star-crossed

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by realfakedoors

Summary
They said, once upon a time, in a faraway land, there was a peaceful and prosperous kingdom, rich in romance and tradition. They said the Prince would host a ball, and choose his spouse, and they would live happily ever after. Well, they lied.

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Keith is a Prince, and Lance lives with his shitty extended family. Neither of them are very happy, and when they meet, they're surprised to have so much in common. Strangers, to friends, and then, well...
Meanwhile, Hunk is a sweetheart, Pidge is an iconic asexual, Shiro is a supportive Knight Dad™, Allura isn't here for anyone's crap, and there's some political shit going on that forces them all together.

Notes

a word to my readers!

1. just for clarity's sake: in this, Lance's father is Altean and his mother is human, and the rest of his immediate family live in a small community on the border of Marmora/Altea/Arus, and they were pretty secluded from everything else. he's just my lil farm boi. and keith's parents are the same as canon, but his father is not present in the story - it will be addressed eventually where he is.
2. and this is the song that inspired this fic!
They said, once upon a time, in a faraway land, there was a peaceful and prosperous kingdom, rich in romance and tradition. They said the Prince would host a ball, and choose his spouse, and they would live happily ever after.

Well, they lied.

With white-knuckled fists balled in his lap, the Prince was trying his very best not allow himself to drift away from the conversation, but it always did during meetings with his Mother and the Council, especially lately. Keith didn’t want to think it was because he was a particularly hateful person (although, he admitted, Shiro might raise a dubious brow to that), but simply because he didn’t want to think about the topic of the conversation he was willfully ignoring: his eighteenth birthday celebration.

His actual birthday was not for almost a month; it was only the end of September, the end of Summer. And yet, turning eighteen as the crown Prince to a country was an annoyingly big deal, so he was sitting in another endless meeting with the others, going over the details.

“...Isn’t that right, Prince Keith?” Shiro, seated to his right, nudged him under the table. If it was anyone else, Keith might have wondered for their sanity, but the Head of the King’s Guard had long since stopped being seen as a member of the service and more of a member of his family.

Keith blinked, but otherwise gave no indication that he hadn’t been paying attention.

“Uh, yes. Of course.”

Thank the stars for Shiro, because he knew the man would never set him up with such a leading statement unless it was something Keith truly would agree to.

The rest of the Council looked expectantly to his mother, seated at the head of the table and to Keith’s immediate left, and she nodded once.

“Then it is settled. Kolivan, you’ll handle the rest?”

The man’s jaw tightened, almost pridefully. “At once, your Highness.”

Krolia settled against the high back chair a bit, her features softening. Her ability to turn on and off the duties of royalty was something Keith certainly envied - he, frankly, was always open like a fucking book.

“Then you are all dismissed.”

A quiet rumbling of feet patterned the floor, with the dark colors of various robes and armors clinking or swishing with the dismissed Council’s chatter. The surreptitious look Shiro gave him did not go unnoticed, nor did his mother’s continued occupation of her seat. Keith sat and waited, trying not to indulge Shiro’s curiosity, and the man ultimately just sighed and stood outside the door.

Keith didn’t want to admit that he was feeling much more nervous without his most valued friend beside him. He didn’t want to admit that he was anything but composed and cool-headed about the situation, because his mother knew what was going on and how much he hated it. He definitely didn’t want to be forced to listen to another lecture about posterity and bearing heirs; just remembering the last conversation on the subject made Keith’s face feel hot.
Once the room was sufficiently empty and quiet, save for his mother’s steady breathing and the blood roaring in Keith’s ear, Keith leaned forward and gently took his mother’s hand.

“Mom, I don’t know how else to tell you this,” he said as softly as he could, trying not to break into a smile. “But this fucking **sucks**.”

She snorted immediately, rolling her eyes. “**Really?** I had **no idea.**”

And they both started laughing at the ridiculousness of it all. This stupid traditional ceremony of choosing a spouse once he came of age; the waste of time and resources throwing a fucking **ball** would be; the idea of Keith having to start thinking about marriage already. They liked to laugh about it when they could, because it was much easier than thinking about the ugly truth of the situation - like the fact that he was indeed the single heir to the throne and was very much expected to bear children; or about how the last assassination attempt on his mother had left them all terribly on edge; or the fucking deep-seeded sense of **marital tradition** that ran across the continent.

Marmora, the landlocked center, was carved from the borders of their six neighbors: Altea to the North and Olkarion to the Northwest, separating Altea from Dibizaal, the sprawling Galra territory to the west; Balmera to the South, with the smaller countries of Puig and Arus finishing out the map. Literally and figuratively, Marmora was the center of all the lands’ people, and therefore had a hand in all manner of politics, diplomacy, and trade - a reality that Keith knew on every possible level. He was himself, after all, half-Galra, half-human, and raised in the company of nobles from every conceivable walk of life.

After a few waves of laughter and poking and prodding between the two, his mother grew serious.

“Keith, you know I am so… **proud** of you for coming around. I know you don’t want this.” She said slowly, leaning forward over the table in a very not-queen-like way, her chin resting on her open palm. The openness of her face frustrated him, because, goddamnit, Keith **wanted** to be angry… but they’d gone through that conversation already. They’d been through them all - some lamentful, others anxious, and most of them very, **very** angry.

But Keith knew from the beginning that this really wasn’t her fault; there wasn’t really anyone who was entirely responsible, no matter how much he wanted to punch that unnamed entity in their stupid jaw.

“Marmora has every confidence in you, son. I do, too. This alliance with Altea is of unspeakable importance.”

Unconsciously, Keith crossed his arms over his chest, trying to will his voice to stay calm.

“I know it is... it just feels really surreal, I guess. I’m fine.” The lie tasted like acid, but Keith let it burn.

“I’m sure,” his mother nodded, sighing and looking up at the chandelier. Waves of guilt practically radiated off her, and Keith felt a tightness in his chest as she visibly relaxed. It was unfair. The Queen’s emotions were clear as water; the sense of relief obvious as the animosity between them extinguished. It annoyed him. Keith really wasn’t done being upset with her, or with the situation, but what was he supposed to do? It’s clear she did not wish this upon him... still, he felt like the right to be angry was swept out from under him.

“I can still remember when you and King Alfor’s little girl would play swords. I feel for him and Princess Allura... I never dreamed that either of you would find yourselves in a marriage that was not founded from love, much less with each other.”
Keith cringed at the notion, not caring for the finality with which she spoke. The words _marriage_ and _Allura_ should never, in his mind, really come up in the same sentence; while Marmora was companionable allies with Altea politically, and Keith even considered his relationship with Allura to be friendly, he had never been able to think of her as much else besides a big sister. Involving romance in the notion made him nearly want to gag… Made no easier by the fact that he had never had eyes for women in the first place.

“Remind me again why we have to host the _party_?” (Keith refused, absolutely _refused_, to call it a _fucking_ _ball_. The whole thing mortified him enough without the flouty language.)

His mother’s face fell into a concentrated scowl, one Keith knew he’d inherited from her.

“You know this, Keith. The stability that Marmora brings to the rest of the region is key to keeping the peace… and now that you’re about to be eighteen, it is customary to at least select your spouse so the realm can relax, knowing you have set forward some sort of plan to rule with a partner at your side. It seems much too young to me now in retrospect, but that is when your father and I became engaged.”

Keith frowned at this, but chose not to comment. It felt too much like she was hopeful, as if forcing him and Princess Allura to marry might bring them some of the same happiness it brought to his mother and father.

“But, more importantly, the sooner we have a unified presence from Altea to Marmora, the Olkari will have a much larger ally at their back against the Galra. The marriage should be enough to threaten them to back down without having to directly involve our own military with the… unrest.”

Unable to help himself, Keith snorted derisively. “That’s one word for it.”

Unrest.

Unrest, meaning, the not-so-minor war that had been plaguing Olkarion’s border as the Galran Empire heedlessly continued their listless expansionism, and Altea’s fierce counterattacks in support of the Olkari. The unrest which, for the first time in generations, was causing enough fear in the commoners who lived near the border to have gotten used to such words as _casualties_ and _skirmish_ and _mortars_. An unrest that spanned nations, and which had to be stopped, and which had somehow fallen right into Keith’s lap.

Allura didn’t want this either, he was almost certain. While Keith didn’t know the extent of the rumors, he had heard mention that she had some sort of secret courtier. He hadn’t cared about the specifics at the time, given that Princess Allura’s relationship status had meant very, _very_ little to him until about two months ago when this ludicrous idea was first brought up to the council.

Somehow, Allura being with someone already made him feel even _more_ uncomfortable; now he was not only being forced _to_ Allura, but _between_ two people who already had another sort of romantic bond.

“I wish there was another way, darling,” his mother said quietly. “I really do.”

Keith simply shrugged, ignoring the twisting in his stomach. “It’s something I have to do.” He’d long since stopped trying to fight it.

Krolia smiled at her only son, fixing a stray piece of hair that fell over his face. “You’ll be a wonderful king someday.”

Keith didn’t know what to say to that, but the mere mention of being responsible for the lives of
hundreds of people made him feel ill. He couldn’t think about it for too long; he’d made his decision, and letting his doubts and anger circle were just going to make him appear weak. What his mother - his people - needed was not someone who showed weakness, but someone who would protect them at all costs.

After a too long moment, a bittersweet acceptance shared between mother and son, Queen Krolia withdrew her hand from fixing her son’s (ever unruly) hair.

“Kolivan and the rest of them will handle most of the preparations. It’s to be hosted in a little more than a fortnight, so you’ll at least have a little longer to relax. We’ve already sent word to the courts of all the others, inviting them for the occasion, along with the usual rabble that haunt these walls.” She smirked, and Keith appreciated her attempt at humor, but the pit in his stomach sucked out his heart. He merely watched her as she continued. “You can invite anyone else as you see fit, of course… Perhaps the Holts, or the families of the guards - whoever you want.”

That had not been mentioned before, and Keith’s eyes widened.

His mother read his surprise as doubt and replied with a conspiratorial tone. “You can thank Shiro for that. I’m sure you can imagine Kolivan and Thace just about chewed my head off when I suggested it, but Shiro knew it would make you more comfortable if there were at least some people who you wanted to be there with, rather than had to.”

Keith considered that for a moment, tried to imagine how Kolivan had reacted when the subject was broached, amused; some sort of veins must have popped in his forehead, or perhaps he finally got an ulcer. Still, Keith’s heart warmed to hear this suggestion had come from Shiro, and it did help calm his nerves a bit to be able to have at least some semblance of control. His mother’s convincing of the rest of the Council could not have been easy.

Indeed, it seemed too good to be true. “Really... Anyone?”.

“Anyone,” his mother nodded, meeting the slightly sinister glint to his eye. She shrugged. “I’d really appreciate it if you didn’t invite murderous, treasonist assassins into the castle, but it’s your party.”

Again, they shared a brief bout of laughter, but it lacked some of the soul Keith remembered it once held. They would ride together when he was still small, and the bouncing of the horse used to make him giggle, which would make his Mother’s smile bright and earnest unlike anything he could remember; they would tease Shiro once he and Adam announced their engagement, questioning how he could marry someone who was allergic to seafood, his favorite cuisine; they would share knowing smirks since he began sitting in the Council meetings when someone would bray on and on for what felt like forever, mirroring each other’s expression as to who might crack first. Those were days filled with laughter that Keith craved, that he loved and would forever cherish in a private place in his soul. These days, their laughter was more like a cheap artist rendition, an awakened memory of what they once had, and had since lost.

Keith excused himself shortly thereafter, knowing they both had much work to do. By the time he stepped out of the Council Chambers, he spotted Shiro leaning at a window on the opposite wall, basking in the mid-afternoon sunshine. Summer may be nearly over, but today was warm and the bright blue skies overhead seemed like a welcome distraction.

“Hey,” Keith said as he stepped beside him, joining him in looking out into the world.

Shiro glanced towards him, arms crossed over his chest, before returning his attention to the window. “Huh, you don’t look angry.”
That made him scoff. “You sound so surprised.”

“I am surprised,” Shiro said with a teasing note, but the mirth quickly fell from his face. “I know you’re not happy.”

Lips pursed, Keith felt like he just tasted something sour. His mother had made a point of that, too. Did they not think he was responsible enough to do what needed to be done without flying off the handle?

Lowering his voice, Keith shot his friend a pointed look. “Of course I’m fucking angry, Shiro.” He paused, looking around to check for lingering ears or eyes. “I’m just not going to whine about it. Not like I can do anything to change it.”

At that, Shiro shifted to lean against the wall, now watching Keith instead of the open air beyond the castle.

“But this isn’t healthy, and you know it. If marrying Princess Allura is going to make you miserable, Keith, you shouldn’t just accept that. Your feelings in this matter, too.”

“Don’t get sentimental on me, you’re no good at it.” Keith deflected, not really wanting to talk about it anymore.

Shiro seemed to get the message, and he gave a small chuckle. “Well… fine, I guess it was always more of Adam’s thing anyways. But, please know you can talk to me about any of this - okay? I don’t want you to feel like you have no say in the matter, because that’s just not true. Your mom doesn’t want –”

“Don’t, Shiro,” Keith warned. He really didn't want to talk about what his mother wanted. He'd already talked that subject to death on his own.

"...Fine,” the knight said sadly. "And how will you be spending the rest of the afternoon?"

“…” Keith scowled, knowing he should confess how he had lessons in about an hour with one of the Balmeran scholars on geology, but he felt like rocks and crystals were not going to effectively hold his attention. It was a collection of small things, but Keith could tell he was wound up - his hands were still balled to fists, his jaw was beginning to ache from being clenched so hard, his scowl unwavering in its severity.

Sighing, Keith decided to be honest. “I… actually, I need to get my mind off of things. Want to spar?”

Shiro opened his mouth, brow creased with worry, but closed it again after a moment. His expression changed into something softer, but it reminded Keith too much of pity to be comforting. The Prince squeezed his fists even tighter.

“Sure. I can meet you on the grounds, I’m basically ready to go.” The knight gestured his wares, which was accurate - the guard had morning exercises before the Council meeting, and Shiro hadn’t bothered to strip his armor.

Keith was glad to at least turn away from the sympathetic look, calling over his shoulder. “Sure, see you soon.”

It did not take long for the Prince to meet Shiro in the yard, though he was surprised to find Adam standing beside the man. They didn’t seem to notice his approach, which was nice in a way, because the pair was so painfully open with one another. It was a culmination of small things, like how Adam
would brush their hands together when talking about something in an animated fashion, or how Shiro’s smile had more than just amusement, but admiration behind it when they would share a joke. It was love, from the rings on their fingers to the way their eyes shined when they spoke of each other.

Once Keith was too near for it to be awkward to watch them, he called casually over his head, “Hey! Ready?” He pretended to just notice Shiro’s company, and sent an easy smile towards his partner. “Hey, Adam.”

“Your Highness,” greeted Adam with a polite nod of his head, his sarcasm just begging to get a rise out of Keith. “How excited you look at the prospect of getting married.”

At that, Keith could only chuckle and shake his head. He knew Adam meant well, but the whole thing was becoming more real and more terrifying with each passing day, and joking about it made Keith feel like he’d chugged ice water.

Shiro quickly shooed Adam away, sneaking a kiss to his husband when it seemed like Keith wouldn’t notice, and turned his attention to their swords.

As ever, Shiro’s age and prosthetic proved to be no hindrance to his impeccable form in combat. Keith’s technique, he had been told by more and more people as he grew, was a dangerous one - flighty, erratic, even emotional. Now, to be fair, it had been Adam who had said that last one, so perhaps he was simply trying to tease Keith, but he recalled the memory as one colored by sincerity rather than humor.

He didn’t mind dangerous, though. It worked more often than not, and it let him tap into strategies that might be unconventional for a perfect knight, but were all too crucial in real fighting. As it happened, annoyingly, Shiro had long since gotten used to his way of fighting, and Keith was constantly forced to adjust and rethink.

It worked, though, kept him fresh, focused, sharp. Sharp. Keith liked that. It made sense, it filled him with a driving force that extended from the tips of his fingers to the point of his blade, something decisive and unquestioning. You fight and you live, or you fight and you die. Training with Shiro might not end in his literal death, sure, but the truth is known to anyone who has been on the wrong end of a saber - if it had been a real fight, you would be dead.

Admittedly, Keith found more comfort in that thought than was probably normal, but he pushed the thoughts aside as Shiro remarked on his weak defense.

By the time they finished, you could’ve asked Keith who Allura was and he might have stumbled for a moment, body thrumming with adrenaline and the inexplicable depth of power after fighting, winning, surviving. They had a fairly even match, much to Keith’s enjoyment and Shiro’s pouting.

“By the way,” Shiro said as they walked back towards the barracks, presumable for Shiro to take off his armor and store his weapons. “I wanted to ask a favor.”

Keith raised a brow, but said nothing.

“Well, Adam and I are coming up on a year…” a cheeky grin found its way to his friends face, and Keith could already tell where this was going. He rolled his eyes but allowed Shiro to go on. “And, you know, with this party and the incoming nobles, we’ll be very busy. Maybe he and I could take a day away, before it gets too hectic? Would you mind?”

The Prince shook his head and chuckled, ribbing Shiro with his tone. “It’s fine, Shiro. You guys can
take all the time you need. A day or more, if you need it.”

“Oh, well, one day should be plenty, but I’ll let you know for sure. We’re thinking the day before the envoy arrives, the ‘calm before the storm’? Adam’s family cottage to the East is due for a visit…”

Keith just shrugged. “Sure.”

It truly made no difference to him - he knew by that time he would be so busy it’s not like he would have time to kill with Shiro’s company, but, he also wasn’t going to let the an opportunity for a joke slip by. “If you decide to stay for a day or so, maybe try to make an excuse for heading that way. Wouldn’t want people thinking you’re sneaking off with Adam on a romantic getaway…”

“What’s this?” Shiro shot him a smirk. “Is this you being nice?”

“Maybe.”

Shiro had to stop walking, bending at the waist as he wheezed through a wave of laughter. How a grown man could giggle with so little shame, Keith would never know.

“Thanks,” Shiro said with sincerity as they reached their destination, and he placed a hand on Keith’s shoulder. “I appreciate it. And we can spar more this week if you need a distraction, okay?”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

And so he did. They spared almost everyday, until Adam made a passing comment about Takashi not working himself to death. Keith had to promise not to kill him prematurely.

The sparring did help, but it was too short a distraction.

Altea and Balmera were the first envoy set to arrive, one week before his stupid party. Arus and Puig were travelling in a joint movement, planning to be in the day after, and the Galra two days after that. By the time the castle would be packed full of every manner of courtier and nobility, it would still be three whole days until his fucking nightmare even started.

The dark nights dragged, long and empty, and Keith spent most of them tossing in the confines of his silken sheets rather than in the comforting arms of sleep. Daytime was no better, even as the season continue to tease at Autumn in the early morning chill, a change Keith usually looked forward to. He was too distracted to really appreciate it; too preoccupied to absorb anything in his lessons, too anxious to really listen to the advisors, too angry to really hold a conversation with Shiro or his mother for longer than a few minutes.

There was too much, and then there was this. This was agonizing, and the opportunities to escape were scarce. Keith seized every chance he could to do something that required more than his presence, but his physical and mental attention. The Prince spent breaks dueling Shiro or some of the other guards, working on his marksmanship, and even taking the opportunity visiting his horse in the stables to refresh on mounted combat. Sure, he was every level of exhausted, purple bruises beneath his eyes starting to stand out against his pale skin, but at least it felt like he was accomplishing something.

All in all, the activities were a welcome source of relief, coloring the world with the green of his memories rather than tugging grays of the days ahead. They helped him to forget about the first of the many royal envoys that would be arriving soon.

Soon - his mother had said a fortnight. Keith felt like he just turned around, and then it was just three days away, then it was tomorrow.
And now, it was today.

Fuck.

Stepping out of the house, Lance sneezed. Twice.

It was a habit he had developed since moving to Marmora, and he really wasn’t sure why. He only ever did it if he was walking from inside to outside or vice versa - maybe something to do with the musty air inside and the freshness outside? Or maybe it was just allergies? He really didn’t know.

A young rush of legs and arms ran past him into the house, a bushel of brilliant aquamarine hair and bright eyes of blue-green.

“Jesús, Tío,” his pseudo-niece said shyly before moving on.

Lance broke into a gentle smile, turning to watch her form retreat into the house. “Gracias, be back soon, okay?”

Her colorful curls had already disappeared around a corner, and with no response, he assumed she’s already probably off to the kitchen where he left her lunch. It was sweet that she tried to pick up on some Spanish from him, and she would often ask about their family, adopting a few words like tío and tía, mamá and papá. She didn’t need to - Lance spoke the common tongue - but she wanted to, and it always made his heart feel a bit more full.

Lance shook his head and refocused on his task for the afternoon. The day was already slipping away faster than he’d realized, and he needed to be quick about this. He stretched his arms out over his head and began down the drive, checking his pockets and satchel to ensure he remembered to grab all he would need, his list and money of which were the most important. Vaguely, he felt like he might be forgetting something, but he decided to just go on and not waste more time.

The day was Wednesday, which meant, it was market day - one of the few days he would head up to the capital city to restock the house of the wants and needs of his step-aunt-on-his-father’s-side’s-second-cousin’s-friend-from-a-different-marriage… or something. She’s someone that his father had once considered family, and frankly, his family tree is long and complicated enough without him trying to map it out for exact titles. She’s “Aunt Hira” as far as he’s concerned, and he idly scanned the list she prepared to make sure he had a sense of what to buy.

Aside from him, Aunt Hira’s house was occupied by her three daughters, and while they were, technically, some extended form of family, there were no minced words over Lance’s position in the house.

He was a servant, and the mildly important status of his aunt’s family paid him well-enough so he could send money home every month. It was preferable to trying to find work in the city, as he did not have to pay for lodging, budget for additional food, or worry about thieves… it was better, but by no means easy.

His role in the house necessitated that he quickly learned all manner of domestic skills since he’d taking residence in Marmora. The older of his twenty-millionth-removed-cousins-or-whatever, Adéla and Emely, were respectively 26 and 24, and the younger Nadia, whom he called his niece, was only 8 years old. They were all always in need of something, whether it be specialty fabrics or jewelry,
books of music and poetry, perfumes or make-up - always something. Whatever it was on any given day, it was that need, (well, Lance wouldn’t have used the word need, but he found it easier not to argue,) that sent him to the market every Wednesday.

As his eyes quickly scanned the scribbled list, it seemed much too long and his coin purse much too light for their demands, but he would have to make due.

Lance was, at least, an expert smooth-talker.

Bartering was like second nature, and he proudly pocketed the list and moved to count his coin. Three crown, two shilling and a few pennies - and all he needed was wine, a replacement axe, two dozen eggs, a half pound milled flour, three yards of linen and two of wool, enough leather to patch some boots, and, according to Adéla, a new pair of lavender drop Altean earrings. Lance rolled his eyes at that. He wasn’t even sure if he had enough for the rest of the list, let alone a fancy new pair of magic earrings.

His budget would be tight, but he could make it work... Probably. Maybe.

The walk to town was about a forty doboshes to an hour varga-long venture, depending on the weather and how quickly he managed to walk. On this day in particular, with the sun hanging high in the afternoon sky, he did not expect any difficulties... With oncoming autumn, the tall fields carried dry and crisp wind, so the rays of the midday sun was a welcome warmth, like an embrace from a benevolent, mighty stranger. Lance dressed lightly in one of his whole three outfits, a loose-fitting white tunic, splotched with dirt and pockmarked with the occasional food stain, dark brown pants rolled up at the ankles, and a terribly worn out pair of sandals.

Now, Lance didn’t like to complain - at least, not unless he was doing it as a joke - but he hated those fucking sandals. Oh, how he hated them.

His feet were fucking killing him.

Lance spent most hours of the day on his feet, and sitting was a drug he would forget about until he tried it again, an addict for a fix of the most basic sense of relief.

Even now, it haunted him. He could sit on the side of the road, just for a few minutes. No one would know. It wouldn’t hurt anyone, and he would get back just as fast after the shopping was done. Maybe close his eyes, rest for a few minutes. It would be easy. So easy.

...But he wouldn’t. Lance focused on whistling a tune, focused on the list of things he had to buy, focused on anything else besides the deep aching of his muscles. This was no ordinary pain, going far past his heels or the soles of his feet; it was like lead had long since fused to his bones, dragging down his calves with unforgiving resistance. It hurt to move, to stand, to walk, to do almost anything, and he felt like that, all fucking day.

Lance thought, more than once on a normal day, if he sat down he very well might never stand up again, and that was simply a risk he could not afford to take. So he stubbornly trudged on, walking until he reached the capital. He approached from the east, and he was thankful that the market was housed almost immediately beyond the city walls so he did not have to go deep into the city.

Dressing lightly had turned out to be a good idea, as it took mere moments for him to be swept into crowds full of sweaty, bustling Marmorans, the city’s trading district thriving with those preoccupied with errands and jobs of their own.

Lance made quick work of his tasks, starting with the concentration of textiles, partially to see what
sort of coin he would be able to work with when it came to the small, usually easier to bargain for, foods. As it turned out, he bought the linen, wool, and leather for a proverbial steal, ironically so, as the shopkeeper insisted to give him a ridiculously low price. He had caught a thief the last time he was in town trying to pocket some of her materials, and she gushed about his heroism; Lance smiled at the praise, but vehemently tried to deny the discount, insisting that anyone would have stepped in if they had noticed, feeling totally undeserving of the woman’s constant string of thank you’s. Eventually, he conceded, as to not waste more time.

He moved next to the food - his favorite part, for more than the obvious reasons.

“Ｈｉｎｎｉｓｓｉｎｎｉｓｉｓｉｓｉｓｉ！” Lance sang as he threw open the front door to the bakery, pirouetting in the way that would make any thespian proud. A dark-skinned teenager, face slightly smeared with flour, poked his head around the back kitchen as soon as Lance made his entrance.

“Lance!” Hunk walked out eagerly, dismissing his mother as she asked who was causing all the racket, and wiping his hands on his almost-offensively-bright yellow apron. “How’re you, bud?”

“Fantastic, as always,” Lance said despite his tired grin, leaning over the counter. “It’s Wednesday, so you know what that means.”

“It means it’s time for you to rake me over the coals on prices?” Hunk deadpanned, but Lance just laughed, and his friend dropped the facade almost immediately.

Their revelry doesn’t take long to be sniffed out by Hunk’s mother, and in a moment, a warm smile rounded the corner to the front of the store.

“Ah! There is my second son,” Mrs. Garrett hurried forward and reached over the counter, her stature and deceptive strength squeezing Lance into a bone-crushing hug, like they hadn’t seen each other in months. It had been… five days, Lance was pretty sure, but he hugged back in gratitude.

“Aww Momma Garrett, you are the best, con todo mi Corazón,” he crooned into her shoulder and the woman gave him one more firm squeeze before dropping him back down. Hunk crossed his arms, looking petulant.

“You live with a woman for seventeen years, you’re birthed by her, and the most affection you get is a flick on the nose…”

Lance laughed at the disinterest in his mother’s expression, and she promptly flicked his son’s forehead. “There, how’s that?”

“Siggggggggh,” Hunk exhaled dramatically, his posture sagging in defeat.

Hunk’s mother dragged Lance behind the counter during his daydreaming, and refused to hear a word of his protest that it was not his place. She was quick to scold him - if he was going to be her second son, then he was going to be let into every corner of their lives like family.

After a bit more teasing at Hunk’s expense, the conversation turned light and familiar, and Lance felt almost right at home again. The Garrett’s truly did treat him like a second son, and everytime he managed to stop in, the experience always made his heart mend and break all over again. He missed his own mamá dearly, and the sort of ghost of affection that he felt radiate from Hunk’s mother hurt, but in a beautiful kind of way. It was nothing like his aunt’s, those walls high and built from cold cement.

That was, perhaps, the hardest part. These visits were always temporary by default, just enough of a reminder for him to miss it before he had to leave again.
Still, he didn’t want to waste what little precious time he had in the Garrett’s company, so he banished the thoughts for now.

“You are too thin, Lancey. Are you eating enough?” Hunk’s mother shoved a small plate of strawberry pastries to him, coaxing him into a chair next to a counter covered in dough.

He popped the confection in his mouth and felt his heart grow three times bigger, the sweetness the perfect balance of a bright and rich. Truly, the Garrett’s cooking was god’s gift to this Earth.

“’M fine, al’ays been skinn’n” he said through a mouthful, but Mrs. Garrett just clicked her tongue and went back to measuring out some ingredients on the other side of the kitchen.

Hunk had retaken his place at the dough counter and began to knead it in a practiced way, one that says he knew exactly what he was doing, so well that he needn’t even think about it.

“So, anything new? How’re the cousins?” Hunk asked genuinely.

Lance shrugged, propping his elbow on a mostly-clean corner of the counter and resting his chin.

“Fine, I guess. Same old. Adéla and Eme are just as demanding as ever. Nadia has been helping in the garden a lot, which is nice. Oh, shit, I forgot - I was going to bring you some tomatoes.”

Hunk twisted his face into something that was probably supposed to be anger, but on him, looked more like a sulky kitten. “Lance, how could you? I will die without your tomatoes.”

A laugh caught in Lance’s throat as he was in the middle of chewing, and Hunk’s serious face broke almost instantly into one of his pure smiles, clearly trying not to laugh.

“I know, I know.” Lance said when he recovers his voice. “It’s not my fault I grow bomb ass tomatoes. I’ll see if I can come back to town again tomorrow or something if I’ve got time, okay?”

At this, Hunk nodded seriously and turned his attention to the dough in his hands, splitting it into smaller chunks with impressive precision.

“Seriously, you better. I have this new recipe I’ve been dying to try but I wanted to wait, no one at market grows tomatoes like you, it would be a crime to try it with their crap.”

“Aww, Hunk,” Lance cupped a hand over his heart, partially for effect, but mostly because he was sincerely touched by his friend’s praise. “You always know just what to say.”

“Oh, I know,” he hummed before glancing at the clock on the opposite wall. Lance watches his face fall slightly, but Hunk is never one to be long without a smile. “Speaking of which, I think you might want to head out soon. I’m guessing you’re not done? It’s almost four.”

“Shit,” Lance said, scrambling to stand. “I’ve gotta be home by five. Ah, fuck, and I’ve still gotta go get... er, right, I did need to buy a few things - the --”

“The usual flour and eggs are on the counter for you manamea,” Mrs. Garrett calls over her shoulder. “Just leave a shilling on the counter.”


Hunk rolled his eyes, sending him a look that read arguing is pointless, but Lance refused to back down. The Garretts had always been incredibly accommodating when it came to prices, but that sort of price was just criminal.
When Hunk’s mother turned around, her usual kindness replaced by a scowl, Lance could feel the onrushing lecture coming. Instead of giving her the chance, he bolted from the kitchen and grabbed the bag he spotted with flour and eggs on the front counter, throwing down two shillings and a few pennies before running out the door.

“I’m Sorry I Love You Please Forgive Meeee!” He cried as he ran outside, ignoring the annoyed glances of people passing by the bakery as he vaulted into the main drag.

With a quick chuckle, Lance allowed himself to be swallowed up in the throngs again, using the opportunity to count the remainder of his coin: he still had exactly one crown and one penny remaining…and he had yet to buy wine, the axe, or the earrings.

He opted to buy the wine and the earrings first. The axe was something he needed, but if it must, it could wait another week. Part of him was regretting asking the Garrett’s if they had an old one they might sell to him, but Lance was always one to live his truth; he knew one of his biggest faults was never thinking far enough ahead.

...Which was exactly the conversation he had waiting for him when he got home.

Winded, Lance jogged almost the entire way home to make it in time, but he still was a few minutes late.

The first thing he did upon walking in the doors, after taking off his shoes, was fish out the coinpurse from his pocket. Still, he was bent over and felt sweat bead down his forehead, wheezing as Aunt Hira approached.

He handed over the remaining shilling and four pennies without a word.

“This is three pennies short.” Aunt Hira said, snapping the purse closed. She also grabbed Adéla’s new earrings and handed them off roughly. Her eyes narrowed at Lance, and her glare of contempt made his throat close.

Aunt Hira was... well, she was a lot. First of all, she was tall - taller than Lance, and he was pretty dang tall - with a tanned and yet still somehow powdery-looking Altean complexion, her skin marked by zags of pale green that framed the bottom corners of her eyes. A grand tower of startling fuschia hair, was piled neatly atop her head in an intricate braid that resembled a series of overlapping crowns, complementing one of her many high-necked gowns. The one she wore that evening in particular was a luscious raiment, composed of a dozen thin layers of silk that ranged from gentle pewter to rich cobalt, all falling in a statuesque manner over her thin frame.

The small beauty mark beneath her right lip twitched, and Lance realized it was because she was scowling at him.

Shit.

“And what was the exact price of the wine?”

“Uh, the same it always is?” He answered, scratching his chin in an attempt to act like he hadn’t been zoning out. “Four shillings, but Zurik was willing to sell down to two.”

“That still doesn’t account for the difference,” his aunt insisted.

Lance frowned, pressing around his trouser pockets to make sure none of the coins had gotten loose. “Mm... I don’t think - oh,” he stopped abruptly, brow furrowing. Right. It was the extra he’d thrown down at the Garrett’s before bolting...
“Ohh, right, right. It’s those earrings, that’s right. There was an option between an older pair with less of the… floaty-magic stuff,” he gestured dismissively in Adéla’s direction, who looked offended to even be addressed indirectly by him. “But I got the newer ones that were priced a bit more, so they’ll last a lot longer before they have to be charmed or whatever.”

Aunt Hira’s lip thinned, a clear sign of contempt, and Lance couldn’t resist feeling his own smug smile creep to his lips. It wasn’t exactly a lie, as he had purchased the higher quality earrings - but he got them down to the price the regular earrings would have cost. The difference was in fact sitting in the Garrett’s ledger of profit for the day, where Lance felt it was duly deserved.

After several seconds, Aunt Hira released an annoyed huff of air. Clearly, she had no way to challenge his claim, and demonstrated her frustration by clamping shut the coinpurse violently.

“Well, you were late. How many times is that now?” She stared coldly at him, and Lance had to punch down the urge to roll his eyes, opting instead for his slightly-victorious smile.

"I'm sorry, was I supposed to be counting?"

Sensing the conversation was over, Lance eventually turned and made towards the kitchen.

Needless to say, he was surprised when Aunt Hira kept talking.

“You don't know when to leave well enough alone, do you, Lance?” It’s been a four deca-peebs, and I still expect it to get easier. For you to learn and behave. You don't know when to leave well enough alone.”

There was a dark quality to her tone that Lance may have found a bit troubling. And the fact that she used his name - that was something she did very seldom.

“Four decapheebs, and you're just as ungrateful as the day I allowed you in my home. I suppose it is my own fault for setting any kind of standard,” the woman continued, eyes sharp. “Be home on time. Don’t steal. Do your work. Is it that impossible for you?”

Okay, maybe Lance was more than a little concerned now, and he tried to ignore the growing ache between his ribs.

“I don’t know why I bother with you. You’re mother just shipped you off here so she wouldn’t have to deal with you anymore, and I’m tired of it, tired of this - this outrageous arrogance you walk around with every single day.”

"Aunt Hira, seriously - this isn't --"

"What, Lance? It isn't cool? And what, are you going to fucking do? Get your act together? Run off to your little friends and cry and spin stories about how I'm unfair to you? Why don't you keep your mouth shut before you embarrass yourself again? I give up so much for my girls, just to let you under this roof, you ungrateful, stupid boy."

Lance ground his teeth, steeling himself against the urge to defend himself. He had gone down that route before, and he ended up with much worse than just his wounded pride. Instead, the teen focused on the weight in of his chest, listlessly memorizing how it felt to have his heart cave in while he watched his aunt with a blank expression.

Thankfully, after several painful seconds of silence, patience rang true. She dismissed him by shooting him a disgusted look, and Lance spun on his heel in the direction of the kitchen.

Mechanically, Lance began dinner, going through the well-ingrained motions that his best friend had
long since taught him. Once again, Hunk was saving his ass, and Lance sighed gratefully while he began chopping some herbs - he really owed the universe one for granting him such a valuable friend. They met only a day after Lance moved to Marmora, but it felt like they’d known each other their whole lives - something about their dynamic just worked. Soft and sensitive Hunk, and brash and bold Lance. They supported each other, and Lance felt particularly thankful whenever he was making a meal for the house.

As far as his responsibilities went, Lance had picked up on the basics of sewing since he moved here, and he had known how to clean, do laundry, and tend to livestock from when he lived at home, but cooking had never been his forte. Sure, he’d been able to cover the basics that his mamá had showed him - how to cut an onion, how to butcher a chicken, how to milk Kaltenecker (who, Lance would very proudly tell anyone who listened, he had won in a bet and that she was entirely his cow), and how to boil water. Actually cooking, with spices and thoughtful technique and all of that nonsense - the nonsense that made Hunk’s eyes sparkle? Yeah, Lance had no idea how that part of things worked, but he had since improved with Hunk’s help and recipes, and since the women of the house were invariably in better spirits whenever he cooked something well, he thanked the gods for the dozenth time today for his best friend. If he couldn’t shut up his aunt with his words, might as well try with food.

While simmering some vegetables in a pan, Lance allowed his mind to wander on the subject of family, thinking of home. He thought of his mamá, and his three older siblings, Luis, Rachel and Veronica, and his nieces and nephews, and how long and short of a time it seemed. It had been just over four deca-pheebs since he moved - he remembered leaving during the providence provided by the springtime, turning his back on the mountains when the last snap of winter’s chill vanished. Now, the Arusian-Altean mountains had never seemed so far.

His nieces and nephews were all under six years old when he left… he recalled each of them fondly, how they would run in the yard with bare feet, chase chickens under the high sun, catch lightning beetles at dusk and kept them in jars. But, fuck all, Sylvio was the youngest, and he two when he left… how much has he grown? Will he even remember what Lance looks like? Will Lance be able to recognize him? How much will they all have grown by the time he’s ever able to come home?

You aren’t going home.

An unsolicited rush of emotion seized his heart, and Lance focused on something else - anything else - to chase off those lingering thoughts. His not-niece-but-close-enough came to mind, which was a good enough distraction.

Nadia was sweeter than Aunt Hira or the cousins, but even she was her mother’s daughter. Her interest in Spanish was sweet, but it got her in trouble with her mother for speaking a country dialect, and Lance in even worse trouble for teaching her. Still, Lance tried not to take it personally when Nadia would throw fits or tantrums, or when she would blame him for her scolding. She was only two when he moved here, and he saw the gradual kindness fade from her eyes with her mother’s influence. Conditioned cruelty, he sighed, had long-term effects.

Dinner wrapped up quickly, and he zipped upstairs to serve the dining room. Once the women were all seated and seemed abated for now, Lance set off towards the kitchen again to start cleaning.

Cleaning. Oh god, cleaning.

So much cleaning.

How can three grown women and a young girl make so much of a mess? It was almost funny when he first came here, but that lasted at most a few vargas during the first week. Lance scrubbed the
floors with a bristle brush and a bucket of water and soap at the end of the day, preferring to clean
after everyone has already walked all over the damn place. Doing it in the morning was too
depressing - he’d come back after a few hours outside or dusting out the drawing room only to find
scuffs and dirt and hair mucking up the floors he literally slaved over. Oddly, while cleaning the
floors hurt his back and made his knees sore, after a day on his feet, it was actually a little vacation
for his heels to be finally relieved of standing. It took at least an hour, usually longer, but it was a
break, so Lance didn’t complain.

He stopped complaining by the winter of the first year; it was easier this way. Sure, he chose to move
away from home to support his family, but it was a little disheartening that they hadn’t fought for him
to stay. He got one letter from his mamá a bit before Christmas that first year, and that was the last
time he heard from her, or any of them.

Lance wrote them a few times a year for the first two years, trying to cluster the letters around
birthdays and holidays, but he never got a single reply. It scared him, and at first he wondered if
something could have happened to them, but Hira assured that the money was sent every month on
the same day, and Lance himself walked it to the courier in the capital on those days. Knowing they
were receiving the money was a small comfort, but it did little to ease the deep ache in his heart that
wondered if he was at all missed. They got their money, their lives went on, and so did his.

Lance stopped writing as often.

He sent two letters last year. He would send one for the holidays this year, he was pretty sure.

Sometime during his work on the downstairs floors, the women finished eating and he made haste to
clear the table, wash the dishes and brew some tea to help them settle for sleep (it was, in truth, as
much a favor for them as it was for him). Once they turned in for the night, Lance finished the
remaining surfaces that he hadn’t touched during the day - shining the windows, wiping down
counters and tables and upholstery, patching his clothes or even hemming the women’s gowns,
wiping down bannisters and airing out curtains. From the time dinner was served, which was ideally
at 5:30 in the evening, Lance stopped cleaning sometime after midnight.

Washing himself was the easiest chore of all. He would have dinner if he had the energy to fix
himself something (whether it was a leftover from the women’s meal or something else), and he
would finish the evening with a bath. It was his absolute favorite time of day, in the quiet hours of
the morning when he was completely able to relax. His muscles would ache by the time he finished
all the chores; back sore and shoulders tensed, knees scuffed and hands calloused, pouring sweat and
looking and, frankly, smelling, awful.

When it was all over, finally, finally over, Lance focused on smaller reminders of existence. How the
warmth opened his pores, and how the steam made his heartbeat feel amplified, the heady experience
of exhaustion and release tied into one. Water was his sanctuary, a constant that was somehow both
tangible and unstable. He breathed the warm air rising off the top of the bath, filling his lungs and his
heart in such different ways. Time slipped through his fingertips, but it progressed all the same; water
became steam and steam became peace, and that peace became the thing he looked forward to
everyday. He refused to sleep until the water turned cold, cherishing every moment.

Before the cold had the chance to rob him completely of the immersive comfort, Lance would get out
and dry himself hastily. A bit of cream he had snuck from Aunt Hira was stuffed in his pillow, and
he would apply a thin layer before sleep - it was his one tiny little thing in the day he did, everyday,
for him. If he got caught, he figured, fuck it - it’s not worth just existing without anything to motivate
him - the risk was worth the small bit of pride he felt in keeping himself at least feeling his age.

The next morning, like every morning, Lance rose just before the sun. If you asked him, he’d tell you
he preferred to wake up this early - it might be a deep lie he has told himself to get over it, but he liked to think it was genuine, that he was always like this. Waking when the sun was up meant the day was slipping away; it meant that the house was awake and he was likely falling behind. It meant that he may have forgotten something, or would be rushed to get to the next thing he needed to do, and being rushed made him even more prone to mistakes.

Before the sun rose, it was easier to take his time. It was early enough to feed the chickens and brush down Kaltenecker and his aunt’s horse before starting on breakfast. Early enough that he could watch the sun break over the treeline, to memorize the quiet colors that drank up the darkness - pastel purple, the color of gentle blush, both stained against an orange backdrop. On that particular day, the eve of Autumn, the air was brisk and still.

Sure, waking up early when he had such little time to sleep was… well, it was exhausting. Lance was exhausted, but it was worth it - to watch life rise in the forest as day broke over the eastern horizon, like a painted scenes from a forgotten fairytale. To the west, the Marmoran castle was breathtaking to behold, even from such a distance; a cluster of blood red towers and turrets practically aglow from the rising light.

Marmora may not be home, but at least it wasn't hell.

Well, not yet.
Out and About

Chapter Summary

Lance grows bomb-ass tomatoes, Keith is really exhausted, Adam and Shiro are honestly OTP, Shay is a sweetheart, Hunk is so pure, Pidge swears a lot, Allura has such a big stupid crush, and the path of fate for our boys get a little bit more narrow.

Chapter Notes

TW: brief instance of abuse, nothing too bad.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

[LANCE]

Lance did not speak a word that morning to anyone. Well, no, that’s not true - he whispered praise to Kaltenecker for being the best, most lovely cow in the entire world, and he cursed under his breath at a chicken that tried to nip him - but he didn’t talk to any person. Avoidance seemed like the right thing to do for now.

Aunt Hira had gotten angry with Lance before - mocking, usually - but last night had been different. Something about the venom in her tone, the lack of compassion with which she looked at him - looked at him like he was less than nothing. It wasn’t the contempt that bothered Lance, not really. He could handle that. He’d gotten used to that. It was something else, something that Lance wasn’t quite ready to admit to himself yet, so he punched down the uncomfortable feeling deep into his throat, willfully denying its existence.

Needless to say, Lance at least made a point of preparing everything perfectly the next morning, not exactly jumping to be on the receiving end of that wrath again.

Much to his relief, tea and breakfast passed with little trouble. Lance continued his day in stony silence, doing his best to stay out of the women’s way while he worked on his morning duties. The bedrooms, staircase, and Aunt Hira’s study were all on his agenda to be cleaned, and Lance was still hoping to slip back up to the city today, so he did not waste anytime getting started.

By eleven, he had made his way to the garden. Humming to himself, Lance weeded and cleared the lawn of the first few brittle leaves that lost their luster to the autumn air, and he was glad for the manual labor. It had his heart working, chasing away the brisk chill that morning settled on any of his exposed skin - hands, ankles, the back of his neck. It would not be much longer before Marmoran winter hit, and while the frost snap was brutal when it came, Lance at least appreciated that it wasn’t as long or as intensely snow-ridden as it was in the mountains.

When he finished, Lance grabbed up a large haul of tomatoes for Hunk, hoping his friend would appreciate them; Lance still owed him in more ways than he could count on both hands.
It was hard to know exactly how long he’d been working outside, but it was long enough to start to wear him down. Lance’s back was starting to ache and his limbs strained, tense from the confusing experience of sweating in crisp air. He released a low groan, taking a quick break by stepping back to appreciate his handiwork - a well-manicured, personal Arcadia, grown and maintained and well-loved by him. It was easy to take pride in his work, even more as he grew older, as it all became a part of him. The lush, defiant grass that stayed green despite the cold, the heavy fruits and vegetables that managed through the heat of summer and into the grips of autumn, the sort of imperfect slope of the drive up to the front door… It wasn’t home, but it was something of his.

Stretching, Lance pressed his hands to his lower back, groaning with each pop of his joints. A little marimba of aches and pains radiated from the spot, and he was so absorbed in the momentary release that he almost did not notice the sound of a horse beyond the front gate.

His brows shot up high into his hairline in surprise, and watched the road - the women of the house very seldom had visitors, and when they did, it was usually someone he was sent to fetch. The approaching unmistakable clopping of hooves grew louder -- it sounded like more than one horse? -- and Lance drifted in the general direction of the gate, a mild mixture of anxiety and excitement bubbling in his stomach.

A beautiful grey mare appeared after another few moments, quickly followed by a chestnut mount behind, decked out with riders who were very clearly not your average nobles.

There was a worn-look in the polish of their mail, and the width of the shoulders suggested men of larger builds and better fit, not like that of the loose, even sarcastic nobility that would ride in perfectly clean, never-touched-a-battle-before armor. And if their conduct alone didn’t tell Lance what he was already guessing, spotting the royal insignia on one of the vestments worn by the rider in the front told him everything.

Knights.

“Oh,” the first rider slowed their trot, stopping when they spotted Lance hovering behind the gate. They weren’t wearing helmets, Lance noted. “Hello there.”

“Uh, hi?” The lanky teen waved, a bit too shocked to come up with anything witty. He’d seen a guard or two when he would bustle around the city, especially when he would make the trek to see Pidge, but never outside of the capital, and never up close.

It was just… weird.

The second man slowed as well, and with a teasing voice, called, “C’mon Takashi, don’t just stare at the poor kid.” He had brown hair and a kind smile, and Lance felt a little bit at ease from the man making light of his obvious discomfort.

The one in the front, particularly broad and with a tuft of white hair - Takashi, Lance assumed - shot a look to his fellow rider before glancing back towards Lance.

“Sorry. Right, uh, we’re from the Castle, delivering a message to the heads of houses. I assume you’re not…” his brow furrowed, and the teasing one rolled his eyes, finishing for his counterpart, “Lady Hira?”

Unable to help himself, Lance slipped out a laugh. “What gave me away?”

Both older men smiled at that, chuckling lightly, and Lance felt himself grin.

“But I do live here with her, she’s my –” he paused, considering the lengthy explanation, and just
decided to settle on the easier answer. “I- I mean, I work here. I can pass a message along?”

Teasing-Guy shrugged, and Apparently-Takashi reached into a bag attached to the horse’s hip.

“That’s fine, just make sure she sees it rather quickly. There’s a bit of a time constraint, I’m afraid,” he said as he handed a letter over the gate, and Lance moved forward to accept it. The surface of the missive was softer than he expected, almost velvety, and the wax stamp with the Queen’s Sigil was firmly planted over the center. The front of the envelope was addressed: The House of Lady Hira Valurian.

“No, I’m just the world’s best guesser.” The teen shook the paper about. “Of course I can read.”

Teasing-Guy’s eyes squinted behind his glasses, head tilting to one side.

“Hold on a minute, are you Altean?”

Lance couldn’t stop the instinct to reach up and touch his cheek. He was born with only a single Altean marking, a bolt of shocking blue that framed his left eye, and it was as confusing as it was mystifying to most people who noticed. His dark hair and only-slightly-pointed ears usually was enough to let people assume it was some sort of magical scar, but some people - like this knight, apparently - were a bit more perceptive. He shook his head, choosing to ignore the question and instead used the opportunity to reassess the visiting knights. His lips thinned.

“It’s probably not my business, but, is there a particular reason two fully-armored knights came all the way here to hand deliver this letter?”

The knight in the back bit his lip, but it did not seem to be from nerves - he looked to be forcing down a laugh. Apparently-Takashi, however, looked stricken.

“Ah - well - er… you’re sharp, aren’t you?” Lance’s vision must be failing him, because, was the man blushing? “If you must know, we are attending to a separate errand a bit East of here. We offered to save the courier a trip, since Lady Hira is the only noble outside the Eastern walls.”

Lance was surprised by how flustered that made the first knight, so he just held up his hands dismissively. “Alright, alright, you aren’t on trial here, geez. Just curious. Kinda freaked me out seeing you come out, if I’m honest. We don’t get a lot of knights hand delivering letters these days.” He thought for a moment, adding, “Or like, ever.”

Teasing-Guy prepared his reins and lightly tapped his feet into his horse’s side. “Well, a first time for everything, then. Sorry if we startled you, we sincerely didn’t mean it. Thank you for your help.”

The guy met eyes with Apparently-Takashi, who followed after him a moment later - true to their word, they headed further East, leaving a bemused Lance in their wake.
Lance tucked the letter carefully into his back pocket, only to promptly forget about it until much later that day, when he undressed for his midnight bath.

*Shit.* He cursed himself for being scatterbrained, reminded that the knight’s implored his family see the letter quickly. Ugh. What difference does a day make, he figured? It would be stupid to wake them in the middle of the night, so Lance decided, fuck it - it could wait until morning.

And then morning came, and went, and Lance felt half-dead by the time the early afternoon arrived. The last few days had been particularly strenuous. After pissing off his aunt once, Lance made a point to be especially thorough in every task asked of him. The lack of sleep and constant work had caused him to forget all about the letter, *again,* until he walked by the spot on the floor where he sleeps, a sort of enclave just around the bend of the kitchen. His mattress, and beside it, a beautiful envelope that looked hilariously out of place around his stuff.

Lance hissed and snatched the letter up immediately, running up the stairs before he could forget *again.*

Considering the house was absurdly large for just the four of them, it was always surprisingly easy to find the women. As if a wind in a long pasture, the invisible traces of them trailed along different parts of the house, still managing to call Lance forward. Maybe it was a sense of connectedness in Alteans, or maybe it was a product of just knowing each tile of the floor well enough Lance considered talking to them -- *no, no, nope! That's something a crazy person does* -- but he could always find them in mere seconds.

Today was particularly easy, as they’d gathered in the music room. The delicate sound of a piano -- perhaps a rendition something vaguely Altean he’d heard before? -- filled the house with something purer than the air itself.

Lance took a steadying breath before carefully stepped into the room, making his presence known.

Nadia sat in Adéla’s lap next to Aunt Hira, the three speaking in murmurs on a cushiony couch while Emely sat at the piano bench, her pristine carmel curls cascading down her back as she focused on her fingers.

“Um,” Lance cleared his throat, keeping his spine straight and expression blank. “There was a letter for you?”

He held Aunt Hira’s gaze, even as it twisted at the corners in clear displeasure.

“When else was I supposed to come in? He wanted to say, but managed to swallow the urge.

“Got it, sorry, ma’am.”

Adéla watched him with a strange mixture of fear and smugness, which did little to ease Lance’s irritation. While neither of his cousins were explicitly cruel, their general garishness never stopped them from turning their noses up at him, first chance they could. Every remark, mannerism, the amount of distance and distaste with which they held themselves made their feelings towards him rather obvious - they felt they were too good for his company.

It ate at his nerves during the first few pheebs, but Lance has all but stopped caring by now.

Aunt Hira spoke again, seized his attention. “Well, where is is then?”
“Right, uh,” he reached into his pocket and brought it over to them, trying to send a small smile at Nadia. She waved up at him.

“For you to interrupt, I assume -- wait, is this -- you opened this?!” Aunt Hira shot up to standing so quickly Lance nearly got whiplash just watching her. “What is wrong with you?!”

Lance took a measured step away, trying to keep voice calm. “Uh… you always have me to read the mail first? To sort through for --”

“Well not if it’s royal mail - you, ugh! Unbelievable! This is what I’m talking about - this.”

She gave him a look that seemed to muster every ounce of disappointment she could, trying to burn the feeling into him with cold eyes, unblinking, for several seconds.

“I didn’t know, okay?” He crossed his arms over his chest, finally looking away. “I don’t think we’ve gotten this kind of mail since I’ve lived here…”

“That’s because you don’t think, Lance. If you would just --”

He threw up his hands, exasperated. “Does it even matter?! You’ve got the stupid letter!”

“I told you not to interrupt me!”

And in a flash of movement, so fast and so sharp a single blink would have blotted out the moment, Aunt Hira was standing right in front of him, her arm extended.

She smacked him across the face.

Hard.

Now, Lance knew being slapped like this was supposed to hurt. It was a convention in plays and books he would read, but he never really knew what to expect. At first, it was nothing, just the radiating sound of a crack when his head flew to one side. Then, it was like being sharply cut by a shallow, white-hot knife, filling up his face from the curve of his jaw and over part of his eyelid, like the muscles there had been bruised beneath the skin. The motion itself was instantaneous, creating the mucky sound of skin of skin, but the sting pulsed in time with his heartbeat, a raging tempest beneath his veins.

It took every ounce of self-control not to hiss, not to reach for his face, not to react.

Don’t, a voice soothed. It'll only make it worse.

It sounded like his mamá.

Rage hummed in the walls of the house, folding the anger in on itself. White noise crackled in the absence of words, mingling with the blood pounding in his ears, and Lance simply stared in the direction his head had been turned. Unmoving. He would not react. Not give her the satisfaction.

Finally, after a grueling thirty seconds of silence, Nadia let out a choked out sob, and everyone seemed to flinch.

Lance didn’t want to appear superior over what just happened, but let’s be honest, his aunt was the one who acted rashly, who had struck him and then consequently, the room, silent. She was the one who caused Nadia to cry.

Okay, maybe he absolutely fucking felt a little bit superior. All Lance could manage was to try as
hard as he could to keep from looking too smug.

His Aunt sighed as Nadia’s crying grew in volume, and Adéla began to bounce her on her knees to try to shush her. Warily, Eme turned her attention back to the piano, playing impossibly soft notes as the house relapsed into the fragile buoyancy, a tide returning to the tumultuous seas.

“I will need you to go to town again today,” Aunt Hira said simply, like nothing unusual just happened. Lance blinked once. Twice, for good measure, and tried to pay attention. “See our usual tailor - she will still have the girl’s measurements -- we will need gowns. Let’s see... for Emely, light purple; Adéla, white; Nadia - Nadia, sweetie, what color dress do you want to wear?”

The girl sniffled, face already puffy and red from the earlier tension, but she looked from Lance to her mother expectantly, like one of them would answer for her.

“Ummm…” The girl rubbed her nose, and in a thick yet small voice, asked, “Red?”

Lance couldn’t help but smile; his favorite color.

“Red, then, for Nadia.” Aunt Hira’s voice was soft, gentle as she wiped at her daughter’s cheeks. Almost comically, the woman’s attitude shifted completely when she beheld Lance, but he tried to keep his face impassive. “Gold for myself. That is all. You may go now.”

Aunt Hira’s command was sweeter music to his ears than the piano could ever exude, and Lance turned on the spot and strolled out without a word. His feet guided him without much thought, carrying him all the way to the back door, through the kitchen and the house and past those walls and away from the look on his aunt’s face -- all of it, disappearing when he walked past the threshold.

He sneezed again -- twice -- like always. All of the stale air was forced from him, literally, and he gasped in easy autumn air.

That. That switch from within to without, that was all it took for Lance’s composure to slip faster than water through a child’s cupped fingers. All at once, his hands were shaking, his cheek was sore, his breathing had become ragged. The emotional turmoil of that moment had rooted in his heart, and now that he could think clearly again, the vines laced around his ribs and squeezed. Honestly, Lance couldn’t tell if it was a good thing, or a bad thing, but it was definitely a Thing. So much feeling, all at once.

And then he was running.

At no particular moment, during the sudden urge to run, Lance found the general notion of pain to actually be rather refreshing. It reminded him how much it meant to be alive.

For once, the throbbing in his calves and the new blisters rising on his heels did not bother him, but spurred him to go faster. He all but ran to town, his satchel filled to the fucking brim with tomatoes, because he was going to be damned if his aunt was going to keep Hunk from making the recipe he wanted. She had effectively ruined his day -- well, she probably ruined more than that, but, Lance decided not to linger on the thought -- but she sure as hell was not going to ruin Hunk’s, too.

He stopped at the gates, his lungs demanding air in exchange for his exertion, and the crashing relief of being surrounded by humanity once again surged through him. It was so simple, standing at the
cusp of the Trading District, to remember all that he was missing.

People recognized him as he strolled down the street, and Lance smiled despite himself, waving as he dragged himself to the Garrett’s bakery. Everywhere, there were people chattering and laughing and selling their goods with smiles on their faces, and, fucking hell, Lance felt his eyes prick because it was was just unfair.

But he didn’t want to break down in front of Hunk right now. Right now, he wanted to see his best friend smile and laugh, and Lance knew that alone would improve his own mood.

Lance closed his eyes, took a long breath in, and walked into the bakery with a smile on his face.

“Did someone order something fresh and delicious?” Singing over the call of the bell, Lance grinned when Hunk appeared almost immediately with stars in his eyes.

“The tomatoes!” He cooed, and Lance scoffed.

“I meant me, but fine, those too.”

His friend practically leapt over the counter and enveloped him in a hug. “Weeee! Thank you buddy!”

Lance laughed before he knew what he was doing, and too many feelings rush up with the emotion. He had always loved hugs. All his memories of his family were a blurred myriad of affection, kisses on cheeks, back scratches, piggyback rides, and so, so many hugs. Lance didn’t know he needed one so badly until Hunk was squeezing his heart out, and he sighed happily at the security it brought.

They untangled after another squeeze, and Hunk snatched up Lance’s satchel with a mystified look in his eyes.

Mrs. Garrett called a fond hello to Lance from the back, which seemed to jostle something in Hunk’s brain.

“‘Oh, yeah.” He shook out his head and craned his neck towards the ceiling. “Pidge! Lance is here!”

“Geez, I’m right here, you don’t need to yell.” Around the far wall, from a staircase to the upstairs portion of the house, a brown-haired mess of a human being trudged down the steps. Predictably, her nose was deep into a book, and she half-waved towards Lance in greeting.

“How you been, Pidgeon?” Lance asked, watching Hunk bustle around the store, unpacking tomatoes and pulling out all manner of food preparation.

“Same old.” Pidge took a seat on the bottom step, the portrait of disinterested, as Hunk zoomed back and forth from the front of the store to the back, nesting a chef’s haven at one edge of the counter. “Matt’s a fucking idiot. Dad’s cool. Mom’s so stressed she’s gonna have a heart attack.”

Lance furrowed his brow, voice suspicious. “Oh? What’d you do to your Mom?”

“And what’d you do to your face?” She retorted, shooting him a look and presenting her own cheek in such a way that could only be described as… cheeky.

Lance turned away, willing down his embarrassed cheeks. He came to town to forget about home for awhile.
“Nothing. Just, hurt it this morning.”

“Mmm.” Pidge didn’t sound convinced, but dropped it. Lance wasn’t sure if he was glad or annoyed by that.

He returned to watching Hunk chop and dice and totally immerse himself in his element, standing at the counter while he fixated on every detail of the food. It was oddly therapeutic, and the silence was comfortable as Lance let his mind wander.

While Lance would never admit it, he was secretly happy to find Pidge here as well. He saw her even less often than he saw Hunk, as she lived on the other side of the city, and his impulsive decision turned into a serendipitous occasion. Now, if Lance could just fully clear his head, loosening the vice around his heart, he would definitely be better able to handle his aunt’s aggression.

Pidge and Hunk probably saw each other often, now that Lance thought about it. They’d known each other since before he moved here, and while Lance felt (or at least, liked to think) that his friendship with Hunk was deeper, Pidge was just around more than he could be. Seriously, somehow, her impish hands seemed to have nails dug into every part of the city - a super scary fifteen year old, in Lance’s opinion. How she did it, he had no idea - perks of having a big shot Dad, maybe.

“I’m bored,” Pidge announced, sighing and snapping their book closed. “You guys wanna go somewhere? I’ve been wanting to break into the castle.”

Lance stifled a laugh, but it was hard to tell if that was a joke. “I mean, I’d normally be down, but I’ve actually gotta go. I’m heading to the tailor -- you guys heard about this ball or whatever?”

Hunk shrugged, already too invested in his culinary creation to give the question his proper attention. On the other hand, Pidge released a sound that was almost inhuman, something like a groan and a wail.

“Geez, what?” Lance took a step away, afraid to catch whatever ungodly virus she had contracted to give rise to that noise.

A flash of anger reflected off her glasses, and Lance knew that better men than he would perish under that glare.

“It’s fucking stupid,” she explained. “My family got invited, cause of Dad or whatever, and my Mom wants me to go.”

Sympathetically, Hunk chimed in. “That doesn’t sound so bad. Don’t you, like, know the Prince?”

“Doesn’t matter. I mean, yeah, he’s alright, but he’ll be busy with all the fuckery.” Pidge hunched down on the ground at this point, staring at the floor as if committing the woodgrain to memory. “And I’ll have to…”

Her voice trailed off for a moment, and Lance leaned down. “Sorry?”

“...dress up.”

“Ohhhhh,” Hunk said, halfway between a laugh and a gasp. The look Pidge sent him quieted him effectively. “S-Sorry. I mean, yeah, I can imagine that’ll be weird for you. Will you… wear a dress?”

Lance couldn’t keep from laughing, though he tried, at the image of Pidge Holt in a fucking dress.
“Lance, so help me, I’ll kill you in your sleep.”

“You wouldn’t,” he let out between breathless giggles, holding the counter for support.

Pidge blinked. “Wanna bet?”

“Please, guys, no murdering,” Hunk pleaded in his very best why-do-we-even-have-to-have-this-conversation voice. “Especially not each other.”

They lulled into easy conversation for a bit after that, and Lance could not be more grateful for such a normal, light distraction. The idea of Pidge going to a ball was endlessly entertaining, and there was a twinkle in Hunk’s eye when he talked about the prospect of so many royals being in the city. His mother tuned into their banter at that point, sharing a pleasant story in which she claimed to have met the Altean King the last time they’d visited. Pidge and Lance shared a look that very much read yeah, and I’m King Goffery the Infirm, but they wouldn’t dare say it to Hunk’s mother.

“Alright, alright,” Lance pushed himself away from the counter, looking at his nails distractedly. “While I know my boyish charm is irresistible, I really gotta get going. Still need to put in an order in for those ball gowns.” He wiggled his eyebrows towards Pidge, who hurled her book square at his head. Lance’s reflexes, honed from growing up in a house with so many siblings, saved him from taking the brunt force, but it smacked him in the temple.

“Go away,” Pidge declared.

Lance pouted. “Hunk, this is your place, you’re going to really let Pidge kick me out?”

“I mean, you did just say you were leaving… so…”

“Cruel betrayal,” he sniffed. Cupping a hand, Lance yelled over their heads, “Bye, Mrs. Garrett! Thank you for being a beautiful, amazing, talented person!”

“Suck up,” Pidge observed, and Lance aimed a kick at her ankles. Like the gremlin she was, her twig legs managed to evade him. “By the way, I remember you were asking about those astrology charts. If you still want, you can come by this week - Matt managed to dig them out of some godforsaken hole.”

“Oh.” Lance tilted his head, almost having forgotten he’d asked Pidge about it. A fog of memory breached his consciousness, recalling a day that had not been totally unlike that afternoon.

Pidge begged Lance and Hunk to join her, to alleviate her boredom for a few hours, during a very typical stop at the bakery. He was all for it, but Hunk seemed hesitant to leave work.

Of course, the clandestine figure that was Hunk’s mother was, she took that exact moment to appear in the doorway, catching just enough of the conversation to dismiss them all from her sight immediately.

“You need to be kids for at least a little longer,” she chastised. Lance appreciated the woman’s doting smile when she ruffled her son’s hair -- and, he would admit, his chest swelled when she did the same to him without skipping a beat.
“Go on. If I see you here again tonight I’m tossing out all of the leftover mousse.”

The trio wandered the streets for a little while, chatting and teasing while they listed to random booths and stopped to admire a particularly good game of liar’s dice outside of bar. Lance tried to chat with a few pretty human women who had hung outside of the double doors, and they giggled at the right moments and one of them even touched his bicep oh so casually, but when he looked away to catch something Hunk said, they vanished.

Inevitably, as the sun went down, they ended up at Pidge’s house. Lance had to gulp down the ever-present shock that came along with it. The place was a fucking mausoleum, not a house.

Mercifully, Pidge led them through the side of the building rather than the front, taking a quicker set of stairs directly to her room. It was a high perch to be planted right in the middle of the city, and the open balcony made for a wonderful view of the sky. Every surface was littered with paper, drawings, tomes thicker than Lance’s head, half-built devices that frankly scared him a little, and overturned plates and goblets. This was more his style, he had to admit.

Hunk plopped down on the bed as soon as they got there, stretching his legs out. “Ugh, my feet are killing me.”

“Sameeeeee,” Lance sighed dramatically, collapsing over Hunk like he’d dropped dead. “I feel like I haven’t sat down all day.”

When he thought about it, Lance realized that he actually hadn’t.

Pidge ignored them, clearing a path towards her balcony immediately, bending over a beautiful telescope. It was dark green, polished from end to end with a flawless lense that seemed more far more opulent than just concave glass. It captured Lance’s attention entirely, and he floated after Pidge despite his protesting feet.

“Whoa, Pidge, did you make this?” He didn’t even care to disguise his admiration; the thing was a work of art, and totally out of place in her hellish disaster of a room.

Proudly, and unironically, Pidge smiled. “Yep. Matt and I made a pair. He’s been trying to map some stars, especially activity over here, look…”

And she let Lance look, and he looked, and looked, and looked. Lance could have stayed there all night. The sky was not just beautiful, but powerful. It was greater than life itself, massive and infinite, and more than he could handle in the best sort of way. It filled him with a lightness, to behold the stars, to imagine each one having a name, a history, a place and a purpose in the grand scheme of reality. Even the darkness was captivating, like ink stained paper, the depth of the accidental paint strokes between everything the universe had to offer was like a dream he never wanted forget.

Lance refocused on the bakery, using the smell of dough and, oddly, basil, to ground him. After getting caught up in stargazing, he’d asked Pidge if he could see some of the stuff she and her brother had come up with sometime. Frankly, Lance was sort of surprised -- surprised that she remembered, and even more surprised that she enlisted her brother’s help to find it.

“Oh. Wow, yeah, okay! I’ll come by sometime this week. Well, probably. Is there a specific day, or…?”
Pidge dismissed him with a hand. “Not really. If I’m not home just ask Matt, he’ll know where it is.”

After that, Lance demanded Hunk stop working for a few seconds to hug him, and he gave Pidge a playful *pat-pat*, which she seemed to accept, albeit begrudgingly. Lance escaped back into the revolving door of life that was the Marmoran capital. The tailor was on the far end of the Trade District, where vendors began to transition over into speciality artisans, and the streets thinned considerably.

The tailor, a short little Arusian named Moontow, was exasperated when Lance arrived with four new orders, and he couldn’t say he blamed her. By what she cited as an *extreme coincidence* and a very conspicuous roll of her eyes, Lady Hira and her daughters were not the only women in the capital who had suddenly requested new raiments with only a week to make good on the orders. Lance apologized, because, shit, he couldn’t even imagine how stressful that must be, but she accepted the request all the same.

“Lady Hira’s lucky she’s got such a cute nephew,” she said with a coy wink, and Lance smiled unabashedly at the compliment. “I’ll have them done, but it’ll be a close call. Pick them up Thursday. And I won’t mince words - I’m upcharing for everything this week because of the ball. That okay?”

“Sure, sure,” he rubbed his chin. “Like, I’m pretty sure Aunt Hira would sell the clothes off her back if it meant Adéla or Eme marrying into royalty, ya know? So go all out, blah blah.” He waved a hand, and Moontow laughed appreciatively.

Just as Lance turned to walk out the door, the girl surprised him with a question. “And what about for you?”

“...What about me?” He paused, confusion quirking his brow.

Moontow looked about as puzzled as he felt. “Aren’t you going? Do you need a suit?”

“Oh.” Lance blurted, laughing before he could stop himself. “*Ohhh*. God, no, I’m not invited, nor am I exactly one to mingle with the *nobility*.” To prove his point, he finished the claim in a ridiculously high, snooty-sounding voice, but Moontow was nonplussed.

“Aww. Are you sure? I can put your order in with these, it’s just one more request - I can handle it, you know,” she put a hand on each hip and studied him, as if being doubted.

Lance sighed dramatically, casting an arm over his forehead. “Moonie, Moonie, Moonie. As much as I know the Prince would not be able to resist the charm of your’s truly, it would be unfair to use my good looks to sweep him off his feet when the whole continent is going to be trying to swoon him. I’m just too handsome, I’m afraid. I’ll have to pass.”

She considered him for a moment, but her serious expression turned to a fond smile. “Well, fine. I’ll get started on these for the ladies. Don’t be a stranger, okay?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Lance felt himself smiling, waving as he was already on his way out the door.

[KEITH]
There was all sorts of propriety and patrician that went into being the son of the Queen, and Keith had to admit, this was one of the things he hated the most.

Standing at the castle steps, bright and early, Keith watched the signature carriages of the Balmerans roll into the courtyard. His mother was perched to his right, looking serious and regal, and Shiro was just as stoic at his left - always alert, looking for danger, gauging potential threats.

Keith gave up trying to fix his face into anything in particular, instead staring blankly ahead, waiting for the cue to welcome their visiting allies.

He’d done this long enough that the greetings fell from his mouth without him having to even think, all the right kinds of false sincerity, and the interactions filled with gracious bows and lots of kissing cheeks. Keith didn’t care for the close proximity or physical responsibilities of being a good host, but such was the life of a Prince.

By the time the procession and pleasantries were done away, Keith found himself sort of uselessly floating around the halls as the Balmerans were shown to their rooms - he wasn’t really needed here, but he didn’t have anywhere else he was supposed to be.

There was a sudden voice at his ear, making him almost jump out of his skin.

“A lot has changed since the last time I was here.”

Keith gripped his chest to still the jackhammer in his ribs, glaring at his guest. “I don’t know, you still seem to be able to sneak up on me without a problem.”

Lady Shay smiled at Keith’s apparent annoyance, and he had to resist the urge to roll his eyes.

“For one, you’ve grown. Maybe you’ll be as tall as me or Rax, soon,” Shay commented, falling in step beside Keith as he wandered.

“Isn’t the average height of a Balmera, like, seven feet tall?” He quizzed, shooting her a look. He was at least a head and a half shorter than she was.

“Something like that.” It was clear she was ribbing him, and Keith actually found that he didn’t mind. It had been at least three years since Shay’s family had come to court, and while he and Shay had never been particularly close, she was royalty. There was at least some common ground.

They chatted comfortably for a little while, and the stone in Keith’s stomach lightened marginally. It was nice to have some company that he could talk to mindlessly, unlike Shiro or his mother - their interactions were nice, but it always felt too intentional, especially lately. Always tense, always twinged by guilt and concern. Talking with Shay about their versions of normal was just… nice.

Keith didn’t have to do much in the way of conversation, which he was thankful for - Lady Shay was content to babble on about the trip from the South, and the wonderful yield they’d had in their crystals for the season. She covered everything from her family to his, foods and friends and foes all tumbling as naturally from her lips as water from the falls.

At some point, Keith interjected with a question that nagged him since they first started wandering.

“Where is Rax, by the way?” Usually, Shay and her brother were inseparable, so his absence seemed suspect.
It took Lady Shay a moment to respond, and Keith registered that their idle chatter had carried them away from the fanfare of the welcoming committee, taking them in an almost perfect loop around the atrium overlooking the entrance hall. Peering over the edge, he could see servants still unloading things from the Balmeran procession through the grand double doors, open wide to the world beyond.

Lady Shay’s expression was blank while Keith’s attention flitted away, but she ended up shrugging. A hum escaped her as she approached a nearby window. “He’s been fussing over Grandmama lately. She’s, you know, really old.”

Well, there was certainly truth to that - the Queen looked positively ancient when she teetered out of the carriage only an hour ago. It made him feel guilty that they’d made the trip for his facade of a party, especially after seeing how frail the woman had looked.

Keith tried to remain impassive, channeling his best Shrio as he crossed his arms and said, “Well, uh, it wasn’t - you didn’t have to come, this isn’t really that big of a deal.”

Shay gave him a sympathetic smile and rested a hand on his shoulder. “Ah, well, she... wanted to come. It was important to her to see you. We aren’t sure how much longer she has.”

“Ooh,” Keith breathed barely audible. He felt incredibly dumb. Of course. The Queen was dying. So much for playing it cool - the guilt seeped from him like an open wound.

Sensing Keith’s discomfort, Lady Shay withdrew her hand and looked back out into the lawn. “That’s actually why I wanted to talk to you alone. Grandmama asked we not tell anyone, but…” Keith watched her expression falter from its usual cheer, turning uncertain.

“But, I just - I don’t agree!” She balled her fists. “It’s just not right. I can’t pretend everything is normal when it’s not. I would feel just, I don’t know, really guilty if you didn’t get the chance to spend a bit of time with her because everyone insists on keeping it as some big secret. They don’t think she’ll survive the winter, and this was the last chance she has to see all the other courts, and I just...” She cringed as the words left her mouth. “I’m sorry, Your Highness. That was - this - I’m probably being really inappropriate…”

“Er, no, that’s okay.” Keith said with raised hands, not exactly sure if he should comfort her - was she angry? Sad? It was hard to tell, and he wasn’t exactly an expert empath. He tried to jog his memory of anything he could possibly say to relate. “I… er... I don’t like keeping secrets, either? Don’t feel bad or anything. I’m glad you told me.”

At that, Shay’s attention flashed up from the window, holding his gaze for a moment before her features eventually softened. “Thank you. I’m... I’m sorry, we’ve all just been emotional messes back home with this, and seeing you about to come of age, and all of this it’s just... It feels like the world is shifting beneath me. Things were the same for so long, and now, it’s…”

Keith frowned, hearing the tightness in her voice. It sounded as if she was trying not to cry.

“Different. Everything’s different, all at once. What a fucking nightmare,” he added the last part with a bit of snark, but Shay smiled at the change of tone in the conversation. “Glad I’m not the only one… They say misery loves company or something, right?”

Keith chuckled in lieu of an answer; he truthfully didn’t put much stock in old sayings. Tradition, lately, was sort of pissing him off.
“Oh, right, speaking of company - aren’t the Alteans arriving today as well?” Lady Shay mused.

It took no small amount of discipline to stop from groaning, and his consciousness gave him an approving pat on the back. It slightly bothered him how much his manifested consciousness was just Shiro, but Keith figured he still had another week for the existential crises to hit.

The remainder of the day passed in a blur of colors and sensation, if Keith were being honest. He’s sure he said the proper greetings and laughed at an unfunny joke told by King Alfor, maybe rolled his eyes at Shiro or eventually found Rax and said his hellos, but, that’s all forgotten by the time he sinks into the silken sheets that night. He hardly remembers the Alteans arrival or the food at the welcoming feast, but he remembers the distinctly fresh and airy scent of each Altean he greeted, remembers the satisfying warmth brought on by cloves and cinnamon at dinner; he knows the sky was bright blue when they arrived, cloudless and infinite, and that it became indigo soon after, spotted with a million tiny stars and the pale, illuminate curves of their two moons.

