tongue stick to the roof of his mouth, making it impossible to speak.

Since talking wasn’t an option, Lance lifted his free hand, flashing a vulgar hand gesture in Keith’s direction, making the other boy burst into laughter again. Real laughter this time.

Thankfully, Lance had gotten pretty decent at nonverbal casting from his private lessons with Shiro. So Keith was caught totally off guard by the stunning spell that slammed in to him, interrupting the laughter.

Keith’s body stiffened, before Lance watched him shake off the effect of the spell.

“Oh, now it’s on,” Keith said from in between gritted teeth.

Lance felt his lips twitch up into a smirk as he fired off another nonverbal stunning spell.

Keith maneuvered his broom out of the way expertly, but Lance had expected that after years of playing quidditch together and was quick to follow the first spell with a second.

The second stunning spell glanced off Keith’s arm, just enough to make him momentarily lose his grip on his broom.

He teetered precariously for a moment, before his legs tightened their grip, allowing Keith to maintain his balance.

“Is that all you’ve got?” Keith challenged. “**Stupefy! Petrificus Totalus!**”

Lance felt his limbs freeze under the effects of the full-body-bind. Luckily, his broom remained in the air, even with his limbs frozen to it.

“Nothing personal!” Keith called, as he whipped past Lance, returning in the direction that they had both came.

Lance wasn’t sure how long it took for both the Langlock and the Full-Body-Bind to wear off, long enough to give Keith a hell of a lead on him, of that he was certain. But as soon as he felt the effects begin to wear off, he followed Keith’s lead and turned back the way that he had came. This path was a dead end, which meant that there had to be another. At least the crystals were all made visible thanks to his sporadic use of the coloring charm earlier.

Hopefully those griffins wouldn’t still be lurking around...

Lance retraced his former path until he came to the four-way-intersection where he had encountered Allura and the griffins, both of whom were thankfully absent. Obviously he had chosen the wrong path last time, which meant that he had to choose the right path this time. There was the path he had originally come from, and the path that Allura had come from, neither of which seemed like good options. Which really only left one path to try.

Lance was about to set down the remaining path when a streak of red and black flashed past him, emerging from the path Allura had taken.
“Get out of here!” Keith called, “They’re right behind me!”

Lance didn’t need any explanation as to who ‘they’ were, he just followed Keith down the last remaining path. Now wasn’t the time for wasting time duelling with Keith, not if the way Keith was flying was any indication, but it was the time for firing off some random blasts of the coloring charm, hopefully revealing any concealed crystals.

“Colovaria!” Lance called out, revealing a neon pink crystal barely a foot in front of Keith.

Keith swerved to the side to avoid it, but the movement was jerky and caused his broom to slam into Lance’s, the force of the collision enough to knock the breath from Lance’s lungs.

“Sorry,” Keith gasped, tightening his grip on his broom and glancing over his shoulder. “I think we lost them.”

Lance followed his gaze. Sure enough, the path seemed clear of any visible enemies. “Do I even want to know what we’re running from?”

“Griffins,” Keith panted, his chest rising and falling with each ragged breath.

Lance snorted. “Oh those guys, Allura and I had an encounter with them earlier.”

“You’ve seen Allura?” Keith questioned. “I haven’t seen her or Lotor.”

“You’ve been lucky then,” Lance teased, reaching over to nudge Keith with his elbow. But he paused halfway through the motion when a flicker of movement at the entryway to the path they were currently flying in caught his eye. “Uh, Keith, I think your friends are back.”

Sure enough, before Lance could even finish speaking, a griffin was flying around the corner, headed straight for them. And Lance didn’t really fancy another tangle with the griffins, they had been nasty enough the first time. He kicked his broom into motion, taking off down the path, hoping that Keith was following him, but not daring to turn around and check.

There was a fork in the path up ahead, stone cutting one path down to two.

Left or right? Left or right? Left or right?

He only had a split second to make a decision.

Left it was, he decided, as he maneuvered his broom so that he was heading in the direction of the left path, turning to catch one last glance at Keith.

Keith had maneuvered towards the right path, but he caught Lance’s eye across the space between them.

“See you at the end, Keith,” Lance called, adding a wink for dramatic effect, raising his arm and flicking his wand in Keith’s direction. “Petrificus Totalus!”

Keith’s eyes narrowed in suspicion seconds before the spell slammed into him, freezing the expression on his face. His eyes, which managed to portray just how he was feeling, looked so betrayed. Lance couldn’t help but laugh.

“That was payback! I’ll see you once I’ve won!” He hollered, before flying down the corridor, sending one last glance over his shoulder to see if the griffin was still following him.

It wasn’t.
“Woooo!” Lance let a scream rip out of his throat, laughter bubbling. He couldn’t believe that he had just managed to do that. He had just beaten Keith at something. Hopefully the griffin wouldn’t, like, maul Keith to pieces or something, but Lance had a sneaking suspicion that the griffin would leave Keith alone if he wasn’t moving, if it even managed to catch up to him in time before the spell wore off.

It didn’t take long for the pathway to spill out into a large, circular open space. One that was probably filled with invisible crystals just waiting for a chance to blow him to pieces.

A drop of something landed in Lance’s hair, and he reached up instinctively to brush it away, just as another drop of something landed on his face. Rain. It was just rain. Nothing to be…

A dark shadow fell over him, casting more of the open space into darkness. Lance glanced up, half expecting to see some huge, terrifying creature. But it was just a large, dark storm cloud passing in front of the sun.

Just a winter storm, nothing too unusual for this time of year. Certainly nothing to be afraid of. After all, it was just a little bit of weather.

Wait.

Weather.

Shit.

He shouldn’t have gone left.

He should not have gone left.

He should not have gone fucking left.

Why did Keith always have better ideas than he did?

Lance fired off a few of the color changing charms quickly, if he was going to have to fight his way out of this area, then he needed to familiarize himself with its terrain. No need for accidental explosions.

Like he had thought, most of the empty space was actually covered with invisible crystals, which were now a sea of multicolored pinks and purples and blues and greens and yellows. It looked like every garrish rainbow Lance had ever seen.

But there wasn’t any time to focus on the colors of the crystals, not when the storm cloud above his head was growing steadily dark, as the rain pouring down was increasing, until his hair was flattened to his forehead.

How the fuck was he supposed to fight a motherfucking Thunderbird?

They were legendary for a reason.

Not to mention that Lance was pretty certain they were, like, endangered.

What had the riddle said about the Thunderbird again?

_A creature’s storm from which you hide._

Okay, that was good, right? That meant he shouldn’t actually have to fight the Thunderbird. He just
needed to find somewhere to hide, somewhere he could wait out the storm.

Lance glanced around, taking care not to overlook anything that could be useful to him. There were the crystals, of course, but even just brushing against one seemed to be enough to set it off. And explosions would only alert the Thunderbird to his presence.

But there, across the way, the path continued on, a tunnel through the rockface. Like where he had encountered the pixies less than an hour ago. He could hide there, wait out the storm, and then hopefully continue on his way. Without being electrocuted by lightning, preferably. Or by being eaten by a Thunderbird, Lance had a vivid imagination, and he didn’t even want to think about what a Thunderbird’s talons would be capable of doing to his frail, human body.

Lance kicked his broom into motion, maneuvering around the crystals as carefully as if he was in a minefield. Which, really, he basically was.

The rain had progressed to a steady downpour by the time that Lance reached the entrance to the tunnel, the water thick enough that it was getting hard to see more than a few feet in front of him. A pair of quidditch goggles would be great right now.

Lance slipped his broom into the tunnel, blinking at the darkness. Hopefully there wouldn’t be any pixies waiting to ambush him, but he couldn’t bring himself to check, not when his eyes were glued to the storm passing by overhead, trying to make out the shape of the Thunderbird that he was sure would be at the center.

But the combination of the cloud cover and the rain was too thick, Lance wasn’t able to make out anything even close to the majestic beast that he had caught a glimpse of in the Forbidden Forest.

It didn’t take long for the rainfall to lighten, slowly at first, the clear sky visible through patches in the cloud cover.

Lance let out a breath that he hadn’t realized that he was holding, reaching over and steadying himself on the stone wall beside him.

His hair and his robes were still soaking wet, and he’d never be able to fight in them like this, so he took a second to cast a drying spell.

Now the only thing to do was press on.

This tunnel had to lead somewhere.

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Like the tunnel where he had fought the pixies, this one was also dark enough that Lance couldn’t see more than a few feet in front of him. He ran one hand against the stone wall of the tunnel, holding his other out in front of him so that the weak light from his wand would illuminate the space, both his legs clenched tightly around his broom to keep from falling off.

Luckily, this tunnel seemed empty of pixies. Lance really didn’t need to worry about them on top of all the other creatures that seemed to be running rampant throughout the arena. The Thunderbird and the occamies he had been prepared for at least, but the griffins and the pixies had both been unpleasant surprises. Surely he had to be getting close to the occamies by now, right?

The tunnel twisted sharply to the right, an opening appearing with a sudden burst of light that had Lance squinting his eyes.
The space appearing before him was wide and open, broken only by stone columns of various heights. This far away it was hard to make out the details of them, but it seemed as though there were large, bird-like nests perched on the tops of the columns. With even larger, bird-like shapes resting on top of them.

Lance swallowed. There was little doubt that those were the occamy nests he would need to steal an egg from.

The occamies hadn’t seemed all that impressive when he and Keith had seen them in the Forbidden Forest, but now they seemed to be even larger than the Thunderbird had been.

There was a flash of color out of the corner of Lance’s eye, and he turned just in time to see Lotor fly towards the occamies, nothing more than a purple flash given the speed he was flying at. There was another shape close behind him, blue robes flashing in the wind, and red offensive spells sparking from her wand as she pursued Lotor through the air.

Allura. So she had made it through the griffins after all.

Lance cast his eyes around. No Keith. Which didn’t necessarily mean that the older boy was out of the competition, but Lance wasn’t going to just stick around and see if he showed up. He had an egg to find.

It seemed like Lotor and Allura knew where they were going, so Lance kicked his broom into motion, firing off a few more of the color revealing charms for good measure, but they fell harmlessly to the ground hundreds of feet below.

No explosive crystals here.

That was a relief, at least.

One of Allura’s stunning spells collided with Lotor’s shoulder, almost knocking him from his broom, although he managed to avoid losing his balance completely. No doubt years of quidditch training kicking in.

Lotor whipped his broom around, looking furious as he fired a spell off in Allura’s direction in retaliation.

Lance was far enough away that he couldn’t tell whether or not the spell hit Allura, but she didn’t seem phased by it, if it did. Her silver-blond hair had slipped free from it’s plait at some point, and now whipped around her face like the Thunderbird’s storm clouds had whipped through the sky just minutes ago.

Lotor was scowling, looking angrier than Lance had ever seen him look before. Except maybe when Lance had been announced as the second Hogwarts champion.

He shouted something, but the wind stole his words away, so Lance had no way of knowing what it was. From the look on Allura’s face, it wasn’t anything particularly inspiring, or even flattering.

The next spell that Allura fired off didn’t just make Lotor lose his balance. It knocked him off his broom completely, sending him plummeting towards the ground below.

Lance blinked.

Allura looked a little shocked at her own powers, her eyes wide and even from this far away Lance could see how pale she had grown.
Lotor’s limbs flailed out wildly, and Lance realized he was waving his wand. Seconds later, Lotor was gripping his broom handle, dangling from it, his fingers the only thing stopping him from plummeting to the ground.

If he had looked enraged before, the look that Lotor turned on Allura now was positively murderous.

Lance inched his broom backwards. It kind of seemed like Lotor and Allura were working their own things out, things he probably didn’t need to get involved with. And besides, with the way Lotor had threatened him earlier, it was probably a good idea to stay away from the Durmstrang champion.

Lotor hauled himself back up onto his broom, shocking Allura out of her trance. She kicked her broom into motion, flying off in the direction of the nearest occamy nest, Lotor taking off after her in quick pursuit.

Okay. He definitely didn’t need to get involved in whatever the two of them had going on.

Lance cast his gaze around, noticing an occamy nest a little further away than the one Lotor and Allura had headed towards, but at least this one wouldn’t have any champions fighting over it.

The occamy resting in the nest that Lance was flying in the direction of picked up its head, like it had noticed Lance’s approach, its beady eyes scanning the air.

Somehow, Lance would have to get around the creature and to the egg it was protecting in the nest.

Now that he was closer, Lance could take in the details of the occamy more fully. Its blue and green scales were shimmering and beautiful in the sunlight. But it was even larger than it had appeared from afar, easily as large as a one-story house. The shape of the occamy uncoiled slowly, like a snake, as its head tilted to the side, studying his approach.

Spells would never be enough to defeat this thing. He would need speed, if he could get it to leave the nest, maybe he could slip past it. Or if he got an opportunity to slip underneath its stomach…

Something slammed into Lance from the side, hard enough that his ribs groaned in protest and his legs lost their grip on his broom, sending him sliding down a slick, slippery surface. His fingers fought for purchase on something, anything, and he managed to get a grip on a jagged scale.

Wait… a scale?

Lance opened his eyes slowly, his vision a sea of blue and green. He felt a bubble of hysterical laughter build in his chest, as he tightened his grip. His feet now scrambling for purchase against the occamy’s back.

He had been so distracted by the occamy in the nest that he hadn’t even noticed the second one approaching him, let alone had time to prepare before it had slammed into his side with its head, making Lance lose his grip on his broom and apparently decide to take a high speed water slide ride down the back of the occamy’s head and neck.

The occamy’s head whipped around, the sudden motion jerking beneath Lance’s hands and almost causing him to lose his grip on the scales.

He couldn’t help the scream that ripped out of his throat as he tightened his grip, even though the scale was biting into his palms hard enough to make them bleed. If the thing succeeded in tossing him off… at this height… Lance swallowed. He didn’t even want to think about what would happen to his body if he were to collide with the ground from this height.
He tried to shift his grip on the occamy’s back, trying to change the grip on his wand so that he could maybe fire off a few spells. Like a summoning charm for his broom, maybe.

Lance gently released his grip on the scale with the hand holding his wand, preparing to cast his summoning spell.

Of course, the occamy just had to chose that exact moment to whip its head around wildly again, trying to dislodge the foreign presence on the back of its neck. Lance’s one handed grip on the creature’s scales wasn’t enough this time, his balance thrown off from trying to get his wand free, and before he even had time to process what was happening, his body was sailing through the air.

His breath was knocked from his lungs, but the surface that Lance landed on was soft enough to cushion his fall. He was definitely feeling the impact, and the combination of the two blows had undoubtedly cracked some of his ribs, but it didn’t feel like anything was broken. And Lance was relatively sure that he would stand, if he wanted to.

The sky overhead was growing darker, clouds of silver and grey swirling. Or maybe it was just Lance’s vision that was swirling.

He reached up, his vision blurring so that it looked like there were two hands drifting in the air above him. Possibly a mild concussion.

Shit.

He had probably hit his head pretty hard. Shit, shit, shit. That wasn’t good.

He could hear what must have been the occamy screeching, although there was a very good possibility that it was actually just the ringing of his ears. He needed to move. Needed to summon his broom. Needed to-

Lance slowly sat up, looking around to see what, exactly, had broken his fall. He felt his eyes widen as he took in the thick tree branches, the hard packed mud, large purple feathers and loose blue and green scales.

He could cast *episkey* on himself to try and heal something, but his injuries were starting to seem like the least of his problems.

Because the surface that had broken his fall was an occamy nest.

With a very unhappy looking occamy staring at him with wide, unblinking tawny eyes.

Resisting the urge to make any sudden movements, Lance tightened his grip on his wand, scooting backwards slowly until his back collided with the edge of the nest.

The occamy made no move to strike out at him, and Lance watched its tail wrap tightly around something protectively. Behind the layers and layers of the occamy’s body, Lance couldn’t make out what it was protecting, but it didn’t take a genius to figure out that it was probably one of the eggs that Lance was supposed to be retrieving. He was close enough that he could make a grab for the egg, but the occamy was staring directly at him, and Lance didn’t have his broom. Even if he managed to get the egg, he wouldn’t have a way to escape.

He stood up slowly, glancing over the edge of the nest, to see if there was somewhere he could go to catch his breath. He raised his arms over his head slowly, flicking his wand and muttering the incantation for the summoning charm under his breath.
For a few, aching seconds nothing happened. Then something hard and wooden slammed into his free hand. The handle of his broom.

Lance let out a breath he hadn’t even realised he was holding, and tossed himself over the side of the occamy nest.

Thank god he had read up on his summoning spells. They did actually come in handy. Maybe his bad feeling earlier wasn’t about the charms at all.