Keith remembers being exhausted, and yet, laying awake for most of the endless night. *This was real. It was really happening.*

Eventually, the needs of his body drowned him in slumber, but it was a far cry from restful.

Adam found Keith on his way down to breakfast, and occupied the place beside him while they walked - as a friend, not a guard. He was constantly being tailed by two guards anyways, and Keith had gotten extremely good at ignoring their existence.

“Morning, your Highness,” Adam said lightly, both brows raised at Keith. “Sleep well?”

Keith tried to think of something witty, but his brain was not quite up to functioning speed. He settled on a flat, “Uh, no.”

Adam looks like he has to stop himself from laughing. “You look it. Would it be a bad time to mention that you’ve got a full agenda today?”

At that, the Prince just groaned and allowed his head to fall back on his shoulders.

“It would be a bad time, yeah.”

“Well, too late. Sorry, I needed this break to be honest; the Altean advisor has basically gabbed my ear off all night and morning already. He’s a nice man, but…” Adam’s lips thin in a way that Keith cannot help but mirror.

“That’s Sir Coran, right?”

“Yes. Very nice. *Too* nice, almost.” Adam hummed, thoughtful. “And that’s coming from me, and I literally will spend the rest of my days with *Takashi, Sir NiceToAFault.*”

Keith cannot help but laugh at that, because it’s true. Shiro was usually too cheery for Keith’s taste, but Sir Coran was a whole different plane of positivity. Even with the brief conversation Keith held yesterday with the Altean advisor, his orange mustache bounced with each word he spoke, like a flashing sign that warns of his boisterous personality.

They were approaching the dining hall, the din of shuffling feet and jovial voices, giving Keith pause. The staff was really pulling out all the stops for this, and Keith watched as and endless stream of maids and servants slipped to and fro from the kitchens, staying as close to the outer walls as possible. Some of the serving staff managed polite smiles, doing their best to hide their stress as they
practically danced around the chaos, constantly refilling goblets, trays and plates between chattering royalty and rushing servants. Keith made a mental note to thank the staff vehemently once this was over.

Adam raised a hand as Keith made to enter the hall, nodding to the guards that were stationed by the door in greeting. A bit surprised, Keith stopped, and Adam took out a folded leaflet from his pocket.

“As about that full agenda you’ve got” he began coolly, indicating the paper in his hands. It looked like a sort of handwritten timetable, and Keith studied it for a moment. “I thought you would want to know what you’re getting yourself into.”

Breakfast & entertainment; Break to prepare for departure; Capital Tour - Artisan district (+ weaponsmith) and Trading District, Northern ridge, Holt’s Arboretum, Willfully Ignore Keith Sneaking off with Pidge; Cover for him, Cover for him, Cover for him; Dinner...

Keith stopped, opening his mouth in surprise. He was already halfway through forming the question when Adam nudged him pointedly in the ribs.

“Hey, *blame* Takashi.” His eyes flicker up towards the guards. “It’s his fault you’re so busy, signing you up for all of this. *Sheesh.*”

A small smile broke across Keith’s face with understanding, looking back down at the list. He followed the tip of Adam’s finger to a note scrawled into the bottom of the parchment.

*Hi, if you’re reading this, it’s supposed to look like a list of what I’ll be doing today. And it is!*

Shiro’s handwriting is fucking atrocious. Keith beams at it anyways.

*Please note that I am harboring an unspeakable amount of anxiety over this afternoon… but I know you need a break, so, have fun!*

Adam folds the paper and tucks it back into his pocket, giving Keith a measured look. “He was the one who insisted I come and, ah, remind you; he’s busy this morning preparing for the whole thing with the other kingdoms’ guards. A security personnel meeting, or something.”

Keith needn’t even look at him to see the eye roll that went with those words. Considering Adam himself was a knight, it was always refreshing to hear him make light of the absurdity of their lives.

“Thank you.” Keith said, and he meant it in more ways than one. He hoped Adam could tell.

The man adjusted his glasses with a grin of his own, leading them into the dining hall. “You’re going to give Takashi a stroke on of these days.”

“Hey!” Keith retorted with false indignation, lip twitching. “It’s not my fault Shiro is… who he is.”

Adam barked a laugh, covering his mouth in vain to stop himself.

“No, but I guess I wouldn’t have him any other way.”
The knowledge that he would have some time today - just a chance to do what he wanted - was enough of a comfort to have him breezing through the morning. His conversations were less forced, his smiles felt more genuine, and when they eventually made their way outside to depart, Keith managed to corner Shiro.

“Hey,” was all he greeted. “Um… I talked to Adam.”

Like the annoying, lovesick fool he was, Shiro sighed happily. “I envy you.”

After dragging a hand down his face, Keith decided to keep things discreet, just smiling and nodding before moving to his horse.

“I owe you one.”

Shiro shook his head and said something in return, but Keith missed it in the clopping of hooves and creaking of carriages. It didn’t matter, though, because Keith was determined to pay him back anyways.

Their pace from the castle, leading down into the capital, was agonizingly slow. Keith’s mare was practically untamable, as most of the stablehands would complain quietly when they thought he couldn’t hear, but she suited Keith just fine. She had an auburn burn of to her chestnut coat ran down her mane, and in the comfortable midday sunshine, she practically glowed beneath him. Keith stroked her gently to keep her from leading them off, knowing she wanted to speed ahead, race, jump, strain herself til they were both breathless, but now was not the time.

Maybe later.

They stopped through the trade guilds that littered the streets on the southside of the capital, unmounting to linger from shop to shop as the Alteans and Balmeras murmured excitedly at the diversity. It was one of the things Keith did appreciate, being a the literal center of all of these different cultural worlds -- Marmora had its own take on everything, gleaning the best parts of each empire’s wares. From Galran weaponry reinforced by Altean magic, or Arusian vestments with Balmeran inlaid crystals, it was home, and it was built on the backs of his people. His people.

“Well, Prince Keith,” a voice beside him roused him from his thoughts as they set off for the trading district. “I have to give my best on your armorer - their work was just lovely.”

Princess Allura’s smiles were always disarming, and almost frustrating - especially now. They both knew that they were now more or less betrothed, but it did not stop her from completely haling him with her candor and humility.

“Thank you, Princess,” he replied, unable to keep the swell of pride that rose in his chest, making his ribs feel swollen. Keith met her eyes, gaze lingering on her very-Altean wares, decked out in a resplendent set of cream-colored riding clothes, lovely and completely impractical. The idea of wearing white while trying to do anything made Keith cringe, and he thanked some tiny star of fate in the universe that his family’s colors were in the favor of utilitarianism - black and purple. Otherwise, she seemed just as much the part of Princess as ever, hair a half-bun of cascading waves, eyes crinkling with sincerity, posture somehow intimidating.

“Forgive me as it has been a few years, but I recall there was a bakery we stopped at the last time we were here.” Allura tilted her head to one side, still looking at Keith. “I was hoping to visit again. The memory of those Shoom fruit pies have kept me up many a night, and I simply must have one again.”
In truth, Keith didn’t explicitly remember that detail of the last time King Alfor and his family visited, but it sounds like something they would have done. On the contrary, it came as no surprise that Allura remembered - she was smart, and sharper than people gave her credit for.

“Hmm, if it was anywhere,” Keith tapped his chin. “Than it was probably the Garrett’s. It’s almost unfair how good their stuff is.”

Allura snapped her fingers. “Ah, that’s right! The name is definitely familiar. Would you mind if we stopped off?”

He let out a short of laugh. “Of course not? This tour is supposed to be for you and the Balmearans. I live here.”

“Oh, of course,” Allura bubbled with a laugh of her own. “Apologies. I’m just, I always feel overwhelmed in Marmora. I’ve brought some friends this time and I promised we would try the Shoom pies... Romelle, come here!”

Over her shoulder, the Princess turned around and waved a hand forward, and Keith followed her motion to spot a blonde girl, perhaps a year or so younger than Allura, but likely older than Keith.

“Prince Keith, this is my companion, Lady Romelle. She’s journeyed with us from Altea - this is her first time in Marmora.” Allura introduced her, the model of diplomacy, and Keith did his best to wave politely. The girl looked white as a sheet, her Altean markings stark against her pallor complexion.

“Hello, your Higherness! I- I mean, High-ness.” Romelle sputtered, laughing too hard at her own faux-pas. “A pleasure to meet you - I’ve heard so many things. Good things - good things, of course!”

Amused, Keith sort of smiled and met eyes with Allura. She laid a sympathetic hand on Romelle’s arm. “Don’t be so nervous, the Prince isn’t going to bite…” She smirked towards Keith. “Tell me you are not going to bite, right?”

“Geez, no, what kind of person do you think I am?”

The blonde Altean rubbed her face, clearly embarrassed. “I - yes, of course. I’m sorry. Just, nervous. I’m not used to being around so many people and so many royals and…”

“Shh, you are fine,” Allura comforted, and Keith noted her hand still rested on Romelle’s arm. “And we’re going to try those Shoom fruit pies. Oh, sweet Oriande, they are amazing.”

The blonde girl moved her own hand atop the Princess’s for a moment, smiling appreciatively.

Oh.

After a beat, they drew apart, and Allura went back to chattering like nothing had happened.

Allura was smarter than people gave her credit for, indeed. She had planned the whole conversation as a way of introducing him to Romelle, and it was quickly clear that Romelle was… not just a regular friend. The pink that stained Princess Allura’s cheeks when they spoke, and the numerous brushes of their arms or hands against each other while riding… It was entirely chaste, and yet, Keith had never seen his childhood friend look at someone like she was now.

It was how Shiro looked at Adam, or the tone of his mother when she spoke of his father; the overwhelming expressiveness that overtook them, like someone threw open the windows to a dusty
chamber and newfound light poured into their very being. A stubborn candle, straining to keep the
darkness of a room from swallowing the last light, they were fiercely unafraid to be so vulnerable.
Keith could not understand it. How -- why, when it would be so easy to be hurt? Yet, the signs were
all there, etched into their faces, voices, mannerisms, everything - they were in love.

Keith felt a little sick, reminded again that he was supposed to technically propose to Allura at the
end of the next week. Princess Allura was in love with this girl, and because the Galra couldn’t leave
well enough alone, they had to marry, form an alliance, and fuck everything up for the both of them.

Annoyance drove him to coax Red a little faster down the cobbled roads, eventually leading the
whole convoy to the trading district.

As promised, Keith directed the Princess to the Garrett bakery that she so fondly remembered, and he
watched with a strained smile as she grabbed Lady Romelle by the hand and dragged her inside.
Nearby, Keith observed the rest of the procession list about -- Shiro was showing around a large part
of their party, stopping at a vendor that sold game and meats; Adam was striking up a conversation
with a dealer in wines and ales, Coran and King Alfor seemed to be swept up in a conversation
about, of all things, the price of pumpkins, with an old woman who seemed to give exactly zero
fucks about the fact that they were both members of high society. Her stern brow and quick hand
smacked at Coran’s wrist when he tried to pick one up, and the King ended up cackling in his face
over the whole ordeal.

Eventually, the role of bystander became a little awkward, so Keith trailed after the others to the
bakery, at least preferring to be in an enclosed space than be subjected to dozens of watching,
curious eyes. He stepped in to an immediate incursion of his senses, as if the air was stolen from his
lungs and replaced by a soft mist, infused with bright fruits and yeast and chocolate. It was positively
intoxicating, and all at once he wondered why the hell he didn’t come here more often -- there was a
reason it had the reputation for the best in the Capital.

At the counter, to his surprise, he saw Lady Shay. She was speaking excitedly to one of the
employees, a dark-skinned young man with a smile that took up his whole face, sporting a yellow
bandana to keep his bangs from his face, and they laughed quietly at some shared joke. On the other
end of the counter, a woman that was so clearly the owner, and the boy’s mother, stood with her
arms crossed beside Allura and Romelle. Madam Garrett, Keith presumed. She was broad like the
one speaking to Shay, but her face was less glaringly happy. Not that she looked upset, but, Keith
felt like the guy with the banada looked absurdly-thrilled, over-the-moon, stupidly-happy. This
woman just looked… proud.

“Oh!” Keith heard Shay’s voice, and turned. She was waving him towards her end of the counter.
“Prince Keith, you must meet try these. The young man insists that we sample it.”

Opposite the display, Keith notes a nametag -- Hunk -- and watches his smile falter for a moment,
like he’s unsure of the situation.

Keith figured he made the guy uncomfortable, much to his dismay, as he often did around his
subjects. How Lady Shay managed to be so easily conversational, he would never understand.

But, as fast as it flickered, the smile on Hunk’s face returns, if not grows even larger than before.

“Oh, uh, wow. Hi, your Highness! I would be honored. I’m trying out. I didn’t
know you were all - we could have done something special, but uh. Yeah. Please do! I mean, if you
want.”

At that, Keith feels a bit of the tightness in his chest lessen, as if this young man’s simple permission
somehow cracked his hesitation in half. It was easy to admire the pride with which he spoke, regarding his work, and Keith looked down to judge it for himself.

Bite-sized cuts of bread, golden brown and slightly warm to the touch, were arranged in a pretty set of concentric circles, with two clear missing from the ensemble at Lady Shay’s hand. They smelled rich, and surprisingly savory, with something bright red with green on top. Keith picked one at random and stopped, holding it a few inches from his face.

He felt a bit of color creep up his neck, and with a small voice, asked, “Do I eat it in one bite, or…?”

The employee answered without an ounce of judgement. “Up to you! I’m a two-biter myself, cause I like to savor, but um,” he looked to Shay, who seemed to remember herself.

“Oh -- S-Shay! My name’s Shay.”

“Oh,” he smiled, turning back to Keith. “Shay here ate them in one bite… which I guess means they’re good.”

“Hunk, they are preposterously good,” she gushed, but Keith stopped paying attention and shoved the whole thing in his mouth.

After contemplating what great karma in the universe Keith did to grant him this tiny tray of, as Shay quite accurately ascribed, preposterously good food, he realized Hunk had started to ramble, a nervousness to his voice.

“Well, I mean, it’s just - it’s just bruschetta, really, a classic. But this incorporates a lot of the Puig’s style, so, it’s a little different. Thankfully I didn’t add any cheese, everyone in the city knows you’re lactose intolerant - but it was just good luck. I didn’t want to mess with the perfect freshness of the tomatoes and herbs - oh, actually, those tomatoes, my friend grows them. I swear they’re the best tomatoes I’ve ever --”

“Your name is Hunk?” Keith interrupted, partially to give the man a chance to breathe, and to confirm what the name tag already told him. Hunk’s posture straightened, and he nodded.

Keith tried to smile. “How do you feel about catering?”

Needless to say, by the time the party headed off, Keith had gotten enough information he needed to relay to the advisors planning the party. If he was going to have a party he didn’t want, surrounded by people he didn’t care to be around, he was at least going to have some decent fucking food.

Their next destination, the Northern Ridge, was both beautiful and uneventful. Keith loved this part of the city, where the bordering walls of the capital came up to the ground. The city was built around this spot as a sort of natural barrier, and the Northern tip of the capital was a plateau that butted up into the Marmoran mountains. There was a single path that led to the peak that could be reached by horse, and it expanded into a breathtaking precipice of a sharp, brilliantly alive sierra -- across the huge cavern, of course.

It was nice, of course, and Keith was feeling more at ease after his conversation with Lady Shay, Hunk, and Madam Garrett, but he was also feeling distracted. If he could just hold out for another varga, they were heading to Pidge’s -- well, the Holt Arboretum according to his list, but in his mind it was just, Pidge’s.

Grueling seconds ticked by, and eventually, finally, the procession moved towards the West, the Holt’s peculiar home easily identifiable amongst the rest. The Holt’s were, among many things, skilled scholars and valued advisers to his mother. The Father, Sam, was a friend of Shiro’s, a history
together in the Marmoran military, but Sam Holt took on a more honorary title as Commander; he was a greater asset as a researcher, scholar, and strategist than as another man with a weapon. As such, their home has taken on an increasingly peculiar appearance as time went on.

An observatory of the stars, and an errant, urban greenhouse all wrapped up in one, the building filled almost an entire city block. It was the unofficial library of the Capital, second only to the one about fifteen feet above Keith’s bed, and the whole monolith was a sprawling dome of glass, paneled like monstrous windows that reflected the heavens overhead. Though it was familiar to Keith by now -- Commander Holt and his family were no strangers to the castle -- it was still impressive.

Keith was about ready to leap from Red by the time they began to dismount, but he converted his excitement to irritable fidgeting, tapping his foot as he waited for the rest of the group to gather. He wondered where Pidge was, and how easy it would be to sneak away. Would Matt join them? Where would they go? As soon as the thought occurred to him, Keith decided it didn’t matter. He was just happy to have this chance to relax.

Chapter End Notes

aaannd for clarity's sake, cause there's a lot of montaging, here's a brief synopsis of what occurred in chronological order:
Thurs - Shiro/Adam meet Lance, go away for an "errand" *wink wink*; Keith waits around the castle, Lance gets the letter and forgets about it
Fri - (One week before the ball) Balmera/Alteans arrive, Shiro/Adam are back at the castle, Lance remembers to give Hira the letter, Hunk makes bomb bruschetta
Sat - Marmoran tour, Hunk meets Shay and Keith, and Lance... well, we'll see what he's up to next time!

our boys are gonna meet next time.

thank you for reading & for those of you who have left comments, they really warm my heart. :)


Knife Boy and the Heartthrob

Chapter Summary

In which, Keith witnesses a crime, Lance intervenes, and they go fishing. Yep. Fishing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[KEITH]

The Holt library was a mystifying, yet tragically unorganized, place. The air was heavy with the almost-musky scent of parchment and leather, with an earthly undertone of the dark wood from the shelving. It was incredibly bright during the daytime – the ceiling was a glass dome, inviting in the heavens to sort through the mess with anyone else who stumbled upon the collection.

While technically a private repository, the Holt’s encouraged people to come in as they pleased. Some books had probably been stolen over time, and others were probably so deeply buried they wouldn’t resurface in Keith’s lifetime, but that only added to the strangely chaotic beauty of the interior. Picking up any book from a shelf, pile, corner or table was about as unpredictable as the weather, and the promise of a constant mystery was oddly thrilling.

There was no real rhyme or reason to the way the place seemed to be arranged, besides that it probably suited some interest of one of the Holt’s. Sometimes it was an ancient tome on property rights with a romantic poem tucked in the margins, or a table covered with political pamphlets, a biting sonnet, and a guide on culinary tools – but the disorder imbued each visit with a sort of manifest quest to find something, even if you don’t know what you’re looking for yet. Especially then.

When Keith entered the sprawling room with the rest of the group, led by the ever-polite Colleen Holt and her husband, Commander Holt, the place was largely unoccupied – midday on a Friday was not likely the most thrilling time to pick out reading materials, he figured – but there was a light chatter that rose over the shelves and followed them around corners, just steady enough that the sound was soothing.

Little by little, Keith began to hang back from the group, picking up a book and pretending to get engrossed in it and waving the others along. Once the tour’s murmur fell out, swallowed by the general thrum of life, Keith sighed and plopped down the book. It was time to begin his quest to find Pidge; she had to know that Keith was here, and it wasn’t like she ever needed much convincing to do something she wasn’t supposed to, so he figured if he could find her, she’d take the lead on what to do.

Eventually, Keith spotted Pidge’s familiar mop of golden-brown hair, finding it passed out on a table.

Well, he found a mop like Pidge’s. Turned out it was Matt, sleeping on top of a half-finished missive with pen still in-hand.
“Matt?” Keith said in amusement, and the teenager shot up so suddenly he nearly fell back in his chair.

He blinked blearily. “Whozthere?”

“Just me.” Keith crossed his arms and watched as Matt began to regain his bearings, realizing that it was in fact the crown prince standing across the table. He snorted, shook his head, and lowered it back down onto the paper.

“Go away. Napping here.”

Keith rolled his eyes. “Wow, that’s how you talk to your Prince?”

“Oh, sorry.” Matt’s head nodded back and forth on the paper, likely smearing his forehead with ink. “Go away, your Majesty.”

“I sometimes don’t know which of you is worse,” the Prince deadpanned, referring to Matt and his wicked little sister.

“We both know it’s Pidge.” Matt waved a lazy hand above his head for a moment, but his neck shot and his eyes were much more alert this time. “Wait, if you’re here, are Shiro and Adam…?”

As a response, Keith just nodded his head in the general direction he’d seen the group moving, and Matt leapt up and turned that way. “Oh, sweet, I needed to ask them something anyways. GetOuttaMyWay!” He complained.

Keith rolled his eyes, but called after him. “Any idea where Pidge is?”

Matt gestured off in the other direction of the library, tacking on “Her room, maybe?” before he disappeared from view.

“Thanks. Big help.” He muttered to himself, glancing at Matt’s partially-finished scroll. It was written in Puigian, and Keith recognized some characters, but certainly not enough to make sense of whatever it said.

Mildly annoyed, Keith spun around and started walking the other way, snaking through some particularly narrow shelves and tracing his way back to the door. He considered calling out for Pidge, but ultimately decided against it in case a nosy Sir Coran or surprisingly deft Lady Shay were to hear and decide to pop up beside him. Sneaking off was going to require at least a minimal amount of patience on his behalf, so Keith was resigned to stalking the aisles aimlessly.

He chose a random bookcase and walked the length of it, fingers trailing over the exposed spines of dozens of tomes – so much information, literally at his fingertips, and yet there was not enough time in the universe to drink it all in. There was something humbling about that, he felt, to know how fleeting this whole marriage disaster would turn out to be. Best case, it would be a blurb in the history books, little more than that, because time and space was so much greater than his hollow heart.

When Keith succeeded to extract himself from the library without a trace of Pidge, he decided to follow Matt’s advice and try her room. He turned down a corridor and went up a floor, making a beeline for Pidge’s chambers. He knocked and waited several ticks before testing to doorknob, unsurprised to find it locked. With a literal constant stream of strangers welcome to their home to use the library or to walk the greenhouse, Keith would have been more worried if the Holt’s didn’t lock their doors.
Still, he found himself annoyed at the inconvenience, and he spotted a piece of paper that looked to have fallen from the door.

Keith bent over, squinting to read the small print.

*Yo. I’m not here. – P*

“Well, no shit,” Keith said to exactly no one. Now he had an afternoon to waste and no one to waste it with. A part of him felt pained, and he considered just going back and thanking Shiro for trying – maybe this was a sign to just suck it up and abide by his princely duties.

The group was too far gone to catch now, and Keith wasn’t too keen on getting himself lost in the library. He awkwardly shifted his weight from side to side in front of Pidge’s door, staring down the hallway. Should he just meet them at the horses? Stick around a little longer to see if Pidge turned up?

After about five doboshees of waiting, his patience made the choice for him and Keith trudged back down the stairs and to the front of the Holt compound, deciding he could use this time to bond a bit with Red. She’d been irritable that morning, evidently not caring for the slow pace of their tour… He didn’t want her sour mood to linger.

Red had always been more to Keith than just a mount. She was a true friend, a companion, a confidant. That might be a little sad, but when you’re a Prince, not many people are interested in making friends – and he means real friends, not those interested in currying politic favor or trying to court him. Of course, he had Shiro and Adam, but they were more like family than friends. Other than them, Pidge and Matt were basically all he had, but the Holts were so… bizarre… that it was sometimes difficult to connect with them. (Let’s be honest, Matt was just flat out strange, in a lovable, dorky kind of way, while Pidge was intimidatingly smart and even a bit scary at times.)

Red was different. She understood him, with her brilliant auburn tones that practically radiated beneath the sun’s rays. When Keith found her outside, he approached with a gentle, sincere smile. They had an emotional bond that even he could not quite explain, but it was always there when they rode – it was like their minds ran together in a loop, bringing out the best (and worst) parts of them both. So after the sluggish morning trek though the capital, it was no surprise that the two had fallen into a bit of negative cycle. Red was restless, so Keith had to try to calm her, which tested his patience, which made her more restless and… it wasn’t great. Still, the Prince didn’t want that negativity swelling in the air between them, so Keith told himself he would at least try to find a brush and maybe spend a bit of quality time together.

Red stood a little way outside the rest of the party’s horses, and Keith nodded briefly at some guards who had stayed behind to monitor the mounts. They appeared confused but did not question him. He quickly untethered Red and coaxed her away, walking her in easy circles like they’d done when they first began riding together.

She was an incredible creature, and while Keith wanted nothing more to hop on and ride away, he’d seen one too many a horse collapse from being overworked or neglected. The stablehands, thankfully, were all well versed in managing the castle horses, but it was still dangerously easy to overwork a horse. He would give her a chance to warm up, wander and soak in the sun before they would ride. Red wasn’t exactly fragile, (indeed, she could probably kill a man if she was angry enough,) but she was also a living creature above all else, and Keith wanted to give her the freedom to move, to chase the entropy of disuse from her legs and allow her to exert her strength. After all, Keith was familiar with the concept of being pent up.

Seeing as he’d already begun to drift, it didn’t take long for the opportunity to arise for him to lead
Red around the corner away from the guards. They weren’t exactly doing the kingdom’s most exciting task at the moment, so when the group of them slipped into inevitable banter, Keith threw his hood up and he and Red were already off.

It wasn’t a great idea to start riding her in the city, because he knew they would tear through the crowds much too quickly, but Keith also wasn’t terribly fond of the idea of walking around. He may have had his hood up, but his face was recognizable to almost every Marmoran. Keith kept his eyes low.

The western walls were nearest, so Keith guided Red in a sort of loop, skirting the city, coming to the far end of the artisan district where the quintent had begun. He preferred this part of the capital to the densely populated center, or the crowded Eastern section that was ever-busy with vendors, the artisan district had a similar feel without the chaos.

Red was moving a little quick for what was probably acceptable, but Keith allowed her to set their pace today. No one seemed particularly concerned with a hooded, hasty rider anyways. Most people out in the afternoon were likely attending to something already, not jumping at the opportunity to cast watchful eyes on passing strangers.

Well, except Keith. He was literally anything but busy, and he couldn’t stop scanning the faces of passersby or looking through shop windows – when a wayward eye did catch his, which was rare, most looked away without thinking twice, and even the two expressions that sparked with recognition didn’t get a good enough look before he was already gone, Red trotting away.

After a few doboshes of riding, the predictable pattern of their weaving through the city came to an abrupt halt just as they neared the main path that lead out of the city along the Western wall – Keith could literally see the gate open from his perch atop Red, and yet, she stopped moving so suddenly that Keith was rocked in the saddle, and his leg muscles cramped slightly in the stirrups.

“Whoa, what’s wrong?” Keith murmured, loosening the reins to run a hand down her mane. Did she get spooked by something? Wary, Keith glanced around the immediate vicinity, not spotting anything unusual at first, but Red remained planted firmly in place. Out of instinct, his hand trailed to the dagger at his hip, thumbing the pommel expectantly.

A sudden shout and slight rumble, like a body being pressed up against something, broke the tension and Keith’s adrenaline spiked. Something was happening.

All at once, maybe fifteen feet in front of him, that something unraveled right before his eyes. Keith watched as a young woman abruptly burst through the doors of what looked like an apothecary, somersaulting gracefully into the road and landing on her feet before bolting between a narrow alley on the opposite side of the street. Not a moment later, a furious old man, some part Olkarian by the looks of it, ran into the street cursing after her.

Oh, shit. Was that a… robbery? It happened so fast, it almost didn’t seem real.

Keith didn’t really know what to do, but his brain was sending off a hundred different warning bells, telling him to do something. Instincts took over, and before he could realize what was happening, he and Red were already across the street, Keith dismounting and turning to the alley. Whether Red had taken the initiative and led him there or he had asked, Keith wasn’t entirely sure, but he supposed it wasn’t important at the moment.

Ever ready, Keith gripped his blade properly this time, and prepared to enter the alley (he wasn’t worried about Red; she would not wander away, of that he was certain). The Prince only got a single foot into the shadows before being wrenched back out again.
“Whoa there, let’s calm down,” a voice said. It almost sounded amused, in the same way he expected Pidge to sound when she outsmarted him, but this one was deeper and oddly… smooth? The tone itself was almost willowy, a quality Keith didn’t even know voices could have, but it was there – the words strung together in the breath used to speak them, flowing.

Keith attempted to rip his arm away, but the grip on his elbow tightened.

“Let me go.”

“Uh, no, not until you simmer down. You’re running after someone who isn’t even a criminal. With a knife. What were planning on doing? Stabbing her?”

That was point enough to knock Keith back to reality, and he stopped struggling to free himself. His gaze fixing properly upon the person who let the girl get away.

And in an annoyingly long list of mistakes that Keith was going to make that quintet, that was his first, and probably the worst of them all.

He was met with a pair of startlingly blue eyes, complemented by warmly tanned-skin and long limbs. Dark brown hair fell around the stranger’s forehead, and it was short and a little messy, adding to the overall effortless, obnoxiously honest air with which the guy held himself. The knit of concern in his brows, the slight tilt of his head in amusement, the knowing, arrogant smirk... His face was all pointed and angular, from his nose to his ears to his sharp jaw – Kogane, he chastised. Get your shit together. Forget about his face.

(You will never forget that face, his mind suggested absolutely unhelpfully. Keith ignored... it, himself? Was he going crazy? That’s what this was, wasn’t it?)

The fact of the matter was, the thief got away, and this guy was looking like he’d just told the world’s best joke. He looked so pleased with himself.

“What do you mean, isn’t a criminal? I literally just saw her rob that store,” Keith growled, finally winning his arm back. “You just aided her getaway!”

The stranger rolled his eyes.

Rolled his eyes.

Keith was certain he’d never been so angry in his life, and that was saying something.

“Dude, relax. It’s only a crime if the stuff didn’t get paid for, right?” The guy said this so casually, like he’d just been asking Keith about the weather. The stranger, wearing a confusingly proud grin, glanced across the street to the shopkeep, who was watching them in bewilderment. Keith, meanwhile, couldn’t decide if he wanted to put this guy under arrest or punch him. Was he stupid? Was he joking? Why did he look so pleased with himself? Did his eyes always sparkle like that when he smiled? Was that marking beneath his left eye Altean, or something else? What was his name? Where did he even come from?

All of his questions went unasked, however, as the stranger just waved dismissively at him before strolling across the street.

“Hey, it’s Lubos, right?”

The apothecarian nodded, eyeing the young man for a moment before his expression changed from
apprehension to recognition, and then from recognition to confusion all in record time. Keith was unbelievably lost. Do they know each other?

“What’d she take, like, a crowns worth? Here.” He watched as the tan guy practically shoved the money at the shopkeep, who barely managed not to drop it. “Just let her off the hook, just this once, okay? I promise it won’t happen again.”

“I – well, I suppose, I – ” The old man shook his head out, seeming to settle on begrudging acceptance, and he pocketed the crown. “I’m holding you to that, lad. If she tries anything like that again, it’s on you, you hear?”

And the infuriating stranger must have said something in response, but it was too quiet for Keith to hear – now that the initial madness of the situation disappeared, people were milling about normally and the chatter drowned them out. He was stuck in front of the alley, observing the scene with a burning rage in his chest, tempered only slightly by his severe confusion.

As Keith watched, ‘Lubos’ ended up laughing boisterously at something the young man said, and just like that, all the earlier ill-will was apparently forgotten.

Who the fuck was this guy?

The answer to that question seemed to be slipping through his gloved fingers quicker than he realized. Keith watched the man and Lubos exchange something that looked like a farewell and headed their separate ways, Lubos to his shop and the guy towards the city’s exit.

And so came Keith’s second mistake of the day. He could have just left it alone. Despite being furious and confused, it was evident that whatever wrongs had just happened were completely and thoroughly righted. There was no more need to worry, no one was in danger, no one had their property stolen. The shopkeep seemed satisfied with the resolution, and all was forgiven.

But Keith didn’t leave it alone.

“Wait!” He called, barely remembering to grab Red’s reins as he jogged after the guy.

They didn’t wait, but he might not have heard Keith, either.

Keith ran a little faster, catching up with him only after they’d cleared the city walls. Somehow, his hood had managed to keep anyone – even the guards – from recognizing him. Small miracles.

Harsher than he meant to, Keith grabbed the guy by the shoulder and said, “Would you just hold on?!”

They met eyes again, and, fucking christ, this had to be a bizarre dream. Maybe he’d wake up passed out in the Holt library, like he found Matt earlier, because there’s no way this guy was a real person. People this beautiful cannot exist in real life.

“Oh, whoa… hey, are you okay?” The guy, wide-eyed, held Keith’s forearm, as he had bent at the waist to catch his breath. He had been, after all, running after him in near-full regalia, whereas this stranger was strolling around in clothes for summertime. Vaguely, he was aware that his arm was burning where the guy was holding him.

“I’m – ” fine? Confused? Pissed?

Keith didn’t know what he was at that moment, so he did what he does best. He deflected. “What was that back there?”
That didn’t seem to be the right thing to say, because the guy flinched away, eyes narrowing.

“Why? You gonna arrest me or something?”

“Er…” Blinking, Keith took a small step back now that they were no longer touching, and Red winnied slightly over his shoulder. “No. I just – ”

...

Wait.

Why did he follow this guy out of the city? He didn’t really have a good reason.

“I had… some… questions,” he said uneasily. That was true enough. He had about a million questions right now.

Now that Keith seemed less blatantly hostile, the stranger hesitantly looked Keith over, like he was checking his wares for any source of being a liar, and ultimately shrugged. He turned away and made like he was going to continue walking, glancing over his shoulder.

“I mean, sure, I’ll answer best I can, but I’ve also got stuff I need to do that can’t really wait. If you want to come with me, that’s fine.”

Keith was surprised by this reaction; he was not used to people walking away from him. That was sort of his M.O.

“Where are we going?” Keith asked, the words falling from his mouth before he really had the chance to realize he was agreeing to go with this stranger.

“I have to…” He seemed to think for a moment, brow furrowing. “Get something.”


The guy shot him a look, a trace of annoyance but with some of the earlier light returned to his smirk. “Listen, alright? I have to go off the road here, so, I’ll only ask this once. You sure you want to come along just to ask some questions? I’d hate if you ruined your clothes, pretty boy.”

The man looked up and down, pointing to Keith’s clothing, which the Prince did not appreciate. His face got hot - from anger. Definitely anger.

“I can handle myself.”

To his surprise, that response earned Keith a bubble of laughter, bright and melodic like a harp, accented by laugh lines and a sparkle in his blue eyes that sent a tingling up Keith’s spine. The lone, possibly-Altean, marking of his face seemed to wink when his cheeks turned up in a smile, and Keith found it mesmerizing to watch. Maybe this guy was magic? Some Alteans are… It would explain the tingling.

“Works for me,” the stranger’s giggles were replaced by a cocky grin, and Keith turned around to unhook his cloak. It was suddenly much too hot for it, and if he was going to be wading through the trees, he might as well not get it caught on any loose branches. Keith walked Red a little into the treeline so she wasn’t immediately visible from the road and tied off her reins, picking the most spacious spot he could amongst the trees. She didn’t seem happy about the whole thing, but did not struggle when Keith patted her gently and promised to be back.
Neither of them spoke for the first dobosh or so as they waded through the thicket of trees, both taking the time for their eyes to adjust to the cavern of nature, weak light filtering in through the breaks of overhead trees like lazy cobwebs, shining gold into a dark stain of nature above their heads.

Keith’s mind was moving a million miles a dobosh, trying and failing to figure out the right questions to ask this person. It seemed most appropriate to focus on the incident of the crime and what had happened, but before he could settle on the exact right way to start, the guy more-or-less forced Keith into the conversation.

“Okay, are you just like, following me, or did you have some actual questions? I know I’m hard to resist, but if you murder me in the forest I’m going to haunt the hell out of you, man.”

Keith surprised himself by laughing. “No, I’m not going to murder you. Well, I don’t plan on it.”

“Knife boy,” his companion hissed, referring to their encounter earlier. He took a veer in the trees where it cleared to something more like a path once again, Keith following a step behind.

“You can never be too careful,” The Prince answered, immediately mortified by how much he sounded like Shiro. He needed to change the subject before he lost his damn mind, if he hadn’t already. “Anyway. Right. Let’s start over. Who are you?”

This part of the forest was wide enough for them to walk side-by-side instead of awkwardly wading in single file through branches and over the underbrush. Keith looked out of the corner of his eye, and caught the stranger’s blue eyes looking back at him.

Another heartbreakingly beautiful smile, and he made a point of striking a pose. “Lance McClain. Local heartthrob.”

_McClain._ It wasn’t familiar.


He did not expect Lance’s response, voice a half-step lower and almost sultry. “Mmm, I don’t know, why don’t you tell me? You’re the one who has lured me into the woods all by my lonesome. Do I make your heartthrob?”

Faster than a spark catching fire, Keith felt his face flood with warmth – what the hell? Was this – was he – flirting? Even though they were alone, Keith had the mental image of Kolivan sweeping down from the trees and murdering Lance right on the spot.

“Oh my god, are you blushing?” Lance blurted, looking right at him, his bright eyes dancing in the flittering lights of the forest. Even though he hadn’t thought it possible, Keith blushed even harder in embarrassment (and, okay, maybe a little bit in fascination at Lance’s laugh). He clawed around his brain for some kind of witty comeback to defend himself, but the need was taken rather abruptly. Lance had gotten so distracted that he promptly smacked his face right into a tree branch. He staggered backwards, hands flying to his forehead, and released a strangled sound between a hiss and a groan.

Now Keith was doubled over, practically cackling at Lance’s flushed face. Even with his tanned skin, Keith could tell he was pink all over.

Lance was immediately indignant, pointing his chin high and giving a slight “hmmp,” already walking away.
It took a lot of self-control for Keith not to just stay in the forest and laugh until he died, but he managed to drag his feet after his companion deeper into the woods.

“Okay, okay,” Lance said moodily. “Let’s all laugh at Lance. So what about you? Do I get the honor of knowing your name, knife boy?”

That made the mirth die on Keith’s lips.

“What?”

“I can come up with more nicknames if you refuse. Knife boy, pretty boy, mullet boy…” Lance drawled on, but Keith hardly noticed. Keith was staring at him, watching his lips move and form words, out-of-sync with his slow understanding.

There may not have been a single time in his life Keith was asked his name before.

He had just assumed that Lance recognized him, and was too rude or – and he cringed internally for thinking it, but, – perhaps too lowly to care. But now that Keith considered it, Lance had not given him a single look of recognition, had not once addressed him by his title, and had even grabbed his arm, shoulder, and bumped hips once by accident.

Lance had no idea that Keith was the Prince of Marmora.

That was… huh.

Sure, his pride was a tiny bit wounded that this beautiful, mysterious boy had no idea who he was, but, more than that, Keith didn’t know how to handle himself like this. He had never been given the chance to make a real first impression. Everyday, people Keith did not know came up to him and put on performances that could have been in the theatre, masking themselves with false cheer and respect in their own vested self-interest.

Lance hadn’t been cloyingly nice, like a too-sweet dessert, but he actually laughed at him. With him. If anything, the guy seemed amused, if maybe a tiny bit annoyed that Keith had followed him, but… it was sort of… nice?

A shudder of dread quickly chased all that away when he realized he still had yet to answer. Lance just asked him his name, and surely, all the genuine congeniality up to this point would vanish the tick Keith said the words. Should he lie? Before Keith knew it, he was starting to grow panicked.

Lance, evidently observant, could tell that something was wrong.

“Hey, uh, I was just kidding, you know? I mean, I can tell you’re a noble…” Lance gestured to Keith’s clothes, but didn’t meet his eye. “If you can’t tell me for like… status reasons, I get it.”

“N-No! It’s not that,” Keith blurted. “I just – ugh. It’s complicated, I want to tell you but, I just…”

“Man, relax.” Lance stopped walking, resting a hand on Keith’s shoulder, again. “I told you it’s okay. Just breathe.”

Now he felt even worse. Why the fuck was this guy being nice, flirting with him, and pissing him off? Just who did he think he was?

Local heartthrob, a voice in his head answered.

Fuck off, Keith replied.
“I… yeah, okay. I’m sorry. Really. It just, might be better if I don’t answer.” Keith eventually admitted.

Lance smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes, and they resumed walking. Keith felt like a fucker, because now the conversation had dried up, and it was awkward. He made it awkward. Fuck, why does he always make things awkward? Also, an even more fucked up part of his mind questioned, why should he even care? Lance was sort of right, that nobles didn’t really rub elbows with commoners, but that’s not why Keith couldn’t tell him, and it would be easier if Lance was just an asshole in return, but no. He was subjecting Keith to so much fucking sincerity at once.

Watching his feet to make sure he didn’t trip, Keith took a steadying breath and broke the silence. “A-Anyways, I really just wanted to know what happened back there. At that shop, I mean.” Annoyance crept back into his tone. “Why did you pay for what that thief did when she clearly stole from that guy?”

Lance did not answer at first. Keith considered pushing it, but decided to bite his tongue until Lance was ready. He’d been enough of a dick already.

When the answer came a dobosh later, Lance’s voice was gentler than Keith expected. “Her name is Nyma.”

“…Nyma?” Keith raised a brow, and Lance sighed.

“Yes. She’s… not a bad person, I promise. What she did was stupid, but I also know she wouldn’t have taken that stuff if it wasn’t something she absolutely needed, and absolutely couldn’t afford. I could, so I stepped in. I’ve met Lubos a few times, enough that he remembered me, thank god.” Lance chuckled and shook his head. “Things could’ve gone pretty bad, otherwise. Couldn’t let her get stabbed by mullet over here.”

Keith didn’t realize his jaw had fallen open, and he tried to compose it into something a little more dignified. In his defense, that was not what he expected Lance to say. He took a moment to process this new information, and Lance’s role in the whole situation, and fixated upon perhaps the stupidest part of the entire explanation.

Words spilled out of his mouth, like a true Prince, a model of elegance.

“I don’t have a mullet.”

Lance snorted and knocked into his shoulder. “Yeah, you kind of do. It’s pretty terrible.”

Glaring, Keith was ready to retort when the sound was choked from him. Lance placed a steady hand in front of them, halting their walk. Keith could practically feel the heat of him through his shirt.

“Sorry,” Lance murmured quickly, sounding all of the sudden much too close. “We’re just – this is the clearing up ahead. Watch your step, it drops down pretty quickly.”

“Oh… um, thanks.”

Keith held off his questions for the time being, waiting until they made it through the treeline and descended carefully into the clearing that had been, apparently, Lance’s destination. Keith was certain he’d never been here before, even with it being so close to the capital, and he was stunned. The sight was breathtaking.
A small stream divided the clearing right through the middle, sourced by a small waterfall along the eastern edge of the miniature valley. The waters were a shimmery blue-green, babbling with the brightness of the spring despite the nip of autumn in the air. Most beautiful of all, though, was the abundance of leaves that had shed from the overhanging treetops, mostly thinned and opening to a perfect pitch of blue sky. All around, the toll of the seasons on mother nature covered the ground with rich rubies, smoky yellows, rusty oranges and even pale purples; the crinkle beneath his boots felt heavy with all of the soaked hues of autumn, swirled together at their feet. It was like a picture, kaleidoscopic and somehow still — life in passage, from one state to the next — but paused, for him to admire just for a few moments.

“‘It’s pretty nice here,’” Lance said in that same tone as before, which Keith was learning was probably his default. It was a bit smug and amused, sly and honest at the same time.

“It’s… yes.”

The boy quirked a brow and began to walk towards the water. Keith could hear the smile in his voice as he trailed after him.

“You’re not much of a talker, are you, mullet?”

“I’m surprised you can even tell, since you don’t seem to shut up,” he shot right back.

That had Lance laughing, a breezy sound like the wind along the Altean coast. It made Keith’s stomach flutter unexpectedly; it wasn’t often he managed to make people laugh, save maybe Adam, but that hardly felt fair (Shiro was, after all, any absurdly easy target).

Keith snapped from his quiet musings when he saw — oh god, what is he doing? — Lance lift up the hem of his shirt on one side. A flash of tan skin peeked out from the off-white tunic, and Keith couldn’t help but stare, transfixed at the security of his waistband hanging low around his hips, and oh, god, oh god, get it together, don’t stare. And if Keith hadn’t been drawn to his last nerve then, mesmerizing by a few freckles on Lance’s waist, he definitely snapped when the shirt fell back down and Lance pulled out a fucking weapon.

It had been tucked along the right side of his body, a handmade wooden creation that was about half the length of Lance’s arm. It resembled a spear, but without a metal head the wood had been shaved down to a dangerous point.

“W-What the fuck?” Keith barely choked out the words, feeling short of breath. Lance didn’t look up, seeming not to have noticed or not to have cared about the Prince’s distress. Small mercy that, as Keith’s face had turned a dangerous crimson color as he could not contain his thoughts, wondering if Lance’s skin was smooth, if he had more of those freckles on his chest, how long it would take to could them all. If Lance had noticed anything unusual, he was at least kind enough not to say.

“Haven’t you ever gone fishing before?” Lance said after a pause, stalking along the water’s edge. “Oh, wait, I guess probably not. Can’t dirty those pretty, noble hands of your’s, hmm?” Keith found himself rolling his eyes.

“Believe it or not, I have gone fishing, thank you very much.”

Lance spun around, something flickering in his gaze. Keith leered back.

“What?”

“Prove it.”
“...What?” Keith repeated, with emphasis.

Lance did the same. “Prove it. I’m calling your bluff.”

“I’m not bluffing!” He snapped. This was stupid, and what was worse, Keith was genuinely mad that Lance didn’t believe him. Why did it even matter? “I’m probably better than you.”

“Oh, ho, ho, really now?” Lance put a hand to his hip, one brow raised into his chocolate-colored bangs. “Well, if you’re going to stand around and badger me with questions, and act all mysterious by not saying a damn thing about yourself, you might as well lend me a hand.”

Keith shook his head, but couldn’t find the will to disagree. It actually sounded kind of nice to do something active, and if Lance was going to stand here and fish anyways, why not join him? Decisively, Keith peeled off some of the extra bells-and-whistles of his outfit and put them in a pile, rolled up his sleeves, and took out his blade once again.

“Why did you come all the way out here to fish?” Keith asked once he and Lance had taken opposite sides of the stream, drifting in different direction of the water. The question wasn’t his most urgent, but Keith was genuinely curious now that he was invested in the activity – there were more convenient spots right outside the castle walls for fishing on both the Eastern and Southern sides.

Lance ignored him, face a mask of concentration as he stared at the water, and Keith found himself watching, expectant. He knew it was coming. It. That moment of action, seizing an instinct and realizing an impulse. It was sort of fascinating to him, in a deeply primal way. Hunting for food, fighting to survive. Nature. There was no personal guard, no high castle walls, no silk sheets. No Shiro, no Adam, and even his mother was absent. Here, it was just him, a weapon, and a target – well, and Lance, but he was equally caught up in the act.

The pause was thick in the air, a sense of anticipation gnawing at Keith’s belly, admiring the lean muscles of Lance’s arm as he held the spear carefully, just above the surface. Swift, like a notched arrow freed from its hold, the weapon broke the water’s surface. Lance pulled it back, producing a flawlessly speared, soft-pink fish.

“Well, if you must know,” he resumed the conversation as if nothing had happened, tossing the fish into the grass off to one side and resumed his previous stance. His ability to behave so flippantly was a little disorienting, if Keith were being honest. “I actually came out here to go see the caravans that are in from Naxzela. Dunno what kinda word gets to your dignified ears, but they’re stationed up on the West side for the birthday-ball-bash-whatever for the Prince.”

Thankfully, he was too preoccupied to see Keith flinch.

“I didn’t come to fish necessarily, but...” his voice trailed off, and Keith took the chance to act on his own prey beneath the bubbly waters. With little more than a flash of limbs and a gleam of a blade, Keith had successful catch. He tossed it over to Lance’s pile, and they shared a quick, sheepish smile.

“This was Plan B,” Lance finished.

“...I’m still a little confused. If the Naxzela caravan was Plan A, then why are we out here?”

Keith waited for the answer, taking a moment to move slightly upstream as Lance stalked after another fish. To his credit, Keith had to admire how quickly Lance seemed to find his targets; Keith had only spotted the one so far.

But Lance’s precision was slightly off, and his spear reemerged empty. He visibly pouted, and Keith
couldn’t decide if it was adorable or hilarious.

“Oh for the love of quiznak.” Lance murmured, but his eyes widened and he shot Keith a weary look. “Oh, uh, shit. Can I say that in front of a noble?”

Definitely adorable.

“You bet your quiznak you can,” Keith deadpanned, and Lance barked a laugh so hard he almost slipped into the stream. He ended up yelping and slipping all over the rocks, barely catching himself above the edge.

When he righted himself, Keith heard him hum as if nothing had happened. “Sorry, what was the question?”

The Prince pursed his lips, studying the waters. “Plan B? Fishing in the most random spot imaginable? Giving up on the trading caravan?”

There was an extended pause, long enough that Keith stole a glance to make sure everything was okay, only to find Lance was scrunching up his nose like a toddler trying to pick between two of their favorite colors. Fuck, he was so cute. Too cute. His heart demanded he stop it right that instant, protesting his stupid observations.

“I mean, none of what you just said was technically a question, but, uh,” Lance dropped the adorably thoughtful face and glanced up at the sky, forgetting about their fishing task for a moment. “I came up here to get my niece a gift. Her birthday is coming up. Plan A was to get her some shoes that are going to match her dress for the ball - Naxzela goods are usually a little on the cheap, and she’s so excited for it, so I thought, fuck it.” Lance’s attention went back to the water, and his voice softened like he’d almost forgotten he was talking to more than just himself and the trees. “But I didn’t know if they’d have a pair that matched, or if they’d fit her – she’s only six, turning seven – and so I had Plan B, catching some Blum for a special dinner instead. They only swim in freshwater and they’re one of her favorites.”

Blinking a few times, Lance’s gaze refocused on Keith’s face, and his tone became smooth and nonchalant once again. “Plan A is a no-go now after that mess in town earlier, sooo... here we are.”

Keith found that, for some reason, he was irritated by this.

Lance made his third attempt on assaulting the waterlife and his spear came back with fish in tow. He nearly dropped the catch when he tried to remove it from his spear, but he was undeterred and happily tossed it with the others. Even if it felt weird to admit it, Keith found himself entranced just watching Lance perform the simple steps – he was ridiculously expressive. One moment he was excited and surprised, the next focused and solemn, perhaps even wistful; his voice was no different. He slipped between tones of curiosity, mockery, and sincerity without even seeming to think about it. Each emotion ran through him like words on a page, and Keith found himself wanting to study every last one.

He looked away only a moment before Lance turned to face him, barley managing not to be caught staring. Keith glared at the water, pretending to focus, and his fingers tightened purposefully around the blade in his hand.

“So,” Keith kept his tone neutral. “Just making sure I understand here. You intended to buy your niece a birthday present. Plan A.”

Lance nodded.
“And now we’re fishing, which was your plan B in case they didn’t have her stuff.”

A soft hum of agreement followed.

Keith bit his lip. “You spent the money you intended on your niece’s birthday present… to keep that thief – ”

“Nyma,” Lance corrected.

“Nyma, then,” Keith conceded. “To keep her from getting arrested?”

Lance replied after a pause, chuckling. “Well, I don’t know about arrested. I was at least trying to keep her from getting stabbed.”

Keith didn’t find the situation funny. If anything, he was even more confused.

“Why?” He demanded, simultaneously puncturing the water with his knife. A flicker of pink splashed free of the stream, red droplets trickling into the water.

“Not bad,” he heard Lance comment. “For a noble.”

Keith sent him a withering look, which Lance rebuffed without even batting an eye. “You didn’t answer.”

And then, Lance did something unexpected; Keith guessed Lance he probably did the unexpected a lot, but didn’t know him well enough to say.

This strange, strange person – this lively, pejorative person, who flirted with strangers and didn’t recognize the prince of his nation – did something unexpected. He sighed. Only once. It was a heavy, empty sound; it was bitter, a cold vacancy of air passing through your lungs. This was no normal exhale. He’d heard this before, from Shiro once or twice, his Mother, Kolivan. It dripped with finality, exhaustion, and endless frustration.

Lance sounded so... tired. Much too tired for someone his age, with his charming smile and frustrating kindness.

Utilizing many long deca-pheebs of deeply ingrained self-discipline, Keith managed not to look up at Lance as he waited patiently for a response.

“I… it’s sort of complicated, okay? I just didn’t want to see a friend get in trouble, and I was in a position to do something about it. What kind of person would I be if I had the chance, and didn’t take it?”

Keith found he did not have an answer to that.

After a few more catches from Keith, and a few more failures and only one more success from Lance, they’d caught enough fish that Lance was confident it would be enough feed his niece and family. It took over a varga, but Keith was actually having fun. He had, to put it bluntly, misjudged Lance, and he felt bad about it. The guy was being extremely nice, if Keith looked past the cursory level of teasing, and he found he really didn’t mind the guy’s company.

Once Lance wrapped up his catch in an impossibly large cloth – really, it was more like a sheet – that he extracted from his pocket, he plopped down beside Keith in the grass at the water’s edge.

Lance kicked off his sandals and dipped his feet in the stream, exhaling dramatically as he did so.
“Aren’t you cold?” Keith was feeling a bit chilled himself, and he certainly had thicker garments than Lance, who had just stuck his feet in freezing water.

“A bit,” he said with a shrug. “But it’s worth it. I don’t get enough time around water anymore. This is so nice.”

“You know,” Keith kept his voice flat. “If you think about it from the Blum’s perspective, you, a freakish monster from the land, just came out of nowhere, decimated the population of their home, and now you’re bathing your feet where their friends, families, and loved ones died, their bodies dragged only meters away.”

“Man, fuck you,” Lance groaned as he sank his feet further into the water, reclining fully on the leaves. Keith caught his eye, and he saw nothing but playfulness in the glimmer. They reflected his emotions like the stream did the sun, so clear, open and honest.

“This is like, my one varga to relax,” he muttered. “Can we not ruin it by making me into a mass murderer?”

“Hey, your words, not mine,” Keith held up his hands, but they both ended up chuckling anyways.

Once their laughter subsided, Lance laced his fingers together and propped them behind his head, and they fell into a surprisingly companionable silence. Keith snuck a peek to his left, relieved to see Lance’s eyes had slipped closed like he was soaking up the sunshine. He looked so serene, cheeks and nose tinted a bit red from the chill. Eventually, his eyes blinked open, and Keith darted his attention away, but he heard Lance turn on his side to face him. It didn’t feel awkward like before, and Keith was actually feeling rather relaxed… but, a thought occurred to him as the sun slipped a bit further into the west. After today, it was unlikely he would ever see Lance again, and the thought made his stomach twist into knots.

“Where do you live?” Keith blurted, feeling the pink rush to his cheeks almost immediately. “I-I mean, you said, you said ‘anymore’, about spending time in the water. Are you, um, not from M-Marmora?”

“Nah,” Lance said, somehow unbothered by Keith’s fucking stuttering. He’s not some blushing maiden, but he sure as hell felt like one.

“I mean, technically, maybe? I grew up in the mountains on the border with Marmora and Altea and Arus. I think the land is technically Arusian? I’m not even sure. It’s right where they all meet, basically.”

That had the Prince humming, not really sure what to do with that information. He’d traveled through those mountains before, but he had never seen any villages.

Lance turned his head over and met his gaze. “You?”

“Oh. Um.”

Right. He’s knife boy, not Prince Keith. He was still getting used to this. “I’ve lived here my whole life. I’ve uh, traveled with my family and stuff, but never lived anywhere else.”

“Mmm…” Lance closed his eyes, looking peaceful enough that he could have been sleeping.

After a beat of silence, Keith shifted in the grass and laid down, too. He kept his boots, socks, and feet out of the water, because, it was still fucking cold. While he and Lance were still several feet apart, the change in posture left Keith feeling much more vulnerable, and he tried his very best not to
glance to his side constantly.

“Do you live in the Northern part of the city?” Lance wondered aloud, a scowl forming on his face (not that Keith noticed, he was not looking at Lance. Nope. Definitely not.) “You don’t have to answer if you’re not comfortable or whatever. I just know that’s where most nobles live and stuff.”

“Um, yeah. What about you? Artisan district?”

The boy released a mirthless laugh, and it sounded unwelcome in his usually airy tone.

“No. Though on quintents like this, I wish. I live with family, a few miles outside the East walls.”

The statement took a moment to process, and Keith picked out a few pieces of information that he decided to file away. One of which could not be left unaddressed.

“Wait, you –  you didn’t walk all this way, did you?”

Lance laughed again, and it sounded even darker than before. “Guiltttttttttty.”

“How – why?” Keith gaped, unable to help himself. He felt a bit embarrassed to so tactlessly just throw questions at the guy, but Lance brushed most of them off with relative ease.


Keith knew he was pushing too far, and the slight twinge of annoyance at the end of Lance’s statement shut down the urge to keep questioning. Even though his tongue was practically burning with curiosity, Keith managed to let it go. It really wasn’t any of his business, and yet, he found himself fascinated with every little piece of information Lance shared.

Rather suddenly, Lance opened his mouth and a softness snuck its way into his voice. “Hey, actually, do you – uh, no, no nevermind. Shit. Forget it.”

Keith frowned, studying the shy look that crossed Lance’s face. It was sweet, with shifted eyes and teeth biting his lower lip.

“What is it?”

Lance squirmed for a moment, but schooled his expression into a practiced indifference that Keith recognized – he would know, he practically invented the look.

“It’s stupid, seriously. Forget about it.”

“You sure? I… I don’t mind, answering some, um, questions.” Keith trained his eyes at the blue sky above, hoping Lance wouldn’t look at see the red creeping up his ears. “I-It only seems fair, you know? If you want to ask anything, I mean.”

Ugh, he was so bad at this sort of thing, but he didn’t want Lance to stop talking.

“…Okay, well,” Lance agreed after an agonizing silence, and Keith felt himself a release a breath he hadn’t known he was holding. “Does your family, like, have servants?”

Keith had been expecting more like, tell me about yourself, what are your hobbies, but hey, he’d take what he could get.

“Yes?”
“A lot?” Lance prompted.

“Uhh… you could say that.”

His companion hummed. “Where do you get them?”

Keith grimaced, turning to face Lance. “Pardon?”

He met Keith’s gaze with surprising intensity. “Like, how do you pick a servant? Is it like, someone who works at your house has connections and they’re like, ‘Hey, my buddy here doesn’t have a job, can he be a servant?’ Or do you like just hire whoever? Do interviews? Do people apply to be servants?”

Keith felt really awful right then, for more than one reason. One, he wasn’t going to be able to answer because he genuinely had no idea how to answer. Two, this was not something he’d ever bothered to learn, and that fact alone made him feel like such a privileged asshole. He made a mental note to ask around the castle when he got home that night.

With a little cough, Keith realized he hadn’t replied. “I don’t actually know how it works. Sorry.”

“It’s cool,” Lance assured him, turning back up to the sky. “I’ve just never gotten to ask someone who has servants what it’s like from their side of things, you know? It’s sort of weird to talk to about it in general, let alone with someone like you. N-No offense, but, you know what I mean?”

“Wait, you’re a servant? I thought you said you lived with your family?” Keith propped himself on his elbows, looking to his left where Lance’s expression slipped into something much closer to a pout, or even anger. Quickly, Keith amended his statement. “Sorry, that was probably too much. You don’t have to answer that.”

Lance let out another sigh, like the one he had earlier. It sounded so wrong, too world-weary for someone with such bright eyes and warm smiles. A small part of Keith picked up on a bizarre sensation while he waited for Lance’s answer. It was his… heart? His chest? Keith had never really noticed before, but his heart was heavy, wasn’t it? A proper thing, like his lungs or the blade at his hip, it had weight, and it had meaning, and it was thumping so loud and so fast that it actually hurt.

It had never hurt before.

By now, Lance had also sat up, frowning at Keith.

“Nah, I guess it doesn’t matter. Both are true. I work for my family. I don’t know if there’s a technical title for it but I make money by cleaning and doing errands and shit for them.” His expression shifted to a glare. “But don’t you dare pity me, alright? I’ll kick your ass if you do.”

Keith snorted, taking a moment to reply. It was clear Lance wasn’t happy talking about this, so he decided to let it go and move on to lighter things.

“If I was going to pity you, it would be for your bad fishing, not that.”

Scoffing in mock offense, Lance shot up to standing and placed a hurt hand over his chest. “And to think, I opened up to you! You wound me, knife boy. Wound. Me.”

Keith smirked at his theatrics and shook his head. Lance, for his part, look rather pleased with himself for the whole performance – but he almost always seems pleased with himself, doesn’t he? Keith mused. It was odd to know so much and so little about a person, all at once – was Lance Altean? Did he always walk around with a fucking spear tucked against his hip? Were there different
version of that smug smile, reserved for different people? If there was, which one was he getting?

Yes, Keith decided, it was a little weird to know so little about this person, but felt like he knew so much. This weird, stupid, nice, cute person, who lived outside of the capital, with family, and worked for them like a servant. A person who spends the whole day walking through a city to get a birthday present, just to give away his money when a friend needed it. The person standing in front of him now, offering him a hand to stand up with a soft smile that made Keith’s heart feel like it was much too big for his chest.

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[LANCE]

“¡Joder! Quiznaking fuck, mierdaaaa.”

Lance hissed, rearing back on his knees a flash of pain send white seared around his ankle. Nearby, he could hear Thou-Whose-Hair-Shalt-Not-Be-Named stir, like he wanted to help but probably not sure how.

“Are you – ?”

“I’m good.” Lance grit his teeth, sighing in irritation as he stood up again. It wasn’t like it hurt, not really. He wasn’t mad about that. He was mad because he just fucking tripped over a groatsbane bush, right in front of Stupid Noble, and got his foot caught on a root when trying to right himself. He was mad because he just made a fool of himself in front of someone that he’d spent the afternoon with, and consequently ruined his one pair of sandals. “It’s just my… uh, the thing. My foot… cover… oh my god. You know – you know, the thing?!”

“...Um.” Knife Boy sounded uncomfortable. “What?”

Lance paused. He didn’t often stumble in the common tongue anymore, but sometimes it happened, and, fuck, what the fuck was that thing called…

Cursing under his breath, he could tell the guy was expecting an answer. Lance was frustrated because he simply couldn’t give him one that would make sense, and he’d already seemed like an idiot for falling.

“It’s the – I just, like, ruined my zapato. Ugh.”

He glanced at Mullet, whose expression shifted from concerned to confused so fast that Lance let out a quick laugh.

Bending at the waist, Lance groaned and scooped up the offending object that had gotten trapped in the knots of a tree root and held it up to demonstrate.

Now Mullet was trying not to laugh. “Your... shoe?”

“YES. THAT. MY FUCKING SHOE IS BROKEN.”

Exasperated and flustered, Lance quickly examined the damage. The slot for his toes had been ripped right from the base, and the tear hadn’t even been on a seam. (Do shoes have seams? He
wondered. What’s the part called where the top part of the shoe meets the bottom, if it’s not a seam? Lance decided to ask Moontow about it if he remembered.)

“I’ll fix it when I get home, let’s just keep going.”

Knife Boy thinned his lips but did not protest as Lance swept ahead of him, mindful of his bare sole in the event of a prickly creature or stray pinecone. God, this sucked.

They chatted for most of the walk back to the gates, and Lance actually found him pretty interesting to talk to, but they both avoided the too-personal topics beyond when he asked Lance about being a servant. Well, sort of. He wasn’t actually a servant, he was just a kid living with a shitty Aunt who makes him do a lot of chores, but that sounds even more pathetic so he certainly wasn’t about to tell that to Broody McKnifington over here his family's name. And… jokes aside, it actually felt a little dangerous to tell this guy about Aunt Hira or his cousins, because, honestly? Mullet seemed nice enough, but Lance was not about to risk getting in a fuck ton of trouble because some snooty asshole decided to rat him out for what happened outside Lubos’ place earlier.

The crown he’d managed to scrape together, by selling the backstock of Kaltenecker’s milk and agreeing to a IOU in helping D’Jahno move later that phebe, had been in his pocket for less than a varga, and paying off criminal’s debts was not exactly a rumor he wanted to reported back to his family. Though he scrunched his nose at calling Nyma a criminal.

Was what he did for her probably stupid? Yes. Was it motivated by the fact that she was fun to flirt with, despite having once tied him to a tree? Jury’s out on that one. Was he a little bummed about not getting Nadia a pair of birthday shoes, just in time for the ball? Yeah.

Would he do it again?

Lance glanced at Black-Haired-Jerk out of the corner of his eye, catching a small smile on his lips as he explained something about luxite.

Yes. Yes he would.

They came upon the Noble Steed sooner than Lance realized, and after giving the guy a moment to retrieve her reins, Lance asked, “Can I pet her? Him?”

“Her,” he clarified. “And… sure, but, be slow. She’s a little temperamental.”

“Oh, well, you two must be perfect together,” Lance observed as he held his hand out, letting the horse sniff him and decide whether or not he was worthy.

Lance pointedly ignored Knife Boy’s indignant sound of protest, focusing instead on his pretty horse. It took a few moments, but she seemed satisfied with his long fingers enough not to nip at him or rear back, so he slowly went to stroke the side of her neck.

“Aw, she’s sweet. Sorry you got stuck with this one,” he stage whispered to the horse, nodding to Mullet. He merely huffed and rolled his eyes.

With just a few more paces and some careful prodding along of Pretty Boy’s Pretty Horse, the three of them were finally out of the trees. Lance hadn’t any inkling of the time, but the sun’s position made him guess three, four at the latest.

It was a two varga walk home.

Internally, he sighed, glancing down at his barefoot. There were leaves stuck to his heel, but no cuts,
thankfully. He put down the makeshift bindle that carried the Blum and stretched momentarily.

Mullet said, “You mentioned – about your niece, going to the Prince’s… party.” He made a face on the word like it offended him. “What do you, er, think about… that?”

Why, heaven above, did Lance find this guy’s horrible ability to string words together so endearing? Frowning, he tried not to focus on the shy way Pretty Boy worried his bottom lip between his teeth. Nooo… that’s hooooot, don’t do thaaaaat…

“Uh, I guess,” Lance cleared his throat. “I don’t know what you mean. My niece, going to the party? Ball, or whatever?”

His dumb mullet rocked up and down as he nodded, and Lance watched as he turned away to adjust the stirrups.

He hummed while considering his response, better able to focus without his eyes on him. “I mean, I don’t really care, she’ll only be seven. I think she’s just excited to dress-up and be a part of something big and fancy. Her sisters are probably the real reason for my family was even invited - er, my cousins. They’re… probably around the Prince’s age?” Now that Lance thought about it, he had no idea how old the Prince was. He just assumed he was young-ish. “I don’t really invest a lot of interest in politics, to be honest. I just know the whole damn city is freaking out over it. Besides the obvious marrying-into-money thing though, I don’t get it. Maybe the Prince is super hot or something.”

To Lance’s surprise, and definite amusement, it was at that exact moment that Knifey decided to hoist himself into the saddle, and something about his coordination was off because he almost overshot and fell off.

Laughter burst from Lance’s lips before he could even be bothered with seeming rude, too amused by the grimace and bright red anger that flushed Pretty Boy’s face.

“What? Oh, shit, you’re a noble too. Do you know the Prince, Mullet? Is he hot?”

From atop the horse, the poor noble looked like he was about to be ill.

A mumble escaped him after several long ticks of staring at the ground. “I… know of him… yeah.”

“And? Deets, man. We fished together and bonded and shit. At least give me some nobility gossip.”

“I really can’t say,” the guy spoke every word like it was going to be his last. A small furrow attached itself to his brow, however, and he met Lance’s gaze at last. “You know, you could just… go to the party and see for yourself.”

Lance couldn’t contain his amusement with the whole thing. “Oh, yeah, I’m sure the Prince wants people like me at his ball. Loudmouth servants who help thieves, right?”

He figured Knife Boy was joking, so when his brow dipped slightly, almost sadly Lance was surprised… and a little flustered, to be honest. Just a little, though.

“You might be surprised.”

At that, Lance just rolled his eyes (and promptly averted his gaze, he couldn’t take it now that Knife Boy was straight up staring at him. Who has rich, deeply indigo-colored eyes, anyways? Rude.). “I’ll, uh, keep that in mind.”
“You should,” he agreed with a bemused hint to his voice, but it puttered out into silence. Lance gulped, and buried his clammy palms into his pant pockets – when did he get so sweaty, anyways? It’s fucking October. He’s wearing a tunic. Get a grip, McClain.

“Well,” Lance chirped when it was clear Dark-and-Awkward wasn’t going to add anything else. “Guess this is bye. Thanks for helping with the Blum, and for not murdering me in the woods.”

“You’re welcome.” Pretty Boy blinked a few times, before laughing under his breath. “I mean, for the fishing. Not for the not-murdering. It was tempting there, for a while.”

“I don’t know if I should feel flattered or insulted,” Lance admitted, grinning like a big old idiot. He was so stupid. God. The guy was just one annoying, attractive, annoyingly attractive noble, who happened to find Lance funny, and had large, round, dark eyes and a laugh that made his throat dry. Lance doesn’t even know his name.

“Why not both?” The guy raised a brow, as if challenging him, and Lance’s stupid little bisexual heart squeezed in its vice.

Stupid stupid stupid.

“Go away, Pretty Boy.” Lance crossed his arms, unwilling to look at his face again. He could already feel his own cheeks growing pink.

There was a pause.

“Bye, Lance. It was nice meeting you. M-Maybe I’ll see you again sometime.”

Was the catch in his voice from the cold? Was it because of him? Did Lance make Mullet nervous? Oh god, nope. No no nope.

“Maybe,” Lance agreed with a tight smile, patting the horse gently as they started towards the city. Lance was actually heading in the same direction, but he wanted Knifey to get a chance to gain some distance before he started back home.

He sighed, kicking a rock out of habit and cursing when he did it with his shoeless foot. It took about ten full ticks of Lance studying the dirt and the surrounding trees, willing his heart to calm down and for the fluttery feeling in his middle to settle, that he noticed something.

Off the side of the rode where he, Knife Boy, and the horse had emerged from the treeline, there was an unceremonious pile of something dark, forgotten at the base of a tree. Paranoid, Lance glanced over each shoulder before leaping over to it, and he realized what it was the moment his fingers brushed against the material.

“Idiot,” he muttered.

Black ripples of velveteen fabric pooled elegantly on the ground, hanging pliant as Lance lifted the cloak, a dark waterfall of textile that was thick but not too heavy. Lance examined it from all sides with great care, feeling a twinge of disbelief. Quizzak. Everything about it just screamed expensive. It was lush without being leaden, and supple but with an amount of body that assured it wouldn’t billow away uselessly in a brisk wind. Clearly, the thing was of high-quality, warm, and – fuck, it smelled really, really good, like smoke from a wood burning stove, but sweeter somehow.

He should leave it. Lance knew he should, but Lance also knew that he was a weak, weak man. Weak to dark eyes and tempers and nameless strangers, apparently. The tick the piece of clothing was in his hands, it was like a curse. It was too beautiful to leave in the dirt, but it wasn’t his. His
mama did not raise a thief, but she also didn’t raise a fool.

A memory – no, wait. A feeling wiggled its way to the surface of Lance’s conscious mind as he fought with himself. Before he knew it, his feet were already guiding him home. He didn’t even notice the missing sandal or his uneven footsteps.

Memories. Memories of phantom touches – mostly, hugs, nudges, and kisses on his cheek, all from faces not unlike his own – they came in waves. He remembered a wobbly chair, and sitting across the kitchen table from his mama. He remembered the smell of ropa vieja thick in the air, and loud giggles from his sisters, and a comforting hand on his head. It belonged to his eldest brother.

He told Lance a story that quintent, about a hero and a parade, and how the road to their house was a gift, granted from the sacrifices of other. That had always stuck with him, thinking back on it now. Bloodstains and bruised bones, and the empty beds of widows or the ruined houses of the stars. That was his father’s story. And his mother – his mama’s story was footprints in the sand – two, then four, and then a dozen more that chased in small succession, plodding up until they reached a steep green meadow. There was a conversation about cost of helmets, rations, and never, ever stealing. Another about accepting the few bottled possibilities fate has stocked in your cellar, and indulge in the ones that taste sweet, mixing or pour out the ones that don’t. Borrow them, enjoy them, and return them whenever you can, hermanito.

It seemed like so long since someone called him that.

Lance did not wear the cloak home that night.

It didn’t feel right, even if the sun had set by the time he was home and there was a chill in the air that crept along his forearms like a fog upon morning dawn. No, he brought the cloak home, and he would borrow it for a little while. And he would return it, too.

Chapter End Notes

sorry lance's section was so short in this one, he's got a big moment coming up soon so don't worry!!
Chapter Summary

Lance is having a very, very, very bad day, while Keith is having a gay panic and makes a new friend.

Chapter Notes

TW: brief mention of ATTEMPTED non-con, nothing sexually graphic.

[LANCE]

Lance didn’t think of himself as a bad person. No, as a matter of fact, Lance considered himself to be pretty good overall. Not great, okay? He had his flaws like everybody else, but he was good enough.

So then, what in Sam Hell did he do so wrong to deserve this?

Coughing, Lance tasted something metallic in his mouth, and he tongued where he’d bitten his gums too hard. Blood. He spat it out, swirling the saliva around his mouth to try in vain to rid himself of the taste.

“Fuck you,” he managed, glaring across the narrow passage. The air was impossibly dark, only disturbed by the thinnest ghost of moonlight that trailed beneath the doorway. “I’m not your fucking property.”

The response was something between a pant and a laugh, which was not even a tiny bit reassuring.

“You’re going to regret that.”

Shit.

Was he going to die here?

A sudden flash of brilliant light knocked him back, and Lance thought -- okay, yep, I’m definitely going to die here.

—

Twelve Hours Earlier
Lance was certain it was Monday morning… okay, well, he was pretty sure, but, really, it took too much effort to try mapping out how he’s spent his time the past few days. Instead, he was busy just trying to keep himself awake, throwing himself at task after task after task. He made it a point to focus on the physical exertion of it all -- his burning muscles, the sweat that ran down his back, and the satisfying thrum of his heart in his ears -- rather than to imagine how nice it would be to just slump over and sleep for the next three weeks.

“Everyone gets to have a bad day.”

Hunk had told him that two deca-phebes ago. Right now, Lance was clinging to the advice like a drowning man clings to air. Desperate. Shameless. He needed the reminder, needed to remember that this was not going to be his life forever. Things would get better. They had to get better.

After all, he had slept a grand total of 2 hours since waking on Saturday morning. That was, what, roughly… 50 hours or so?

His eyes were so sore it felt like they were both sporting shiners, and they hardly looked much better -- purple bruises dusted the tips of his cheekbones like a makeover gone horribly wrong wrong, and the color contrasted sharply with his papery skin. The sag to his shoulders was heavy, the bend his battered knees was wrought from iron, and every conceivable muscle from his arms, forehead, back, abdomen, calves, toes, jaw, hips -- they were all positively aching. In particular, his back -- ugh. It felt like the bones had been permanently warped in an unpleasant curve, a product of his constantly hunched posture.

This was his burden to bear, though, so he didn’t complain. (Okay, that’s a bit of a lie. He complained almost nonstop to Kaltenecker, but only ‘cause she was the world’s best listener.) With Nadia’s birthday and the big stupid ball ever growing closer, so did his aunt’s patience grow ever thinner. She criticized everything. From his attentiveness, to picking out a spot of dirt on the floor, to chastising him for ruining his sandals; Aunt Hira showed no mercy. Stand up straighter. Don’t cross your arms. Mop the foyer. Dust the blinds. Scrub the livestock pens. Trim this. Move that. Clean here, there, and there, you idiot. Eye contact.

Lance was almost numb to it after the nonstop harassment he’d braved for the past few days. It was just… easier if he didn’t argue. It was easier if he just swept every single inch of floor, scrubbed under the grimy sink base, brushed out cobwebs from the ceiling corners. He hated it, because he had some fucking self-respect and wanted to defend himself, but, would the ends justify the means? Would calling Aunt Hira on her crap actually accomplish anything? He didn’t think so, so he just continued on, doing as he was told.

Over those days, Lance was permitted no breaks except to make the girls tea and to prepare their meals; Lance ate before “bed” (that is, falling onto his mattress at four in the morning), or not at all.

Given the circumstances, Lance tried to remember if Pidge had ever mentioned something about going crazy from lack of sleep. He thought she might’ve said something along those lines, but he didn’t think he was quite there yet, just… getting closer. That’s how he justified the recent stupid train of thought that kept distracting him -- it wasn’t his fault that Knife Boy slipped into his stream of consciousness every fucking minute of the goddamn day. It was just because he was so exhausted, he was nearly going crazy. He hadn’t been truly lucid since that afternoon, so really, it was just coincidence. Yes. That sounded right.

During one of those rather annoying daydreams (because, let’s face it, Lance wasn’t going to have any actual dreams anytime soon), he was wiping down the window above the kitchen sink, absent}
reasoning if a mullet could be considered acceptable if it was at least pulled up into a ponytail, when he was interrupted by a soft voice.

“Um, Lance?”

He may have squeaked, and almost hit his head, and almost fallen over. Maybe.

When he spun around, he spotted a curious and mildly concerned Emely, poking her head through the door.

“Err… are you alright?” She questioned, the words awkward but not unkind.

Lance rubbed the back of his neck, sheepish. “Oh, uh, yup. You just got the jump on me, ya know? What’s up?”

Emely took a tentative step into the room, her pristine caramel hair arranged in a loose plait over her shoulder. After a moment, her curiosity twisted into something eerily reminiscent of pity, and Lance unconsciously clenched his hands to fists.

“Yes, right… Mother was looking for you. I believe she has an errand.”

Lance bit back a groan. Great. Fucking fabulous. An errand in this house could mean anything, so long as it was nothing good. It could be riding for days to meet up with some random nomads that traded in rare Altean goods, or heading to town to fetch some poor noble that would be subjected to dinner with his aunt. Sometimes, it was just a flimsy excuse to summon him and to more-or-less berate him, to watch him squirm -- she seemed to find that funny. Lance? Not so much.

If Lance’s displeasure played out on his face, his cousin thankfully did not comment. He leveled a tight smile in her direction.

“Thanks, Eme. I’ll be upstairs in a tick…” He paused, noticing his cousin’s outfit for the first time. It was not the day dresses he was used to seeing her in, but rather, riding clothes. “Going somewhere?”

“Yes, actually.” She said with a proud smile, and Lance couldn’t help but return the gesture. She looked so much like his sister Rachel when she smiled. “I’ve actually got to be off now, but Mother will explain… um, bye.”

Lance waved, amused and curious as Emely slipped out the back door to the stalls.

It did not him take long to find the other women, as Nadia’s spirited giggles were pouring out of the library. The only other sound was his muted footfalls, dirt and dust stuck to his soles and scuffing the floors that he’d spent last night cleaning… the floors that, fuck all, he was going to spend all night re-cleaning. Quiznak. He really needed to work on fixing his sandals, Lance thought with a frown, watching his dirt-stained feet leading up to the room.

He peeked around the corner before announcing his presence, surveying the room. Adelá was at the far end of the couch, reading from a small bound book, with Nadia in front of her on the ground, splayed out on her stomach, playing with some toys with a book of her own forgotten to one side. A little shriek of joy escaped her when she made the two dolls she was focusing on hold hands, dancing them together in front of the gentle flames of the fireplace.

His aunt was seated with her back to him at a desk, pen twirling on a piece of parchment and pausing only so often as to reapply more ink.

“Hey?” Lance coughed, trying not to startle everyone as he stepped through the door frame. “Eme
said you had an errand?”

Nadia looked up with bright eyes and a beaming smile.

“Tío! Come play!”

Aunt Hira sat down her pen and shot the girl a look, evidently disapproving of her random babble of Spanish, though it gave Lance some small smug source of satisfaction. He chuckled to acknowledge Nadia’s comment, but kept his gaze trained on his aunt.

She rose from her chair, hands folded neatly in front of her. “Ah, yes. It is not so much of an errand as it is a question. What, pray tell, is this?”

“Uh,” Lance furrowed his brow, eyes following her hands as she pulled plucked up a bundle from the corner of her desk. Oh, fuck. The color of midnight beneath the hard lights of the library, Aunt Hira gripped a very familiar cloak with great care. Even from across the room, the raiment looked softer than fresh snow, and it rippled in the air like black water.

His onset of panic was overwhelming. One moment, he was blissfully unaware, and now his heart had dropped through the floor. Aunt Hira’s eyes were like ice, watching him, daring him to slip and fall.

Nadia had put her toys down, observing them, totally oblivious to how fucking dead he was. She tilted her head and looked at the cloak, scooting over and running her hands over the supple texture. “Whoa, soft… what is it?”

“A good question,” Aunt Hira hummed, never taking her eyes off Lance. He seriously considered bolting.

Somehow, he found his voice, and he cringed at how loud and brash it was. Pidge had always said he was a terrible liar.

“Oh, oh, that, well, you know… It’s not mine, obviously. I, um, found it?”

Aunt Hira looked as if she hadn’t heard him, giving no visible signs of recognition. The room was awkwardly bubbling with the ooh’s and aah’s of Nadia pushing and pulling on the ends of the cloak and the slight crackle of embers in the fireplace.

Finally, her mouth twitched.

“You found it.”

“Uhh… ah, well, yes.”

“And why didn’t you notify me when you came home with it? Where did you find it?”

Lance bit down the urge to stutter, instead reverting to his default -- loud and annoying. “I was planning on returning it!”

He laughed, not that there was anything funny about the current situation, adding, “I know, that sounds really bad, right? But seriously -- hear me out. I was on the far side of the city, and when I was there I ran into this guy, a noble, and we hung out for the afternoon. He dropped his cloak before he left and I picked it up, so I was just holding onto it until I could give it back. So… yeah!”

Adelá glanced up from her book for the first time since the conversation started, a slight downturn to
her lips. “A noble? Who?”

_Fucking goddamnit._

Lance took a deep breath. “I don’t know. He couldn’t tell me his name.”

At that, Aunt Hira finally tore her gaze away and knelt, coming face-to-face with her youngest daughter. The girl looked at her with wide, curious eyes.

“Sweetheart, why don’t you go with Addy and get changed? Your sister will be back soon with a carriage, and I need to talk to your cousin. _Alone_.”

_I am so dead, fuck, shit, fuck._ Lance said a prayer to whatever higher beings were up there, guiding his shitty life up to that point, asking for some sort of mercy. He was so caught up in his own doom he hadn’t even noticed Nadia tug at his pant leg before leaving the room, led away by her older sister’s hand.

Really, Lance only had enough time to take in a steadying breath -- which was shaky and really didn’t do anything to steady him -- before his aunt was upon him. She glided forward slowly, tracing patterns into the cloak with her hands. She wasn’t looking at him, thank the fucking _universe._

After an eternity of waiting, Lance trying to relearn how to use his lungs, Aunt Hira spoke.

“Lance. I thought we talked about this.” The words were spoken like a tired parent and a child who just finished throwing a tantrum. “Stealing? _Lying?_ Your mother would be terribly disappointed.”

Lance’s eye twitched.

“Yes,” he agreed, before hesitantly tagging on, “But I didn’t steal it. Seriously, if I did, I would just own up to it -- I’m being honest. My friend left it behind.”

Was Mullet even his friend? An acquaintance, maybe? He didn’t even know the guy’s name, who the fuck was he kidding?

Certainly not his aunt. “Right, right… this friend, a _noble_, whose name you don’t know? Who you spent the day with when there was no one else around?” She looked up from the cloak finally, lips thinned. “Okay, Lance. I’ll humor you -- let’s say that is all true. How were you planning to return it when you don’t know who it belongs to?”

“I -- ” he stopped. God, he was so fucked. “I didn’t… really have a plan. I just figured I’d see him again sometime.”

Aunt Hira nodded slowly, evidently unsurprised, and she returned to her desk once again. Her focus seemed distant, somehow, as if she was unsure of herself -- which was _not_ like Aunt Hira at all. With deliberate movements, she refolded the robe carefully and pulled open a drawer, setting it neatly inside.

“We’ll talk about this tomorrow. I need to prepare for the evening… We are going to the Olkarion Embassy. We’ve been invited for a diplomatic event, and will be staying the evening. Do not leave the house, and expect us back for breakfast.”

“Oh.” Lance blinked, surprised he still had a pulse. Aunt Hira was letting him live? “Uhh, right, okay. Was there… anything else?”

His aunt considered him for a long moment, just long enough for him to start to shift back and forth
She approached with an unreadable look on her face, stopping at his shoulder as she made to leave the room. “I would suggest thinking long and hard about what explanation you have for this when I return.”

He cringed, and that seemed to satisfy her well enough. She continued out of the room, leaving him alone with a dying fire and a knotted stomach.

Lance waited until her footsteps had long since gone before backing up against the wall, shaking. Stupid stupid stupid… The robe was definitely not worth this. Now he had to wait, wondering what sort of misery his aunt had in-store for him. Should he lie and just accept that he’d been… “caught?” Would it be better if she just punished him for stealing, rather than for what she believed to be stealing and then lying about it?

Ugh. The fucked up injustice of the whole thing made him sick -- he’s a human being who is allowed to have a one-off miracle, right? He didn’t dream up Mullet Head all on his own (trust him, if he had been in charge of constructing that annoying, snarky, adorable jerk, Lance at least would have had the common decency to imagine him with a tolerable hairstyle).

His mind reeled, a slideshow of worries sending his lungs into a frantic, uneven rhythm. Worst case scenarios churned in his stomach. Would he go back to sleeping without a mattress? Make him get rid of Kaltenecker? Would she cut off the money going to his family? That was probably the worst things could get, although a bit selfishly, his throat closed up at the thought of one other possibility -- the cellar.

No, no -- no no no. He wasn’t going to think about that. Not now, and not ever again.

Maybe she would just kill him. It would be a shame that he wouldn’t get to return Knife Boy’s cloak, what with being dead and all, but maybe he could still haunt the guy. That could be sort of fun, right?

Lance wasn’t sure how long he stood there and dissociated/panicked -- his sense of time was already poor, and running on very little sleep wasn’t helping -- but it must have been awhile because by the time he regained his wits, there was a little girl staring up at him.

“Tío?”

Startled, Lance flinched away from the soft soprano of Nadia’s voice, and she appeared visibly hurt by his reaction. A surge of guilt gripped him, and Lance quickly crouched down to be at her level, fixing his face into a smile.

“Oh, sorry, sorry cariño. I’m uh, just a little jumpy I guess. Stress, probably -- what with the big party coming up.”

That seemed to placate her a bit, a small laugh sneaking out. “Ohh, the ball!”

Lance’s grin widened. “I was talking about your birthday, nena. It’s not every day you turn seven!”

The look of joy in her eyes was so pure it almost hurt, only to be replaced momentarily with a concentrated scowl.

“Seven…” Nadia splayed out both hands, counting up by curling her fingers one-by-one. “That’s… siete?”
“Bien hecho, pequeña genio!”

“Nadia! We’re going!” Aunt Hira called from the hallway, and Lance ruffled his niece’s curls lightly before bidding her off -- it was as much for his own benefit as her’s. Pissing off his aunt by holding up their carriage wasn’t going to improve his chances of living through the weekend.

Lance finished the chores he had started while he still had some sad excuse of motivation left. He knew that, unsupervised, if he sat down on his mattress for only a minute he would be out for the next 18 hours. Ugh.

Some sunshine and fresh air, he figured, would at least help to keep him awake. Lance found his way outside once he finished up the kitchen, stopping in the stalls to pluck up his watering can when -- oh. Something else caught his eye.

His bow.

It had been a long time since he last used it. Too long, really. A sudden itch thrummed through his nerves, causing his fingers to twitch -- to grip the nocking point, to feel the feather-soft tips of the arrows, gentle against the satisfying sting of the taut string along the pads of his fingers. Aunt Hira preferred carefully butchered meats to game, so anytime he’d had use of it in the past few decaphebes had been purely recreational -- aimed at a tree, a leaf, a branch, any targets nature was willing to give him. Back home, his older brothers dominated fishing, only hunting on occasion… obviously, he wasn’t going to catch up with them in terms of skill in the water, so instead he threw himself into archery. He switched between hand-me-down bows of varying sizes as he grew, and Lance ended up better adapted to the limbs of the weapon than his own gangly ones. Archery was one of the few things he was genuinely proud of, and he thought he was pretty darn good, if he said so himself.

His mother would tell anyone who would listen -- Lance was an excellent shot.

That’s why she gave him his father’s bow when he left for Marmora; she told him he earned it.

The impulse to feel that familiar sting on his fingertips became overwhelming, and Lance felt a thrill jolt through him when he donned his quiver. He planted an affectionate kiss on Kaltenecker’s head before taking a spot in the yard for himself.

Notch, aim, breathe. Breathe, and then, there. It was the moment between a heartbeat and a breath, and it was then that he would let go. Really, it was little more than a special sort of stillness, a flicker of nothing. That was the best time to fire. Ironically, Lance had never felt more alive than when his body was completely quiet.

He emptied his quiver in no time at all. Retrieving his arrows, he went again, and again, and again, without missing a single one of his imagined target across the yard. It was invigorating, empowering, and his earlier exhaustion had become a distant memory.

Now, with a clearer head, Lance began to turn his current cloak situation over in his mind, really considering the fucking travesty he’d ended up in. Should he lie and say he stole it, or should he stand his ground? The first was a guaranteed bad time, but probably less severe than he would get for sticking up for himself. The second option felt right, but it was a risk -- in the one in a million chance Aunt Hira believed him, he would get out with little more than a slap on the wrist… probably… but if she didn’t? Well, then he was double fucked.

The whole thing with the cloak… god, in retrospect, it was just silly. Juvenile, like a kindergartener stealing the apple from his crush’s lunchbox. Lance knew it, and yet, he couldn’t feel a shred of
regret for taking it, which really just equated to, he couldn’t stop thinking about Knife Boy. Lance was already a disaster in terms of crushing on people, and an even bigger disaster in terms of getting over them, but this sudden and intense infatuation was an all time low. Lance didn’t even know his name! He knew almost nothing about him! Sure, he had a sweet smile, and sure, the guy had a laugh that made Lance’s heart and stomach switch places, but it’s not like Lance could help that! Really, he was just a healthy teenage boy who had an interest in pretty people -- it would have been even weirder not to have noticed how attractive the stranger was, considering he managed to pull off a mullet.

Oh, god. I even like his stupid fucking haircut.

A voice in his head that sounded an awful lot like Pidge began to cackle at him. Lance desperately tried to ignore it, along with the rising hope that had crested in his stomach and moved up to his chest, squeezing his heart. It was getting harder to focus on notching his arrows. Was it really so wrong? To feel a tiny glimmer of wonder, wanting to know if they might cross paths again? It’s not like Lance ever went to the Northern District of town, and he doubted Sir Broods A Lot was inclined to leave the city anytime in the near future, so it’s not like he had counted on seeing him again soon… or ever again. He missed the leaf he’d singled out as his target by a few inches.

...But he could at least hope, right? Was that so wrong?

Lance, at the very least, really did want to return the cloak -- that’s what this was about, anyways. Forget about Mullet’s pretty, dark amerthine eyes that twinkled when he had tried not to smile at something Lance said; forget about the lean muscle that hid beneath all of the stupid noble clothing that became visible when he started to fish alongside him. Forget that. It was Mullet’s fault for being forgetful in the first place! If anyone should be drawn and quartered by his Aunt Hira, it should be him. This whole thing only started over returning that jerk’s property, nothing else.


Another taunt cropped up in his stream of consciousness, practically outright mocking him.

“Lance! HEY, LANCE!”

He winced; that voice in his head was starting to sound so much like Pidge it was starting to freak him out.

“LANNNNNNNNNNCEEEEEE!”

Wait.

“LANCE, OVER HERE, YOU IDIOT!”

That actually was Pidge.

Lance snapped to attention, not entirely sure how long he’d been standing there with the string taut in his grip, but the pressure was intense and his fingers felt numb when he lowered the bow. A modest cart was rolling down the drive in his direction, and true to form, perched dutifully at the reins, was one Pidge Holt, waving at him.

“Pidge!” Lance shouted, jogging to meet her halfway. “What the heck? What are you doing here?!”

As they neared each other, Lance saw another head pop out of the back of the open cart.

“Hey, buddy! We were just coming to get you,” Hunk spoke through one of his iconic smiles, the
sort of look that brightened up the whole world, the ray of sunshine that he was.

Lance came to a stop a few feet from the cart. “Come get me? What?”

“Hop in, fucker,” Pidge answered with her most impish grin. “We’re going to the castle.”

“Wow, dude, you look terrible.” Hunk said sympathetically, adding a quick, “No offense, of course.”

“Nah, it’s fine,” Lance agreed, rubbing his eyes as he let the bumpy rhythm of the cart drag him to the castle. “I’m sure I actually do look bad right now. I’m so tired, Hira is working me like crazy.”

“We know, you’re never around anymore.” Pidge admonished, but her tone was anything but accusatory. “That’s why I had Ryner request the honorable Lady Hira Valurian for a diplomatic discussion for a day.”

“Wait -- wait, what?! You did that?” Lance sat up, ramrod straight, staring into the back of Pidge’s messy hair like she just confessed her love to him.

Hunk piped up on Pidge’s behalf as she slowed the reins, coming to a turn in the city. “Yeah! Pidge planned the whole thing, apparently Representative Ryner owed the Holt’s something and Pidge cashed it in. Now we’re castle crashing!”

“Actually,” Pidge leaned back, keeping her eyes ahead as she carved a path through the streets and up to the castle. “You and I are castle crashing, Lance. Hunk here got asked by the Prince in person if he would cater the Ball, so he has an official note and everything.”

Lance’s face went blank, trying to process all of this information. He needed several ticks before mechanically turning to his best friend, needing to see the truth for himself. Hunk was smiling and blushing every shade of red imaginable, and that was good enough for him. Lance basically threw himself across the back of the cart.

“Hunk! That’s AMAZING! I’m so so so happy for you!” He tried to squeeze the rest of Hunk’s sunshine out of his big, squishy body, but it was a never-ending pool of happiness when it came to his best friend; he just squeezed Lance right back, probably bruising his ribs, but fuck it.

“I-I know! I feel like it’s a dream!” He said through laughter, and Lance thought he sounded close to tears. “The whole thing was crazy, and it just happened so fast. There I was, just at the counter doing my thing and this really pretty noble from Balmera came in on Saturday -- her name was Lady Shay -- and she had the Prince and some other royalty with her and she convinced him to try one of my -- one of our bruschetta! It was your tomatoes, man!”

Hunk was gesturing wildly with his arms at this point, and Lance was just watching with a smile so huge that it actually hurt his cheeks. His friend sounded -- looked -- so happy. If anyone deserved it, it was Hunk.

“Your tomatoes were so good, and I just like, turned them into bruschetta and the Prince ate one and was just like -- floored. The first words out of his mouth were just, like, ‘Do you cater?’ And fifteen doboshes later, I’ve got a formal missive inviting me to the castle to look around the kitchens and figure out what to prepare for Friday!”
At this point, Hunk actually was crying, and Lance was pretty sure he started crying too. All the teen could do was scooch up against his friend and hug him again, congratulating him and ruffling his hair and laughing until he was breathless during the whole trek up the castle.

Occasionally, Pidge would interrupt and try to tease Hunk about this Lady Shay character, and Lance found himself joining in as his friend continued to gush about her endlessly.

“Wow, look at you, catering royal Balls, courting royal girls. Damn, Hunk. If I wasn’t so freakin’ happy for you right now I’d be dying of jealousy.”

“Alright, alright,” Pidge called over her shoulder. “Dry your eyes ladies and get your shit together, we’re almost there.”

Doing as he was bid (really, he only teared up, he wasn’t sobbing rivers of joy with his best friend, that would be embarrassing), Lance laughed to himself. It was sort of unreal, and while a voice in his head reminded him that Aunt Hira had specifically told him not to leave the house, he also knew she wouldn’t be back until morning.

A random question popped into his head. “Why did you guys want to bring me along, anyway?”

It came out as an afterthought, but as he said it, it didn’t sound quite as casual as he hoped. Almost… suspicious sounding. Pidge could basically come and go in the capital as she saw fit because of her family, and Hunk’s invitation had been thoroughly explained up to that point. Lance was just… tagging along.

“Uh, because you’re our friend? I never thought I’d get to step foot in the castle, of course you’re coming with us!” Hunk retorted, sounding almost angry at Lance for asking such a thing.

Pidge weighed in, “Plus, like, we’re glad you moved here and stuff so we can be friends, and for that we’re thankful for your aunt, but honestly? Fuck her, man. You need a break.”

Lance could have cried again. Maybe he did. He’s not even sure anymore.

“Thanks, guys.”

“You got it,” Hunk answered with a playful nudge, and they began to slow at the castle entrance.

Pidge dropped the reins as she motioned a stablehand to help tend to their horses, and Lance felt a twinge of guilt while they hopped out of the back. He met eyes with the guy, nodding a quick “thanks” before following his friends.

“By the way, I’ve been meaning to give you this,” Pidge began digging around her pockets, finally fishing out a piece of folded paper. “If I don’t give it to you now I’ll literally never remember.”

Lance accepted it with a raised brow, unfolding it and nearly dropping the parchment with the rush of gratitude that surged through him.

“This is -- oh, my little Pidgeon! Thank you!” He tackled the gremlin in the courtyard, not even caring that they were now amongst the upper echelons of societal bullshit. It was the star chart he’d been meaning to grab from her. The map of the night sky, a tailored guide to the universe, and it was in his hands. Something about the labels, the coordinates, the lines and notes in Pidge and Matt’s respectively awful scrawls made his heart fit to burst with excitement, and all of Pidge’s complaints on personal space fell on deaf ears as Lance just hugged her tighter.
The castle was, of course, a marvel. Just stepping foot inside seemed like a fantasy, something his mamá would have told him as a child before bed in the form of a cuento. From the pillars that sprouted from the ground and pierced through the ceilings, to the infinite lengths of hallways, lined by stained glass windows that dyed the interior all manner of purple, indigo, red, and black, the place practically radiated with a sense of magic and ethereal. Each wall was a sprawling monolith, disconnecting the world within from the afflictions of autumn, of bugs and pests, of rants by paupers on street corners or distant stares of awaiting vendors. Here, the tall towers protected them, warmed by a hearth of brick, stone, mortar and legacy.

In truth, Lance hated how beautiful it all was. The expansive grounds, the endless corridors, even the air itself felt like so much that it made Lance shudder with inadequacy. Every bannister, clearly products of only the finest masonry, or every painting, masterpieces of color that captured worlds real and false, reminded him that he did not belong there, not even a little bit. Pidge made it seem so easy, but Lance could tell even Hunk felt intimidated by the size and splendor of it all.

Even so, at least Hunk was wearing fucking shoes. He had been invited to the castle out of merit. And Lance? Lance looked like a bumpkin by comparison, walking on warm stone with his bare, sore feet.

(He was a bumpkin by comparison, but it’s not like he went out of his way to advertise it.)

They did not have free reign of the castle by any means, though Pidge had made quick work of escaping their mandatory guard that was supposed to show them to the kitchens. The amber-eyed menace that was the youngest Holt made for a much more entertaining tour guide anyways, and Lance found his sour mood forgotten when she joked about how expensive something was or from what country that painting had been commissioned, and why the subject matter was the absolute example of excess. She knew of a servants passage that would bring them straight to the kitchens, but she insisted on a detour before heading downstairs. In the dark passage of the servants hall, she turned and led them up a narrow staircase that had Hunk huffing and squirming every step of the way.

“Where are… we going…” he panted from behind Lance, who was following Pidge’s lead. They were clearly inside the walls of the castle, for the poor lighting and lack of an actual staircase, but Lance was at least a bit familiar with this. He seldom had use for it at his aunt’s house, but he had at least gone into the passages a few times.

“Matt’s here today.” Pidge supplied, which wasn’t really an answer at all, but Hunk seemed too out of breath to argue. “Just through here, I think, uhh… yeah.” She pushed through a portion of the wall and it shifted, allowing them to slip back through to an unknown hallway. A few steps to their left, an impossibly beautiful set of wooden doors were thrown open, glass panels shining in the streaming sunlight from the walls of the hallway, and Matt’s voice could be heard from within.

Of course, Pidge grinned victoriously, looking at them over her shoulder with every bit the I-told-you-so plastered on her face. Neither Lance or Hunk decided to mention that they had not actually challenged her.

“Matthew Holt!” She demanded, charging straight into the room while Lance and Hunk awkwardly scooted in after her.

Lance ignored whatever predictable sibling bickering erupted at that point, too busy absorbing the gorgeous room. It was ovular, perhaps the size of the entire first floor of his house, and the walls
were sparkling. Actually sparkling, like, magically enchanted to look like swirling stars and impossible flashes of photons from what was surely just a painted wall. The floors were pale white, with lighting to match -- it gave everything an opulent sort of radiance. Lance was reminded of a fresh snow leading up to the city, before the horses battered down the path with the ever-present beckon of reality. Highlights of light green and pastel purple traced the ceiling in odd patterns, sharp and precise unlike the brilliant pools of starlight that soaked the walls, which was random and enchanting.

Off to the right side of the room, the only noticeable piece of furniture was pushed up against a wall. A lightly colored, wide desk that followed the same alabaster schematic, with green accents at the feet and a chair in the same styling, was occupied by one Matthew Holt.

“Wah -- Pidge? Oh! Hunk, Lance! ‘Sup, guys?”

“What the quiznak is this place?” The words fell from Lance’s mouth before he had time to realize he’d been very obviously rude. Matt didn’t seem to mind, though that may have had something to do with the fifteen-year-old, smaller version of himself that threw her arms around him and became dead weight on his hip.

Hunk chuckled, taking a few tentative steps closer to the middle of the room. “This is something else. Is this a ballroom?”

“Good guess,” Matt said with a strained smile, trying to release himself of the added 130-pound tumor attached to his side. “But it’s a training room. They’re sorta similar, if you think about it.”

“Dance with swords, dance with a person. Same difference,” a new voice mused, entering behind them.

Clawing his chest, trying to still his frantic heart, Lance swung around and was half-a-breath into telling the guy off -- rude, you don’t just sneak up behind people -- when the complaint got stuck in his throat.

“You!” He gaped, taking in that distinctive tuft of white hair, honest eyes, and faded scar across his nose. Even without the armor, the guy was still built like a fighter, and he seemed to share in Lance’s moment of abrupt recollection. “You’re that knight! Uhh… Taka… something!”

“Oh, it’s you! From outside the city, out East?” Taka-Something laughed, coming forward with a smile and holding out a hand. Lance eyed it for a moment before accepting.

“It’s Takashi, but please, I go by Shiro.”

“Shiro, then,” Lance returned his smile with a more nervous of his own. “I’m Lance.”

As it happened, Lance ended up withdrawing his hand in the nick of time, as not a moment later a violent flash of Pidge-colored mayhem shot right between the two men and clung to Shiro like a parasite.

“Shiro! Hi!”

“Hi, Pidge,” he half-laughed, half-groaned. “Did someone give you sugar?”

Hunk joined the little half-circle then, raising a sheepish hand. “My bad.”

Matt huffed and waved a hand. “Please, can you just keep her? I can’t handle Sugar-Pidge.”
Pidge paid them no mind. “Shiro, these are my friends that I’ve told you about -- Hunk, and you’ve just met Lance.”

Shiro shook Hunk’s hand with the same easy air about him. Despite Lance’s pent up discomfort at being in the castle -- god, these floors are white, too white, really, it’s a wonder I haven’t left fucking footprints by now -- he had to admit Shiro’s straightforward smile put him at ease.

“You’re the Hunk who’s making all the food, right?” Inquired Shiro politely, and Hunk beamed.

“I can’t believe it myself, but yep, that’s me.”

Lance took Hunk’s arm and gave him a firm pat-pat. “Well, I sure can believe it. Not sure if you’ve had the chance yet, Shiro, but Hunk is seriously the best chef in the city. Maybe in all of Marmora. You’re in for a hell of a party if he’s cookin’”

Hunk bristled at the praise, making noises of denial, but Shiro laughed.

“That’s what I’ve heard. You really made an impression on Lady Shay.”

“Ooowooooo00ooh,” Matt and Pidge cooed in harmony, like the little shits that they are. “Lady Shay!”

“G-Guys! It’s not like that, really -- we aren’t, I could never! Not that I mean -- OF COURSE she’s pretty, but I’m -- we just --”

“Hunk, breathe buddy,” Lance coached, trying not to laugh too hard himself. It was just so easy to love Hunk, but a flustered Hunk? Even better.

Matt threw a lazy arm over Shiro, lolling his head like a helpless child onto the taller man’s shoulder.

“Shiro, Shiro, Shiro. I think Kolivan is trying to kill me. If I die, will you keep Pidge away from my funeral? Have Adam give the eulogy, he was always better at words and feelings and all that.”

Shiro, seemingly exasperated but amused, indulged him. “What is it that is so plaguing you, Matt?”

“If I go over these translations one more time, I think that’s it, I’ll die. Never find myself a hot bae, never get to see the countryside, never get to ride the back of a space whale through the cosmos…”

Unceremoniously, Shiro shrugged Matt off his shoulder and rolled his eyes.

“Yeesh, and I thought I was dramatic,” Lance snickered, Hunk and Pidge joining in.

“Did I hear someone say drama?” A new voice inquired, female and smooth like silk. The accent caught his attention, and Lance had to do a double-take when he looked around for the source.

A beautiful young woman, her blonde hair trailing over her shoulders in loose curls, walked into the room with luxurious robes that followed a distinctly similar color palette to the room itself. Her eyes were bright and wide, meeting each face with a kind smile, accented by her spring green obviously-Altean markings. In step beside her, perhaps even more shocking, was an Altean man about a head taller, with neatly styled orange hair and a mustache so well-manicured it almost didn’t look real. His attire suggested that of a lord rather than a knight, but it was by no means casual -- Matt, Pidge, they dressed casually. Hunk was underdressed for the occasion, and Lance? He didn’t want to talk about it.

“Ah, Lady Romelle, Sir Coran,” Shiro clapped his hands together, grabbing the attention of the new
faces. “Are you here to train? You don’t strike me as the combat type.”

“Oh, don’t be so sure,” the man, presumably Sir Coran, said. “In my day I was quite the warrior! Just a snap of one-two- and a pow right between the eyes. Quicker than a spritely clovenheifer, I was. Those baddies never saw it coming, not once!”

“Oh Coran, please,” Lady Romelle said with a defeated shake of the head. “You couldn’t even mount a gazurga without Allura holding onto you. Honestly, it was a bit pathetic.”

Matt and Pidge laughed at this, to which Hunk and Lance met eyes and chuckled along awkwardly. Lance may be half-Altean, but he didn’t understand half of what just came out of their mouths.

“Oh anyway,” the blonde girl said, turning back to them with a dazzling smile. “Coran and I were just out and about, waiting for the Princess, you know -- and we heard you all in here laughing like you were out of your crankers. Who are you all?”

Shiro, arms crossed and head tilted, looked like he was stuck on a mildly challenging puzzle.

“If you’re going to stroll the castle, I’d at least encourage you to let someone act as an escort. You could get lost, or worse -- hurt,” he said in a scolding tone. “You can notify the first guard you find and they’ll get you someone as soon as they can. Okay?”

The two scratched the backs of their heads and fidgeted, realizing their mistake as Shiro lectured, but his tone softened before the conversation could turn completely awkward.

He held a hand up. “You both know Matt and Pidge Holt?”

Lady Romelle and Sir Coran nodded, the former adding a quick, “Although know is a bit strong. We crossed paths at your family’s archives. It was wonderful, really.”

After dismissive shrug from Pidge, Matt elbowed his sister and bowed. “It’s a pleasure, m’lady.”

Shiro, Lance, and Hunk all laughed simultaneously. Matt was hilariously un-smooth.

“And these are friends of the Holt’s, Hunk of Garrett’s Bakery --”

“Oh!” Lady Romelle dropped a fist into her hand, the model image of deduction. “I knew I recognized you! You’re the one Lady Shay was talking about!”

“Oh, you’re the one?” Sir Coran leaned in, visibly intrigued. “Lady Shay was thrilled to talk of your cooking.”

If Hunk had flushed from embarrassment before, it was nothing compared to the shocking crimson color that overwhelmed his face. He tried to desperately choke out some words before giving up, burying his face in his hands.

“And this,” Shiro said between chuckles. “Is Lance… Uh, Lance…” he paused, brow furrowed and looking towards him.

“Lance McClain,” he added, with a small smile and a shrug. “I’m just a servant.”

Pidge glared at him. “No, you’re not.”

Hunk crossed his arms, unamused. “Yeah, dude, we’ve been over this.”

Now Lance was the one blushing, cheeks flushed in chagrin. He knew his friends were trying to
stand up for him, but this was neither the time nor the place to argue the point.

“I mean, maybe not technically! They don’t need my life story.” He whisper-yelled to the both of them, returning to his normal volume to add, “Not technically a servant, okay? I’m a servant as far as it really counts.”

Just as Hunk was about to say something, wearing his very best oh-no-you-didn’t face, Sir Coran joined the offended encore.

“Well, nonsense that! Service is a valuable pursuit, my boy. My whole family, starting way back at my grand-grand-grand Pop-Pop Wimbleton have all been in service to the Altean royal line. Myself included!”


Sir Coran’s mustache twitched, and Lance had an overwhelming temptation to try to rip it off, because no way was it real. But that would probably get him kicked out of the castle, or maybe thrown in jail, so he decided against it.

“I’m what, exactly?” Sir Coran prompted.

Lance wrung his hands. “I dunno -- you’re all, you know... Fancy!”

The word bounced off the cold white walls, reverberating back to them in echoes of shame. Lance had started yelling -- when did that happen? Mortified, he began to flap his mouth open and closed, working something like an apology on his tongue with little success.

And the universe had mercy that day, because Matt started to laugh. Not just chuckle to break the tension, but really laugh. Like, shaking his body, eyes pricked with tears, red-faced laughter. Pidge wasn’t far behind him, and then Hunk was giggling like a mad schoolgirl, and that was enough to send the rest of them into a slap-happy euphoria. Breathing was almost impossible, as every inhale was forced back out into a stream of constant, raucous laughter, and at some point Lance was bent over his knees, fighting back snorts. Shiro rested a hand on his shoulder, leaning against him for support as he nursed a stitch in his side from the stupid, uncontrollable giddiness that swept over all of them.

After a solid five doboshes, Lady Romelle with tears pouring down her cheeks, Pidge’s glasses abandoned so she could cover her face, Matt and Shiro trying to calm each other down before bursting into a giggle again, and Hunk literally on his back laughing, they all managed to finally regain their wits enough to talk, like normal people.

“Oh, goodness, I haven’t laughed like that since King Alfor spilled mulberry wine on Allura’s favorite gown phebes ago.” Romelle said, breathily. “I like this lot, Shiro.”

“As do I,” Coran added with a twirl of his moustache, directing his attention pointedly to Hunk. “And if you’re going to be providing food for the Ball, I imagine we’ll be seeing more of you?”

The teen adjusted his headband, having fallen slightly askew during his episode on the floor a few moments ago, and smiled proudly. “Yep! That’s the idea. I’m actually here today to check out the kitchens, we just sort of ended up in this part of the castle, because… uh…”

Matt raised a brow at his sudden sheepishness, shooting a look at his sister. “...Let me guess, to bother me?”
“Well, I maybe wouldn’t put it quite like that…” Hunk shrugged, “but yeah, basically.”

Shiro spoke before Pidge could get a word in edgewise, which she very much looked prepared to do.

“So you’re heading down to the kitchens? I can take you there, if you’d like. It’s best not to wander the castle, especially right now, without an escort.” He sent a measured look to Lady Romelle and Sir Coran, both of whom seemed very preoccupied with a particulate of dust floating between them all of the sudden. “I know Pidge knows her way around, but it’s not you getting lost I’m worried about. Security is extremely heightened right now, so even a guard might accidentally mistake you for a trespasser without an escort and… well, let it suffice to say that that would not be good.”

“Well, we wouldn’t want to be a burden, but that sounds -- ” his friend began, but the blonde cut him off.

“That’s a splendid idea, Shiro!” Romelle beamed, clapping her hands together lightly. “I’m starving. To the kitchens?”

Hunk seemed surprised that they intended to join them, and looked to Lance for some sort of support. He didn’t get the chance, as Pidge, impatient as ever rolled her eyes and shoved the middle of Hunk’s back with all her might, not even budging him an inch. “C’mon! To the kitchens!”

As sure as the sunrise, the group was successfully driven out of the ornate, futuristic training room (that Lance later learned was designed to be accommodating to Altean and Puigan soldiers) and into the lower rungs of the castle. The serving hands in the lower parts of the castle more, well, resembled him, donning tunics and well-worn shoes instead of vestments or gowns. The stains of his heels no longer felt so glaringly obvious, accusatory in their demands of what are you even doing here?

They were, admittedly, a bit of a hodgepodge group. Shiro, a knight who, by the way others bowed and muttered respectful words, was likely no ordinary sword-and-board wielder; two human teenagers, both geniuses in their own right; Matt, a scholar of good humor and sharp wit; Coran and Romelle, aloof but impossibly kind Altean nobility; and him, a not-really-servant to a not-really-important family. Still, it sort of worked. They worked, and their trip to the kitchens became over a varga-long conversation over food, laughter, and grunts of frustration or hums of understanding.

By the time they finished their culinary tour and the conversation lulled into a comfortable murmur, Shiro decided he had to get back -- Adam, the knight who Lance had apparently seen him with when they first met, and consequently Shiro’s husband -- was supposed to be meeting him for some committee thing. He offered to get them back upstairs, and so the group reluctantly left the basements and climbed through stairs until Lance’s legs ached, eventually coming out in the same hallway they first found Matt in. While they walked, their impromptu leader became an honorary tour guide, pleasantly chattering with Hunk and Lady Romelle about different pieces of history that marked the walls. Pidge and Matt shot snarky remarks back and forth, while Lance and Sir Coran took up the rear, both quiet as they basked in the simple camaraderie of being in good company.

They parted ways with Shiro in front of the Altean training room, and Lance felt infinitely more comfortable shaking his hand the second time, thanking him for his help and for, you know, not kicking him out when he clearly wasn’t supposed to be there. The older man found some humor in that, waving as he left them. (“Don’t leave without an escort, okay? I’ll send someone right up after me.”)

As Hunk and Pidge turned on Matt with some sort of inhuman screeching, catching Lady Romelle up in the mess -- something about molecular regeneration in bioplasts? -- Sir Coran tapped on Lance’s shoulder.
The older man’s eyes were bright, twinkling as they turned up at the corners, one of those kind smiles that fills his whole face, from mustache to forehead to slight crow’s feet.

“So, Lance, you never did tell us about your situation. Would it be wrong of me to assume that you are a servant, then?”

“Yes…” Lance kept his gaze trained forward, unsure what expression he was making. “More or less. I live with my aunt, actually. I look after the house, and it’s just her and her three daughters, so, I mean, yeah. I’m family, but I’m also their… housekeeper, errand runner, cook, you know, the usual service stuff.”

Out of habit, Lance had braced himself for the look of pity and wasted apologies or awkward subject change, but it never came. Instead, Sir Coran seemed more interested than ever.

“Well, that sounds like a nice bit of luck, then. Working and family! They say not to mix personal and professional, but I my boy, never saw the fun in that.”

Lance scratched his cheek and decided not to comment on how fucking awful his aunt was, unwilling to banish the earnestness from Sir Coran’s expression. Instead, he decided to turn the question back on Coran.

“So, what’s it like being fancy all the time? Is the mustache a prerequisite to working for royalty?”

“Oh, I just love it!” He supplied brightly.

That gave Lance pause. “You love it?”

“You bet your hummufer’s rezipar I do!” His whole presence seemed to radiate with delight at the opportunity to speak about the royal Altean family. “They may not be my blood, but I’ve always felt like a part of the family. It’s a treasure, to be sure.”

Lance was unsure of what to say, so he hummed in acknowledgment and wondered (and maybe hoped) the topic was considered dropped.

No such luck. Lance wasn’t really known for his luck.

Sir Coran cast him a deliberate look from his left side, and Lance felt himself shrink a bit. It was weird. Technically, this guy was no different than him, right? They’re both servants. But this guy was Sir Coran, servant of a King. He, on the other hand was just… Lance.

“I do hope it is not rude of me, so do feel free to dismiss my curiosity if it comes off this way… but, are you by chance Altean in origin?”

“Ahh… you noticed that, did you?” He grinned sheepishly, brushing a hand over his mark. “Half-Altean, half-human.”

The moustache on the man’s face danced as he grinned, large and intrigued. “The marking is hard to miss, though I’ll admit, I don’t know I’ve seen just one. Quite the quirk, indeed – usually it’s all or nothing, even in mixed folk. Do you hail from Altea? I have seen some pretty bang-up tattoo jobs that imitate the look, but there’s no missing a natural mark.”

Lance blinked, surprised but not dissuaded by Sir Coran’s boldness. The conversation jumped from A to B to X so quickly that it took him a moment to realize he’d been asked a question in there somewhere.
“No. I grew up in the Arusian-Altean mountain ranges. My family lives there now.”

“Ahh, but you traversed all the way to Marmora to live with… family as well?”

Lance wore a small smile. “Something like that, yeah.”

A guard jogged around the corner not a tick later, looking confused but relieved to find their gaggle standing in the middle of a hallway. Shiro’s doting, Lance assumed.

“Are Masters Garrett, Holt and McClain ready for their escort out of the castle?” He questioned, which made Lance blush and laugh at the same time. Master McClain. Oh, man, that was a new one.

Pidge shrugged on behalf of all of them. “Sure.”

“Alright. Sir Coran, Lady Romelle, Sir Matthew -- remain here until I have returned. Do not wander, please.”

The last word seemed to be tagged on with a hint of desperation, and Lance sort of felt bad for ditching their original guard at the beginning of the day. Imagine, signing up for a rugged life of blood, loyalty and fulfillment, only to be assigned to be a goddamn chaperon. It was a little sad.

A few smiles and thanks and hugs later (because let’s face it, Lance is a hugger, everyone knows that), the trio set off with their escort down the hallways, overlooking the servants passage as they made their way down -- the long way, apparently, because Lance’s legs were starting to hurt after a few dobosh.

“Aw, crap! Hunk -- did you give Matt back his codex?” Pidge paused in the middle of the hallway, fiddling around her pockets and coming up with a piece of parchment that Lance had to assume belonged to Matt.

His friend groaned in response, reaching into his own pocket and pulling out some sort of accompanying booklet. It looked like a language translator, but it was in a script that was not recognizable to Lance.

“Yes, ugh, crap.” Hunk said, locking eyes with their exasperated gremlin. “Let’s just run it back to him, okay? We’ll be right back!”

Just like that, before Lance had the chance to blink, the pair of them were bolting down the hall the way they’d come, just in time for their knight to blow a gasket.

“W-Wait! You need an escort!” He all but screamed after them, clanking down the hallway obnoxiously.

Lance watched them, hand raised halfway to call after them, but he just sort of stopped when they all turned the corner. Sure, he probably should have just followed them, but his eyes trailed to the tall window they’d conveniently paused in front, eyeing the cushioned seat with envy. It even had decorative pillows. Outside, it had started to grow dark, the sun slipping over the trees, and Lance felt a bit surprised -- had the day really passed that quickly? It was a shame. He was really enjoying the momentary freedom he’d been granted.

So he sat down, leaning his back against the stone and looking over a magnificent view of the castle grounds, out into the Western part of the city. Clouds and the pastel ribbons of the sunset played a harmony of calming warmth over the lawn, castle walls, and into the city itself. The Holt’s home was visible above the others, a known landmark for their oddities and eccentricities -- not to mention the building itself was tall and ridiculous in every way the Holts knew how to be.
In the quieting darkness of the lone castle hallway, Lance felt his eyes grow heavy with his lost sleep, but he tried to stay awake. It would be embarrassing to be caught sleeping in the middle of some random hallway in a castle that he had no right stepping foot in. He should have just ran after the knight in the first place, but there wasn’t much he could do about that now. It wasn’t like Pidge and Hunk could take very long, right? Maybe if he did just close his eyes, just for a second, he could get at least a tiny bit of relief. They wouldn’t burn or scratch as much when Pidge took him home. Just for a few minutes...

...

“Excuse me?”

“Mierda! Holy quiznak -- oh, I’m sorry!” Lance flinched back, smacking his head into the stone behind him and groaning in response. A string of Spanish curses loosened his lips as consciousness returned, and he blinked away the white spots in his vision before settling on a face.

Well, a torso, and then a face, because the guy was fucking huge. Lance had to crane his neck just to meet his eye.

“W-Who…?” He began, licking his lips as the past few hours returned to him. It was dark outside now, the colors washed from the clouds in the sky. The horizon had darkened, somber but alight with a lovely waxing moon, nearly full and luminous with ripples of stars pockmarking the sky.

“This part of the castle is reserved for members of the Galra nobility and military. Why are you here?”

Lance took in the guy’s appearance a second, more lucid, time, eyes fixing on the puffy ears and unruly mane of hair. The darkness made his lilac skin take on a shrouded, indigo quality.

“Well?” He demanded, sharper this time.

Lance’s voice cracked, so he cleared his throat and tried again. “I -- sorry, I didn’t mean to intrude or anything. I’m here with a few friends and we were just leaving, I was just waiting for our escort to return.”

He stumbled slightly, but tried to brush himself off and start down the hallway, acting like he had any sort of clue he knew where he was going. Fake it ‘til you make it, right? Mechanically, he turned down hallway after hallway, trying to at least put himself out of the apparently “off limit” Galra zone. It worked well enough, after a few dobosh he was passing through some well-lit halls, others quiet and dark, but with a greater presence of life in the castle. He passed other Galra, along with Alteans, humans, Balmeran, Arusians and Puigans, too. No one paid him much mind, probably figuring him a servant (they weren’t wrong) that was just going about his business.

Lance wanted to be upset with Pidge and Hunk for leaving him in the first place, or their knightly chaperone who ran off, but the decision to stay behind and wait had ultimately been his own… A tendril of fear crawled up his throat momentarily at the thought of his friends. Pidge and Hunk. He had been so focused on getting himself out, he hadn’t considered –- did they leave? Without him? Or did something happen to them? Perhaps they were hurt? Or looking for him as well?

The anxiety of his missing friends was starting to make his heart thump painfully, rocking against his ribcage in a panic, so when he turned a corner and saw a sight so beautiful, he was struck with silent in quiet awe. He wasn’t one to be left speechless easily, but this part of the castle stole all the clever
remarks from his tongue.

The walls were painted daubs of black, mighty shadows extending into pitch tar, only to be teased back to reality again by the bleaching rays of the moon. It was black, white, and it was beautiful, and absolutely terrifying. Vaguely, Lance envisioned that he was, in fact, a tinier version of himself, standing at the edge of a luxurious piano, the keys and chords corresponding to the notes tuned by windows and moonlight.

It was pretty, but Lance was exhausted, worried, and uncomfortable. He needed to get out of here, he needed to just go home. Lance spotted a particular door at the end of the darkened hallway, shorter and nondescript compared to the lavish and polished woods of the other entrances; it resembled the servants passage he had gone through earlier with Pidge and Hunk. Chewing his lip, he decided to take the door, hoping he guessed right. After all, servants stairways had to lead to the servants chambers, and more than likely, the kitchens… there, he could at least find someone to help him.

When he began walking, he could practically feel the relief and panic like the tides rolling in, soft in the light and fearsome in the unlit parts of the corridor. On, off. Light, dark. Worry, calm.

*He was fine. Pidge and Hunk were probably looking for him right now! Maybe they had the same idea of going to the kitchens? That made sense -- why didn’t he think of it sooner? The only other meeting place they all knew of was basically that random Altean-Puigian training room. No way he’d be able to find his way back there on his own, so this was definitely the best option. Yes. Good. He was okay. Fine. Better than fine, he was great. No problem.*

A group of people walked out of a random door, directly in front of him, making Lance freeze in place. They appeared to be all Galra by the looks of it, chattering in low tones amongst themselves. None of them even seemed to notice him as he stood in the middle of the hallway, and Lance made a beeline for the door, trying to occupy as little space as possible.

“Hey,” one of voices said, louder than the murmur of their group’s chatter. Lance didn’t make eye contact or show any indication of having heard whoever was speaking. It sounded like a male, but the tone of most Galra was low and grumbly so it really could have been a woman just as well.

For once in his life, Lance very much wanted to be as invisible as he often felt. Not because he didn’t like attention -- no, not that. There was just… something wrong in the air, he could feel it, like something was stuck to his skin. A shadow, or a film of dust, it clung to him, making the lengths of each shadow in the hallway seem longer and the gaps of white light seem shorter. He was nearly there, though. Just walk in, close the door, slip downstairs. Easy.

Present

He was pretty pissed about the whole thing, even now -- especially now -- because one dobosh he went from ignoring strangers and trying not to make eye contact with anyone, to having a rough pressure collapsing around his throat, his back embedding with stone as he hit a brick wall.

Movement. A disembodied voice. Dark purple, black -- spots in his vision that were so white it hurt
to see -- rushing back with the fresh contrast of chalky moonlight, just a slit beneath the doorway.

Lance was so taken aback that he couldn’t have spoken if he wanted to. (He did want to, for the record. He very much want to say “hey, fuck you, leave me alone.” But such was life.)

“An Altean, aren’t you?” A husky voice reeled, so close to his ear that Lance could feel the vibration of their vocal chords pressed against him. Jesus, fuck, they were way too close -- too close, too warm, get off of me, but his voice had been knocked out with the air in his lungs. “Did’ya lose your way, little one? Your Princess is up, up, up, high in the castle, you shouldn’t be here all alone…”

“No --” his lung scraped out a sound, but he couldn’t finish the thought. Not his Princess. Not Altean, not really. Not alone, just… temporarily.

“Shh, you’re prettier when you’re quiet,” the sound was horrible, dark and lustful. It was threatening. “Stay quiet for me. Yes, just like that.”

A murmur ate the last words, turned to a trail of kisses along his collarbone, and Lance gasped just in time for a hand to be clamped over his mouth.

He could imagine each of his ribs snapping under the pressure of his jackhammer heart and the muscular torso pinning him in place. The combination of warm, slightly spiced breath and very little space was clouding his mind, literally overwhelming him -- he could barely take in air with the vice over his throat. The hand on his face was large, rough and smelled slightly of sweat, not that he was really paying that much attention to it, more concerned with the way it practically crushed his head against the wall behind him with the force exerted to keep his mouth shut.

“A good servant, aren’t you?” The voice practically purred. “Do you always take orders so well?”

After that initial moment of -- fear? Confusion? The entire feeling of ‘what the fuck are you doing?’ if it could be bottled up into a molotov cocktail? Whatever it was, it passed, quickly burned out by cold fury in his veins. It made all sensation stop for a moment, just long enough for Lance to brace himself against the wall and rear his fist back, punching that motherfucker square in the jaw.

The guy staggered backwards, and for the first time, Lance could tell properly that he was a Galra. Maybe military, based off his wares, with a terrible snarl and deep purple hair. Lance was unimpressed, even if he had two feet and at least 70 pounds on him.

Coughing at the sudden return of air, Lance held his ground. “Fuck you. I’m not your fucking property.”

The teen, massaging his throat, tongued the inside of his cheek and grimaced at the taste of something metallic. He must have bitten his cheek during the initial surprise, and swirled the blood in his mouth before spitting it at his feet.

The response was something between a pant and a laugh, which was not even a tiny bit reassuring.

“You’re going to regret that.”

Shit.

Was he going to die here?

A sudden flash of brilliant light knocked him back, and Lance thought -- okay, yep, I’m definitely going to die here.
Instinctually, he lifted his hands to cover his eyes, trying to block out the sudden light in vain. Maybe he died and had already passed on? Was the afterlife just a really fucking bright place, like staring at the sun for the rest of time? That sounded more like hell, if he were honest.

But he heard a voice, or no… maybe two? Yes. There were voices, and it wasn’t his abuelita greeting him at the pearly gates or his first girlfriend laughing at him in the fiery depths of the hell. Slowly, his eyes began to adjust to the brilliant splash of color as the world that came back to him, and he realized with a start that someone was holding onto him.

“...ou alright?” Someone said, gently. They had white hair like an angel, gathered carefully in curls that cascaded over dainty shoulders, and their voice sounded like melting ice cream, sweet and cool without freezing him out. (Cut him a break, yeah? Lance hit his head pretty hard. That was the only real visual he could come up with.)

Beside the first voice, another joined in. This one was similar to the first one, but more familiar. “Are they alri -- oh my god, is that…? Lance?”

That was enough to finally ground him again, and to his surprise, he found his eyes misted and his whole body trembling. He was laying with his head in the lap of the white-haired angel, and beside her, another beautiful face stared at him, dumbstruck.

“...Romelle?” Blushing, Lance tried to get a grip on both himself and the situation. He was basically laying on top of the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen, with a nearly-as-beautiful woman leaning over him. “W-What happened?”

Romelle’s bright eyes clouded, and she shared a pointed look with the woman who was still supporting Lance’s weight slightly, a steady hand between his shoulders as he leaned up. Looking around, he was surprised to find himself in a normal hallway once again, no black and white and growling purple.

After a pause, Romelle spoke with great care. “You… blacked out, but for only a moment, I think. Do you remember what happened?”

“I…” he felt the back of his head, but noticed both women were looking at his neck. He blushed again, this time from shame rather than admiration. There must be something worth seeing there, and it made his face hot and angry tears pricked his eyes when he realized why. Right. He’d nearly been strangled and was roughly shoved up against a wall, with way too much body heat involved. “Oh… Yeah. Okay.”

The white haired one, Lance realized, was wearing some of the most beautiful soft blue robes he’d ever seen. She was already breathtaking, but this outfit seemed to accent every angle, every point and curve of her face, shoulders, wrists, anything. She was positively lovely, and entirely intimidating.

“Your name is Lance?” She asked him.

He nodded. If he spoke, he might cry, and he really didn’t feel up for that right now.

“Well, Lance. You’re okay now.” Delicate fingers brushed away his bangs. “We’ve made sure the man who attacked you will be properly reprimanded. There is no room for such monstrous behavior in this castle, or this country for that matter. So, there will be recompense for his actions, I assure you.”

The blonde smiled at her, and Lance watched a glint of awe form in her eyes. “Recompense on top of getting his ass kicked by the Princess, that is.”
That earned Romelle a playful eye roll, but Lance blinked and pulled further away from the white-haired woman in horrified shock. “Wait, Princess?”

Shifting her weight, the girl wore a small smile. “Yes. I am Princess Allura of Altea. It’s nice to meet you, Lance, though I am sorry it is under such circumstances.”

Lady Romelle scooted a bit closer to Allura, laughing at Lance’s clear disbelief. “She’s also Allura the Ass-Kicker. It was pretty incredible to watch you flip a man twice your size flat on his back, I have to admit.”

Lance was sure his jaw had unhinged by now, because, what the fuck? There was -- no way, he didn’t -- THE Princess Allura?

“Well,” she straightened slightly, chin held high. “What do you expect? A drunken Galran general tries to attack an Altean on my watch? He’s lucky he’s alive."

“Yes,” Romelle caught her hand and gave it a squeeze. “I suppose murder would dampen the mood in the castle, wouldn’t it?”

The teen shook his head and tried to stand, needing to take a step back and make sure this was really happening. He got about halfway up before sagging, but Princess Allura managed to catch him beneath the elbow.

“Perhaps we should take you to the infirmary. Are you here alone?”

“Um.” Lance wasn’t paying attention. He was too flushed and nervous and overwhelmed to do much but stare at her.

Thank the stars for Romelle, who gently came to his rescue.

“No, he is here with two others. Hunk Garrett and Pidge Holt. I’m not sure where they’ve gone, though.” She frowned.

Allura mirrored her expression, releasing Lance’s elbow when he seemed steady.

“We are going to take you to the infirmary, and see if we can’t find your friends. Is that alright? Can you manage?”

He bobbed his head up and down, and he was pretty sure he could feel his brain rattle around inside.

Unsure what to do with himself, Lance stayed just a step behind Princess Allura and Lady Romelle, the latter chattering amicably about everything and anything while Allura listened and commented on occasion, sometimes laughing along. There was something about their mannerisms that seemed intimate, sort of in the way Lance felt around Hunk -- they were both affectionate people, but, Lance was pretty sure Hunk never looked at him with goo-goo eyes like the ones the Princess had on right now. There was probably something there, friendship at a minimum, but Lance suspected more.

As far as the conversation itself, Lance was barely listening. He was overwhelmed by the last varga (rightly so), half-tempted to crawl into a random chamber and die of embarrassment, or shock, or just in general.

Jesus, he really could have died not five minutes ago. Now he was walking the quiet castle halls with a Lady and a Princess, who happened to step in before something actually terrible could have happened. Lance shuddered. He had been so defenseless; it was sort of terrifying.
That made something tug at his heart, like a ghost of a smile that beckoned him at the edge of his memories.

“No, I’m not going to murder you. Or at least, I wasn’t planning on it.” The corner of his lip twitched, fighting a smirk. Lance thought it was the cutest, most stubborn thing he’d ever seen.

“Knife boy…” Lance hissed in reply, granting him an official Lance McClain Original Nickname.

“You can never be too careful.” Lance could hear the smile in his voice.

Lance was starting to think maybe carrying a knife wasn’t such a bad idea. Also, why do all the pretty people have to be nobles? It’s just not fair.

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**[KEITH]**

Sitting in the Council chambers, Keith traced patterns into the dark wooden tabletop with his fingers. Their session had let out over an hour ago, but he stayed behind to speak with a few people in a sort of unintentional rotation.

First, he had been cornered by Shiro, who had been casting him looks all fucking day, and the day before.

Keith didn’t have the patience for Shiro’s let’s just ease into this conversation attitude, especially not with stress in the castle being at an all-time-high after the Galra’s arrival early that morning. The moment the older man turned to him with an innocent smile on his face, Keith shot him a glare.

“Just spit it out, Shiro. What do you want?”

Brows raised, the knight’s expression flickered from surprised to concerned. “Well, okay. I just… I wanted to remind you, you know you can talk to me about anything, right?”

Keith didn’t reply. He knew Shiro well enough; there was definitely more coming.

“Listen, Keith,” he sighed, folding his hands neatly on the table. “I know you’re not happy about all of this, but I also know you can handle it. You’ve made that perfectly clear. So what I’m trying to say is -- if there’s something else going on, I want you to be able to come to me. Alright?”

That softened a bit of his sour mood, and he glimpsed guiltily in Shiro’s direction. He was studying his folded hands on the table.

“I -- yes, I know.” Keith mumbled after a pause. “I know, and I’m sorry, okay? Just, I feel like there’s too much happening all at once. How can it only be Monday? I don’t know if I’ll even survive until Friday at this rate. And it’s not really just about this party and having all the guests here and whatever… It’s just...”

The older man said nothing, still looking at his folded fingers. Keith swallowed the surge of panic that bubbled up his throat and, in his most nonchalant tone, tagged on the truth that he knew Shiro was waiting for.
“I may... have met someone I want to... invite on Friday?”

Clearly, that had not been what Shiro had been expecting him to say, given by the way he practically leapt back in his seat. Comically wide-eyed, the older man turned his whole torso towards Keith, looking for any sign of dishonesty.

Annoyed, Keith knew all he would notice was his red cheeks.

“As in… like, invite-invite someone?”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Keith grunted, but made no moves to deny it.

Shiro seemed thoughtful. “Okay. Well… do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“I’m shocked.” Shiro snorted.

Keith sunk into his arms, now on the tabletop, and groaned. “Shiro, I -- it’s not that I don’t trust you. I just… don’t know how to talk about this. Does that make sense?”

After a beat of silence, the knight propped his elbow on the table and leaned his chin into the palm of his hand. Keith turned his head to the side to look at him, relieved to see there was no judgment there.

“It does, Keith. Definitely. Can I at least ask a few questions about him or her, which you can choose to ignore or answer? It would at least help me to relax if I had a slightly better idea of what’s going on.”

He bit his lip. Talking about it would make it just seem so much more… real. God, he was pathetic.

Keith clenched his jaw. “...Him.”

“What?” Shiro leaned down slightly, not having heard him.

Keith stifled a groan. “You asked… about him or her. I’m telling you. Him.”

“Oh.” Shiro exhaled a puff of air, sounding like his soul had just abandoned his mortal body. It took everything in Keith’s power not to punch him for looking at him, so stupidly proud about him admitting this. Keith had never really expressed interest in… well, anyone before, actually. Shiro knew his preference, but this was the first time it had ever come to fruition enough to justify a conversation. The older man looked so smug and happy that Keith was already regretting his decision.

It seemed the knight remembered himself after a moment, clearing his throat and putting back on his serious-Shiro face. “Okay. So, is he from one of the other kingdoms?”

Keith shook his head.

“Then they’re Marmoran?”

“...Not exactly.”

“Okay…” Shiro’s eyes looked like they were fucking sparkling with delight. The Prince was, on the other hand, trying to calculate if a jump from the window at this height would be enough to kill him.
“How do you know this person?”

*I don’t really know him at all. That’s part of the fucking problem.*

“Er, we met when you let me have the afternoon to myself on Saturday.”

That elicited a surprised, almost affronted, noise from Shiro that Keith quite frankly would not have believed he had the capability to make, had he not just heard it himself.

“*Wait wait wait -- you’ve only known this person for a few days*?”

Keith decided that was a question he wanted to ignore.

Shiro clenched his fist, unclenching it after a deep breath. “Sorry. I just -- there are a lot of people out there who could try to hurt you and take advantage of you for… well, for obvious reasons, actually. I just worry.”

“I know,” Keith sighed, feeling a tiny curve at the corner of his mouth. “But that’s actually… sort of why I… he didn’t recognize me, Shiro. At all. He treated me normally.”

“So he was nice?” Shiro smiled.

Keith snorted. “No, he was kind of an ass, but in a good way. Like Adam, you know?”

“Trust me, *I know*.”

After another half of varga of questioning, Keith decided he couldn’t take the conversation anymore. His face was practically *burning* red, and Shiro was actually seeming more frustrated than supportive as they went on. Keith was trying to keep it vague, he didn’t want to get ahead of himself.

Finally, Shiro sighed and put both hands on the table. “Okay. One more question.”

“Thank god,” Keith muttered.

Shiro ignored him. “This conversation began because you wanted to invite him? What are you going to do?”

Keith opened his mouth, and snapped it closed again. Fuck. *This* is what he was talking about; why was this so hard?

*Yes, I want to invite him. I want to know more about him and make him laugh again. I want to answer his questions this time and listen to him talk all fucking night because… fuck, I don’t even know.*

“I don’t know,” Keith admitted, breaking the heavy silence. “I really don’t know.”

Their conversation didn’t go much further than that, as his Mother walked in a few moments later and Keith gave Shiro A Look: *say one fucking word about this and I will personally slit your throat, I don’t care if you’re like a brother to me, I fucking dare you.*

Shiro promptly excused himself, and in a blink, his mother was seated beside him.

“What was that about?” She mused.

Keith shrugged, glad his cheeks were no longer aflame.
The queen, thankfully, did not push the issue. In fact, she looked a little strained, and Keith reached out to rest a hand on one of hers on top of the table.

“Hey, is everything okay?”

She looked at him for a long moment, considering her answer. “I think so. The meeting earlier was just… I don’t know. It left me feeling off. Did anything seem unusual to you?”

Shit. Keith hadn’t expected her to come to him for consultation, even though he had been there for the entire meeting. His mind was on… other things, not giving the whole situation his due attention.

“Ahh… not really?” He admitted. “I’ll be honest, I’ve been having trouble focusing on the meetings and lessons lately. There’s just… a lot.”

His mother leaned back, craning her head to look at the ceiling. “Yes, I suppose that’s fair. I admire Alfor and Allura’s diligence. It’s unusual for me not to be the most commanding force in the room. Refreshing, though.”

“Well, we’re not the ones who are technically war here, so it makes sense,” Keith pointed out. “Not that it’s technically war, either, but…”

“Olkarion is getting ravaged, I know.” Queen Krolia sighed, resting her eyes. “Having King Alfor and Emperor Zarkon in the same room together was… hard. Harder than I thought it would be.”

“I don’t get it,” Keith said bluntly, which caught his mother’s attention. She peeked at him through one eye. “How can this just happen? I just -- I don’t get how the Galra get away with it.”

Tersely, she chuckled. “They do, and they don’t, my son. Their claim is that they are reunifying a province on the border that was rightfully theirs, that the Olkari wrongfully stole. Altea has stepped up to bolster Olkarion’s defense of the land, and their trade embargo is putting a huge strain on all three economies, but it’s also made things so… dangerous in the region. If any other kingdom get involved directly -- if we get involved -- it will be seen as an act of aggression. Actual war will be imminent.”

“So we do nothing,” Keith muttered, angrily. They’d talked about this before, enough times that he shouldn’t really get upset anymore. But he would anyways, every time. It just felt wrong – that intervening to help innocent people from being slaughtered would somehow make them the aggressors.

“No, you do something.” She looked at her son, gaze soft. “By marrying Allura, you’ll unify our kingdoms, at least for this generation. It’s not that we’ll be agreeing to defend the Olkari overtly; that’s simply too dangerous. It implies the kingdoms will fight together if we have to. Zarkon knows he can’t best both of us, and will back down.”

For the second time, Keith groaned and laid his across his arms on the table. He really should have been paying better attention in all of these meetings -- this was clearly so much more important than an obnoxious, charming, blue-eyed stranger. Somehow, his personal freedom was the small price to pay for peacefully saving thousands of lives. The choice seemed obvious, and yet, here he was, imagining Lance’s stupid cocky smile in his head again.

His mother smiled sympathetically, probably chalking up his distress to the general difficulty of the week. She changed the topic, for which Keith was grateful.

“I don’t care for Prince Lotor. He’s grown up to be…”
Keith quirked a brow. “A dick?”

“I was going to say arrogant, but, yours is probably more accurate.” The queen laughed, and Keith couldn’t help but smile a bit. There was something wonderful about making his mother happy, something deep and precious that he kept nestled beside his heart.

She continued on, smiling wryly. “I thought it might have ended up boasting well, you know, that he was half-Altean. I thought that might make him more sympathetic to the whole thing, but…”

The Prince frowned. “I know what you mean. It’s like, he doesn’t exactly do anything… but there’s just a way he acts that pisses me off. He always talks down to Allura, and he always gives Shiro’s these pitying, looks -- like he’s broken or that we’re being so generous to let him ‘stay’ Head of the Guard. Like, we all fucking know he lost an arm. It doesn’t make him any different!”

The last part came out almost as a growl, and Keith relished in the feeling of his anger. It was nice to finally feel something besides frustrated and confused; anger made sense. He could do anger.

“It doesn’t,” his mother grimaced. “I anxiously await for the week to be over so they’ll be out of the castle. But we must manage for a little longer. After all…”

They met eyes for a moment, and Keith caught her smirking. At the same time, they both opened their mouths and said, in very poor Shiro-impressions: “Patience yields focus.”

After chuckling heartily, enough to at least dispel some of the black cloud that clung to their robes like moss to a tree, Keith listened to his mother speak about some other current events and surprising gossip. It wasn’t exactly his thing, but his mother seemed to like it, and it was easy to just listen -- Kolivan trying to run her a message so quickly that he tripped over Lord Rax’s robes in the middle of breakfast, causing a huge scene; the Puigian Ambassador asking Matt Holt to leave their people the fuck alone, as politely and diplomatically as possible; the unbelievable amount of flour that was shipped in just for his party. Her collection of anecdotes put Keith at ease, and he found the whole prospect of the party a little less nerve-wracking when they joked about it.

Eventually, his mother let out a small, satisfied breath of air. She reached over to muss his hair, and Keith, predictably, pretended not to like the affection.

“Let’s sneak downstairs to the kitchens, like we used to. That sounds nice.”

“We’re about to have dinner in like an hour. They’re probably super busy.” Keith rolled his eyes, wondering when he became the responsible one.

She was already standing, hoisting him up. “Doesn’t matter. This is the last week that my son is going to be a baby and I’m going to soak up every moment.”

“Oh my god,” Keith snorted but allowed her to drag them out of the room, not bothering to notify the guards where they were going. Those stationed at the doors would just follow them anyways.

It wasn’t exactly hard to get down to the kitchens, but they couldn’t resist falling back into old habits. Marmora was, after all, more than just the hub of the continent; they specialized in information, and that required stealth. From the time he could walk, his mother was showing him how to stand still in the shadows, when to peak around corridors, and what it meant to hide like your life depended on it. Honestly, Keith felt a bit silly when a servant passed them, looking terrified to find the Queen and Prince ducking around corners and taking secret paths into the lower levels, but that only made it more hilarious when they finally reached their destination.

Ultimately, they strolled into the kitchens panting and with a bit of laughter, trying to calm the
shocked chefs and quell the serving staff who all froze upon their arrival.

“Just a casual visit, for old times sake. Please, carry on.” Queen Krolia assured in her regal, soothing tone. The room bustled back to normal within seconds, though everyone gave them a wide breadth of the kitchens as they sat at a servants table.

“Oh, whoa,” a voice exclaimed at the doorway, and Keith and his mother both looked up.

“Pidge?” Keith furrowed his brow. “What are you doing here?”

The girl disappeared for a moment, grabbing something out of the frame and dragging in a hand, arm and -- oh.

Keith looked between the two in amusement. “Hunk? You know Pidge?”

The Queen looked to her son, evidently curious. “Should I go?”

Keith shrugged, lowering his voice. “Up to you. I don’t know what Pidge wants, but Hunk is the guy I told you I met during the city tour. Garrett’s Bakery?”

“Ahh.” She acknowledged, making no move to stand. Keith was equally surprised to see them, but they were nice enough people so he beckoned them to come forward.

His mother looked amused, head tilted. “Hello, Pidge. And you must be Hunk?”

The boy, just as bright and earnest as Keith remembered, walked with surprising grace to their table, bowing and accepting his mother’s hand.

“Yes, it’s such an honor to meet you!” His words sounded a little shaken by nerves, but they were no less sincere. He turned to Keith. “And yes, Your Highness, to answer your question. Pidge and I have been friends for a few years now.”

Keith scoffed. “Figured Pidge would buddy up with someone to get free food.”

“Hey!” She smacked his arm, plopping down in the seat to his right. “That is just a bonus of knowing Hunk, thank you very much. He’s excellent in every other way, too.”

“Aww, Pidge.” The larger man clutched a hand over his chest, like the words literally made his heart warm. Keith could barely contain the urge to roll his eyes.

“Hunk, please, sit.” His mother instructed, pointing to the chair across from Keith and to her immediate left. He faltered slightly, probably from shock to be addressed directly, but complied after a pause.

Keith drummed his fingers on the table while Hunk settled in. He turned to Pidge. “So...?”

“So, what?” She pushed her glasses up her nose. She met Keith’s stare with one of equal intensity.

“So, what are you even doing here?”

Pidge could never let anything just be easy. “Why, I just wanted to spend some time with my dear friend the Prince, whose personality is just so refreshing and companionable!”

He could hear his mother snicker slightly, but Keith ignored her.

Across the table, a noticeably more nervous-looking Hunk cleared his throat. “Um, w-well, we
actually, um… we were supposed to leave a few hours ago. Now we’re trying to find Shiro. Someone said he’s predisposed at the moment and -- and we lost our friend, see, and then when we went to find him, but now we’re retracing our steps and --”

“Okay, hold on.” Keith rolled his shoulders back, facing Hunk properly. “Start over, but also, relax a little, okay?” He tried to smile, and it seemed to help; Hunk’s features softened a bit. “Someone is missing? And something about Shiro?”

“Sorry.” Pidge said quietly, dropping her tone to a whisper, and it took Keith by surprise. Very seldom did any of the Holts ever act seriously, perhaps with the exception of Colleen. “This is kind of my fault.”

His mother watched the three intently, choosing not to speak.

“What happened?” Keith prompted when no one took the initiative.

“Well, Hunk was supposed to come to the castle today to look at the kitchens. You know, so he could get everything set up for Friday, meet the sous chefs, all that.” Pidge started, voice strained.

Hunk spoke next. “And I did, thank you again by the way for the opportunity. But, well, I was really nervous to come. Still am, to be honest, heh.” He paused to scratch his cheek, and Keith felt himself smirk. Seriously, Hunk was so genuine it was borderline endearing. “So I asked if Pidge would come with me. And she did, obviously. And we brought our other friend, because, well -- that’s a long story, but he’s been having a rough time lately and we wanted to help lift his spirits so we brought him to the castle with us, sort of as a plus one.”

“Ah.” Keith covered his eyes with a hand, connecting the dots. “And you lost him?”

“We lost him.” Pidge affirmed. “In our defense, we had a stupid knight escorting us around and when we were leaving, Hunk and I had to run back and return something to Matt. We figured he’d stay with him since we were only going to be gone a second, but somehow it all got messed up.”

Sighing, she and Hunk exchanged a look.

“And we searched for a while, but Shiro was really on us about not wandering without an escort. We figured Lance might try to come back do the kitchens, since we were here earlier, and -- uh, Keith?”

All eyes were on him, justifiably so, as he went from exasperated to fully fucking gobsmacked in record time.

Lance.

No fucking way.

“Your friend --” he managed to choke out. “His name is Lance?”

“Lance McClain,” Hunk clarified, almost proudly. Keith was pretty sure the world tilted. “He’s a really great guy. I mean, he can sometimes get into trouble, which is why we were looking for Shiro in the first place… they sorta seemed to know each other? But, uh, the knight we were with got all turned around and we couldn’t find where we left him. And anyways, it’s been over an hour…”

The well-meaning boy rambled on about his concerns, probably too worried to notice the horribly undignified color Keith’s cheeks had become. Stupid pale skin, a constant source of emotional betrayal.
Lance.

He’s here. In the castle.

What the actual fuck.

“You’re friends... with Lance?” Keith rudely interrupted, looking from Pidge to Hunk, wondering if this was somehow an elaborate trick, but he knew better. He hadn’t told anyone about Lance, at least not by name.

His mother flicked his elbow, scolding.

“Wait, I’m sorry -- are you telling me you know Lance? Like, Lance McClain -- tall, tan, annoying Lance?”

“I -- ” Keith didn’t know what to say. Shit. Fuck. He’d been so surprised that he basically just blasted out the truth like spilt blood on carpet.

Lamely, he tried to save some amount of dignity. “...We’ve met.”

“Wow. Rude. Lance didn’t even tell me.” Hunk crossed his arms, looking only minorly annoyed.

Pidge was looking at Keith, too pointedly for his comfort, and it was making his face even hotter. He tried to shoot her his best fuck off look, but she didn’t even blink.

His mother sensed the tension and decided to finally address them. “So, I’m a little lost here… this Lance McClain is friends with all of you?”

“I… guess?” Keith struggled to call him a friend, but that seemed easier than explaining right now.

Her lips thinned. “And he’s lost in our castle, alone, past night fall?”

Hunk looked like he was between crying and throwing up, his earlier worry returned. “Um… yes. Which is why we’re here -- we figured Lance might try to go to one of the few places in the castle he knows. We were really only here and the training room on the… third floor?” He scrunched his face in concentration, glancing at Pidge to confirm. She nodded.

“I see.” The Queen tapped her chin. “I suppose that’s a good start. We can try to let one of the guards know and have anyone patrolling to keep an eye out. You said he was tall, and tan? Any other distinguishing features?”

“Hmm…” Hunk thought for a moment, but Pidge piped up.

“He’s not wearing shoes.”

Keith couldn’t keep his mouth shut any longer. “Why?”

“I don’t know. He said something about one of them breaking and he hadn’t had the chance to fix it, I think.” Pidge shrugged. Keith felt his face warm again, because, oh god that was definitely the same Lance McClain. He was there when he broke his damn shoe.

The Queen waved over one of the four guards that had not-so-subtly followed them from upstairs and detailed the situation to them. She sent him off with a firm nod to, presumably, update the other guards.

When she rose, Hunk and Pidge scrambled to stand as was expected, which Keith couldn’t help but
laugh at. His mother insisted that it wasn’t necessary, calling over two of the guards for herself to take her leave.

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Hunk. Any friends of Keith are always welcome, so please, make yourself at home. Kitchen’s yours whenever you’d like.”

Again, Keith lingered on the word friend... Pidge was his friend, he would admit that, but Hunk was... well, he definitely could be friends with the guy. He was just about the nicest person on the planet, so it’s not like that was an issue. Keith was just sort of new to the idea.

She squeezed his shoulder, getting his attention. “We’ve got dinner in another hour, but if you wanted to stay down here for a while, I’ll leave you with Ulaz.”

Keith agreed... probably too quickly. It’s not like he was intentionally going to hang around the kitchens waiting to see if Lance really did show up. That’s... that’s not what he was planning at all. No, definitely. That would be weird, and creepy. Keith was weird, maybe, but not creepy.

“So what do you like to do?” Hunk asked, his face expectant.

“What?” Keith frowned.

The guy gestured with his hands, saying, “You know... what kind of stuff do you do? Do you have hobbies? I like to cook; Pidge likes to cause chaos. What do you like to do?”

Pidge ran a hand down her face. “Hunk, seriously?”