Wind rushed past his face, making his eyes water, as he shifted his weight so that he was hanging from his broom, slowing his descent. Using his upper body strength, Lance hauled himself up onto his broom, leaning forward and resting his forehead against the wooden handle.

His bruised ribs were groaning in protest, and his hands felt chafed and raw from the occamy scales.

He didn’t really have the time to just sit here catching his breath. The first occamy that had attacked him was probably still lurking around somewhere, and who knew whether or not the other occamy would decide to leave its nest in pursuit of him.

Lance forced himself to sit back up, kicking his broom into motion. A little distance between himself and the occamies would be good, and then maybe he would have time to formulate some kind of plan. He hadn’t heard any announcements, so it was unlikely that Keith, Allura or Lotor had beat him to getting one of the eggs, but he would have to try and get an egg sooner rather than later.

Lance maneuvered his broom until he was mostly hidden from sight behind a stone pillar, but still close enough to the occamy and its nest that he could watch it and make sure none of the other champions tried to get to the egg before he could.

The occamy hadn’t left its nest to pursue him, which was a relief, at least. But it was still looking around with watchful eyes.

There was no way Lance would be able to get to the egg unnoticed.

Maybe it would be better to try one of the other nests, the other occamies might not be as alerted to his presence. Plus stealth would be his best bet for having any hope of completing this trial.

Taking one last look at the occamy and its nest, Lance kicked his broom back into motion and headed off in search of a different nest.

>>>>

It didn’t take long for Lance to find another occamy nest, since there seemed to be plenty around for the champions to choose from. He made sure to avoid the nest that Allura and Lotor had seemed to be competing over, not particularly wanting to tangle with either of them. There was still no sign of Keith, and Lance wasn’t sure whether that was a good sign or not.

On one hand, it might mean that Keith was already out of the competition and that was one less champion to worry about beating. But on the other hand, it might mean that he was really hurt.

Lance took a steadying breath. He couldn’t worry about Keith right now, he couldn’t afford to be distracted. Not when there were griffins and occamies and a motherfucking Thunderbird still lurking around.

The nest that Lance had chosen to target was on a lower rock outcropping than many of the others, which meant he currently had a pretty decent point from the air up above it. The occamy sitting
inside the nest hadn’t noticed him yet, though she was casting her gaze around the nearby area like she was just waiting for someone to try and steal her egg. But she didn’t seem too violent. In fact, other than the occamy that had slammed into his side, none of the other occamies had left their nests. Almost like they were waiting for the champions to get close before they attacked. That made sense, Lance reasoned, they were only supposed to be aggressive once you got too close to their eggs.

Maybe the one that had attacked Lance had already gotten its egg stolen by one of the other champions? That was really the only explanation Lance could think of for why the occamy would just be flying around the arena.

There was another perk to being up above, Lance found. He could actually see the silver egg that was nestled within the curl of the occamy’s tail. From this vantage point, the egg was nothing more than a tiny silver speck amidst the blues and purples and greens of the occamy’s scales and feathers. It couldn’t have bigger than a baseball, small enough to sit in the palm of his hand.

How on earth was he supposed to grab such a tiny thing without the occamy noticing him?

Lance glanced behind him, wondering if he could see how Allura or Lotor were planning on grabbing the occamy egg. That was, if they hadn’t already managed to grab one.

There was a flash of red in the distance, and Lance realized with a start that it was Keith, in his crimson Gryffindor-colored robes. He executed an elegant dive down towards an occamy nest. The occamy nest that Lance had abandoned in favor of finding one where the occamy wasn’t quite so alerted to his presence.

The occamy barely had time to raise its head in Keith’s direction before Keith was already retreating away from the nest, a noticeable glint in his hands. Damn. He was fast. Lance hadn’t even seen him reach down to grab the occamy egg, it was like Keith had been nothing but a blur of color.

The occamy let out a roar of frustration, or maybe anger, Lance wasn’t sure, as it pushed out of its nest and took off in pursuit of Keith. But this was the type of challenge where Keith’s chaser skills came into focus. He was faster than the occamy, which was slowed by its large form, and he was just as skilled about dodging rock columns as he had been dodging bludgers and players from the other team.

Keith’s raw talent had been part of the reason that the Gryffindor team had been practically unbeatable in Quidditch these last few years, and part of the reason that Lance had wanted to beat him so badly. But Lance didn’t want to beat him now, and he let out a triumphant cheer as Keith whipped around a rock column seconds before he should have collided into it, unfortunately the large occamy didn’t stand a chance of copying such a flawless maneuver, and it slammed into the stone with a deafening thud.

Keith slowed his path back towards the starting area once the occamy was no longer following him, his broom hovering in the entrance towards one of the pathways away from the clearing, and it looked like he was watching the events unfolding in front of him.

Like he didn’t have anything to worry about.

Which he didn’t. Because by grabbing that egg, Keith had just secured his position in first place. Or second if Allura or Lotor had already grabbed an egg, which Lance had no way of knowing.

Which meant that if he didn’t find a way to get this egg, and soon, there was a very real possibility that Lance might end this trial in last place.
Lance suddenly realized with a jolt that while he had been watching Keith, the occamy underneath him had realized his presence, and it was staring up at him with wide, tawny eyes.

“Shit,” Lance hissed.

He needed to get that egg. And he needed to do it now.

Options, shit, he needed to think of his options.

He could try the same route that Keith had taken. In and out, quickly. Hopefully before he was exposed to the occamy’s razor sharp teeth.

He would have to be fast, faster than he had been when he tried to outfly the other Ravenclaws during quidditch practices, but he had been flying and training enough times with Keith this year that he thought he could make it.

Lance took a deep breath, steadying himself. He would probably only get one shot at this, because the occamy certainly wouldn’t let him come close to the egg a second time.

The wind whipped against Lance’s face as he angled his broom down in the direction of the occamy’s nest, making his eyes water.

The space between himself and the occamy disappeared faster than Lance thought should have been possible, and he loosened his grip on the broom handle, reaching one of his arms out in front of him, no point in getting closer to the occamy than he absolutely had to.

His fingertips brushed against the smooth silver of the occamy egg, he just needed to be… a little… bit… closer…

Suddenly the occamy shifted, its tail coiling around and effectively swallowing the egg, hiding it from Lance’s view.

And Lance had just seconds to realise that now he had absolutely nowhere to go, and no way of grabbing the occamy’s egg, before the occamy continued to move, twisting like a snake until its face was staring right at Lance.

He jerked his broom to a stop, less than a foot away from a gleaming bronze beak lined with rows and rows of razor sharp teeth.

Shit.

Lance fumbled with his free hand for his wand, sliding it out of his robes and holding it towards the occamy in front of him. He really, really didn’t want to have to hurt such a beautiful creature, but he was going to need to defend himself.

The occamy snapped at him, and Lance pulled his broom backwards, putting a little more space between the creature’s mouth and his frail, human body. His blood was pounding in his ears, loud enough that he could just barely hear the roar of the crowd.

He fired a full-body bind at the creature, hoping that would slow it long enough for him to make a hasty retreat. He needed to regroup. To come up with another plan. The spell slammed into the occamy’s snout, rippling across its body.

Lance had no idea whether the spell had worked or how long it would hold for, but he kicked his broom into motion and turned in the opposite direction, intending to make a run for it.
But his broom came to halt almost as soon as he had turned it around. Because there were four occamies closing in on him, slowly abandoning their own nests and beginning to fly in his direction.

They were moving slowly, almost reluctantly, but there was no denying that they were closing in on him, effectively cornering him against the edge of the nest.

God, he *really* hoped the full-body bind had worked on the occamy that was behind him. Otherwise he was *fucked*.

Now that they were getting closer, Lance could tell that these occamies looked different than the others had. Where the other occamies had intelligence gleaming in their tawny eyes, the occamies approaching him had eyes that were glowing an unnatural yellow.

But Lance didn’t have much time to contemplate why these occamies seemed different than the others, because the one flying at him from his left suddenly lashed out with its tail, which crashed into the edge of the nest behind Lance, close enough that his broom shook from the force of the blow.

Taking advantage of the way the occamy’s tail seemed to be stuck in the dried mud and tree branches of the nest, Lance whipped his broom underneath the tail, trying to put as much distance between himself and the occamies as he could.

He could hear the sound of the occamies pursuing him, their wings flapping and some sort of hissing noise that they must be making, though Lance wasn’t about to turn around and check.

With so many occamies pursuing him, that had to mean that there nests were empty. This was his chance. He could fly over there as quick as he could and grab an egg whilst they were over here.

He tightened his grip on his broom, beginning to shift back in the direction of the occamy nests. Unfortunately by altering his path, he had brought himself within the range of one of the occamies, who lashed out viciously with their tail. Lance swerved away before the tail could make contact with his broom, cursing.

Sweat dripped down the back of his neck, and Lance knew he must be overheating from the exertion, but he felt chilled down to his bones.

Something wasn’t right with those occamies. They shouldn’t be actively pursuing him like this.

Occamies were only vicious if you threatened their eggs.

He knew that. He had done so much reading on the occamies in the weeks leading up to the trial. He knew what they were supposed to do, how they were supposed to react. *Hell*, he had seen what they did to Keith just now, fighting only when he drew too close to the nests. Responding only when he became a true threat to the eggs, when he had *taken* one.

This wasn’t *right*.

Lance whipped around one of the stone columns, like he had seen Keith do, letting out a relieved breath when he heard one of the occamies crash into the stone column. Keith’s trick had worked, thankfully.

But that was just one occamy, there were still *way* too many. And he still had no idea how to get an egg, especially not with this many occamies chasing him. He could try to get back towards the starting area, maybe there would be someone who could help him. Or maybe if he just got far enough away from the nests, the occamies would stop chasing him…
That was as worth a try as any of his other plans.

Lance angled his broom upwards, flying upwards into the air.

He could feel the air growing thinner around him as he ascended, making it harder for him to gasp for air. He couldn’t stop though, soaring upwards and upwards to try and get away.

He risked a glance backwards over his shoulder, hoping that the occamies would be falling backwards. Or even returning to their nests.

But if anything, they seemed closer than ever. Close enough that Lance could see how their eyes clouded over with some kind of film, so that their eyes were pupiless.

Lance whipped his head back around to see where he was flying, even though at this height, there was nothing around him except clouds and sky.

The occamies definitely shouldn’t be following him anymore. There was no way they would leave their nests unprotected.

This wasn’t right.

This wasn’t right.

Shit, shit, shit.

Lance angled his broom downwards, dropping into a nosedive down towards the ground. He was going to have to go back towards the starting area. That was really the only solution left. And hopefully the ministry would have some members of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures who could get the occamies under control.

But first he needed an egg.

Maybe… since the occamies were actually abandoning their nests, Lance would be able to sneak past them and grab one of the eggs. It was probably a long shot, but he didn’t really have a lot of other options…

He was just going to have to go for it.

He jerked his broom upwards, heading in the direction of the closest nest. He could hear the occamies behind him, but he didn’t dare turn around to check how close they were to him.

He was close enough that he could see the hint of silver in the empty nest, no occamy waiting to guard it. Just like scooping a quaffle off the ground when he was practicing quidditch with Keith.

Speaking of Keith, Lance hadn’t seen him since he had claimed his own egg. With any luck, Keith was already back to the starting area with his prize, safe from the occamies’ rage.

Lance circled around the nest, preparing to dive down towards the egg. He would have to be careful, too fast, and he would crash his broom into the edge of the nest. Too slow, and he was occamy food.

He really only would have one shot to get this right, Lance dropped down into a short dive, releasing his grip on his broom with one hand so that he’ll be prepared to grab the egg.

He was too far away.

The realization slammed into Lance as he watched a blur of purple and white streak underneath him,
closer to the nest than he had dared to go. The silver of the egg quickly disappearing into the pocket of violet robes.

Lotor.

Lance let out a quiet curse, as he attempted to pull his broom upwards and out of the dive. There was no use in crashing into an empty nest.

One of the occamies shook its head, before peeling away from the pack that was chasing after Lance, pursuing Lotor across the skies. But only one.

There was no way that was right. Lotor had actually succeeded in stealing the eggs, and only one occamy was attempting to chase him? Meanwhile Lance could barely fly in any direction without the threat of attack? His fingers hadn’t even skimmed an egg and there were four occamies on his tail.

Lance let his eyes wander across the arena. He needed to find a nest that still had an egg inside of it…

Allura was across the clearing, casting spells at the glistening shape of the Thunderbird. Lance had never thought he would be envious of someone who was fighting a Thunderbird, but suddenly, he was. He would take a single Thunderbird over a handful of occamies any day.

One of the occamies pursuing him let out a sharp squawk, shrill enough and close enough that it made Lance’s ears ring.

Startled, he felt his broom dip underneath him, as he reflexively dove away from the occamy in a sharp drop towards the ground.

The sudden appearance of an occamy beneath him was enough for that plan to warp from a mildly good idea to a devastatingly bad one. The occamy beneath him looked different than the one in the nest had, it had the same unnatural yellow eyes, a film rendering them featureless and filmy. Its golden beak was pulled open, revealing rows and rows of small, sharp teeth, a long pink tongue lolling from the open mouth.

Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.

He was basically trapped between the one pursuing him and the one down below him. If he pulled out of the dive, the wind resistance would slow him enough that the occamy behind him might be able to get a bite in. But if he didn’t slow down, he was chopped meat. Literally. He would probably end up dinner for one of the creepy, yellow-eyed occamies. And that did not sound pleasant.

The space separating his broom and the occamy beneath him was rapidly disappearing. Shit, he didn’t have time to think this through!

Lance pulled up on his broomstick instinctually, just seconds before he would have crashed into the second occamy. His broom jerked from the sudden upward motion, and his the speed he had gathered during his descent all but disappeared, his upward climb back into the air seeming achingly slow compared to the drop down.

There was a sudden stinging pain in his shoulder, making Lance cry out, his voice swallowed by the rush of the wind. He lifted his wand and pointed it over his shoulder, casting a stunning spell nonverbally without turning to see if it hit. Instead, he pressed his wand to his shoulder, casting a nonverbal healing spell and wincing as the flesh of his shoulder began to clumsily knit itself back together.
There was a roar of noise that Lance didn’t process at first, thinking, maybe, that it was the sound of blood rushing in his ears. But the dull noise began to take on the form of words that Lance dimly recognised.

“CHAMPIONS,” the words were enchanted to boom across the arena, some part of Lance recognized, the way Headmaster Holt often enchanted his voice to talk over the roar of the dining hall. “PLEASE REMAIN CALM. WE ARE COMING TO ASSIST. SOMETHING IS WRONG.”

Lance barked out a laugh, startled by the sudden sound. These announcers had to be joking, of course something was wrong.

Lance risked a glance over his shoulder, letting out a relieved breath as he realized that his stunning spell had worked against the occamy, giving him a bit of breathing room.

Lance cast his gaze around the arena, trying to make out the other champions. The announcement had mentioned them, so surely he wasn’t the last one up in the air.

There.

Allura was across the clearing from him, still casting defensive spells at the Thunderbird, cradling a small silver egg against her chest with her free hands.

Lance cast his eyes around the arena, trying to find out where Lotor had vanished to. But it wasn’t the Durmstrang champion that he saw flying towards him. It couldn’t be… was that Keith? Flying in front of the occamies? It had to be, there was no one else it could be, red gryffindor robes and black hair flying in the wind. But what was he doing here? He had already won, he should be flying back towards the starting area, not flying right towards Lance, himself.

What was he thinking?! They had agreed that they weren’t going to help each other, and now Keith was swooping in to save the day? Actually competing against each other his ass.

Words began to spill out over the arena again, although they weren’t words that Lance recognised. They sounded like a counterspell, and Lance looked around until he noticed a team of yellow and green robed magizoologists emerging into the arena, flying on state of the art broomsticks.

Down below him, the occamy that Lance had stunned was slowly stirring back to life. Shit, he really couldn’t risk staying still that much longer. But there was nowhere to go.

For good measure, Lance fired off a few more offensive spells towards the occamy beneath him, keeping one eye trained on Keith’s progress across the arena towards him. Keith was outflying the occamies with ease, no surprise.

One of the two occamies remaining in their nests suddenly stirred, spreading its wings. It was close to where Keith was flying, and Lance couldn’t really make out the details, but it seemed like Keith suddenly jerked on his broom to pull out of the occamy’s way.

The occamy took off in a flurry of wings, but Lance could only blink in shock as the occamy ignored Keith, choosing, instead, to fly right in his own direction.

The other remaining occamy was stirring too, taking flight and all but ignoring Allura, who was just a few feet away from it.