“Yes, seriously!” He was undeterred. “Okay, listen, Your Highness, a week ago I never thought I would ever step foot in the castle. Now I’ve met the Queen, you twice, and I get to spend some time just... hanging out? You bet I’m going to ask my burning questions!”

“But your burning question is... what are his hobbies?” Pidge shook her head.

Hunk nodded, ignoring Pidge’s tone. In truth, Keith didn’t mind. It was a little unusual, sure, but he’d pick it over someone asking him about tax credits for farmers or pardoning their imprisoned uncle any day.

He thought for a moment before responding. “I guess I like to... spar? I train with the guard when I have time. Does that count?”

“Well, do you like doing it?” Hunk prodded.

Keith thought that was implied, but clarified, “Yes?”

“Then duh, of course it counts! That’s sweet, man. Do you have like, a specific weapon you like to use, or are you all over the place?”

Okay, follow-up questions. Keith can do this. He’s a human being with social skills. Be interesting!

“Uh. Swords.”

_I am so bad at this._

“And yet, Shiro still kicks your ass without even needing a weapon,” Pidge nudged him in the ribs. Keith sort of wondered when she was going to go too far one of these days with that stuff and Kolivan or Ulaz would just spear her through the chest. It was a little funny to think about... morbid, okay, but funny.
“Shiro’s been fighting longer than I’ve been alive.” Keith said, not willing to deny it but naturally defensive.

Hunk beamed, and asked Keith more questions. And more. There were follow-up questions then, too. It was definitely not normal, but it was nice, talking to him and Pidge. Pidge wasn’t exactly the model of friendship, so having another source of comparison was really refreshing.

It didn’t stop him from glancing at the door every five minutes, and he saw the others do it too. Weirdly, it made him feel guilty. *He* wasn’t Lance’s friend; he wouldn’t even tell Lance his name, because, you know, he’s a dick. It wasn’t really his place to worry.

When a frazzled face appeared in the door during one of those routine, not-so-subtle glances, Keith had to do a double-take.

“Sir Coran? What’s wrong?”

Pidge and Hunk were already on their feet, and Keith slowly joined them. The man was nursing a stitch in his side, evidently having ran down to find them.

“I found -- I found him. Well, that’s not true, the Princess found him, actually.” He huffed, taking a kerchief from his breast pocket and padding his forehead. Hunk visibly sagged with relief, and the guilt Pidge had been hiding seemed to melt off her with a laugh.

Coran, however, still looked stricken. “Something’s happened. I think you should come with me. Your Highness, perhaps you should come as well.”
In which, Lance struggles with sleep deprivation and accepting what happened, but finds comfort in his friends. Keith doesn't understand the concept of doctor-patient confidentiality and, as a result, his secret slips out. Also featuring: Good Friends Hunk and Pidge, Protective Allura, Proud Uncle Coran, Patient Shiro, and Adam, who deserves an award.

[LANCE]

“Absolutely not.”

Lance narrowed his eyes. He was quickly running out of ways to politely tell all of the High and Mighty’s in the room to let him the fuck go, but cursing at a Princess and the Head of the Marmoran Guard seemed like a bad idea, even to him.

Princess Allura’s voice was sharp as she continued.

“Lance, I know you must be anxious to get home, but it’s important that we do some follow-up while everything is still… fresh.”

She slowly, but firmly, pressed down his shoulders against the hospital bed to emphasize her point.

“Fine.”

His voice was rough, like he’d had the air choked out of him. Oh wait. He did.

With difficulty, he tried not to look at any one person; considering he was surrounded, this was no simple feat. He settled on looking at his hands, folded neatly in his lap. One normal, the other smattered with ugly purple bruises. Absently, Lance wondered if he broke that guy’s jaw; he was certain that he didn’t, but he liked to imagine he did.

Lady Romelle stood nearby, watching the Princess with a frown on her face. “Is someone notifying the Queen? And the Prince?”

He grimaced. As if it wasn’t humiliating enough that he had lost his friends, gotten turned around in the castle in which he was trespassing, and had been totally and utterly fucked before the Princess showed up. Now, they were going to bring the heads of the country here to worry over him, too?

With his most charming smile, Lance tried to convince them for the umpteenth time.

“Really, I’m fine.” In vain, he tried to tuck his chin in to hide the imprint of brutal fingers that peppered his throat, spreading all the way down his collar. “It’s just some bruises. Trust me, I’ve had worse. I’m plenty fine with just one royal, thank you.” He grinned at Allura, who looked bemused for a fleeting moment before her eyes were wrecked again with worry.
At the end of the bed, Shiro seemed pained. “Lance, please. Let’s just let Adam look you over and make sure there aren’t any severe injuries, yeah? We just want to make sure everything you need is taken care of.”

“What I need,” the grumpy teen muttered, low enough that no one heard, “is to go home.”

The words scarcely passed his lips when the door at the end of the room burst open, causing them all to jump. Shiro’s stance became defensive, moving between Lance and the potential threat, but he relaxed when Pidge and Hunk’s panting, frantic faces appeared in the doorway. Within a matter of ticks, they were elbowing their way to his bedside.

“Lance! You jackass!” Pidge decked him right in the shoulder with one of her tiny fists. Lance cried an indignant, “Hey!” and rubbed the spot, annoyed.

The amber-eyed girl looked ready to swing at him again, but instead fell forward and crushed him into a hug.

“Ugh, why does everything bad always happen to you?” She muttered, mostly to herself.

Lance chuckled and patted her between the shoulder blades.

Hunk pulled a chair up and sat at his elbow as Pidge released him, looking uncannily like a mother hen. “I’m sorry we left you, man. I never thought things could get so messed up so fast.”

“It’s okay. Really.” Lance added the last part a bit harshly, shooting a glance at Allura and Shiro who still appeared far from convinced.

During Pidge’s well-meant complaining and Hunk’s doting, a distressed looking Sir Coran popped through the doorway, and Lance stifled a groan. These people were all super nice -- too nice -- but the more bodies that forced their way in to fuss over him, the longer he was going to be stuck here.

However, Lance was surprised; when he expected the mustachioed man to bustle over, he instead hovered by the door with a strained expression.

“Terribly sorry, but, Shiro -- could I have a word, please?”

The knight blinked twice, looking quickly to his husband and then to Lance before setting off towards the door. Allura watched them disappear with a scowl.

Across from Hunk, Romelle had pulled up a chair on his opposite side. Her gaze was reluctant and worried; when Lance followed it, he could tell why. She was looking down at his side, where his bruised knuckles rested atop the flimsy infirmary sheets. As nonchalantly as possible, he slid his hands under the covers, sensing the unspoken questions in her gaze when she looked up at him.

What happened?

Nope. He was not about to go there.

You’re prettier when you’re quiet.

Not right now. Maybe not ever.

Stay quiet for me. Yes, just like that.

It’s not like he had much of a choice, the fucker was crushing his jaw and throat, he scarce had the opportunity to breathe, let alone call for help. It wasn’t -- it wasn’t because he told him to.
A good little servant, aren’t you? Do you always take orders so well?

“—ance? Buddy, you okay?” Hunk was leaning closer to him, and Lance flinched back. The room had quieted, everyone was looking at him, and he felt his face flush under their probing gazes.

“Um, yeah. Sorry. It’s just been a really long day… I’m exhausted.”

For all Lance loved about Hunk, it was a blessing and a curse that his friend could read him so well. The larger teen’s furrowed brow and doubtful eyes told Lance that he was not buying it, but he was also a true enough friend not to probe further in the company of so many others. Instead, Hunk gave his arm a light squeeze. Lance got the message: *we’re talking about this later.*

Wrinkling his nose, he hoped his nonverbal response read just as well: *you can pry it from my cold, dead hands.*

Okay, in his defense, Lance felt like he’d just been hung out to dry by the universe. He just wanted to… to *relax,* was that so wrong? Just like, for five dobosh. A varga, if the universe was feeling particularly merciful. Because lately? It kind of felt like Fortune had decided to chew him up and spit him back out again, or like the great smithy of the creation had decided to pick back up his tools and intended to crush Lance into powder, to reduce him back to the stardust from which the world was wrought. Only, in this case, the cosmic artisan changed his mind halfway through, producing a half-formed and worn-down version of himself, tired and pulled to the last of his wits. Was it really *that* selfish to just want the day to be over, to go to bed and forget this all happened? He didn’t want a Princess, Prince and Queen badgering him with political questions. Shit, he didn’t even want to tell Hunk and Pidge the extent of what happened.

*A good little servant, aren’t you?*

Selfish? Maybe. But he couldn’t care, he was far too tired for that. Even if the Princess seemed convinced that what happened to Lance was no coincidence, and she would not leave his side as a result. She’d gone from a stranger, concerned bystander, ass-kicking badass, and to protective BFF in what seemed like a matter of ticks. Shiro had basically sprinted to the infirmary to offer his protection as Head of the Guard and as a friendly face. Sir Adam and Coran and Lady Romelle had all elected to miss their dinner to be with him. Really, he should be more grateful… but, fuck, Lance couldn’t *make* himself care about this stuff. He wasn’t noble, or important, or even fucking Altean. It was a fluke that he managed to get swept up in, and it was keeping him from home, from bed, from rest. Lance was okay with being selfish right now.

He was so *tired.*

Somewhere in front of him, there were half-heard introductions being made between Hunk, Sir Adam and Princess Allura. Romelle was just watching the others, maybe watching him, too.

“Excuse me, everyone?” Shiro reappeared at the end of the room, looking uneasy. His dark eyes fell to Lance, where they lingered with a weird sense of curiosity. “In the interest of time, I’d like to ask everyone to leave Lance with Adam for a few minutes so he can fully check the extent of his injuries.”

Almost immediately, Allura was hovering in Lance’s personal space. If he wasn’t so intimidated by her, Lance might have commented on how she could dominant his personal space *all* day, *every* day… but, there was a fire in her eyes that glittered dangerously.

He, wisely, decided to stay quiet.
“But what of the risk? Lance has already been injured, and we do not know the --”

Sir Adam took a small step forward, effectively cutting her off. His tone was serious, but not unkind.

“Princess Allura, excuse me. I understand your worry, but Takashi is right. It would be easier for me to look him over if I had space to work. If something is wrong -- like internal bleeding -- it’s all the more important that we move quickly; to do so, I need the room.”

Hunk seemed to share in the Princess’ worry, and Pidge looked unsure.

Grimacing, Lance mustered some sort of resolve and he clenched his fists beneath the sheet.

“Can you all just go, please? I get that that you’re all worried and I appreciate it, seriously. But, I also just want this to be over with. So unless Sir Adam is planning to murder me, I think I’ll be okay for ten dobosh with just him, okay?”

Mixed looks of guilt and concern flitted across the faces of everyone surrounding him, save Adam, who merely looked relieved. Lance decided he couldn’t care about hurting anyone’s feelings right now… he just wanted to crawl back onto his mattress, in the spotless kitchen at the empty house just outside the city. He wanted to cuddle up with a very specific, impossibly-soft cloak, and sleep forever.

The others left after a brief bit of commentary (“Lance, if you need anything, we’ll be just outside,” the Princess had assured him. On any other day, he would have found the gesture sweet and even endearing; right now, he just nodded and hoped he didn’t seem too rude.) He was left alone in the room with Sir Adam.

The man was quiet, which Lance appreciated right now. He found himself watching the knight as he went to wash his hands and pick up some sort of medical equipment. The man’s skin tone was not unlike Lance’s own, but he did not appear to be Altean -- a human, like his mother’s family, with copper skin and warm eyes. When he turned back and approached Lance’s bed, he wore a crooked smile, head tilted apologetically.

“Sorry about all of this. It’s Lance, right?”

The teen nodded.

“We didn’t get to really meet earlier,” he sighed, gesturing for Lance to remove his shirt. The teen hesitated, but ultimately complied. “Just sort of thrown into this mess at the same time. So, for the sake of propriety, I’m Adam. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Um, likewise,” Lance mumbled, trying not to squirm too much while the man started to work. He managed to remain mostly still, though he was unable suppress a low hiss when Sir Adam lightly pressed one of the particularly nasty bruises on his neck.

As the older man continued his examination, Lance noticed him hesitate near his collarbone, and a sharp stab of shame flooded his gut. Out of the corner of his eye, Lance could see the discoloration, but there was a concentrated area where the shapes and shades were different; they’d been left not by violent fingers and a crushing grip, but by salacious kisses and a wanton mouth. In a way, they were less intense then the maroon splotches that decorated his chin and certainly hurt far less, but they made him feel about fifteen times worse. They stood out, like a sickening badge over his tan skin. It made him feel… distant, outside of himself. Marked. Stained.

Just thinking about the trail down his jaw made him want to take a bath and scrub relentlessly at his skin, rub the area until it was red and raw but at least it would be a single color once again, it would
be his color from his skin tone, not dyed by some pervert’s fucked up desire.

Now desperate for a distraction, Lance’s gaze lingered over Adam’s uniform, which was comparatively casual if he thought to compare it to Shiro’s. It had some sort of emblazoned logo alongside the kingdom’s emblem, with a subscript in an old language Lance did not know. He recognized the symbol as one that hung at the entrance of the clinic in the city, though.

“I didn’t know doctors could be knights,” he blurted, which made the man pause. Lance realized that may have seemed insensitive, but before he had the chance to backpedal, Sir Adam snorted.

“That’s not an uncommon assumption. If you’re picturing a jousting knight, when someone says knight, then yeah. Count me out.” He said with a chuckle, and Lance had to join him, if only because Lance was grateful for lighter topic. By now, he had Lance leaning forward to check the back of his head where it had made contact with the unforgiving brick wall. “I was knighted for my service to the kingdom, not for my… knightly-ness.”

“Huh,” Lance thought for a moment. “I guess that makes sense. That’s… um, cool. I didn’t really realize they could do that.”

“There’s a lot of this royal court business I still don’t understand,” he said with a shrug. “And I’ve been around these parts for seven years.”

They both chuckled. It was a refreshing change of pace in Lance’s day.

After that, they slipped into a more comfortable silence while Adam finished the physical part of the examination. Lance put his shirt back on, and Adam checked his eyesight and asked him a few questions, some of which he wasn’t really sure about -- like, yes, his head was pounding, but that could be from lack of sleep. The same could be said of his fatigue and poor reflexes.

“And you said you felt this way before the incident?” Sir Adam quizzed, and Lance shrugged. He closed his eyes and sat back on the pillows.

“I… I haven’t been sleeping much, so yeah. Headaches are sort of a constant for me.”

After a thoughtful pause, Adam said, “I see. Well, if that’s the case --”

The sound of the door opening disrupted them, and the doctor’s rolled eyes went unseen by Lance, still resting his eyes. “Takashi, I said I would come get you when -- oh.”

A pause.

“Huh, I’m surprised you’re not at dinner. I figured you would have waited until after.”

Something in the catch of Sir Adam’s voice made Lance nervous, and he straightened and opened his eyes as a reflex.

Needless to say, the figure at the end of the row of beds was the absolute last person Lance expected to see, and his heart wasn’t quite prepared to handle it.

“Lance?” The newcomer said after an awkward pause, stepping a little closer. There was a distinctive brand of shyness to the way he moved that was so adorable that Lance sincerely could have melted, but, there was no way. He had to be dreaming, or dead, because how else could Knife Boy be right there?

Raven hair fell around his face, hands fidgeting in front of him. Pink dusted his cheeks and his
breathing was shallow, like perhaps he’d run there. Unlike last time Lance had seen him, he wore no complicated mess of robes like he had in the woods. Instead, he wore simple pieces, all perfectly tailored (much to Lance’s dismay) to hug his chest, arms, and legs -- a black shirt, tucked into trousers that were just a bit lighter, flirting with shades charcoal gray, paired with boots so shiny Lance bet he could see his reflection if he looked.

At his hip, in the loop of his belt, was a familiar knife, but Lance’s gaze did not linger there long. He couldn’t help but be drawn back to the bottomless, dark eyes that were staring right back at him.

“I -- you?” Lance knew his mouth was hanging open, but he felt his stunned reaction was rather justified, given the circumstances. “What are you -- how?”

Knife Boy looked torn for a moment, shifting his weight restlessly as he looked from Lance to Adam. It was clear he was anxious, and that made Lance’s stomach do a stupid little flip.

Do I make him nervous?

“I heard about what happened.” He said, eventually, and Lance watched him suck in a large breath. “I... wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Oh.” Lance felt his face heat up, a million pinpricks of sensation erupting up and down his skin. Each one seemed to rise with a question, effectively silencing his ability to speak at all. Why was he worried about you? How did he hear about it so quickly? Why is he here in the first place? I guess nobles hang out in the castle, probably? Where the heck are your friends? Maybe I’m dreaming? That makes more sense than anything. Although, for a dream, this is a lot more PG than I would have -- NO. NOPE DO NOT GO THERE. DO NOT.

Ignoring the fact that he was now sweating, Lance clawed around his usually witty-brain for something, anything to say that wasn’t mindless gawking.

Flirting. Lance could do flirting! Sure, Sir Adam was still right here, so that was weird, but, fuck it.

“Awww,” Lance placed a bashful hand to his cheek, stammering through the first words he could think of. “And here I thought you didn’t like me, Mullet.”

So-Named-Bad-Hairstyle’s posture relaxed slightly, and he rolled his eyes. “There’s that nickname again.”

“You know you love it!” Lance pointed, victorious when the other teen’s lip twitched, resembling something hauntingly close to a smile.

Adam glanced between the two, bemused. “So, you two know each other?”

Their answers were simultaneous, and oppositional.

“Yes.” Lance said.

“Hardly,” Mullet muttered.

They glared at each other. Right. Lance shouldn’t have been surprised; nobles weren’t known for buddying up with his type. It had just been an odd day of exceptions so far, and his -- his whoever Knife Boy was -- his denial stung a bit. Even so, it didn’t chase away the warm feeling in his chest completely.
I wanted to make sure you were okay.

“Oooookay then,” Adam dug his hands in his pockets, adopting a knowing grin. “Well, we were almost done… just because you’re the you doesn’t mean you can disrespect my patient’s right to privacy.” He turned to Lance. “I can kick him out if you want.”

“No!” Lance said, definitely way too excited, damn. It’s just -- he hadn’t even been sure he’d ever see Mullet’s stupid mullet ever again just a varga ago, and now, here he was in all his awkward, intense glory. “I-I mean, no. He can stay. We’re almost done, anyways, right?”

He risked a look towards Knife Boy at the end of the row, and a surprising softness reached his eyes; Lance swore he felt his heart stop, trying to beat out time just to try to make the moment last a little longer. *Ugh.*

“All right,” Sir Adam pulled Lance back to his goddamned senses, taking the chair that Hunk had previously occupied and facing him. “So, if the headaches and fatigue were present before the incident, it’s hard to say if it is or isn’t a concussion… but you do need to rest more, either way.”

Lance nodded, forcing himself to pay attention to Adam. He could practically sense Knife Boy drift closer, eventually leaning against the adjacent bed, which made it a little difficult.

“Especially now that you’re dealing with some injuries,” the doctor continued with a weary sigh. “I’d recommend bed rest for tomorrow, at least, just to make sure you don’t overexert yourself, and then light physical activity for the remainder of the week. It doesn’t seem like your larynx or hypoid are fractured, due to the rate of swelling, but if you start feeling bouts of nausea, difficulty breathing - especially laying down -- or pain in your chest, it could be more serious. You should definitely check in to the clinic in town if anything changes, or you can always make the trek up to the castle. I’ll be happy to look you over again.”

That… wasn’t really an option, but Lance wasn’t exactly sure how to tell him that. Avoiding the man’s eye, Lance decided to study his bruised knuckles.

“I’ll… keep that in mind,” he said eventually. He really did appreciate the information, but there was no way he was going to sleep all day tomorrow, or likely ever see Sir Adam again. “Thank you. I really appreciate it.”

A beat of silence passed, and Lance jumped when a firm hand came to rest on his shoulder. Sir Adam was looking at him with a steady, earnest gaze. “It’s my professional opinion that you really should stay and let us monitor you, at least for the night. I know you’ve already turned down the Princess’s and Takashi’s offers, but as a medical doctor, I at least have to make the case myself. There’s no way I can convince you to stay here to rest? There would be no charge to you or your family.”

He gave a light squeeze in anticipation for Lance’s answer, and for some reason, the teen felt much younger and more vulnerable than he had in a very long time. A heat built around the corners of his eyes, but Lance blinked away the reactionary tears. Ignoring a stranger’s kindness was different than denying a doctor’s professional opinion… but Lance just *can’t.* It doesn’t matter if he’s hurt, because if he’s hurt, he can’t work. And if he can’t work, his family wouldn’t get money. And if they didn’t get any money...

“I really… *can’t.* My family needs me home.”

The knight let out a low exhale, but he smiled at Lance and nodded in understanding. If Lance wasn’t sure before, he now decided that he definitely liked Adam -- no wonder he and Shiro were
together. They were both nicer than anyone had any right to be, and they both genuinely seemed to want what was best for him. It made his heart fill with warmth, something reminiscent of nostalgia. Something that reminded him of mountain air, a feel that, while dearly missed, was inevitably bittersweet.

“Alright, last thing. Just a sec,” Sir Adam walked towards a desk along the opposite wall, opening drawers in search of something. Lance dared a glimpse at his quiet, dark-haired stranger. He was glaring at the ground, some sort of vaguely angered concentration settling in the valley’s of his forehead. It reminded Lance of when Pidge was trying to explain something complex to him, and she was reaching the point of giving up.

Suddenly, Mullet’s attention snapped to him, and Lance felt himself redden at being caught staring. He tried to play it off like he’d been preparing to ease into a conversation.

“Um, sooooo, how you been…?” Lance cringed, trying to look anywhere but Hot and Bothered’s face. (He was particularly proud of that nickname, because the guy was totally both.)

Mullet’s head tilted to the side, worrying his lower lip with his teeth. Lance very much wanted to ask him to stop, because he could not look him in the eye if he was going to do that.

“I’ve been very busy, actually.”

“Doing... noble stuff?” Lance questioned.

He watched Knife Boy’s gaze turn icy, like Lance had crossed some sort of line that he wasn’t meant to even know about. Self-conscious, Lance leaned back and scratched his cheek.

“Ah, shit, -- nevermind. You don’t have to answer that. I forgot you can’t for like, personal reasons or whatever. Sorry.”

Sir Adam returned then, and Lance’s awkward attempts at conversation were relieved. “I’m going to send you home with some bandaging for your neck, okay? If it swells and becomes uncomfortable, ice it and keep it lightly compressed; not too tight. I wouldn’t suggest leaving them on for too long, but if you’re going out and feel compelled to cover them, that’s also an option.”

“Oh. Um, okay.” Lance watched the knight place some medical tape and gauze wrappings onto the bed. The dark stains on his knuckles seemed violent and unnatural against the sterile white of the bedding and supplies.

He had been so swept up in meeting the Princess of Altea, being chauffeured to the infirmary, and being cosseted by, like, seven different people, that he hadn’t really considered how bad he must have looked. He already looked pretty shitty when he left that morning -- that was before, you know, being attacked by a malevolent stranger.

Lance didn’t bother trying to contain his sigh. Surely, his bruising was visible in just about every light, at every angle.

_What am I going to tell Aunt Hira?_

_I’m so fucking dead._

Sir Adam headed towards the door, the movement catching Lance’s attention. “Alright, well, let me just get the others -- is that alright?”

Before he had the chance to answer, the knight wore a wry smile and looked at the ceiling.
“Actually, don’t answer that. I won’t be able to keep them out even if you want me to, so, you know -- it’s the thought that counts, or something.”

“Yeah, it’s fine,” Lance managed a small smile, picturing a sweating Hunk and an impatient Pidge. “Bring it on.”

A few ticks later and he heard Adam about to slip out of the room, but his head poked back into the infirmary at the last moment. “Oh, and your Highness? I think Ulaz is about to have a heart attack out here. I’m going to let him in with the others. It was nice meeting you, Lance.”

And with that, he was left alone with… with…

Um…

Wait.

As soon as the door sighed into its hinges, closing with a soft click, Lance blinked at the space where Adam had been, then his gaze flickered to Knife Boy. He blinked again, and then one more time -- just for good measure, of course, because did he just say…?

The dark-haired boy’s eyes widened, like a child caught sneaking food past bedtime, guilt and anxiety lining his brow. A pretty blush -- or, a normal blush crept up his neck as they stared at each other.

Lance just tilted his head, thinking, considering. Maybe he’d really had his break with sanity, all that lost sleep finally catching up to him? Somehow, a laugh broke through his stunned silence.

*Well,* Lance’s consciousness brushed off its hands and leaned back in its imaginary desk chair. *Now seemed like as good a time as any to embrace insanity.*

During the brief out-of-body experience that followed, Lance felt like he could see the inside of his brain. Oddly, the image was comforting. Lance’s imaginary mind was filled, apparently, by a complex network of gears and cogs that turned and spun in time with each other, and this large, Mullet-shaped wedge had somehow gotten stuck in the system. His thoughts had ground to a halt. From above, a tiny version of Hunk lowered into the madness with a manual, a wrench, and a flashlight in his teeth. Right - right right right. He was there to do repairs. Of course. Everything stopped for a few ticks while Hunk worked, prying a name out of Lance’s laughable memory and unlodging the cogs again. Nearby, a tiny version of Pidge hovered over some electrical wiring, her hands moving so quickly they were little more than flashes of color. She rebooted the circuits that kept things moving, and suddenly reality rushed back to him.

Because Adam had just addressed *Mullet Head* as *Your Highness* and *you’ve got to be fucking kidding me.* Because getting his ass-saving by one royal wasn’t enough, was it? Because so much of the broody stranger’s secrecy made sense now. The quality of the cloak, the hood he kept up in the city, his unexpected presence in the castle...

*Keith.*

His name was *Keith.*

One part of him wanted to die, the part that very clearly said said: *yes, as in, Keith Kogane, Prince of fucking Marmora, you imbecile.*

Another, small but surprisingly strong part of him filled the space beneath the resounding *duh* -- needling into the cracks as the shock fizzled away, filling up his chest and his lungs and his heart.
This second part, it was warm and tingly, and it made him feel so stupidly happy that Lance could have sung or cried and it wouldn’t have mattered.

Keith.

Unable to help himself, Lance felt himself smiling. Was he still laughing? Oh man, he must look and sound crazy. The realization made him flush with embarrassment, but he wasn’t keen on the idea of blushing like a fool in front of Keith, (because he could call him that now, hah!), so Lance let his face fall in his hands and shook his head from side to side. His mother said he did always had a tendency for the dramatic.

“Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo… ” he whined, part in disbelief, part panic and and definitely at least forty percent relief, and also, some stupid mixture of him being nervous, awkward and giddy because this was Knife Boy, but it was also Keith, and he was right here, and he didn’t declare coming here because he had to check on the political fallout, but had come here to see if Lance was okay.

When Keith responded, Lance’s blood ran cold.

“I… I’m sorry, I should -- I’ll go,” he started to back away, and Lance dropped his hands in his lap.

“Wait! Wait wait wait!” He half-laughed, lifting his head again. Keith looked so confused, his brows drawn together, and almost a little sad. Lance kicked himself back into acting like a human being.

“I’m sorry, man. Don’t leave. I’m just… HAH. I just never would have… dios mío, first the Princess, and now you too! ¿Por qué toda la gente real es tan bonita? Es tan injusto,” he leveled a glare in the other’s direction. Seriously, it was like, the prettier the person, the more likely they were to be royal. “Rude.”

“…What are you even talking about?” Purple eyes locked on his for the first time since Sir Adam disappeared, and Lance had to fight a very illegal urge to grab him by the shoulders and shake him senseless because you’re so beautiful that it hurts you fucking asshole I can’t believe you’re the goddamn Prince no wonder you didn’t tell me! I wouldn’t have told me either! But now I know and I think I am going insane from lack of sleep!

“Nothing, it’s nothing,” Lance said instead with a barely-contained smile. “Just… you freakin’ nobles, man. So unfair.”

A slow relief spread on Keith’s face, and he ended up rolling his eyes. “I still don’t know what you’re talking about… also, technically, it’s royalty.”

Lance deadpanned. “I will drop dead right now if you tell me I have to start calling you Your Highness.”

And there it was. That flicker on Knife Boy’s -- Keith’s -- face when he tried not to laugh. It was the most damned endearing thing Lance had ever seen, and until now, he thought he was going to have to pluck it from his memories from just one random afternoon for the rest of his life if he wanted to remember. Now, he had at least one more chance to memorize it.

“I’d really prefer if you didn’t,” Keith countered with a wry smile, leaning back against the opposite bed again. Some of the color had faded from his face, and he looked much less severe. Still nervous, but the energy seemed brighter. “Just ‘Keith’ is fine.”

Lance flashed him a grin. “I don’t know, I think I’ll stick to Mullet or Knife Boy. They’ve grown on me.”
“Of course they have,” Keith groaned.

And then they both laughed, short little chuckles that grew to stupid waves of relief and confusion. Lance felt like all of his nerves had come undone, and geez, was he just so slap-happy right now that it was actually embarrassing.

They shared a dohsh of content silence once the giggles subsided, and Lance absently scratched his neck. He had gotten a little sweaty, okay? It’s not like he was freaking out or anything, because, quiznak, who was he kidding? He was freaking out.

But only a little. Just a tiny, tiny bit.

The action must have caught the Prince’s attention, because with two smooth strides forward, he was standing right beside Lance. Inches away, dark eyes were trained to his throat, with an unreadable expression on his face.

Usually, Lance would relish the attention from anyone -- even more so if they were attractive, obviously -- but right now? Not so much. The bruises, shaped like thumbs and light scratches from claws; red and dark and unnatural, the Prince’s eyes roamed up and down his neck like a critic taking in a freshly painted canvas. His fingers hovered over Lance’s shoulders without actually touching him, the motion somehow natural, like they’d done this a million times before.

Lance was prepared to shove him back, embarrassed and annoyed -- cause like, dude, does no one here understand personal space? -- when Keith’s voice surprised him.

“Does it hurt?” He asked.

It was low and angry, but somehow gentle, too. It reminded him of a rumbling storm that rolled in over the countryside, the kind he was afraid of when he was small even though he knew they wouldn’t hurt him. Even now, he remembers those rumbles of thunder -- strong enough to reverberate straight through him, the sound dark and ominous, yet, it only pointed to the arrival of rain. He loved the rain, but hated the storm.

“A little,” Lance admitted, not sure why he started whispering. He swallowed. “I’m mostly just… tired though.”

There was a too long silence, and Lance desperately wanted to say something, but his head was foggy. They were really close. Too close. Way, way too close, but, the almost-touch of the Prince’s hands near his collar made the space between them crackle, electric and magnetic and strangely provoking. Like, Lance would not have been able to explain why, but there was an unspoken dare in the space between them, in the air itself that filled his lungs, that told him not to move, not to move, not to move -- he wouldn’t cave, wouldn’t be the one to push the Prince back, wouldn’t be the one to brush his throat forward a few centimeters. It almost pissed him off, because, Mullet was fucking stubborn. His dark eyes refused to look away, and he didn’t accidentally graze Lance, just waited, challenging him to disturb the weirdly intimate moment that had blossomed from their silence.

And, just when it felt like the tension was going to destroy him, the doors at the end of the room fucking burst open.
Lance flinched away, just in time for him to stumble backwards. He’d argue that Lance moved first, if anyone asked, but if he were honest it seemed pretty much simultaneous.

*What the fuck was that?*

Keith’s heart was positively *buzzing* in his chest, way faster than could ever be considered healthy, but he at least managed not to fall when people spilled into the room.

Without meaning to, his eyes flickered up to Lance, but the worn teenager was looking at his hands again. Keith wondered if he was in worse shape than he was letting on; he appeared almost feverish, red and sweating.

“Keith?” Shiro’s voice was the first that really dragged him back to the third-dimension, where more things existed than oceanic eyes and beautiful, tanned skin. His head whipped around and he swallowed tersely when he locked eyes with Shiro. “When did you sneak in here? Have you been here long?”

Adam, standing beside him, gave a nearly imperceptible shrug.

“No. Not long.” (Honestly, Keith had no idea how much time had passed. It felt like five hours, but it also felt like five minutes?)

Keith moved to the end of the adjacent bed, allowing for Pidge and Hunk to claim the spot beside Lance. Hunk took the seat, launching into some questions, and Pidge teased him about not straining his brain since he might be concussed (“Not that that should be a problem for *you*,” she knocked on his temple, and Keith had to choke down a laugh). Coran was back with them this time, looking a little less frazzled, and he spoke animatedly with Lady Romelle about something he was too far away to hear. Shiro was making motions with his hands while Adam scowled attentively, nodding or commenting at breaks in his husband’s monologue. Keith noted Ulaz, Kolivan, Thace and three other higher Blade members slip in quietly, standing back in the shadows. With the amount of high profile people in the room, Keith was unsurprised by their number.

He was… only slightly bitter that they’d been interrupted. A sense of relief washed over him now that the room was filled by idle chatter, allowing him the much needed time to step back, grind his teeth, clench his fists until pointed crescents imprinted his palms, and stamp out the impulsivity that flirted dangerously with bloodlust and revenge.

It had been a true test of discipline for Keith when he first saw Lance, sitting in the hospital-style bed, to not turn on his heel and march to the holding room that held the offending Galra and rip his fucking throat out. When he saw the clear purple marks of fingers that had touched Lance’s light brown skin, or the evidence that some fucking *monster* had left around Lance’s collar that looked a little too much like teeth marks, Keith was sure his vision went red.

But he didn’t leave. He *couldn’t*. Not when Lance was all smiles, teasing, *laughing*, acting not at all like he’d been nearly killed hours ago. He actually seemed… *happy* to see Keith. And, okay, Keith would be the first to admit that he wasn’t the best at reading people, but Lance’s stupidly expressive face left very little room for questions. Lance was an open book, and small miracle that; Keith was about as close to emotionally illiterate as one could get.

None of what Keith had expected happened when he walked into the infirmary and interrupted
Adam’s examination (though, to be fair, he didn’t know what he could have really expected). But, for Lance, there was no fear, no sadness, no disappointment. If anything, he seemed happy, but drained. The dark circles under his eyes were probably a good indicator as to why.

The gentle alto of Princess Allura’s voice cut into Keith’s ruminating. He hadn’t even noticed that she’d gone over to Kolivan until she passed by him, moving to Lance’s bed.

“Lance?” She gently directed his attention from Hunk to her tall and authoritative form. “I know you’ve insisted that you must get home, so I would like to make this quick. It’s already become so late, it seems cruel to send you back into the night any later in your condition.”

He made an affronted sound. “I’m pretty sure I can manage a few miles to my house. Pidge, can we still take that cart back into the city?”

The shorter girl shrugged. “I mean, yeah. Hunk planned on staying over at my place, but we still have to get home.”

This made the larger of the two bristle. He spoke with an obvious twinge of fear.

“Actually, yeah… maybe we should go, like, soon? The later we’re out the more dangerous it gets, and plus Lance is outside the city on the East side…”

Lance began chewing his lip, and Keith was gripped by the sudden urge to brush his thumb over the abused skin, to get him to stop, to relax. Then, he just about smacked himself for the thought in the first place, and settled on something at least semi-sane.

When Allura spoke, it was with her utmost leader tone, the same one Keith heard her use during the council meeting earlier that day.

“We’ve already taken the responding party into a part of the castle for questioning and where his punishment will be decided, but, there is a bit more we must know. Can you tell us what happened leading up to the… incident?”

Lance blinked at her, appearing distracted. “Um, sure. But first, what time is it?”

Coran supplied a pocket watch, pausing to read it. “Just about to turn to Tuesday, in fact!”

Lance groaned, dropping his head into his hands for the second time since Keith had seen him; this time, he wasn’t laughing.

“Okay. Yeah. We need to go, like, soon.” He shook his head and refocused his attention on the princess, then to Shiro, and landing on Keith. The bright shine he’d grown accustomed to seeing there seemed muted, but Keith didn’t have to time to consider what that meant before he was speaking again.

“So… I don’t know what time we said goodbye to Lady Romelle and Coran earlier, but it wasn’t long after that that we…”

And Lance retold the story, filling in the blanks exactly as Keith guessed based off the otherside he’d gleaned from Pidge and Hunk. They left him in the hallway, and none of them expected their knight to get lost, so Lance did the classic thing you’re supposed to do when people are looking for you: wait. It made Keith shudder to think that he had been sleeping in a windowsill, though, in one of the Galran occupied sections of the castle. Galra weren’t… he wasn’t… cruel by default. Just, doubtful, suspicious. He wasn’t surprised by the encounter Lance had with the random Galra that had woken him up.
By the time Lance explained how he ended up alone in the servant’s passage with the man who attacked him, he was suspiciously vague.

“He threw me up against the opposite wall, and hit my head really hard in the process. He was... my throat, I c-couldn’t breathe.”

Hunk squeezed Lance’s arm when he paused, and for some reason, Keith found the action annoying.

“He sort of… taunted me, I guess. I don’t remember most of what he said, but he pointed out that I wasn’t supposed to be there -- he thought I was Altean, and that I was supposed to be with the Princess’s, uh, entourage I guess.” A bitter chuckle. “I guess he got what was coming to him, though, because after I punched him, that’s when the Princess and Lady Romelle showed up.”

All in all, the retelling didn’t take longer than ten minutes, but Lance looked considerably worse by the time it was over. His forehead was knit together, mouth thin, eyes impossibly dark. Keith would not wish what happened tonight upon anyone, but he would wish it upon anyone but Lance.

Sir Coran broke the silence, walking right up to Lance’s bedside and putting a firm hand on both his shoulders.

“You did well, my boy. Thank Oriande you’re alright.”

The teen looked up at Coran, blinking repeatedly, and his lips turned up at the corners. A soft, wondering smile that looked like he was sunbathing instead of moonlighting at the castle. Keith sighed, louder than he meant, and Lance’s gaze swept over to him.

The smile widened, and Keith considered lying down in one of the beds himself.

Coran released him, and no sooner did lanky limbs swing over the side of the bed beside Hunk. There was a pause while he blinked, slowly, like he needed to adjust to the sensation of standing again (which, Keith thought, was ridiculous; he couldn’t have been in that bed for longer than two hours).

Once steady, Lance set a wistful gaze around the room, eyes lingering on each face. Keith swore it felt like they stayed on himself the longest, and the thought made his abdomen tie itself into knots.

“Thank you, all. This has been a really… really weird day for me. It was nice meeting everyone.”

Princess Allura replied on behalf of everyone, and Keith scowled.

“It was our pleasure, Lance. And it was lovely meeting you as well, Hunk. We’re all just glad you’re alright. Now, get home safe, you three! Your parents must be worried sick.”

And for the first time since Keith has seen Lance, his usually animated expression went perfectly blank. It was... kind of scary, actually. Had Allura struck a nerve? Now Keith was glad he’d stayed quiet.

Pidge cleared her throat and grabbed Lance’s wrist, tugging him in the direction of the door. Hunk was close behind them.

“Thanks for helping us find our idiot,” the girl said in a sing-song voice, which put the annoyed frown right back on Lance’s face. It was better than the empty stare, but Keith felt a pang go off in his chest. They were already out the door, and Lance looked back and -- their eyes met, again. No smile this time, but the blues were back to bright and breathtaking and Keith barely managed not to gasp when they slipped out of sight.
Thace and one other blade moved towards the door, automatically transitioning to the role of guard and escort without so much as a word.

Almost immediately, everyone that remained in the room started discussing the fallout. Questions hung heavy in the absence of Lance, Hunk, and Pidge, but they were answered with appreciative nods and understanding commentary from everyone… except Adam, who was standing next to him.

“What the hell are you still doing here?”

Keith was so surprised that he looked right into the other’s face, incredulous. The older man just shook his head.

“Go.”

Most people don’t tell the Prince what to do, but then, Shiro and Adam had never been most people.

Keith’s heart started to race. Just like the first time they met, Keith found he had a million questions practically scorching the inside of his throat, burning to come out, but he didn’t even know where to start.

*Why did Lance react that way about his parents? Were they like Keith’s father, gone? Did Adam miss something in the examination, is that why he swayed when he stood up? Will I… Will I see him again?*

He thought they’d had a nice… a nice whatever it was they had between the time when Adam left the infirmary and the others arrived, and the idea of Lance, after all of the terrible shit that happened today, being led out of the castle by some random members of the Blades seemed impersonal and wrong.

They had said good-bye on such tenuous terms the first time.

Keith didn’t want that. Not again.

“I’ll be right back,” he said quietly, not bothering to wait for Adam’s response before he was out the door.

He could hear the sounds of Hunk’s and Pidge’s voices disappearing down the hallway, and when he turned the corner.

Keith’s boots pounded the marble floors, stalking after them with too much excitement thrumming in his veins. He tried to tell himself it was because Lance was alright, and not because he was going to get to see him one more time.

“Hey, wait!” Keith called, loud enough that the three of them (and their accompanying Blades) all stopped. They’d just started taking the steps, not far enough gone that they disappeared around the corner. Pidge was still guiding Lance by the wrist, and Hunk was beside him. Lance, for his part, seemed a little dazed, but he quickly shook his head back into focus. Keith swore those blue eyes did not leave his the entire rest of the run-walk to the staircase. By the time they were close enough to speak reasonable Hunk was shifting from foot to foot, the model image of anxious.

“Your Highness, is everything okay?” He said, glancing at a long window at the base of the stairs. A pinch of guilt twisted Keith’s stomach; he knew they needed to get home, but Keith wasn’t satisfied.

“No -- I mean, yes, just,” his face felt warm with them all looking at him, and he mumbled out the
first excuse he could think of. “You mentioned a cart to take you home -- let me, let us at least give you a proper carriage. It’s the least we can do for the shit you’ve all gone through.”

Hunk’s mouth fell open, and Pidge raised her brows. Lance bit his lip, but he was smiling, and it did things to Keith’s stomach that he was not prepared to confront in the middle of the crowded staircase.

They walked at a slow pace, which suited Keith just fine. Hunk’s anxiety seemed forgotten at the prospect of traveling by carriage, which made sense -- they were protected and much safer than riding in the back of an open cart -- so he returned to drilling Keith with all manner of simple questions, each occasionally sparking some banter.

He snorted at one such comment. “Really? ‘llura’ You have a nickname for everyone -- even the Princess of Altea?”

“Hey, consider yourself lucky!” His responding squawk was indignant. “You’ve got at least three Lance Original’s in the naming department, and that’s high quality product. Some people don’t even get one.”

And, much to Keith’s dismay, he did consider himself lucky. *What is wrong with me?*

“Wow, I’m honored.” He said dryly. Pidge cackled, and Hunk chuckled as he let Lance bury his head into the larger man’s shoulder. “Hunk, Knife Boy is picking on meeeeee.”

In an effort to keep himself from laughing, Keith bit down a smile and stared at their feet as they walked up the main atrium. The doors were in sight, and for the first time the whole evening, he noticed that Lance really wasn’t wearing shoes. A unwanted bubble of hurt climbed up Keith’s throat, as he thought about the day they’d spent in the woods. Did Lance not have any other pairs of shoes?

Lance didn’t deserve half of the shit that happened today, but deserved fucking shoes, at least.

Keith wanted to say as much, but they were standing at the castle doors now, a chilly autumn night breaching the castle walls.

“Hey, *Hunk,*” Pidge cleared her throat at the door. “I want to make sure I didn’t forget anything in the cart outside.”

“Okay?” The guy scratched his head.

“So why don’t you *come with me?*” She looked towards Keith pointedly, and he realized what she was doing.

“*Pidge.*” He warned, eyes narrowing.

But Hunk was already agreeing, shrugging his shoulders. The pair walked towards the stable with one of their Blade escorts slinked behind them, barely visible in the shadows cast by the castle and the moon. Thace had already gone to fetch a carriage, leaving him alone except…

“So, you uh, excited for your birthday?” Lance’s hands were buried deep in the pockets of his trousers, and he absently kicked up dust in front of the courtyard.

Keith let out a breath of a laugh. “Yeah, no.”

“Oh?”
“Mmm…” Keith thought for a moment. “It might surprise you, but a big, extravagant three-day party filled with a bunch of stuck-up nobles who are only interested in our borders and our money isn’t exactly my ideal for a birthday.”

That made Lance laugh, and it was such a pretty sound. Far prettier than just a laugh should be.

“Wow, you do have a sense of humor buried under all that hair.”

Keith chuckled, but sighed. Talking about the party made him tense, and he couldn’t help but think back to his and Shiro’s conversation earlier that evening.

“This conversation began because you wanted to invite him? What are you going to do?”

He still didn’t know.

“You know,” Lance grinned up at him, and Keith raised a brow. “My cousins and aunt are going to the ball. It’s all they’ve been able to talk about this week. And Pidge is being forced to wear a dress. Man, imagine if someone asks her to dance.”

“They’ll be murdered,” Keith stated bluntly. “Guess we’ll add death to the list of excitement for my party.”

Lance’s response was softer than Keith expected, even if it was sarcastic. “It sounds like a real rager.”

“You want to know the worst part?” He managed to keep his voice steady, but there was no stopping the red that rushed to his cheeks. He pretended to look at the castle turrets, unable to look Lance in the eye. “I’m supposed to pick who I want to marry at the end of it. Traditions are stupid.”

After a slight pause, Lance’s voice came in sounding normal again. “Aw, but marriage is supposed to be sweet, dude. Going in with a mindset like that will only make you even more moody.”

“I’m not -- ” Keith was already ready to retort, learning that a taunt was never far from Lance’s tongue, but his breath hitched. In his reflex to glare, he’d made the mistake of looking at Lance, who was instead looking into the night sky. Without a single cloud, the pale wash of the moon made everything about the teen look impossibly brighter -- his Altean marking glowed, his cheeks were full and sparkled with freckles that Keith hadn’t been able to see before, and the lowlights of soft purple that was prominent in most Alteans’eyes shimmered softly above the cerulean surface.

He was so… beautiful. Angular and pointed and still somehow soft. Keith wanted to touch his face, to count all of his freckles, to be the object of his attention instead of the stars above.

Oh no.

“Oh no.

“Keith?”

Oh no no no.

“You alright? You sorta just stopped talking…”

“I’m fine!” He practically jumped away from Lance, who seemed genuinely concerned. Keith just shook his head and wondered where the hell Thace was with the carriage because he couldn’t be alone with Lance for another second without losing his control. Shiro had always told him his impulse control was laughable, but Keith liked to think he’d gotten better over the years.
If he could hold off murdering the fucker that had attacked Lance, surely he could hold off his own sudden urge to lean over and kiss Lance.

“Mmm. Well, alright. Sorry if the subject was sensitive, I don’t think before I speak sometimes. One of my many charms.” Keith could hear the smile in his voice, but he stared determinedly at the ground, not willing to see it.

“I don’t doubt it,” he mumbled, remembering the conversation and regaining some steady footing in the process. “But it’s nothing to apologize for. I’m the one who brought it up, and it’s just, you know -- silly. To marry someone you don’t love.”

Lance took a moment before responding, sounding a little breathless. “Silly. Yeah.”

The tell-tale sign of rolling wheels grabbed Keith’s attention, and he couldn’t decide if he was furious or thrilled because he needed to go but that meant Lance had to leave.

“Listen, I’m -- ”

“I was meaning to --”

They both started speaking at the same time, and locked eyes. Lance chuckled and shook his head.

“Go ahead, mullet.”

Keith glared, but he couldn’t keep the small smile from his expression.

“I… I just wanted to apologize. I feel responsible, somehow. This is my castle, and the guy was technically my guest. So… you know… sorry.”

By the time Keith stuttered through the end, he felt his cheeks run red and he could hear the horses and carriage stopping in front of them.

“You don’t need to apologize, man,” Lance said, his tone surprisingly gentle. “I won’t lie to you. I’ve had like, a shitty, terrible day. Like, top five worst days ever. But it’s not your fault.”

“I can still be sorry that it happened,” he replied in a small voice. Seizing a bit of courage, he looked up to find Lance watching him with an unreadable expression on his face, but it bloomed into a pure smile seconds after their eyes locked.

“Thanks. For what it’s worth, you made the day a lot better.”

Keith couldn’t speak, and wouldn’t dare risk trying to understand what that meant. He just helplessly gestured with his hand: your turn.

“O-Oh, hah, well… y-yeah, um.” The tan boy cleared his throat. “Now it feels stupid by comparison. I was just gonna say… I have your cloak.”

“My… cloak?” He was so puzzled, his distress was momentarily forgotten. “What cloak?”

“From the other day,” Lance clarified, letting out a large breath. It sounded like one of relief. “When we got out of the forest, it must’ve gotten caught on a branch or something. I found it on the ground, and I took it home.”

Keith didn’t know what to say, but he felt sort of bad. Clearly this was something that mattered to Lance for him to bring it up and be so nervous, but in reality, he hadn’t even noticed it was gone.

“Oh? Um, okay. You can keep it.”
“W-What!” He looked dumbstruck. “No way, man! It’s like, really really nice. I can’t keep it, but I can return it. Well, probably.”

Lance’s brow furrowed, so Keith took the bait.

“Probably?”

“Errr… my aunt took it from me. Long story, just a misunderstanding. But I can definitely return it to you.” He seemed much more determined this time when he said it, and Keith swore his eyes were twinkling.

“Sure. Okay.” Keith was smiling now, because as he agreed, he realized that meant -- for Lance to return it to him… *I’ll have to see him again.*

At that moment, Thace and the other Blade reconvened, which Keith thought was a suspiciously well-timed return on Pidge and Hunk’s behalf. Both looked totally, unconvincingly innocent.

“Oh, hey, guys! Sorry. Looks like there wasn’t anything in the cart after all.” Hunk beamed, and Pidge nodded like a sad puppy.

“Oh, yes, *so sorry.*”

Keith shook his head. “Go away, Pidge.”

“Yes, *Your Highness,*” she returned with her nose upturned.

Hunk and Lance laughed at the frustrated noise he made, which he in reality did not mind at all.

They climbed into the carriage, Hunk and Lance both comically too tall for the short door, and Keith stood at the edge to close it for them.

“Byeeeee! And try not to stab anyone, Knife Boy!” Lance bid with a wave, even though Keith was literally right there. Hunk and Pidge both laughed and said goodbye as well.

Keith couldn’t keep himself from smiling, and it was starting to get a little ridiculous. His cheeks hurt.

“See you.”

The horses clopped loudly and they began to pull away, and Keith watched them until Thace motioned to return to the castle.

*“See you soon.”*
An Unlucky Little Thing Called Fate

Chapter Summary

In which, Keith is angry, Lance is unlucky, and both are totally smitten.

Chapter Notes

my brain: you can't do plot and fluff AND angst in one chapter! that's just too much!
my will to write this fucking story, 22k words later: I WONT HESITATE

(okay but honestly, this was so long and took forever to write and I'm sorry if there are
any typos or anything. I physically could NOT keep writing and rewriting this anymore
without wanting to die)

[KEITH]

“McClain?”

The archivist blinked owlishly at him.

Keith was tempted to ask: did I fucking stutter?

However, he didn’t exactly have a lot of time to spare, and did not want to piss this guy off. Wisely, instead, he said, “Yes.”

At this, the man rubbed his chin, slow and contemplative, the pattern grating on Keith’s nerves. He just seemed so fucking unconcerned. How could anyone be that laidback when the entirety of the whole damn kingdom seemed wired?

Currently, Keith was in one of his… not so great moods. Allegedly. That’s what Shiro had said when he snapped at him for coming into his room to check on him. He wasn’t six. Keith knew how to make his way down to the fucking breakfast table without an escort.

Okay, maybe Shiro was right this time about his mood, Keith conceded. But in his defense, he hardly slept at all last night. An ache had taken root somewhere between his ribs, and anytime he nearly dozed off, images flooded his brain – images of an indigo nightscape, painted with a thousand stars overhead, that, even in all their brilliance, did not twinkle half as bright as a particular pair of blue eyes. Then there were thoughts of soft, almost-shy freckles that came out only when Keith was close enough to touch them. A laugh that seemed more like a song than a release of air.

Refocusing his attention on the conversation, or perhaps more accurately, the lack thereof, Keith
cleared his throat. “They’re, uh, probably connected to the Valurian family line, to some extent?”

The old Galra, a whole head shorter and much bulkier than Keith, nodded and made a note on a stray piece of parchment. Thin lips and doubtful eyes met the Prince’s when he finished scribbling.

“The Valurians I am familiar with, Your Highness …McClain, however, does strike me with any sort of familiarity. But I shall look. Give me two quintant.”

Keith scowled, but didn’t bother to argue as he exited the library posthaste, making a beeline for the dining hall; breakfast would be starting soon and he did not fancy being late in his own castle.

While he walked, the Prince mull over the man’s reaction. He didn’t seem to have even an inkling of Lance’s surname which was… not a great sign, admittedly.

The archivist was many things -- prideful, skeptical, and at least a little racist -- but more than anything, the man was old. Like, really old. Ancient. The sort of figure that must have been born into this world decrepit and wrinkled, because imagining him anything besides knocking on death’s door was impossible. And, sure, Galra lived longer than humans on average, but even amongst Galra the archivist was a far cry from average. This particular curmudgeon literally seemed incapable of dying, at least from old age (the implications of which, Keith would rather not think about), and with that came an alarming amount of knowledge. Well, actually, records would be a more apt description: facts, figures, dates, wars, battles, policy, geography, maths and magic. The archivist dabbled in everything, and while he was certainly smart, he was also one person with one mind. Most finer details required he refer to his notes, but even so, there was no part of the realm left untouched by his inquisitive eye.

Genealogy included.

If anyone could give Keith answers, it was him.

The Prince arrived to the dining hall with only moments to spare, and with a rush of already-forgotten, half-thought pleasantries later, Keith found himself scowling down at his plate. Lavishly prepared game and still-warm fruit tarts, fresh from the oven and totems to the tireless labor of those in the kitchens, sat prettily atop polished silver, but even between the soothing waft of spices or the clinking sound of goblets, a shrill metal sound above the comfortable murmur of the wealthy and unconcerned, his appetite was nowhere to be found.

The hall was all smiles and laughter, baubles of jewelry and glittering crowns; it was filled with people and practically devoid of life. The walls were tall and gray and Keith had never thought they’d looked so unfamiliar, sealing him in instead of keeping others out. Anything outside those walls, anything real, was unwelcome at the table. Even his mother and Shiro had never felt so far away, each babbling animatedly with people whose name’s Keith never bothered to learn, and he was seated only a few feet from each of them.

Still, mechanically, the Prince forced himself to eat anyway, but he didn’t really taste the food. At minimum, he was just doing so to avoid a Shiro Lecture™ later: hold fork, stab at plate, chew. Chew chew chew, swallow, repeat.

It was almost too much work to manage for him right now, though. Sitting there was like fucking torture. And could you really blame him? The atmosphere was so fake he felt like he could scarcely breathe.

How is it that someone had been assaulted in his castle only twelve hours ago, and yet, no one seemed to even a little bit bothered?
It wasn’t that people were pretending that the events of last night hadn’t happened -- quite the opposite, in fact. That would have upset Keith privately, but at least he could brood quietly over it, a dark storm to be contained in his own heart -- but, no, the people around him just had to continue to open their ignorant fucking mouths. With passing comments and questions made about the incident, most of their guests seemed to lose interest when there was mention that the victim was just a servant. One person had the gall to spew some form of a distasteful joke about it, but still, some of the others laughed. Just as quick as the subject came up, it was forgotten again in lieu of politics or the upcoming Ball.

They were dismissive. Disinterested. Bored. As if Lance’s life somehow mattered less because he hadn’t been wearing silks or had a last name that would have made the archivist snap his fingers in recognition. There was something ugly in the way they would roll their eyes, reminding him of a parent wagging a finger at a child who had goofed off one time too many. Like somehow, Lance had it coming to him, it was bound to happen eventually, it just comes with the territory.

Fork, stab something, chew. Chew chew chew, swallow, repeat.

Keith knew -- he knew that some of the people surrounding him had to care about what happened. His Mother had gone stone cold in her fury when she found out yesterday, but trusted Keith to handle the situation so she could keep a calm amongst their guests. Shiro had upped security to the point of ridiculousness, and Adam kept sending him looks that all asked him the same question: are you okay? And that’s the thing -- he wasn’t.

Keith was not okay. Nothing about this was okay.

But propriety had to come first, didn’t it? His Mother and Shiro certainly seemed to think so, burying their own distress in the false interest of their guests. Keith wished he could better contain his emotions, at least pretend to feel something other than anger, but it was taking everything in him just to sit through the meal.

These people -- his peers -- they made him sick.

Did his citizens -- commonfolk like Hunk, Lance, the vendors in the streets, the stablehands, the cooks -- did they see him like this? Was he like this?

Keith wanted to say no. No, because, he had a fucking conscious that weighed on him more heavily than the crown atop his head… but was that really true? If what had happened to Lance had been somebody else, a stranger, would he be just as apathetic as the empty-headed people filling his castle? Would he be fake smiling, making fake conversation, peeling with fake laughter, fake, fake, fake…

“Keith?” A voice called to him. Keith wasn’t even sure who had said his name.

When he focused, he looked down at his hands.

Oh.

He had bent the fork in his hand, folding the metal in on itself.

“I was done anyways,” he grumbled under his breath, but he tucked the ruined utensil into a pocket instead of placing it on the table.

“Keith.” The voice said again, a little less severe this time. It was someone placating and casual at the same time.
Lady Shay, seated across from him with her brother, was leaning forward. No one seemed to have noticed his disagreement with the silverware besides the two of them, but he eyed them warily nonetheless.

“Is something wrong?” He returned, trying to speak just a decibel or two lower than everyone else so as not to draw attention.

Shay smiled knowingly at him. “I was going to ask you that…” but, thankfully, she seemed to understand that Keith was not much in the mood for a conversation. She nodded and returned to her food, taking up a meaningless conversation with Rax beside her.

Around him, the world continued on, a stone's throw away from perfectly gray, unfeeling tutelage. He felt like a void amongst them, sucking the underlying illusion straight from the surrounding air, a ripple in the still waters of the morally ambiguous.

The only other person who seemed visibly upset was Princess Allura, seated beside him on the dais. (Keith suspected their placement during meals had been intentional, some ploy to further promote the whole facade of ongoing courtship between them.) On her far side, Lady Romelle chattered happily about anything and everything, it seemed. The Princess’s smiles and returning banter seemed hollow, but the frost settling along her brow thawed with each gentle brush of their arms or private smiles that Keith was sure he was not meant to see.

Whatever the extent of their relationship, it was clear that Allura had Romelle by her side to help ground her, and the tender way in which their interactions always seemed pure, intentional, loving…

The Princess had someone, someone reserved especially for her. Someone who would give her attention and comfort and who didn’t seem to bat an eye at the idea that she was supposed to marry Keith. Princess Allura had Romelle.

Keith didn’t have anyone. Not like that, anyways. He never really thought he’d want that, because there had never been any sort of poetic emptiness in his chest, the sort of metaphorical absence he was supposed to want to fix or fill. He had always been just fine on his own; he could function and breathe and attend to his duties as both Prince and person, alone. So why was he so petty that he couldn’t even be glad for his longtime friend to have found someone that makes her happy? Because instead of a heart-shaped void, a crawling blackness that begged for company, Keith swore he had something more akin to a cancerous swelling tucked neatly somewhere between his ribs, stitching his lungs together with bitterness and stuffing his heart with unwelcome jealousy. It was the point of feeling too much, too much anger and too much confusion and too much of this unfamiliar warmth that had him more prepared to explode than cave in.

He didn’t have any idea what was happening to him, but stranger than that, he knew -- he knew he didn’t want it to stop. Maybe he had a death wish, because this pressure, expanding like it would consume him -- it ached, and he fucking loved it. Like a flame stealing oxygen from the atmosphere, the pain was an anchor tethering him from floating too far to the outside himself. Pain was basic, and it was universal. Galra knew pain. Alteans knew pain. He knew pain. And maybe this fire would burn him up, run a fever pitch like this for the rest of his life.

And maybe, just maybe, he was okay with that.

It wasn’t clear to him when exactly the feeling started, but he could feel it now, and he felt it all last night, too. It was the same sensation that had continually brought him back from the brink of sleep the night before, restless visions of starlike freckles; secret, gentle laughter and littering bruises; carding his hands an inch away from the abused skin, as if it would provide some sort of comfort. Transfixed, utterly and completely, by the endless rays of light that poured out of this new figure in his life. He wanted to say it was like sunshine, warming and radiant, but Keith knew that wasn’t
quite right. It was more... more like the moon, maybe. Soft, comforting, reflecting the light of others - - even Keith’s, who had long since thought he had no light to share -- and making it all the more brilliant besides.

The urge to kiss him. The taste of a name that he couldn’t tire of.

*Lance.*

“Keith.” The same grounding voice from before, bringing him out of the senseless visions in his head. His gaze landed on Lady Shay and Lord Rax, the latter of whom was eyeing him suspiciously.

“I wanted to ask you something.” She was leaning forward, almost… excitedly? There was something sneaky and conspiratorial in her usually innocent grin.

Rax mumbled something to her that was unintelligible to Keith. A roll of her wide, bright eyes later and she turned back to give Keith her full attention again.

“I was planning to go to the city early tomorrow. Skipping breakfast, in fact.”

Keith wasn’t sure why he was being told this. “Okay…?”

“I, um,” she looked around, eyes resting on her grandmother for a long pause before turning back to Keith. “I was planning to… try sample some of the Garrett’s recipes for your celebration. Perhaps you would want to join me?”

Again, Rax muttered something furiously to her, but Shay waved him off and didn’t break eye contact with Keith.

“I…” Keith chewed his lip, barely managing to stop himself from blurting an automatic *yes definitely*, because frankly, the temptation was overwhelming. Sure, Hunk was super nice and Keith genuinely wouldn’t mind seeing the guy again, and the added bonus of eating more of his food was incredibly inviting, but that was not what caused his fledgling heart to flutter like a bird trapped in the cage of his ribs. No, it was the bakery’s location that made his mind grind to a halt; it was almost as far East as the city walls, and just a few miles outside of the city…

*Lance.*

“I’m sorry, Shay, I don’t think I can.”

“Told you,” Rax muttered, definitely loud enough that Keith would hear him. The Prince resisted the urge to glare in his direction.

*Patience yields focus,* the Shiro-angel on his shoulder reminded him. The devil on his other shoulder, which was really just a smaller version of himself with horns, was still all too aware of the fact that there was a predator in the castle walls that had regretfully not gotten the shit beaten out of him yet -- the malicious part of his consciousness had little wrath to spare for Rax’s commentary.

Shay pursed her lips and gave him a puzzling look, like she was trying to tell him... *something*, but Keith had never been much for social cues. He had trouble with *verbal* conversations, let alone nonverbal ones.

“Um… was there something else?” He prompted when her stare became uncomfortable.

Just a few seconds passed before she merely shrugged and her usual pleasant smile returned. Shay shook her head and went back to eating. “No, no. Of course not. You just look a little… worn down.
I just thought you might desire a break from your duties.”

More desperately than he would have liked, Keith said again, “I can’t, Shay.”

He wasn’t entirely sure if he was saying it for her benefit or his own.

Sweet as she was, Shay merely sent him an understanding smile and said nothing else.

Keith couldn’t go with her, no matter how much he wanted to. There was endless preparations that still needed to be done; making adjustments to the Altea-Galra-Olkari diplomacy agenda for Sunday, and preparing the remarks he had to give himself during the meeting; a session with the coordinator for the Ball itself on deliveries, music, decor and decorum (but not food, Keith had figured that one out himself, thank you very much); a secondary meeting for him to privately review all of the most ridiculous etiquette rules imaginable expected of him through his three-day nightmare.

There was too much to be done, Keith told himself firmly, responsibly.

He would not go to town with Shay tomorrow.

--

Let it be known that Keith Kogane was a man of his word. The kind of man who says what he means, and means what he says.

So why, you may ask, was he riding Red into the city beside Lady Shay’s carriage early the day?

Well.

It’s not that he had changed his mind, exactly. Just, the circumstances had changed, that’s all. He needed to be flexible to accommodate the new situation. That was the responsible thing to do as the Prince, after all. Adaptability was important.

And, to be clear, the situation changing was entirely not his fault, okay? Keith could swallow some pride and say that, yes, maybe he could have just sent Antok or Thace along instead of insisting he went himself, and, sure, Shay’s plans happened to coincide dangerously close to the Eastern outskirts of the city -- just because he happened to be a nervous fucking wreck about it was absolutely beside the point!

The situation changed like this:

Yesterday, the Prince had escaped breakfast with just a bit of time to spare before he was to meet with the Council, again. Keith had enough time to do something, but not much, and the young Prince knew he wasn’t exactly acting sensically right now. He hadn’t slept, glowered at anything with a pulse, and couldn’t stop the twisting anxiety in his stomach knowing he passed up the chance to see Lance again.

He was being stupid. Keith knew this, and for once in his damned life, he needed to talk about it, because he didn’t know what these feelings meant or why he was so confused and why did it have to happen during the busiest week of my fucking life?

In search of an audience that wasn’t going to give him unsolicited advice (read: Shiro), Keith walked
straight from the dining hall out into the front yard, marching towards the stables.

A calm constant, Red was always happy to see him when he would go visit, though sometimes her mane looked a little worse-for-wear. Not anything that was concerning, just a bit unkempt; Keith held no ill will for the ones assigned to tend to her. Red would never completely settle herself long enough for anyone else beside him to thoroughly brush her down. Keith was pretty sure she didn’t do it intentionally, but that she was just easily annoyed and most stablehands got on her nerves before they could finish their duty. Keith smiled at the thought. He could spend hours with Red and she would only relax more, their shared idiosyncrasies somehow making them each compatible. She calmed to Keith, and Keith would admit that she had the same effect on him.

It was odd to think of the time he’d last come down here on his own. It had been perhaps a week before the nobility began to arrive in droves, and it had been comparatively peaceful. It seemed so long ago that Keith slept easy, head heavy with dreams only to be forgotten come morning; he could come in and find just one or two stablehands keeping up with their duties unbidden, the kind who would nod and shuffle away when Keith entered a room. Most servants are like that -- well, at least, most of the servants in his castle. He could think of a few shining exceptions to that rule these days.

Walking through the stable door now, Keith found the place the exact opposite of the calm and quiet sanctuary he’d grown used to. The enclosure was positively bustling, teeming with activity as people moved in and out the doors, guiding horses, carrying hay, satchels, harnesses, spurs, saddles, reins, and everything else one could possibly think to bring while horseback from the boarding area back to the front room, where the supplies would be stored for safekeeping.

Keith tried to slip into Red’s stall unnoticed, which failed spectacularly when he nearly bowled over a little Arusian stablehand. The young aid was so alarmed that they fell back into a mount, which consequently spooked the unfortunate creature, and the small mistake exploded into a huge scene. Cue a minute of deeply apologetic servants and a mumbly, awkward Keith, and the stable suddenly cleared of most nonessential staff in record time.

Keith had to suppress the urge to sigh. He wondered if driving people away was conditional to his station or his personality; he imagined Allura would have handled the situation a hundred times more graceflly. Now quiet but for a light murmur of the remaining servants and the occasional bustle of horses cooped up in the stables, Keith came upon a disinterested-looking Red in her stall. She was gazing expectantly at the door when he pushed his way inside, as if she’d heard the ruckus too and was waiting to pass her judgement on his unparalleled social ineptitude.

“Meh,” he huffed, and she merely shifted her weight slightly as he took off his cloak and hung it up, grabbing a brush and coming up to her with practiced ease.

“Hey, girl.” Red settled when he spoke to her, and Keith was deliberate as he brushed her slowly and thoroughly. A brief, affectionate winnie escaped her, but otherwise the pair stayed silent for several minutes.

“Why don’t you and I just run away, huh?” He bit his tongue, smiling at the quiet joke. Red looked at him with understanding, and he would swear she was thinking the same thing -- of course he wasn’t serious, but wasn’t it funny to imagine? The town criers would lose their voices shouting out the headlines.

He considered getting out the saddle, but knew he wouldn’t have enough time to really make it worth it. Instead, he was content to brush her until she shined, the red undertones of her brown coat blazing beneath the morning sun coming through the window.

Vaguely, he was aware of some new voices joining with the muted activity across the stable.
Breakfast was likely over, then, and the guard and perhaps even some of the nobility were coming down to fetch their horses.

“Do you think I’m cruel, Red?” Keith whispered, surprising himself with the rawness of his own voice. He stopped brushing for a moment, letting the words settle in the dusty air between them.

“I don’t want to be. Is it wrong to want to be upset about this? I know… I know the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few,” he grumbled out the tired advice that had been drilled into his head since the tender age of two. Every noble knew those words, as they recited them frequently to one another when trying to take the moral high ground.

He knelt, smoothing the tool down her legs carefully. “I know that if I freak out, everyone else might too, and keeping up appearances is important, but… but I just can’t. I can’t not feel angry about this.”

There was bitter truth to that. Keith had always known that he did not have just a temper as Shiro often liked to tease, but rather, he felt like his mind was a bubbling black pool when it came to his emotions, dark and endless if he dared sink below the surface. They weren’t all negative emotions, but they were opaque, fully enveloping him and everything around him. When he felt, he felt intensely. Happy or sad, bitter or surprised, Keith felt things too much and could never reign himself in, never temper himself around even important guests or during decisive meetings. His mother had perfected stilling the storm within her, and Shiro was nearly as good, but Keith couldn’t do it to save his damn life.

Keith didn’t feel the least bit guilty about it, not this time anyway. He used to, when he was younger and would snap at an advisor who disagreed with him or the Council wrote off his recommendations. They all chalked up his outbursts as parts of his temperamental nature, but right now, if anything, Keith was fucking proud to be angry.

“I’m not overreacting,” he told Red. There was no waver in his voice. “Maybe I’m letting it show too much, but I’m not overreacting. If no one else is going to be pissed about it, then I’ll be angry enough for everyone. Lance deserves to have someone upset on his behalf.”

A smile pulled at his lips, and with no one but Red around to see it, Keith allowed it to spread.

“He’d probably be pissed at me if he knew I said that. Plus, he has Hunk and Pidge to worry about him, I guess. I don’t know, Red. This is just weird for me and… I don’t know.”

_I don’t know._

Keith wasn’t used to that, and the phrase hung heavy in the silence that followed.

Just as he was nearly finished tending to Red, stretching his arms above his head to ease out some of the strain between his shoulders, he turned in time to the sound of the stall door sliding open.

“Hello,” the accompanying voice slithered above the general din of the stables. Keith was met by delicate purple features and yellow eyes, oddly softened by the dark irises within.

His lips pursed in distaste. “What do you want, Lotor?”

“Just as gracious as ever, aren’t you, your Highness?” Lotor mewled in a voice of molten silver; pretty, but it would scorch your skin if you got too close. “Nothing at all, in fact. I was merely fetching my own horse when I thought I heard someone. Your’s is quite the beauty though, isn’t she?”
Keith shrugged, not at all buying that he was here by coincidence -- Lotor was not the kind of get his own horse saddled and ready -- and waited for his fellow Prince to elaborate.

He seemed to pick up on Keith’s impatience and promptly got to the point.

“I do not mean to keep you, but seeing as you got caught up in the affairs of last night, I wonder if I could have a word regarding the, ah, victim.”

Well. That was certainly not what Keith was expecting him to say. His heart felt like it was pumped full of lead, weighing a million pounds as it dragged through his stomach and into the floor. Honestly, he couldn’t imagine what his face might have looked like, but he hoped it was something like cold curiosity rather than blatant suspicion.

“Why?”

Lotor’s golden eyes narrowed marginally, some of the princely facade falling with it. “This week is not meant to add strain to the already tense relationship between our kingdoms. You have never been one to mince words, and I respect that -- so allow me to take a page from your book. My kingdom’s disagreements with the Olkari are being felt from all sides, and I have no illusions regarding the real reason behind this celebration. It is as much as it is for your coming of age as it is for our families to try to peacefully resolve the lingering threats between them. And in truth, how you or your family view my father’s decisions is of little consequence to me. I am not here to defend him, nor make a stand against him. What I am here to do is to say that, as an act of good faith, I wish to apologize on behalf of the offender to reinforce a calm between the kingdoms.”

Keith gave Lotor his best doubtful expression, wondering if he looked half as shocked as he felt. Lotor… apologizing? Had something infected the water supply? Were the end times upon them?

What the quiznak was going on?

“So… you want to say sorry… for what happened last night? Am I understanding this right?” Keith could hardly believe the words coming from his own mouth.

Lotor raised a thin brow. “My father is not pleased by the idea, but we are guests here and I am in no mood to further fray our already tenuous bonds with Marmora or Altea. I understand you spoke with the subject yesterday evening -- did you happen to catch the name of his master?”

Master.

That brought him back to reality pretty fucking quickly.

The prospect of Lotor apologizing to Lance’s master for what happened had him clenching his jaw so tightly, his teeth were actually beginning to hurt. Not apologize to Lance, no, that would be silly.

“No,” lied the Prince, his tone sharp like fractured glass.

Like fucking hell Keith was going to help this blue-blooded, egotistical, glorified pastel piece of shit get anywhere near Lance.

“Hmm.” Lotor seemed unphased by the turmoil bubbling dangerously close to the surface of Keith’s carefully crafted mask. “Very well. I do not blame you; I would scarce have paid mind to the names of those involved, either. But for appearances, what must be done, must be done. I shall speak to whoever is heading the investigation -- that would be the one you’ve, ah, kept on as the Head of the Guard?”
“Shiro,” Keith corrected with no small amount of venom lacing his tone. “His name is Shiro.”

“Is it?” He hardly seemed to be listening anymore, looking down at his cuffs and adjusting the way they lay around his wrists. “Well, I best track him down. I hope to have this whole affair smoothed over tomorrow.”

Lotor walked out, leaving the stall door open as he went.

Fuck.

There were countless people involved in yesterday’s nightmare, and with a castle packed to the brim, the rumors were surely already flying. Lotor would get Lance’s name and information sooner or later. Was he planning to have guards summon him to the castle? That wasn’t exactly unheard of, but it worried Keith -- Lance seemed to operate on a tight schedule from the little he’s gleamed of their time spent together, so the idea of stealing him and his “master” away for something as trivial as the Galra trying to save face seemed less than ideal? Or would Lotor go outside the city himself? Maybe call Lance and the Valurians out into the city square? Oh, he could see it already. Probably some big fucking publicity move in which the benevolent Prince Lotor makes humble amends with the battered and bruised servant of Lady Valurian. Which translates to Lotor basically kicking any manner of the self-respect Lance has right into the fucking dirt.

Keith felt his muscles thrumming, stuck beside Red, her clopping feet and unsettled noises growing restless. In a moment of rage, he threw the brush he was holding at a bale of hay, anger unabated by the unsatisfying plop sound made by the wooden handle before the tool clattered to the ground. Keith needed something more substantive to destroy, or he was going to be coiled with this horrible energy all day. He couldn’t let Lotor do this. He wouldn’t. Anger was blinding him, though. He couldn’t think straight. He couldn’t move. What the fuck was he supposed to do?

And no sooner did the living, breathing miracle that was Lady Shay waltz right by the open stable doors, her grandmother leaning heavily on the young girl’s arm as they walked the castle grounds. ...And that’s how Keith ended up on his way to the city alongside Lady Shay, thank you very much. Well, not only Lady Shay, because somehow during the madness of the proceeding day, Princess Allura had pulled him aside for a sidebar and asked if she could join them. In all honesty, Keith wouldn’t have cared if Kolivan wanted to tag along, but he didn’t say this to Allura.

But it got worse. What was supposed to be a quiet outing had become a... a thing. Keith hated things, for the record, and he vehemently muttered how it wasn’t his fault that it became a thing -- if anything, he would blame Shiro (if only because he liked to blame everything on his older not-really-brother). The plan went from himself, Lotor, and Shay (the latter of whom provided good company and a better excuse to keep an eye on the Galran Prince), to Princess Allura, accompanied by Lady Romelle, and Lord Rax ended up coming along anyways, and then the little Princess Tylivia of Puig was stuck with them as well.

It had become some young royal outing... thing.

Allura, Romelle, Shay and Rax occupied the carriage, with the little Tylivia bouncing happily in the Altean Princess’s lap. She was probably... what, four now? Keith was pretty sure she was four, or thereabouts, anyway. Enough to be bubbly and happy and giggling in her tiny tiara. Keith rode beside the carriage, citing the excuse of ‘not enough room’ so he could ride Red. Lotor promised to catch up with them, though the Prince would much rather he didn’t.
Now, they were practically a procession, with several guards and a Blade assigned to each of them trailing slower than he would have liked into the city. Keith couldn’t decide if the electricity sizzling beneath his veins was excitement or dread, but it buzzed ceaselessly each step further they moved from the castle. Lady Shay had tried to politely involve him in their conversations for awhile, the unseasonably warm day prompting her to choose one of the uncovered, soft-leather padded carriages rather than an enclosed one.