The occamies were flying in at him from all sides, and the one below him didn’t seem phased by the offensive spells he had cast. Which meant that the only way to go was up. Lance pulled his broom
upwards, feeling the air grow thinner around him, from this height, Keith was nothing but a tiny speck of red and black. The occamies followed him, gaining on him. His broom wasn’t enough to outfly them, not when he was trying to move straight up into the sky, the wind resistance pushing around him.

His broom jerked backwards suddenly, as one of the occamies pulled on the head of his broom, their teeth embedded in the bristles. With the occamy pulling on him, Lance couldn’t move his broomstick, he turned in his seat, firing a stunning spell right towards the occamy’s eye. It let go of his broom with a pained squeak.

Something sharp pierced his upper thigh, and Lance bit on his lip to keep from screaming. The second occamy had approached while he was distracted, clamping its beak around his thigh. It shook its head, trying to tear him off of his broom. Its teeth tore further into his flesh and muscle as it did, and this time, Lance couldn’t help the pained cry that escaped his lips.

“Stupefy!” He cried, pointing his wand towards the second occamy.

He heard what sounded like Keith calling his name.

Keith.

With two of the occamies stunned, Lance took advantage of the slight opening, dropping back down and racing in the direction of where he had seen Keith. Surely two would be better than one when it came to facing the occamies.

“Keith!” He cried, the wind tearing the words from his throat. His voice sounded hoarse. Why was his voice so hoarse?

Lance watched as Keith’s eyes widened in fear as he drew closer to the older boy, close enough to take in the details of his red robes, the white-knuckled grip that he had on the broom.

“Are you alright?” Keith shouted. Or, at least, Lance thought he shouted. He could barely hear him over the wind.

Lance nodded automatically, even though, in truth he had no idea what was going on. And he wasn’t alright. He was in so much pain. His leg, where it had been bitten, was beginning to feel cold. A sign of loss of blood. Not good. Lance pressed his free hand to the wound, it was slippery with blood. He needed to heal it, but he didn’t trust himself, it wasn’t like the surface wounds on his shoulder. It was deep.

“Something is wrong!” Lance shouted back. “They didn’t act like this with Allura.”

“They didn’t act like this with me, either!” Keith shouted back, “I don’t understand what’s happening!”

But Lance had the sinking feeling that he did understand what was happening.

For some reason, the occamies were targeting him and him alone.

Something was wrong.

Deadly wrong.
please let us know what you think is going to happen next, tweet us at @sunnyjolras and @slowklancing or comment below.
Chapter Twenty-Five

Lance had barely realized something was wrong with the occamies before they had resumed their attacks against him, making it necessary for him to kick his broom into motion.

“CHAMPIONS, PLEASE MAKE YOUR WAY BACK TO THE STARTING AREA!” Boomed the voice of one of the magizoologists.

_Easier said than done_, Lance thought bitterly, as he just barely managed to dodge out of the way of one of the occamy’s gleaming copper beaks. Unfortunately that immediately put him within range of another’s tail, the sudden slap against his broomstick sending him spiraling out of control.

Once he had gotten closer to Keith, most of the occamies that had been following him decided to chase after Lance instead, which unfortunately meant that now he had eight, _eight_ occamies all pursuing him at once.

Keith was about fifty yards away, attempting to battle one of the remaining occamies, though from the looks of things, his spells didn’t seem to be doing much to divert its attention. “Why is this happening?” Keith cried out, loud enough that Lance could just barely make out the words. “They all keep ignoring me and going after you.”

As if in response to his words, the occamy peeled away from him, joining the group that Lance was leading around in circles as he attempted to outfly them.

Shit.

“I don’t know!” Lance called back, firing a full-body bind at the occamy that was closest to him. “I don’t _know_!”

“Do you… that the occamies… weird to you?” Keith shouted, but Lance could only make out about half of the sentence over the roar of the wind in his ears.

“Um, yeah, Keith, I’m pretty sure they’re acting weird! I mean, they are trying to _murder_ me!” Lance shouted back, his frustration and fear making the sarcasm come out sharper than it normally
would have. “What’s going on?”

“Did you… their eyes?” Keith asked, making Lance think that maybe he hadn’t been able to hear the response. “They... yellow and cloudy. I don’t… supposed to look…”

With a start, Lance realized that while they had been shouting back and forth, he had flown further away from Keith than he had meant to, the distance between them was now great enough that he could barely even hear the older boy.

Lance risked a glance over his shoulder. The eight (eight!) occamies behind him were still hot on his tail, flying like a flock of death behind him. In the distance, behind the large, purple and blue shapes, Lance could just make out the yellow and green robes of the magizoologists. It seemed like they were trying to cast spells, probably something to calm the occamies down, but it didn’t seem like it was working.

“Keith!” Lance cried, loud enough to hurt his throat, although the faint pain barely registered compared to the pulsing pain in his leg. Oh shit, his leg!

In the midst of flying to avoid the occamies, he had forgotten to heal his leg!

“KEITH! I CAN’T HEAR YOU! OH MY GOD, HELP!”

One of the occamies had flew underneath his broom, rising up to slam into the thin wooden stick with its head.

Lance’s whole body jerked as his broomstick fought to stay afloat. It was like when whales scraped against the bottom of a boat, except the bottom of the boat was actually Lance’s legs. He let out a hiss of pain at the way his already wounded leg jerked.

Fuck. He needed to get away. He needed to heal his leg.

He needed these fucking occamies to leave him alone!

A streak of blue light passed over Lance’s head, closer than he felt comfortable with. Instinctually, he turned just in time to see the spell slam into an occamy that had been trying to come down on him from above.

The beast froze, the effects of a full-body bind leaving it suspended in the air for a second before it began to drop like a rock.

Lance barely had enough time to pull his broomstick out of the way of the falling beast. Who on earth had just cast that? Had the magizoologists finally decided to actually help the champions?

It wasn’t the magizoologists.

Keith lowered his wand, Lance hadn’t noticed him approaching, but somehow Keith had drawn close enough that Lance could make out a red cut underneath one of his eyes, blood dripping down his cheek. There were long scrapes down his arm, his robes torn, as if from claws. They were probably from the griffins. But overall he looked fine, even though he was frowning in concentration as he fired off another full-body bind.

Lance swooped his broom around so that he could draw closer to Keith. “Are you alright?” He asked.

Keith raised an eyebrow. “I think I should be asking you that. What the hell did you do to piss the
Lance glanced around. Keith’s full-body binds had bought them a little time, but they still needed to get out of here as quickly as possible. “I didn’t do anything!” He exclaimed. “I haven’t even gotten close to one of their eggs, I don’t know why they’re all targeting me!”

He kicked his broom into motion, being sure to fly as close to Keith as he could, as they attempted to put some distance between themselves and the occamies.

“You still don’t have an egg?” Keith said, sounding shocked. “Have they been acting like this the whole time?”

Lance shook his head. “I don’t think so, at least not all of them, not at first. But then they all started to get aggressive, and I thought it was because I was getting closer to the eggs, but they kept getting more and more angry even when I retreated. Then I thought that maybe it was another part of the trial, except they totally seemed to ignore Allura, and you, and I think even Lotor.”

“Watch out,” Keith said, reaching over and grabbing the sleeve of Lance’s robe, pulling him out of the way as an occamy behind him bit into empty air.

“We have to get back to the starting area, that’s what the magizoologists said to do,” Lance said, watching Keith cast a full-body bind at the occamy.

Keith shook his head. “We’re right here, we need to grab one of the eggs for you first, we can get it on the way.”

“I don’t even think the trial matters at this point, Keith,” Lance said, glancing around nervously. The majority of the occamies were either still frozen due to the body-binds, or far enough away that they weren’t going to attack right that second. “I just want to get out of here.”

“Hey,” Keith said, squeezing Lance’s arm before letting go. “You came this far, okay? We can do this.”

Lance bit his lip. “Keith, this feels like a bad idea. Something isn’t right. They keep coming after me. I know about occamies. They aren’t supposed to be this aggressive, they aren’t supposed to fly this far away from their nests. Not if they have eggs. They just keep coming after me and it’s all wrong.”

“I know,” Keith agreed. He looked distressed, his eyebrows were furrowed and a frown was tugging on his lips. “Something isn’t right. But if they’re all this far away from the nests, it should be easier to get to an egg, right? We’ve got this,” Keith said surely, letting go of his grip on his broom and reaching over to place his hand on Lance’s thigh.

Lance heard a whine that he couldn’t place, until it struck him that it was coming from himself, an instinctual reaction to the pulse of pain that had just shot through his leg as Keith’s hand landed on the torn flesh.

“Lance,” Keith said, his voice coming out as a horrified breath. “Lance, you’re hurt!”

“M’know,” Lance said, blinking white spots from his vision. “Haven’t had time to heal it.”

“Let me do that,” Keith said, fumbling for his wand.

Some part of Lance dimly recognised that Keith’s hand, as it pulled away, was covered in red, sticky blood. His blood. His stomach rolled in response.
“Lance!” Keith sounded worried. Desperate. “Lance!”

Lance blinked.

“Lance, you need a healer. You look like shit,” Keith said, and that was definitely worry coating every one of his words.

“Thanks,” Lance said dryly.

“Shut up,” Keith replied automatically, and without any heat. “Forget about the egg. We need to get you out of here. How much blood have you lost?”

Lance risked a glance down at his thigh. He couldn’t even see his tan skin underneath the blood that was bubbling from the wound. Pressure. Pressure was supposed to stop bleeding, right?

Lance pressed his hand down onto his leg, the blood slipping across his skin. There was another pulse of pain in his leg as he added the pressure, but then it settled down into a dull throb. “I dunno, Keith. It’s been…”

How long had it been?

“It’s been a few minutes,” Lance guessed, even though it felt like it had been hours.

“Hold still while I heal this for you, okay?” Keith ordered.

“Keith?” Lance said, as he watched Keith fumble for his wand.

The older boy looked over at him. “Yeah?”

“I’m scared.”

Keith sucked in a deep breath. “I’m scared too. Now hold still, okay?”

Lance nodded. He watched as Keith pressed the tip of his wand to the fucked up skin of his leg, but the sight made his stomach turn, so he cast his gaze around the arena instead.

“Keith! Watch out!” Lance cried, as he fumbled for his wand.

Keith quickly whipped his broom out of the way just as an occamy soared into the space that he had just vacated.

It was making some kind of noise that was a horrific combination of squeaking and hissing, as it lashed out at them with its tail.

They jerked away in opposite directions, the occamy’s tail cutting through the air between them.

“Come at me you ugly fuck!” Keith cried, casting a spell that bounced harmlessly off the occamy’s scales.

The creature ignored him turning towards Lance, its gleaming beak opening.

“Lance, I can’t get its attention!” Keith said, sounding desperate. “None of them will pay attention to me! Lance? Lance!”

Lance cast a full body bind sloppily, his arm wavering. And was there one occamy or two? It was hard to tell which one he should aim for…
His spell went wide, missing the occamy.

Fuck.

Two more occamies were flying in from the left, another from the right, and he could hear some approaching from behind, all of which were ignoring Keith. If he didn’t get out of here, and soon, he was going to be completely surrounded.

He couldn’t get to Keith, not with the occamies separating them. He needed to get away using the only possible route. Up.

He tugged his broom upwards, trying to put some space between himself and the occamies. His eyes were watering, making it even harder to see what was happening. His chest constricted, as he climbed higher into the air. The oxygen levels were lower here. He could barely breathe.

It was cold, too. Or, at least, Lance thought that the wind was cold. But maybe that was just him.

His leg felt really cold.

Lance glanced downward, trying to see if he could spot Keith.

But all he could see behind him was a sea of occamies, their scales flashing in the thin sunlight. He couldn’t be sure, but he thought he caught a glimpse of Gryffindor red towards the back of the pack, before one of the occamies shifted and blocked him from seeing any more.

Lance risked a glance down beneath him, praying that the magizoologists had made it onto the quidditch pitch.

The ground was nothing but a tiny speck of green somewhere far below him, and Lance had played enough quidditch that being up in the air usually didn’t bother him, but right now…

Lance squeezed his eyes shut against the sight.

He just wanted this trial to be over.

What were the champions supposed to do if they were in trouble? Something with a spell that created sparks, right? Maybe if Lance did that, the magizoologists would see, or the ministry members. Maybe they would be able to help, get to him first before dealing with the occamies.

Lance reached for his wand, pointing it towards the sky.

He never got to cast the spell.

Something slammed into Lance from behind, hard enough to knock the wind from his lungs. Hard enough to knock his hand free from his loose grip on his broom. Hard enough to knock his unbalanced body from the sky.

The wind rushed around Lance, but he barely had time to register what had just happened, barely had time for the fear to sink in.

Barely had time to hear Keith screaming his name.

He was unconscious before he hit the ground.

Chapter End Notes
lol we lied about feeling guilty get rekt yall

come scream at us on twitter @slowklancing and @sunnyjolras if you want lmao
Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Summary

The aftermath.

Chapter Notes

Hey y'all. Oh shit, fuck, oh I see we have an angry mob on our hands :o ... just kidding! Well, almost. The reaction to the last chapter was so amazing, and because we're so evil it made us laugh a lot. We also wanted to apologise for the delay in getting this chapter up. Life was a bit hard for us these last few weeks. I got drunk, Kate got her wisdom teeth removed. Its been a ride. Please, either comment or live tweet what you think about the chapter, we need to know! Leave a kudos if you enjoy, and we'll see you all in two weeks. You guys are the best, we love you so much <333
- caitie

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The first thing that Lance registered was pain. Specifically, a steady throb of pain throughout his entire body, with no discernable beginning or end. His head was pounding so badly that it was making his vision pulse, the black and red of his inner eyelid shifting in his vision.

Opening his eyes seemed like an impossible task.

Everything hurt, his legs, his back, his arms, his head. Even his goddamn nose.

Movement was impossible, as impossible as climbing Everest with no preparation or going deep sea diving without an oxygen tank.

There was a low groaning noise from... somewhere. Somewhere nearby. Somewhere in the general vicinity of his...

Oh. Oh. It was him.

The groaning noise was coming from his mouth.

Lance strained to open his eyes, the sudden flash of daylight burning with a white hot heat, brighter than it had any right to be. Only it wasn’t any brighter than normal, his eyes were just so tired. The inky blackness behind them seemed to offer a promise of escape, however temporary, from the pain that was weighing on his limbs like the weight of the sky atop Atlas.

There were shapes circling above him, like the birds circling the heads of cartoon characters, and Lance wondered idly if he was hallucinating. If so, it wasn’t a very nice hallucination. The creatures above him were far from brightly colored songbirds, they were monstrous things.

His eyelids threatened to fall shut again, so Lance rolled his head to the side in an effort to see…
something, something that could keep him latched onto consciousness. The movement proved to be a mistake.

A fresh wave of pain rocked through him, sharp enough that Lance lost the battle of keeping his eyelids open.

They slid shut, and this time the darkness seemed warm, comforting, and safer than those monsters circling above.

<<<

“Stupefy! Get away you stupid bird. I said… get away! Sectumsempra!”

The loud noises were drawing closer, some part of Lance dimly recognised, but he couldn’t find it in himself to care.

The blackness was lapping against him like waves, and he didn’t have the strength in him to resist.

“Lance!”

That was his name, someone was calling his name. Which meant that Lance should probably respond.

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

There was only the darkness.

<<<

He wasn’t sure how long he was unconscious for. It just as easily might have been seconds, minutes, or hours. But this time, he came to with a sharp stab of pain in his left arm as something gripped his shoulder. A low whine slipped from between his teeth, oh god, even his teeth hurt.

But he felt a little more alert than he had before. So that was something. Maybe.

“Lance?!” Someone was saying, their fingers flexing into the fabric of his robes. “Oh, Merlin.”

Lance blinked his eyes open, to see wide indigo eyes set into a pale face.

“Keith?” He asked, his voice hoarse. Like he had been screaming. Had he been screaming? He couldn’t remember.

“You’re alive,” Keith let out a sound that sounded like it torn between turning into a laugh or a sob. His face was dizzyingly close to Lance’s own, his eyes puffy, his cheeks red. From the wind? Lance wasn’t sure. “Merlin, when you fell… I wasn’t sure.”

“Mmm still not sure,” Lance muttered, feeling the wave of blackness threatening to pull him back under. “Everything… everythin’ hurts.”

Keith pulled back slightly, turning so he could scan his gaze over Lance’s body, no doubt taking stock of his injuries. There was a series of hissed curse words, which told Lance that he probably looked as bad as he felt. “I… I don’t think I can heal this,” Keith said. “Fuck! I don’t want to make it any worse.” His gaze flickered upwards towards the sky, where the occamies were no doubt still circling. Not that he could see anything more than vague outlines through the thick fog that had settled over the quidditch pitch. “Can you even move? I hate being out in the open like this, not with the occamies still everywhere, Merlin’s beard, we need to get you to a healer.”
Lance tried to shake his head, and bit his lip to keep from crying out at how even the slight movement made his head pound. A concussion, no doubt. And given the pain in his left arm... it had to be broken. And Lance didn’t even want to think about what his legs looked like to make Keith wary about healing them. Had to be broken bones, Keith wasn’t reckless enough to risk the *Brackium Emendo* spell without any training in healing magic.


Lance couldn’t see what was happening, but he felt his leg be forced into the straight position as bandages wound tightly around it, tying it to a splint. It should have hurt, but if anything, the bandages actually seemed to be making his leg feel ever so slightly better.

He could hear the rustle of robes as Keith moved over to his other leg, repeating the spell. Then, Keith very, very gently picked up Lance’s injured arm and muttered the incantation once more.

Lance took a breath, tipping his head backwards. There was a warm liquid dripping down his face, and Lance reached up with his uninjured arm, he probed at his face gently, holding the hand in front of his face. It came away stained crimson, and Lance’s stomach lurches at the sight.

A broken nose, the least of his problems, probably, but apparently his stomach hadn’t gotten that message.

Keith reappeared in his line of sight, leaning over him. His own, long, pale fingers wrapped around Lance’s, pulling Lance’s hand out of his view.

“That I can fix,” Keith muttered, apparently to himself, as he pressed his wand up against whatever cartilage remained of Lance’s nose. “*Episkey,*” he said.

Lance’s nose felt hot from the magic, and then ice cold, and with a snap, it clicked back into place.

“Thanks,” Lance said, his voice coming out like sandpaper. It hurt to move his jaw, a pain he hadn’t registered immediately, but now that most of the shock and adrenaline was wearing off, he could actually identify specific sources of pain, where before they had just all blurred together.

His legs felt better, nowhere near perfect, but a lot better than they had been before. Same with his arm. His neck felt sore, like whiplash from a car accident. His ribs were aching in protest with every rise and fall of his chest. His jaw was throbbing with pain, but hopefully not fractured. Probably not, if he could speak.

“Shh,” Keith said, “It’s okay. You don’t have to talk. I’m right here.”

Lance struggled to find purchase on the ground beneath him with his uninjured elbow, trying to force himself up into a sitting position. He didn’t make it very far.


“I ’member… flyin’… an’ the occamies were being… weird. Their eyes were glowin’. Uh... Gold, I think? One of them hit me, or I hit them maybe? I fell off my broom,” Every word was achingly painful as Lance forced them through his lips. “It hurts. Wanna sleep.”

“You can’t go to sleep,” Keith said, his voice rushed. Panicked. The first hint of any real, genuine terror that Keith had displayed, and Lance felt a bolt of fear stab through his chest at the tone. “I know it hurts. I know, but you need to keep your eyes open.”
Lance tried to keep his eyes open, he really did, forcing himself to trace the lines of Keith’s face. Over and over and over again.

“I’m going to try to summon some of the ministry members with the emergency signal,” Keith told him, and Lance got the feeling that Keith was narrating his actions as a way to keep himself composed, rather than because he thought that Lance was actually listening to him. He was, but only barely.

“Kay,” Lance said, or he thought that he said. He wasn’t entirely sure.

Keith raised his wand towards the sky, letting off a shower of red sparks that danced and echoed in Lance’s vision, blurring the way fireworks blur when you try to take a picture of them.

“Just hold on, okay? Someone is coming,” Keith promised. “Someone is coming.”

Whether someone was coming or not, the occamies had noticed the red sparks. If they hadn’t already been aware of the injured prey cowering in the fog beneath them, they were beginning to circle overhead in alarming numbers. Thankfully, for the time being, they seemed content to stay airborne.

“Are you still with me?” Keith asked, his grip on Lance’s uninjured hand tightening.

“Ye’,” Lance said, trying to squeeze Keith’s fingers in response.

“The magizoologists seem to be getting closer to some of the occamies, maybe they’ll calm them down.”

“Maybe,” Lance said, coughing slightly. There was the sharp, metallic taste of blood in his mouth. “This wasn’t what was s’posed to happ’n,” he said, coughing again. His chest burned.

“Is that… Lance, is that blood?” Keith asked, and Lance felt fingers dragging across his lips. “Shit. Fuck. Okay, you’re coughing up blood. That’s bad. I know that’s bad, but what does that mean?”

Keith’s words sounded more like they were for his own benefit, but Lance answered him anyway.


Keith’s eyes widened, and then his hands were pulling at Lance’s robes, undoing the laces enough so that Keith would have access to his chest.

Not exactly the way Lance had pictured this exact scenario.

Lance tilted his neck down so he could see what Keith was looking at, and winced at the same time that Keith muttered another string of curses.

The skin of his chest was marked by fresh forming bruises, the area around his ribs already an angry red and purple against his tan skin.

“Where are the motherfucking medics?” Keith hissed.

Lance closed his eyes against the vivid sight of his injuries. He had never thought himself squeamish, had been familiar with his own blood in a way that only the youngest of five children could be. But these trials were really testing everything he thought that he had known about himself, and the clear definition of his broken ribs through the fragile lining of his skin was too much for him to handle on top of everything else.
He should probably feel really panicked right now, the way that Keith obviously did, despite the false composition he was trying to put on, but he didn’t. He just felt drained. Tired. More tired than he had ever felt in his entire life.

“Lance, Lance,” Keith’s voice was sharp. “Lance! Wake up!”

“Hmm,” Lance made a noise that wasn’t quite a hum of disagreement. “Wasna sleepin’. Pr’mise.”

“Lance, open your eyes,” Keith pleaded, and Lance felt two cool hands press to the side of his face.

He winced as Keith inadvertently pressed against his injured jaw, and Keith snatched his hands away as if he had been burned.

Everything hurt.

“Please just… open your eyes,” Keith said. There was something in his voice as he said that, his breath seemed to catch on one of the words.

Trying his best to oblige him, Lance pried his eyes open once more, just in time to see a shadow looming behind Keith.

Jesus, he had forgotten just how horrifying the occamies looked up close.

Wait… an occamy?

“Keith,” Lance tried to say, tried to warn, but his voice came out as a croak, not a shout. “Keith look up.”

Keith’s features were covered in blatant relief at hearing Lance’s voice, but it quickly shifted into a look of pure confusion. Still, Keith followed the direction, and turned around just in time to see the occamy that was flying directly towards them.

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Lance wasn’t quite sure when it happened, but at some point between the occamy diving down at them and Keith trying to pull him out of the way, he had blacked out.

Which was probably a blessing, really, because at least when he was unconscious he couldn’t feel the full extent of his injuries. Except, if he was unconscious he was just dead weight in Keith’s arms, and he couldn’t cast spells, and he would probably get eaten by an occamy. Well, at least he wouldn’t have to feel himself die that particular form of painful and gruesome death.

Lance blinked his eyes open, they felt heavier each time, and it was getting harder and harder to convince them to stay open.

They were at the base of one of the pillars. Yards away from where Lance had originally fallen. How had Keith managed to get him there?

“Hover charm,” Keith whispered to him, as his face swam into view. Lance hadn’t thought he said that out loud. “It’s meant to be used on objects, I think, so it didn’t work very well and I couldn’t get us very far, but… I figured some cover was better than just sitting out in the open.”

Lance tried to nod, but all it really seemed to do was send a stab of pain through his skull.

“What happ’ned to the occamy?” He asked weakly, coughing. The sharp taste of iron filled his mouth. He forced himself to swallow it back down.
“Allura,” Keith answered, helping Lance sit up slightly, so that he could rest his back against the foot of the pillar. “Just showed up on her broom out of nowhere and started firing offensive spells. She distracted it long enough for me to grab you and get behind this pillar. I mean, I don’t think she killed it or anything, but… it’s gone for now.”

Lance nodded, but he could feel his attention slipping. It was hard to listen, hard to focus, hard to remember things.

Keith was rambling. Lance had never known Keith to ramble. Not ever, in all the years they had known one another. He was quiet, usually. Serious. Hotheaded. Impatient.

He didn’t ramble.

“Hey, Lance,” there were cool hands pressing against his cheeks. They were slick with something, and a familiar scent stung Lance’s nose. Metallic and coppery. Blood. The fingers pressing against his face were slick with blood. His? “I need you to hold on, just a few more minutes, okay?” The hands disappeared. “Periculum!” There was a flash of red light against Lance’s closed eyelids, and he dimly recognised the words of the flare spell.

He struggled to open his eyes, reached up with his uninjured arm to wipe at his face. His fingers came away sticky and red. Where had the blood even come from? His legs, probably.

“Merlin,” Keith hissed, scowling at something in the distance. A slick, serpentine body cutting through the fog. It didn’t seem like it had noticed them, but the reminder of the creatures that were still lurking somewhere above them made Lance shudder.

His focus slipped, and his eyes fell on Keith again. The curl of the hair on his nape, the clench of his jaw, the pain in his eyes.

“What happ’ned to the occamy?” Lance heard himself say, but his voice was too quiet. If Keith heard the words at all, he gave no sign.

“Keith,” he said weakly. It was like he blinked, and everything felt worse. “Why are we hidin’ behind a pillar? How’d I get ‘ere?”

“What?” Keith sounded concerned. “I just told you, we had to get away from the occamy while Allura had it distracted. I just told you that, you remember, don’t you?”

Lance nodded slowly. “Yeah, yeah, I ‘member.”

He wondered if Keith heard the lie for what it was.

Keith relaxed slightly, although it did nothing to ease the tension that was visible in every line of his body. His white-knuckled fists, the stiff line of his back, his clenched jaw. “We’re lucky that Allura was able to distract it at all,” Keith frowned. “Nothing I was doing seemed to keep the occamies’ attention on me.”

Lance could still see the flash of the occamies’ golden eyes, their glistening teeth. Oh yeah, that had happened.

“They really liked me,” Lance agreed. “Dunno why. Why d’you think they were chasin’ me?”

“I don’t know, Lance,” Keith said, and he sounded like he wished he had an answer almost as badly as Lance thought he had probably sounded when he had asked the question in the first place. “I wish I did, and we’ll find out. I promise.”
“They wouldn’ stop…” Lance whined. He could feel tears forming and it only made his head pound worse. “Why didn’ they stop? I didn’ even get an’ egg.”

“I know, Lance.” Keith replied. “It’s weird, something isn’t right, but we will find out, okay?! ”

“M’kay,” Lance said, “Adam an’ the ministry will figure it out this time, righ’?”

“Right,” Keith agreed, before suddenly leaning in closer. The fog was making his eyes look more grey than indigo, his eyebrows furrowed. He was beautiful. “Lance, are you okay, you look really pale-”

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“Lance? Lance?! Lance!”

Someone was shaking his shoulders, making his brain rattle in his skull and his ribs rattle in his chest. It hurt.

Everything hurt.

The adrenaline was wearing off and all that he could feel was a numbing pain. The kind of pain that made everything else feel distant and fuzzy. He could feel it in his head, his legs, his arm. He could feel it in his chest most of all, a grating pain that was growing worse and worse.

He could even hear it, in the way his breathing had grown labored and shallow.

“M’fine,” he said, even though he clearly wasn’t. He just wanted the shaking to stop. “Shh… m’awake… hurts. Get the m’dics.”

The shaking stopped. “I know it hurts, Lance. I know it hurts, but you need to stay awake, okay? I need you to do that for me. I’ve already called the medics, you just need to wait until they can get down here. You saw me call them, yeah? You remember? They’ll be here soon.”

Lance didn’t remember, but he knew that if Keith had called them already and they still hadn’t arrived, then-

“They’re not comin’,” Lance said weakly.

“Don’t say that,” Keith said sharply. “They’ll get here, and they’ll patch you all up, and then Madam Pomfrey will have to fix everything again because the medic’s job was sloppy and you know what she’s like and everything will be fine. Everything is going to be fine.”


“Don’t say that,” Keith said again. But this time it was less of a demand and more of a plea. “You just need to hold on. Just a little bit longer. We still have time.”

Lance shook his head softly, forcing his eyes open so that he could meet Keith’s indigo gaze one last time. Another breath rattled in his chest. “We don’ have more time.”

It was the truth.

Painful and scary, but the truth.

It was startling to realise that Keith’s eyes were shining, and even more startling when the tears
began to leak down his cheeks, carving a path through the dirt and grime and blood that stained it.

“Don’t say that,” this time, the words were so quiet that Lance barely heard them. “I’ll try healing you. I know a few spells, maybe they’ll work. Maybe I’ll…”

“You can’t,” Lance said. He tried to make it sound gentle, but he wasn’t sure if he managed it or not. It was hard to sound calm through gritted teeth. “It’s not helpin’… it jus’ hurts.”

Keith’s hand formed a fist, clenching angrily into the fabric of his robes. “This isn’t fair! This whole trial isn’t fair! It wasn’t supposed to be like this. You… everything was supposed to be fine!”

“Y’said… y’said you wan’ed t’ tell me somethin’. ‘fter the trial,” Lance said, remembering the conversation with Keith suddenly. It felt like it had been months, years, ages ago that Keith had said the words. Had it really been less than a day? Less than a few hours?

Keith shook his head. “No, no, no! Not like this. Just… I’ll tell you in the hospital wing, okay, first thing after the trial. I promise, you just have be strong for a little bit longer. Just fight, okay?”

Lance coughed weakly. “Nothin’ to fight. Not anymore.”

Keith leaned forward, pressing their foreheads together. “Please,” he said softly. “For me.”

“There’s somethin’ I wan’ed to tell you,” Lance said instead, when Keith made no further move to explain what he wanted to talk about.

Lance had a feeling he already knew.

“Wan’ed to tell you before, but I thin’ I was scared. Doesn’ seem so scary now.”

Days ago, talking to Keith, actually talking to Keith had seemed like the scariest thing Lance could think of. Scarier than quidditch, scarier than the trials. But now… now all Lance could think about was how much he regretted not telling Keith everything. They could have had days, weeks, months, years of happiness and Lance had just wasted them away. Why? Why would he do that? He wasn’t immortal, he was a teenage boy, he would only get so many days…

Why had he wasted all of them?

He couldn’t remember.

Keith shook his head, and Lance could feel the motion against his own forehead. Could taste the salt from Keith’s tears on his lips from where they had fallen.

“Stop it,” Keith said sternly. “We are not doing this right now. It’s going to be okay.”

“I though’… at the Yule Ball,” He made to carry on with his thought, but it escaped him. What was the Yule Ball again? Lance shook his head softly. “It doesn’ matter. Wha’ matters is that I’ve wanted to say… for a while now…” He paused, trying to form thoughts, remember anything he could. “Uh… but with the trials an’ the drama it never felt right. But the trip. An’ the library. An’ I just…”

“You are not allowed to tell me that right now,” Keith growled. “Not like you’re… like you think that you’re going to… going to… to die! You are not dying on me, do you hear me, Lance Álvarez? I won’t let you.”

Lance choked on a sob, or maybe it was a laugh. He couldn’t really tell. He hoped it was a laugh. He would rather die laughing than crying.
The thought chilled him to the bone. More effectively than a bucket of ice water.

“Keith,” he asked, his voice impossibly quiet. “‘m I really dying?”

“No,” Keith said sternly. “No. You’re not.”

“‘m dying.”

“Stop saying that. I won’t let you.”

“Everythin’ hurts. So much. Hurts to breathe.”

Keith’s eyes flickered down to Lance’s chest. The movement slight, but still enough to catch Lance’s attention.

“I’m getting you out of here,” Keith declared suddenly.

Lance tried to imagine moving. His stomach rolled in protest. “Keith, I can’t move. How?”

Keith bit his lip. “We’re going to have to fly,” he said, producing his wand from his robes. He muttered a summoning spell under his breath, and a few seconds later his broom was soaring towards them.

Keith let go of his grip on Lance in order to catch the broom. It looked a little worse for wear, the handle was splintering and the bristles stuck out like the quills of a porcupine.

“Come on,” Keith said, gently slipping his hands underneath Lance’s shoulders. “I know this is going to be hard, but I need you to sit up, okay? On three… one… two… three.”

Keith eased him up into a sitting position, achingly slow. Lance felt his teeth grind together, a low groan escaping his mouth as he felt his ribs shift.

“Okay, now it’s time for the hard part,” Keith said, “I’m gonna lift you onto the broom, and then just lean against me, okay?”