By the time they passed from the Northern edge to the Eastern sector, Shay released a world-weary sigh and dropped the usual melody behind her tone. “So, what is actually going on with you, your Highness?”

“Nothing,” he ground out.

“Keith, you’re a worse liar than me.” She didn’t sound angry, but concerned. “You’ve been quiet all this morning and you looked… well, you looked positively murderous yesterday at breakfast. I know when something is up with you.”

His hold on Red’s reins tightened, and he trained his gaze forward as they made their way through the streets. People stopped in all manner of preoccupation to stare, bow, shout and cheer congratulations, children running up as close as the guards would allow on occasion and waving with big, unguarded grins plastered over their small faces.

It reminded him of the Lance’s smile. Sincere and honest -- not because it was childish, but that it was so pure that it made Keith smile too, in spite of himself.

Princess Allura spoke up at some point, prying as gently as her voice could manage. “Keith, please, we’re all friends here. Is it about Lance?”

“Lance?” Princess Tylivia repeated, looking back up at Allura with bright eyes. She made a face like she was trying to decide if the name was an acceptable use of the common tongue, and her judgement must have been favorable because in a matter of seconds she was cheering.

“Lance! Lance, Lance, Lance!”

The Prince groaned, using a hand to scrub down the side of his face.

“Who is Lance?” Rax questioned, a brow raised towards his sister. She frowned at Keith and did not respond.

Lady Romelle laughed merrily. “Lance is our friend, silly. We met a few days at the castle… Oh, and, I believe Hunk and Lance are best friends… right, Shay?” She pretend-elbowed the girl across the aisle, who snapped back at the mention of a certain someone’s name.

“Um. Yes. H-Hunk did say he was very close with someone named Lance.” A small smile appeared on her lips and she gazed over to Keith. “Apparently, Lance is the one who grew the tomatoes for that amazing bruschetta. Do you remember?”

Of course he remembered, but it was taking every ounce of concentration to keep himself from blushing like a tomato. Instead, he just hummed a noncommittal noise of agreement.

Thankfully, they took his silence as understanding to fucking drop it, please, so drop it they did. The remainder of the ride was short and filled with teasing, laughter, and plenty of questions about the landscape. Keith actually managed to get distracted explaining a bit of history to an extremely fascinated Lady Romelle by the time Garrett’s Bakery came into view, something that helped to settle his fiery nerves.
They dismounted quietly, the Guards having already pushed back a large part of the street to allow them some semblance of privacy. Keith felt a little guilty, actually, as his citizens were only trying to go about their business and here came a group of young adults and one child, literally causing a detour in their day.

Before he could stop himself, Keith’s eyes roamed the crowd, searching for a familiar smirk or gangly set of limbs. Nothing.

He was more-or-less shoved into the storefront by Ulaz, though tried not harbor too much irritation with the Blade member. Part of his own training, a core fundamental to stealth, was to never leave yourself exposed if you can help it. Four-closed walls in a small bakery seemed much less a threat than standing and staring at the crowd.

Hunk was already pulling people into hugs by the time the Prince entered, and he looked ready to sweep Keith up too when he hesitated.

A frown, serious and respectful. “Your Highness, can I hug you?”

“I told you, call me Keith.” He felt himself cave at the radiating smile Hunk sent his way. “And… fine.”

He pretended not to love it as much as he did. Keith couldn’t remember the last time someone hugged him like that.

“Gosh this is -- just, what a surprise!” The larger boy beamed as he put Keith back on solid ground. “I would have done more to prepare, and oh man this headband is my one with the stain on it. Ahhh, well. C’mon in, please!”

Princess Tylivia had not even waited for the invitation, judging by the giggles and the voice of an older woman coming from the back; Keith assumed it was Madam Garrett, who he vaguely remembered from before.

All six of them, plus Hunk and his mother, plus two guards and a Blade, all squeezed into the kitchen area. It was cluttered, and more cramped than Keith would have liked, but there was also something undeniably cozy about the space. The ovens were full and there was foodstuff everywhere; chopping tables and recipes stuck to walls, coupled with aromas so overwhelming Keith felt heady just breathing it all in -- yeast and cinnamon, cloves and apples, roasted vegetables and fresh herbs. They were all things he’d known before, but the kitchens in the castle were sprawling rooms; here, the flavors were concentrated into a thick, delicious vapor that filled him from the inside out.

On the far wall, in front of what appeared to be a workstation, there was a huge piece of parchment tacked up against the bricks, the words FRIDAY - SATURDAY - SUNDAY written in neat, block print. A proverbial index of every variety of food Keith could image were listed out beneath each designated day, with a large reminder at the bottom informing them of Keith’s lactose intolerance. The sight, combined with the thoughtful note and attention to detail, made the Prince feel a twinge of excitement, for the very first time, for his birthday.

Shay seemed to hang on Hunk’s every word as he explained the space to them, which Keith found all kinds of amusing. The two seemed to gravitate towards each other, and neither even really noticed it was happening. Hunk hugged Shay again at some point, and she had taken his hands in her own while she sang some sort praise for the hard work they’ve put into the planning already.

Madam Garrett chattered happily alongside her son, but kept herself busy by pulling fresh tray of
treats from the oven, putting random things into the freezer, or a mixing bowl, or measuring carefully with a captivated Princess Tylivia in her shadow, *ooh*’ing and *ahh*’ing at each flick of her wrist.

Of course, Hunk insisted they sample everything, seeing as they skipped out on breakfast to come early into the city. Allura and Romelle indulged eagerly, meanwhile helping the little Princess as to not make a huge mess of herself. Rax hovered nearby to Shay, arms crossed defensively, but he did not say anything while he chewed a few biscuits and the like. Keith wasn’t, to be honest, all that hungry, but the look on the dark-skinned boy’s face when he politely tried to decline any food was so heartbreaking that Keith just decided it was worth it just to see Hunk happy.

He had no idea what he was eating half the time, but he knew that it was all *fucking amazing*. From *Caneles de Bordeaux* to a classic torte, *pani popo* (some sort of sweet bread?) to something called *moravian sugar cake*, they ate and ate while the Garrett’s took turns explaining what they happened to have already around and prepared. It was so good Keith honestly considered asking them to forget about their storefront and to just come to the castle, because he was pretty sure he would never be able to go back to the usual meals served at the castle after this.

Madam Garrett had called in some reinforcements in the form of family who lived about a day’s ride from the capital, and they were supposed to arrive in a few hours. The Garrett clan planned on working in shifts to have everything prepared and tested in time for Thursday, at which time Hunk was to show up bright and early and probably dismantle the castle kitchens while cooking for two days straight. Keith couldn’t even feel too guilty for how much of an ordeal he must be causing them, given how frequently and sincerely Madam Garrett and her son thanked him for the opportunity. It made his throat close up, to be on the receiving end of such boundless gratitude. If there was a place that existed on the opposite side of reality, it was the breakfast table from the previous morning -- his open hostility easily forgotten in the tiny bakery at the edge of the city.

Though unintentional, Keith ended up speaking quietly to Madam Garrett for a decent period of time while the others joked and teased. As a prince, he had spent most of his life up to that point around people at least twice his age, what with the Council, Shiro and Adam, his mother, the rest of the Blade and the guard for his usual company-- by now, he just tended to get along better with people older than him.

During a slight lull in their conversation, Madam Garrett turned to him with anxiety lining her dark eyes, the same color and shape as her son’s.

Before Keith had the chance to question it, the woman crossed the room and spoke something quietly into her son’s ear. Hunk kept a sure smile on his face, but Keith didn’t miss the momentary dip in his brow.

After gracefully untangling himself from the conversation, Hunk came towards Keith, letting his mother steer the attention of everyone else in the room.

“Your Highness --” He paused, biting his lip at the Prince’s responding grimace. “Ah, sorry. *Keith*. That’ll take some getting used to, my bad. Anyway, could I have a word?” His voice dropped an octave towards the end, and Keith felt a twist of nerves in his stomach.

Hunk led the way for them to just step around the corner to what more resembled a normal office space, though there was all sorts of ingredients piled haphazardly on every open surface.

When Ulaz moved to follow them, Keith raised a hand and rolled his eyes at the Blade’s disapproving glare.

Keith would take his chances; if *Hunk* turned out to be a secret assassin hired to murder him, he
would deserve no death more fitting than to be stabbed in the back of their bakery by the physical embodiment of sunshine himself.

To the Prince’s surprise, when he looked up to meet the larger boy’s gaze, Hunk looked somber but -- happy? It reminded Keith of when he sparring with the guards, when he would best someone during a training session. They would seem pleased with themselves but not with the outcome.

It only served to make Keith more nervous.

“So.”

Keith shifted his weight. “So?”

Hunk let out a long breath.

“Have you seen or talked to Pidge since I last saw you?”

He shook his head from side to side, and Hunk seemed to have expected his answer when not a moment later he launched into a slightly rambling speech.

“Okay, listen. I know this is probably going to sound weird, but I really wanted to say thank you. And not just for the opportunity at the castle and stuff,” he waved a dismissive hand at the other room. “I know we’re not super close or anything -- but thank you for looking out for Lance the other day. Whatever you guys talked about really seemed to help him feel better. He’s been… going through a rough patch, so when you and Princess Allura and Sir Shiro and Sir Adam all made sure he was -- just, it was nice to see other people stand up for him. I think he needed that.”

“What do you mean, ‘rough patch’?” Keith knew he was probably overstepping, but that was the second time he or Pidge mentioned something going on with Lance and his curiosity was starting to overwhelm him.

However, when a shadow was cast over Hunk’s dimpled cheeks, storm clouds blotting out the sunny rays, Keith wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer.

His voice came out a bit strained.

“I don’t know how much Lance has told you, and I don’t want to overshare stuff that isn’t mine to share, so…” Hunk stopped to rub his temples. “I guess, just, Pidge and I are worried about him. He doesn’t sleep a lot or eat as much as he should and his family… they’re not like, the nicest people in the world, I guess.”

“How so?”

A long, slow exhale followed, and Hunk’s smile looked particularly pained when he gazed out the back window.

“It’s hard to say, ‘cause I don’t know how much Lance even tells me. He doesn’t like to put his problems onto other people, so I’m like 80% sure he’d murder me if he found I was telling you any of this, but… My mom has contacted the authorities, like, three times to report his aunt for being, ah… cruel. Nothing ever changes,’ since his position in the house means basically nothing to the higher-ups -- er, no offense.” He flickered his eye’s to Keith and then away again. “Anyway. The reason I’m telling you this at all -- risking my life here, man, seriously. Lance would at least smack me for this.” His voice turned fond momentarily, and Keith felt himself relax slightly in reference to his friend’s antics. “Is that Pidge and I agreed yesterday that you, at least, seemed to care.”
“I do.” Keith surprised himself by how immediately he admitted that, his cheeks pinking when Hunk grinned at him, but he did not amend his statement.

“This is gonna sound counter-intuitive then, but, if you care about Lance at all -- try to keep a distance from him, yeah?”

Keith’s grimace was reflexive. If he was a little disappointed, well, he at least tried not to let it show.

“What? I-I mean, I can, but just... why?”

“Oh, I didn’t mean like -- sorry, I should have been more clear. Pidge and I agreed whoever saw you first would tell you -- don’t seek him out at home, like, uhh… ever? He wasn’t supposed to be out at all on Monday, which is why he was so anxious to get home. He’d get into a ton of trouble if his aunt found out that he snuck out, or even worse that he…”

The boy’s expression flashed in anger again, but a quick readjustment of his headband seemed to soothe his irritation. “These are Lance’s words, not mine, but he’d also get in trouble if he ‘brought any shame or embarrassment to his family.’ I know, I think he’s ridiculous, too,” Hunk remarked pointedly to Keith’s flared nostrils, shaking his head. “But I also don’t doubt that he was being honest, either. So if you ever wanna hang out with us again, which like, I think would be really cool, man -- you seem really nice -- just don’t ever actually go to Lance’s house, okay? He comes to the city every Thursday to shop and on some weekends he has time to see me and Pidge. Just… like, come here first, and see if he’s around?”

Keith felt like he was burning, face red all the way to the tips of his ears. What was he supposed to say? How could he possibly respond to something so… so honest?

A nod. He was pretty sure he could at least manage a nod.

It was hard to tell with the distracting tattoo his heart was carving into his chest.

Hunk gave him a long look, unreadable from Keith’s point of view -- it might have been readable to anyone else, but he was still in some sort of emotional comatose from the weight of Hunk’s unexpected speech -- before standing up with a broad smile, even wider than normal.

“Speaking of which...” Hunk trailed off, clapping Keith on the back, and he nearly buckled from surprise. Hunk was very… touchy-feely. Keith still wasn’t quite used to it.

The dark-skinned teen pulled something carefully down from a shelf that was just a bit higher than chest level, and walked it to the small desk pushed against the wall. Hunk meticulously pulled up a creased arrangement of cardboard, and Keith watched on in silent interest as he fluidly folded the contraption into a perfect cake box, and he rearranged the thing he had retrieved from the shelf into said container.

In delicate, iced-calligraphy, Keith saw the words **Happy Birthday Nadia** swirled from edge to edge with intricate flowers woven around the perimeter. The sight niggled a memory from Keith’s mind, the edges blurry but filling in with the sound of crinkling leaves and cracked branches, the pleasant smell of earth and water mingling with freshly caught fish.

*I came up here to get my niece a gift. Her birthday is coming up. Plan A was to get her some shoes that are going to match her dress for the ball.*

“Speaking of which,” Hunk repeated as he closed the lid, cutting Keith’s attention back to the present. “He’s actually supposed to be here soon, today’s his niece’s birthday. You can wait around for awhile if you want -- I know I’m crazy anxious to see how his neck is doing.”
Keith considered pulling Hunk into a hug right that moment for delivering the best news he’d heard all day.

No sooner did Keith settle on smiling and accepting Hunk’s offer, who rather did not notice or graciously decided not to question him about the flush in his cheeks, did Ulaz poke his head into the back again.

“Your Highness, apologies —” he began, but Keith shrugged.

“We were just about done back here. Is everything okay?”

Ulaz pursed his lips. “Ah. Well. No citizens are allowed in the perimeter we’ve set up while you are all here, but...”

And then all of them froze, the tell-tale sign of a certain whiny teenager carrying above all of the din, outside and in.

“I SAID -- NEED -- THIS CAKE, GET -- QUIZNAK OUT --!”

Ulaz coughed. “It is Master Lance, from the other day. But your guard is having trouble keeping him --”

“Oh, my god,” Keith tried to cover the laughs spilling from his mouth. “No, no, let him in, it’s fine!”

And with a hasty nod, a slightly distraught Ulaz -- which Keith didn’t think to be possible -- bolted through the kitchen to the front of the store, and a bell rang loudly overhead. A flicker of the irate teen’s voice squeezed in between the jingle, sounding a lot like Spanish.

Hunk rested a hand on his own cheek, bemused. “Oh, Lance. He’s lucky my mother doesn’t know Spanish.” They exchanged a look, and Hunk chuckled before turning back to the kitchen. “I’m not fluent myself, but I pick up some things he says. He’s using some… colorful vocabulary right now. She’d smack him upside the head.”

At that, Hunk shuddered, demonstrating that this was no empty threat.

“Wait, you’re -- Ulaz? Right?”

Keith’s entire body tensed, the raucous tittering in the kitchen quietsing. He rushed in after Hunk, catching eyes with Princess Allura and Lady Romelle, both who seemed equally surprised.

“You’re from -- but that means, oh, no...”

“Lance!” Hunk greeted, striding through the kitchen like there was nothing unusual about this situation. He placed the cake down on the counter before promptly eliciting a surprised squeak from Lance. Madam Garrett was only a step behind her son in rushing to welcome him into the store.

After Hunk announced his name, every set of eyes in the kitchen rested heavy against Keith, and he suddenly felt much less pleased about this whole thing. Part of him was tempted to just snap at them to mind their own business, because, because Lance was just out that door, he could hear him...

But the Prince had no idea what to do. After the incident, he’d had adrenaline and worry to carry him into the infirmary to confront the situation, but now, now... Should he wait for Lance to come to him? Follow Hunk out and try to be normal? What even was normal for Keith? Shiro would probably say moody and stand-offish, so, no, maybe not that.
He waited too long, and the decision was made for him.

“Lance!” Tylivia shrieked happily, running from between Lady Romelle’s legs and repeating the learned word from the ride down to the city. She was sprinting out to the front door, young and curious and comically unaware to the embarrassment she was currently causing the Prince. “Lance, Lance, Lance, Lance!”

Finally, Lance spoke again, and some of the tension in Keith’s shoulders relaxed at the bright, familiar laugh that came with it.

“Oh, well hello there, pumpkin! Aren’t you just adorable?”

“Hehe, t-thank you. Are you Lance? I like your name.”

Princess Allura was staring at Keith with some sort of benign fury in her eyes that he could not even begin to comprehend, but she mouthed “go!” silently and gestured towards the front of the store.

Muscle memory, along with Princess Allura’s not at all subtle encouragement, reminded him that, oh yeah, I’m not glued to the fucking floor, and he forced himself to walk out after Hunk.

Keith appeared just in time to watch Lance scoop up the little girl like they hadn’t just met seconds ago, both teen and child staring at each other with matching, mischievous grins. She shrieked and giggled wildly while Lance bounced her in his arms. “That’s me! The one and only! It is a pretty nice name, my Mamà gave it to me, after all.”

The girl clung to Lance’s tunic, and he supported her legs with an arm, sort of settling her onto his hip. Keith thought he looked incredibly natural with the girl propped against him, and finally, finally, Lance looked away and caught his eye.

If Keith thought he was prepared for Lance, his body and mind utterly convinced they had his face memorized, oh, boy, how wrong he was. There was something different about Lance with a little girl tucked against him, looking tired and breathless but so pleasantly sure of himself that Keith could’ve fallen down and probably wouldn’t have noticed. It was… confidence, maybe? Something more than that, though, and he was oddly reminded of champagne -- the confidence was the liquid courage, but it sparkled with an effervescent that turned it from sweet wine to something brighter, fuller. Some sense of… ugh, what was it? Warmth? Wholeness?

He wasn’t sure if a single word could really capture it, because Lance wasn’t just Lance, holed up in the infirmary, or Lance that helped thieves in the city. He wasn’t just Hunk’s friend, or -- or whatever he was to Keith -- but he was all of that compressed into a single person, and somehow more. A whole greater than the sum of its parts. Lance with a child was just another part of the puzzle, and when their eyes locked, it made Keith’s heart thump painfully, joyously, because Lance smiled even wider, impossibly even brighter than before at him, to him.

“Oh no. I feel terrible.” Keith deadpanned, and he saw familiar look of challenge flash in the other’s amused blue eyes. Lance even looked about ready to rise to the bait when a firm hand smacked the back of his head.

Madam Garrett was having none of it. Hunk sent Keith a grave look that almost made him choke on a laugh.
“Aye!” Lance swatted at Madam Garrett’s hand, dodging a second hit. Princess Tylivia was giggling, thoroughly pleased at Lance’s chagrin. Keith might have laughed too, but only a little.

“Disrespecting the Prince? In my house? Lance Alexander McClain so help me --”

Hunk, ever the calming presence in the room, placed a careful hand on his mother’s shoulder. “Go easy on him, Mom, he’s hurt, remember?”

The woman muttered something, but Keith’s attention had zeroed in on Lance’s neck as soon as Hunk pointed it out. He cringed as Tylivia, evidently, noticed at the same time and started to tug at the bandages messily wrapped around his throat. Small slivers of dark purple and unsightly red peeked out against the stark white, and he felt the flames of his unspent anger rising through his blood, burning him on the inside.

“Lance, Lance, Lanceeee, what is it,” Tylivia repeated her chorus, this time with notable concern as she continued to pull at his neck. “Are you a mummy?”

Lance sighed with a tired smile, angling his throat away from her. In a soothing tone, he sang-whispered to her something soothing in Spanish, almost like a lullaby.

Keith -- nor anyone -- had any clue what he was saying, but the effect it had on Tylivia made it clear that Lance knew what he was doing. The girl quickly quieted and took back her grabby fingers, bobbing her head back and forth over her shoulders at the soft sounds of foreign tongue.

Allura, Romelle and Rax all entered the front of the store, and Lance’s initial surprise redoubled when he realized it was more than just Keith who had interrupted his errands, though Keith noted he didn’t snap at any of them for the “riot” outside.

Instead, he was his usual grinning self, tickling Tylivia on his hip once she was no longer focused on his bandaging. The bakery filled with the sound of her spirited giggling, which Lance spoke over easily.

“Hi, Princess! Romelle! I totally was not expecting to see you both again so soon.”

“Lance, how are you feeling? We’ve been worried.” The Princess swept up beside him immediately, trying to relieve him of the four year-old burden now clinging to him like he was her favorite person in the world.

“We?” Lance raised an eyebrow, and Keith felt his face warm slightly.

The little girl whined when the Princess began to scoop up beneath her small arms. “Nooo, no no!” Lance shook his head at Allura and readjusted Tylivia’s weight back onto him, letting her sort of sprawl his chest and lean her head over one shoulder. She was clinging like a koala bear, but he hardly seemed to notice.

“It’s fine -- I’m fine, thanks,” his smile was tighter now, if not a little uncomfortable. Keith thought of the conversation he’d just had with Hunk and bit his lip. “Sorry, I didn’t get your name?”

He held a hand out to Rax, who looked at it for a few awkward seconds before accepting.

“Rax.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Lance, but, I guess you probably know that.” He gestured to the girl in his arms. “Speaking of, who is this little cutie, anyways? You seem to know my name well-enough.”
“Livia!” She practically screamed, pulling herself up to stare at him. Several of the bodies in the store flinched at her shrill volume, though Lance didn’t so much as blink.

“‘Livia, huh? Is that your full name?’

“It’s Tylivia. Princess Tylivia of Puig, actually.” Princess Allura supplied, smoothing down the smaller girls thick reddish-brown hair.

“Tylivia -- wow, that’s a really pretty name. And how old are you?”

She held up four fingers, wiggling them proudly. “This many.”

“How many?” He prompted, jostling her slightly. Neither of them seemed aware that the bakery had fallen silent, the rest of them quietly captivated by their totally innocent conversation.

“Umm... Nålugu?” Keith recognized the very basic Puigian word for, indeed, four. He was ready to interrupt, to tell Lance that she was still learning, but Lance was already clicking his tongue and shaking his head from side to side.

“Tch. Nuh, uh, no, niña, in the common tongue. If I had to learn it when I was your age, then I’m sure you know it.”

When she just looked down at her fingers, utterly frustrated, Keith had to fight down a smile. She looked like she was trying to puzzle through the secrets of the universe, and Lance’s own expression quirked up into a smirk.

A devastatingly beautiful, crafty, confident smirk.

Keith felt a little weak in the knees.

“Let’s try together, okay? One…” Lance held up the corresponding finger, waiting for the girl to echo him.

“One?”

“Good. Two.”

“Two.” She recited, utterly serious. Lance nodding approvingly.

“And three?”

“Three!”

“And then…?”

“UAhhh… F-four?”

Lance’s doting gentleness was replaced almost instantaneously by his usual dramatic energy, if not goofier than normal. He began tossing the little Princess lightly in the air. “Yay! You did it! You did it!”

For some reason, Allura and Romelle cooed like they’d been woken from a very long sleep, and Keith didn’t know why he had the urge to fucking cheer along with them. He’d never heard Tylivia laugh like that. Rax actually chuckled.

For what it’s worth, Keith still hadn’t ruled out the possibility that Lance was magic.
After the moment’s reprieve washed out, leaving behind it an air of happy sighs and light chuckles, Princess Allura excused herself to the restroom, and Keith noticed for the first time that Shay and Hunk were nowhere to be seen. Rax seemed to pick up on this as well and stormed into the back in search of his sister, where Madam Garrett could be heard clinking together some sort of containers.

Lady Romelle looked between the two with wide eyes, supplying a rushed, “Oh, yes! I also… I also have to go to the bathroom! Be right back!”

Lance watched the blonde disappear with a frown, then his attention went from Tylivia to Keith, and the Prince couldn’t help it if his eyes flickered down to Lance’s lips momentarily -- it wasn’t his fault Lance had chosen that exact moment to worry the pretty, soft skin there between his teeth. It would have been rude not to notice. Still standing the breadth of the store length, Keith smirked when the Princess interrupted by wiggling to get the lanky boy’s attention

“Lance! Laance, psssssssst,” she clapped her hands wildly, beckoning him to come down to better hear her.

Not quietly at all, Tylivia spoke at her usual volume, just cupped behind a hand. “Hey, did -- did you know that’s the Prince?”

“You don’t say?” was Lance’s response, catching eyes with him while sporting look so adorable Keith should really do something about making it illegal. “Why don’t you introduce us, ‘Livia?”

Just as Keith was prepared to roll his eyes, a habit he thought he was going to start doing a lot more these days, a sudden blare of sound behind Lance made them all jump. Tylivia even let out a small whimper of surprise. Keith blinked over Lance’s shoulder, his heart stilling.

“Apologies, I was caught up.” Lotor walked in, eyeing the place critically from floor to ceiling and nearly running right into Lance. “I hope I haven’t missed all of the fun.”

“Uh, sorry,” the teen muttered, taking a large step closer to the counter -- closer to me, Keith allowed the traitorous thought -- to get out of the Galran Prince’s way.

“Mmm… Laann…” Princess Tylivia whined, clearly distressed as she blubbered Puigian nonsense after that.

“Oh. And you are?” Lotor said, a thin brow arching almost up to his hairline, looking from the little girl to the man holding her. Lance seemed confused, but held out his free arm before Keith could tell him not to bother.

“Oh, I’m Lance, nice to meet you. Are you friends with Keith and Princess Allura?”

“Ah.” His yellow eyes widened in recognition. He did not accept Lance’s hand, turning now to Keith. “So you did end up finding the servant.”

“Er,” Lance let his hand fall to his side. He raised it again quickly to pat Tylivia’s back, and shot a confused, slightly annoyed look towards Keith. “If you’re talking about me, he didn’t find anything, I was just -- ”

“We no longer need the name of his master, though, I do appreciate your help in looking into the matter.” Lotor interrupted.

“M-Master?” Lance retorted, disbelief giving way to anger. “I’m not -- I don’t have a master.”

The silver-haired Prince did not so much as look at Lance, as if he couldn’t hear him. Keith couldn’t decide if he was glad for that or not -- on the one hand, he’d very much like it if Lotor never so much
as breathed the same air as Lance, let alone speak to him; on the other, it was at the expense of treating Lance like he wasn’t there at all.

Before he knew what he was doing, Keith was on the other side of the counter. He positioned himself between Lance, who was still holding Tylivia, and Lotor, glaring directly at the lilac-complexion of the other Prince’s sinisterly innocent expression.

“I don’t know how you guys treat your subjects in Daibazaal but that’s not how we do things here. Don’t you ever fucking disrespect one of my citizens again.”

“Citizen?” Lotor blinked, seeming at least marginally surprised by Keith’s reaction. “Your Highness, with all due respect, you’ve taken quite a strong stance defending someone who, may I remind you, assaulted a rather esteemed general in my own people’s army.”

Keith felt like he’d been smacked. “What the fuck are you talking about?

“I’ve done some research, and after questioning the alleged attacker, I find their story to be more credible than what was reported by your guards. Princess Allura only intervened after the first punch was thrown.”

A door opened and footsteps came down the stairs, revealing Lady Romelle with the very same Princess trailing behind her.

Allura’s eyes widened at the scene. “Keith -- Lotor? What’s going on?”

“I -- no. I have to go.” Lance said abruptly, stepping far to one side so that he was no longer lined up behind Keith and Lotor. “I have to go, like right now. Where can I…?”

“Lance?” Madam Garrett reappeared now, Hunk right behind her.

“Buddy, what’s up?”

Keith didn’t really know how to help as Lance looked awkwardly around for somewhere to place Tylivia, as she was gripping to the front of his tunic with tough little fingers, but the Prince floated towards them anyways. It was like when Lance broke his shoe and couldn’t remember his words, trying in vain to explain to Keith what happened, except now the panic was reserved for his wide, blue eyes.

“Lance, here, I’ll um -- I’ll take her.” Keith stuck his arms out, trying to mimic what Allura had tried earlier, and this time Lance didn’t hesitate.

“Shh, I know baby, I know,” he cooed sweetly to Tylivia, pushing back her thick hair when she fought to stay in his hold. “I’ll try to see you again sometime, hmm? Won’t that be nice?”

The random words of comfort were half-hearted, as if Lance didn’t believe them himself, but Keith hardly heard it anyways. The whole time, he was watching Lance, trying to read his expression, but he wouldn’t so much as glance to him even as he transitioned Tylivia to his arms. He lifted the cake from the counter that Hunk had placed there earlier.

His friend stepped forward. “Lance, wait -- are you…?”

“I have to go.” Lance spat out harshly, looking at no one in particular. “Don’t -- just, don’t.”

In a flash he was at the door, where he swung it open with enough force to shake the frame. Lance was gone before Keith had a chance to breathe a goodbye.
The room was incredibly tense, all of the others having reconvened at the loud noise of Lance’s exit.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Keith rounded on Lotor, his manners for little Tylivia’s sake wholly forgotten. “He’s a fucking person, how could you act like that?”

“He may have attacked one of my officers,” Prince Lotor repeated calmly. “I am simply trying to refrain from taking any sort of position on the matter until there is sufficient evidence. However, there does seem to be a credibility question on his part – his reputation precedes him, I’m afraid. He is rumored to be friends with thieves, in addition to his existing offense of trespassing, especially with such high profile individuals staying in your castle. That alone should be grounds for arrest -- think of how many more could have been endangered? Compare that to my own subject, a highly decorated officer in the military, and well...”

“How -- how dare you!” Allura was shaking, marching right up to him and staring him down. Her whole body seethed with loathing.

Hunk’s let out a noise like she’d been punched in the stomach, and Keith heard Lady Shay whisper reassurances to him.

The Prince was prepared to snap at him, but Hunk held him back with a gentle hand and a shake of his head.

*He’s not worth it*, the motion read. Keith knew that. He knew it, but god, if he didn’t want to punch him anyways.

*He’s not worth it, but Lance is.*

---

[LANCE]

*Fortune favors the bold*, Lance remembered Luis telling him once. Luis… what a fucking liar.

Lance was pretty bold, if he did say so himself -- he at least tried to put himself out there. When time permitted, he would strike up conversation with anyone and everyone in town and tried his damn best to remember the details of their stories: whose sister had just gotten married, why there were no zucchini in stock for the next two weeks, where the Yourp family was planning to move, etc. He wasn’t perfect, but he tried, and he succeeded well enough that a lot of the regular faces he saw seemed to recognize and even enjoy his company. No one could take that away from him.

Well, almost no one. Fortune herself had a pretty strong hand to play, and she seemed even more flippant than Rachel when she was all hormonal from her pregnancy.

Like, seriously.

Tuesday morning, when his Aunt and cousins returned, he’d been ready for anything. He planned to wait and see what his Aunt Hira said about his bruised throat before attempting to explain away the cloak he had supposedly “stolen.” Cause if she freaked out about the fucking *handprints* on his skin, then Lance had a feeling the cloak would be little more than afterthought at that point.
It seemed almost funny to him, after having slept for a full four hours that night, that Knife Boy -- *Keith*, he reminded himself again -- that *Keith* had even offered for Lance to keep the thing.

Just thinking about it made him blush and want to hide his face. Like, *The Prince* offering Lance his cloak? To *keep*? God, it was like he was living his cousin’s cheesy romance books… except, well, a little gayer.

Okay, a *lot* gayer.

But, like, it wasn’t like *that*. He just wasn’t expecting *Keith* to offer, okay? It’s not like the Prince felt that way about him at all -- Lance was content to just, you know, maybe fantasize just a little bit.

Sue him. *Keith* was literally a dream -- a *Prince*, like a *fucking actual*, literal *Prince* -- with a terrible, dry sense of humor, dark, round eyes with an even darker mess of hair, and a stupid little smile that made Lance want to fucking claw at his neck just to get his face closer to him and really, *Keith* was *objectively* attractive, and it’s not like Lance couldn’t stop himself from imaging what he would look like *without his clothes*, because *his arms seemed so toned* and --

Anyway.

Lance didn’t have the best luck, that was his point. Lately it had been especially bad, and he wondered if the events of Monday night were the apex of how shitty things could get, or if it was just the penultimate disaster, and whatever fresh hell Aunt Hira had when she figured him out would in fact be the pinnacle of his misfortune.

As such was Lance’s luck, he wasn’t exactly a *betting* man -- he’d try to stack the odds in his favor every opportunity he could, just to *maybe* twist the tides of fate so as not to have every single thing he did end in a ridiculous disaster. So he made sure to have the house *perfect* when the girls returned -- breakfast just finished, warm and elaborate, just like his aunt liked it; tea freshly poured with just the right amount of sugar for each of them; fires blazing in the hearth of the dining room, sitting room and library. All Lance had to do to really seal the deal was act the right amount of pathetic. He could swallow his pride a little to save his skin. He didn’t mind that.

Stand up straight, but still look small, speak clearly, but softly -- essentially, act like he didn’t mind being walked all over. Let Aunt Hira feel like she was bigger and more important than she was, because there’s nothing she loved more than that.

And somehow? Somehow it fucking worked.

Sort of.

Aunt Hira seemed pleased by his behavior and the state of the house, so her mood wasn’t quite as critical when she assessed his neck. It was hard to miss the discoloration, and it was one of her first comments when she stepped over the threshold.

“What happened to you?”

“I… I had an accident, Aunt Hira. I’m sorry.”

Clicking her tongue, she came closer. Lance struggled to keep eye contact, but he knew she hated when he looked away.

“What happened?” She repeated.

“I, uh, I was trying to clean the upstairs windows, and when I poked my head outside to wipe down
the outside glass, the frame fell and sort of snapped down on my neck.” The lie was embarrassing, but not as embarrassing as the truth. He kept his lips sealed tight and prayed the pattern of fingers wasn’t so obvious that it outed him.

She chastised him to be more careful -- “You best hope there’s nothing broken, because I won’t pay for you to see the clinician.” -- but otherwise didn’t punish him.

Small miracles, he reminded himself. They still had to discuss the cloak.

Lance had thought the whole mess through by then, using the time in the castle carriage from the early hours of that morning, sweeping him through the town and back to his home. He had been careful to bring the medical tape and bandaging Sir Adam had been kind enough to give him, and playing with the stuff kept him distracted, seeing as Pidge and Hunk had been dropped off first.

He decided to cut his losses.

After the day he’d had, flirting with danger more than he had with lady’s maids, Lance decided it just wasn’t worth trying to convince Aunt Hira that he didn’t steal the cloak. She would never believe him -- would never believe that he had met Prince Keith Kogane at the opposite edge of the city, was pestered and stalked for the afternoon due to his temper, only to end on decent terms with a forgotten cloak between them. It didn’t even sound believable to him, and he’d lived it, so he had about a snowball’s chance in hell to make it out of the conversation with anything even resembling a sense of victory that would have been worth his pride.

So he admitted, quietly and with a misplaced sense of shame, that he had stolen the cloak. He said he lied to her, because he panicked, and that he was sorry.

Lance lost his mattress that day and the scraps of his already-ruined shoes were thrown in the garbage. Aunt Hira didn’t give him money for a replacement pair, so he guessed he was going barefoot for a little while. She was also especially critical of all of his chores and to be faster, quicker, and more responsive.

Honestly, it could have worse -- a lot worse. Lance didn’t even have it in him to complain when night fell when he finally went to bed around three in the morning and slept on the cold kitchen floor. He was usually too tired to worry about being comfortable anyways, and that night had been no exception, having stayed up especially late to finish preparing all the Blum that had been in the freezer box for the past several days for Nadia’s birthday tomorrow.

Lance slept heavily, head filled by empty dreams, but that wasn’t uncommon. Romantic, nonsensical visions didn’t really suit him anymore. They stopped not long after he left home, and most of the time he slept in perfectly blank space without any make-believe world behind his eyelids. It was fine, perhaps even better, this way. Dreams were entirely too hopeful for someone with as little prospect as Lance, and he kept himself grounded in the day-to-day by not thinking about everything he didn’t have.

Early Wednesday morning, the end of October just around the corner, Lance woke from another of those dreamless sleeps. His limbs felt dense and his mind foggy, but the quiet rustle of branches and dry leaves from the open window in the kitchen was enough to slowly drag himself to consciousness. There was a breeze, but it wasn’t particularly cold, and he managed to slowly drag himself up and went outside to start his morning routine. Kaltenecker was there waiting, like she always was, staring at him with practiced indifference -- Lance knew that that meant she loved him, though. The sun hadn’t even begun to tease over the horizon yet, so it was plenty dark and quiet in their secluded section of woods, giving Lance the opportunity to wake up gradually.
Breakfast was another task that he needed to address soon if he wanted to have the whole spread ready in time for the girls to wake up. Birthday breakfasts were always extra special, and Lance didn’t even mind since it was Nadia -- it felt a little more like home, to do something special for like this for his family. He wore a lot of hats in his day-to-day, but some of his favorites were brother, uncle, family, and he didn’t get to wear them often anymore -- this was one of the few days a year that was exception to that fact, so he was going to let himself enjoy it.

He was just putting the kettle on to boil when a sudden light thumping caused him to jump, thinking one of the girls had snuck up on him, but there was no one when he turned around. Suspicious, he narrowed his eyes and put down the pot on the stove, eyes straining in the still-dark house, barely lit by the weak crystal lights glimmering from the ceiling and the beginning of day finally making its way above the treeline. Lance traced the sound, a bit unnerved, to the south-facing wall. It carried a distinct scurrying quality that he hated -- probably a rodent. He didn’t dislike animals, but when mice got into the house things became a fucking circus, turning the place upside down, and he was then responsible for getting rid of it and cleaning up the nightmare of dropped pearl necklaces and shoe-scuffed chairs that came with it. If he could get rid of it before anyone else woke up, all the better.

Warily, Lance crept around the wall, examining the crevices between cabinets, pulling out the base of the freezer box, slightly testing the cafe curtains, and… oh.

Oh.

Just outside the window, seated on the exterior ledge, was an absolutely precious little kitten.

It pawed at the glass, and now that Lance was near enough, he heard a soft mewl escape from it.

“Oh my god,” he breathed, sure that he’s fallen in love, “you are the cutest thing I have ever seen!”

Slowly, so as not to scare his unexpected visitor, Lance cracked the window and carefully raised it from the base.

“Holaaaaa,” Lance sang in an excited whisper, reaching a hand slowly towards the cat in fear it might jump away.

Instead, almost hilariously, it swatted a paw at his incoming fingers and hissed.

“Aye, not cool,” he furrowed his brow and moved closer to the ledge, kneeling to be at level with it. “What’s got you all uppity?”

The cat blinked, looking entirely unamused. It’s coloration was inarguably adorable - the short hairs were a cool steel gray color, and its little eyes twinkled mischievously in shade of blue so bright it reminded Lance of faroff stars or planets in the night sky.

“C’mon, Lancey Lance just wants to give you a scratchy scratch,” he keened a bit closer.

With a brief sniff of his fingers, the cat finally yielded to Lance’s advances. In mere moments, the feline melted into his touch and was purring, rubbing its nose and chin anywhere it could meet resistance, eager to be pet.

“Aw, gosh, now I’m going to have to keep you and love you forever. My first son.” Lance wiped away a false tear, sure he’d never been prouder than he was in that moment. “Or daughter. I don’t know.”

As if in agreement, the cat meowed almost gleefully. Lance didn’t even know cats could be gleeful, but that would be the word he would use to describe that excited jolt that his affection had earned.
Laughing, and pleased by the unexpected company, Lance scratched right behind the cat’s ears.

“And what will we call you? You know me, Lancey Lance, andddd… I think I’ll call you… Winnie, since I found you in a window?”

Lance scrunched his nose, not liking the name as much once he’s said it out loud. Winnie seemed to agree, as it smacked his hand away and drew back, a look of vehement betrayal in their bright irises.

“O-Okay, I wasn’t a huge fan either! Geez. What about, uh, I mean… I’m not really creative… maybe, Blue?”

The cat formerly-known-as-Winnie tilted its head slightly, in such a way that Lance was actually feeling a little uncomfortable. It seemed… too understanding of him. Maybe it did understand him? Could it be magic? He didn’t really have any expertise with magical cats -- or magical anything, except for the occasional mundane charmed item -- but it hadn’t made to hurt him yet so…

Lance cleared his throat. “‘Cause of your eyes, you know?”

Still, the cat continued to stare, head slightly turned as if examining him for… for… well, what would cats even inspect a human for? Their next meal? A treat? It felt like it was judging him, which was just… weird.

A slight whistle to his right distracted him, the boiling kettle emitting a plume of steam, and he went to turn off the stove.

“Okay, hold up Blue, let me just pour this and I’ll see if I can find something for you. Oh, shit, we even have fish right now -- Blue you’re going to love this.”

Just as he or she was told -- for some reason, now Lance was leaning towards a she -- Blue kept her perch in the windowsill while Lance bustled around the kitchen to finish the tea. He would have to wake the girls up for breakfast soon so it wouldn’t get cold, but he figured he had enough time to pluck out one of the smaller Blum catches.

Once he found what he deemed to be a small enough one, he eyed Blue carefully and thought about inviting her in to eat it on the ground, but he wasn’t really sure how cats worked. Instead, Lance decided to set it beside her on the window, where she stared at it for several long seconds.

Then she tapped it with her paw, curious, and Lance’s heart melted just a little.

And if that wasn’t enough, then she stood up on all four legs, arched her tiny back in a stretch, and grabbed the Blum between her teeth like a dog grabs a stick -- it was almost as big as she was, but her hold on the thing was firm, determined.

…and then she hopped out of the window and scurried off into the woods.

“Hey! Pequeño ladrón azul!” He half-laughed half-yelled after her, but she was already sneaking off through the early light of dawn with her prize in tow.

Lance didn’t have it in himself to be actually upset, so he just shook his head affectionately and returned to the task of breakfast.

To the surprise of absolutely no one, Nadia was a ball of energy that morning. She hopped and skipped and sang around the house, waiting eagerly for breakfast to be served, unable to sit still while her sisters and mother had their tea. Lance thought it was actually pretty cute, and even his aunt didn’t try to dampen the little girl’s mood on her special day.
She prattled Adelá’s and Emely’s ears off, bringing up a bunch of names and conversations Lance wasn’t familiar with from their visit to the Olkarion embassy. The older sisters were amused and nodded and asked questions they clearly knew the answer to, and they even pulled Lance into the conversation a handful of times much to the younger girl’s delight.

Once they finished their meal and Lance removed their dishes, Aunt Hira surprised him by sending him to the city rather abruptly.

“Nadia’s cake, from the Garrett’s?” She reminded, a little exasperated. “Pay attention, boy, I told you we would place the order on Monday on our way in and you were to pick it up today. Hurry now, I expect you back within two vargas.”

“O-Oh,” Lance mumbled, taking the coin purse that felt like it weighed much more than the small amount of coin within. He nodded and tucked it into his pocket. “I’ll be as quick as I can.”

Practically sprinting to his corner of the kitchen, Lance hastily found and tried to use the bandages Sir Adam had given him for his throat. Without a proper mirror he knew it was a little messy, but he’d prefer a slightly disheveled mystery to showing off the horror that was beneath them. When most of the unsightly maroon marks had been covered, he deemed it good enough and set off to the capital.

Bless his long legs, because he could set a fast pace without actually having to jog, but it didn’t make the pain in his feet any less. If he thought Thursdays were long with his treks to the city for his aunts and cousins weekly needs, then he was fucking kidding himself compared to how he felt now. His calluses had calluses. A careless step onto a particularly pointed rock definitely broke the skin, but he kept going because time was of the essence today. It was just a nick, surely. An annoying nick that stung when he put pressure on his right foot, but, whatever.

When he approached the edge of town, Lance was genuinely surprised to see the first row of vendors almost completely abandoned. Had something happened? Was it a holiday?

The answer came as soon as Hunk’s place came into view, though, a large gathering of folk stirring around the building like moths to a flame.

He was alarmed at first, thinking something might have happened to the bakery -- or, god forbid, Hunk or his mother -- but there was no medical personnel that he could see and the crowd seemed to be wired with more of jittery, excited energy than fearful or worried.

“What’s going on?” He asked a random seller, someone he recognized as having decently priced produce but shit prices on everything else. Lance was pretty sure his name was Kinkade, because frankly, what kind of fucking name was that?

The taller man shrugged, looking over heads in the crowd. “Hard to say, looks like some procession from the castle. Maybe they’re here to pick up the Garrett’s for the catering gig?”

“Maybe,” Lance muttered, giving a grateful wave before pushing himself through the gaggle of bodies. No way was Pretty Boy going to send some guards down here to take his friend before Lance could pick up his cake. There were priorities, people, and Lance getting that cake was one of them, thank you.

When he finally pushed through the front, a guard wearing a uniform similar to Shiro’s stopped him with the butt of his spear.

“Apologies, no citizens in the confectionary at this time.”
“Uh, excuse me?” Lance put a hand on his hip, sizing the guy up. “I have a cake to pick up.”

He didn’t seem phased. “No exceptions.”

“Heh.” Lance ran a hand down his face before adjusting the strap of his messenger bag on his shoulder, the one he always took into the city just in case. “You’re going to regret that.”

The man’s eyes narrowed, and his hold on the spear tightened. “Is that a threat, sir?”

“No, not exactly. I just don’t see this working out for you.” An innocent shrug, and Lance took a delicate step forward.

The man lightly pressed Lance’s shoulder with his gauntlet, which was all the just cause he needed. Shit-eating grin in place, he began screaming over the crowd, angry and defensive.

“YOU CAN’T JUST HIT A CITIZEN? WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU? ARE YOU TRYING TO START SOMETHING — I JUST NEED MY CAKE, QUIZNAK, WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU? I SWEAR TO GOD IF YOU DON’T LET ME THROUGH RIGHT NOW…”

Needless to say, the man was so shocked he had absolutely no response as Lance skirted past him, pretending to be horribly offended and distressed by their brief contact. Another guard moved to stop him, so Lance just took a large step backwards while they comically fell on their face into the dirt.

A hand squeezed his shoulder from behind, and, ah fuck.

Where he expected the same guard regalia, instead a dark suit and serious grimace met Lance’s surprised expression. “Wait -- you’re a Blade, right?”

Cue a bit of arguing back and forth, and maybe some creative suggestions of where the Blade could stick his knife, and eventually another Blade member poked their head out into the street. This one, Lance knew by name.

“Ulaz! Wait, if you’re here…?”

If Ulaz were here, all those guards, the Blades, a royal procession… Lance’s luck was definitely, definitely improving.

Well, or so he thought. The unexpected sight of a particular mullet-headed royal had sent his pulse skyrocketing and his stomach hurt from laughing at little “Livia’s” antics, but the merriment was cut short by a tall, silver-haired dude in need of a major attitude adjustment.

And a lesson in manners, and maybe a good punch in the face, too.

Something delicate and feminine broke Lance from his stunned silence. It took him several seconds to even realize it was Princess Allura.

“Keith -- Lotor? What’s going on?”

Lance had hardly heard the last words that were said, too caught in the earlier conversation to give the present much thought.
Servant. Master. Some bullshit story of him instigating the attack -- that was what really got to him. Lance was half-tempted to rip his collar down just to show the guy his fucking neck properly, so he could ask him what the fuck he would call the bite marks along his clavicle if it was his fault, but with a little girl in his arms…

“I -- no. I have to go.” Lance shook his head. He recognized in some capacity that Keith was trying to stand up for him, which under different circumstances might have made his heart flutter, but Lance really couldn’t even hear him anymore. It felt like he was just witness to the scene rather than a part of it, watching from the far end of a long tunnel, all of their words warped and distended by the time they finally reached him. Lance didn’t want to seem unappreciative of Keith’s efforts, but, honestly? He was not interested in getting sucked into more of his political bullshit today. He’d had enough of that for one week, at least.

Out of instinct, Lance’s eyes darted to the clock on the wall. Fucking hell. He had less than half a varga. Panic sent his pulse to a hummingbird pace, and the teen almost felt dizzy with the overwhelming sense that, yup, his luck was definitely running out again.

“I have to go, like right now.” The little girl clinging to him was now much more of a problem than he had originally anticipated, and he was regretting Allura’s invitation to take her earlier. Desperate, he looked around, “Where can I…?”

He saw Hunk and his mom appear through the kitchens, faces painted fresh with worry and surprise. They said something to him, but he didn’t hear it.

Lance almost flinched when he realized Keith was standing only an inch in front of him, his voice was soft and grounding through the panic, distinct enough that Lance could at least understand him. “Lance, here, I’ll um -- I’ll take her.”

He untangled Tylivia from his shirt without a second thought, murmuring to her like he would his own nieces or nephews. A random push of energy had him snatching up the cake on the counter and was ready to bolt for the door when Hunk tried to stop him.

“Lance, wait -- are you…?”

“I have to go.” Lance hoped his friend could tell he wasn’t angry... just, he couldn’t afford to mess up again. Not on Nadia’s birthday. Not after barely skirting by as it was. The best he could manage was a quick, “Don’t -- just, don’t.”

Part of him ached at the knowledge that he could physically feel Keith looking at him, and that Hunk and his mom were understandably worried, but Lance had to go. If he didn’t turn away right then, he knew his resolve would crumble and, shit, he might even start crying from the stress and guilt of being party to that horrible tension in the bakery.

Two sneezes later and he was out the door before he could change his mind.

Let the record show that for all Lance’s talents, his ability to perform under pressure was one of the ones he was most thankful for. More and more, his life felt like one continuous loop of shit shit shit not enough time shit this is bad, and yet, he managed pretty well… most of the time. Running through the streets and down the dirt road towards his aunt’s home while balancing a cake box and trying not to trip and fall was one such moment that his talent came in handy, though he did run a few minutes late.

When he stumbled through the back door, pouring sweat through his tunic, Lance quickly sneezed
his usual two sneezes and carefully cracked the lid of the cake box, examining the inside.

Okay. It got… a little smushed. He could fix it, though, it wasn’t like he was helpless in the kitchen. He wasn’t Hunk, but he wasn’t Pidge either -- those represented opposite ends of the spectrum for cooking as far as he was concerned.

Lance pursed his lips and took a few deep breaths, trying to collect himself. A guilty part of him realized he forgot to pay Hunk and Madam Garrett in his hurry to get the fuck out of there, but thankfully he knew they wouldn’t hold it against him. He took the money he owed from the coipurse and went to slip it into his pillowcase when a sharp voice cleared behind him.

“Ahem.”

“S-Shieeeeooooowwwww…” he managed not to curse, only just. “Wow, uh, Aunt Hira. You startled me. Sorry I was a few minutes late, there was a big like, detour in town… Something to do with the Prince I guess.”

Her eyebrows raised in perfect symmetry, but otherwise, her face did not change. She simply leaned against the doorframe, unusually casual for her. In fact, it was sort of unusual for her to be downstairs at all, and that realization made Lance a little nervous.

“W-Well, I was probably going to start on afternoon tea soon, did you need anything?” He managed, coughing only once to keep his voice from cracking.

She assessed him with a meaningful look, which made him fidget. It was weird, like she was trying to see right through him, to look at his skeleton rather than his face.

“No. I don’t believe so. The coinpurse?”

Lance shot up immediately and ran it over to her, dropping the little pouch neatly in her hands before taking a healthy step backwards. For some reason, he thought she was going to whip it at his head, and he braced for impact.

Instead, she just closed her palm around it and looked at her hand, not even bothering to check it for the correct change. With a quick turn, Aunt Hira disappeared back into the depths of the house, her sharp heels clicking all the way until she could be heard no longer.

Okay, that was weird.

Lance frowned, but decided not to linger on the unusual encounter. It’s not like whatever new criticism she was working up towards about actually mattered. Lance was done, at least for a little while. Done pushing his luck -- done relying on luck at all, really. Everytime he felt like things were going well, something came in and fucked it all up. The events at the bakery were basically a perfect microcosm of that exact problem.

Admittedly, a lot of the things that seemed to go wrong were his fault, like not following after his friends when they turned around at the castle, or agreeing to go out when he knew it was a bad idea, or forcing his way through a crowd when it was set up to keep people like him out, with good reason judging by the encounter he had once inside. Even in the cases where things going wrong wasn’t his fault, the end result was the same; a pyrrhic victory at best, a total disaster at worst, and it was really becoming exhausting.

No more. Lance needed to get himself back to neutral. He would help the girls prepare for the Ball, clean and maybe catch up on writing a letter to his family while they were out in the evenings for the next few nights, and by next week, all of this weirdness would pass.
It was just coincidence that he and Keith had crossed paths each time they had, and now that he was apparently friends with Pidge and Hunk it only made sense that they would see each other sometimes.

No, this wasn’t fate. This wasn’t those silly romance novels at all. This was just his life, and his life was confined to the empty rooms of this overly large house, and his heart somewhere in a small village in the mountains. It wasn’t -- it wasn’t anywhere near Marmora. Lance needed to stop fooling himself into thinking that it ever could be.

The fact that Lance had messed up one time too many did not become apparent until the day was nearly over, which was, in a way, tragic, because he had really almost convinced himself that he would get past this.

Nadia had already been put to bed about a varga ago, a team effort by her mother and Emely. Adelà excused herself early that night for not feeling well. Lance and the two waking women were quiet in the house, staying their usual distance from one another, which typically took the form of Lance starting on the downstairs floors, sometimes suffering a mild, unwelcome and unpleasant high from the chemical fumes, with at least a good floor or two separating him from Emely, known to read at this hour, and his aunt who would close herself into her study. Lance presumed it was to read also, but he didn’t know or particularly care.

When he heard the tell-tale sign of the last of the lights going off upstairs and his aunt’s door snapping shut, Lance abandoned the bucket and sponge on the floor and headed for the kitchen, taking a much needed five-dobosh break.

Filling up a glass with water from the tap, he leaned his lower back against the sink and stared at the opposite wall. It had been a strange few days, and much as he hated cleaning, as much as his muscles were sore and begging him to actually take a break, something about falling back into his routine was also satisfying. This was normal, and normal wasn’t great, but he could survive normal. Sure, he would joke with Pidge and Hunk that he was going to marry a trophy wife who could bench-press him and loved all of his pick-up lines, but Lance knew as well as they did that it was a joke. Jokes were fine, too, because he didn’t have to get too serious, or too sincere, and that way no one really could get hurt -- his feelings or anyone else’s.

Lance sighed and downed the remainder of the glass, setting it off to one-side and stretching his shoulders until they released a satisfying pop.

At the same time, a knock so light he had almost mistaken it for the wind came from the back door. He blinked at it incredulously -- the only person who could reasonably be at his house past midnight, showing up at the back door, was rather a murderer or Pidge, and that was only because the little gremlin was anything but reasonable.

He shot a look over his shoulder, but he knew everyone else was asleep. Just… gotta check if it’s a murderer or Pidge. Not that it couldn’t be both; he sort of imagined one day he would die by Pidge’s chaotic little hands. Didn’t seem the worst way to go, honestly.

Lance gripped the handle, palms terribly sweaty for no good reason, and he cracked it open slowly and quietly.

“Listen, if you’re here to murder me, or you’re Pidge, I’d rather you go away.”

“Wrong on both, I’m afraid.”

Lance had to do a double-take, fully opening the door this time with a stunned expression on his
“S-Shiro?! What the…” he said too loudly, then forced his mouth together into a thin line. Lance pressed a single finger to his own lips, the universal sign for shh, and he stepped out into the backyard beside the knight, who simply smiled politely and nodded in understanding.

Lance sneezed twice, per usual.

Then, as seriously and ridiculously as he could muster (because this was Lance, the living-breathing master of oxymorons), he whisper-shouted: “What the quiznak, dude? Why are you here? Is -- oh, is everything okay? Did something happen?”

“What? Oh, no -- nothing happened, everything’s fine.” The man held up both hands, his prosthetic catching a bit of shine under the moonlight. He half-laughed, but took Lance’s lead and kept his voice low. “No, I’m actually here with Keith, but with heightened security after -- well, you know -- it’s protocol that I made sure it was actually you who answered the door. I figured your aunt was probably sleeping, but you know, you can’t be too careful.”

“O-Oh…” Lance fell back against the door lightly, needing the support. “Um… Yeah. My aunt just went to bed, actually. So… Keith, huh? Where is he?” His eyes scanned over Shiro’s shoulders, which was admittedly a challenge because he was several inches taller and definitely a fair amount broader than Lance in the shoulder-department.

“I’m literally right here.”

“H-holy--!” Lance nearly leapt out of his skin, but the rest of his curse was muffled by the fucking shadow of the night fucking Mullet over here that just apparated two fucking inches beside him.

It didn’t help that he was pressing his hand against Lance’s face, against his mouth. Oh, sweet, sweet god.

Kill me or something already I honestly can’t keep this up.

Keith, for his credit, looked extremely satisfied to have gotten the jump on Lance. His smirk was borderline sinful, and Lance was having a very hard time keeping his thoughts from turning him to very inappropriate with Shiro only a few feet away just snickering at them.

“Weren’t you the one who said to be quiet?” Keith raised a brow and simultaneously lowered his hand when it appeared Lance was not going to shriek bloody murder… which he still hadn’t ruled out, just to be clear.

Lance merely laid a hand over his eyes and groaned, leaning back against the house and trying to clear his head and not think about the warmth that had just been covering his lips.

“Okay.” He said solemnly once his heart was a little less frantic. “Just, for the record, jumping out of the dark at the guy who literally just got strangled in a dark hallway, and shoving your hand over my mouth, that might’ve been, ah, a little, uh, too much, too soon, yeah?”

Almost immediately, Keith’s eyes widened and he covered his own face with a hand. “Shit, I didn’t even think about that -- I, ah, shit I didn’t even mean to scare you. Honestly, I was just standing here, and you didn’t see me.”

Lance made a point of gesturing to Keith’s outfit. “Maybe because you’re wearing all black and it’s the middle of the night?”
The Prince narrowed his eyes. “Or maybe you’re just not very perceptive?”

Shiro shook his head and gave Keith a pointed look. “No, Lance is definitely right on this. We really should’ve been more transparent and sensitive to what happened. Sorry. Are you okay?”

“It’s no biggie,” he shrugged, feeling a little flush to have drawn attention back to his injuries. Averting his eyes, Lance stuck to more important things. “Anyways, really, what are you doing out here? This isn’t exactly a step or two away from the castle or anything.”

Out of instinct, Lance looked to the older man to answer, but Shiro had both brows raised at Keith who… looked, frankly, a little grumpy with his arms crossed and glaring eyes trained to his feet. It was like the kitten from earlier when he tried to name her Winnie. The thought made Lance smile slightly.

“I… uh…” the Prince swallowed. “Well, there’s two things I guess. Hunk asked me to deliver a message to you, or whatever. He’s really worried about you. About your neck, I mean. He said, and I swear if this is some weird curse thing, I will kill you, he said, ‘if you see Lance, ask him if he wants to share any honeycombs and gyoza and if so, tell him he should bring two bags.’ I have no fucking clue what he was talking about, so.”


Lance blinked, taking a moment to process before cracking into a huge grin. Unable to help himself, he let out a little laugh at Keith’s confused, almost frightened expression, based off Lance’s reaction.

“It’s code, dummy. Two bags? Huh, okay. Do either of you have the time?”

Shiro quickly flicked open a pocket watch, squinting in the low light. “Just a little after one. God, I am too old for this.”

“Shiro, you’re like, thirty. Calm down.” Keith rolled his eyes, and Lance chuckled.

“Mmm… Okay, well, what was the other thing?”

The Prince scowled and motioned with his hands. “Wait, you’re not even going to explain that cryptic message?”

Lance shrugged innocently, loving the look of annoyance it earned him from Keith. “Nope. If Hunk wanted you to know what it meant, why would he have used the code?”

“Unbelievable,” Keith scoffed, but Shiro seemed only further amused.

“So? The other part?” Lance prompted, trying to look as devilish as possible just to get on Keith’s nerves.

The Prince pursed his lips and stared at him momentarily, like he was debating on whether he would actually tell Lance, but he ended up sighing and looking away.

“Fine. I… I just, I was thinking about what happened at the bakery today, and I felt really bad. You were just trying to be polite, and Lotor was a total dick and you didn’t deserve that -- shit, you didn’t deserve any of what happened at the castle and all that, but like, the Lotor thing was something I could’ve prevented and he was still a huge ass. I’m sorry.”

“Whoa, whoa,” Lance put a hand on Keith’s shoulder, who tensed momentarily before looking up to meet his gaze. In the dark, Lance swore Keith’s eyes were pitch black, deep and so shiny that it
made his throat dry.

“I can’t believe -- you guys came down here for...?” He paused, now feeling very much like an ass himself for the teasing, but smiled softly at the magnitude of that moment. Keith had left his castle, rode through the dark and snuck around the back of the house just… just to make sure Lance was okay? It made the teen’s face flush, and he squeezed Keith’s shoulder. “Wow. I -- thank you. It means a lot that you cared enough to check, but honestly, I try not to let that stuff get to me. You really don’t have to apologize for that guy, Lotor was his name? No, if anything, seeing you was the highlight of my day.”

Keith was looking at him strangely, and Lance realized, oh, shit, shit, holy shit, did I just say that? Did he seriously just -- just say that seeing Keith was basically the best thing that happened to him all day? With his hand still on his shoulder, too?!

“Y-You guys I mean! You and the Princess and Romelle, and Tylivia! She was adorable. Yep. Super sweet.”

_Fucking hell._

Lance gave the guy a firm _pat-pat_ and took his hand back, and feeling a million kinds of awkward, he decided to just kept talking. It was one of Lance’s specialties.

“And anyways, yeah, Lotor! He was a jerk, like you said. Not like you made him that way. Also, who doesn’t shake someone’s hand when they meet them? Like, who _does_ that? Rude. And you nobles or royals or whatever are supposed to be all about class. Clearly, I’m more classy than any of you!” He rambled, trying to distract from the very obvious social faux pas he just committed. Keith still hadn’t said anything, but Shiro nodded gravely at Lance’s comment.

“Oh, you’re right about Lotor. He won’t shake my hand either, although mines because of this,” he said, flexing his prosthetic fingers into a fist.

Lance was horrified. “Wait, really? But -- but it’s like, your brain controls the hand! What’s the difference?”

“There is no difference.” Keith said flatly, staring hard at Shiro for a moment. Lance was just relieved he was speaking again and didn’t seem freaked out by his very _shitty romantic novel_ moment. “I’m sure there’s a total of like, two people Lotor would actually willingly talk to, let alone shake hands with.”

Shiro let out a small chuckle, and Lance smiled at the lightened mood. Color him five different shades of surprised and maybe twenty more of giddy and nervous that this was happening right now, but Lance wasn’t complaining.

“I’d like, offer for you guys to come in for tea or something, but, my family is asleep and stuff. Sorry,” Lance mumbled, a little sheepish as he scratched the back of his head.

The Prince shrugged, the model image of _I really don’t care_, and Shiro offered a polite shake of the head.

“We couldn’t impose further. I’m surprised we didn’t wake you up.”

“What?” Lance’s brow furrowed. “Oh, no, yeah. I go to bed like… late. Way later. I’m… busy,” he tagged on, hoping they wouldn’t ask questions. He was enjoying what had turned from a five dobosh break into a secret late night chit-chat with a dark and handsome Prince and his personal Head of the Guard, and didn’t want it to end just yet.
That gave him an idea, and, boy, if it wasn’t one of his betters ones.

“Hey, random question. The ball starts on Friday, right? So are you guys busy tomorrow?”

Keith and Shiro looked at each other, neither really sure what he was getting at, when the Prince finally sent him a doubtful look.

“I mean, it depends?”

“Well.” Lance grinned. “What would you say that I’ll tell you what the code meant, but on a condition?”

“Condition?” Shiro raised a suspicious brow and glanced to Keith, almost protectively. Lance could have laughed because honestly, if Lance were to even dream of hurting Keith, he had no doubt that the Prince would skewer him with that pointy blade he loves so much.

“It’s nothing bad or anything. Just, you have to trust me? There’s a place about, eh, a mile or two north of here in the woods where there’s a clearing where you would have to meet me tomorrow night, around two AM. And no, I’m not a member of some elite group of bandits trying to lure the Prince to his doom.”

The Head of the Guard sighed dramatically, looking up to the sky. “I remember when I was young once, gallivanting through the woods in search of adventure.”

“Oh my god, Shiro, shut up.” Keith aimed a kick at his ankle, which the man effortlessly evaded. He looked back to Lance, a bit confused but interested. “So what’s in this clearing, then?”

“Oh I mean, nothing really.” Lance buried his hands in his pockets. “That’s sort of the point. Hunk, Pidge and I would meet there when we need to clear our heads and don’t want to be in the capital. Usually one of us just sets the day and time, and we try to go. If we can’t, the person just goes alone. I guess Hunk needed a break -- honeycomb is the place, bags are the varga, and usually a type of food represents the day. Gyoza means Thursday. Two bags, as in, two AM.”

“Why use a code at all, then?” Keith wondered aloud.

Lance shrugged. “We started doing it after I was caught sneaking out a few deca-phebe ago. Sometimes we would write little messages on parchment or whatever and give them to each other, and a random bunch of words seemed less likely to end with me in trouble than saying ‘hey sneak out on Thursday and bring your bow hehe xoxo Pidge.’ It would be weird not to anymore.”

Keith snorted, a little too loudly and covered his mouth and nose to stifle the laughter.

“I don’t think Pidge would ever say, write, or suggest anything even remotely close to ‘xoxo.’ Not even ironically.”

Lance and Shiro both laughed at that.

“Alright Mullet, ya got me. That might have been me with the x’s and the o’s.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Keith shot back with a smile, and Lance almost gasped audibly, because god, it was so cute.

A loud groaning sound off to one side made Keith and Shiro stiffen and instinctively move towards their weapons. Lance had to keep himself from snickering, holding up two hands so they wouldn’t go into full-scale attack mode.
“Whoa, hey, that’s okay. That’s just Kaltenecker. Wanna meet her?”

Keith bit his lip, eyeing the back door. “Is she... your aunt?”

“What?” He had to bite down on the urge to cackle, because his aunt was, in some ways, a cow. “Oh - oh my god, no, that’s hilarious though. Come here.”

Lance led them through the stall beside the house and Shiro outright started laughing, while Keith just looked confused. The tanned teenager patted his cow’s head affectionately. “This is my pride and joy. Isn’t she sweet?”

The Prince sent him a disbelieving look. “You have a cow, but you don’t have shoes?”

“H-Hey!” Lance pouted, turning away indignantly. “I won Kaltenecker after a very fortunate series of gambles at a bar near the center of the city, if you must know. People barter weird shit, and shoes don’t happen to be very high on that list.”

“Mmm,” was all the response he got from the Prince, but Shiro had already moved forward to and was petting her head.

“Aw, she’s sweet. I think it’s nice that you take care of an animal, Lance. Keith here looks after his horse like it’s his own child.”

“Shiro, seriously, did marrying Adam just like, automatically flip the switch that turned you from being cool into being my awkward Dad? Just stop.”

“Hey, I am very cool, thank you.”

That made Keith roll his eyes, and Lance laughed at the exchange. Kaltenecker didn’t seem to mind the added attention, either.

“Oh.” He heard Keith release a low breath, and Lance followed his eye to the opposite wall. “Do you shoot?”

His bow was mounted proudly with his quiver laid carefully beneath it. Lance walked towards it with a smile. “Yep. It’s for hunting, though I usually just end up shooting at practice targets anymore.”

“Are you any good?” replied Keith coolly, and Lance knew he was trying to get a rise out of him.

Unphased, Lance replied with the same careful dismissiveness. “I’m sure I could give your guard a run for their money.”

Keith snorted. “Okay, don’t flatter yourself.”

“Oh no, I was really just trying to be modest; didn’t want to point out that I could probably outshoot the whole kingdom, but hey.” Lance shrugged and wore a mischievous grin, pointed directly towards the Prince. “I’m nothing if not honest.”

“I’d very much like to see that.” Keith said, voice flat, but his eyes seemed brighter, more of that oddly purple tone visible in the stall’s lantern-light. They were flickering, amused, and Lance knew a challenge when he saw one.

His own expression only grew more wicked. “I don’t know, Your Highness, I wouldn’t want to embarrass your whole army.”
“Boys,” Shiro said in warning when it looked like Keith was going to hit him. Lance just laughed, really laughed from his belly and the feeling made his chest spread with warmth. Keith, he realized, had started laughing too.

God, why did it sound so pretty? Lance really wished it wasn’t and that he would stop, because it was making it really difficult to catch his breath.

“Alright, we really should get back. I’m not getting any younger,” Shiro made a display of stretching his back out, and Keith muttered something under his breath that Lance could only assume was an insult.

Lance walked them back to the other side of the house, Keith saying they’d left their horses slightly behind the treeline. Shiro volunteered to go get them, at which the Prince made an affronted noise, but the knight was gone before there was really adequate time for an argument.

The slightly ruffled look of his stupid hair and the pout on his face when Keith turned around made Lance’s stomach flip. No, no, he can’t get feelings for someone like this. It -- he -- the whole thing was off-limits. Forbidden, illegal or at least definitely not considered acceptable.

Which made his twitching fingers all the more annoying, because Lance had never been so tempted in his entire life to just smooth out the slight muss of those dark bangs. Maybe linger along his cheekbones, brush his thumb over it to see how soft his skin was, pull him close enough that Lance could find the hidden line of purple in his irises that disappeared beneath the moon.

“Hey, um,” Keith scratched his cheek, looking away. Lance loved when the shy, awkward side of him came out, just like he’d been when he sought him out in the infirmary. It wasn’t clear what caused it, not exactly, but Lance was all too aware of the little things it did to his heart, and he knew that it was downright unfair. Not for the first time, he wondered, do I make you nervous? And if I do, why do I make you nervous?

He wasn’t sure if he could bare the answer, because god, if he didn’t want to know, and Keith was so close, but any form of answer was too far away, no possibility that anything good could come of whatever he might say. There wasn’t a possibility at all -- it was just a dream, a stupid, lovely dream.

“I know you said it wasn’t a big deal with Lotor, but, I’m still glad you were okay. I was worried earlier… I don’t know, I thought maybe… I thought you might have hated me or something.”

His face felt hot, and crap if it wasn’t so obvious that Lance wanted him, but he tried to keep his composure.

Smiling, he said, “I don’t think I could ever hate you, man. You don’t give yourself enough credit. You tried to stand up for me. Just because you’re a royal like him, doesn’t mean you’re automatically a bad person, you know?”

“It feels like it, sometimes,” he admitted quietly. Lance was surprised by his honesty.

Chewing his lip, he considered how to respond.

“Just because you were born as a Prince with all the money and responsibility that goes along with that, it doesn’t mean you don’t get to choose what kind of person you want to be. Like, think about it, Keith. You get to lead a nation, like, that’s crazy -- but you also get to lead who you want to be, you know? No one gets to decide that for you.”

Lance tried his best to hold the Prince’s gaze, but by the end his throat had closed up and he was
near to losing his cool entirely. There was something captivating, piercing in the way Keith looked at him, and it wasn’t uncomfortable exactly, just… intense.

“Lance…” There was a small waver to the Prince’s voice, enough to give Lance the courage to look him in the face again. “I know, this is going to sound stupid and seriously, uh, I’m not even sure how to ask or what or how this works, but um…”

Keith set his jaw, determined. It was pretty sexy, if Lance was honest.

“I told you when we first met that you might be surprised by ‘who the Prince would want at the Ball’. I think you should go. I… I want you to go.”

Um.

What?

Lance was pretty sure his cheeks were absolutely on fire, because -- what? Did he mean, like, with him? Or just, in general? Pidge would be there, maybe he just meant as someone to hang out with? That was probably it. But, then, why is he blushing too? Fuck, what the fuck.

Oh my god say something say something don’t just stare you idiot.

“Wait, no -- I can’t, I shouldn’t. I-I mean not that I don’t want to, just, even if I could, you know, I can’t exactly waltz in in my day clothes, and geez, like I don’t even own any shoes, Keith, trust me. You don’t want me there. I would just embarrass you, just, I appreciate it but, hah, there’s no way, no way!”

Keith blinked, and, holy christ why is he smiling like that? I’m dead, yep, definitely dead. Totally.

“Embarrass...? Lance -- wait, are you saying you would go?”

“I-I I don’t know! I never even, I don’t know how -- why are you even asking?! Don’t like, important people go to this thing? I can’t just show up, I’m a mess, Keith.”

“That’s true,” the Prince hummed, but he looked like not a single word of Lance’s protests were getting through to him because he was still smiling and it was so bright and his eyes were so pretty and oh my god GET A GRIP.

“So you do want to go, though.”

Lance was full blown panicking, and the absolutely smug look on the Prince’s face made him want to die.

Dignity. Maintain some dignity, McClain. Mamà didn’t raise no stuttering mess.

“I- Maybe? I don’t think my aunt would even let me, to be honest. I’m sort of tempting fate as it is right now.”

“Fate, huh?” Keith looked at him thoughtfully for a moment. “That’s funny, I was thinking the same thing.”

Lance frowned and looked away. “W-what is that supposed to mean?”

Before either boy could say another word, Shiro reappeared from the trees, two horses in tow.

“Alright, let’s get going -- oh, um, Lance, are you alright?”
Lance, visibly sweating and red, chirped, “Never better!” indicating that he was, in fact, very much not alright.

Shiro smiled though, looking from him to Keith with something akin to understanding that Lance didn’t even want to try to discern at the moment.

Keith walked over to take his reins and hoisted himself up in the saddle easily. He sent Lance a smirk, which felt a lot like a nail being driven right through his chest, and said, “You should think about it.”

Lance withered against the other side of the door, panting in the quiet of the kitchen like he’d just run a fucking marathon. His eyes slid closed and he held his pounding heart like it was going to break through his ribs.

Oh, god. God.

Good god.

Keith wanted him to go. Lance didn’t think his day could get any more surprising, and he was content to just let himself fall asleep pressed against the back door.

And maybe that was when Fortune decided that she really, really didn’t like Lance. Hated him, even. Because instead of just letting him slip comfortably into a happy, quiet sleep, or reinvigorate him with the motivation to go back down the hall and finish cleaning, instead, for the second time in less than a quintant, he realized that he wasn’t as alone as he previously thought.

Lady Hira was standing in the doorway of the kitchen. Lance hadn’t really known how long she was there, and it took the hair standing up on the back of his neck to realize someone was watching him.

This time he didn’t startle, but blinked his eyes open and fixed his gaze towards his aunt. He sat up slightly, the added pressure of being sprawled over the floor not exactly a pose he was eager to hold for whatever conversation she was gearing up towards.

He decided to get it over with. “Oh, um, hi.”

“Welcome back.”

Lance pursed his lips, but didn’t say anything. He wasn’t quite sure how he could defend himself, and he definitely did not like the look she was giving him.

“Do you ever get tired, Lance?”

“Um…. yes, in general? Did you mean like, of something in particular?”

“Of lying all of the time.” Aunt Hira did not skip a beat before adding, “I was hoping to have this conversation almost a varga ago, so imagine my surprise when I came downstairs to find you nowhere to be seen.”

Then, just as briskly, she added, “I know that you were at the castle on Monday.”

It wasn’t even a question. It wasn’t even said with anger. Just, laying out the facts.
Lance felt like his stomach had just fallen through the floor, staring at her.

“You were at the castle, and you fought with a Galra military official. Am I wrong?”

Lance liked to think he suppressed the flinch that came from that, but he didn’t.

Aunt Hira hadn’t moved from the doorway, hadn’t changed her expression but to move her lips. “I’ve thought about this pattern, with you. I’ve thought about it a lot. Sneaking out. Lying. Stealing. And here you are, sneaking out again. Sometimes I wonder if you’re worth the trouble you bring.”

His heart had begun to thump painfully against his chest, and an uncomfortable, deep sense of guilt began to flood his lungs. It was like drowning, like when Marco hadn’t been able to grab him out of the river current that one time when they were small, and the water had gone from bright and thrilling to a terror like he’d never known.

“Do me a favor, and think about this from my perspective, just for a moment,” Aunt Hira said with just the slightly lilt of her head. “You open your house to someone who is bearing a burden on their shoulders that only money can solve. Not just someone, but family. And then, instead of showing you gratitude, they lie to you. Repeatedly. They steal, and make friends with thieves. They go against your specific request not to leave the house, and not only do they lie about that too, but -- then they get into a fight? And you would think they would learn their lessons, with my daughter’s reputations at stake, but they sneak away in the middle of the night yet again.”

She stopped to take a steadying breath, her voice rising towards the point of yelling. Lance, to his credit, was just numbly absorbing the situation. He wasn’t crying, or even teary-eyed. Honestly, it’s not like she was saying anything he didn’t already think to himself.

“These problems -- I know they sound like a lot, but honestly, if I could explain --”

“Have you ever considered, Lance, that maybe you’re the problem? I have.” She said bluntly. “I waited until the end of the day to have this conversation with you, because I see how Nadia looks up to you and I did not dampen her day. But I thought -- I thought after the first deca-phebe maybe you had grown past this. But it’s clear to me that you have not. I am… I will give you one last chance. Not because you’ve earned it, but because I know Nadia would hate to see you go. Fix this, whatever it is you’ve been so stuck on, for yourself or for Nadia or whoever it is that matters to you. Because if you don’t, you will never step foot in this house again.”

“I --” the words died on his tongue. He cleared his throat, hoping his voice would not shake. “Okay. It won’t happen again.”

“Oh, I’m sure it won’t, not after you learn your lesson.” Her expression finally changed to something from quiet fury or blank disappointment. This was different... almost pleased?

“Cellar.”

His jaw snapped shut so quickly it made his ears ring. Really, he should have seen it coming. It was the one -- the one thing she knew he absolutely hated, and fighting it would only make it worse. He learned that the hard way.

Cellar.

It even sounded ugly. Nasally, too round on the tongue, making the speaker’s lips snarl automatically. Lance stared blankly at his aunt, the whole situation not quite registering. It had been some time since he’d heard it said out loud, and the sound itself was a shock to his system. Not quite fear, but something else -- something darker, almost primal. Something that screamed at his fight-or-
flight reflexes to *run*.

“What?” He managed to force out.

“The cellar, Lance. What are you waiting for? Get up.”

Aunt Hira’s words were biting, tiny claws that dug into his skin and pulled tight. Lance didn’t even realize he was standing until his legs started moving in the direction of that god-forsaken place. The door to the basement was at least a head too short for him, a small staircase leading below the house from the hallway running from the kitchen. He was pretty sure it hadn’t been opened in about three deca-phebes.

It was predictably dark, filled up by the vastness of nothing at all, but it was the stale force of air, he was pretty sure, that set him off. The trickle of dust in his lungs as soon as the door opened, *that* was when he cracked. Lance’s composure slipped faster than water through a child’s cupped fingers, and his hands were shaking, his heart pounding, his breathing ragged. He was so angry and frustrated and god he can’t do this again -- he wanted to scream, carding his hands through his hair and grimacing in frustration.

The placating sound of his mamà is his ear whispered at him to stop, to be calm, to take a deep breath and count to ten.

“I can’t -- Aunt Hira, I can’t go down there. I can’t do this again.” He held his ground, anger rolling off him in waves.

*Calm, breathe*, his mama soothed. *Survive, my son.*

“Aren’t our people supposed to be kind? Compassionate?” And even as the words were being said, Lance can’t believe they’re coming from his stupid mouth.

But Lance was *angry*. Because, fucking hell, you *can’t treat people like this*. Lance knew this was the wrong thing to do, knew he would only make things worse, but this was not him being stubborn or naive. This was a *need*. It was like his life depended on it, on him maintaining some shred of pride, not to be treated like this.

He’s not a whipping boy. He’s not an animal to be put in a cage.

Technically, he’s not even a servant.

He’s a fucking human being.

“And you call yourself a *proud* Altean. Give me a break.”

There was a pregnant pause, so tense it felt like Lance was breathing in, in, in, unable to let go of the air within him, and then --

Just a simple, solid push. That was all it took, and he was falling, rolling, body smacking carelessly into walls and beams and stairs. He didn’t even register what happened until the door was closing.

His aunt’s silhouette -- upside down from the way he landed -- was the last thing Lance saw. Her the words were the final seal to his fate, the fate that told him, yes, this very much was happening.

“You can come out after the Ball. Then we’ll figure out what to do with you.”

And everything went black.
Chapter Summary

That's a long chapter title. It basically says it all.

...Oh, and, it gets worse before it gets better. Always. Unfortunately.

[LANCE]

APPROXIMATELY 1 HOUR IN CONFINEMENT

Here he was, again.

The cellar.

The place of the infinite, heavy nothingness.

Where Death’s right hand, Doubt, was the only assurance that life existed at all.

No no no I can’t do this I can’t do this not again --

Where the tides came in from the ocean of panic, waves of the ebony sea that pulled sailors under, drowning them in the depth of silence.

Fuck, why is it so hard to breathe down here? Still even after all this time --

Where there were no sounds outside of himself, and the click of the lock on the door was louder than nails hammered into a coffin, because it was the last, desperate sound of something that was real.

No, I can’t I won’t this isn’t happening not again not again not again. Fuck, no, no, not again.

Where imagination and reality were the last riders to board the train waiting in the station, confusing his senses.

I fell down upside down, so rightside up is this way? Right? Yes -- that feels like the stairs, okay.

Where the bump of his knee against the wall felt like hurt more than it should because he could not have expected it, because he could only feel and smell and hear and fear.

Okay, okay. Just need to calm down. I’ll be fine. I’ll be fine. Calm down. Calm, calm, calm down -- please, he begged his aching lungs, please stop. The way his chest was rising and falling, each breath cresting like choppy waves in a stormy sea, was too much and god it hurts.

Pain. Pain?

Pain! That was tangible. He latched to it like a it was his last life preserver in open waters. Finally,
he found some return to awareness from the throbbing of his shoulder.

Lance had fallen roughly on his side when his body met concrete, which all things considered, could have been worse. He’d landed almost entirely upside down, so he thanked some tiny lucky star out there that he at least hadn’t broken his neck.

It took several dobosh for the first of coils of anxiety to untwist in his stomach, for his heart to finally still long enough that he could think, for his lungs to stop sounding like they would cave in any moment. It took several dobosh, but Lance felt remarkably better once he began to settle himself.

He had gone through this before. He could do it again.

As long as he could just focus. Not like that was particularly hard, since he couldn’t see an inch in front of him. For the record, Lance was not -- and had never really been -- afraid of the dark. That was not the problem. It was time, because time was precious, scarce, and totally immeasurable when the only metronome he had was his body and his only company was his thoughts.

Skipping meals, staying up for ungodly amounts of time and working until his hands bled might have seemed like a crueler fate, but it was nothing compared to what went on in that cellar. Fuck, he hated this place, and even as he carefully stood up and slowly patted against the walls to navigate away from the stairs, he couldn’t steady his trembling hands. It wasn’t fear, exactly. More like a distant sort of acceptance that this was really happening, no matter how much his mind tried to convince him it was a nightmare.

After all, the cellar was the one place where Lance was completely at his aunt’s mercy, and somehow fooled into thinking he was at all in control of his fate. That was probably what he hated about it more than anything, because he knew better, but his mind willfully ignored the truth and decided for him. His Aunt may have put him down there, but it was his choices that would keep him there.

He had been in the cellar enough times to know how to survive, to know how it worked.

The knowledge of knowing exactly what to expect made it both easier and a hundred times worse.

First, Lance reviewed what not to do. That list was pretty simple: do not yell, do not ask for help, do not pound on the door; each violation would add a varga to his punishment.

Second, predictably, Lance then started on what he did need to do. He started by settling into a spot along the floor beside one of the crates of wine, picking a random bottle and hoping that it was one of the ones with the lowest alcohol contents. Drink only small amounts, and drink as infrequently as possible. Yes, he may be a teenager with unhindered access to a near endless supply of alcohol, the situation was not nearly as glamorous as it seemed; being stuck in the pitch black darkness with nothing but your thoughts to keep you company and nothing but long-forgotten in dusty bottles to keep you alive was a part of the punishment itself.

The cellar had been stocked with cheap drink since the Valurian’s purchased the house generations ago (Lance suspected the supply had been left behind by the previous owners, but he never did ask), and it had remained untouched by the family ever since. After all, the Valurians drank only nunvil, or things of similar caliber; human-made beverages were perceived to be beneath them. For what it’s worth, Lance the drinks were made by aliens for all he cared, but he definitely would have preferred alien-water or alien-juice, or basically anything else, really, besides alcohol -- it took only a few sips on an empty stomach for the darkness itself to start to spin and his already tenuous grip on reality to slip further and further away.
Finally, stubbornly, deliberately, Lance had to survive. All that really meant he had to do was wait, and try not to think too much; to hum, tap his fingers, adjust his shoulders, memorize the feeling of opening and closing his lips, eat up time by training himself not to scratch the itch on his nose, count the stitches in his shirt -- Lance just had to wait, and do whatever it took not to lose his sense of self.

If he could follow his own three step plan, the teen knew that he would make it. This would be his fifth stay in the cellar, and he’d made it through each high and low intact… maybe not unscathed, but alive. If he admitted it, Lance felt that everytime he came walked up those stairs and back into the kitchen, a part of him had stayed trapped in those shadows. Ghosts of himself haunted that cellar, different versions of his younger days and past mistakes.

So Lance did what he knew to do. Slowly puttered around the wall until he reached the first bin of wine, hands groping aimlessly in the dark in search of the tell-tale bottleneck of too sweet wine. It was a slow going process, wary to hit his bare feet into anything or tumble over a loose stone, so it took a decent few dobosh to meander his way into a smooth, semi-comfortable spot beside the crate and settle down, cross-legged and nursing a cold bottle between his knees.

Now, it was time to wait.

From times before, Lance knew that some stretch of the beginning wouldn’t be terrible. It wasn’t until the depth of the silence would become loud itself that things would turn south, though knowing how long that would be was impossible. Until then, he could try to sort through things in logical steps, or rational processes. He wouldn’t go crazy down here.

Not for a while, anyways.

But he did wonder. How long until it would start? Until he could feel the buzzing intensity of nothing that was the air, drowning out the slow and steady rattle of his lungs?

And then, how long after that would he still be stuck down here? The longest he’d ever gone, Lance was pretty sure, was five quintant. He didn’t know if he could do that again, but he would try to be brave, try not to think about it, try to focus on easier, simpler things, like Hunk and Pidge, or his mamà’s ropa vieja -- okay, maybe not food. Okay, uh, nice thoughts -- happy thoughts. The look on Kaltecker’s previous owner’s face when Lance had bested him in that bar, that was a good moment. The swirly, silly signatures on the last letter he’d gotten from home, his siblings all crowding the page with their names. Oh, and there was another name that recently entered his vocabulary, a new one he’d heard a dozen times in passing and was quite sure he’d never said out loud himself.

Keith.

Lance was even embarrassed for himself because, god, just thinking about him made so many happy images pop like soap bubbles in his brain, random and unabated; the usual tedious task of catching Blum in the stream west of the capital, suddenly made adventurous and exciting just by the matter of Lance’s company; or the nervous, worried fidgeting Lance could sense beside him while waiting for the carriage to pull up outside of the castle, late at night beneath a sea of stars; or the amused twinkle situated deeply within dark eyes as Lance played and teased the little Princess Tylivia; or a particularly smug, stupid smile after asking if Lance would go to the Ball --

Oh. Right.

He’d almost forgotten.
Not that Lance had really been planning on taking Keith up on the offer anyways, because seriously, who did Keith think he was? Some hotshot? (Ha ha, Lance. Very funny.) Just because Keith was… was deceptively charming, and more than a little attractive, and surprisingly sweet (who in their right mind would come all the way to the a near-stranger's house in the middle of the night just to make sure they didn’t hate him? Seriously, that just wasn’t fair to Lance’s stupid heart.) -- just because Keith was all those things didn’t mean Lance was going to be able to drop everything and actually go. He couldn’t now, even if he wanted to; that decision had been swiftly made for him by his Aunt Hira.

And, well, if he felt a stab of disappointment in his stomach, or even the mist of tears prick at his eyes… at least there was no one around to see.

All Lance had to do was not let his heart get involved in the whole mess. It’s not like -- it’s not like he couldn't just think the good parts of Keith without thinking of what he was missing out on. Certainly, Lance could at least do that -- think about Keith’s weirdly endearing, dry sense of humor, or how easy it was to poke fun at his mullet.

If he could do that, then he… he would be fine.

Lance would be fine. He played with the wine in his hands, twirling the bottle carefully, trying to think about something else. It must have been at least two in the morning, though his body was certainly tired enough for it to be six.

All he knew for sure was that it had been Thursday -- early, early on Thursday -- when he’d been pushed down the stairs. Going by his aunt’s word, best case scenario, he would be let out after the ball which ended… Sunday, probably late into the night, so Monday. Just to be safe, he guessed it would be after the girls woke up and had tea so… maybe around 9 AM?

Thursday to Monday.

Best case scenario, that was about… one hundred varga, give or take?

*Fuck.*

Lance didn’t even want to start thinking about worst case scenarios. He had at least fifty varga to go until he was that desperate.

*Fuck.*

---

[KEITH]

*Side-step. Pivot. Crouch and… yes, an opening. Roll forward and….*

Keith lunged, pommel tight in his grip, but they were too fast. While Keith’s instincts were good, his opponent fared better. In retaliation to his misstep, the Blade he was sparring with back-stepped out of his reach and used their longer limbs advantageously, grazing his arm with their training knife. It was just barely enough to break the skin, but it was still plenty to remind him that he’d have been royally fucked if this was a real fight.
Pun not intended, of course. This was Keith, after all.

(Later, privately, he would wonder if Lance would have liked his joke. But of course he would have, Keith reasoned -- Lance seemed to find enjoyment in just about anything, even Keith’s poor version of humor.)

Blade training was a welcome distraction, the strain in his muscles thrumming pleasantly as he continued to dodge and counter to the best of his ability. He and his current partner had been going for awhile now, a to-and-fro dance of attrition, and Keith knew his stamina would start to slip soon. He needed to act quickly if he wanted to seize the upper hand, and so he decidedly tried to use his opponent’s size and wiry frame to his advantage.

Feigning right, he kept close to their torso and came up around their left, fluidly pulling his knife upwards in the motion to rest the the top against his opponent’s back. They managed to get away, only barely.

An instinctual growl rose in Keith’s throat, his focus solely on the fight, and he found that he was rather enjoying the challenge; it felt like it’d been too long since he’d been able to release his pent-up frustration and anger and confusion into something like this, something raw and unrestrained. He loved it. There were no blue-eyed mysteries in the training room, no external pressures to maintaining peace or to marrying away his free-will. No, here, all that Keith could afford to think about was saving his own skin, dodging the advances of the pursuing Blade.

During Blade training, they all wore their masks, himself included. (In fairness, Keith could have just as well not worn his mask. His half-human heritage made him appear especially tiny in comparison to virtually all the other members. He stuck out like an angry, diminutive thumb.) Keith wasn’t even sure who he was sparing with anymore, as they’d gone around in circles switching partners all morning, but he did know it was taking everything in him to keep up. Their match only came to an end once it appeared that Keith had been bested, the other Blade lowering their guard before either of them officially called the match.

With his back splayed against the mat, Keith watched as his opponent simply looked down at him, staring, thoughtful -- a predator’s final assessment before striking at their prey, perhaps? Whatever caused their hesitation, Keith took it as an opportunity, hooking his foot around their ankle and tugging with as much force as he could. They tumbled backwards, and he used the momentum from the pull to role on his side and grip his weapon, pointed decisively at the other’s throat.

Incidentally, his partner’s reaction time was not something to be so easily dismissed. Their own weapon flew forward and halted just shy of his chin, the pointed edge of their knife hovering close enough that he could feel the gentle snag of his collar against it.

“Match?” He asked, panting but doing his best to stay still so his opponent did not accidentally stick him.

“Match.”

That was the first time he’d heard their voice, and, oh, oh shit --

“Mom?” Keith flinched away, falling swiftly onto his backside, tapping his mask out of habit since the match had ended.

His opponent mirrored his action, and sure enough, there was his mother, beaming and chest heaving in much the same state.
“It’s only taken you eighteen years,” she grinned, and he could practically feel the pride radiating off her. It made him flush, flattered but mostly just embarrassed that he hadn’t even realized who he’d been fighting. “But you finally caught up.”

“Y-yeah,” Keith managed. He was still breathing heavily, and used it as an excuse to clear his throat. Thace was passing by them on the mat and offered Keith a hand, helping him to his feet.

The Queen righted herself before Keith or Thace could offer to help, and the woman brushed the nonexistent dust off her uniform. “I mean, technically, it was seventeen years and three-hundred sixty-four days, and oh, about nine hours, but who’s counting?”

“*Mom.*” He complained, said with the practiced love and annoyance that only a son could muster. She pointed out as much, nudging him in the ribs, and he tried to swat her hands away.

“Come. Let’s rest for a bit,” she instructed, laughing and motioning with a nod towards the benches on the far side of the room. Keith followed a step behind her, groaning when he heaved himself onto the plush seating. His legs were shaking, and his heart had only just started to settle back to a healthy rhythm after their fight. Considering he was supposed to be on his feet almost constantly for the next three fucking days, he’d probably pushed himself a little too hard.

Krolia claimed two cups of water before sitting, handing one to her son as she settled a few feet down the lounger. She released a similar satisfied, sore noise when she sank into the couch beside her son.

“You’ve improved marvelously,” she noted between swigs of water.

Keith tried to bite down his smile, just nodding at the compliment. “I didn’t see you come in. You hardly ever train with us anymore.”

Stretching her arms over her head, the Queen did not respond right away. Instead, she leaned over to a nearby table and poked around a medical kit someone had left out, humming while she snatched up some medical tape and bandaging. She slid down the bench and promptly began rolling up Keith’s sleeve.

He rolled his eyes. “It’s like, barely a scratch, Mom. You don’t need to --”

“Doesn’t matter,” she cut him off with a smile, but kept her attention on his arm. “I want to.”

Once he was fully bandaged up -- she couldn’t just let him keep his dignity, because of course she had to place the most gentle, tender kiss against the dressings once they were secure -- she finally returned to her own water and addressed his question.

“I wanted to clear my head, and I wanted to see how you’re faring in hand-to-hand. This seemed like an effective way to kill two birds with one stone.” Krolia paused, sending him a sly look. “Not that Kolivan doesn’t regularly tell me how sloppy your technique is in his reports; I merely wanted to assess for myself.”

“Hey!” Keith pushed her leg with his foot, but they both just ended up laughing.

His mother’s eyes softened as she finished her water, eyes trained to the ground.

“That’s not all Kolivan tells me, you know. I hear a little bit of everything,” her voice was light, musing. She counted off on her fingers. “There’s never any shortage of good gossip in the capital, political or otherwise. There’s the tourism boom we’ve had these past few weeks, there was an arson at a Southern District bar over some silly card game a few days ago, oh and, my favorite, the
midnight escapades of a certain son of mine, all the way outside the city walls.”

The Prince nearly choked on his water, hand flying to his mouth as he hacked out a painful fit of coughs.

Krolia merely rolled her eyes, and Keith was struck by the thought that, wow, it sure was annoying to be on the receiving end of that gesture. Did he always look so damn superior when he did that? Maybe he would stop.

“What, you honestly think I wouldn’t find out?” She teased, pointing to his flushed cheeks and mortified expression. “Give your mother some credit, Keith. I’m only the crowned ruler of a country that specializes in information and spy networks.”

“I -- well -- I mean…” he sputtered, chagrined by how fucking guilty he must have sounded. Damn her.

He deflected. “It’s not that I didn’t expect you to find out, just, it’s only been like ten hours. I would have told you if you asked.”

She snorted and moved closer to him, placing a hand on his forearm. It was surprisingly gentle, considering she’d just finished making a fool of him.

“I’m sure you would’ve, if I had asked,” she repeated. “So, here I am, asking now! What in the world were you doing out there? Poor Shiro looked exhausted at breakfast.”

Keith bristled, because damn her, she really was good. Had she already questioned Shiro on what happened? There wasn’t really any point in lying about it, not that he would have been successful in fibbing right to his mother’s face… and, besides, maybe Keith didn’t really want to lie about this.

“I was, um,” he paused, glowering at the ground. “I went to check up on a friend. Lance. He lives with the Valurian family, just outside the city.”

Considering how it had taken all of Keith’s composure to grit the truth out between his teeth, his mother seemed entirely unsurprised.

“Oh ho, the infamous Lance McClain? Funny how I hadn’t even heard his name before a week ago, now it’s practically common tongue.” Krolia nodded, rubbing her chin. “And pray tell, why didn’t you send a Blade to check on his health? Or wait until a reasonable hour to do so?”

Keith pretended to be focused on a fight going on straight ahead, needing a few moments to collect his thoughts. It wasn’t an issue of working up his nerve -- he had agonized over just asking Lance for days -- but he just wasn’t quite sure how to discuss the topic now that it was rearing it’s flaming, homosexual head.

Mom, I’m gay, and I think I might be crazy about someone I hardly know?

“...I asked him to come tomorrow. To the… to the Ball. As my guest.”

She motioned with her hands impatiently. “...And?”

“What do you mean, and?”

“What do you mean, what do I mean?” His mother sounded very tired all of the sudden. “What did he say? He said yes? He would have been stupid not to.”
Keith immediately rounded on her, dark eyes flashing. Mirrors of his own gazed back at him, and they were so sincere and searching that it disarmed him.

“You -- wait, what? I mean,” Keith blinked, rubbing his forehead in exasperation. “He said yes, I think? He said he would… if he could. He’s under the impression that his aunt won’t let him, but he said he would go if he can.”

His next question was only half-formed when the Queen pulled him into a rib-cracking hug, and Keith felt the rest of the words died on a painful exhale.

“Oh, good, good. I’m glad. I wish I could have met him from the way Shiro and Adam have been talking about him. So is he cute? Tall? Coran said he has only Altean one-marking, right? How rare. What color is it? What color is his hair, for that matter? Alteans always have such strange --”

“M-Mom,” Keith wheezed, pushing back and sending her a long, disbeliefing look. “What are you… you don’t mind? That I’m -- I asked a guy? You know, that I’m… You aren’t… surprised? Or… or, you know… disappointed?”

The woman scrubbed a hand down her face, shaking out her long strands of hair in the process. “Keith Akira Yorak Kogane, I am insulted. I am you mother -- of course I’m not surprised. Granted, I wasn’t sure if you were necessarily attracted to men, but it was pretty clear you took no interest in women. And I could never, ever be disappointed in you for being yourself, Keith.” Her responding glare was dark and sincere -- piercing, just like her. “You are my son, and I love everything about you. Every single thing. I’m proud you decided to go through with asking, I imagine that you must have been so nervous.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but snapped it shut again when his throat closed up. This conversation, Keith had figured, might happen eventually (unless he just decided to ‘grin and bear’ it upon marrying Allura which, until recently, had actually seemed like a real possibility), but even in the scenarios he imagined in which he would tell his mother, he had never imagined it would go like this -- for her to be so… not just accepting, and not even just happy, but flat out annoyed with him for being so presumptuous and proud that he acted upon his interests.

It was so surprising, that he didn’t even mind that he was smiling like a fool. It was all he could do not to tear up.

“T-Thanks, Mom. I love you too.”

In a fluid motion, the Queen raised herself from the couch as most of the other Blades began to disperse for the day. She pulled Keith up by the elbow and gently led him towards the door.

“Of course. Now, you still haven’t answered. Is he cute?”

Keith groaned and tried to hide his blushing cheeks in his hands.

Talking to the Queen about… about, well, about everything -- being gay, not interested in marrying Allura in the slightest, having this confusing pit in his stomach anytime he thought of Lance -- Keith had to admit, while he did feel better overall, he also felt sickened by nerves. No longer did he carry around a heavy stone in his abdomen, hot like a coal that burned and smacked around his chest angrily each time he thought of marrying Princess Allura. Now, he had a full bodied inferno trapped
inside him, blistering with questions about Lance that Keith had never even thought about; so many real things that were as interesting to him as they were downright terrifying. Somehow, admitting the truth to his mother and for her to have such a positive reaction… it empowered him. It made him want to tell more people, which was… so not a Keith thing to do.

Because Lance wasn’t… Lance wasn’t a fantasy, or something he dreamed up. Lance was a living, breathing person with wants and needs and a family. A person with a past and hobbies and friends. He wasn’t just some beautiful stranger or frightening, lovely daydream; he was Lance, and that meant what Keith was feeling was real.

Real. Real. Real real real. That scared him more than he cared to admit.

Not long after parting ways with his mother and washing up for the day, Keith opted out of tea and the midday meal -- he was too nervous and nauseous to have much of an appetite -- and made a clear path towards the archivist quarter’s. The man had said he would need two quintant to come up with a report, and Keith had given him that time then some.

The Prince’s nose wrinkled at the smell of dust and old, leathery books when he entered the room, only to find the old curmudgeon snoring over a massive tome. Fortunately, Keith needed only to clear his throat to rouse the old man, who blinked up at him in confusion for a moment before his face fell.

“Ah, your Highness. You are here for the McClain inquiry?”

Keith appreciated that he got straight to the point and nodded. “Yes. What did you find?”

In lieu of an answer, he took off his glasses and rubbed them with the corner of his shirt.

“Nothing yet.”

Keith felt his mouth fall open slightly, taken aback by his matter-of-fact tone.

“N-Nothing? At all?”

Narrow eyes looked nervously around piles and piles of books, records, almanacs, and maps as glasses were replaced along the bridge of his nose.

“Nothing that dates back before Lance Alexander McClain moved to Marmora. There are records of his registering a show grade female in his name, likely to allow him to legally sell milk at market, a hunting license, and some public documents with his name attached -- the library, the parcel and missive delivery services, et cetera. But before four years ago, there has been nothing.”

Keith blinked. “Is this some sort of joke?”

That was probably rude, he realized, but he was beyond managing his manners. This was unheard of.

The Galra sneered, evidently irked by his insinuation. “Of course not, your Grace. I have not slept since you’ve given me the directive -- well, not properly. I have found my head a little too comfortably atop some piles of parchment, but otherwise, I have done nothing but scour our records.”

“Oh,” Keith bit his lip. He was annoyed that after two full days of searching there was nothing yet to show for it, and dammit if Keith didn’t want to know more, but he could see the tired rings lining the man’s eyes and the especially heavy drag of his skin under the realm’s gravity.
With a great creak of ancient bones, the archivist heaved himself to his feet and shuffled over to a different desk. Keith followed, curious, noting the mess of parchment and books open to genealogical records. The old Galra grunted and reached for a rolled up piece of paper and passed it across the table.

“Your Highness, this is the most recent copy of their family lineage I’ve been able to secure. There’s a number of weak leads that I intend to follow, but this is turning out to be no simple task.”

Nodding, Keith accepted the piece of paper and nervously unfurled it. A quick glance showed the average looking family-tree, with the exception that it was exceptionally small. Alarmed, Keith turned the paper over, just to make sure there wasn’t more on the back.

“This is it? This is his whole family?”

The man nodded. “As far as I’ve been able to verify, my Prince.”

Keith tried not to let his disappointment show too visibly, but a sigh escaped him anyways. Well, he had to start somewhere, right?

He began at the top of the paper, a familiar arrangement of bubbles and names that linked for marriages and branched downwards for children. A small symbol for human stood out next to his mother’s name, and a corresponding mark for Altean was prominent beside his father.

*Rosa McClain -- Medram McClain*

Then, their children, all of which had corresponding half-markings.

*Rachel [Ferriano] (daughter) -- Antonio [Ferriano] (son-in-law), Luis (son) -- Sidonia (daughter-in-law), Veronica (daughter), Lance (son), Marco (son), Maria (daughter), Sonia (daughter).*

Beneath the names Rachel and Antonio were three other names, Miguel, Elena, and Sylvio. Children, presumably. And again beneath Luis and Sidonia were two more, Teresa and Medici.

Holy. Shit.

This was Lance’s immediate family? How can -- Keith had to count again, just to be absolutely positive -- how can sixteen people all materialize on a piece of paper, and have no traceable history?

The question must have been apparent on his face, because the archivist piped up, “Records in the more rural corners of the nations are harder to trace with accuracy, but I’ve never seen a family history so sparse. I assure you, I will keep looking.”

Brow furrowed, the Prince tried to play off some of his annoyance but he tried to play it off as resignation and set down the paper. It quickly rolled right back up into a scroll once his fingers were no longer prying it apart. “I -- alright. Please, get some rest for the remainder of the day, and start again tomorrow. There must be more out there, but if you’re hardly awake, you won’t be doing anyone any good.”

“Thank you, your Highness.” For the first time since Keith entered his stream of consciousness at the tender age of two years-old, the archivist sounded genuinely grateful. He began dragging his way down a hall, further into the records rather than out of them, waving a hand behind him. “It is most appreciated.”

Keith stood there for a few moments, trying to gather his chaotic thoughts. It wasn’t enough -- he needed more information. How can sixteen people go unaccounted for beyond four years ago?
Lance’s history in the city was the only available record for all of those people? Were the recordkeepers for the mountains really that inept?

Frustrated, Keith ran a hand through his hair. He would be seeing Lance again tonight and there was little more Keith hated then being ill-prepared. His reputation as impulsive and temperamental was not mutually exclusive with a desire to be thorough; it was easier, in fact, to behave reactively to situations the more familiar one is with their surroundings. Another basic of Blade training.

“Pardon me, your Grace,” a light voice from behind called.

He turned to find one of his guards, Plaxum, leaning through the doorway. Plaxum was a soft-spoken young woman with a proclivity for spears and an impressive ability to chase off some of the more annoying adulators that were exceptionally good at cornering Keith in the castle.

“Yes?” He shook his head and tried to focus. Thankfully, Plaxum had always been discreet, and it was one of the reasons he liked keeping her on the personal escort that rarely strayed farther than fifteen feet from him. She’d been on his guard for only two years now, but her level-head and composure had always made Keith feel fond towards her. She respected him, and herself, and their relationship -- sometimes, that was all he could ask for.

“I don’t mean to interrupt your personal affairs, but there are many appointments today Sir Shirogane has asked me to keep you aware of. There is a fitting for the ball in about twenty dobosh and an appointment with the event coordinator immediately after. I do not wish to rush you, of course.”

Keith bit back a groan and instead nodded resolutely. It shouldn’t have been surprising, as he’d sort of skirted by all day on his own agenda; his own duties were bound to catch up eventually.

“No, no, you’re right. I should... Downstairs?” He asked, passing by the double doors of the archives, catching a quick affirmative nod from the young woman.

The two of them were never much for words, needing only a few statements to convey important affairs which Keith, naturally, appreciated.

The short clipped notes of his boots and the slight clatter of the guards armor behind him was the only sound for a short time as Keith wound his way down familiar halls and through grand staircases. The tailor’s work station was almost as far down as the kitchens, so it gave the Prince plenty of time to mull over the conversation he’d had again with the archivist.

How it seemed those meetings were becoming counterproductive; Keith had sought out his counsel with the hope for answers, but he seemed only to ever leave with more questions.

The archivist’s frustrating, fruitless efforts made Keith even more fascinated with the strange boy with a heart-stopping smile and the ability to charm seemingly everyone.

Just who exactly was he?

He’d only met Lance… what, six days ago? How was that even possible? It felt like a year had gone by since that day in the city, when he was wretched back from the alleyway by Lance’s steady grip. Without insight and knowing Keith would see him again tonight, he felt fluttery and excited and irritated all at once. Keith wanted answers like grass craves the sunshine or rain, but everytime he felt himself get a bit closer to figuring Lance out, a sudden wind swept up and the answers slipped through his fingers, taking Lance away with them.

Maybe it was his conversation with his mother that had him acting so needlessly inquisitive, Keith reasoned. She had asked at least a dozen questions about Lance that it made him feel so... so much
closer to the blue-eyed boy. Which was, frankly, untrue -- he was no closer than he’d been to Lance than he was a few hours ago, but still, it felt different. Everything felt different these days.

Maybe it was just Keith. Maybe he was different.

He effectively zoned out the entire time he was being fitted, standing on a literal pedestal and letting the anxiety bubble in the back of his throat. The victory high, if he could even rightly call it that, of Lance admitting that he would like to go to the ball had been enough to carry Keith’s confidence throughout the day, but the closer he got to the evening -- he was supposed to meet Pidge and Hunk outside the castle with Shiro around eleven -- the less he felt sure of himself. Did he make it clear enough that he wanted to bring Lance as his… god, Kogane, get it together. You’re turning eighteen in a few hours.

Say it. You can do this.

“...date.”

“What?” The tailor had just been pining his pants in place, the room quiet for what had been probably an hour at that point, and fuck he just blurted that out loud didn’t he?

“N-Nothing. Nevermind,” he gracelessly coughed and looked away, blushing furiously. The woman merely shrugged and went back to working.

Mercifully, the pants were the last thing she had to adjust, and in ten more minutes Keith was finally allowed out the doors. He nearly slammed right into the person on the other side in his haste to get out of there.

“Oh. Hello, your Highness.” Princess Allura smiled gently, the conversation she’d just been having with Coran cut-short when they came face to face.

He cleared his throat. “Oh, uh, hi, Princess,” hoping to just step around them with a quick greeting, but Coran seemed in the mood for a conversation. (Then again, wasn’t he always?)

“And how did your fitting go, Prince Keith? I’m sure you’ll look just dapper tomorrow. A big day!”

His orange mustache twitched when he smiled. “Although I’m surprised to find you here and not down in the kitchens.”

Unable to help himself, Keith raised a brow. Sometimes, he swore, Coran was just flat out bizarre, and this was one such moment he had to indulge.

“...And why would I be in the kitchens?”

“Well, aren’t your friends down there? The fiesty one with the glasses -- Pidge, if I recall -- and the large fellow, Hunk?”

“Oh?” The Princess’s eyes lit up, apparently, this had been news to her too. “Is Lance there? I wanted to have a word with him. I feel just awful about what happened yesterday at the bakery, and I think Tylivia was quite upset as well. She thinks she did something wrong.”

That made Keith’s heart hurt a little bit. He hadn’t barely noticed the little Princess’s distress after the disaster yesterday with Lotor; in Keith’s defense, he remembered very little besides the frantic look in Lance’s face, the almost irresistible urge to murder the Galran Prince on the spot, and the deep, private fear that Lance hated him and would never want to see him again.

Even if Lance didn’t… feel things… like Keith was feeling… things… (how do people even express
feelings? He literally couldn’t even make sense of them in his own head, let alone out loud), the Prince would have marked himself lucky if Lance were to even consider letting them be friends again. Sure, Keith would have hated it, because he was feeling… more things than just friend things, but he would have accepted it. And then Lance went and surprised him yet again by not only not reassuring that he held no ill-will towards Keith for putting him in that awful situation, but then Lance was the one making him feel better?

“Just because you were born as a Prince with all the money and responsibility that goes along with that, it doesn’t mean you don’t get to choose what kind of person you want to be. Like, think about it, Keith. You get to lead a nation, like, that’s crazy -- but you also get to lead who you want to be, you know? No one gets to decide that for you.”

Coran’s voice snapped Keith out of his short daze. “Oh, afraid not, Princess. Though I haven’t been down there myself, I imagine the man has all sorts of preparations for the Ball keeping him busy.”

Keith made a sound somewhere between a gasp, wheeze, and a cough.

A perfect white eyebrow was arched at him, sported by a curious Allura, but Coran seemed to pay Keith’s strange outburst no mind.

“The girls he lives with are all going to the Ball tomorrow, of course! Cousins of his, I believe. He’ll be helping them get all dolled up over the next day or so.”

Princess Allura stared at Keith’s for just a moment longer before turning her attention towards Sir Coran. “Oh... is that so? Lance didn’t speak much about his family, just that it was of the utmost importance that he get home to them.” She paused, letting out a tired sigh. “I suppose if they’ll all be joining us tomorrow, then, I’ll simply have to hold off on my apologies. We’ll have to be sure to find him and let little ’Livia know she’s not to blame.”

A certain twirly mustache fidgeted slightly, and both royals looked expectantly towards the older man. He seemed unusually… nervous.

“I wouldn’t get my hopes up on that. As much as I like young Lance, he seemed not to... think highly of his relationship with his family. I expect he’s treated like most service and the invitation would not have been extended to him, accordingly.”

Keith recalled Lance’s hesitation in accepting last night, which, in addition to his absolutely adorable stuttering and flushed embarrassment, had almost made Keith lose his cool and start giggling or drooling or god knows what, but it would have been mortifying -- of that much he was certain. With or without his pride intact, there was something in the way everyone spoke about Lance’s family thus far that didn’t settle right with Keith. Hunk’s warnings were still heavy in the back of his mind, and Pidge’s grim expression when she dragged Lance out of the infirmary. Even Sir Coran, who somehow seemed to know Lance better than Keith -- which definitely didn’t annoy him, not at all -- was unusually wary when speaking of them.

“Actually, that reminds me… Princess, your father has been asking you and the Prince to set aside some time to discuss your engagement -- now may be a proper opportunity to do just that. We’re a bit early for your fitting.”

“C-Coran! Please, we haven’t any idea what Prince Keith is doing, now really isn’t the time -- ”

Allura looked a bit outraged, if not saddened, by man’s suggestion. Keith was, to his credit, surprised for the subject to be brought up so suddenly, though not necessarily surprised that it was being brought up in the first place. He figured they would need to talk about it eventually, as it was no secret amongst the Alteans and Marmorans that the two were more-or-less betrothed at that point…
and that it wasn’t exactly the most willing of arrangements on either side.

“Well, what better time is there? The ball is tomorrow and I know your father is… well, you know how he is, Princess.”

“Do I ever,” she huffed, crossing her arms. “He worries too much. We shouldn’t bother Keith with such things. He’s surely busy enough already.”

Keith couldn’t help but laugh a little at the petulant display, even if his stomach felt a little sick. It was somehow reassuring to remember that Allura didn’t want this just as much.

Before the two could begin bickering in earnest, Keith interrupted. “It’s fine, Princess. If King Alfor wants us to talk, we probably should. I’m supposed to go to a planning thing, but I’d really rather not. This is a good excuse.”

Some of the tension in her thin shoulders seemed to wilt, and her smile turned a bit appreciative.

“Well, alright, if you’re sure you don’t mind?”

Coran clapped his hands together, urging the Princess along once again. “Splendid! I’ll leave you to it then. I must go find the King -- the news that you’ve found a time to talk will doubtlessly calm that stress ulcer he’s been hiding. I think it will do his mind some good.”

“Don’t be dramatic, Coran,” the Princess studied at her nails, unimpressed, before shooting Keith a look. “Father is just nosy and wants to know what’s going on in my life.”

“You think you’ve got it bad?” Keith snorted, waving to the Altean advisor as he began towards the door. “My Mom is literally the head of an elite group of spies. I can’t do anything without her knowing.”

He made no attempt to hide his annoyance, and the Princess laughed and shook her head fondly.

“Should we go somewhere beside standing outside the tailor’s workroom? I’d feel bad for her to have to listen in on my royal drama.”

At that, Keith snorted and shrugged, heading down the hall slightly.

“Yeah, sure, there’s a study on this floor I like. We can talk there.”

They walked side by side, the sound of guards and shuffling feet quiet behind them. The walk was less than two minutes, but it required a number of twist and turns that would have been dizzying to anyone not familiar with the castle.

“Well, this is quite hidden away, isn’t it?” Allura commented after they made two lefts and then another right, chuckling to herself.

Keith nodded. “That’s why I like it. It’s sort of private.”

Behind them, Plaxum cleared her throat when they stopped at a solid, dark-oak door. “Your Grace, shall we…?”

“Stay here, if you don’t mind? Yeah.” He finished for her, opening the door and allowing Princess Allura in first. The last thing he needed was nosy pair of Shiro’s men hovering over his shoulders while he and Allura talked about their marriage.

The room itself was cozy, warm, and easily one of Keith’s favorite places in the castle. And yes, he
was biased, thank you very much.

The walls were dark and covered in velvet tapestries, the royal colors emblazoned on every surface. Dark mahogany chairs and a desk, coffee table and mantle around the hearth made the space seem cozy, and the room always smelled of smoke from the constant fire blazing in the corner. Only on the hottest days of summer would the servants not to light it, and even then, it made the room feel empty without the crackling embers and smoldering logs flickering in the dark space. Seeing as they were underground, there were no windows, but instead there were large panes of glass enchanted by old magic that revealed a sea of stars outside, like the room itself opened to another plane of existence that passed above their atmosphere rather than a league beneath the surface.

“Wow,” she breathed, drawn towards one of the ceiling-length “windows,” the light color of stars reflecting in her aquamarine eyes. “This is a beautiful room.”

Keith shrugged and took a seat by the fire as she settled in on the windowsill. “It’s my favorite place to read if I want to get out of my room. Sometimes I get antsy if I’m in the same place for too long.”

A hum of acknowledgement came from across the room, followed by a comfortable silence. Allura had her attention trained on the false world outside, a small smile on her face. It faded slowly, and Keith was worried to see it gone completely by the time she looked up.

“So... we’re to be married. Announce our engagement on Monday.” She cleared her throat. “It’s… strange, certainly. My father -- and I have to admit, I agree with him this time -- thought we should try to set some expectations moving forward.”

“...Okay. That’s reasonable.”

She flattened the top of her skirt needlessly -- perhaps a nervous habit? -- before speaking again.

“I don’t see a way out of it, and I know it’s not what you want,” the words tumbled from her mouth sadly, deflating with each syllable that passed through her lips. Keith’s own stomach clenched, but he felt compelled to reply.

“And it’s not what you want either, is it? You have Romelle.” The Princess’ head snapped up, and he hoped his eyes demonstrated his lack of judgement.

Whatever she saw in his face must have been deemed trustworthy, because what remained of her proper composure crumbled.

Allura held her face in her hands. “I do. I… I have Romelle. Stars above, this is harder than I ever thought it would be.”

Keith watched on uncomfortably, fiddling with his gloves for something to do. Comforting wasn’t exactly his area of expertise, and he had no idea what to say.

After a tense thirty seconds, the young woman drew herself back up to her full height, jaw clenched. Her eyes were red-rimmed, but dry.

“And Romelle and I have our own choices to make. I have given her a dozen outs since my father first told me of the plans for our arrangement. It feels… wrong, and unfair, to expect her to stay by my side when I am quite literally going to marry another.” She paused, her voice turning fond, if not exasperated. “And everytime, she insists that there is no one she would rather be with than me. Heavens if I don’t understand her, but I do know that I… I love her. I do not want to drag her into this mess but, and perhaps I am selfishly to blame for not fighting her harder, but I cannot let her go either. She means too much to me. Far, far too much.”
Some of his earlier unease from yesterday reignited the flame in his chest, the boil that made his blood run hotter and hotter. It seared like jealousy or anger, because, the Princess was describing something that Keith had never had, and had never wanted.

And yet.

His palms were sweating. Anxiously, he wiped them on his trousers and tried to think of something to say to the Princess, but, what could he even say? What did she want from him?

“Why… why are you telling me this?” He leveraged eventually, unable to completely keep the undertone of bitterness from his voice. “About you and Romelle. I’m not surprised, I thought you guys might have been together, but like… why does it affect me?”

She didn’t seem offended. If anything, a bit wistful, but she kept her tone patient while responding.

“Because, as much as I wish it were simpler than it is, so many lives, so much of what we do… it affects other people, Keith. I can’t let my own desires get in the way of the well-being of countless others… No matter how much I love Romelle. I will stay with her as long as she’ll have me, but if you and I are to marry, then we must do what we have to for our people. We’ve been friends long enough that I want… I want you to know you can trust me, and I am trusting you with this. I want you to be able to be happy, even if neither of us want this. Not because I’m going to be -- ugh, your wife --”

They both grimaced at the word, stopping momentarily to laugh. God, it was just so weird and uncomfortable to even think about Allura like that; judging by the exhaustion behind her sighs, he guessed she felt the same.

“But because I have people counting on me. Romelle convinced me… I do not have to be unhappy to make others happy. My life, your life -- they stop being our own lives if we live them entirely for other people. So I will try to find make out of this… this sham marriage, I suppose you could call it -- I will try to make something with her that is akin to happiness, and I want to have Romelle by my side through each step. She has elected to act as a… private consort, though it even makes me feel uneasy to mention it, because she is so much more than that. She deserves so much more than that, but it is her decision, and I would not deny her that. I hope you will not resent me -- or us -- for our choice.”

Keith let out a small, disbelieving laugh. It was more like a puff of air, but he couldn’t help himself.

“Allura, was that your really, really nice way of telling me you’re gay?”

“I -- Keith! Why must you be so crude about it? I was trying to be sincere with you.”

“Because, Princess,” he leaned back and ran a hand down his face. “I’m gay.”

She was up and across the room in an instant, looking six different shades of scandalized.

“What?! You are not!”

He’d gone his whole life without actually saying it out loud, directly, and now he’s told two people in one day? Honestly, Keith was half-convinced that this was all some sort of strange dream.

“Really.” Keith shook his head. “I can’t believe -- I literally just told my Mother this morning.”

Princess Allura’s jaw-dropped, and then she was doubled over, laughing. Keith couldn’t help but join her, both of them snickering like children -- like the children they were when they grew up together,
and like the children they were now, if he was honest, that had grown up a little too fast. She was twenty, and he was only an hour into being eighteen, and they were both about to marry each other, and it just seemed so ridiculous that neither of them could help but laugh at the stupid hilarity of it all.

“Stars above,” she shook her head as the laughter subsided. “I cannot believe this. We are in such terrible luck here, are we not?”

“Oh, abso-fucking-lutely.”

She scrunched her nose. “I wish you wouldn’t speak with such harsh language, Keith. You’re like my baby brother, just because we have to get married doesn’t mean you can cuss like a sailor.”

“Stop saying that,” he groaned, leaning over the side of his chair. “I don’t care if it’s true, but talking about it makes me feel… weird.”

“Agreed,” she said with a quick flash of her toothy smile. “Anyway, I’m glad we could talk about this. I feel… better, knowing you feel the same. Literally.”

She started to pull herself to her feet, adjusting her crown that fell slightly askew in their fits of giggles. Keith had to admit, he felt a bit better, too.

“I suppose I must get back, if you could help guide me through this maze you call a castle. The tailor will poke me with her evil little needles if I’m late,” she said with a last affectionate chuckle, leading the way to the door.

“Shall we?”

[LANCE]

APPROXIMATELY 14 HOURS IN CONFINEMENT

Really, the problem with the darkness was how easy it was for Lance to slip away from himself. It was harder to tell what was and wasn’t real when there was nothing but the voices in his head -- the best he could do was try to keep the more dangerous ones at bay.

Lance still had not had any wine, though he also wasn’t sure if it was even appropriate to use “still” just yet. He drifted off for to sleep for awhile, not long after the initial settling down on the cold stone, but the stupor and silence made it a little difficult to tell where consciousness and unconsciousness ended and began again. Sleeping, or drifting at least, was uncomfortable with the obvious awkward slump of his posture taken against one of the walls. Had it been dobosh, or varga? Twelve? A quintant? Surely, he felt it at least had to be that long, because the ringing in his ears had already started, a cymbal crash landing flat against his eardrums that just rang, and rang, and rang.

No, no, focus on things that are real. Things that are real. What is real right now? I’m here, and this bottle is real, and -- and, um. It shouldn’t have taken him as long as it did, but the darkness did strange things to his mind. He hated that he could recognize it, because self-awareness wouldn’t stop the jumble of reality from overloading his brain.
Lance ran a hand through his hair, trying to focus on the texture. It was greasy since he hadn’t been able to take a bath before ending up down here, and it had started to take on some of its natural curl towards the bottom. Maybe it was time to get it trimmed again. Nyma usually did it for him, and she definitely owed him one. Heh. Maybe he could introduce Keith to Nyma properly this time; heaven knows that mullet of his needs to stare down the opposite end of a pair of shears.

Yes, Lance resolved to getting a haircut after this mess blew over.

Loudly, as if angered by the thought of a certain knife-wielding-catastrophe-of-a-person, Lance’s stomach growled. Ugh. Not good. Hunger wouldn’t go abated for long, but at least it gave him something new to focus on. Counting breaths between grumbles seemed like as good a distraction as any, especially considering the niggling prick of disappointment that felt like a knife sticking through his ribs. If he didn’t think about knives or about Knife Boy, the stabbing sensation didn’t hurt as much, so Lance let his mind decidedly wander once again.

He made it one-hundred and sixty breaths exactly before his stomach growled again. Easy. He could top that -- like besting his brother’s when they used to hunt together.

Used to.

That was a weird thought. When did his conception of his family go from things they did together to things they used to do together? Probably sometime after the second deca-phebe of living in Marmora, Lance guessed, but he wasn’t sure. Maybe it was when they stopped writing as often; maybe they had made the choice for him.

To say Lance missed his family would be the understatement of the century. His real family, that is; not Aunt Hira or his cousins. Even Nadia’s gentile nature compared to her sisters and mother was a poor substitute for dog-piling on the couch around his mother while she would tell them stories, or tucking in his little sister to bed, or helping set the table for a meal he would actually be able to join.

There was no winter holiday to celebrate in Marmora -- well no, that’s not true. The holiday marking in the solstice was observed the realm over, it was just for Lance there was nothing to celebrate since he moved to the capital. He had insisted Pidge and Hunk not get him anything, because he could not give anything in return; they still managed to wriggle small kindnesses into his life in the shape of extra free cookies at the bakery or “loaning” him a book and never asking for it back. He loved them for that, for being able to give and expect nothing in return. Lance was so grateful to have Hunk and Pidge. They weren’t his family, but they were at least something, and he wanted them both to be happy.

Shay seemed to have at least some interest in Hunk, judging by their conspicuous disappearance yesterday(?) when he visited the bakery, and if it was at least midday Thursday by now, Hunk would be up at the castle to start on the cooking. A lovely little film reel played in his mind, the image of domesticity with Hunk’s face pasted with flour and the quiet Lady Shay hovering near the prep station, chatting and handing him ingredients all the while. Was it weird for him to fantasize about his friend’s love life? Maybe, but that was neither here nor there when he was alone in a cavernous, cold cellar with no company -- he’d gladly indulge in mind-movies if it meant he could be distracted. And it’s not like Hunk would never hold it against him, if he somehow ever found out.

Yes, Lance conceded, Hunk deserved to be that happy. He was a kind, generous person with a heart of gold and a smile that could soften even the most permanent of scowls. Shay, for what little Lance knew about her, had the guy completely smitten and it was just about the sweetest thing he could imagine. With his place in the castle for the next several days, Lance wondered if his friend would have the opportunity to slip away from his duties to perhaps actually attend the ball for a few hours. Surely, even in a chef’s jacket and one of those goofy hats that looked like a mushroom, Lance was
sure his best friend would smile and twirl just as naturally as anyone in the room… especially if he had his pretty Balmeran royal in his arms.

Again, Lance’s stomach rumbled loudly, a warning sound for the oncoming physical strain his body was going to endure. It seemed faster and perhaps even more aggressive this time, and while the skinny teen did not envy the burn in his throat or the twisting pattern of his thoughts while intoxicated, he was going to grow weak and delirious eventually at this rate. It was probably time.

Tentatively, Lance gripped the bottle and managed to pop off the cork after a few dobosh of struggling -- just in time for his stomach to suck in painfully, like the muscles there were berating him for taking so long in the first place, the honeyed smell of fermented grapes already making his throat itch in anticipation.

He took a small, steady gulp from the neck of the bottle, tilting his head back. The room-temperature drink settled into his body almost immediately, the warmth beneath his abdomen spreading and chasing away some of the lingering chill of the cellar. It was easy to forget how cold it was until he started drinking, but that only made him want to drink more.

Instead, Lance sighed and lazily rested the bottle between his outstretched legs, looking out into the nothingness of the air and room before him. It felt bigger, somehow, the longer he was there. The lack of any sound -- probably from the way the stone absorbed his breaths rather than echoed them back to him -- made it seem much grander than Lance knew it to be. He pictured himself in the atrium of the castle again, except pitch black, with those high high ceilings painted with pretty murals that were too far away to even really appreciate.

Lance sighed again.

He hoped Hunk would get to see it, and appreciate it, and dance with Lady Shay. Sure, she was maybe a one-time thing, seeing as she was visiting the kingdom for such a specific occasion, but maybe they would keep in touch? Hunk deserved it, her, and everything else.

Pidge, too, deserved what she wanted. Lance had teased her about having to wear a dress to hopefully lighten her spirits, but she should feel inclined to be, act, and present as she pleased. The socialite lifestyle did not exactly suit her, the operative part of that being social, but with it came opportunity and that’s what Pidge really deserved. She should travel the realm and expand the understanding of future generations, researching and reading and studying and learning. The culture of the wealthy at least gave her those chances, and Lance hoped she could use this time where the kingdoms came together to really put herself out there, perhaps take up a place in the court of the Olkari like she so wanted, or go off to Puig for a season with Matt to study.

Hunk deserved to be brought up, pulled into that life, that splendor and greatness. He deserved to be loved and held and to twirl with a pretty person tucked against him. Pidge was already up there, and her place had never felt more fitting than it did when the realm came together to speak of the future.

A bit desperately, Lance tried not to draw any comparisons, but the shadows had different ideas. A whisper sounded in his ear, so close and real he flinched, swearing he could feel the tickle of hot air beside his throat: it reminded him that he did not have any substantive future.

Maybe he never had one, not even when he lived with his family. The life he’d been born to live was going to be one destined to toil and struggle, rural customs and poverty sticking to him like the cold that settled into the stones beneath his bare feet.

Lance wasn’t so self-loathing to think that he didn’t deserve a future, or at least a chance at one, but he was also realistic. Life wasn’t fair. Bad things happen to good people. Everyone deserves a
chance to be happy. Yes, sure, those things were well and good and it was nice to talk about what the world should be like, and it was another thing entirely to talk about what it was actually like.

Things like what was happening to Hunk, or the opportunities laid out before Pidge… they just didn’t happen to people like him. It wasn’t meant to happen. He thought he had accepted it, but recently, he’d let his hopes grow, stubborn little weeds between cracks in the sidewalk.

Lance knew better, or thought he did. He was hardly Altean, lacking in any of the grace, magic, or sharp features that came with his heritage, aside from one stray cheek mark and perhaps a slight point to his ears. No heightened reflexes or special set of skills, like shifting his appearance or hiding some deceptive strength in his long limbs, and even his human qualities were less-than-remarkable. Lance took pride in his ability to shoot a bow, but everything else? He was just… good enough. An okay cook. A decent judge of character. Strong enough to lift, but not enough to fight; tall enough to run, but not fast enough to sprint; smart enough to read, but not enough to develop new ideas; bold enough to stand out, but not enough to lead.

A funny, hopeless romantic with out any real fun, hope, or romance to boast about.

Lance drank from the wine bottle again, chasing the feeling of warmth spreading down his throat.

He was fine, and would be fine, and that had to be enough. It had to be, because Lance knew that was all he was going to get.

Sure, he happened to be in the right place -- or, rather, the wrong place -- at the right time on a few occasions, and it led to him meeting, almost befriending, a Prince. A nice, handsome, surprising Prince, who liked knives and took pride in his country. Sure, that happened. Lance wasn’t denying it, or even feeling ungrateful about it. No, instead, the hot breath at his ear, the one that sounded like a lustful Galra with his hands all over him, was taunting him with a leering sort of question.

So what?

Was he really so swept up in the thrill of meeting Keith that he was convinced the Prince was actually interested in him? The invitation to the ball -- what he had read as nerves -- was probably just an extension of his general kindness and Lance had indelicately, instantaneously come apart like a babbling mess at the mere suggestion of going? Now, in retrospect, Lance felt a little mortified that he had even admitted he would like to go but wouldn’t have been able to.

Way to add to the fucking pity party, McClain.

Restless fingers itched around the dark, grasping for the bottle and finding it with a vice grip. He took another gentle swig, the festering ache in his stomach finally backing off at the slight feeling of fullness the alcohol lent to him.

So what? Keith invited Lance to the ball. Lance wasn’t, couldn’t, go. So? Did that give his chest a reason to throb, like he’d been torn in half like a wet piece of parchment? Did that give him reason to want to crawl into a ball of himself and fucking cry? God, this was pathetic. He was pathetic.

Hunk and Pidge deserved this weekend. Lance sincerely, without an ounce of bitterness, wished the best upon them both. They deserved the best.

And Lance? Well, Lance deserved exactly what he got.
The Prince was practically running to the stables, propriety be damned for the twelfth time that day, the last of his patience absolutely spent after the ladies retired to the drawing room. For whatever godforsaken reason, it was deemed the best course of action to have the women led out of the dining room to attend to their own variety of gossip, leaving Keith in a loud room with boisterous drinkers and habit smokers. Which, really, amounted to Rax and Keith talking each other down from delivering a series of swift kicks to Lotor’s ankles every chance they could.

For a little while, he managed to stick close to Adam and Shiro which made it less insufferable, but there’s something simply bawdy and unappealing to a bunch of tipsy assholes talking about how much capital they own, or lauding over each other’s accomplishments in the never-ending game one one-upping each other.

Sure, turning of age in just a few hours, Keith could have joined them in some drinking had he so wanted -- indeed, the discomfort of the situation alone had made it tempting -- but Keith was not much for the bodily effects or loose tongue associated he knew to be associated with alcohol. He didn’t envy people who made fools of themselves after a few sips of brandy, and the sleazy behavior of bachelor’s after a female servant would try to sneak by and refill the drinks made him outright disgusted. Even Emperor Zarkon had became a slurred, brawny caricature of his usual self once someone pulled out the nunvil.

So -- Keith sharing in that brotherly camaraderie with people who were more pigs than they were men?

Yeah, no thanks.

For the remaining half-hour of the shitty post-dinner drinking, Keith had at least been able to tune out the event planner who hadcornered him yet again to discuss some of the details of the coming nights. Why was it so hard to believe that he did not give a single shit about the number of banners and baubles that hung from the ceiling. Why did they even feel inclined to ask him? It was his birthday, maybe, but this Ball had never been for him from the start.

So he swung his leg over Red the moment they were outside the stable doors, and God if it didn’t feel good to breath in fresh air again. He felt like he’d just aged twenty years from second-hand smoke alone. Shiro was a little less purposeful as he mounted his own horse, but it was clear he was also relieved to no longer be stuck in that room. Keith impatiently began to take Red into trot around the yard while they waited for Pidge and Hunk to arrive.

“That was awful.” He said plainly to Shiro, who sighed but did not disagree. “Thank god it’s over.”

“Don’t thank god,” a voice shouted from the front steps, followed by an appropriately maniacal laugh. “Thank me instead!”

“Pidge, not so loud!” A very tired but happy sounding Hunk said, following her down the front steps. “Hi, Sir Shiro, your Hi-- er, Keith.”

“Hey there,” the knight greeted with a polite smile, denoting two horses that were prepared off to one side of the stable for them. “We picked some castle horses for you guys, that okay?”

Pidge pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and came up to one, Hunk following behind and
offering to help her into the saddle.

“Better than okay, thanks, Shiro. You know these legs weren’t made for walking.”

By now, Keith had slowed Red to a stop a few feet from them, waiting for Hunk to settle into his own saddle.

“You guys know the way, then?”

Pidge smirked, leering forward. “Eager, aren’t we?”

“I swear to fucking god --”

“Language, Keith, please.” Shiro interrupted, and Pidge sent the Prince a victorious.

“Yeah, Keithy, watch your fucking mouth.”

Shiro just groaned a world-weary sound that vaguely sounded like Pidge’s name before turning his horse around. With Hunk properly atop his horse, Keith and Shiro allowed them to lead.

When they turned towards the military barracks instead of further into town, however, both men look surprised.

“Garrison barracks? What gives?”

Hunk pulled at his collar, a little nervous, and gestured to Pidge.

“Don’t blame me for this, Pidge assured me it was fine, but uh, I mean, we could go a different route. Maybe a safer route. I don’t mind that idea.”

“Oh hush,” the girl at the front called over her shoulder, dismissing them with a lazy wave. “It’s just faster if we go through the training grounds.”

Keith swore he could hear Shiro’s blood pressure rise.

“The training grounds that are very dangerous and intended only for training, hence the name training grounds?” He spoke with a strained voice.

Pidge merely laughed. “Those are the ones!”

Hunk chuckled, obviously uncomfortable, but Keith merely picked up Red’s gait. He trusted the Holts, maybe against his better judgment, but he did.

It took some careful maneuvering to get them all around the practice fields and Keith kept an eye trained to any stray blade or arrowhead the like that may have gotten forgotten in the field, but the trip through was uneventful and, he had to admit, a much faster way to get outside the city walls than actually traversing through the city itself. Shiro was painfully alert the whole time, not joining in the ideal chatter as his eyes and ears scanned for any potential threats.

By the time they reached the forest proper, the knight finally relaxed, but only marginally.

“So, now that that’s over with,” he said in a tone that implied the unspoken “thank god,” at the end, “we’re just heading straight east?”

“Yup, that should be the case,” Hunk nodded, seeming to return to his usual chipper self now that they were outside the capital. By no particular consequence, his castle steed fell in step beside Red,
and Keith found himself already feeling mentally recovered from the needless trauma that was any after dinner social event with the realm’s wealthiest men. He much preferred company like this.

“The cooking is going well,” Hunk supplied after a brief silence, probably sensing Keith’s desire (and inability) to strike up a conversation. “I was able to time my break with my Mother and Aunt so they’re covering for me now, so we should be all on schedule for tomorrow!”

“That’s great, Hunk,” Keith said truthfully, and tagged on a small smile. “I’m honestly really glad you agreed to cater for this. I know it was sort of spur of the moment but… you know, it’s nice to feel like I know what’s going on.”

Hunk frowned, looking into Pidge’s back for a moment. “You don’t know what’s going on with the Ball? But it’s your party, isn’t it? Oh god, I’m bad at dates -- it is your birthday, right? I’m not making that up?”

“No, no,” Keith laughed, and Shiro looked back at them over his shoulder. “I mean, like, the food is giving me something to be excited about. It’s nice knowing you and your family are putting a lot of… work into it, I guess? Does that make sense? Just like, the decoration and all of the rest of the stuff I don’t have any say in… not that I really do with the food… but, ugh, I don’t know. It made more sense in my head.”

“Nah, I think I get it,” Hunk smiled and gave Keith a thoughtful, kind look. “I’m happy to be a part of it.”

“What he’s really happy about is getting to see Lady Shay,” Pidge turned in her seat and grinned mischievously to her friend, and Keith watched Hunk’s cheeks bloom with color. “You see here, Hunk finds the respectable Lady of the Balmera to be… uh, fucking perfect?”

“Pidge!” Shiro and Hunk chastised in unison, although Keith thought Shiro sounded a little more amused than Hunk about the whole thing.

Keith wasn’t sure if he should tease along or defend Hunk, as this kind of social jeering was still sort of unfamiliar to him. After sucking his teeth momentarily, he decided to just be honest -- it was usually the best policy, right?

“I think you guys seem good together,” he tried to keep his tone mild, not wanting to overstep. Hunk whipped his head around in a fashion so dramatic it would have even made Lance proud. Keith smiled that the thought.

“W-What?! You really mean that? You guys are kind of close, right?”

He nodded, a little taken aback by the absolute wonder in Hunk’s gaze, but continued anyways.

“Yes. I’ve known Shay for a really long time. She’s sweet and a little soft-spoken, so sometimes people talk over her at stupid high-society bullshit meetings -- don’t even, Shiro, you know it’s true,” Keith countered preemptively when it looked like the man would admonish him for swearing. The knight’s mouth remained closed, but his brow did dip in typical disapproval.

His attention went back to Hunk when it seemed Shiro would not interrupt. “Anyway, yeah, you seem really nice and Shay deserves someone nice. If you’re interested in her, you should go for it.”

Pidge was looking at him strangely, at which he grimaced and shrugged, but Hunk looked positively awestruck. Keith almost felt uncomfortable, but mostly, he felt proud that he managed to make Hunk happy.
“That -- that was the nicest thing I’ve heard all day, thank you, Keith.” He sniffled, and oh god, was he about to start crying? Keith seemed horror-struck, but the guy was still smiling so… that was a good sign, right? Right?!

“So you like Lady Shay then? Good for you, buddy. Have you asked her if she’s interested?” Shiro piped up, sending a supportive and absolutely lame thumbs-up back to them. Keith snorted and made no attempt to hide it.

Pidge made an annoyed noise, coming to a curve in the trees and leading them through it, while adding, “I’ve been trying to get him to calm his shit all day, and you guys say two words and he’s putty. Unfair. You should just ask her to dance at the ball, and if she says yes, then you’ll know she likes you. If she says no, well, you can just go burn down the castle in the kitchens.”

“Please don’t do that,” Keith supplied while Hunk chewed his lower lip, thoughtful.

“Okay, first of all,” Hunk said with a slightly nervous laugh. “I would never burn down the castle, just so we’re clear. And second, just asking her to dance is easier said than done considering I’m going to be in the kitchens the whole time! And even if I could,” he shot Keith a look when it appeared the Prince was going to interrupt. (Hunk was right -- Keith was about to insist that he leave his family to tend to the kitchens at least for one evening and join them.) “She can’t dance with anyone of my status. You guys know that.”

“Fuck that,” Pidge sniffed. “The whole status thing is just dumb tradition. I’m not dancing with anyone because I hate everyone, but you can dance with whoever you want.”

Keith nodded, but didn’t say anything. He was surprised that Shiro spoke up.

“It’s true, Hunk. If you think Lady Shay -- or anyone for that matter -- would want to dance with you, the choice should be their’s to make. Don’t let the fear of the social standards get in your way. They matter to some people, but not everyone, and the Balmerans in general have never really struck me as the kind to care too much. Galra, definitely; Alteans, almost as much. Marmora and Olkari are… somewhere in between. But Puig, Arusians, and Balmerans are much more lax about that kind of thing.”

“I guess… I’ll think about it… Thanks, you guys.” Hunk’s voice waivered just a bit, and Keith decided that was cue to drop it. While the guy hid his nerves well beneath his shining personality, Hunk was human, susceptible to nerves and insecurities just like anyone else.

“Fine, but we’re not done talking about this,” Pidge shrugged. “You never did say, by the way -- is Lance coming out tonight? You said Keith and Father Figure over here were supposed to get him the message, yeah?”

“We did get him the message, yes. I think he seemed like he was going to come.” Shiro looked back to Keith, as if in agreement. He merely nodded -- it would have been too much to admit that talking about Lance made his mouth turn into cotton.

“Thanks again for doing that, by the way,” Hunk scratched his cheek sheepishly. “I just knew I wouldn’t be able to get to see him with how busy things were for me, and I was just really worried about him after yesterday… That Lotor guy was, um, really… something.”

“Yeah, what the hell was that about? Hunk told me everything -- guy’s a dick.” Pidge’s voice turned a few shades darker, and Keith suppressed a shudder. He loved Pidge, don’t get him wrong, but he also never envied someone who got on her bad side. She was flat out dangerous when she wanted to be.
“I think that is the most appropriate use of swearing I’ve ever heard from you, Katie.”

She hissed at the use of her proper name, but said nothing else. Hunk just frowned towards Keith, almost sympathetically.

“Yeah, sorry you have to be friends with that guy… If he wasn’t a Prince I probably would have kicked his ass to the curb.”

“I am not Lotor’s friend.” Keith ground out, a red rush of fury spilling from his chest at the memory of yesterday. That fucking asshole. “I just have to be around him for this sort of thing. Lotor is a prick and he can’t talk about my friends like that. If I didn’t have appearances to keep up I would have punched him, so, the feeling is mutual Hunk.”

“Oh, right, your friends.” Pidge was facing forward again, but Keith did not appreciate the slightly knowing lilt in her voice. “How did it go with Lance? Did he seem okay?”

“Um,” Keith chewed his lower lip. It’s not like he could lie to Pidge or Lance’s best friend about it, surely Lance was going to tell them anyways?

“He seemed… yeah, he was okay. He really doesn’t sleep much, does he?”

Pidge laughed, but the sound lacked some of her usual conniving. “Almost less than me. Almost.”

Hunk cut in with a slight edge to his tone, not a harsh one -- rather, just one that suggested a change in topic. “Isn’t it right up ahead, Pidge?”

“Oh, yeah, right. Let’s stop here.”

Shiro and Keith did as they were bid, slowing their mounts to a complete stop as Pidge and Hunk instructed. They were in a small clearing beside a shallow pond, barely large enough for the four them to stand while unmounted.

“Let’s water the horses here and tie them up, and go on foot. It’s just through there.” Pidge pointed to a nondescript thicket in the trees, at which Shiro and Keith met eyes and shrugged.

Keith was mostly quiet during the short walk, trying to examine the trees or bushes they passed for anything that resembled a honeycomb -- that was what Lance had called the place. Well, that was part of it -- really, he was trying to just distract himself so as not to let on how fucking nervous he was. It was like learning to fight for the first time, all over again; excitement and fear and hyperaware of every sound and silence and waiting for something to change, the drop of the pin or to be crushed by a boulder -- he didn’t know, he just knew it was something worth anticipating and the fact that it was really happening made him shrink in on himself, bundled up to keep his nerves together like a child does to maintain their warmth. Except, unlike the first time Keith fought, this was even worse because he couldn’t keep on his usual scowl to appear just the right amount of disinterested.

For fuck’s sake, he was smiling.

Like a giddy, stupid, starstruck mess.
A bundle of teenaged nerves, because he was going to see Lance and he was so stupidly excited that he was actually a little angry with himself over it.

“Why the code, by the way?” Keith asked suddenly in a desperate attempt to distract himself. He recalled Lance’s cryptic, annoying answers from the night before. “I mean, Lance ended up telling us anyways, so what was the point?”

Pidge adjusted their glasses thoughtfully, stepping over a log. “Probably because that made inviting you Lance’s decision. If Hunk invited you and Lance didn’t want you to go, then he wouldn’t have told you what it meant.”

“Yeah, sorry, man.” Hunk sounded a little embarrassed. “I totally wanted to invite you myself! I just, I didn’t want to overstep, and I was actually calling the ‘meeting’ if you could call it that for Lance’s sake, not mine. After what Prince Lotor said yesterday, I just wanted to make sure he was okay… and that he’d be okay with you being there.”

“O-Oh.”

Keith… hadn’t expected that, and it made his cheeks turn very noticeably red. Lance wanted him to spend time with them, enough to let him and Shiro in on something that the three of them used to keep each other happy, stable, safe. It was silly -- as silly as four adults (if Pidge could be considered an adult… that was debatable) stepping over roots and branches in the middle of the night could be, but it was also special, that they’d been welcomed into their group. Given the lengths to which the trio kept their meeting spots private, it was not just something to be easily spread around… and Lance trusted him enough to share it.

Keith’s heartbeat was so fluttery and erratic against his ribs that it was almost painful. Almost.

Pidge glanced at Keith, and his stupidly pale skin gave away his blush even in the heavy shade of night. She grinned knowingly and leaned close, speaking so low he barely caught her words.

“Guess Hunk isn’t the only one who needs to ask someone to dance, hmm?”

“I --” Keith was prepared to defend himself, but she was already humming and skipping ahead.

“We’re here!”

Letting out a sigh, Keith jogged after her and Shiro and Hunk broke through the brush just seconds after, all of them quiet in as they entered the clearing. It was really more of a small meadow than a regular break in the forest, filled with tall blades of grass that seemed to sag with the cold night air and wilting wild flowers on their last hurrah before the cold snap hits. Even so, Keith felt like the breath had been taken from his body as his eyes traveled from his feet to the heavens above. It was so clear, and even though it wasn’t really possible, it somehow felt like his life had just been turned to high definition; everything seemed sharper, brighter, fuller, more real here.

The clearing itself was octogonal, and each corner was marked with such precision it surely had to have been man-made. The stars were visible like little raindrops disturbing a puddle of the universe, the sky relentlessly punctured by silvery twinkles of light. The moon carved itself a hole in the very center of the zenith, a bright source of light that illuminated everything in the most surreal tones of milky whites and inky blacks, contrasts turned to the highest degree beneath its pale incandescence.

Keith and the others were silent, all admiring the sight of quiet night before them. It was Hunk, eventually, who took the initiative to break the quiet. He settled down a large blanket in the middle and used some random rocks and big branches to hold down the corners, setting a basket gently atop
the fabric.

“Lance isn’t here yet… I guess that’s good cause we were running a little late,” he mused as he pulled out perfectly cut and prepared canapés -- how they didn’t get ruined on the way over here, Keith had no idea -- and started to set out drinks and the like.

Pidge immediately flopped down onto the quilt and patted for Keith to join her. Shiro raised a brow towards the Prince, but he just shrugged and followed her lead. Knowing that Lance wasn’t there yet was both disheartening and relaxing -- it gave him a chance to get comfortable and readjust to the setting without trying to also form words with his mouth and brain.

“You can sit, Shiro,” Keith motioned when he continued to hover nearby, arms crossed neatly against his chest. “Pidge might bite, but I’m good and Hunk seems cool.”

“Thanks!” The chef chirped proudly, and they all laughed.

Shiro just ended up shaking his head, smiling out towards the trees. “No, that’s alright. I think I’ll stand at least for awhile. When Lance eventually shows we’ll probably hear him before we see him, right? I’ll be too on edge to relax, so I might as well keep my ears and eyes open.”

“Boooo, Shiro you’re no fun,” Pidge complained, popping three of Hunk’s treats into her mouth at once.

He poked her in the ribs with his boot -- he was wearing his greaves, so the tiny “ow!” Pidge elicited was probably justified. “If you wanted fun you should’ve brought Matt.”

“You’re here because Keith needs a babysitter, and Matt is a certified baby himself so no can do.”

“I don’t need a babysitter,” the Prince grumbled while accepting an assortment of treats already on a plate that Hunk passed him. Mindlessly, he popped the first one in his mouth and wanted to melt. “Fuck, that’s so good.”

Shiro rolled his eyes. “Kids, you know everytime you swear I get a gray hair?”

“Guess that explains why you’re thirty and already going gray, isn’t it?” Keith stated, unimpressed. Hunk and Pidge both laughed, and a little squeeze of joy loosened his lungs slightly, allowing him to breathe the night air even more readily. It was nice to have friends who would laugh at his jokes. This was nice.

And when Lance showed up, it would be perfect.

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[LANCE]

APPROXIMATELY 20 HOURS IN CONFINEMENT

Fuck. He got carried away.

A whole bottle, gone already? That wasn’t a good sign. Maybe? Or maybe it was?
Maybe it was already a few quintant, actually. Maybe he was being harder on himself than necessary.

No, Lance reasoned, he’d be much hungrier than he was if it had been longer than a whole quintant. Really, he was just losing his grip of the situation, and he drank too much.

Now his head hurt and the warmth in his body from the alcohol somehow made him feel even colder, emptier in the frigid temperatures of the cellar. What he wouldn’t give for Keith’s cloak right about now -- so soft and warm, thicker than any blanket without being heavy.

It smelled so nice, too. Lance loved it. Even if the mullet it belonged to was annoying and didn’t understand how complicated he made everything. Why invite Lance to the Ball? It’s not like he wanted to -- couldn’t let himself even think about wanting to go. There wasn’t anything there for people like him, even if --

“Oh, what the fuck,” Lance muttered, voice slurring as he gripped the empty bottle.

Because truly, who was he kidding?

He wanted to go. He wanted to go so badly that it fucking hurt.

Alcohol, loosened fears, and false courage allowed Lance to admit it -- denial was weak in the face of cheap wine, apparently -- Lance wanted to go, but that was only the tip of the iceberg.

Keith was fucking beautiful, and kind, and sensitive, and Lance wanted him all to himself. Stupid, because, he was a Prince, and his whole life was probably already laid out before him. Stupid, because Keith would marry a proper lady or even a Princess, probably, and go on to rule and be great and stupid for everyone else’s’ sake, and Lance was petty, and Lance was selfish, and he didn’t even care to admit it, because fucking hell he wanted the Prince all to himself.

Of course inviting Lance to the ball didn’t mean anything. How could it? Keith was just trying to make up for what that fucking purple douche had said, trying to make the situation right. And Lance let himself believe that there was something there, something meaningful and sweet because he was stupid.

It wasn’t fair that Keith got to be so handsome and sweet and make idiots like Lance fall in love with him so easily. Lance had crushed on people before, he’d had two girlfriends in the time he’d moved to Marmora but they were hardly relationships if they only lasted less than a moon cycle, and this wasn’t anything even in the same stratosphere of feelings that he’d had for those girls anyways.

Keith was something wonderful, because he made Lance feel special.

And he Keith was something awful, because Lance was the most unextraordinary person alive.

He hated Keith so much that it only made him want him more. It didn’t make sense. Lance was drunk, so maybe that was a fine excuse, but he hated him and cared about him and it wasn’t fair because Lance barely even knew him but he knew that nothing felt as good as the look on his face when he laughed at something Lance said or the stupid goosebumps that broke on his skin when Keith was baiting him into an argument. He wanted to win and he wanted to lose and his heart was doing both and it wasn’t fucking fair that Keith had this much pull on his life.