“M’kay,” Lance said. “‘Why’re we doin’ this?”

“Lance,” Keith’s voice was quiet, serious. But he started to help Lance up onto the broom as carefully as he could. The movement made Lance’s ribs ache, but the splints kept his legs from shifting too much.

Keith climbed up onto the broom behind him, wrapping one of his arms gently around Lance’s stomach to hold him upright. With the other hand, he reached forward to grip the front of the broom. Once he was sure that Lance was settled, he kicked off the ground.

Almost immediately, they were enveloped by the fog that had settled in the air. The pillars loomed, dark and distant shapes around them.

The sting of the wind at least helped to keep Lance feeling somewhat alert and conscious. Flying didn’t hurt as much as he had feared that it might. At least, not the slow steady pace that Keith was currently flying them at.

But the sight of the ground disappearing beneath them, so similar to the sight Lance had seen before he tumbled from his own broom, made his stomach lurch. He hadn’t actually fallen as much as he had thought it had been while he was soaring through the air. It had probably been about 200 or 300 yards, and they were slowly drawing closer to that height.
Still more than enough to make him this injured.

Lance closed his eyes against the sight, tearing his gaze away from the disappearing ground.

Keith’s arm tightened around him, as if he could sense the turn of Lance’s thoughts. The increased pressure made his ribs ache, but the solid presence of Keith behind him was a distraction from the ever-increasing air between their broom and the ground, so the distraction was welcome, even if it was slightly painful.

“Not much further, we just have to find the entrance we came in through. Then we can retrace our route back to the beginning, the starting area of the trial,” Keith muttered. The wind swallowed most of his voice, so that Lance couldn’t tell if the words were even meant for him. “Keep your eyes open for any magizoologists,” Keith said louder, meant for Lance this time. “Tell me if you see any, okay? They could help us. Or… tell me if you see anything else, okay? I need you to be my eyes for me.”

“M’kay,” Lance agreed. “I can do that.”

Of course, there wasn’t much to see. The fog seemed to have thickened in the time that they had been on the ground.

Had the Thunderbird gotten violent too?

Lance didn’t even want to imagine that.

He blinked. Wait. Were they flying? Why were they flying? When had they gotten on a broom?

“Are we flyin’?” Lance asked.

Keith’s arm tightened around him, making Lance wince. “Yes, Lance, we’re flying. You’re supposed to be keeping a lookout, remember?”

“’member,” Lance agreed. Yes, that was something Keith had said.

There were dark shapes moving through the fog, far enough away that Lance thought it likely that the fog was obscuring them from the occamies’ view, as much as it was hiding the occamies. Which meant that it was at least good for something.

Now that the initial shock of the cold air was wearing off, some of the pain was beginning to seep back in.

Lance blinked against it, and forced himself to form words. “There’s some occ’mies in the distance over there,” he said, gesturing weakly with his uninjured arm.

“I see them,” Keith muttered, tightening his grip around Lance’s stomach. His ribs throbbed briefly in protest. “I’m going to have to take a hard turn so that we don’t fly right into them, okay? In the direction of the rest of the maze.”

Lance nodded weakly. “M’kay.”

“Okay, let’s do this,” Keith said, and Lance wasn’t sure which of them he was trying to prepare.

The broom lurched suddenly, angling sharply towards the right.

The movement was sharp enough to make Lance’s vision swim. He heard the sound of ragged, shallow breathing. It took him a moment to realise that the source of the sound was his own breathing. It sounded worse than it had down on the ground. Was he getting worse?
Had one of his broken ribs punctured his other lung?

_Fuck._

Keith’s arm shifted slightly in its grip on his abdomen, sending another wave of pain ricocheting through Lance’s body.

Lance felt something wet drip down his cheeks. Tears. Was he crying?

His head lolled backwards from the pain, colliding with a dull thud against Keith’s shoulder.

“No, no, no, no,” Keith whispered. “Come on, Lance.”

Distantly Lance could feel that Keith picked up some speed, could feel the shift in the air around him, could feel the change in the vibration of the broom beneath him. All tell-tale signs that he recognized from years of flying lessons, quidditch practice. It was instinctual to recognise, to categorize. And it was easier to focus on than the pain in his chest, or the pounding in his head.

“I need you to keep speaking Lance, keep talking, it’s going to be okay.” Keith’s voice was a steady stream in his ear. But the words felt like they were coming from very far away, or through water. Distant, blurry, and hard to focus on.

He blinked. Or well, he thought he did. What was it called when you only did half a blink?

Oh, right.

Darkness.

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The movement of the broom stopped. The sudden change in speed was enough to jolt Lance from his trance-like state. He hadn’t been totally unconscious, at least, he didn’t think so. But he hadn’t been fully conscious, either. He couldn’t really remember.

With a shock, Lance realised that the reason that they had stopped was because they were hovering just a foot or so above the ground. But it wasn’t the soft grass of the quidditch pitch, instead the ground was hard and rocky, like the cliffs that Lance and his siblings would go cliff-diving from back home, during the summers.

He had seen them earlier, hadn’t he? There had been people standing on them. Official, ministry people? Hadn’t there been?

If there had been, there weren’t any now.

The fog had thinned slightly. Likely because they were above the worst of it, but the sky overhead seemed clear and blue. No lurking dark storm clouds. So maybe the Thunderbird had calmed down. Or been subdued.

“Where’s… where’s ev’rybody?” Lance asked weakly. He could feel a cough building in his chest, but he did his best to force it back down.

Lance couldn’t see Keith’s face, but he thought he felt some of the tension drain from Keith’s body as the older boy heard his voice. “I thought they would be here, but… wait! There they are! Do you see them? It looks like they’re trying to round up the occamies.”
Keith was pointing, but Lance couldn’t make out whatever he was supposed to be seeing. His vision was blurry, and clouded by the tears still prickling in his eyes.

“Huh… thas’ goo’.” Lance said. The cough he had been suppressing burst free, rattling in his chest. Trying to stop himself from coughing had apparently only made it worse, and the fit continued for several long seconds. The sharp taste of blood filled his mouth, and Lance felt it dribbling onto his chin.

“If the magizoologists are getting the occamies to calm down, there must be medics nearby,” Keith muttered. “We’re getting out of here. Okay? I promise?”

Keith let go of the broom, and Lance could feel him fumbling for something, before another shower of red sparks was sent up over their heads.

The lights danced in Lance’s eyes, as he tracked the flare. Where was the audience watching them from? Where were the teachers? And the ministry members? Where was… anybody?

What had happened to Allura? Last Lance remembered, he had seen her grab an egg. Had she made it out? What had Keith been thinking, coming back for him?

All of the thinking was making Lance’s head spin. And he felt dizzy even though the broom wasn’t even moving.

Another cough racked his chest.

“Merlin,” Keith cursed. “Okay, we need someone right the fuck now.”

Loudly, but also distantly, Lance heard. “Help! Help! We need a medic over here! Anyone?!”

Keith’s voice… was it… magically amplified? It was loud. Louder than it had any right to be. And it was making Lance’s brain pound against his skull.

Lance squeezed his eyes shut, like he could block out all the noise and the light and the pain if he only tried hard enough.

This time, when the blackness reached up and wrapped its inky claws around the edges of Lance’s vision, he did nothing to fight it. Not when it seemed to be offering him peace and quiet and a way to escape the pain that seemed to be making every nerve of his body stand on alert.

Keith’s voice was a thin lifeline, and Lance could feel himself pulled away from it with every breath. His vision was blurring around the edges, making the whole world seem soft and fuzzy, like everything bad - all the pain, the monsters - were very far away.

Lance tipped his head backwards, looking up towards the sky.

He would have liked to have seen the stars one last time before he died.

But it was too early in the day for stars, and the sky was blue and clear. Well, it would have to do. It was almost the same color as the ocean back home. Almost, but not quite.

He would have liked to have been able to see that one last time, too. The ocean, too. Would have liked to watch the waves crashing against the shore from the Malecón, while the city lights glistened like fireflies around him.

Home. It would have been nice to have seen home one final time. To see his family, to introduce
them to Keith.

There was still so much more that he wanted.

There was a loud burst of noise, but it felt like Lance was underwater. He could barely make out what might have been a voice, the same one, a familiar one repeating the same word over and over and over but he couldn’t focus on it.

Streams of red light spilled across the blue sky like blood.

Chapter End Notes

we just wanted to clarify quickly, that major character death is not a tag for this fic. see you guys inn two weeks <33
Wizarding hospitals, including the Hogwarts Hospital Wing, were nothing like muggle hospitals. There was no sharp smell of antiseptic, no constant beeping of machines and heart-rate monitors, no familiar prick of IVs. In fact, were it not for the sea of white that greeted Lance’s vision as he slowly blinked his eyes open, he probably wouldn’t have realised that he was in the Hospital Wing at all. But the pillow that he was pressing his face into was stiffer than his usual one in the Ravenclaw common room, and the blanket pulled across his body was thin and scratchy, not his thick, navy duvet cover.

Lance turned his head, trying to glimpse more of his surroundings. This was definitely the Hospital Wing, not the medical tent like he had been taken too after the first trial.

Trial.

The second trial.

He had been injured, right?

How long had it been since the end of the second trial? Hours? Days? It was impossible to guess.

But his legs felt whole underneath the blankets, and he could wiggle his toes, even if it did hurt. His shoulder no longer felt like it was dislocated, only bruised, and his ribs weren’t screaming with every breath, though they were still protesting. Healing was one of the best benefits of magic; if he had received similar injuries back home, he would have been stuck in casts and braces for weeks, months even.

Wait… Lance furrowed his brows. He had been really hurt, he could remember the pain, how it had pulsed through every inch of his body. But he couldn’t remember how he had gotten hurt. Not a
spell, surely. Lance didn’t know any spells that were nasty enough to break bones and fracture ribs.

A wave of cold concern flooded his views. Why couldn’t he remember?

Lance tipped his head the rest of the way to the side, wondering if Madam Pomfrey was anywhere around, surely she would be able to tell him what had happened to him.

But it wasn’t Madam Pomfrey that was sitting in the rickety chair that someone had dragged up beside his bed. Instead, it was a familiar dark-haired figure, their head pillowed on their hands near the edge of his bed. The position could hardly have been comfortable to sleep in, hunched over like that, and Lance felt a fond smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

“Keith,” he whispered, reaching over gently to push Keith’s bangs away from his forehead. He winced at how the movement made his arm throb with residual pain, but still took his time to be gentle. The older boy shifted slightly in his sleep, his form shifting with the rise and fall of each inhale and exhale of his breath.

“Keith,” he tried again, a little louder this time. His voice was hoarse. Like he had been screaming. Had he been screaming?

He probably had been.

Keith shifted, rousing slightly, as he picked his head up off his hands. The older boy blinked slowly. “Lance?” he asked, sounding confused. His voice was still clearly heavy with sleep. But his gaze sharpened and took in Lance’s own wide eyes, and Lance’s hand, which had dropped back down to rest against the bed.

Lance’s lips twisted into a small, pained smile, and he watched as Keith blinked, before recognition registered, and he leaned forward, the movements seeming almost excited in their fervor.

“Lance,” Keith said again, and while there was no longer the hint of confusion, his voice still wavered. “Merlin, you’re awake.” The words were a rasp, and Keith’s eyes were red, the skin around them puffy.

He looked like he had been… but he couldn’t have…

Had Keith been crying?

“How long?” Lance asked quietly, hoping the unspoken part was answered. Have I been out for a while?

“The better part of the day,” Keith said slowly, his eyes flickering across Lance’s face as if to gauge how he was taking the news. “It’s past midnight, I think. Uh, probably later. I fell asleep. But the trial was this morning.”

Lance let out a sigh of relief. He had expected it to have been much longer. Days, maybe even weeks. “Wh… what hap’ned?” He asked, voice still too raw to pronounce things properly.

“You don’t remember?” Keith was frowning.

Lance shook his head softly. A pained exhale escaped when he felt his head throb in time with the shaking, his neck aching. “I remember bits. Pieces. Nothin’ that makes sense. I remember pain. I was really hurt?”
If it was possible, Keith’s frown deeped, his voice shifting to something distant and clinical. He sounded more like the Keith from two years ago, rather than the Keith that Lance had gotten to know over the past school year. “Madam Pomfrey said you had two broken legs, an occamy bite on one of your thighs, six fractured ribs, which caused a punctured lung, a broken arm, a dislocated shoulder, and a pretty serious concussion. Fuck, and even more stuff too. It was… really, really bad. She also said you should have been…” His persona cracked, and emotion flickered across his face again. “You fell off your broom.”

Lance nodded. He thought he had remembered the rush of wind around his body.

There was the sound of fabric rustling, and then Keith was leaning forward, picking Lance’s hand up gently and running his fingers across the knuckles. His voice was a ghost in the empty Hospital Wing when he said “You really scared me. I thought… the way you were talking, Lance…”

Lance felt his own throat close. But he swallowed anyway, and said “What’d I say?”

Keith just shook his head, as if the memory was too painful for him.

“Keith,” Lance tried again. “What’d I say?”

“You were talking like you were going to die,” Keith admitted, the words ragged. There was anger throbbing underneath them, Lance could hear it, could hear how Keith was fighting to keep it contained. And it wasn’t his usual kind of anger, the fiery kind that reared its ugly head at the worst of times. It was cold, the kind of anger that is born of fear. Lance had never seen Keith burn with that kind of anger. “Do you remember any of that?”

Lance closed his eyes, tipped his head backwards so that it was resting against his pillow, trying to make sense of the bits and pieces that Keith was telling him. Now that Keith had mentioned them, he could remember the occamies, their blue and purple scales glistening in the light. He could remember falling, the roar of the air echoing in his ears, could remember the unnatural angles his legs had been at. He remembered an echo of his own voice saying ‘There’s somethin’ I wanted to tell you.’

Keith’s grip tightened on his hand, anchoring him in the present.

“A little,” Lance admitted, and Keith’s fingers twitched against his hand. “You told me I wasn’t allowed to die.”

Keith let out a sound that might have been a snort, but it sounded more like a wet sob. “That’s true,” he confirmed. “I did say that.”

Lance opened his eyes, and turned back to study Keith. “You got us out?” He didn’t mean for it to come out like a question. It did anyways.

Keith nodded, and the movement caused the moonlight slipping through a nearby window to catch on the gleaming of his eyes. “Barely. It took forever for the magizoologists to get the occamies under control long enough to get us out of there.”

“The occamies were after me, weren’t they?” Lance questioned, frowning. “I remember them chasing me. A lot of them. Then falling, then pain.”

“The magizoologists said they didn’t know what came over them. The occamies were only supposed to attack the champions who tried to steal their eggs. It doesn’t make any sense.”

Trying to focus on it was making Lance’s head pound, so he abandoned the train of thought. They could figure it out later, once he had gotten a few more hours of sleep and some food in his system.
He hadn’t eaten since that morning, and Lance realised that he was hungry. Hungry and tired and his body still hurt, even though it was nothing compared to the pain he was remembering in flashes.

“It still hurts a lot, Keith.”

“I know, I know,” Keith said, his voice thick. “You’re going to be just fine though. I promise. A full recovery too, though Madam Pomfrey said your leg will take a little longer to heal than the rest of you.”

Lance felt his lips twitch. Keith didn’t often make promises. But the twitch of his lips quickly turned into a yawn. “Sorry,” he said instinctively. “M’tired.”

“You can go back to sleep,” Keith told him. “I’ll be right here. I’m not going anywhere.” He rushed to add, his voice thick with something that Lance couldn’t immediately identify. On anyone else, he would have guessed that it was panic. But Keith didn’t panic.

Lance nodded slowly. “But… wait, aren’t y’tired too? It’s late.”

Keith waved off his concern. “I’m fine. I just want to make sure that you’re okay.”

“That’s stupid,” Lance declared, shifting on the bed. “Y’need to sleep. You had the trial, too.”

Keith narrowed his eyes. “I’m not leaving you.”

“That’s not what I meant!” Lance insisted, “Just… here,” he held the edge of his blanket up. “Come on, I know that you’re tired too. Let’s just go to sleep, okay? We can talk more in the morning.”

“I don’t know, Lance,” Keith bit his lip, “What if I hurt you?”

“You won’t,” Lance said, tugging Keith closer.

Keith resisted. “Lance,” he said softly.

“You won’t,” Lance insisted. “Okay?”

“Okay,” Keith relented, standing and slipping slowly onto the twin-sized hospital bed.

Maybe it was stupid, there were half a dozen other empty beds in the Hospital Wing, but Lance needed to hear the steady sound of Keith’s breathing, needed to feel the warmth of Keith’s fingers, which were still wrapped around his own. It was grounding, reminded him that this was real.

That he was alive.

He could already feel his eyelids growing heavy, slipping closed, as his breathing began to even out.

The quiet of the Hospital Wing was still, broken only by the alternating sounds of Keith’s breath and then his own.

He was drifting on the waves of sleep, dozing slightly, when he heard a voice break the silence.

It was quiet, and if it wasn’t coming from right beside him, there would have been no way that Lance would have heard it.

But it was coming from right beside him, and he did hear it.
“He’s okay,” it was Keith, but there was no one he could have been speaking to. Clearly the words were meant for himself. “He’s okay. He’s safe now.”

There was a pause, as Keith drew in a ragged breath. “I meant it, I’m not going anywhere. I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m going to make sure that you stay safe. I’m never letting this happen again.” His voice was low, with the hint of a threat.

The sound of a few ragged breaths in a row filled the silence of the room, like Keith was trying to make himself calm down.

Then Lance felt Keith’s forehead press down, resting gently on his shoulder. Lance thought he could feel a dampness from Keith’s cheek dripping onto his shirt, but sleep claimed him before he could be sure.

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Bright sunlight streaming in through the large windows that lined the Hospital Wing roused Lance from his slumber. His eyelids felt heavy, crusted with sleep, but he slowly eased himself up into a sitting position with his good arm, careful not to jostle his ribs.

There was an indent on the bed next to him from where Keith must have finally fallen asleep, but the older boy was nowhere to be seen.

A goblet of water was sitting on the bedside table, so Lance reached over and lifted it to his lips. The liquid was cool and refreshing, soothing against his raw throat.

He felt better today, the night’s rest giving his body time for more of Madam Pomfrey’s healing spells to finish their work. His ribs still twinged and ached when he shifted, and he still thought that his legs would give out from underneath him if he tried to stand, but the pounding in his head had stopped completely and for the first time in almost twenty-four hours, Lance felt as though he was thinking clearly.

He took another careful sip of water, wondering where Keith had vanished to. It was entirely possible that Madam Pomfrey had kicked him out of the Hospital Wing, sending him back to the Gryffindor Dormitory. He hoped not.

Lance let his gaze flicker around the Hospital Wing. The other beds were empty, which meant that Keith was definitely nowhere to be found within the room. Madam Pomfrey was in her office, Lance could see her through the cracked door, stirring a bubbling cauldron that was probably full of some kind of disgusting potion she would make him drink later.

Still, her disgusting potions meant that he didn’t have to wear casts for weeks and weeks, and that he would probably be back to his classes within the next few days, so Lance supposed that he should probably be grateful. If similar injuries had happened to one of his siblings, they would have had to spend weeks in a muggle hospital and even longer waiting for their bodies to repair themselves.

Oh god. His siblings.

Veronica was going to kill him for getting hurt again.

Lance shook the thoughts from his head, grateful that the motion didn’t send a pulse of pain through his skull the way it had just the day before.

At the other end of the Hospital Wing, one of the large double doors squeaked open. Lance caught the sound, noticeable in the otherwise silent Hospital Wing and turned his head just in time to see a
familiar figure slip through the crack, a larger silhouette following him.

Keith crossed the room quickly, his arms laden with two plates piled high with breakfast food - toast and eggs. Behind him, Shiro was holding two mugs, as if he had grabbed them from Keith before the older boy spilled everything that he was carrying onto the stone floor of the castle.

“You’re awake,” Keith looked relieved. “Madam Pomfrey said you would be up soon.”

“Did you bring me breakfast?” Lance asked, his voice hoarse, as he watched Keith perch carefully on the side of his bed.

Keith nodded, handing over one of the plates. “Just plain eggs and toast, since the healing potions usually come with the unfortunate side effect of nausea.”

Lance smiled weakly, studying the food on the plate in his hands. “Thanks,” he said quietly. But Keith was right, the smell of the food was making his stomach roll unpleasantly.

“Lance, it’s good to see you awake and alert,” Shiro said, approaching behind Keith and dropping down into one of the chairs that had been dragged up beside Lance’s hospital bed. He couldn’t help but wonder who else had come to visit him while he was unconscious. Romelle? Hunk? Pidge?

Shiro slid one of the mugs onto the bedside table, pressing the other into Lance’s free hand. “Chamomile tea.”

Lance let out a relieved sigh, ignoring the food in favor of sipping carefully at the tea.

“How are you feeling today?” Shiro asked, his sharp eyes scanning over Lance’s form, no doubt cataloguing all of the changes from whenever Shiro had seen him last.

“I’ve felt better but I’ve definitely felt worse,” Lance said dryly. “I mean, I don’t think I’ll be batting any bludgers around anytime soon, but… I’m alive.”

Shiro’s lips twisted, but Lance didn’t think that it was in amusement. “Luckily. What happened in the second trial… that never should have happened, Lance.”

Lance set the mug of tea to the side. “I know. Something wasn’t right with the occamies. I’ve studied magical creatures, and their reactions didn’t fit with normal behavior patterns.” Lance shuddered at the memory of the occamies pursuing him from the skies, their eyes that unnatural gold.

Keith’s fingers curled around Lance’s knee, where his hand was resting, as if he were recalling the same memories.

“You’re right,” Shiro said, “and that’s exactly what Professor Smythe said when we talked to him about it. They weren’t acting the way they were supposed to, and the Ministry wants to understand why. Needs to understand why, if there’s any chance of the third trial happening. Headmaster Holt is…” Shiro paused, considering what to say, “unhappy with what happened. He’s fighting to cancel the Triwizard Tournament, but the other headmasters, and a lot of the ministry members, are resisting him. They think that since the champions have made it this far…” Shiro shook his head. “Do you remember anything? The ministry has already questioned all the other champions, they’ve just been waiting for you to wake up. I’m sure that Adam is going to want to talk to you soon.”

Lance bit his lip. “I remember that the occamies’ eyes were glowing. And they were gold. It wasn’t natural. Not to mention, I wasn’t anywhere near the nests, or in the possession of an egg, when they started to attack.”
Shiro nodded. “That’s what Keith and Allura reported as well.”

Lance frowned. “Not Lotor?”

“Ah, no,” Shiro admitted. “He claims he didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary, and that he was already on his way back to the starting area with his egg when he saw the red flashes up in the air above him.”

Of fucking course, Lance thought bitterly. How could Lotor have completely missed what was going on with the other champions? It didn’t make any sense. There was something seriously suspicious about the Durmstrang champion.

“Well, that’s convenient,” Lance muttered.

Concern flashed across Shiro’s face. “Do you think that Lotor might have had something to do with your attack, Lance?” Shiro questioned gently.

“I don’t know,” Lance sighed, his shoulders slumping. “Maybe. Before the trial, I overheard him talking with Headmistress Daibazaal. He said that he was going to make me regret that I had ever been born.”

Keith’s fingers tightened in their grip on his knee, like they were trying to instinctively form into a fist. “I’ll kill him,” Keith growled, pushing himself off the bed.

Without looking, Shiro reached over and grabbed Keith’s wrist, halting him in place. “Keith, wait,” Shiro said firmly. “While that’s concerning, we don’t actually have any proof that Lotor was involved.”

Keith let out a noise that Lance could only consider a growl, before dropping back down onto the edge of the bed. “He threatened him! And then the occamies targeted Lance. And only Lance. Are you trying to tell me that it’s a coincidence?” Keith’s hand waved through the air, gesturing towards Lance.

Shiro let out a deep sigh, running a hand through his hair. “I’m saying… let’s let Adam do his job, okay?”

Keith bit his lip. “Like how they figured out why two Hogwarts champions were chosen by the Goblet of Fire?” Keith asked quietly, obviously trying to not let his sarcasm be too explicit.

“Just,” Shiro sighed again, “let’s talk to Adam, first, okay?”

“Fine,” Keith huffed.

“Wait here,” Shiro said, pushing himself out of the chair. “I’ll go find Adam, and then we can get to the bottom of this.”

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When Shiro came back to the hospital wing, it wasn’t just with Adam in tow. Behind the pair, Headmaster Holt was following them into the room.

Lance tracked the movement of the trio with his eyes, and he could feel Keith’s fingers tighten against his own. Rather than risk Keith running off to find Lotor and challenge him to a duel or something, Lance had wrapped their hands together, anchoring Keith to the hospital bed.
Keith had been quiet while Shiro had gone to find Adam, only breaking the silence to try and convince Lance to eat some of the breakfast he had brought him.

Lance had nibbled on a piece of rye toast, mostly to appease Keith.

But the older boy’s gaze had been distant, focused on the door to the Hospital Wing.

Shiro reclaimed his chair, Adam standing behind him, resting his hands lightly on his fiance’s shoulder. Headmaster Holt, too, remained standing, his hands clasped behind him.

“Lance,” Headmaster Holt’s voice was warm. “I was pleased to hear from Madam Pomfrey that you’re making a quick recovery.”

Lance nodded. “Thanks Sa-Headmaster Holt.”

There was a pause, the silence slightly awkward, before Lance cleared his throat and said “Shiro said that you’re trying to shut down the Triwizard Tournament.”

Headmaster Holt nodded slowly. “What happened to you… it can’t happen again. Maybe the Ministry was wrong to think they could regulate the Tournament. It’s too dangerous.”

“We can’t just stop the tournament,” Adam said. His voice was quiet, but Lance could hear the layer of steel underneath the words. Lance hadn’t seen him since the first trial, but it didn’t look like the time had done any favors to Adam. He looked haggard, with dark circles under his eyes, his brown hair hanging limp over his forehead. Even his robes looked dirty, stained with dust and torn in certain places. “Once the Goblet of Fire has selected a champion, they must complete in the tournament until the end of the third task. Even if the Ministry wanted to stop the tournament, it’s simply not possible.”

The words were like a punch, and Lance felt the air whoosh from his lungs. His last thread of hope, that he might not have to do this again… gone.

Before the end of the school year, he would be expected to risk his life once more.

It made him feel sick. Suddenly the nausea wasn’t from the healing spells and potions Madam Pomfrey had been supplying him with.

“We could find a way around the enchantment,” Headmaster Holt protested.

Adam just shook his head. “There isn’t one. Believe me, if there was, the Ministry would know.”

“So we need to find whoever is responsible for this disaster before the third trial,” Headmaster Holt said seriously. “I refuse to risk my students’ lives again.”

“No one is arguing with you there, Headmaster,” Adam agreed. “And the Ministry is going to take every step possible to find the culprit.” Suddenly, Adam’s serious, steady gaze was aimed at Lance. “Do you have any idea of who would want to hurt you, Lance? Takashi mentioned that one of the other champions had threatened you before the beginning of the trial?”

Lance nodded. “Not to me, directly, but I heard Lotor tell Headmistress Daibazaal that he would ‘make me regret I was ever born.’”

A frown tugged at Headmaster Holt’s lips. “And how did you manage to overhear this comment?”

“I was behind them on the walk down to the quidditch pitch, they didn’t see me there. I guess
Headmistress Daibazaal was upset that Lotor had lost so badly in the first trial, especially since he had lost to a muggleborn. And I guess Lotor wanted to, I don’t know, redeem himself and Durmstrang by winning this trial? It seemed like he was… threatened by me, or something.”

“While that is concerning, it could have just meant that he was going to try and beat you in the trial, which would be a fair part of the second task. It did state that combat between the champions was expected. It doesn’t necessarily mean that he is the one responsible for the attack on you,” Headmaster Holt said seriously.

Adam nodded. “Could you describe the attack itself, we’ve heard both Keith and Allura’s account, but we’d like to hear from you as well.”

Lance nodded. “Um, like I was telling Shiro, the occamies were acting weird. Their eyes were glowing gold, and they were targeting me even though I wasn’t near their eggs. When Keith tried to draw them away, they pretty much ignored him. Same with Allura, I think. It seemed like they were just focused on attacking me. For no reason.” Lance paused, biting his lip. “Even when I was all the way down on the ground they kept coming after me. It wasn’t right. Occamies shouldn’t leave their nests like that, especially since they had eggs inside.”

“That sounds very similar to what the magizoologists reported. They said that they had difficulty capturing the occamies’ attention, and that the occamies were more violent than they should have been,” Adam confirmed.

“Professor Smythe said the same,” Headmaster Holt nodded.

“You said their eyes were glowing?” Adam questioned.

Lance nodded. “Gold. Unnaturally gold.”

Adam turned towards Keith, who nodded in confirmation, before sharing a concerned glance with Headmaster Holt. “This is disturbing news, and I’ll report it to the Ministry. We need to find the person that is responsible for these attacks as soon as possible.”

The thought that there was a specific person behind the attack against him… Lance felt like he was going to throw up. Who would want to something like that to him? Headmaster Holt was right, Lotor might have just been talking about trying to duel him in the trial. And if it wasn’t Lotor, then who?

Lance felt as though the blood in his veins had turned to ice. Because, well, there was someone.

“Whoever it is,” Lance said slowly, drawing the eyes of the adults back to him, “it’s probably the same person who forced my name out of the Goblet of Fire to begin with, right?”

Headmaster Holt stiffened noticeably. Adam was frowning. Keith’s fingers tightened their grip around Lance’s own.

“Could that be the case?” Shiro asked Adam quietly. His eyes were wide.

Adam pushed his glasses up his nose. “I didn’t think of that, but it is… possible. Likely, even. The boy has a point.”

He… he did?

Lance had thought his suggestion far-fetched, just a random thought that came to him, especially since the Ministry had never really dug into why his name had been chosen in the first place. But if Adam thought that what he said might be true…
What did *that* mean?

“It’s well known that the trials are dangerous. Someone might have been hoping to target him, using the trials as a convenient way to mask their true intentions.”

Keith’s knuckles had turned white.

Headmaster Holt took a breath. “Many of us forgot, or chose to ignore, the question of why the Goblet of Fire chose two Hogwarts champions. Had refused to consider the possibility that Lance’s name might have come out of the cup because someone had forced it to. Many of us attributed it to a fault of the Goblet’s, or just luck. Not malice.”

Lance had wondered. He had wondered why he had never heard anything about why his name was chosen alongside Keith, why no one had ever *told* him anything. Was this why? Had it simply been that no one *cared* enough to investigate when they felt as though there was an easier answer in front of them? That everyone had just *assumed*?

“Yet after Lance triumphed in the first trial, whoever enchanted his name must not have been satisfied. And the second trial provided them an opportunity to make sure that he was severely injured.” Headmaster Holt continued, and Lance could tangibly *feel* as the statement sank into everyone.

“The boy is right, someone clearly forced him into the trial, and whoever did so has it out for him, and this needs to be investigated thoroughly.”

Lance could do nothing but sink back into the pillows as Headmaster Holt’s words registered. His breath turned ragged, even to his own ears.

Adam nodded. “It will be, I’ll be sure of it,” he swore.

“But why?” Keith blurted out, the first words he had spoken since Headmaster Holt and Adam had arrived. His face was as white as the sheets on Lance’s hospital bed, but his fists were clenched in rage, his jaw clenched so hard that Lance’s own teeth ached in sympathy. “Why would anyone want to hurt Lance that badly?”

Headmaster Holt shook his head, “I don’t know.”

And for the first time in his life, Lance watched as the Headmaster loosened his grip on his composure.

“I don’t know, but it is of the utmost importance that we find out.”

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“Keith,” Lance said softly, once Headmaster Holt, Adam, and Shiro had gone to find the other ministry members. “You’re being really quiet.”

“Sorry,” Keith said, shaking his head slightly. “I was just…”

“Thinking about what Headmaster Holt and Adam just said?” Lance supplied.

Keith let out a chuckle, though there wasn’t any humor behind it. “Yeah.”

“Me too,” Lance admitted. He felt Keith’s fingers flex around his own.

Silence fell between them, lingering until Keith turned to face him. “How are you feeling today? Are
you still in pain?"

Lance nodded, slumping against his pillows. “Not as much as yesterday. And my head feels clear, like I can actually think.”

That, at least, cleared some of the tension from Keith’s face. “I was really worried about you,” he said softly.

“I know,” Lance replied, squeezing Keith’s fingers. “I’m sorry I scared you.”

“For a second there…” Keith paused, then seemed to steel himself for something. “For a second there, I thought I was going to lose you. That I had lost you.”

Lance felt his heart slam against the walls of his chest at the ache in Keith’s voice, at his own thoughts of what had so very nearly happened to him.

The desperation and fear that had gripped his heart when he was laying on the ground trying to tell Keith something that he thought he might never get the opportunity to say.

Keith had continued talking while Lance’s thoughts spun. “I... I never want to feel like that again. I mean, Merlin, Lance, when I saw you on the ground?” Keith paused to take a breath, blinking back the tears that were forming in his eyes.