Wasn’t one of his rules about not thinking too much?

Fuck. This wasn’t going well at all.
His *mama* told him life wasn’t fair, and even so, Lance had let himself get swept up in some fairytale. This wasn’t a fucking storybook. This was his life -- his shitty, one track life, where the best weeks were the ones where he ate regular meals and the worst ones were the ones he spent shackled to shadows ten feet below where he sleeps at night, crowded by glass bottles of false warmth and reminders of cruel reality. He wasn’t even the protagonist to his own story, really, just a side arc character who threw in a bump in the plot. Someone else deserved the title, someone with a future and with potential -- someone like Keith, and he hated that, because teasing Keith or making him blush had made Lance feel like something so much more than nothing but he *was* nothing.

Nothing, nothing, nothing.

Lance was as forgettable as dusty, cheap bottles of wine.

Thankfully, an empty stomach and a losing mentality make for a great combination for sleep, and Lance curled into a ball on the floor and slept through a the distorted haze.

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**APPROXIMATELY 30 HOURS IN CONFINEMENT**

Lance woke up and nearly screamed, thinking he’d gone blind. The sharp intake of air, however, died in his throat with a fit of coughing instead. It was enough to force him back into the plane of reality and catch him up with current events… though, how current, he wasn’t really sure. The bottle had fallen over in his sleep and was tucked against his side like the world’s most pathetic teddybear, and when he groped around he found that he flipped over at one point and the crate he’d been using as an anchor point was a little further away.

Carefully, he scooted back towards it and dragged the empty glass bottle with him, head predictably pounding. He needed to pee, and he was pretty sure he had stumbled over to a corner after half the bottle of wine had been gone, so he tried to find the same spot to relieve himself. It was gross and uncomfortable to pee on a random patch of floor and it made the already dank air smell thicker with urine and wine and his own body odor, but it felt at least a little more natural to find a single spot and commit to that as where he would use the restroom.

Sighing, Lance bumped into some boxes and managed not to break any bottles on his way back to his resting spot. This was considerably easier to find as the ground was still warm from his latent body heat. He anxiously pulled another bottle from the already opened crate, but prayed to his mother’s new god and his father’s many old ones that he wouldn’t need to drink through it all again. Unwelcome dark thoughts, thick like tar and stuck against the back of his brain, from before were still stuck to his brain, making the already uncomfortable pounding in his head almost unbearable.

Why did Keith have to come into his life like this? Lance was doing just fucking *fine* before he showed up -- he’d gone three deca-phebe since being stuck down here like this -- and a fancy ass *Mullet* sporting asshole with a kind heart comes in and just fucked it all up.

But… even saying that hurt his heart, too. Lance wanted to blame Keith because… because he wanted kiss him and then punch him in his annoyingly perfect jaw. It wasn’t his fault, but it was his fault.
It didn’t make sense. Ugh. His head hurt even worse thinking about this, about Keith. What time was it by now? Was it already Keith’s birthday? Had it passed already? An annoying part of his brain tried to figure out if he should get Keith a present after all of this, but that was fucked up for more than a few reasons -- he’d probably never see Keith again, and Keith was supposed to get engaged at the end of his stupid Ball so he’d probably be too busy or not care about Lance trying to be his friend, and Lance couldn’t even blame him.

Lance hated how badly his neck hurt right now. He just wanted to go back to sleep, but the floor wasn’t comfortable enough unless he passed out from exhaustion or with the help of the wine, and Lance really didn’t want anymore alcohol right now. Miserable, he curled in on himself, tucked his knees to his chest and laid his head there.

A few tears slipped out, which was a waste of fluids, and a waste of his heart for that matter. Why was he crying? Because he was alone? His fault for fucking up. Because he was tired and uncomfortable and sore? His fault, too. If he’d been more careful or just not broken the rules he wouldn’t have ended up down here. Because he missed his friends, his family? He didn’t even know what was going on with his family. Maybe there were new children who had been born, or -- fuck, what if someone died? What if that’s why he stopped getting letters?

“No,” he whispered to no one, not caring that his voice sounded cracked and hoarse with disuse. It wasn’t possible. His mamà, his siblings, the nieces and nephews -- they were all fine. They had to be fine, because, what else would he be doing here? Why was he even down here, if not for them?

Relax, breathe, just gotta relax. Lance tried to coach himself to settle down, but he could feel another wave of panic coming upon him, and with the general aches and pains of his body, and frankly, his mind, he wasn’t sure how well he would be able to handle it.

His stomach growled, which meant, a cycle was starting… which wasn’t good, because that meant his body was beginning to adjust to the situation. If he felt hungry he would need to drink again, but if he drank again, he’d end up even more fucking miserable.

He had to wonder if his Aunt Hira had set this situation up on purpose: be sober and starve, be drunk and want to die. Maybe she was hoping he’d drink himself to death. A bit shamefully, Lance had even thought about it -- for someone as thin as him, alcohol poisoning probably wouldn’t be that difficult -- but he wouldn’t give his Aunt the goddamn satisfaction.

If absolutely nothing else, Lance would stay alive just to fucking spite her.

[KEITH]

And then, Lance didn’t show.

What the fuck.

At first, Hunk and Pidge had been teasing about the issue, commenting that Lance was infamously late for everything they did together -- he would say fashionably late, but that was neither here nor there.
Then, it went from playful and lighthearted to annoyed, like maybe he’d forgotten the time, and they even double checked to make sure Keith had given Lance the right “codes.” He had, and neither Pidge nor Hunk really seemed to have been confident in that suspicion in the first place.

That’s when they started to get a little desperate.

Shiro had taken a seat at that point, half snoozing in the early hours of the morning. The sky was beginning to lighten and Keith felt like shit, a cesspool of doubt and worries and fears.

Had he been wrong? Misread the situation? Maybe Lance hadn’t wanted him to come along at all, and this was his not-so-subtle way of saying *fuck off*?

Hunk had mentioned more than once that this wasn’t like Lance, that he would never just flake unless he had a good, specific reason… which, frankly, just made them all worry a little more.

Around four in the morning, Keith snapped.

“I have to fucking go back. I can’t sit here anymore. I need to try to get some sleep before tonight or I will be positively dead for the rest of the day.”

Pidge seemed even more frantic by comparison and she ran her hands through her hair, causing the brown strands to stand up in every direction.

“I don’t -- I fucking don’t know what’s happening. I just have a bad feeling. Isn’t that stupid? It’s stupid -- right?”

Shiro had given up trying to get them to stop swearing, and he even seemed to find the situation warranting of concern. “It’s not stupid. You’re worried about your friend, Pidge. Just… try to relax. Panicking won’t help.”

“I *am* relaxed,” she muttered, the bags under her eyes and tremble of her hands suggesting otherwise. Wisely, no one pointed this out to her.

Hunk’s silence was uneasy, and he spoke less and less as the minutes turned to hours. When Keith snapped, he seemed about ready to burst into tears or ride the horses straight to Lance’s house and drag him out.

“I feel like -- I feel like, what if his Aunt did something? I’m um, I’m sorry your -- er, Keith, Shiro. I feel bad saying this, you know, Lance is my best friend and it’s his business but what if he’s *hurt*? His Aunt is really…”

“She’s a right bitch, is what she is. And I mean that, Shiro, don’t bother.” Pidge spoke with unsettling ice behind her voice. “This has something to do with her, I’m sure of it. She caught him when he tried to sneak out or something. God, fuck her. He doesn’t deserve that shit.”

Shiro, who had been leaned on the blanket propped on an elbow, sat up straight. “I haven’t heard the kindness words about Lady Valurian, I’ll admit, but… is it at all possible Lance just, fell asleep? Or forgot?”

Pidge just sighed and looked at Hunk. The larger boy worried his lower lip between his teeth, shifting his weight back and forth as he sat on the ground. It was almost a peaceful sway, if he did not look so anxious.

“I mean, it’s *possible*, of course. I just get anxious when we don’t hear from him in awhile. There
would be stretches where we couldn’t find him for days, even if we went right up to the house. I don’t know…”

“I mean, can we do anything?” Keith muttered, mostly to himself, but the three of them looked right at him. He managed not to cringe and repeated himself. “Lance didn’t come. Whether or not he got caught sneaking out or decided not to come doesn’t change that, right? So why the fuck are we still out here?”

Hunk and Pidge looked at each other, both sporting mixtures of sadness and resignation, and Shiro seemed predictably concerned.

“I’m sure he has a reason…” Hunk said quietly, but started gathering his blanket and dishes with about as much grace as a bull in a china shop. The worry and exhaustion had turned his usual bubbly personality into a husk of anxiety, and it was sort of pissing Keith off.

He wasn’t mad at Hunk, to be clear. It was Lance’s fault for making him worry like that.

“Whatever. He didn’t come. Let’s just, go back, okay?”

With much less banter on the way back, Keith swept himself onto Red in a single motion and took off to the castle, not bothering to wait or respond to Shiro’s calling.

Fucking hell. He stayed up all night. He worried all damn day. He even had his staff and friends -- Allura, Coran, the archivist, Shiro -- investing their own time and concern into Lance, of who he was and… he didn’t show up.

Keith heard Pidge and Hunk murmur to themselves about reasons he might not have come, but he tried to ignore them. A small part of him knew he was being unreasonable and rash, trying to deal with the initial hurt and disappointment, but a larger, much more angry part of Keith’s brain was throwing up walls left and right, trapping himself up in a labyrinth so he could quietly return to hating fucking everyone in peace. That part of him didn’t want to hear reason or to even worry -- that part of him wanted to ban the fucker from the castle and never see him again.

He had been acting like a goddamn primary school child or a page for a renowned knight, gleeful and excited and so nervous. God, Keith was fucking embarrassed. He wasn’t going to be able to look Shiro or his Mother in the eye. How many Blades knew, too? At least Kolivan and Ulaz, probably Thace, and who knows how many more.

It’s not even like that to have loved and lost bullshit; Keith didn’t even have that. He just got himself wound up in something that wasn’t even there in the first place.

And he didn’t even fucking show up.
The Blue Paladin

Chapter Summary

In which, it's the first night of the Ball, and it's Keith's birthday... Lance has some well-deserved fun, while the Prince literally cannot understand how anyone can be so beautiful.

Some ups, downs, important conversations, and oh, yes, there's going to be dancing.

Chapter Notes

*buries face in hands*

guys I've been waiting for this chapter the whole time!!!! im sorry there's been so much langst and for keith being a bit of jerk the last chapter, but it's all been leading up to this unbelievable ball of fluff (get it? ball of fluff?! *finger guns*)

THANK YOU FOR READING & COMMENTING & SUBSCRIBING! i love pouring my heart & soul into these pining dorks, so it means a lot that you all are kind enough to demonstrate your support. <3

special thanks to:
- a lovely and loyal reader anonwrites for dreaming up this adorable suit for lance! I wanted to play up his altean heritage, so I pulled from their design and combined elements of it some my favorite altean lance artists, seitenma, castor and gatorix1!

-marymorgenstern on instagram, this drawing was the inspiration for lance's hair! vamp? peasant? don't matter! he always look good!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

[LANCE]

Scrtch.

Lance nearly leapt out of his skin.

He doesn’t know why he was so surprised by it -- the emergence of the false sounds were inevitable. Even so, when the hush that had settled in the cellar for vargas on-end was finally broken? Lance started right out of the state between sleep and waking.

Struggling to regain his bearings, Lance was vaguely reminded of when he still lived at home, when the light would flicker on outside the room he shared with his brother or when he could hear the tell-tale signs of feet in the hall dragging over creaky floors. Lance had, for as long as he could remember, always had trouble sleeping if he knew other people were awake. Not for any sort of paranoid reason, not really; it was most likely he was just plagued by a nagging sense of off-ness that
crept at the corners of his consciousness, no matter how tired he was. Someone getting a glass of water or his little sister crying because she’d wet the bed, his mama up especially early with joint pains or the giggling of his siblings teasing each other late at night -- those were the sounds taken by his home in the hours between dusk and dawn, an odd sort of lullaby that kept him awake instead of rocking him to sleep.

Old habits, he supposed, died hard. It took only the smallest first discernible sound that was not coming from his own body to send Lance’s body into a state of hyperawareness. It was a gentle noise, almost like the scrape of a chisel against wood, but when he’d had no outside sounds for however long, it was deafening by any other name.

Lance strained his ears, waiting, listening. The sound that had shocked him awake… had there actually been anything? Or was he imagining it? It was probably nearing the point where false sounds reached out, their decibels soft murmurs against his collar, real enough to make his hair stand on end. One or two such whisper had already slipped passed his defenses, and his careful walls must finally be crumbling. The broken gate to his consciousness swung, catching and grinding unpleasantly in anticipation for the next stroke of insanity.

Staring straight ahead in the direction of the stairs, Lance’s grip tightened around his second bottle of wine -- still unopened, mind you. He’d been slumped against the crate when he passed out, and Lance was aiming to remain sober for as long as possible. The wine would clog his brain with traitorous, dark thoughts that swirled like a whirlpool in which he couldn’t discern between a blackout and the blackness, and Lance was not eager to be dragged beneath those lecherous currents again anytime soon.

A solid dobosh passed, and Lance heard only his wheezing exhales and lazy heartbeat. Maybe he had a little longer until he started to hear things, after all.

Lance sighed and squeezed his eyes together tightly, propping his head back against the crate. His head was throbbing slightly, and he couldn’t tell if it was from the delirious state into which he’d been woken, or the lingering remnants of his first bottle of drink.

Scrtch.

Again, he bolted upright, all his nerves on high-alert. Why was he so jumpy?

“Fuck, calm down,” he chastised himself. It was nothing new, like, he knew it was coming and it was still freaking him out. Was he really that afraid? Or ill-prepared?

Scrtch scrtch scrtch.

Lance blinked around, as if it would grant him scortic vision or something that would actually be fucking useful, slightly enraptured by the little stop-and-go melody.

Scrtch.

From his past experiences in the cellar, when Lance started to hear things he expected them to sound… well, creepy. Like spiders winding webs in the crevices of his eardrums, the buzzing of their creations sending vibrations straight through his body. This was not like that at all, more closely sounding like a hollow thump or pushing sound, a little too far away.

The dull, almost soft sounds of the scrtch had Lance pulling himself up to his feet, and his languid muscles were pushing forward before he had enough sense to plant his butt firmly back on the floor.

(Only crazy people seek out sounds that aren’t there, and Lance wasn’t crazy. Not yet.)
Turns out, Lance’s body had conflicting plans on seeking out the sound -- while his legs moved, his forehead wacked violently against the underside of the staircase, which he’d been certain was at least five more steps away. Cursing, Lance rubbed the spot between his brows and added yet another type of discomfort to his list of general aches and pain, a real pain, not the phantom headaches and dysphoria that stuck to him in the darkness.

Scratch scratch.

Okay.

What the fuck?

Lance craned his neck stupidly, because there wasn’t anything he could hope to see, but the sound was definitely louder, and somehow more... anxious? Desperate? That didn’t even make sense because it was really just a vacant sort of carving noise, like the scrape of a pocket knife on a splintered piece of wood that he was trying to whittle down.

“Ugh,” he pushed the heels of his palms into his eyes and tried to will himself to stop. Stop, stop, stop.

Scratch scratch.

There’s nothing there, there’s no sound. It’s just your imagination.

Scratch.

Motherfucker.

Just to prove to himself that he was making this up, Lance groped around foolishly in the darkness until he found the wobbly baluster of the stairs and his toe crept around for the bottom step. The sound was clearly not coming from above him, even if that’s what he thought he was hearing, so Lance resolved to just go right up to the door and prove to his stupid, thick-headed brain that there was no reason to get his hopes up, because, fuck all, that’s what was happening, wasn’t it?

Lance halted, two or three steps up already, nails digging into the rotting wooden railing. Would it always be like this? No matter how much he convinced himself that he knew what to expect, that he wouldn’t fall into the same desperate traps of mindless purgatory, that he wouldn’t be able to just grit his teeth and adopt a defeatist stance for once in his goddamn life? Was Lance really that stubborn, that even if he knew he was making things harder on himself than was strictly necessary, his stupid heart or mind or body couldn’t just accept being thoroughly demoralized?

Call him a fucking masochist, because all he could stand to do was make himself relive it again and again and again.

Get ready for another lesson in fucking disappointment, McClain, you self-flagellating idiot, because here we go.

Muscle memory navigated him up the remaining steps without tripping over himself, and Lance stopped once the door was within his fumbling reach, about three steps down.

He rested both hands against the surface, lightly at first, and gradually pressing his weight into it. Lance was only slightly surprised to realize he was crying, fat, ugly tears running down his cheeks.

“See? You’re alone. Nothing. There.” He shoved against the door during each cadence, as if he could hammer the nail into his own goddamn head.
Scratch scratch scratch scratch scratch!

Lance nearly toppled right the fuck over.

Scratch scratch scratch scratch --

It wasn’t stopping, and it hadn’t disappeared -- it was getting louder and more frantic?

“H-Hello?” His voice was hoarse, but that hardly mattered at the moment.

**SCRATCH SCRATCH SRTCH!**

Was someone actually out there? Maybe Nadia had taken pity on him? Or was it a test from his Aunt to see if he’d try to call for someone to let him out? Yeah, that wasn’t happening. Instead, Lance lowered his voice and tried his best listen to communicate with his maybe-maybe-not imaginary friend.

Lance cleared his throat. “N-Nadia, if that’s you, I’m okay. I don’t want you to get in trouble, just, go back upstairs.”

The incessant tapping finally stopped, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Okay, he wasn’t crazy, it was responding to his voice. That was reassuring. And it stopped… so, yeah, it must have been Nadia. His heart felt a little fuller knowing that she was worried about him, but the slight comfort was quickly overshadowed by the rising surge of panic that came along with talking to someone on the other side. Not seeking help was one of the first rules, and while he didn’t specifically ask for help, he doubted Aunt Hira would choose to see with much distinction there; while some people wore rose-colored glasses, his aunt had a tendency to don black, light-blocking shades instead, ones that painted every defense as an offense and every explanation as an excuse. (And no, they weren’t the kind of sunnies that looked cool as fuck, either. Lance liked to think he was a pretty good judge of that kind of thing.)

Resigned to the next however-many-quintant of solitude, Lance sighed, but he hadn’t even fully turned himself around to start down the stairs when another sound, a distinctive sound, pierced the silence that had become his home for the past however many quintant.

**Click.**

Straight ahead, a sliver of weak light burned his eyes, and instinctively one hand rose to shield himself from the sudden change. It was like breaking the through the surface of the sea after being dragged to its darkest depths, and Lance felt the air leave his lungs, but not in a way where he was being choked, but born, like he’d never had air properly before that moment. It was but a tiny breeze, a fissure in the bleak in-between that he occupied -- a few steps short of freedom and Lance was almost sure he could fucking hear his jaw unhinging, because -- because that was the sound of the door and oh my god what the fuck it’s opening holy shit holy shit --

“Brrt?”

Lance was glad he’d instinctively reached for the bannister, because he definitely would have fallen over. Peeking around the thin opening in the doorway was a twinkling pair of shocking ocean eyes, small and curious, and so like his own it made him gape, jaw flapping uselessly.

The mixture of surprise and disbelief that turned his voice into a weak, feeble thing, heart pounding in his ears.

“B-Blue?”
The kitten from a few days ago, the very same one who had taken off like a thief in the night with a
Blum in her teeth, was now seated in the doorway, poking her tiny head into the cellar. With soft
illumination at her back, she was little more than a black silhouette, displaying shocking blue eyes
bright despite the weak light. Instinctually, Lance’s gaze flickered up, trying to gauge the time of day
based off the light and coloration bleeding through the kitchen. It was late, nearly nighttime. The sun
was already mostly set by the looks of it, but a few weak rays of daytime clung obstinately to the
kitchen interior. The curtains were drawn on the far window, and Lance could just glean the curving
sky, stained in the softest tones of autumn -- gentle golds and rusty oranges and pale purples, all
blended together into a calming elixir of dusk, the kiss of twilight dusted over every surface.

Shaking his head, Lance clenched the hand not supporting himself on the staircase into a fist and
pushed the cellar door open, half-expecting to find his aunt on the other side, leering at him.

There was no one. The kitchen, the house -- it was all silent. Lance still didn’t know what day it was,
but his family must have gone up to the castle already for the ball.

He was alone? …Well, not quite.

Blue pushed her small forehead up against Lance’s ankle, emitting a soft, rumbling purr in the most
fond display he’d been subject to in a long time. The affection turned his knobby knees weak, and in
a heap of limbs, Lance sank to the floor of the kitchen. His eyes were painfully adjusting to the return
of light, blinking through tears of amazement and gratitude and confusion because -- what the actual
hell was going on?

As if sensing his distress, Blue chirped happily at him, if Lance could even call the sound that. It was
like, an extremely shortened meow, and he swore the kitten was looking at him with a smile. An
almost smug look, like, um, duh, I just saved you! Give me lots of pets, please, thanks.

He reached out a trembling hand to scratch her ears, and her purring intensified. She was so
obviously pleased with herself, and Lance the moment his fingers wound into her soft fur he could
immediately feel that Blue was pleased with herself. It was hard to explain because he was just
strokling her tiny head in gratitude, but the interaction felt like more than that… it was, deeper? Was
that the right word? No, it was bigger, more significant than that -- the touch was... belonging, like,
for all the fucked up wrongs and rights, all the sleepless nights and mistakes, all the smiles and the
bruises and the fears and wants his live had gifted or neglected him in seventeen years -- it had been
building up to this moment. It was potent, raw energy that crackled beneath his fingertips with
potential he’d couldn’t even begin to understand.

It was like getting to know himself in a stranger, a feeling of familiarity that was impossible. It was
an unbelievable conclusion to an insane set of of circumstances -- call it an accident or coincidence or
fate, if you want -- but at the end of the day it amounted to same the impossible truth that Lance
needed to be with Blue, needed to be found by her, needed to be freed by her.

Never before, not when he’d been wedged on his family’s couch, or marveling in the comfort of
Hunk’s bakery, or laughing beneath the stars with an annoying royal, had Lance ever felt like he’d
belonged more than he did, right there, right then, with a creature that couldn’t understand a word he
of what he said, but somehow reached out and pushed against his soul -- her little rumbling was a
nudge against his heart, tapping at the cage of his ribs that said I'm here.

Lance wanted to thank her, but his lips were sewn shut. Instead, a dam of emotions spilled over that
amounted to an ache so strong he knew Blue felt it too.

Was she the one feeling it, and sharing in the pain with him, or had he felt these things himself, and
she was simply drawing them out?
Both were impossible, not that that seemed to matter at the moment. It didn’t stop the feelings from being any more real.

Truth was, Lance wasn’t fine.

Nothing was okay.

Being thrown into a cellar with cold for company and a path leading to nowhere but the bottom of a bottle he never even wanted to open was not -- it was not okay. Being treated like a nuisance, a troublemaker, a bad-person -- a mistake, a fuck up, an idiot -- it was not okay.

He could lie to himself ten ways to Sunday, deny and ignore the fact that he was miserable, but the truth was he wasn’t okay, and he hadn’t been in a long time.

And Blue -- Blue knew. Somehow. She was sorry that it happened to him. She was filling him with sympathy, compassion, kindness, and love. Well-deserved things, she told him, because happiness wasn’t a commodity to be bought and hoarded by those for could afford it. It was earned. Earned by the most beautiful things in life, the things that could have ruined him but couldn’t because he was strong.

It was hard for him to hear it -- feel it -- because Lance had never felt strong before in his life, but when the feeling was being poured straight into his heart like adrenaline pumping through his veins, it was hard for him to feel anything but truth.

Tears were falling faster, harder, and with joy now. Lance continued to rake his fingers gently behind Blue’s ears, trying to focus on the feeling. His heart was still buzzing with something not unlike panic, but the anxiety was tempered somehow, like a kettle set to boil but the whine of furious steam never came.

With the initial shock to his system of climbing out of the cellar over, Lance tried to collect himself, but it wasn’t easy. Besides the mildly overwhelming fact that he’d just formed a mind-altering, soul-fusing bond with a stray animal, Lance was still struggling to remaster sensations. They were, in general too much; syncing up his body and mind once again was strange and slow. His skin felt dirty, eyes crusted by restless bouts sleep and dried tears, his ears strained against the widened silence of the kitchen compared to the cramped quiet of the cellar. Silence was silence, but even so, the nature of the quiet was undeniably different when filling in the corners a hushed house rather being trapped in a muted box. Either way, this brand of silence was much more calming, more… open. He could still taste the too-sweet wine in the back of his throat, but it was mingled now with fresh air from the kitchen window that had been left open.

Once he’d managed to reestablish himself in the house, carefully, gently, Lance’s eyes returned to Blue herself. There was a soft reflection in her gaze that almost made him jump back, and he’s certain that if Blue hadn’t so effectively calmed him down, he would have done just that.

His -- his cheek mark.

It was glowing.

Out of instinct, his hand flew back from stroking Blue’s head and instead traced his mark, frantic, like he’d be able to feel the blue energy as it pulsed beneath his skin.

“Am I… supposed to do something? Does this mean something?”

The inexplicable bond he felt for the creature before him seemed to thrum in the back of his head, and no sooner did he feel the weight of Blue there did a weird, metaphysical sort of tug pull him right
up to his feet. Blue craned her neck up to watch him. He was still trembling, but strangely, he also felt better than he had in weeks, like she’d healed him not only in mind but in body, too.

Once upright, his eyes landed on the door across the kitchen, and an emotion so sudden and intense struck him that he felt like he’d gotten whiplash.

*I need to leave.*

The desire hit him like an arrow through his chest, violent and fatalistic as it buried itself deep between his ribs. He couldn’t stay there another minute. This didn’t feel like Blue telling him or leading him -- but empowering him. And, sure, Lance had his doubts -- a very vocal part of his consciousness was screaming at him to stop playing pretend, to stop indulging in what was clearly his break with reality. That voice was trying to shake sense into him, scolding him that leaving the house *while already in trouble* was the most stupid, reckless thing he could ever do, and he would get in even more trouble once it was all over, but *fuck* that, because his legs were already moving, straining to carve a path away from the house, away from the kitchen, away from that cellar.

Lance needed to get *away.*

And so he ran, through the back yard because that was the closest door. He ran and passed Kaltenecker’s stall and could have cried because, god, what was he *doing?* If he left her behind his aunt would sell her or worse, but right then it just *didn’t* matter, he could feel Blue at his heels and he *had to go* and he *had to go now.*

Woods, sticks, and animals flew by, and cracking twigs and sharp bushes and jutting rocks and *god he doesn’t have any shoes this was a terrible idea* but he could care less because it was better than going back into that cellar, better than spending one more fucking minute in that house. He watched Blue, small though she was, with laser-focus as she started to pull ahead of him, and before Lance could bother to think again about how foolish this was, he was *laughing.* Laughing and running faster after her, chasing her and trying to outrun her only to find they were perfectly matched, and he wasn’t even surprised. He didn’t think he would want it any other way.

His muscles were burning and his legs were *on fire* with greedy gulps of sharp, autumn air, and all Lance could do was laugh even more. It was only once his body couldn’t go any longer than Blue began to slow, and so he did accordingly, coming first to a jog and then an exhausted walk through the patchy trees.

Lance watched Blue dart out of sight for the first time since they’d sprinted from the house, but it wasn’t hard to see where she’d gone. Just a few feet to his right was a stone edifice, hollowed by its masons Mother Nature and Father Time into the shape of a crag or cave, but with a slight dropdown. The opening was only perhaps four feet tall, but it was clear from the way he saw a gray tail disappear from view that it opened into something larger.

Lance sat down on the matted earth and swung his legs in first, sort of folding-limboing his torso and head until he felt his toes finally reach something solid. Chilly, but firm, he allowed himself to plant both feet before ducking the rest of his body head into the private nook in the middle of the forest.

There wasn’t anything divine or heartstopping to behold when he stood up, not like he’d felt with Blue earlier when he could sense her tied to his soul. Instead, the little… shrine? Temple? Whatever it was, it was humble and simple, cool-white stone smoothed out into an oblong shape. There was perhaps half-a-foot clearance for Lance to stand up straight without hitting his head. He wondered if the rock was actually some sort of crystal, like those that hung from the ceilings of his aunt’s home, enchanted to emit their own soft light. The light here was much weaker than any crystals marketed to people across the realm to light their homes, but it was strong enough he could make out a small dais
On the ground a few feet in front of him.

Blue was curled up on top of the platform across the small cave, and her shining gaze was turned to him, almost lazily. Lance inched forward and carefully came to kneel before the wide obelisk, like some strange altar to a private god. There were five perfectly shaped rivets in the stone. In each five matching timepieces were flesh against the surface, each unlabeled, and each cast in a different style. Each watch was surrounded by a band bands or chain of silver. (*Real silver? Holy shit*). The hands of the watch were each hidden behind a concave piece of glass, all tinted a different colors. Perhaps most unusual was that, even in the hush of dusk, Lance could detect no quiet gears working beneath their surfaces, no *tocks* to measure the ticks as they passed. Instead, in perfect silence, in perfect harmony, he watched in awe as each timepiece seamlessly moved in sync to an unknown source, a metronome to which Lance could only fathom one explanation.

“*Magic,*” he breathed. Blue let out a low sound, something he suspected to be affirmative, and it made his skin itch with interest and curiosity.

From the left side to the right, the timepieces were red, blue, black, yellow, and green. The styles varied respectively, and, call Lance biased all you want, but the blue one was *definitely* the best looking of them all. The red and blue were similar in that they were both wristwatch fashions, but the band for the red watch was thin and came to a point where the ends met, so sharp it looked easily like it could easily break the skin if the wearer wasn’t careful. The face of the timepiece itself was so small there was scarcely room for numbers, just the two hands moving in time with the four others beside it. The blue watch, similarly, was fit for a wrist, but had a slightly wider band and four solid numbers at twelve, three, six and nine — *like a proper watch should,* he thought to himself. Along the rim of the band, where the blue crystal hugged the silver base, a small gauge with tic marks along the outside was set into the face with a simple dial that appeared to rotate. Lance was no expert, but he was pretty sure this designated it as a diving watch.

The yellow and green watches on the other end similarly matched, but these were both pocket watches. The one with the transparent golden face was large and displayed each of the twelve numbers clearly, the hands that marked the dobosh and ticks easy to read. It was a functional piece of work, certainly, though it seemed too heavy for Lance’s taste, and the accompanying silver chain was banded with thick loops of silver. Beside it, the emerald watch one was oddly charming with a long, thin chain that clasped to a minimalistic face. There was a twelve on the top and strong pointed hands, but no accompanying markings or talleys around the perimeter to make telling the time any easier.

The black timepiece was the most bizarre and certainly the largest of them. Seated directly in the middle, it was nestled in a proverbial crater if compared to the smaller green or red watches. The silver rim wash fashioned without any opening in the silver outside to attach a chain or loop a band; instead, it reminded Lance of a locket without the accompanying necklace, and the outward face of the accessory doubled as a watch. The black quartz-like material was branded by bright white hands and simple tick marks, no numbers, and had a small clasp on one side that made him wonder, perhaps it was some sort of locket? And if so, what was hidden within?

“What *is* this place?” Lance wondered out loud, slowing dragging his gaze over each of the timepieces and back to Blue. “Why am I here?”

Eyes narrowed, the kitten held his gaze for several seconds before finally pushing on the corresponding blue watch with her paw. Her ministrations didn’t dislodge it from the perfectly cut array in the stone meant to hold it, but Lance figured what she meant.

“I liked that one too,” he smiled softly and reached for the watch, carefully slipping it on his wrist.
His fingers were shaking and it wasn’t easy to secure without help, but when he finally managed to clasp the thing shut, he nearly wretched it off the moment it closed around his thin wrist.

A burst of pain seared his nerves from the moment it connected, a bone-deep fire that licked between the cartilage of his joints and set all his blood aflame. From the pressure point in the vein at his wrist, coursing all the way from his toes to his neck, the sensation spread like spilt ink on a page, steady as it worked its way over and across his body. When the feeling reached his face, however, the pain changed from a flash of discomfort to pulsing, white-hot agony, like the hand of the devil had reached through an inferno and was determined to drag him through it, but settled on peeling away part of his flesh, but only -- only on his face, one side of his face -- and then the pain was gone.

It was over as quickly as it began.

Lance barely managed not to sob, and if it hadn’t come and gone so suddenly he had no doubts he would be writhing on the ground. As it was, he had only broken into sheen of sweat, hands anxiously patting around his face in a sort of horrified realization.

His other cheek -- his other Altean mark -- it was there, burned into him. Literal magic had fucking tattooed it into his skin, and Lance felt dizzy from the sudden rush of it. The glow in his left cheek mark had not faded during his trek with Blue into the forest, and he could see now two light flickers in Blue’s eyes as she watched him carefully.

The watch fit perfectly, of course, but Lance hardly even cared about that. Hard to pay much attention when your body was getting fucking consumed by invisible, magical flames.

Panting, Lance half-laughed in the absolute sense of what the fuck is going on.

In spite of the pain, this was still Lance, so it seemed only fitting to force out a joke.

“Heh. What do you know, Blue? I was thinking it was about time I got a watch.”

His feline guide made an unassuming hissing sound and padded off the dais, leaping from stone edges protruding from the walls with practiced ease. She maneuvered herself out of the strange watch-sanctuary-temple-thing without skipping a beat. Lance automatically made to follow her with about as much grace as someone with his gangly limbs could managed, using his arms to hoist himself back up to the forest floor and sort of side-turning in the process, ultimately ending up face down into a pile of wet leaves.

Which wasn’t a big deal, until he lifted his head and came nose-to-nose with a fucking mouse.

He let out an alarmed little yelp, scurrying back and falling on his ass. Thankfully, he managed not to fall straight back into the cave, but it was a close call.

Blue stood at attention, and beside her were four pairs of beady-pairs of eyes, all lined up next to each other and looking at him expectantly.

“Okay. I’m -- yep. Okay.” Lance shook his head, because seated before him was Blue with an even smaller audience of four adorable mice.

He leaned forward to better examine them, wrinkling his nose as he said, “Aren’t you supposed to hate each other or something? Cats and mice?”

The one nearest to Blue was a large yellowish one, its front paws folded over its belly. Lance was vaguely reminded of how a person might sit after eating a very satisfying meal. The next two were medium sized, one pinkish-red and light blue, both with fiery, striking red eyes. They were fidgeting
and scratching their ears while their prehensile tails were dueling it out behind them -- Lance didn’t
know if that was happening intentionally or not, and he guessed it didn’t really matter. Lastly, and
the smallest, was another blue creature. This one seemed painfully sweet and mild, wide eyes shining
up at him as if they might break into beautiful tears any moment.

It was cute, but he was so confused.

“Blue, what the **fuck**.” It wasn’t even a question, just an --

*[Be calm, my paladin.]*

*Holy shit.*

“W-wait, you can TALK?!!”

Blue’s head tilted to one side, though her mouth remained unmoving. Lance wasn’t sure if it was
more unnerving that the voice had just rumbled deep in his own conscious mind, or that the timbre
with which she answered was otherworldly and golgothian, not anything like the adorable kitten she
appeared to be.

*[Yes and no. I can communicate with you, but I do not need words to do so.]*

“I -- what -- okay, deep breath, Lance.” He tried to do as he bid, though the inhale was shaky and
the exhale came out as a wheeze. “This is -- you’re fine, you’re okay, you’re just hallucinating. It
was fun while it lasted. Maybe that wine was bad. Can wine even go bad? Or doesn’t it get better
with age or something?”

mice that look like they wanted to be his pals? A little weird, but they’re cute, so he could get over it.
Literally fucking *searing a magical mark into his face*, likely permanently? Um, ouch, but okay.

*Telepathically communicating with a magical cat that was trying to tell him to calm down after all of
the aforementioned fucking insanity has already happened?*

He had to draw the line *somewhere.*

“**Brrrrrrrrrt,**” Blue said -- in a tone that Lance would’ve bet his new magical watch was one of
protest.

If she was trying to convince Lance that he wasn’t crazy, she was doing a pretty bang-up job.

Gesturing wildly with his hands, Lance practically shouted. “Okay -- okay. What is going *on?* First
you get me out of the cellar, and then we ran through the woods and I’m pretty sure I mind-melded
with you? And like, what is this watch about? *And you can fucking talk?!* I’m so confused, also, is
your name really Blue? Also, what day is it?”

Glancing at the timepiece on his arm, Lance realized he hadn’t even bothered to actually *check* the
time in all the ticks he’d spent ogling the collection in the little shrine. It was just past six-thirty.

*[You are my paladin, and the name you have given is the name I shall accept.]*

Lance, the model example of staying on topic, answered with: “Okay, but to be fair, I tried to call
you something else at first and you hissed at me.”

*[...It was an objectively bad name, my paladin.]*
He snorted and crossed his arms. “Okay, fine. Why do you keep calling me your paladin? What does that even mean? Also, if you were able to talk this whole time, couldn’t you have warned me before I seared a goddamn scar right across my face?”

"Your mark has always been there. The magic of the timepiece has merely let it surface. I can only communicate with you while you wield the watch."

Lance muttered something about how a warning still would have been nice, but decided to let it go. Given that he was telepathically communicating with a fucking magical cat, he figured there were some things he’d just overlook for the time being.

All in all, it didn’t take very long for Blue to explain herself to Lance. Any of the times in which he would have usually interrupted or questioned something in a normal conversation, Blue slowed her explanation and adjusted to allow for his needs. Of all the things Lance has ever done, many of which would rank as “odd” or “unusual,” having a half-aural-half-telepathic conversation with a magical cat about magical shit and guardian spirits definitely rang in at a Category 10, Threat Level Bat-Shit-Crazy, but, hey, it’s not his fault. It’s hard to argue when the cat in question was able to read your mind and knew exactly what to say to placate your doubts.

“So…” Lance was now leaning against a tree, staring at the darkening sky. The sun had fully vanished over the horizon and night proper was beginning to settle. Blackness hadn’t quite overtaken the skies, still stained something like a cerulean afterthought, bleeding slowly into the indigio of night. “Let me just make sure I got all of that. So you’re… my guardian, and I’m your paladin. You protect me, and I protect… time?”

"The universe,"

Blue corrected patiently.

“Right.” He coughed, the silver band on his wrist suddenly feeling much heavier. “So I protect… the universe, that’s how you put it? Okay. Um… So you came to me because you felt me slipping away, and that would’ve thrown off the… universal… balance-thing. And now I’m supposed to… do what exactly?”

"Live."

Subconsciously, Lance began scratching the skin around the watch until it was almost raw, at which point he realized there was a new vibration in his head -- like a gentle melody serenading his heart.

Blue was trying to… calm him?

"Yes."

Slowly, Lance let out an exhale. He couldn’t say her efforts weren’t effective.

“Blue, you can literally sense my thoughts, right? I mean, you have to see how this is like, insane, right? I don’t need to tell you that I have like, a million doubts right now, but not… in you. I’m just… I’m not sure if you really want me to be the one to, uh, wear your watch, I guess. The universe and time and stuff all seems really important and I get that, but I don’t think I should be the --”

"You are the one worthy to carry my watch."

Her rumbling tug on the bond was firmer this time, no less patient but irrevocably sure.

Lance chuckled and knelt, finally looking back down to the tiny physical form that somehow carried the spirit of this fucking supermagical universe guardian.

“I…” he couldn’t help but smile, the warmth of their strange clandestine link making his whole body
hum in contentment, like he himself was purring beneath his skin, confident and assured that, whatever fresh hell lie ahead of him, Blue knew what to do, she would guide him -- guide them.

Together.

“Okay. Just tell me what I need to do.”

The moment the words passed his lips, that same pulsing energy that had made his marks glow began to ripple over his skin, and while Lance would be the first to admit that he was anxious, he also wasn’t exactly afraid. Just, surprised, because a sort of vapor began to form around his body and clung to his skin, but it wasn’t humid or sticky like it looked -- indeed, it was soft like he imagined a cloud might feel, impossibly plush and warm as it materialized over his arms, legs, feet, and even his face.

Without a mirror, Lance could only inspect what was happening to him, but he felt different, refreshed and clean and full. He scarcely had the chance to linger on the feeling before the four mice and a particularly large bundle of leaves on the forest floor that had already begun their return to earth in various states of decomposition all became enveloped in that same, cobalt mist that had clung to his body like a second skin. Incorporeal shadows began to twist and take shape around him, and in a matter of ticks from the vapor was born the effigies of four horses and an accompanying beautiful, expensive-looking carriage.

The body of the cart was deep navy, and in the darkening light of night it looked almost black, but the curvature of the wood and metal caught reflections of color in the forest with shades of the sea, slate and sapphire and admiral and frost all bleeding into one another, coming to a head at a door in the side that looked about the perfect height for him to clamber through without bumping his head.

He blinked down at himself, touching the mask covering his face and inspecting the wares wrapping his figure. “Wait, seriously? This is what we’re doing?”

The transformation of his ratty and unrefined self into a set of impossibly debonair raiments with a resplendent stagecoach had lasted only a matter of ticks. Lance had barely taken a few breaths before realizing that there hadn’t been an answer nestled comfortably in his brain.

The question was somewhat rhetorical because, clearly, this was exactly what Blue was intending for him to do. However, when he glanced around the twigs and branches around him and found no Blue to hedge his complaints with, he started to panic.

Blue had vanished like smoke on the wind, and at first it had sent a shock of fear through his system that she was actually gone, but after a moment of blindly searching his mind he was able to feel her, subtle and sort of… diffused, in a way. He wanted to ask her what had happened, but then the answer was in his mind as soon as he thought the question, that same nudge that said I’m here, and Lance knew.

She was… this all was her. The energy -- the transformation -- it was all her.

“Why -- I mean, why are we doing this, Blue? I know you said live, but that could mean a lot of things -- the Ball, though?” Lance was biting his lip, craning his neck around to try to get a better look at his clothing; he had never worn anything even remotely close to this before.

She wasn’t able to answer him like this, apparently -- at least, not directly? Lance received a sort of weird esoteric sense of Blue’s presence rather than any direct sort of affirmation, like she was… prodding him in a way that said yes but didn’t say why or how.
Nervous, Lance babbled to himself, at least comforted by the fact that it seemed Blue hadn’t left him alone completely. “I-I mean, I maybe… I wanted to go and stuff, just a little, but…? What does this have to do with the universe?”

Two of the horses at the head of the carriage nickered restlessly, annoyed by his hesitation, and Lance pursed his lips.

“Well, okay, message received. It’s not like you had to twist my arm…” he grumbled. “But how the heck are you guys even going to get out of the forest?”

The door to the carriage swung open, inviting him into plush cushioned seating of every shade of an aegean dream, and again the answer was presented for him.

“Right… magic.”

Agreeing with Blue had been the easy part.

Following through, however...

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” Lance muttered, his voice drowned out by the loud rumble of the horses. Well, they looked like horses and sounded like horses, but they were really just fucking magical mice that were friends with his magical cat guardian and this is the weirdest fucking day of my life.

And really, Lance wouldn’t have believed he was doing this if the reality of the situation wasn’t fucking screaming at him through every single one of senses: hey, buddy, Lance, pal, look. You’re going to the fucking Ball!

He hadn’t a mirror to get a proper look at himself when he climbed in the carriage -- ah, but the moment he wanted one, it was there. Damn. Magic really was something, wasn’t it?

Lance used the opportunity to properly look himself over -- which, holy shit, he looked good -- and it provided a nice distraction. He admittedly wasn’t too keen on looking out the window and seeing how the hell he was effortlessly gliding through what should be a thicket of trees without a coachman by four magical mice-horses who he hoped for the life of him had a good sense of direction.

Anyway. Lance could only handle so much. Now seemed an appropriate chance to be a little vain; cut him some slack, yeah?

His hair had been artfully swept back, not harshly gelled or greasy but effortlessly coiffed with a single dark strand lazily hanging over his forehead. Blue’s choice of apparel for him seemed to draw heavily from his Altean heritage -- the style reminded him of Princess’s Allura’s gown when he’d seen her in the castle, a masterful arrangement of sharp lines and angles. It wasn’t what he would have ever thought to pick for himself, but Lance trusted Blue’s judgement. To be clear, he fucking loved the outfit, it was just was not what he expected, thinking of Moontow’s offer last Thursday to make him a suit -- it defied and exceeded any expectations he might have ever had for something he could ever wear, and yet here he was.

In a word, he thought he looked rather… posh?

The ensemble was composed of a number of layers -- primarily, a shirt, pants, and cloak -- all dyed in a cool shade of almost icy-blue, with bright yellow accents in stark contrast along the hems, from the collar of the cloak to the point the the sleeve that stopped at his wrist. Really, Lance could only
think to describe the outfit as having the sharpest features of a suit fused with the softer, more elegant, breathable qualities of a gown. The shirt was much finer than any dress shirt Lance had ever worn, but it wasn’t quite what could be described as a blouse, either. Fitted but somehow delicate, the fabric hugged his chest without feeling tight, and it brandished a large misshapen ‘v’ of navy across the front. It had no proper sleeves, but came with gloves that far enough up his arms to make up for the difference, leaving only a few inches of his bicep visible. The watch on his left arm sat snugly atop the fabric. The pants were, accordingly, fitted to perfection, but they too were banded and marked by crisp angels of different shades of blue with a strong band of yellow over the middle of each thigh. Seamlessly, the cloak was clasped over the base of his throat, tapering down his back like a cape while effortlessly settling over his hips. A pair of boots came up to half-calf, the same gentle blue-yellow arcing over his legs, but the base of his toe, almost like an exposed steel-toe, was rich, bright royal blue.

For as impressive as his outfit was, the real showstopper had little to do with actual clothing. An opulent mask veiled the finer features of Lance’s face, including his cheek mark (marks, he corrected… speaking of them in the plural would take some getting used to), by way of creamy fabric gauzed with frosty lace, following a traditional masquerade style with three wings, one on either side of his face and the third reaching a center apex between his brows. Delicate sapphire stones were inlaid in swirls overtop the fabric, extending up and out with the contours of the mask. A greater part of the left side was obscured by a plume of dark, navy juniper blossoms that were gathered delicately around the base of a particularly large gemstone near his temple.

Lance felt that the silken, lovely subterfuge looked more like a work of art, something that would be better suited in a museum rather than resting perfectly over the bridge of his nose, but he couldn’t deny how incredible it made him feel. The soft palette stood out sharply against his complexion, and his freckles fell just beneath the mask like little raindrops. His Altean markings (he forced the plural ‘s’ roughly in his head) were concealed, but only barely.

The clothing, the fresh, clean feeling, his windswept hair, the almost ethereal quality of the mask and how it made his eyes pop and blended smoothly with his dark skin… it made Lance feel pretty.

And just when he thought he was starting to get used to all the cushiony warmth inside the coach and soft brush of fabric all over his body paired with the rise of nervous goosebumps up and down his arms, the carriage stopped.

Shit shit shit shit shit shit.

He was really about to do this.

There were rules, of course. Blue’s urging at the back of his mind as he stumbled out of the carriage fucking gracelessly was preempted by a constant stream of warnings. They weren’t speaking per say, not in the direct telepathic sense anymore, but there were some innate instincts that she’d drilled into him by bleeding their quintessences together (something Lance would come to understand later. He was not pulling fancy Altean magical technicalities out of his ass.)

First, no one will know be able to know who he is by way of the senses -- sight, smell, taste (um?), touch, or feeling. If Lance wanted to share his identity with anyone, he must invite them to do so… whatever the fuck that meant. In any event, he guessed the mask made a little more sense now as he trudged up the steps and noticed that oh, this isn’t a masquerade affair at all, I’m just walking around like a creep in a mask. Cool. Cool cool cool.

Jokes aside, with the mask, Lance was for all intents and purposes still at home, in the cellar, being quiet. As long as he made it back down there after the ball ended but before his aunt had intended to let him go, she would be none the wiser to this whole thing.
Second, Blue was powerful -- not *all* powerful. She could bend some rules here or there to his benefit, like getting him past the security check -- which, by the way, was entirely hilarious to watch. The guy scanning the list’s eyes went crossed momentarily and he just waved Lance through no-problem. It made him feel like a child all over again, sneaking candy from the kitchen with Luis and Rachel.

Third, and finally, the watch now made a lot more sense because part of the problem was Blue could only lend Lance her quintessence for so long. There would become a point where expending her magic was too much, at which point the watch would warn him that he needed to go or his identity would be exposed, but as long as Blue had some time to rest she would be ready to go again by the next night.

The next night.

*Holy shit.* The realization hit him like a punch to the gut, and Lance stopped dead in his tracks in the middle of a hallway bigger than the market in town, because -- *holy shit.*

There were three nights of the Ball.

He’s going to be doing *this* two more times? *Quiznak.*

Quiznak, quiznak, quiznak.

---

**[KEITH]**

“Happy birthday, your Highness.”

*One hundred seventy-one.*

Keith was counting how many times he heard *that* particular turn of phrase. He was confident he could break two-hundred if he stayed still for a few more minutes.

At present, the Prince was taking a break from dancing -- largely in part due to the fact that Keith was confident that whoever had the displeasure of asking him to dance next would end up with his knife buried in their intestines.

Yes, a break seemed like the safest option for everyone involved. And for the record, no, it wasn’t turning out to be a very “happy” birthday by any means. Not that the fake fucking smile plastered on his face was very telling of his bad mood. Keeping up appearances.

He sighed.

Beside him, Princess Allura was positively radiant in a form-fitting, baby pink gown with luxurious looking white-platinum accessories, and she echoed his sigh with an even heavier one of her own. They were linked at the arm like a good and proper bunch of heterosexuals. Keith was wearing a well-tailored suit in dark tones -- almost-black pants and jacket with a vest that was just a shade or two lighter. He wore a dark, proper tie tucked underneath. Keith had allowed one of his mother’s ladies’ maids try to wrangle his hair for all of five minutes before politely asking them to fuck off and dealing with it himself… which amounted to him doing an impressive amount of *nothing.*

Keith wasn’t in a great mood today, alright? And, okay, he might say that a lot -- fuck, he probably said he was in a bad mood at least twice a day -- but today, he *really* meant it.

After sleeping for just a few hours that morning, heading down to break his fast, Keith promptly
fucked back off to bed until he was forced to get up and start getting ready for the Ball. That alone had taken hours, gifting the Prince plenty of time to think about the events of the previous day.

About Lance.

By now, most of the guests had arrived. It was a little past seven, he guessed. There had been a big cluster-fuck right at five when things officially began, endless entrances and announcements. Anyone who entered had to do so through the Grand Ballroom (meaning they got through Shiro’s frankly ridiculous measures of security) and were declared publicly as ‘in attendance’ at the top of the grand staircase: Lord and Lady blah blah blah, Duke and Duchess of who-fucking-cares, et cetera.

When Keith had made his formal arrival, he had done so with his mother on his arm, and Allura shortly after with her father.

That, at least, had been nice.

His mother looked quite pretty in a rich-purple gown, so dark it was almost black, and it clung to her muscular frame. Though, to be fair, Keith wouldn’t have been a good son if he didn’t think it was a little too tight, right? The low-cut back set her lilac skin alight in contrast to the dark fabric, earning her a few too many sets of wandering eyes (read: any) for Keith’s liking, but, she looked happy and he supposed that was what mattered.

And, really, it’s not like the Queen couldn’t handle herself. Keith almost wanted to see what would happen if someone tried to make a move on her -- Kolivan bet they’d lose a hand, Shiro, ever the joker, had guessed it would be their whole arm. Keith just assumed she’d murder them on the spot.

After the first hour of nonstop greetings and thank-you’s and welcoming, Keith had retreated to one of the lesser ballrooms, dragging a nonplussed Allura with him. The whole party had basically blocked off an entire wing in the castle, taking over no fewer than four ballrooms spanning three floors, the entire outside terrace along the Western part of the castle, two rooms specifically for dining and a litany of cocktail tables spread out through each hall and room from corner to corner, hollowing out plenty of room for dancing in the center of the ballrooms.

The Grand Ballroom, where the entrances were announced, was now occupied mostly by people seeking to dance, so dance they did. Keith had gotten through the heavy foot-traffic and danced with all the people he was expected to, and some of it wasn’t even that bad. Allura was a fine dancer, and to the surprise of absolutely no one they danced with each other first and frequently. After that, he’d had chances to dance with Shay, his Mother, Romelle, and about fifty other women. A few times, he could barely keep from gagging over some of them -- age was no discriminating factor, it seemed, for people who wanted to marry him. Go figure that even with the publicity of his and Allura’s “relationship” now being advertised across the kingdom, he was still expected to dance with women who were old enough to be his mother, or wore enough makeup to be mistaken for harlots, or had doused himself in so much perfume it made his nostrils burn.

The food had already been coming out in waves for well over an hour, and it was one of the few things that Keith managed to be excited about, thinking fondly of Hunk in the kitchens. Even with the delicious temptations, his appetite sat like a hard rock in the base of his gut. Keith settled for just one of everything, not able to indulge quite as happily as he wanted given the circumstances and his mood.

Yesterday, Keith conceded, had not been a complete waste. He realized it after having enough time to let his disappointment burn itself out. Once it was through his system, Keith just felt angry and gross and guilty.
He had that he was unfairly blaming Lance in his disappointment from the previous night. Keith wasn’t a fucking child, though, and he needed to take responsibility for his own actions -- oh, yes, he was still angry, just, not with Lance.

In general. At everything.

At himself, most of all,

Keith was the sort of angry that made music sound off-key by default, the sort of angry that made his tone short and temper shorter. He was the sort of angry that hurt bluntly instead of festering, like a stab wound rather than a disease. He was the sort of angry that made his skin feel like sandpaper and his insides like a volcano, burning and searing the blood beneath his veins. But instead of spilling over into waves of magma, Keith exploded into clouds of ash, his rage painting everything black.

It wasn’t like he asked to feel this way. In fact, when Keith was younger, before his father vanished, he wanted desperately to be a better, balanced person. A happy person. Angry people used to scare him. He didn’t like when members of the Council shouted at meetings, or when guards swore each other out after practice, or when his mother cursed the letter she received saying Dad was dead. Anger seemed to him like poison, spreading and ruining anything it touched, and Keith had once been naive enough to think will-power and positivity alone would be enough to keep it from mucking up his own insides.

After what happened with the King, he avoided trying to develop any attachments that went beyond knowing someone’s name. If there was no one around, who was he supposed to get angry with? No one. Simple. Keith had it all figured out, floating on cloud fucking nine for the better part of two years, friendless and doing just fine.

Then he remembered, wait a fucking minute, I’m a Prince. Taking care of people was literally his duty.

So Keith grew into whatever he called this monstrosity of a personality he had today. All he knew was he never wanted to be like this, bitter, mean-spirited, angry. Always so angry. He never wanted to blame other people, but Keith didn’t know how to deal with the way he felt, and when he felt it was just so much -- too much -- and the things he did and said when angry stained his world like spilt blood.

He never learned anything else, anything better, so here he was. Angry and impulsive and he couldn’t blame Lance for staying away from him. He was a fucking bully, petty, and mean. Lance was kind and sincere and made friends like Keith made enemies -- that is to say naturally and suddenly -- so Lance should continue to stay as far fucking away from him as he could.

Just thinking about this made the Prince want to punch the next person he saw -- Galran, Altean, man, or woman, didn’t matter -- because, stars above, Keith wanted to hate Lance. He wanted to direct these disgusting, seething feelings that clung to him like icher and blackened his insides towards Lance, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t hate Lance, even if he tried.

And trust him on this, Keith tried.

“Your Highness! Happy Birthday, what a special day!”

One-hundred seventy-two.

Yes, happy fucking birthday, Keith. Good job. You lived for another shitty year. Congratulations, way to go, mazel fucking tov.
At his shoulder, a new voice caught his ear. “You look terrible.”

Pidge was glowering beside him, her arms crossed over her chest. She looked almost as unhappy as he felt.

Princess Allura exhaled a small laugh while Keith rolled his eyes. “Hello, Pidge. Your gown looks lovely -- the color complements your skin tone.”

Pidge grumbled something like a thank you, but Keith could tell she was trying hard not to grimace (or, more likely, cuss), because while he did agree -- the pale green color of the dress Pidge was wearing did actually look nice -- it was evident that she was uncomfortable to have been forced to wear such a thing.


Allura, to her credit, looked extremely confused, but merely smiled at their unusual relationship.

“Aye! There’s my favorite sister.” Another voice crowded them, coming up on Allura’s side. Pidge automatically groaned, but Keith felt his face split into a small smile.

“Hey, Matt.” He greeted, awkwardly accepting the fist bump Matt offered him. The man made a show of showering Princess Allura with all manner of praise, and she rolled her eyes good-naturedly and allowed him to place a kiss into her knuckles.

Matt snatched a drink from a passing waiter and downed it in a single gulp. “Have you guys been hiding over here long?”

Keith shrugged. “Maybe ten minutes. Just needed a break from dancing.”

The Princess rolled her head on her shoulders, sounding tired. “Yes, being on your feet for hours like this really takes the life out of you, I’m afraid. Nothing like dancing with lots of uncoordinated brutes to really get you in the partying spirit.”

Matt brightened immediately. “I’m no brute, Princess, let me sweep you away! I’d be so good for you!”

Pidge snorted. “You’ve got exactly one penis too many to be the Princess’s type, idiot.”

Undeterred, Matt pulled his long hair out of the braid he’d been sporting and tousled it ridiculously, like he was some sort of pin-up model. “I can be whatever the Princess wants~”

“Are you sure you’re a scholar and not a fool, Matthew?” Another voice, deceptively kind for the accompanying words, said over Keith, Allura and Pidge’s laughter.

“Oh, Sir Adam! And don’t you look dashing?” Princess Allura beamed at him, nodding her head in greeting. Keith had to agree: Adam had gone with a formal military regalia instead of a traditional tux or high-quality suit. His uniform was almost entirely white with golden accents, and it suited him nicely.

Matt let out a huff of air that blew the bangs from his face, addressing Adam’s teasing grin. “Uh, again, I can be whatever the Princess wants. Fool, scholar, naked --”

“Please, stop,” Pidge put a hand up. “I regret saying anything on the subject in the first place.”

Keith nodded solemnly. “Sorry, Matt, I’m with Pidge on this. Thinking about you naked was not
exactly what I had in mind for a break.” He turned his attention slightly towards Adam.

“Shiro’s not with you?”

The man’s grinned widened. “Oh, he was. There was some sort of security problem that he got inevitably tangled up in. A guest list mistake or something. I think it’s already sorted but the guard ended up getting dizzy so Takashi’s finding a replacement so he can go lay down.”

“Who was the guest?” Pidge tilted her head.

Adam just shrugged and looked around the room. “Don’t know, they got it all figured out. I think the guard just got overheated or something.”

“Mmm, Shiro’s probably just being dramatic,” Matt stroked his chin thoughtfully, eyes wandering the crowd. His attention flickered and he snapped his fingers before turning back to them. “Oh, yeah! Around ten I’m going to sneak downstairs to see Hunk. Anyone wanna join?”

“Me. Please, for the love of god, get me out of here for awhile,” Keith deadpanned, and Matt chuckled and nodded.

“How about you Princess?”

She pursed her lips before settling on a shrug. “Mmm. Perhaps. Fetch me nearer to the time and we’ll see how I’m feeling?”

Adam waved them off politely and started to make his way back where he’d come from. “I’ll let Shiro know not to have a heart-attack once you all disappear.”

“Wait! Shiro should come! You both should!” Matt called back, launching himself after Adam, crowing loudly above the music.

Keith, Pidge and Allura shared a quick snicker as people dived out of the rowdy Holt’s path before another familiar face poked through the crowds and headed their way.

“Hello, Coran,” the Princess beamed. He nodded to the three of them, mustache all atwitter with merriment.

“Evening, Princess! Prince! Pidge! My three favorite P’s, all together!”

“It’s really A-K-P, since Princess and Prince aren’t actually their names,” Pidge corrected with a roll of her eyes, but she was smiling. “Your mustache is looking extra… full tonight?”

Keith had to fight down a laugh when a sudden spring of tears pooled at the corners of Coran’s eyes, literally about to burst into tears over the compliment.

“A-Anyway,” the man said, dotting his cheeks with a kerchief. “I was seeking out the Princess to see if she might join this old fellow in a dance?”

“Aw, of course, Coran,” she smiled and dropped Keith’s arm, swiftly taking up the Altean’s instead. “You, Father, and Prince Keith are amongst the few men here who can dance without squashing me.”

“I’m flattered, m’dear. How about some fresh air, while we’re at it…” Keith heard Coran’s voice trail off as he led them towards the third floor stairwell; heading towards the terrace, he assumed.

After a brief, though comfortable silence, Pidge nodded towards a group of women around Keith’s
age who were gossiping and shooting them both glances. “Which one of us do you think is more unapproachable? I like to think we’re pretty evenly matched.”

“Hmm. I want to say me, but…” Keith gave Pidge a once-over look, his hand hovering towards the knife in his belt. “I think people know I won’t actually murder them, even if I look like I want to. You, on the other hand… less predictable.”

Laughing, Pidge nodded her assent. “Good answer.”

One of the women from the chattering group, a statuesque Puigian with dark skin and darker eyes broke off from the group and strode confidently in their direction.

“You know,” Pidge looked down at the buff of her nails, unimpressed. “I’d ask if you want to dance to help protect you from some of these leechers, but, you know, fuck you.”

Keith forced his scowl not to flicker to a grin -- though it might seem unusual to most, Keith could tell it was Pidge’s way of trying to cheer him up.

“Fuck you too, Pidge,” he said with a dark chuckle, affixing his best What-No-No-I-Don’t-Hate-This-Don’t-Be-Silly face.

Begrudgingly, Keith allowed himself to be led back to the Grand Ballroom floor, slowly working his way through dancers in hopes that he might at least bump into his Mother or Shay or Romelle, all of whom made far better dance partners than random women who threw themselves at him. Hell, if at least some men tried to ask to dance with him, that might at least make for a nice distraction, but the only people who expressed interest to dance with him were those that were supposed to be interested in marrying him; it was well-known that the Prince was expected to marry a woman, so there weren’t exactly many men vying for his hand.

Keith wasn’t a bad dancer. He’d been doing it since he could walk, par for the course when you grow up in a castle, and there were some similarities to the whole practice that he associated with Blade training. Light on his feet, fluid movements, thoughtful pauses -- he could dance well, he just preferred not to.

Especially when every dance partner he found himself with, with the exception of a few familiar, had been primed to give them their personal autobiography in the three-minutes or so it took the music to change to the next song. The usual sorts of opportunist small talk -- their name, lineage, claims to various estates and territories, and if Keith was really lucky, they would even throw in the purity of their family line.

Hah.

“Thank you for the dance, your Highness.” The wiry young Olkari bowed gracefully. “And I wish you a Happy Birthday.”

Two-hundred six.

“Thank you for gifting me with the opportunity,” he answered mechanically, quickly ducking out before the next song could start.

As apologetically as possible, Keith extracted himself from the crowd and declined the invitation of an older human woman from Arus with the promise he would gladly accept a dance with her after he took another chance to rest, seeking desperate refuge along the far wall of the Grand Ballroom again.

Keith grabbed a crystal chalice filled with water from a passing server, asking they leave the dazzling
decanter on the table, and sighed as he lowered the glass from his lips.

Mindlessly, the Prince allowed his gaze to wander over the people dancing and laughing, twinkling like diamonds beneath the blinding glitter of the half-dozen chandeliers overhead. The room itself was golden from floor to ceiling, like someone had smelted down the sun and infused the cosmic essence into the very ignontes that gave structure to this part of the castle. Luxurious purple accents dangled from the ceiling, some baubles of purple fire enchanted to float overhead, making all the shine of the party seem that much more vibrant and alive under their flickering wicks. Beneath those flames, swaying hips and twirling gowns and coordinated movements were all the eidetic image of the painfully superficial.

It took several minutes of studying the crowds for him to realize that there was a strange sort of slowness settling over the dancers, one that did not correspond with the current song ending.

At first, the Prince merely thought it was a product of his own imagination, but it didn’t take long for the ripple of quiet to pass over the heads of almost the entire room. Add the conspicuous sounds of rising voices and...

Scowling, Keith looked across the hall to the Herald, situated appropriately at the top of the stairs. Sure enough, he appeared to be… arguing with someone? Their voices were just barely loud enough to carry over the light orchestra playing in the background, but the scene was enough to capture the attention of most of those in the ballroom. Their exact words were warbled by the light din in the hall, even with the partial quiet of those watching the argument, and Keith was much too far away to get a good look at who was harassing the poor attendant.

He watched in mild interest as the hasseler threw their hands up and adjusted something affixed to their head -- wait, were they wearing a mask?

“My Lords and Ladies, I announce the arrival of the Esteemable Blue Paladin, Castellan of the Family Lions!”

The announcement seemed to annoy “Blue,” who visibly wrung his hands. The hall had fallen almost still, and so Keith was able to just catch the tail-end of what sounded like a... complaint?

“No, no -- we, I’m not -- nevermind!”

And then, the guy shook his head and muttered something before outright fucking running down the stairs, any sense of rectitude abandoned.

To himself, Keith muttered, “who…?”

Whoever they were, they had successfully stumbled their way to the bottom of the stairs and the crowd uneasily resumed the gentle murmur and clinking of crystal glasses and the tap of heels on polished floors. The music, which had softened to accommodate Blue’s entrance, resumed its regular pitch. Keith took a slow drink from his water and dismissed the odd moment, assuming Paladin was a lesser family name that he’d never bothered to learn.

“Make way--”

Keith blinked, head shooting up and turned in the direction of the near-shouting he heard in the middle of the room.

“Coming through, excuse me --”

Something in his chest was reacting to the voice -- it was one he was sure he knew, but the general
clamor and confusion was making it difficult for Keith to properly focus.

“Just gotta sqqqqqqueueeze by ya’ here...”

It was getting closer, wasn’t it? Keith forced down another gulp of cold water, desperate for the relief on his dry throat. Why the hell was he nervous?

“Anndddd, phew! There we go!”

And just like that, the disembodied voice that had been getting louder and, frankly, more obnoxious, was before him in the form of an arm forcing its way through the crowd, then two legs, and the other arm -- and then there was a whole person, standing maybe six feet away, freed from the crowd and emerging on the perimeter of the circle of bodies. They looked mildly ruffled from braving the sea of people, but otherwise -- otherwise --

He was outside the circle.

Standing right in front of Keith.

“Hey,” Blue said, a beautiful, breathy exhale that made Keith’s skin erupt into goosebumps.


Keith knew he recognized that voice -- he knew it -- and then Blue was even closer, a few feet, then just a few inches away.

“Happy birthday.”

Two-hundred seven.

Keith decided that this would forever be his new favorite number.

Now, there was a lot going on in the Prince’s mind at that moment.

First of all, he was angry.

Big surprise there -- Keith Kogane, angry?

Never.

But this -- this was something different. It was like his heart had fallen out of his body, or one of the neurons in his brain had violently misfired because -- because he knew that voice and knew who this was but there was something stopping him, something greater than himself from identifying those eyes, those eyes -- god, they’re so beautiful, what the actual fuck? It was a puzzle Keith had solved before, and yet, Blue was -- he was -- so close Keith could literally reach out and touch him and yet Keith couldn’t explain who they were.

What Keith could tell you was one thing. Blue was impossibly beautiful.

Now, read that again. Read it backwards and forwards and rearrange the letters if you have to, to understand exactly how pretty this person was in front of him. It was the only coherent thing Keith could even grasp at that moment, because there was no way that Blue was a normal person -- normal, real people don’t and can’t look like that. Was that why he wore a mask? Because he would literally look so fucking good without it that he would actually do bodily harm to bystanders?

The most of his face Keith could see was his mouth, which, oh, god, don’t look right now -- because
Keith knows himself, and he knows he’s weak, and he knows that if he looked there, right now, he would have a problem a little further south that definitely could not be relieved in the company of others -- and then there were those fucking eyes.

Eyes that Keith knew. They weren’t just -- they weren’t just blue, because that was just a color. These eyes were emotion, and Keith remembered when his mother had told him that blue was the color of sadness, but now he wasn’t so sure. Maybe these eyes were the answer, the real deal of emotional vulnerability, the feeling of blue; it was less like sadness and more like the rush like a typhoon but with the precision of ice crystals that made you forget you were ever sad to before, and instead you were seated at the edge of something so divine it could easily destroy you. Keith wanted to lose himself in them, effluent and misty and deep with secrets. He had seen those fucking eyes before, and he knew it, because they were like the Altean coast, the ripple of a high tide under brilliant sunlight. Those eyes were water, and forget everything Keith has ever said about himself overflowing, being hot-headed, feeling too much -- because one single drop of these eyes was more than enough to cool him, fill him, drown him.

“I -- are you okay?” The voice, his voice, said.

Keith blinked, pursing his lips. He shook his head, unable to form words right now.

“Oh. Oh! Right, I forgot about this… you don’t know me, do you?”

Again, Keith shook his head, and he was pretty sure he felt the contents of his brain rattle around like loose coins.

“Okay…” Blue bit his lip, fighting a smile and moving just another inch closer towards Keith, which really left only a few breaths distance between them. Blue’s arm twitched, and then there was a hand held in the space between their chests. The palm faced upwards, cupped ever so slightly -- a question.

“Dance with me?”

Keith didn’t honestly know what was happening to him, because he definitely did not give his hand permission to move, or to intertwine their fingers, but the reactions were happening before he could even bother to try to stop it. What’s more, Keith was certain he did not command his legs to be the one to tug the person along, up the stairs and out of the Grand Ballroom and into one of the lesser rooms, moving them towards the dancefloors. He was half-dazed by the time they stopped in the middle of other dancers, some of whom shot a curious glance their way. A feather-light hand situated itself onto Keith’s shoulder, and out of instinct, the Prince let his own hand move to the dip of Blue’s waist, where it met narrow hips. Keith was just a bit taller (thank you, Galra genes, thank you), and his gaze flickered down to find Blue’s only for his breath to be stolen from him, absolute thievery, highway robbery of the loveliest kind. The other boy was beaming, a huge, anticipatory smile, and Keith felt like his fingers were buzzing with electricity where they were still connected. Their hands fit together like they were made to be that way, and the thin waist in Keith’s other hand felt so right. A slightly impatient part of the Prince wondered where, and how else, they might fit together so well -- and rather suddenly he had to fight to keep himself from pulling Blue’s body flush against him just to find out.

Instead, Keith tried to refocus on the act of actually dancing, taking the lead and setting a gentle rhythm, easy and natural as breathing. With Blue’s long limbs and crooked grin crowding his space, it was all the Prince could do not to explode into an unhealthy shade of red -- he tried to focus on
dancing to distract from that very problem.

They swayed and maneuvered comfortably for several minutes. Keith wasn’t sure what to say, but he knew he wanted to say something -- stupidly, he ended up merely watching the expressions and attention flit across Blue’s face, and Keith found he didn’t mind. Blue was so beautiful, with freckles like little stars peeking out beneath his mask, and this close, Keith could tell their cheeks were flush.

“This isn’t a costume party, you know that, right?”

Blue snorted. And fuck if it wasn’t cute sound.

“Yeah, thanks for the memo.”

Keith wanted them closer, wanted to know their name, their everything. He decided to be direct. “So then why the mask?”

“It wasn’t… intentional.” Blue hummed to themselves, a small smile on their lips. “There are people here who can’t know who I am. It would be… um, I would get in trouble.”

He wondered if Blue was a criminal, but couldn’t find himself to care. Keith merely bit his lip.

“...Can I know?”

“Well, that depends.” Their lips spread into a sly smile. “Can you keep a secret?”

Emboldened by Blue’s teasing, Keith made a show of frowning and dragging his eyes away, looking at the ceiling. Given the view he was giving up, the simple act was harder than it looked. “Drat. As the Prince and future King of the nation specializing in spy networks, you’ve found my weakness. Secret keeping.”

Blue laughed, the sound of bright chiming bells, and Keith swore he saw Blue’s freckles almost glow under the mask, like they were backlit by the pretty dark tone of his skin.

“Too bad,” Blue answered, playing along. “Marmora is going to be screwed with you as King, huh?”

“Don’t remind me,” Keith grumbled before he realized what he’d said.

Blue frowned, his eyes searching. “You don’t think you’re fit to be King?”

“I don’t know you well enough to answer that,” admitted the Prince. He was uncomfortable talking about this people he knew well, let alone perfect strangers (emphasis on the perfect). Keith grappled for the first subject he could think of, eyes flickering down to the other man’s almost ceremonial-like attire.

“You’re Altean?” He guessed, the style of the fabrics reflecting their cultural norms. A handful of other men in the room were wearing similar ensembles, but Keith thought those all looked dull by comparison.

Blue’s answer took a moment. “I’m not from Altea. But I suppose I am Altean.”

“Then where are you from?” Keith pressed on, pausing to twirl the man in his arms and admiring the grace with which his long limbs moved, fluid like water but somehow sharp and enrapturing like ice.

Slotting back together after their spin, Blue’s eyes were impossibly wide beneath their mask. “You really can’t tell who I am?”
“I --” Keith stopped himself, feeling his heart leap into his throat. That was twice now Blue had said something cryptic, alluding to their familiarity, and it was gnawing at the back of the Prince’s brain, desperate for an answer. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean?” Blue sounded nervous.

Closing his eyes, the Prince allowed himself to focus, trying not to be overwhelmed by the very pressing feeling against all of his senses that were consumed by a color and a person -- his ears heard the melodic, tragic timbre; body held the essence of the pelagic in his hands; tongue tasted the doubt and furious desire at the back of his throat; mouth inhaled the natural, almost sylvan aroma of the forest, bright like spearmint but salted like the ocean’s brine.

When Keith opened his eyes, the last of his senses finally grounded, he realized they were longer swaying. Standing in place in the middle of the ebb-and-flow of dancers, beneath lavender-colored candles that cast shapes and shadows over each slope of Blue’s face, Keith swore he felt something tap against his heart. A rapping at the entryway, begging for him to open the door.

“I know you.” He said steadily. “And I know that I know you. But… I can’t think of your name. It’s like I’ve lost my memory of something -- that probably sounds really stupid and crazy,” Keith tagged the last part on quickly, afraid he might lose his nerve if he didn’t get it all out. He nearly dropped his hold of Blue’s hand and waist, but instead deciding to tighten his hand and curled his arm around Blue’s lower back. “But I have to know who you are.”

Blue inhaled sharply at the increase in contact, and it made Keith’s heart race. “M-my mask,” he spoke breathily, and Keith watched his long lashes flutter. “It’s my mask. It’s magic -- the mask, not me. I was given it by a… a friend. It keeps my identity hidden, I think I can choose who knows who I am… but I think I have to show you? Ugh, I really should ask follow-up questions.”

The music slowly tapered off, signaling the end of the song and the inevitable end of their conversation.

“So if you take it off…?” Keith urged, helpless with Blue’s breath at the hollow of his throat. Their chests were practically touching, and Keith would have sworn on his life he could feel Blue’s heart-racing just as fast as his.

“You’ll know me.” Blue affirmed softly. “But I don’t know if --”

A voice cut in before he could finish, and Keith nearly growled. The delicate tension that had thread them together was snapped like a wire, and reality flooded back all too quickly.

An older Galra man popped up, seemingly out of thin air, right beside Blue and nearly knocked him over with the egregious amount of space the Galra occupied. Judging by his apparel, Keith guessed they were a diplomat of some sort, face fixed into a smarmy, neat smile.

“Your Highness, I would be honored if you might me to introduce you to my daughter? Her name is Axca, and she --”

Keith could barely stop himself from rolling his eyes, hoping his body language was enough to demonstrate how not interested he was, but he didn’t even get the proper opportunity to fully express the sentiment before there was another person by his side. Well, more accurately, on his side, this time in the form of a young woman with a tasteful gown and a tasteless attitude as she draped herself over his shoulder and arm.

He didn’t even hear what she was saying before there was s another fucking voice, and this time
Blue was stepping away to make room for their company.

Thace had cut through the ambush, voice flat. “Excuse me, your Highness. I wanted to make sure you were alright?”

“I…” Keith’s head was full of cotton. What had Blue been about to say? He wanted, needed to know, but the dark-skinned man was already beginning to back away.

With a small smile, he looked from Keith to crowd around him and then back again.

“Well, you sure are in high demand, huh?” He tried to tease, but Keith thought he caught an edge to it. “Go ahead.”

Swallowing thickly, Keith was barely able to use the muscles in this throat for how dry it had become. He lurched forward awkwardly, ignoring the girl and the Blade and the Galra with an agenda.

“Um.” He coughed, hand half-raised as if to grab Blue’s wrist, but instead decided to let it hang there. “Just… don’t leave, okay? Don’t leave before I have the chance to talk to you again.”

Blue’s crooked smile returned, eyes twinkling. Navy and aquamarine and cobalt and richer than the sea.