“Magic can do so, so much. But the one thing that it can’t do is bring people back from the... bring people back. I don’t know what I would do without you,” the words had dropped down to nothing more than a whisper.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Lance said, “don’t cry.” Even though he could feel tears welling in his own eyes at Keith’s words. “Seriously, don’t cry, okay, because if you do, then it’s going to make me cry.”

Keith sniffled, but it might have been a chuckle, Lance couldn’t tell.

“I’m not going anywhere, okay?” Lance promised, freeing his hands from Keith’s so that he could place them against Keith’s cheeks, tipping the older boy’s head down until their foreheads were pressed together. Keith had to bend pretty far down to actually make it work, since Lance was currently laying, half-propped up in his hospital bed. “I promise.”

“But you can’t promise that!” Keith protested, pulling his head away from Lance’s. “There’s some asshole who’s after you. What if this happens again?

“Adam and Shiro and Headmaster Holt will figure it out. And if they don’t, then I have you to watch my back, okay? I trust you.”

“But it didn’t matter that I had your back in the second trial! It didn’t make a difference, the occamies just kept coming!”

“Keith,” Lance said seriously, willing every ounce of determination to fill his gaze so that Keith could see the truth of his words in his eyes. “You saved me, okay? If it hadn’t been for you, I never would have made it off of that field. It did matter, okay? Having you there mattered.”

Keith bit his lip.

“Keith, I would have died if it wasn’t for you. You have my back, and I have yours. Always.”

“Always,” Keith echoed.
Keith’s gaze was serious and steady, and his teeth were still biting into his lip. Lance could feel his gaze drawn down, flickering between Keith’s eyes and his lips.

He really, really wanted to kiss him.

And he really, really wanted to finish telling Keith what he had been trying to tell him down on the quidditch pitch. Because Keith needed to know.

His heart was pounding so loudly that Lance was sure Keith could hear it, a sudden rush of adrenaline filling his veins that had nothing to do with quidditch or flying or almost dying. Just Keith, Keith, Keith.

All of Lance’s senses felt like they were heightened. The scent of sweat on Keith’s skin overpowering the lingering hints of Camomile still drifting from Lance’s half-empty mug. Keith’s smooth skin underneath his fingertips, as his fingers slid across the sharp angle of Keith’s cheekbones. The sound of Keith breathing echoing within the rise and fall of his chest, and was it Lance’s imagination or was he breathing faster than he had been mere minutes ago?

How long had it been since he had realized that his feeling for Keith weren’t hatred, weren’t rivalry, weren’t envy, weren’t admiration, weren’t friendship?

Too long.

And Lance was tired of waiting.

He didn’t just want to kiss Keith, he needed to kiss him.

Especially knowing all that he knew now.

Now that he didn’t know who it was that was after him, or when the next attack would be.

Now that he had almost died.

So before he could lose his courage, Lance opened his mouth to speak.

“You know,” Lance said, much softer than before. “I think I was trying to tell you something, you know, after it happened.”

Lance watched as Keith seemed to freeze, caught mid-breath and not daring to move a muscle, like a deer in car headlights.

“Before you so rudely interrupted me and told me that I wasn’t allowed to say it to you while I was almost dying. And I think there was something you wanted to tell me before the trial. Keith, I wonder if they’re the same thing.”

Keith’s cheeks flushed, an immediate and brilliant reaction. He leaned forward, just far enough for his black bangs to hang over his face, obscuring himself from view. His fingers tightened against Lance’s, although Lance suspected that the motion was unintentional, as if Keith were trying to form a fist in an effort to calm himself down.

“I mean…” Keith started, before abruptly cutting himself off, shaking his head slightly. “I just… I didn’t want you to say anything while you were like that, all out of it. I didn’t want you to say anything you didn’t mean.”

Lance could feel his chest constrict, even his body protesting against the idea that he would have told
Keith everything without meaning a word.

Lance’s conflicted emotions, whatever they were, must have shown on his face, because Keith continued. “I mean, I didn’t even know if you knew what you were trying to say, and I just wanted everything to be… Uh…” Keith cut himself off, clearly frustrated as he reached up to run a hand through his hair.

Lance’s eyes tracked the movement. Now that Keith’s bangs were pushed away from his face, he could see the flush that had spread across the pale skin, the way Keith’s eyes were shining with uncertainty.

“Look, Lance, I… I just, fuck okay this is difficult,” Keith let out a noise that was half-growl, half-frustration. When he spoke again, it was too much, too fast, his words spilling out almost before Lance could process them. “Look I know I wanted to tell you after the trial but it’s almost more important now, after everything, uh… but I… yeah, I really hope they are the same thing in that case so, uh, I-”

“Keith?” Lance said, “Take a deep breath.”

It felt ironic, since Lance felt as though he could barely catch his own breath.

He hadn’t expected his attempt at a confession to go this way.

He wasn’t sure what he had expected, really, but not this. Not Keith, pink and flushed, stumbling over his own words. Not the butterflies filling his stomach. Not the way he felt dizzy and lightheaded in the best way possible.

Keith snapped his mouth closed, before slowly taking a breath.

“Now what’s going on?” Lance asked gently. “Just… tell me what you’re thinking.”

“Right,” Keith said with a nod. “Right. Okay. I can do this.” His last statement was quieter than the others had been, almost under his breath, like it was meant for himself rather than for Lance to hear.

Keith took another deep breath, sitting up straighter. “I think you might have been my first friend. Ever. And that was great! I love playing quidditch together and working on our essays in the library. I even don’t mind hanging out with your friends, like Hunk and Romelle, and you know, I think they’re even kind of my friends now, too. Except I don’t… I don’t feel the same way for them that I do for you. Um, obviously.”

It alarmed Lance, the sudden thrill of giddiness that he felt at the statement. At the idea that Keith viewed him differently than he viewed Hunk or Romelle. That he saw Lance as… more. Maybe. Hopefully.

The pulsing in his chest grew louder, loud enough that Lance could hear his own blood pounding in his ears.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Could Keith hear it too?

“And it kind of seems like you feel the same way,” Keith continued, his words still tumbling out too quickly, his tongue tripping over itself like he was afraid if he didn’t say everything at once he wouldn’t be able to get it out. “But I’ve been so afraid to say something in case there was a reason that you weren’t saying anything. And then there was all that shit that Rita Skeeter wrote about in her
papers, and I never wanted you to think that I was, like, like I was using you or anything like that. So I told myself I would wait until after the Tournament, but now you’ve been injured twice and you almost died. You would’ve died and never have known and… and… I just really need to tell you now. Lance,” Keith paused suddenly, a pink flush staining his cheeks, his breaths disjointed, his grip tightening around Lance’s own as if he were steadying himself for something. “I… Lance, I-.”

“Keith?” Lance said, feeling a bubble of laughter build in his chest at how flustered Keith had become.

Keith took a deep breath, looking like he was trying to brace himself for whatever Lance was going to say. “Yes?”

“Shut up,” Lance requested, reaching up to pull Keith down closer, close enough that he could reach up the rest of the way and press his lips softly against Keith’s own.

Chapter End Notes

when we said slow burn we fucking meant it
let us know what you think and hopefully yall forgive us now :D
- cait
Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Summary

A kiss continues in the hospital wing. Confessions are made, discussions are had, and letters are written.

Chapter Notes

hello hello hello everyone!!! welcome to... post-kiss inslytl. glad you've all stuck around for so long even though we put you through,, so much,, *ahem* three cliffhangers in a row... ANYWAY we're so glad you're enjoying still and that you like this chapter. our favourite line of the fic is in this chapter which is pretty cool. anyway, if you read please please PLEASE either comment or live tweet at us, as well as leave a kudos. we love you all so much, and we'll see you soon <33
- caitie :D

Lance had imagined kissing Keith more than he would probably like to admit. Back in fourth year, most of those fantasies had involved the quidditch locker rooms and angry, post-game makeouts involving bit lips and pulled hair. Later, and more recently, he had imagined kissing Keith in the library, interrupting the older boy mid-speech about the uses of shield charms or stunning spells.

Of course, he had never quite imagined that their first kiss would be in the hospital wing.

It didn’t matter, because it was better than anything his imagination would have ever been able to come up with anyways.

Keith’s lips were chapped against his own, and Lance could feel Keith’s fingers tightening their grip on his thigh, and even the slight thrum of pain from the increase in pressure wasn’t enough to distract Lance from how perfect the moment was.

He reached up with his good hand, the relatively uninjured one, so that he could press his palm against the side of Keith’s face, tilting the older boy’s head just enough to change the angle of the kiss.

It was chaste, just the barest brushing of lips, and Lance pulled back much sooner than he would have liked, but he needed to see Keith, to double check his reaction and make sure that this was what he had meant. That this was what he wanted.

Keith’s eyes had drifted shut, although Lance wasn’t sure when, but he blinked them open now.

Lance couldn’t quite read the expression on Keith’s face.

Fuck.

Should he not have done that?
He probably shouldn’t have done that.

Lance opened his mouth to say… something, he wasn’t exactly sure what. But before he got a chance to say anything, Keith was leaning forward, closing what little space there was between them and pressing his lips to Lance’s once more.

It was fairly obvious that Keith didn’t have a lot of experience. His movements were clumsy, like he was trying to copy what Lance had done and wasn’t quite sure if he was doing it right.

But Lance didn’t mind.

Keith pulled back hesitantly. “Hi.” He said, a small smile playing at the edges of his lips despite the nerves that Lance could clearly hear in his voice.

“Hi,” Lance echoed, laughing quietly. He tipped his head forward, pressing his forehead to Keith’s, and let his eyes flicker shut, just reveling in the feeling of Keith’s skin against his, in the way that his lips still seemed to be tingling. It felt like the way that magic made him feel, the same thrill of excitement that he got when he learned a new spell or about a new magical creature was thrumming through his veins now. Only now it was just Keith. Only Keith.

“What are you thinking about right now?” Keith asked quietly.

Lance blinked his eyes open, this close it seemed as though he could spot every speck of indigo in Keith’s grey eyes. He opened and closed his mouth, trying to sort through his kiss-addled mind for an eloquent response.

“You make me feel like magic is real.”

“Magic is real,” Keith pointed out seriously, his face falling. “Do you still have a concussion? How hard did you hit your head?”

“Not that hard,” Lance replied with a laugh. “And I meant a different kind of magic.”

Keith’s eyes narrowed, like he still thought that Lance wasn’t making a lot of sense. He could practically hear Keith’s thoughts trying to work themselves out. “I think there’s only one kind…”

“Jesus Christ, Keith, just kiss me again,” Lance said with a shake of his head, before he pulled Keith’s face down towards his, so that he could press his lips to Keith’s once more.

Keith was a quick study, mirroring the movements of Lance’s lips until they both ran out of air.

“Man,” Lance said, panting slightly. “I’ve wanted to do that forever.”


Lance paused, considering. Well, there could hardly be any point in keeping it a secret at this point. Someone was bound to rat him out, and sure, it was a little embarrassing, but Hunk or Romelle would end up telling Keith anyways. Trust was probably more important. “Since fourth year,” he admitted, feeling him blush under the incredulous look that Keith was directing at him.

“Fourth year?” Keith echoed. “You mean we could have been doing this for two years and we’re both just idiots?”

Lance scoffed. “Please. You so didn’t like me back then.” He paused, a question bubbling up before he could think to stop it. “Did you?”
Keith hesitated. “Well, no,” he admitted, but rushed to add when he saw Lance wince slightly, “But you just talked about beating me at quidditch all the time. I mean… I thought you were… attractive or whatever,” Keith admitted, flushing, “but this year you actually let me get to know the real you. And I really like that guy. I wish I had met him earlier.”

“I do too,” Lance said, as he leaned back on his hospital bed, before tugging Keith down to lay next to him. “But I guess we just have to make up for lost time.”

Keith muffled his snort by pressing his face into the hollow between Lance’s throat and collarbone.

“That tickles,” Lance said, but he made no move to shift away. “It’s kind of my fault that it took us so long to get here anyways. I mean, I was the one who started the whole stupid rivalry. Well, the rivalry beyond competing in quidditch and the duelling club. The constant rivalry, really. But, I mean, it was never because I really hated you or anything. You know that, right? I was just… stupid. And I didn’t know how to process what I was feeling for you. And I kind of took it out on you, but I didn’t mean any of it. The insults or anything. I just needed you to know that.”

“I know. If there’s anything that’s been made clear this year, it’s that you’re a good person. Okay, Lance? So I forgive you for insulting me when we were both young and stupid.”

“I was just making sure,” Lance said, bending to drop a kiss to the top of Keith’s head. Because apparently that was a thing he was allowed to do now.

Lance could hear Keith’s breathing become slow and even, and he wondered if the older boy was falling asleep. He probably needed it, the trial had been stressful, and Lance was sure they were both recovering.

But he found even the idea of sleep impossible. He couldn’t stop his mind from replaying everything that had just happened, thinking over everything that Keith had just told him, thinking over every single interaction he had had with Keith over the past few months.

“Oh my god!” He said loudly, loud enough that Keith picked his head up from Lance’s shoulder so that he could narrow his eyes.

“What?” Keith asked, his voice heavy with sleep. “Is everything alright?”

“It was totally a date!” Lance said, and he wished that Keith wasn’t laying on his good arm, so that he could smack himself on the forehead.

“What are you talking about?” Keith asked, sounding confused.

“Valentine’s Day! When we went to Hogsmeade. I wasn’t sure… I guess Hunk was right.”

Keith blinked at him, before a look of incredulity dawned on his face. “Wait. You didn’t know?!”

“No,” Lance replied, maybe a bit defensively. “It was… vague. I wasn’t sure.”

“I asked you to go to Hogsmeade on Valentines weekend,” Keith said slowly.

“Well you could have told me that you liked me first!” Lance protested.

Keith shook his head. “You’re an absolute idiot,” he said, but it sounded fond.

“And you’re confusing,” Lance countered.

“Wait. So you told Hunk that you weren’t sure if it was a date or not and that still didn’t convince
you?” Keith asked.

“I mean…” Lance shrugged. “I thought that it had seemed like you were flirting with me, like in the hallway, you know? But it kind of came out of nowhere and I didn’t want to make something out of it that wasn’t really there, you know?”

Keith hummed, but he didn’t say anything else.

Maybe he was already falling back asleep.

“Hey, Keith,” Lance said quietly, unable to stop himself. His mind was just racing through thoughts, still trying to process every word and action that just happened. “What did you mean earlier, when you said all that stuff about Rita Skeeter’s articles?”

Keith, who was evidently not falling back asleep, answered immediately. “You saw what she was writing. Saying I was pretending to be friends with a muggleborn to improve my own image. To try and make people forget that my mom is Galra. It wasn’t true, any of it, and I didn’t want you to think that it was.”

“I wouldn’t have thought that,” Lance insisted. “You know I don’t think that.”

“But you might have. I didn’t want to take the risk. I was willing to wait. I mean, I was going to tell you after the trials were over. It just seemed like… if I told you during the Tournament,” Keith cut himself off to growl in frustration. “It seemed like if I told you during the Tournament then it wouldn’t just be about us anymore. And I didn’t want it to be about anything else.”

“Oh,” Lance said softly, unsure what else there was to say to that. It sounded stupid, as soon as it left his mouth. But it made Keith smile, so maybe that was okay.

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“So the Yule Ball was definitely a date, though, right?” Lance asked later, his fingers tracing lazy circles on Keith’s palm.

Lance wasn’t exactly sure of what time it was, probably pretty late in the afternoon. The conversation with Shiro and Headmaster Holt and Adam felt like it had been forever ago.

Keith hummed thoughtfully. “I think so. I wanted it to be.”

Lance bit his lip. “So what are we going to count as our first date, like for anniversaries and shit? The Yule Ball or Valentines Day?”

“Neither, since we didn’t actually get together until today,” Keith said. “I hardly think we could count the Yule Ball as the beginning of our relationship.

“Why not? Don’t want to have a Christmas anniversary? Because you know if Shiro hadn’t shown up, I was going to kiss you.”

Keith opened his mouth like he was going to say something, before he closed it. Lance waited, sure that Keith would get to whatever he wanted to say in his own time. Sure enough, a minute or two later, Keith spoke.

“I gave him hell for that, you know.”

“You didn’t,” Lance said in amazement, already feeling a laugh building in his chest.
“He couldn’t look me in the eye for three days.”

Thinking back on the Yule Ball, and that moment out beside the lake together, something clicked. “I knew I heard yelling!” Lance teased.

Keith’s smile turned softer. “I would have kissed you if Griffin hadn’t shown up. Out on the dance floor, in front of everyone.”

“No you wouldn’t have,” Lance said, rolling his eyes. But he couldn’t help but recall the moment, anyways. How he had been so sure, and how he and Keith had been so close.

Of course, he also remembered how awkward things had been between he and Keith afterwards. The way they had avoided each other so they wouldn’t have to bring up what had almost happened between them. How he felt that he had lost something so important.


“I think we both did, I mean, I pretty much used my invisibility cloak to get around for a few days so that I wouldn’t bump into you,” Keith said. “I didn’t know what to say to you. I wasn’t sure if it had just been the night and the lights and the music. Or if it was really about me, you know?”

“It was about you,” Lance told him. “I promise. I didn’t really care about the night or the lights or the music. I just liked having an excuse to spend time with you, to have a reason to hold you and dance with you. That might be the one good thing to come out of these fucking trials.”

Keith pressed his nose against Lance’s neck. “At least something good came out of it.”

Lance nodded, even though he knew Keith couldn’t see the movement. “Yeah, something really good.”

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Lance was eating dinner that evening when Madam Pomfrey allowed Shiro and Adam to visit him again.

Adam had changed out of his ministry robes, and Shiro was wearing a pair of muggle jeans and a t-shirt with the Weird Sisters logo on it. Lance blinked at the sight, unable to fully comprehend. He didn’t think that he had ever seen Shiro wearing anything other than his black robes.

Lance turned to face Keith, who was perched near the edge of the hospital bed. “The concussion still hasn’t worn off, right?” He questioned.

Keith narrowed his eyes in confusion. “What?”

“I mean, I’m clearly imagining Shiro trying to be cool.” Lance’s statement was punctuated with a pointed look in Shiro’s direction.

Keith followed his gaze, and after a moment a smirk began to tug on the corners of his lips. “Nope. Sadly, Shiro actually dresses like that. On a fairly regular basis when school isn’t in session.”

“Are you talking about me?” Shiro asked indignantly as he and Adam approached the hospital bed. He reached over, ruffling Keith’s hair.

“Ugh,” Keith batted Shiro’s hands away. “Stop that.”

Shiro just grinned, before he dropped down into one of the chairs dragged alongside Lance’s hospital
bed.

Huh, so that was what Shiro and Keith were like in private. They seemed more like brothers than a teacher and a student. Well, Keith did spend the holidays with Shiro, and Lance did know they were close, so maybe he shouldn’t be surprised.

“To be fair,” Adam added, sitting beside Shiro. “Your fashion taste does leave something to be desired.”

Shiro sucked in an over-dramatic gasp. “My own fiancé.”

Adam shook his head softly, but he was smiling.

It was nice to see Shiro in his element, it made him less like an intimidating master of Defense Against the Dark Arts and more like someone that it might be fun to go to concerts with on the weekends.

“How are you feeling, Lance?” Shiro asked suddenly, his voice losing any trace of teasing.

“I’m good,” Lance answered honestly. The pounding in his head had mostly subsided, and Madam Pomfrey told him he would be able to start walking again tomorrow. Magic, Lance had decided (not for the first time), was wonderful.

Shiro grinned, looking relieved. “Glad to hear it.”

“He’s going to be allowed to leave the Hospital Wing soon, maybe the day after tomorrow,” Keith added.

Shiro raised a brow, maybe wondering how Keith knew that, but he didn’t question it.

“I’ll be back to class in no time,” Lance added. “I promise.”

The frown returned, and it made Shiro look so much older than his twenty-five years, especially with the shock of white in his hair. “No one is expecting you to jump right back into classes, Lance. You need to let your body recover.”

Lance rolled his eyes. “I’ll be careful, take it slow and all that. But I can’t stay in this Hospital Wing much longer. I think I’m going to go crazy.”

“You weren’t much better that time you ended up in Saint Mungo’s,” Adam reminded Shiro softly. “In fact, I recall you demanded that the doctors let you return to work.”

“I wasn’t even injured,” Shiro protested. “A little memory confusion spell gone wrong, that’s all.”

“You let the Erklings loose in the house. They got outside,” Adam said pointedly.

“Is that why Shiro isn’t allowed to keep any magical creatures anymore?” Lance asked in a stage whisper to Keith.

“Yes,” Keith nodded sagely. “It tore the garden to shreds. Adam spent weeks replanting his roses.”

Lance shuddered dramatically, trying to imagine a small pack of Erklings tearing up a rose garden tended by the serious ministry official. It was an amusing mental image, at least.

“Tell me there are moving pictures,” Lance said. “I need to see this.”
Keith grinned wickedly. “I’m sure Adam has a few.”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Shiro interrupted. “There will be no distributing of any moving photos. And,” he glared pointedly at Adam, “no further mention of any ruined rose bushes.”

Adam barked with laughter, the sudden sound jarring. It made Lance jump, a little. He didn’t think that he had ever heard Adam laugh before. Granted, he didn’t know the older man very well, but Adam didn’t strike him as the type of person who spent a lot of time laughing. Maybe Shiro brought it out of him.

However, Shiro sobered quickly. “But that’s not what we came to talk about. We actually wanted to tell you something, Lance.”

Lance felt himself stiffen. “Did you figure anything out about the occamies?”

Shiro winced. “No, the Ministry is still investigating. We actually wanted to let you know that your family has been notified of your fall.”

Now it was Lance’s turn to wince.

“Given the extent of your injuries… Headmaster Holt thought that it was necessary. I’m inclined to agree with him, although you seem to be recovering your sense of humor at least.”

“You told them everything?” Lance asked, and he hated how small his voice sounded. His family had been worried enough about him being in the tournament… what would they think now?

“We had to, Lance, it’s our responsibility to care for the students. And Headmaster Holt thought it would be better to come from him than anyone else.”

Lance bit his lip. “I should write to them. They were worried about me being in the trials at all, and I think they were kind of freaked out by the fact that I was injured in the first trial.”

God, that felt like it had happened forever ago. The wound on his leg from the mercreatures seemed like nothing compared to the damage the occamies had wrought.

Shiro patted his shoulder gently. “It would probably do them good to hear from you, let them know that you’re alright. They might not believe it otherwise.”

Lance snorted, but there wasn’t any humor to it. “Ronni is gonna kill me.”

Shiro grimaced, “They’ll probably just be happy to hear from you, Lance.”

“You’ve never met my sister,” Lance said dryly.

“They’ll probably just be happy to hear from you, Lance.”

“Is she really going to be that upset?” Keith asked, biting his lip.

Lance let out a breath of air. “Yes. No. I don’t know. She’ll be mad that I was hurt and that she can’t do anything about it. She’s my big sister, you know? And my family doesn’t really understand magic. Not completely. It scares them a little, so…” he trailed off, shrugging, feeling himself blushing. It was one thing to be telling this to Keith, but with Shiro and Adam still sitting right there… it felt a little too personal.

Keith’s fingers squeezed Lance’s knee lightly, a supportive smile tugging at the corners of his lips, as if he could read all of Lance’s thoughts on his face.

But Lance was distracted by the way that Shiro’s eyes had flickered over to track the movement, a
knowing smile tugging at the corner of his lip. If it was possible, Lance felt his flush deepen, as he burrowed down into his pillows, wishing that they could swallow him whole.

But to Lance’s immense relief, Shiro didn’t comment on whatever he noticed, he just rose to his feet. “Alright, we’ll leave you to get some rest. Healing spells are only effective if you’re resting. Keith, are you coming?”

Keith’s gaze flickered between Shiro and Lance, looking conflicted, so Lance took pity on him.

“You should go,” he said. Hurt flashed over Keith’s face, but before it could settle, Lance rushed to add, “You’ve been in here as long as I have and you aren’t even injured, go have a real dinner and track down all your teachers so you can get the work you missed from class today. I’ll be okay for a few hours, promise. I don’t want you to fall behind in class because of me.”

Appeased by the response, Keith reluctantly stood from his position on Lance’s bed. “I’ll get your work, too,” he promised. “We can work on it together when I get back.”

“Sounds perfect,” Lance said, smiling in what had to be a ridiculously sappy way, but he couldn’t even bring it in himself to care. “See if you can nab me some chocolate chip cookies from the house elves.”

Keith rolled his eyes, but he let Shiro place a hand on his shoulder and begin to direct him in the entrance to the Hospital Wing, even if he did shoot one last look at Lance over his shoulder. Lance just waved cheerfully back at him from his position in his bed.

As the trio were walking away, Lance heard Shiro whisper loudly to Keith, “When did that happen?”

“Shut up,” Keith grumbled in response, pulling away when Shiro tried to ruffle his hair again.

Lance hid his laugh behind his hand, watching until the Hospital Wing door was closing behind them. Only when he was alone did Lance let out a long, slow breath. The last forty-eight hours had been a bit of an emotional rollercoaster, and it felt good to have a minute to himself to process what had happened. Brutal injuries, near death confessions, ministry investigations, actual confessions. It was a lot, it made Lance want to sleep for a week, hoping that everything would have magically fixed itself by the time he awoke. Headmaster Holt, Adam, and Shiro would have found out who was responsible for the occamies and putting his name in the Goblet of Fire, and the ministry would have figured out some way to shut down the Triwizard Tournament, and Lance could just worry about studying for his N.E.W.T.s and spending the rest of the year with Keith. Fuck. This was Keith’s last year at Hogwarts, come next fall he would be starting some super fancy auror training or playing quidditch professionally and Lance would still be here, studying and taking the same classes as always.

So much time that they had just wasted.

Lance shook his head, he couldn’t think about that right now. They still had months.

He had something more important that he needed to do right now.

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Lance pressed his quill against the paper that Madam Pomfrey had let him borrow, staring at it. Half an hour of staring at it, and the paper was still blank. How do you tell your family that you almost died? How do you tell them that it might happen again?
He felt like he was going to be sick.

Dear Everyone,

By the time Kaltenecker is able to get this to you, you’ll probably have already gotten the letter that Sam Headmaster Holt wrote to you. Which means that you already know what happened during the second trial. I don’t know how bad he told you it was. Did he tell you that I almost died? I hope he didn’t. I don’t want you to worry about me. It was pretty bad. Worse than what happened to me in the first trial. But it wasn’t supposed to happen. The trials are dangerous but they aren’t supposed to be deadly aren’t supposed to be like that. There were these magical creatures involved, and they started acting really weird. The ministry is looking into it, and hopefully they’ll be able to figure out what is going on. I hope they figure out what is going on.

I’m staying in the Hospital Wing for right now while I recover, I’m not sure how much longer I’ll be in here, but Madam Pomfrey says I should be able to start walking soon. And then I’ll be able to go back to classes. But I haven’t been alone, so you don’t have to worry about that. Keith has been staying with me, and Professor Shirogane and his fiancé, Adam, came to visit this afternoon. Adam works for the ministry. He’s going to figure out why this happened to me.

I’m sorry that I couldn’t keep my promise to you. I promised you that I would be more careful in the second trial. I promised that I wouldn’t get hurt again. I tried. I promise that I tried. I tried so fucking hard. I would say that I promise I won’t get hurt in the next trial, but I don’t think I can promise that. There’s something else going on here. I don’t know what it is. But, Mamá you didn’t see their eyes. They wanted to hurt me and I don’t know why. They didn’t act like that with anyone else, it was just with me. What did I do? I never asked for any of this. But the third trial isn’t until closer to the end of the school year, so hopefully Adam and the ministry are able to figure out something before than. Maybe I’ll luck out and they’ll cancel the whole stupid thing.

Anyways, I just wanted to write to you so that everyone would know that I’m okay. If it’s okay with you, I’d rather hear from you than talk about this tournament anymore. I miss you, all of you, and I can’t wait to come home for the summer so that I can see all of you and I can take Sylvio and Nadia out to go get ice cream and then we can walk down to the beach, tell them that I can’t wait to see them, okay? Don’t tell them about the other stuff. I don’t want to scare them. I don’t want to think that I might not come home this summer. Ronni, did you ever get Abuela’s old car up and running yet? Because you promised me that I could drive it when you finally did, and you better remember that I’m going to take you up on that. Has Rachel found a new job for the summer, yet? Have you told her to check the local restaurants? They’re always looking for new waitresses.

Also, weird request, but next time you send a letter, can you include a picture of the Malecón? I was thinking about it the other day, and I realized that I haven’t actually seen it in a really long time. Too long, probably. Anyways, it would just make me think of home, I guess. I really need to think of home right now. If you don’t have any pictures, don’t worry about it. I’d ask you for a picture of the stars and constellations you can see in Cuba, but I don’t think that’s possible with muggle technology. I just really wanted to see it again.

I’m running out of paper, so I’m going to stop here because I want to write another letter for Rachel. But I love you and I miss you and I’ll see you this summer. I hope.

Todo mi amor,

Lance

Lance studied the parchment in front of him, frowning at the parts he had to scratch out. Still, it would have to do. Hopefully his family would feel better just from hearing from him, because he
wasn’t sure that his words, just by themselves, would be that comforting.

Rather than second-guess himself, he turned his attention to the second letter he wanted to write before Keith got back.

Rachel,

I’m going to save us both from explaining what happened during the second trial, I know Mamá will show you the letter that I wrote for everyone, and I know you’ll have found a way to read the letter from Headmaster Holt. Anyways, I have something more exciting to talk to you about.

Do you remember Keith? I think I might have mentioned him to you before. Ronni remembered the name, so I’m sure that you will too. We played quidditch against each other. Well, anyways, we’ve been hanging out a lot since we’re both in the tournament, so we’ve gotten a lot closer this year than we used to be. And, well, I guess we’re kind of dating? No, not kind of, I mean we are dating. We went out for Valentine’s Day, and we went to the Yule Ball together, but we didn’t officially start dating until, well, today, I guess.

I wanted to tell you first because we’ve always told each other everything and this feels like it’s really important. It’s not a joke, it’s serious. I’m pretty sure it’s the real deal. And that should probably scare me, but it doesn’t. Is that weird? I think it’s just because I know that I can trust him completely, you know? Like I know that he always has my back no matter what.

You would like him, I think. Even if you would make fun of his hair. That’s okay, though, I make fun of his hair, too. I always tell him that he looks like Jesse from Full House, but he never knows who I’m talking about. This summer, I’m gonna drag him down to Cuba and we’re going to make him watch every episode, okay?

I really, really want him to meet all of you. I hope he wants that too, we haven’t really talked about it yet. Like I said, this is a pretty recent development. But I think he would want to. He always listens when I talk about all of you, and he remembers what I tell him. He’s a good listener, he never complains that I talk too much (even though I know that I do), just sneaks down to the kitchen to steal us cookies from the house elves. That’s what he’s doing right now, well, that’s what he’s supposed to be doing - in addition to picking up our homework from today so that we don’t fall behind in our classes. He’s been staying with me in the Hospital Wing so that I don’t have to be by myself. Plus I think he’s still a little freaked out by what happened at the trial.

He was there with me, you know, so he had to see it. I know it’s probably been really hard for all of you to hear about what happened to me but I don’t even want to think about what it must have been like for him.

Anyways, I’m rambling. I just wanted to tell you that I have a boyfriend now, I guess. I’m still kind of in shock about it I think. I have a boyfriend and his name is Keith Kogane. He’s a seventh year, training to become an auror. They’re basically, like, wizard police. So I guess he’ll probably end up working for the ministry. He’s in Gryffindor, which basically means that he’s brave and hot-headed and an idiot. But he’s my idiot. And I really, really like him. I just needed you to know that.

Write back soon, okay? I really want to hear from you.

Tu gemelo,

Leandro
Lance shuffled the papers in front of him, folding them neatly. He would probably have to ask Keith to take them up the owlery, since Madam Pomfrey still officially had him on bed rest. But it had helped, writing to them, at least, Lance thought that it had.

He knew that his family would be worried about him, and there was nothing else he could do to try and alleviate their concerns. Hell, maybe they were right to be concerned. Clearly, someone was using the Triwizard Tournament as a way to target him. But that didn’t seem as scary as it had this morning.

Because Keith would watch his back, just like always.

The door to the Hospital Wing opened with a creak.

“The house elves didn’t have chocolate chip cookies,” Keith announced loudly, a tall stack of books tilting precariously in his arms. “So you’re going to have to settle for macadamia nuts. Is that okay?”

“It sounds perfect,” Lance said, tucking his letters into the nightstand beside his bed. He could worry about sending them later. Right now, he just wanted to eat house elf cookies and work on his homework with his new boyfriend and pretend that his life was normal.

He could forget about the Triwizard Tournament, just for a little while, just for right now. He would worry about it tomorrow.

End Notes

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