“Deal, but only if you promise me a second dance later.”

He couldn’t agree fast enough.

“D-Deal.”

Keith was definitely not being creepy.

Okay? You’re sure you got that?

Not creepy.

Got it? Good.

Because you may have to politely put your judgements aside for the way he acted for the rest of the night.

Just because he never let Blue stray far enough away that Keith couldn’t at least catch a glimpse of the juniper blooms that sprouted from his mask, and just because Keith made sure to always dance with people in the same room as him, watching him over the heads of shorter partners or around the shoulders of taller ones -- that did not mean that he was being creepy.

It wasn’t even his fault. The blame was entirely belonging to the Blue Paladin. He had, in what turned out to be only one grueling hour, captured the attention of seemingly everyone at the Ball, gender and sexuality and status be damned.

He was effortlessly charming, and it was fucking maddening.

People seemed almost as eager to dance with him as they were with Keith, except Blue’s audience was wider and more willing. Oddly, Keith was no longer stuck exclusively with single women anymore -- they were still the primary suitors asking him to dance -- but a few bolder men, two humans and an Altean, all asked him to dance at various points in the next hour. It was a surprising
change, one that wouldn’t have been exciting if not for the fact that, always within a stone’s throw, Blue was dancing with everyone and anyone who would ask him.

Thankfully, Keith didn’t have to try too hard to pay attention to his own dancing. Towards the end of the hour, he was reunited with Princess Allura as a dance partner, and she seemed somewhat relieved to have been returned to a familiar face as well.

Children ran up to Blue and he let them dance on his shoes, their little bodies overflowing with giggles when he twirled with them; men shorter and taller held his waist or shoulder and laughed and murmured in his ear with in sweeping strides; women smiled coyly and blushed under his attention, and Blue always kissed their knuckles like a proper gentleman after every dance.

Keith couldn’t stop watching him. The nearest thing he could even compare Blue’s presence to was from an old memory, one that wriggled to the forefront of his mind the longer he watched the man across the room.

He was like the lion tamer that had visited the court many moons ago, a member of a ragtag troop of traveling entertainers. Blue’s confidence in his ability was a mirror image to the lion tamer’s. Young Keith had been amazed -- that an Olkari-hybrid, who should have known his rightful place in the animal kingdom -- lions always above man -- had not only the confidence to perform without fear, but he knew exactly what he wanted, and even while challenging the creature’s temper, he was able to command it to do as he bid.

It was mystifying, electrifying.

Terrifying, too.

“So who is this Blue Paladin figure, anyway?” Princess Allura’s gaze followed his. They’d taken a break for the time being, both sipping drinks and savoring snacks at one of the standing tables. “He seems Altean, but he’s certainly not one of my citizens.”

Keith’s cheeks pinked and he scowled down at some unusual food that reminded him yogurt but tasted meaty and rich. He’d been staring at Blue… again, not in a creepy way... and couldn’t meet the Princess’s eye. Part of him wondered if she had the same creeping sense of familiarity with him, but Blue had asked if he could keep a secret about his mask, and Keith didn’t want to risk letting anything slip.

He ended up just shrugging “I don’t know him.”

“Hmm.” She frowned. “I wonder why all the mystery? But if he made it past Shiro’s security I imagine there need not be any reason to worry.”

Keith tried to hide his frustration and simply nodded. He appreciated Allura’s ability to read him, as she dropped the subject thereafter and the two began exchanging tales about some of the more horrible dances they had already had the displeasure of enduring through the end of the next song.

“Romelle is funny.” Keith said at one point, smiling a little as he and the Princess joked. Her blue eyes with lilac spots crinkled at the corner at the mention of Lady Romelle. “Everytime she and I have danced she complains, she says I hold her hand weird.”

“Oh.” Princess Allura nodded. “Yes, I’m not sure why but she’s very peculiar about that. Needs the fingers to be aligned just so… odd, perhaps, but I’d be lying if I didn’t admit that I find it awfully endearing.”

“So it’s not me.” Keith chuckled, popping a pastry in his mouth this time and almost moaning. It was
some sort of chocolate-orange-salted delicacy that Keith needed more of immediately. His eyes scanned for the nearest server and he froze, sudden panic knocking the wind out of him.

“What? What is it -- oh.” Allura had been sipping her drink, but she lowered her cup to glance around. Her usual measured gaze caught the candles, flicking with amusement.

Blue seemed to be trying to pull himself from the dancefloor, and, holy *fuck*, Keith’s heart was positively hammering because -- because he just met eyes with him and Blue smiled, pointedly, clearly right at him.

“Well. I should excuse myself, shouldn’t I?” Allura was grinning, a look so mischievous it would have made Pidge proud. “I owe my father another dance, I believe,” and she was already escaping down the wall.

Not that Keith even noticed.

Blue had finished crossing the room and was standing on the other side of the cocktail table, the smile on his face had only grown larger.

“Hi, again.”

The vice on Keith’s vocal chords squeezed out a feeble little “hi” in response.

“Well, I gotta hand it to you, Pret-- er, your Highness,” Blue leaned an elbow on the tablecloth, and it bunched lightly under the intrusive weight. “You sure know how to throw a party. Talk about a birthday to remember, huh?”

Keith licked his lips and tried, really tried his absolute hardness, to keep his voice carefully flat. “Yep. Can’t you tell this is *exactly* how I want to be spending my birthday?”

Blue laughed, and Keith wanted to give himself a pat on the back. Despite the fact that he was sweating bullets, this pretty, kind boy seemed to think he was *funny*. Keith could have died happy.

Long fingers made to a staccato rhythm over the tabletop. “Hmm. And how exactly *would* the Prince like to be spending his birthday, if not here?”

“I can think of a few things,” Keith hummed, not wanting to even admit to *himself* how many absolutely dirty images just popped into his head, let alone to the man standing in front of him. He groped for the first topic he could think of before the heat pooling in his abdomen became… any harder to deal with.

“So, if you’ve got magic friends with magical identity concealing masks, I can hope you weren’t hired to infiltrate the castle and murder me?”

Blue flashed a grin of white-teeth, his gaze flickering down to where the Prince’s knife sat ever-present on his hip. “Surprise! For your birthday, I got you the special *Blue Assassin Murder-Spa Package*. Manicured and your deluxe choice of how you die included.”

_Fuck, he’s funny too._

Keith tried so hard not to laugh that it ended up making him laugh *harder*. At first he was just releasing a suppressed set of half-snorts that he tried to force down by biting his lip, but then Blue was laughing too and any composure Keith had slipped away into a bundle of helpless, giddy snorts and giggles, doubled-over and gripping the table for support.
After several seconds of wheezing, the Prince steadied himself with a flush to his face that he could effectively blame on the fit of laughter and found Blue looking back at him with a fond expression.

Keith seized the moment of confidence before he could talk himself down from it.

“I could use some fresh air, I think. Want to come with me?”

Blue eagerly agreed, and Keith had to punch down the urge to smile dumbly as he led the way.

They walked beside each other, Blue’s movements becoming increasingly fidgety as they climbed the steps. Keith wouldn’t admit how pleased he was when a young woman approached and asked Blue to dance, only for him to decline and trail after the Prince. A large, desperate, borderline pathetic part of him wanted to just reach out and grab Blue’s hand and run the rest of the way to the terrace, but Keith was admiring the chance to observe Blue in a setting outside of the ballroom.

So, for one of the few times in Keith’s young life, he indulged the Shiro-angel that always pandered on his shoulder. Patience yields focus, it told him, so patient he remained all the way outside.

Keith plucked up a drink from a passing server that went through the castle doors just as they were exiting.

“Do you…?”

Blue’s expression soured. “Depends… is it wine?”

Rolling his eyes, Keith handed him his goblet and grabbed a second for himself. “No, this is just mulberry juice. Alcohol is well and good but I’m not particularly inclined to make a drunken fool of myself on my birthday.”

As quickly as it had turned dark, Blue’s expression lightened. “Oh. Thanks. Though I wouldn’t mind getting you a little drunk.”

Keith nearly choked on his juice, but managed to keep it down. Blue snickered.

They finished their drinks quickly and set them on a stray table, and the Prince took the opportunity to appreciate the fresh air and the subtle, delicate decorum along the outside of the castle. The terrace was a sprawling place, leading down into the castle gardens through an elegant stairwell on the far end, but guards were posted at each point down so partygoers didn’t sneak off or pass out in the bushes. Lines of tables with unbelievable amounts of Hunk’s amazing food were set up strategically, breaking up the sprawling outside area into distinct sections, each with couples or odd guests milling about, whispering or laughing in their own little worlds. From the castle walls, perpendicular to the doorway and stretching out far over the garden, fairy lights hung lazily in the still autumn air, swaying only with the vibrations of the castle’s music.

“This place is amazing.” Blue said, practically in awe. “I can’t believe you get to live like this every day.”

Keith nodded, too busy eyeing Blue’s hand hanging loosely by his side to work up a proper response. Hastily wiping his own sweaty palms on his trousers, the Prince reached out and was prepared to ask him to dance, but when they touched, Blue snatched his hand back and twisted his own fingers together tightly.

Nervously.

“I think I’ve made a mistake,” Blue murmured, and Keith felt a sudden dread spread through his
stomach.

He tried not to seem too disappointmented when he asked, “What do you -- what do you mean?”

“Oh -- no, no, I don’t mean you,” he shook his head and his eyes fell to the floor before brushing a frustrated hand through his hair. “I mean, ugh, fuck, I should have just *told* you first thing about this and I got carried away tonight and now I’m -- I don’t think I’m who you’re expecting. I’m not even supposed to be here.”

Keith couldn’t fathom what sort of expression he might have been making, but it must have been at least moderately amusing because Blue still cracked a grin despite the anxiety in his eyes. He took Keith by the wrist and pulled him away from the crowds, away from the dancing and levity of the evening.

“I don’t know what she was thinking sending me here,” he sighed and backed Keith into the precipice of the castle walls. Blue glanced around, worrying his lower lip with his teeth and Keith’s eyes lingered there hungrily for a little too long, breaking his focus only when both of Blue’s tanned hands had gripped against the bottom of the mask.

“Uh, okay, here goes. I guess I’ll just…” they leaned forward and in one swift shift, the mask was pushed up to their forehead and they stayed like that just long enough for Keith to take in their features.

The world tilted for a moment, and like a dam finally breaking, understanding rushed back to greet him.

Oh.

Of course.

Because, of course, who else would end up in such a fucking impossible situation, only to wink at Keith before sliding the mask right back down to his nose?

“Lance.”

He breathed the name, a recognition, an acknowledgement.

When Keith’s sense of self eventually returned, slowly, *slowly, s-l-o-w-l-y*, he blinked to see fearful eyes looking back at him, hidden behind the mask again, but everything was now connected and different and -- and Keith had never been good with words, so don’t judge him too harshly for how stupid he sounded when he finally found his voice.

“I thought you only had one-cheek mark.”

And so Lance stared at him for a long, drawn out moment before his lip twitched, a smile pulling up into a grin and then he was bursting out laughing, the sight and sound more graceful than anyone had any right to be at that volume.
“That’s the first thing you noticed?!”

“Don’t laugh at me!”

Lance tried to cover his mouth with a hand to stop himself from giggling, but his eyes were clearly sparkling like a fucker. “Shh -- and no more of that name here. I don’t want to get caught. It’s Blue while I’m here, okay?”

Keith ground his teeth together, the partygoers none-the-wiser to the fucking rippling insanity pulsating from the corner of the terrace. Even his nearest Blade was halfway across the open area, monitoring the guests more broadly than the Prince specifically.

“Okay, Blue.” The words were like pulling teeth. He wasn’t even sure what he was so goddamn angry about, but then again, Keith had always been the master of living his truth when it came to being an asshole, hadn’t he? “What the fuck are you doing here?”

This time, Lance’s humor had completely vanished. He flinched, but annoyance leaked into his own voice. “You invited me! What do you mean what am I doing here?!”

“Well, yeah, but why are you -- what is this?” He flapped his arm at Lance’s mask, words beyond him.

“I told you, I could get in trouble if certain people know I’m here, asshole. Do you actually ever listen to what people are saying?”

Keith was blindly consumed by the urge to punch him or kiss him, and he honestly wasn’t sure which was worse. The conflicting impulse had him just stuck, glaring, the waves of anger practically visible as they radiated off him.

Lance sighed and shook his head. “Like I said. This was a mistake.” He turned away, tagging on a weak, “I’ll just go. Happy birthday.”

“No, wait,” Keith lurched after him. “I don’t want -- I’m being a dick. Just, hold on.”

The Prince huffed, pressing a hand over his eyes. Keith’s cheeks were annoyingly warm even in the crisp night air, and he felt like such an idiot.

He took a calming, deep breath, and let the Shiro-angel on his shoulder lead again for a little while. Patience yields focus.

“Okay. I’m trying to work on being a piece of shit, I was just surprised.” Keith admitted, fighting to keep his voice steady. “And I’m glad you’re -- but Blue was, and they were you and… I just -- this was so confusing! After you didn’t show up last night, Hunk, Pidge and Shiro, and… me… we were worried. And to find out you were off playing with magic and sneaking around -- what the fuck, man? I invited you, you could have just come like a normal person! And Pidge and Hunk… they thought something was wrong or something happened to you! They were worried. I was… I was worried. I thought…”

Lance was quiet, and Keith was still covering both his eyes with a hand. “I thought you, I don’t know, changed your mind… that you didn’t want to come? I was mad about it, and I don’t handle this shit well. I’m… I’m sorry.”

Keith heard a tiny breath leave Lance’s body.
“Oh.”

He managed not to wince when he felt cold fingers grasp for the hand at his side, his other hand still firmly planted over his eyes. Tentatively, Keith uncovered his face, forcing himself to meet the other’s gaze.

“You’re an idiot,” Lance said with a shake of his head, and Keith wanted to laugh because Lance was smiling. “I didn’t show up yesterday because I was locked in the basement beneath my house, I’m not a flake, you ass. But, I guess you couldn’t have known, I never told Pidge or Hunk that my aunt does that sometimes, it’s one of her worst punishments for when I do something wrong, okay? And... uh, shit, I wasn’t necessarily planning on telling Hunk or Pidge, soooo, I’m not even sure why I just told you that but -- but do you believe me? I didn’t mean to not show up.”

Keith’s stomach twisted with something. Something awful. “What do you mean, you were locked in your basement?”

“You’ve been locked in your basement?” Lance took his bottom lip between his teeth and looked down for a minute, taking back both his arms and crossing them defensively over his chest. “I guess you already know now, so… okay. Fine. But what did I say about pitying me?”

His eyes were narrowed, sharp sapphires piercing in the dark.

Keith pursed his lips. “That you’d kick my ass?”

“And that still stands, Mullet. I don’t care if you’re the Prince or not.” He declared with a grin, but there was something pained beneath the usual playful lilt of his voice. He watched Lance’s adam’s apple bob up and down. “My aunt found out that I was at the castle on Monday, and I wasn’t supposed to leave the house. And then, she caught me out of the house when you and Shiro came to check on me a few nights ago so she just… locked me in the cellar.”

“And then...?” The Prince prompted when Lance fell quiet.

His lip-curled. “No, no, you’re not getting it. That is the punishment. No windows, no food, nothing. That was it. Completely... completely black. It’s dark. A-Anways, I was down there for... I guess close to forty varga -- hours,” Lance amended with a glance towards him.

“I know what a varga is,” Keith snapped back out of habit, at which Lance rolled his eyes.

“Because now is really the best time to make that point, Knife Boy?”

“Right. Sorry. I’m just -- this is a lot. Forty hours is... a long time... and how in there did you make a magical friend that gave you this mask?”

Lance sighed, arms crossing even tighter over his chest. He looked at the watch on his wrist for a long pause, and Keith hadn’t noticed it before. It was of an extremely high quality, the polished silver shining even in the lowlight. “I sort of... snuck out? Again? I know, didn’t I learn my lesson the first three times, right? Anyway, I... met someone who is magic and they were the one who let me out of the cellar. Well, she’s not so much of a someone as she is a... nevermind. That’s a long story.” He shook his head and his mouth was turned down into a frown. “The point is -- I’m able to be here because this mask will keep anyone from recognizing me, most importantly is my Aunt Hira. If she finds out that I’m not at home right now I will -- and I’m not kidding -- I will be fucked. So please, please don’t tell anyone, okay?”

Keith could feel the furious scowl that had worked its way over his brow, deepening with every word. His voice sounded so venomous by the time Lance finished that Keith could hardly believe it
was him speaking.

“So you’re telling me… that your aunt has had you locked up for almost two straight days? And this isn’t the first time it’s happened?”

Lance wasn’t looking at him, but he nodded.

“…You do know that I’m the Prince, right? Like, I was pretty sure we established that before? I can have your aunt arrested and thrown in our fucking dungeon, and we can see how she likes it.”

Blue eyes snapped up to him, shocked and… if Keith would indulge himself, maybe a little impressed?

“Really?” A tiny, evil little smile worked its way onto Lance’s face when he stopped and shook his head. “W-wait, wait wait wait, you can’t. She has daughters that need her. And anyways, that’s not important right this minute. Like, I’ll figure that shit out later -- tonight is your birthday. Sorry if I sort of ruined the party vibe with all of this stuff. Did you still want to, uh, well…?”

Lance just nodded in the direction of the dance floor and waited, looking and sounding much less sure of himself.

The Prince, to his credit, was still trying to process the dizzying amount of information Lance had just shared with him, so he just stared blankly back towards the other boy.

He was, frankly, still abundantly confused by some of the finer details of the whole thing, and more than a little embarrassed with himself that he’d spent so much of the evening stalking -- not stalking, just, extremely interested in -- someone and it had turned out to be Lance, of all people, which actually made perfect fucking sense. It was just finally putting the pieces of the puzzle together, but instead of making him angrier or spiteful or even more confused, Keith just felt…

He felt happy.

Because, whatever odds and ends to Lance’s story still needed to be accounted for, whatever was going on with his magical mask, whatever background there was to the fucked up situation was with his aunt (which, by the way, don’t you fucking think for a second that Keith isn’t intending to properly address that later) -- because what this really amounted to was just one simple thing, wasn’t it?

Lance came to the ball.

He accepted Keith’s invitation. (And, if Lance’s story was anything to go by, it sounded like he had to take some pretty extreme measures to do so.)

Lance had come all this way because… because Keith asked him to.

“Keith, say something. I’m kind of freaking out over here.”

Hearing Lance say his name was what really jolted him back to the present, and suddenly, he swore his heart felt three sizes too big for his body. Every inch of skin where they had accidentally touched over the course of the night felt like it was buzzing -- his fingers, hands, arms, the base of his neck, his chest, even the tips of his toes where their shoes had brushed against each other -- Keith could feel Lance all over his skin. He was everywhere on him but he also wasn’t.

The overt awareness of Lance on his skin made it all the more painfully obvious in the places that he wasn’t, empty and absent in the one place Keith really needed to feel him.
His lips.

Keith’s hands moved to the sides of Lance’s face, thumbs dusting over the freckles there, and he felt the temperature of Lance’s cheeks increase beneath his fingers.

“K-Keith? Ah... this was a mistake. I’m sorry.” Lance’s voice wobbled. “I shouldn’t have come here. You’re supposed to be back inside dancing with all of the people and you’re supposed to find someone to marry, right? I’m sorry I lied about who I was -- I should have told you first thing when I saw you but then I just wanted to dance with you, and I’m just a servant Keith, I’m not supposed to be here and --”

“Lance.” Keith interrupted, firmly, quietly. The other boy’s jaw snapped closed, eyes wide. “Or Blue. Or whoever you want to be tonight. Do you want to be here? Are you here because you want to be here?”

His response was so silly but it came without hesitation, and it was so Lance that it made Keith’s own cheeks hurt from how hard he was smiling.

“Um... duh?”

Funny, Keith thought. (It was one of the those ‘this isn’t actually funny, but I’m going to say it’s funny because what else would I call it?’ moments, for the record.) Funny, how he can’t control his own emotions for shit, but when other people were freaking out around him he somehow managed to remain freakishly calm.

Funny.

“How the fuck are you even real?” Keith growled out before tilting Lance’s face up and kissing him.

And….oh. Wait. Wait, wait, wait.

Oh god, he was kissing Lance, shit, where is my impulse control, abort, fucking ABORT.

And then Lance was kissing him back.

His lips were incredibly soft, and the gentle return was almost too much, because no one, no one was this perfect, but Lance was fucking real, goddamnit, and he was kissing him back.

All things considered, Keith was actually having a pretty good birthday.

The Prince pulled back only a second or two after it started, mostly because he had forgotten how to breathe. Lance just blinked owlishly, like he’d just been asked a trick question, eyes searching Keith’s face for… something.

“Did you just…?” He began, and Keith’s skin erupted into gooseflesh, because he was close enough to still feel Lance’s breath ghost over his lips.

“...Yeah.”

Lance simply continued fluttering his eyelids, like if he didn’t force the motion his body would forget how to do it on its own.

“And I just...you... back?”

Keith slowly pulled his hands off Lance’s cheekbones, worried that he had misread Lance kissing him back -- what the fuck, Kogane, you can’t just kiss people like that.
“Um… yeah. Was that… okay?”

After an agonizing few seconds, Lance’s glazed over look brightened and bloomed like a moonflower, turning into a dorky grin. “Was that okay’ he asks. Whomst the fuck. *Por supuesto que lo fue, idiota -- creo que podría estar enamorado de ti.*”

“I don’t… understand?” Keith chuckled weakly, but Lance was smiling and that was… that was at least a good sign, right?

“I don’t understand you,” Lance groaned, shooting forward and pulling Keith down this time from the front of his suit jacket and holding him firmly in place, lips warm and eager as he pressed against him. Keith let out an absolutely embarrassing “mph!” of surprise, but he really, *really* didn’t care about that right now, because he was drowning in the sensation of being tugged down, of warm breath on his face, of supple lips tenderly pressed against his own.

Again, it was really only a chaste kiss for a matter of seconds, but Keith felt like the whole universe had shifted, the night had brightened, the world was fuller but somehow narrower, Lance as its anchor point but the possibilities as innumerable as the stars in the sky.

When the brunette boy pulled back, the soft string of lights above reflected from his eyes like sun over the ocean and he was smiling, a sneaky, almost tempting whisper slipping from his tongue.

“Now, I think I owe you another dance, don’t I?”

Keith was already being tugged by the hand from their private corner back towards the center of the terrace, his heart racing much too fast for the eloquent, long-suffering pace of the orchestra music that saturated the nighttime air.

And Keith had to ask himself, when they stopped walking and Lance turned around to face him: who fucking cared about status, or wealth, or responsibilities? Who cared about posturing, or punishment, or expectations? Who cared about alliances, arrangements, kingdoms or treaties? How could the world expect him to *care* about such things when Lance was looking at him like *that*, like Keith was by some laughing measure even *worthy* of the attention of someone like Lance. Lance, who was was this absolutely ethereal, *impossible* person, who was offering him his hand to dance?

Keith couldn’t very well say he cared very much about anything else at that moment. Not even a bit.

Chapter End Notes

...TWO MORE FULL DAYS OF THE BALL?
*AND I'M JUST GETTING STARTED*
Chapter Summary

In which Keith struggles to vocalize his feelings and ends up being kind of a jerk about it, Lance finally gets to use that star chart Pidge let him borrow, and Blue totally ships it.

CW: very soft boys ahead

Chapter Notes

thanks for reading along!! I apologize this chapter took so long to publish, I have a lot of plans for the story and ended up writing somewhere close to 40k with different directions this chapter could have taken... so the good news is, all of that extra material is pre-written and will definitely impact the release times of next few chapters, hopefully coming out sooner than normal! I'm just indecisive and a perfectionist when it comes to storytelling haha.

anyways, please enjoy!

[KEITH]

Irony really was something, wasn’t it?

For over a month, the Prince had been, in no simple terms, fucking dreading his birthday and the royal ball. He loathed the day when he would be forced to dance with strangers, comparing his most eligible citizens or most valuable allies like the newest novelty on the market. The attendants were all but trafficking themselves (or their daughters or sisters) to him in a series of quick sales pitches that lasted as long as the next song. The harloting wasn’t even the worst of it, though. Turning eighteen meant he was officially old enough to be King when his Mother stepped down, and that was by no stretch of the imagination something Keith had ever wanted to celebrate.

It meant he wasn’t a child anymore. It meant he would have to accept things that were hard to think about and even harder to talk about, like that his father really was never going return to Marmora someday, and that he and his mother would never get to laugh and tease him about the years they’d spent mourning for him to have just gotten lost on an excursion to the south, about how it had just been a misunderstanding. It meant the lives of hundreds of thousands were resting on his shoulders, that his Mother was getting older, and she would leave him just like his father did. It meant there was the inevitable wedding, and the demands that he produce an heir -- the whole concept usually made him want to die and Keith wasn’t ready to be a martyr. Not today.

When they began the actual planning about a month ago, he had been hoping it would all be over-and-done with as fast as possible. There wasn’t anything or -- or anyone -- that could have convinced Keith that dragging on his pre-engagement-announcement-party-that-also-happened-to-be-his-
birthday for anymore than strictly necessary was a good idea.

And then Lance arrived into his life like a fucking hurricane in a drought, washing all his carefully crafted apathy away.

Now, Keith was pathetically begging Father Time to stop being an asshole about all of this.

Come on, just give him five more minutes. Two?

Thirty seconds. Please.

Because honest to goodness, Keith never wanted this day to end.

How’s that for fucking irony?

On the castle terrace beneath the stars, where the chilly night air turned his exhalts into vapor and the soft bauble lights overhead illuminated the castle and stretched out over the gardens, eighteen didn’t cripple him with anxiety. Quite the opposite. Keith may never have been this happy, so could you blame him for wanting to pause and savor the moment? Especially when the most beautiful person he’d ever met was holding onto him, where he was close enough to kiss him, and Keith had been much too tempted by the knowledge that if he did, the act would very likely have been reciprocated?

Eighteen didn’t seem so scary when he could just take a too-wide, calculated step that would make Lance trip slightly and fall against him.

“Hey! You did that on purpose!”

See? Not scary at all.

He did his best to keep his mouth from twitching to a smile. “Libel of the royal family is a criminal offense, you know.”

“...it’s not libel if it’s true, asshole.”

The suffocating pressure of how his decisions might impact the fate of thousands of refugee Olkari didn’t seem as pressing when he was laughing at the indignant squeak Lance made when Keith curled his fingers slightly into the base of his spine, or how Lance had pushed himself back against his chest, righting himself without Keith’s help thank you very much.

“You’re a big softie under that mullet, aren’t you, Mullet?”

“What is your obsession with my hair?”

Lance’s jaw dropped dramatically. “If you just got a proper haircut, it wouldn’t be an issue!”

Keith laughed, and Lance joined him.

No pressure whatsoever.

Even replacing his father as a capable King even seemed like an achievable dream when Lance had looked at him like that, like Keith was worthy of the title -- it was so convincing, he was almost starting to believe it himself.

At that moment, honest to goodness, the only thing that kept the Prince from kissing Lance again (and again, and again,) was the fact that there were other dancers around. But, fuck if that made it somehow all the more tempting? Don’t worry, Keith was just as confused by the idea, but he also
couldn’t deny that something kindled within him, something like thrill and rebellion, that kickstarted his pulse whenever he was on the receiving end of one of the blue-eyed boy’s quirked up smiles. Lance was prattling on easily and endlessly, entirely at the center of Keith’s little world for those few minutes they had.

When their second dance drew to an end, Keith said a defiant little fuck you in Father Time’s face and tightened his hold on Lance instead of letting him go. In truth, the Prince was a little surprised with himself for being so bold, almost possessive, but it was hard to pay attention to such things when the other boy’s freckles had practically vanished beneath the rush of color that had darkened to his cheeks, and Keith found the hide-and-seek effect fascinating.

Making Lance blush more often was now officially going to be one of his personal goals. Maybe he’d make it a decree. He could do that, you know.

“W-well, as much as I know I’m an excellent dancer, your Highness,” Lance hedged, scrunching his nose and looking pointedly the other direction. “I’m sure you’ve got like, a hundred other people waiting to dance with you.”

He was right, of course. The Prince of Marmora could not let any one person monopolize his time -- it was his party, maybe, but it was not being held on his terms. Traditional, stupid, socialite fuckery had to come first. Even with Princess Allura all but announced as Keith’s betrothed, there were social axioms he had to uphold, one of which was giving any interested and eligible suitors their due attention.

Navigating them back to the castle, Keith kept a loose grip on Lance’s fingers. “And what about you, Blue?” He said the pseudonym with the same amount of sarcasm with which Lance used his title. “You sure did make yourself popular considering you need to keep a low profile, hmm?”

Vaguely, Keith noted that Lance had sneezed twice when they entered the castle -- he did that often, didn’t he? -- but he didn’t linger on the thought, more interested in the other man’s predictable scoff.

(Did Keith mention how much he loved being able to start predicting things in Lance’s behavior? Because he did. He really loved that.)

Walking at a pace that would make a snail proud, Keith finally released Lance’s hand once they were inside but stayed close enough that their fingers brushed together. He might’ve blushed, but so did Lance.

“It’s not my fault I’m so charming!” The brunette cried in mock offense. “Just because everyone else can’t help themselves doesn’t mean you can turn this around on me. I’m just too beautiful for this party.”

True.

Keith settled on just rolling his eyes.

“Besides it’s not like I asked any of -- ah,” Lance droned on, but he stopped abruptly and his voice shot up an octave. “Nevermind!”

“What?”

Lance was scowling, the expression petulant, and he crossed both arms over his chest. “I said nevermind, Mullet! Are you deaf?”

Keith couldn’t resist ribbing him for being so juvenile. “What kind of comeback was that? Are you
“At heart, I pride myself on being no older than seven,” the boy answered seriously, chin held high. Keith chucked and shook his head, biting his lower lip to keep himself from laughing too loudly. Their voices had dropped to practically whisper-level decibels as they strolled down the few hallways that would bring them to the nearest ballroom.

Looking ready to say something else, because it seemed one of Lance’s many talents was literally always having something to say, the tanned boy promptly stopped dead in his tracks like he’d been electrocuted. Literally, he still had one leg bent and his other was lifted, frozen in midair. He looked almost carved from stone for a beat before his foot hit the ground again, and the moment it did, he spun exaggeratedly on his heel to face the other way.

“What is it?” Keith asked, but Lance was staring straight at his own arm. Following his gaze, the Prince’s gaze landed on the exceptional watch that rested on his left wrist. “Lance?”

“Hmm?” Lance blinked up at him, looking and sounding dazed before his sharp blue eyes eventually came back into focus. “Oh. No, right, I’m… I’m good. Sorry. I just, I guess I have to go.”

“Oh… okay?” Keith felt like he’d gotten whiplash, wanting to be surprised but thrown off by the dopey grin on Lance’s face. He looked almost drunk, smiling and distracted and red-faced.

More pressingly, the Prince felt a sharp twinge of concern. “Wait, you’re not going back to your aunt’s house, right? You will never step foot in that cellar, Lance. I’m serious.”

The last part carried with it a warning, and the boy’s smile slipped off his face. He sighed. “No, no,” Lance shook his head and looked down at the watch again, brow furrowing. “I just can’t stay here anymore. It’s uh,” he cleared his throat and looked around. They had stopped in the middle of a large, opulent hallway that led right into the third floor Solris Ballroom (smaller than the Grand Ballroom, larger than a Lesser Ballroom, that kind of deal). He swiftly snatched Keith by the elbow and pulled him towards a wall to continue the conversation with a semblance of privacy.

He tapped the face of the watch twice, speaking hurriedly. “It’s the magic, it’s wearing off for the night. I have a little longer, but not much… about twenty dobosh to get out of here.”

“Oh.” Keith frowned at the timepiece like it was somehow responsible for the news. Maybe it was? Lance had been sort of vague regarding how the magic thing worked. “Where are you staying? Do you need a carriage?”

“Uhh… good question, actually,” his face twisted, and again he frowned down at the watch. Keith made up his mind before Lance could come up with an answer.

Firmly, he said, “You’ll stay here. It’s not like we have any shortage of space, and I’m not letting you sleep in the streets.”

Lance’s eyes widened at the suggestion. “I-I mean… you don’t have to do that, like you’ve got enough going on here without me to worry about. I’ll just crash at Hunk or Pidge’s for the night.”

The Prince shook his head and took the other boy’s wrist, already guiding them out of the western wing of the castle. “I just saw Commander Holt before we came inside, so they’re still at the party -- who knows when they’ll go home -- and Hunk and his family are staying here as guests. You can stay, Lance, really.”

“Um…” the other postured momentarily, but Keith was satisfied when he didn’t put up too much of
a fight. In fact, he should have known Lance would go for the outlandish.

“Well, okay, I guess I can’t say it wouldn’t be cool to sleep in a castle for a night. But if you wanted to get me into bed so badly, Mullet, you didn’t have to put on the chivalrous act.” He made a show of bouncing his eyebrows in a way that could only be described as silly.

“On second thought,” Keith made a point to look away in hopes Lance wouldn’t catch the redness quickly spreading over his cheeks. “Maybe you should just sleep outside.”

“Nooooooo,” the other whined quietly, both of their voices having dropped now that they were no longer in the proximity of mulling crowds and the quiet hum of the orchestral accompaniment had fallen out. “You’re a cruel Prince, ya know that? Tempting your citizens with the sparkly digs of the castle just to threaten to boot them out.”

“The hand that giveth can taketh away, Blue.”

Lance merely feigned hurt, throwing his free hand over his brows like a slighted maiden. The best the Prince could do was snort and keep walking, still holding on Lance’s wrist as they passed through the castle.

They didn’t bother running -- twenty minutes was plenty of time -- but Keith made sure to set a fast pace. They passed a few guards as they exited the blocked off wings, but they made no move to interrupt. Lance hadn’t bothered to hide how anxious he was growing as the seconds ticked by, constantly glancing at his watch, and Keith watched him visibly sag with relief when he stopped in front of a door.

“Okay, here we go,” the Prince began unlocking the large bolts with a key from his pocket, and he noted it was weird to see it -- and the whole hallway for that matter -- completely unguarded. It made sense, as the security personnel had basically locked down the castle besides the western wing and the southern guest rooms. Most of the usual suspects he’d come to expect were likely attending the party or guarding it. “This is my room, so you shouldn’t --”

“Q-Quiznak, Keith!” Lance stumbled back slightly when Keith held open the door. “I was j-just joking, you don’t have to -- this is your room!”

The Prince blinked back at him, frowning and stepping through the doorway. “I mean, it’s pretty big? No one will come into my chambers without permission.” He paused, scowling. “Okay, except maybe Shiro, because he’s a mannerless asshole to me exclusively who doesn’t understand boundaries.”

“But where will you sleep?” Lance insisted, looking increasingly red. Keith was genuinely confused.

“...In my room?”

Lance whisper-shouted, wringing his hands but reluctantly following Keith in and shutting the door behind them. “And you don’t see the problem with this?!”

“Why would… oh, you… ohhh,” Keith let out a little laugh, almost a giggle, mostly because Lance was so indignant over the mere suggestion that it had turned him bashful.

“Lance my room has like, three separate chambers, a couch, and a private bathroom,” he pointed to each, coming back to find the tanned boy looked slightly mollified. He now appeared to be closer to mildly embarrassed than outright affronted, so forgive Keith for not being able to pass up the opportunity to tease him.
“Plus you probably don’t have much longer, I can’t exactly summon someone to have them prepare a room for you in five minutes. This is the easiest and fastest option, and I don’t have any problem with it... unless you don’t think your modest little heart can handle it?”

The brunette squawked -- literally, outright flapped his arms and made the most hilariously offended noise possible -- and stamped his foot.

“You know what? Fine! Have it your way! I’ll sleep in one of these rooms,” Lance opened the first door he could to reveal, anticlimactically, the bathroom. Keith was clutching his sides from laughing so hard, Lance’s annoyance clear as water when he slammed the door shut. “Okay, maybe not that one -- but you get the point!”

“I’m so glad I decided to be a hospitable host,” the Prince replied as he regained control of his breathing. “It’s my birthday, aren’t you supposed to be nice to me?”

Lance hid his face in his hands and let out a long-suffering sigh. “I hate you so much right now. Just go awayyy.”

Keith allowed himself to be pushed towards the door, mostly because he was still laughing, and finally stopped when Lance rested his grip on the handle and was about to bodily throw him out.

He stopped short with a gasp, and Keith was about to ask him what was wrong when, all at once the still air in the room vanished momentarily, sucked through an invisible pressure vent, only to be brought back in a rush of... wind? Keith gaped at Lance, his body beginning to glow a soft, luminescent shade of blue. Keith had only the forethought to flick on the nearest lamp when he led Lance in, so the color in the near-dark was both blinding and beautiful, and the Prince felt his breath leave him as the magic that Lance had so described disappeared.

In the stead of the Blue Paladin stood a tired but happy teenager, tan skin just as warm and smooth, the same but for the random pockmarks of dirt on his face, arms, and his hands and feet especially. There was some light bruising still visible beneath his jawline, and he wore a murky beige colored tunic, paired with some darker trousers of the same designation.

Not for the first time, Keith noticed Lance was barefoot.

“Oh,” Lance let out a tiny breath, the sound barely an exhale. “I guess that’s over, then. Ta-da!”

He smiled, and Keith was transfixed by the light fluorescence bleeding into the air around them, making the space shimmer in the soft blue afterglow of the magic. Keith had been intrigued by Lance’s single-cheek mark since the first time they’d met, but now that he suddenly had a matching pair, Keith found himself utterly unable to look away. The twin markings glinted in the dissipating effervescent light, and they made Lance look... he wasn’t even sure how to appropriately describe it. Divine? Otherworldly? Certainly, something from the most amazing of dreams.

Simply put, Lance was just too pretty, the soft light and ethereal zigzags framed his pouty lips and freckled nose and Keith was momentarily overcome by the sudden impulse to to reach out and run his thumbs over the curves of his cheekbones. It was like the previous asymmetry of his features must have been the work of an intelligent and merciful creator, who had decided giving one person’s physical appearance this much unfair power over others would have been cruel. They’d given him only one mark so regular people could stand to even look at him, only for all of the careful craftsmanship to be thrown aside with the undoings of magic.

“Ah, wait -- is she...?”
Lance’s sharp tone cut through Keith’s stupor, blue eyes darting around the dark. Keith’s gaze followed automatically, only for him to almost fall back into the door when Lance let out a tired, pleased breath of air.

There, splayed out comfortably on one of his lounge chairs, laid a small gray kitten with piercing aquamarine eyes, blearily blinking up at them.

“Blue.”

Once he’d spotted her, Lance was onto the next thing, and Keith wondered if this was Lance’s everyday -- hopscotching through the first relevant things that popped into his head. It was a little dizzying for the Prince, brought up by the rigidity of constant structure and routine, but Keith would be lying if he didn’t find the abrupt jumps refreshing.

Lance was inspecting his hands and clothing, making a face while he did so. “That’s Blue. I’m her Paladin, so she says. It’s sort of… complicated. But she’s the one who made me look so fine tonight, so props to my girl.”

In typical Lance fashion, he winked to Keith, and the cat let out an unimpressed little mewl and caught eyes with the brunette. They shared a significant look, and Keith watched several emotions play across Lance’s features over the course of only a few seconds.

“Lance?” Keith swallowed on the lump in his throat. Were they… talking? Communicating?

“Mmm? Oh, sorry.” His voice returned after a few more seconds, soft, but firm. “Blue needs to rest for now. She’ll be out for awhile.”

“So you’re back to --” Keith paused. He was going to say normal, but Lance was by no stretch of the imagination someone he considered normal. “Back to you for now? Like no magic?”

Lance crossed an arm over his chest and let out a small laugh. “Yep. You’re stuck with regular me, I guess.”

There was an edge of self-deprecation in his tone that made the Prince scowl. “I didn’t mean it like that! I just... don’t know how any of this works? Is there anything we -- you -- need to do?”

Something hard flickered in Lance’s eyes for a moment, but the look quickly softened. “Right. Sorry, that was unfair of me. She just needs to sleep. It’s hard to realize Blue is talking to me mentally and not out loud, because it feels so real.”

Keith could only nod, unable to relate but trying to understand nonetheless.

“Well, okay, so there’s the bathroom, if you need it. You’re welcome to whatever is in there. The other rooms are my study, training room and closet. You can change into some fresh clothes if you want. There’s sleep stuff in the wardrobe.”

Lance shifted his weight back and forth. “Oh, um, thanks.”

The room fell into a weird, tense silence. Neither of them were looking right at the other, and Keith was wholly unsure of what exactly to do. He’d hosted a thousand guests in his lifetime by now -- hell, he was hosting over a hundred in the castle just tonight -- but the prospect of having someone (and not just someone, but Lance) in his room was doing funny things to his heart, and less-funny but no-less-real things to the pooling heat in his abdomen.

The proper, princely part of him was fully aware that he should turn and go back to the party now.
He could already envision a distressed Shiro running down corridors if Keith was gone much longer, but the thought of leaving Lance alone was a cry against his base instincts. Humans and Galra were both selfish creatures by nature, and trying to still that innate selfishness caused an uncomfortable shiver to run over his body. The force of what his heart was urging him to do was powerful, a mixture of feelings and desires whirlpooling against his responsibilities, coming to a head only and especially when Lance’s face was near enough to appreciate the gentle bow of his upper-lip or the curved tip of his nose.

For as complex and confusing a feeling it was to the Prince, it was but single word, a four letter request.

A question, a suggestion, a plea.

Stay?

And, for as admittedly awful the Prince was at reading others, Keith would have sworn it felt like there was something almost… reciprocal in the silence. Maybe he was just projecting -- he was almost definitely just projecting -- but he wondered if Lance wanted him to stay, too.

“Well, I guess you’ve got a party to get back to, huh?”

Keith grappled with his courage and finally met his eye, to see a pained, resigned look on Lance’s face.

Before Keith could use his fucking brain, his mouth slipped out a broken admission.

“I don’t want to.”

Across the few feet between them, which in some confounding way felt both like miles and like inches, he watched as Lance’s arms fell to his sides and his eyes widened, enough that even in the low-lighting the blue within them twinkled.

Keith, realizing his mistake, was about to backtrack, so he opened his mouth and decided to say… Nothing.

He closed his mouth and didn’t say anything. This was supposed to be a new chapter, some bullshit milestone for him, right? He’d had enough pretending in his seventeen years to last him his for the rest of his life, and if there was ever someone he wanted to be honest with, it was Lance. All his life, he’d been raised to lie, born to lead, fated to the restraining weight of his crown. The throne was as much a chair as it was a holding cell, and Keith was tired of holding on, holding back, holding out hope that maybe next year would be better.

Marmora wasn’t built in a day, but Keith could at least start by being honest. Lance deserved that much.

A little huff, almost a scoff, of disbelief came from Lance and he shook his head. “You… what?”

“I don’t want to go back to the party,” the Prince repeated, a little more firmly. His voice did not waver, thank the stars, though his nerves were utterly shot.

A small smile found its place on Lance’s face, the look so sincere it could almost be described as vulnerable. “Then don’t.”

“You say it like it’s so simple.” A humorless laugh escaped Keith’s lips, and it made him sound more
bitter than he intended.

“And why not?” Lance challenged simply, raising a brow. “It’s your birthday, Keith. If you don’t want to go back there, then don’t go. You don’t even have to stay here, or I can close myself up in one of the other rooms if you want privacy, but you should be the one to choose how you spend the rest of the day.”

Lance’s matter-of-fact tone gave him pause. He was speaking like this was just a black and white issue -- go, or don’t go -- and that there weren’t consequences. Toeing that line, the dangerous edge of a thousand shades of gray, that was what Keith feared -- that one day he’d slip in there somewhere and never come out again.

Softly, Lance offered a question.

“If you don’t want to go to the party, then what do you want?”

The candor was again surprising, and Keith licked his lips while he considered how to respond. His pulse quickened when he watched the other’s sharp sapphire eyes follow the motion.

You, his throat burned with the urge to speak, but this blind sort of vulnerability was new and uncomfortable and Keith couldn’t force himself to say it no matter how much he wanted to.

Knock knock.

Both Lance and Keith jumped at the rapping sound of gauntlets against the wooden door, breaking the quiet with a strange sharpness. The Prince met the other teen’s gaze to find the blues turned wide and fearful.

“Your Highness? Are you in there?”

A relieved hand flew to his chest in a vain attempt to still his hummingbird heart, fluttering madly in his chest from the unexpected interruption. Keith sent a quick look to Lance, whose hand had hesitantly begun palming the doorknob to the bathroom, and he pressed a single finger to his own lips and opened the door, making sure to take up the small amount of entryway with his body.

“Hi, Plaxum.” The Prince greeted, lamely.

The woman appeared slightly frazzled when Keith first opened the door, but the strain wilted into relief, twinged by concern. “Your Highness, I am so sorry to have bothered you in your private chambers. Are... you feeling alright? Sir Shiro couldn’t find you for nearly a varga and well…”

Keith had to snort. “He started panicking, didn’t he?”

“That’s putting it mildly.” She wore a wry smile, but it faded quickly. “Whatever case, I am relieved to find you unharmed. Permission to escort you back? I’m afraid Sir Shiro would very much end my career if he learned I found you and didn’t return with you.”

He could practically feel the weight of Lance’s gaze just out of his line of sight.

Then, the faintest whisper floated by him, barely above a breeze.

“Ask for one tick.”

With literally no good excuse, Keith’s mouth twisted for a second and he left a puzzled Plaxum standing in the hallway. “Just... uh, hold on. Gotta…”
He shut the door and whirled on the spot, stopping just in time to stop himself from getting fucking bulldozed by Lance, who had conveniently decided to fling himself across the room. The Prince’s breath was promptly knocked out of him, and he physically staggered back with the force of the impact, but once he realized that it was Lance, and that it meant what Keith thought it did, he didn’t mind being a little breathless.

Arms were wrapped tightly around his shoulders, and after a stunned second of silence, Keith gently placed his own arms around Lance’s waist.

On a related note, Keith wholly wanted to tell Father Time to quiznak the fuck off.

“Go to the party if it’s what you need to do,” Lance whispered at the hollow beneath his ear. Keith shivered. (On a related note, the Prince wholly wanted to tell Father Time to quiznak the fuck off at that moment.)

“I shouldn’t have put you on the spot like that. This wasn’t the right time to… anyways, I’m sorry.” He felt more than he saw Lance’s head shake from side to side. “I’m going to be here when you get back, okay? We’re not done talking about this.”

Numbly, all he could do was nod and squeeze Lance tighter against him for several brave, fleeting seconds.

Lance playfully shoved him towards the door. “Now go before you actually put Shiro in an early grave.”

Keith’s lips ghosted a smile as he turned away, only to stop when a flash of unsolicited anxiety gripped him. Fingers just barely grazing the door handle, he bit his lip and debated with himself. The last time Lance had been alone in his castle, he’d gotten lost, and hurt, and who knows what else could have happened if Allura hadn’t shown up. The thought alone made his vision turn red around the edges. The circumstances were totally different tonight and it’s not like he was expecting anything to go wrong, but… in the event something did? Keith wasn’t sure if he would be able handle it.

Finally, swallowing the lump in his throat, he whispered a final request. “Lance, promise me you will not leave this room.”

The protest he knew was coming was already starting to form. “Hey! A little credit --”

“Please, Lance.” He tried to use his tone to convey how serious he was. “Just promise me.”

The other boy let out low a grumble but ultimately agreed. “…Fine. I promise.”

“Thank you,” Keith sighed and finally turned back to the door, schooling his expression into something neutral, and opening it again.

“Sorry, I was just looking for something. We can go back now.”

Plaxum gave an affirmative nod and stepped aside. “Did you find what you were looking for, your Highness?”

“I think so.”

Keith made sure to close and lock the door behind him.
“Well, this was… not how I expected this night to go, at all.” Lance plopped down on the couch adjacent to the chair Blue had since claimed for her very literal cat-nap.

Mulling over… all of what Keith had said… Lance found himself distracted by inadvertently testing, and was ultimately satisfied by, the more substantive connection he felt with Blue when she wasn’t using her magic to disguise him, even if she was currently sleeping now that he was alone.

In her physical-kitten-form, which seemed especially laughable now that Lance had seen the extent of her awesome power, he could feel their bond more discernibly, a presence tangible enough that he was fairly sure he could reach out himself instead of waiting for her to take the first step; when her powers were diffused, her presence was much less accessible.

Even so, Lance didn’t reach out. Blue was clearly exhausted if her sleeping purrs were any indication, so he allowed his attention to go elsewhere.

He started first by taking time to properly examine the room now that he was no longer saddled with a certain temperamental Prince. Lance wasn’t sure what he expected, but he was not at all surprised by what he found. The space was very functional, but not especially homey -- very Keith. The chairs and couches didn’t look or feel particularly lived in, and even the bed was made to perfection, not a crease out of place.

As far as decor went, there was a concerning collection of knives along the eastern wall beside two grand, glass double doors that led to some sort of private balcony, and there was a huge, elegantly crafted iteration of the Marmoran emblem in the country’s colors emblazoned over the fireplace opposite Keith’s bed. Otherwise, the walls were bare and dark.

Lance glanced at his watch: it was just passed 10:30 in the evening, and he didn’t know how long Keith would be gone, but he guessed at least a varga, so Lance made his way to the next place he recognized -- the bathroom. It had been awhile since he washed and he fully intended to take advantage of the opportunity since Keith had offered.

When he opened the door and flicked on the crystal lights, he, in no-dramatic-fashion, collapsed to his knees.

“This is so unfair,” the teen nearly cried, leering at the tile in some weird mixture of adoration and anger.

The bathroom was bigger than the whole kitchen at his aunt’s house, with its white tiles polished to perfection and a tub so large that if it had proper buoyancy, Lance was sure it could classify as a small class of ship.

Warily, he got to his feet and stepped into the actual space of the lavatory, the tiles cold and vaguely familiar beneath his… bare feet… oh hell fucking no. When Lance looked down, he seriously considered turning on the spot and hurling himself right off Keith’s balcony; he’d tracked his goddamn dirty bare feet all over the flawless floors. Fucking hell. And if his mood wasn’t spiraling fast enough, it took a goddamn nose-dive when Lance looked up into the mirror that spanned the length of the sprawling countertop that was much too large for any one person to ever need and got a
good and proper look at himself.

The physical disparity of his appearance, juxtaposed with the gilded, spotless, immaculate state of the bathroom, was an overwhelming and ugly reminder of his status. Take your pick of the appropriate mockery -- poor, dirty, servant -- didn’t matter which, because all of them were fitting, sticking to him like the plague. He looked awful, dark purple bruises beneath his eyes and cracked, dry skin. Stars, how long had it been since he used the little face cream he’d stolen from his aunt? Maybe a whole movement by now.

Continuing his inspection, perhaps against his better judgment, Lance suspected his state of being had been restored to the moment Blue had transformed him after they gave chase through the forest. Too bad; the magic had really done him wonders. Sighing, Lance examined the caked on mud and accumulated scratches on his legs from running through bramble and over sticks when he pursued Blue through the forest, and his usual casual-unkempt hair style was a total disaster, greasy and slicked with sweat. The state of his clothes made him want to find the nearest pit and crawl into it. He even had a twig in his curls.

Embarrassed, he pulled it out and threw it in the bin nearby, feeling a flush of shame fill his cheeks.

Keith had seen him like this. Gods, Lance had pulled Keith into a fucking hug looking like this. Small miracle that the Prince hadn’t turned on the overhead light and just the lamp; maybe he hadn’t noticed the extent of how gross Lance was.

But, fucking seriously, if he felt like he hadn’t belonged in the castle when he was masquerading around as the Blue Paladin, he sure as fuck felt out of place now.

So Lance decided to just say fuck it. Keith had insisted he stay here, so he was going to enjoy himself. And, goddamnit, he’d clean the floors. Keith didn’t need to see his muddy footprints, no sir.

The teen ran himself a bath, legs almost buckling when he opened up a cabinet to find the most impressive assortment of bath products ever. Salts, bubbles, soaps, oils, emulsions, exfoliants, masks, gels, -- you name it, it was there.

Let it be known that if Lance ever were to wake up in another life and he and Keith had switched places, he would make damn sure to enjoy every single one of those products. Fucker doesn’t even realize what he has... Lance sighed and chastised himself, fighting back his unjustified bitterness. He shouldn’t judge Keith; indeed, he hadn’t done anything to deserve Lance’s contempt. The whole self-care thing really didn’t seem like something Mullet would indulge in and Lance just needed to accept that he was being petty... but it was still hard. Lance wasn’t a bad person, but he was human, okay? Maybe he let out a little sob of envy, so what? He wasn’t going to shame himself for it.

With no small demonstration of self-control, Lance agonizingly decided to reel in his impulse to try one of everything. (Imagine his horror to find most of the bottles and containers weren’t even fucking open! What the fuck, Keith?!) He settled on a simple soap, shampoo and conditioner combination, and he stripped but for his watch. Call him crazy, but he had a feeling the magical relic could handle a little water.

When he got in, Lance let out a deep, almost guttural groan at the transcendent feeling of near-scalding water over his grimy skin. Bliss against his sore muscles. Heaven compared to the chill of the bathroom tiles, or worse, the cold cellar floor.

Lance stayed in the tub for about thirty dobosh (did he mention that he loved having a watch?) before taking one of the neatly folded towels from the cabinet above the toilet and drying himself thoroughly. He let a little water drip on the floor with the plan to come back and wipe down the dirty
prints he’d left.

After securely tying the towel around his waist, he opened the bathroom door a crack and peeked around to make sure he was still alone. Knowing Lance’s luck, Keith was about to walk in on him naked, or there was going to be an assassin lurking in the corner who would mistake him for the Prince and slit his throat instead.

Okay, maybe Lance was starting to grow a little paranoid. He had a pretty close time the last time he was alone in the castle, alright? He’ll work on that.

Grateful to find no such disturbances, Lance passed by Blue who was in the same spot as before, now sprawled on her back snoozing adorably like the magical-omniscient-telepathic-cat-guardian that she was.

As quickly as possible, Lance opened the next door in search of a closet and he can’t even say he was surprised when he found the walk-in wardrobe that could house a small family. He sighed, not even bothering to oogle because, frankly, he’d be there all fucking night, and he hurriedly looked through Keith’s clothes for something that didn’t seem too expensive. It was a tried and true challenge.

After some awkward searching, because, this was Keith’s closet and these were Keith’s clothes, Lance managed to find a few pieces tucked in the back that seemed suitable. He selected a cotton shirt, ashen and simple that hung a little loose on him and a similar pair of pants in dark-brown. Vaguely, he was aware that he may have been drawn to them because they were the closest thing he could find to his own comparatively-garbage tunic and pants. Finally, seeing as the multi-chambered room was on the chilly side, he pulled out a navy cloak that seemed like it was collecting dust, hoping that was a sign that it was something Keith wouldn’t mind letting him borrow. The material wasn’t quite as thick as the dark cloak his aunt had confiscated, and it was well-worn and matted in some places, but he flung it over his shoulders comfortably enough.

God, Lance hated how easy this all was. Keith’s life was a dream, a lovely, impossible dream, and he felt like he was falling right into it. Scraping his knees and bumping his elbows on the way down, but falling nonetheless.

Lance trudged his way back to the bathroom, indulged in some of Mullet’s barely-touched hair products and face cream (sue him), and began to wipe up the floors with the same towel he’d used to dry himself. It would have been silly to dirty another one, after all.

Once he fully finished his excursion in the bathroom, Lance felt considerably less gross and a little better about the whole thing. Yes, he was still uncomfortable with the fact that he was in Keith’s room, and that Keith insisted he sleep here, but Lance couldn’t say he wasn’t grateful for the Prince’s kindness.

This would have been easier if he had just been a royal, stuck-up jerk. So much easier.

Over the next twenty dobosh, Lance had no shortage of peeking and prodding to keep himself busy, poking his head into the other two doorways respectively to reveal a sort of study and what looked like a private fitness studio. Made sense; Knifey had to get those tragically, sinfully well-toned arms from doing more than signing decrees or… or whatever it was that Keith did all day.

Lance’s nosy prying ran its course in that time, but Keith still hadn’t come up from his party. His watch told him it was just past midnight and he had half a mind to just curl up in the study and try to sleep -- that would probably be the least weird place to sleep tonight, right?
Eager to keep busy, he began to build himself a little enclave in the private room beside the desk, folding his worn clothes neatly and pulling down a spare pillow and blanket (fucking holy shit this is so soft what is this made of please bury me in this material thank you) he found in Keith’s closet.

“Blue, do you wanna sleep in here with me?” He called softly, rubbing the wrist that carried her timepiece. She rather didn’t hear him or didn’t care, because the dormant presence in his mind (and on Keith’s lounge chair) did not so much as a twitch.

Shrugging, Lance turned around prepared to plop himself down with the blanket, but stopped when he heard a weird, almost crinkly noise? He blinked down to realize he’d stepped on his folded, al biet ratty, clothes, and tested the pressure on his foot.

And then the sound again. It resembled a sort of shuffle, or compression, but with a textured quality, like the flirtatious murmurs of brushstrokes over canvas.

Curious, Lance shook out the pile until he found the source and -- oh. It was the star chart that Pidge had given him, folded in on itself neatly. Shit, had he left it in his pants pocket through that whole thing? Lance said a quiet thanks that it hadn’t gotten turned into some weird magical vapor; Pidge would have fucking murdered him if he lost it or ruined it.

A grin crept over his face as he smoothed out the parchment. Well, it’s not like he had anything better to do, right?

Lance saw the obvious opportunity and leapt up, only to hesitant once he was back in Keith’s room proper.

*Lance, promise me you will not leave this room.*

Sucking his teeth for a pause, he ultimately came to the conclusion that the restriction probably didn’t apply to the balcony, right? Just in case, he refastened the cloak so it obscured the lower half of his face and pulled up the hood, just in case there were other balconies with wandering eyes on that part of the castle.

Nervous excitement made his fingertips tingle, pins-and-needles playing up and down his arms when he threw open the glass doors.

He sneezed, twice, again. Quiznak, it was an annoying habit. *So much for romantically sweeping out under the moonlight,* he thought as he rubbed his nose irritably.

Ignoring that the best he could, the night was brisk, probably around 5 degrees Celsius if Lance had to guess, and he wrapped himself tighter in the cloak as a consequence. Thankfully, it was cloudless, a bright full moon bathing the castle walls in pale light, a background of stars winking into existence before his very eyes.

The balcony itself was much like Keith’s room -- simple. It was little more than a solid slab of stone, so well-polished and smooth that the surface felt almost soft beneath his toes. It was decorated with traditional crown molding around the columns that created a sturdy bannister, seamlessly sprouting from the stone in an impressive demonstration of masonry.

Lance vaguely wondered how long it would take for him to stop thinking everything here was impressive. He guessed never.

With the guide to the stars in his hands, Lance let himself slip into a content sort of observational study. Occasionally a sound carried from the surrounding city or the castle grounds, but for the most part, Marmora’s capital was quiet and he lost himself in the dark heavens. According to the Holt’s
ledger, tonight was the first night of Scorpio’s cycle and the last of Libra. Lance flipped through the notes to find any corresponding constellation patterns, and once he had something to look for, he let himself float away for awhile, into something bigger, grander than himself.

While he was admittedly missing Pidge’s super nice telescope for accuracy, the raised ledge in the castle was by no means something to turn his nose up to. Metaphorically, that is -- he was literally looking up and around, craning his neck until it was sore and not at all minding the discomfort. The altitude made him heady in the best kind of way; it felt of home.

He found Aquarius as a common anchoring point, and the water constellations slowly filled in around it: Erinadus, Pisces, and Cetus -- the river, the fish, and the monster, all with a black ocean behind them.

“Protector of the universe, huh?” Lance mumbled, a hand running over his new cheek mark. If he hadn’t seen the marking so clearly seared into his skin, if he wasn’t standing at the edge of the castle looking at the galaxies within which he lived and through which he saw further stars and suns that had long since burnt out -- if he wasn’t so damn sure this was really happening, Lance would never have believed it.

This whole thing very well could have been something he fantasized when wine-drunk, a dreamscape that he would wake from and find himself back in pitch blackness. Lance’s breath puffed in front of him, and he hugged his limbs together tightly, afraid he might fall apart if he didn’t.

The realest thing he had was Blue in the back of his mind. She wasn’t conscious, but she was present, and the link kept some of the doubts at bay. After her, he felt phantom fingers ghost over his cheeks. He felt warm, sure lips capture his own and --

Lance groaned, closing his eyes momentarily. The stars weren’t going anywhere. He could have a few minutes to process.

_I don’t want to go back to the party._

Keith said he wanted to stay. But why? To stay with him?

_Because_ of him?

A dangerous thought, that.

Lance, on his neverending series of ups and downs, had acted on instinct when his mind knew better, blinded by attraction and admiration for stupid Keith being the source of his life’s recent tendency towards the unpredictable. So his mouth and heart had conspired against him, deciding the appropriate response was, instead of using his lips to say thank you, he’d use them to fucking kiss him.

_He kissed you first_, a small voice reminded, and Lance swore it sounded annoyingly like _hope_. He asked it politely to go away, and when that didn’t work, he tried to reason with the voice in his head, you know, like a crazy person.

1. Keith kissed him first. Lance wanted desperately to say he regretted kissing him back, but both he and Hope knew that was a lie.

1.1. ...and Keith had outright invited him tonight, hadn’t he? He’d come to Lance’s house in the middle of the night to make sure he was okay and told him, point-black, he wanted Lance to go. Rather that meant Keith had legitimate interest, or he was straight and had the absolute worst interpretation of friendzone boundaries known to man.
2. Lance McClain wasn’t *anybody* and Keith Kogane was the most important person in the goddamn kingdom. Catching feelings for someone you could never, *ever* have had ‘bad idea’ written all over it.

3. These sorts of things they just -- they don’t work out. Keith would marry a Princess and live his happily ever after. That’s how this shit worked.

*The quiznak are you doing then?*

Good question.

Stargazing, poorly.

At that, Lance let out a low, mirthless laugh just in time for the door in Keith’s bedroom to loudly rattle. The teen startled, pulling the hood of his cloak lower while peering through the glass, back into the room. Keith had said no one but him or Shiro would come in, but if this just happened to be time for an exception, or that assassin he imagined earlier had conveniently decided to show up, Lance had no option but to face them or fucking *jump*.

“...Lance?”

“Oh, thank god,” he muttered. It was Keith. Out of habit, Lance glanced at his watch -- it was just a few minutes past midnight.

He waved his hand exaggeratedly from outside to let Keith know he wasn’t a ghost haunting his balcony, leaving the invitation for him to join up in the air. A relieved part of him very much wanted Keith to come outside and give him some company, weighed against a very sensible part of him that said that was a terrible fucking idea.

Guess which side won?

“Hey,” Keith shuttered the door behind him as he stepped up to the bannister. “Why…?”

Lance’s gaze flickered his way, and he grinned sheepishly at the puzzled look on the Prince’s face. When confused, apparently, Keith wore an unconscious pout that was equal parts adorable and terrible for Lance’s force of will. He was eyeing the hood drawn over Lance’s head.

“Oh, right. I didn’t know if other people could see your balcony,” He made a nondescript gesture indicating the windows and shrugged. “I figured no one would be able to tell the difference, but just in case…”

“That… okay, makes sense.” Keith hummed, setting a hand on the ledge beside where Lance was resting his elbow. The heat from the near-contact was almost too much for him to stand.

Keith asked a question after a moment of quiet. “What are you doing out here?”

Lance smirked and waved the chart in his hands. “Stargazing. Poorly.”

A brow of interest disappeared beneath the Prince’s bangs, so Lance explained.

“This is Pidge’s star chat, she lent me her copy on Monday and I never got the chance to utilize it. The view here is great so I would just…” he trailed off, letting the universe speak for him. If only it could do that more often, maybe things wouldn’t be so complicated.

“It is.” Keith’s answer was soft-spoken. “I used to match constellations with my Dad when I was younger. There’s a few better places in the castle, but this is definitely up there.”
“I found Aquarius as a starting point, there, and then Draco is there,” Lance pointed overhead in the directions of the respective constellations, waiting until Keith affirmed he found them too. “I was looking for Pegasus and Lacerta over here, but…”

His voice slipped away, catching the look of quiet awe from the Prince as he stared up at the skies. His eyes flickered back and forth like he was reading a page, much to Lance’s amusement, and beneath the bleached rays of the moon he found no traces of dark purple in the irises; only pitch black reflecting pools, a perfect mirror for all the stars overhead.

After a solid dozish of quiet observation, the Prince glanced over and Lance hurriedly looked away, hoping his bronze complexion would hopefully masking his blush.

“Um, can I see? The chart, I mean,” asked the Prince after a pause.

Lance held out the parchment in Keith’s directions while keeping his own gaze carefully trained up and away. “Sure, knock yourself out.”

Almost immediately, Lance heard Keith begin to mutter to himself, flicking back and forth between the front and back pages and back up to the skies. “According to this, if we can find Andromeda, Lacerta should be just a few degrees above… oh, is that it? No wait…”

Of course Mullet would talk to himself while focused on something; it was precious and the universe clearly took no pity on Lance’s heart. He huffed a quiet laugh but tried to continue searching the skies for several minutes before spotting a familiar arrangement of celestial bodies.

“Oh wait, I think I see one -- lemme see that,” Lance took back the chart and squinted down at the margins, redirecting himself back to the anchor points he’d found. “Yes! There’s Cepheus, just a little under Draco.”

Keith tilted his head, looking from the page and up at the sky a few times. His eyes were narrowed in concentration. “I don’t see it.”

“Ugh, look, it’s there,” Lance grabbed the sides of Keith’s face and angling him just-so the right ascension and latitude of the constellation matched up. “The red star, there, that’s the tip of the scepter.”

“Oh. Yeah, okay. I see it.” Keith stilled for several seconds. “Um, Lance?”

“What?”

The Prince sounded a little uncomfortable. “Uh, could you let go of my face now?”

“O-Oh fuck, sorry,” he flinched back like Keith’s cheeks had burned him. Maybe they had. “Sometimes I get really into the whole stargazing thing… hah. Sorry.”

“It’s not a problem.” The Prince wrinkled his nose and looked skyward again. He rather didn’t notice or was polite enough not comment on Lance’s obvious embarrassment. “I’ll be honest, I don’t know much about the stars. I studied them with… when I was younger for fun, but I never learned much about them besides using them as a guide if you get lost. Is this a hobby of yours?”

“Um… yeah, sort of. On clear nights, Mamá would bring all the kids outside and tell us all the different mythological stories. I remember… some of them, the ones she repeated a lot for my younger siblings I remember better. You know, Aquarius, Orion, Artemis, the easier ones.” Lance paused, picking at one of the calluses on his fingers absentmindedly.
“Huh. Your Mom sounds like a really smart woman.”

“Smartest I’ve ever met,” Lance agreed with a wistful grin. “That’s assuming we don’t count Pidge as a woman, because I sure don’t.”

The Prince let out a little snicker of laughter, much to Lance’s joy. Gods, he was so weak. Where’s that resolve, McClain? Where’s that catching-feelings-is-a-bad-idea mindset? Because you’re fucking it up pretty badly right now.

He kept talking, ignoring the whining in the back of his brain. “But yeah, back home, there’s no formal schooling or anything. I learned most of what I know from her, but I owe a lot to my brother-in-law Tony, too. He was a teacher in Plaht City and leant us all books and stuff, so between the two of them, I got weird folk stuff from my mom and a dosage of second-hand homeschooling?”

Lance held up each hand and smushed them together as if to demonstrate his unconventional education, and Keith cracked a smile. “It was a real culture shock when I moved here. There’s not exactly a lot to do in the mountains as far as entertainment goes… oh, sorry, I guess I got a little sidetracked.” A light blush darkened his cheeks and he averted his eyes. “Anyways, you could say it’s a hobby, but it’s also just part of home. Everything is so different in Marmora, but the stars are the same.”

“Oh. That’s…” Keith’s voice sounded unsure. “I’m sorry?”

Lance shook his head and smiled. “No, no, it’s not bad different. Just different. Sorry, that was probably a real debbie-downer answer, huh?”

He sensed more than he saw Keith shift his weight, since they were still standing rather close. “No, it’s fine, and you don’t have to be sorry. I’m, um, trying to be more honest… so you shouldn’t apologize for saying what’s true.”

“Geez, Keith.” Lance laughed and turned around, leaning his lower back into the stone molding. Arms crossed over his chest, he tried to give the Prince his most disparaging look, shaking his head like a scolding mother. “Attractive, rich and sensitive? You’re going to end up breaking someone’s heart if you keep it up.”

Probably mine.

“Y-You –” Keith sputtered, his face washed out under the moonlight but for the faintest of rosy glows dusting his cheeks. “You think I’m… attractive?”

Rolling his eyes, Lance just craned his neck around so he could look up again. His hood slipped back slightly, but it covered most of his forehead. “I’m not even going to dignify that with an answer.”

The Prince’s confused expression went unnoticed by Lance, since he was purposefully avoiding his gaze, but some of the emotion still crept into his voice. “O-Oh. Umm. okay? Anyways… it’s cold and late, maybe we should uh, go inside?”

Lance heard the weight of a hand on the doorknob and sighed, reluctant to give up his twinkling distraction, but ultimately agreed. He was trying to work up his nerve for the conversation he knew was coming; it was probably best to do this with the security of four walls around them, both for privacy and safety reasons. Just because they couldn’t be seen didn’t mean they couldn’t be heard, and just because he had every intention of resuming their earlier conversation about what Keith wanted didn’t mean the answers he received would hurt any less. A freefall as his only escape route
just seemed like poor planning.

Following Keith inside, Lance carefully began folding up Pidge’s chart in between his subsequent sneezes, and shut the door behind him.

“Do you have a cold? You did that earlier -- sneezed a few times, I mean.” Keith asked, because of course he noticed, like the sweet, thoughtful asshole that he was.

Lance sighed. “Nah, it’s just something with Marmora’s air. I just sneeze whenever I go in or out of places, I don’t know if its your dust or what but consider this me filing an official complaint.”

“Complaint?” Keith snorted and shook his head, walking towards his wardrobe and pulling out some clothes. “I’ll be sure to go ahead and fix the air for you. That’s definitely within my jurisdiction.”

Lance bit his lip, trying not to grin. “Well, good. Glad someone is on that, finally.”

Keith threw a scowl his way as he walked towards a chest of drawers and rummaged around for a moment. He used his hip to shut the dresser with fresh clothes in his hands. “Just give me a sec to change, these clothes are really uncomfortable.”

Lance’s voice had decided to abandon ship, so he just nodded before sitting back on the couch nearest Blue, only to flinch back when he realized she was awake, watching him with unusually bright irises.

“Blue? You’re awake?” Lance quizzed seriously, but he slipped into a giggle when she let out a tiny yawn. He’d been so distracted, he hadn’t even noticed the magnetic pull of her mind in his when she returned to consciousness. “You sort of just passed out earlier. Are you okay?”

A feeling of fondness spread through his chest, gentle and sure.

[Much better with rest, thank you, my paladin. You did well earlier.]

Chewing his lip, Lance shot a look at the bathroom door. He had yet to try communicating with her telepathically, but he wasn’t exactly excited by the prospect of Keith overhearing what he so desperately had been wanting to ask her, so he gave it a go.

Do you really mean that? I didn’t -- I didn’t really do anything. Universe defending, and all that... I just sort of messed around and danced with people. Mullet and I, we, uh, kissed... dunno if you knew that. But anyways, I’m sort of freaking out about it? He hasn’t said anything but he seemed like he was going to have a meltdown earlier so I hugged him and it was weird and intimate and I don’t know what to do.

There was a pause, and he wasn’t sure if she ‘heard’ him, but her answer came instead as a shift in his attention, like all the same facts were laid before him but in a kaleidoscopic shift, the image changed slightly and he was focused instead of a buzzing sound through their connection. It was metronomic and steady like a pulse; an accurate assessment, he realized, because it was his -- their? - - pulse. Yes. They shared a pulse now, apparently. Or… her’s was an extension of his. Sort of. Soul bonds, man. Don’t even ask him how they worked.

Anyway, the sound was now the object of his attention, and it was heavy and hard against his ribs and mind, but the longer Blue focused with him, the steadier it became, and slowly he felt the panic slide off him like droplets of water in a passing storm.

[You did exactly as you needed to do. I am confident of that.]
Blue’s assurance was unyielding, but Lance was nothing if not stubborn.

*How can you be so sure?*

She waited for him to take a deep breath, which he obliged. Her ear flicked in an annoyed-cute way, which did not at all fit the serious tone of their silent conversation.

*[This fear in you, I do not like it. Why do you doubt your own worth?]*

Anxiety roiled in his stomach like bile, and Lance truly felt nauseous. Blue was worse than a mirror, because at least Lance could lie to himself; she wasn’t about let to him off so easily.

*Blue, I... please, understand, I mean you no disrespect, but I just don’t think I am who you want me to be. It’s not that I’m doubting my worth, it’s that I know exactly what I am and what I’m worth, and I am not the kind of person that destiny plucks up to defend time and fate and the universe. There’s clearly something big and important going on here if you sought someone out who can do whatever it is you need, someone who is a good fighter or has access to --*

*[Lance.]*

His runaway fears stilled immediately. That was the first time she’d said his name directly, and it carried with a heavy weight, rumbling in his brain like a tuning fork that radiated outwards against the pressing darkness of his thoughts.

*[I chose you for a reason.] The words were fiercely spoken, like a terrible gust of wind and Lance had to accept it, *had* to because it was in his own mind but it was just hard to believe, hard to accept.

*Okay -- okay. Please, just, at least tell me *why* me? Of all people?*

She paused, unblinking, holding Lance’s heart in her claws before he even realized what he’d done. He put the question out there and there was no taking it back now; with one word, he’d gifting her the power to ruin him because there was no hiding from whatever answer she had to give him.

*[Because you alone are unlike anyone else. The one to bear my watch is the one who draws out the goodness in others, whose compassion outweighs their complacency, who would sacrifice their whole world if they had to for those you care for. No other person can do these things as you -- not even the other paladins.]*

Before he could even register that, *wait*, did she just say there are other paladins, a low, almost angry growl filled his heart, mind, and body and chased away the thought for now. Color and feeling blotted out everything for a moment, his eyes only seeing the wide blue ocean, his body sinking through the tides. She reached out to blanket him in her currents, warm or cold, frozen or liquid, she was held him in her waters and kept him safe, gave him her trust when he could not trust himself, kept his senses sharp and mind clear no matter the circumstance. Even if he was drowning, even if he was lost, she was his ocean and he would have her until his last breath.

A siren’s song, the feeling called him to sea, filled him with love, and delivered him safely back to the shore.

*[I chose you for these reasons, my paladin. And I would choose you again.]*

A sharp intake of breath came like he’d broken through the surface, but Lance just found himself back on the couch in Keith’s room in silence, his heart racing in his chest and tears flowing freely down his cheeks, Blue in his lap.
“Thank you,” he whispered, holding her close, hoping to hold her in some way like she’d held him to express his gratitude.

After thirty ticks, the bathroom door opened and Lance had almost completely forgotten about Keith. He looked up and met eyes with him, laughing at the fact that he’d had a total mental breakdown and recovery in the time it took for the Prince to just change.

“What are – Lance?” He was in front of him immediately, kneeling in front of the couch and looking like he wanted to reach forward and offer some sort of comfort, but he didn’t. Blue was purring and nuzzling into Lance’s arms anyways, so it’s not like he was really in a position to hug. “What’s going on? Are you okay? Is -- did something happen?”

“No, no, I’m good, I’m so good that it’s funny,” Lance shook with laughter and tears like a hysterical idiot, and he only flinched a little when gentle fingers grazed over his cheekbones. The strokes were incredibly tender, steady as his breathing calmed down, the tears slowing. Keith’s touch was feather-light, like he was afraid Lance might shatter beneath his fingertips if he exerted any amount of pressure. The thought of the careful, almost loving ministrations that crested his cheeks to his marks, back and forth, made his skin burn.

Lance didn’t push him away, though. Gods, he knew he wouldn’t ever be able push him away.

“Your marks…” Keith murmured after several dobosh. “They’re glowing again. Is it because of Blue?”

_It’s because of you, you idiot._

He shook his head with a watery smile, finally opening his eyes and fixing his attention to a very pouty scowl, the raven-haired boy’s brows dipped in their concern.

Lance, however, had attention on much more important things. “Oh my god, is that a ponytail?!! Keith, that’s so cute!”

The Prince flushed scarlet and immediately pulled back, leaving the brunette to slightly regret his exclamation. It was taking everything in Lance not to squeal.

“U-Um, thanks. It’s not considered _proper_ , so I can’t really wear it outside of my room or unless I’m training… but, wait,” he shook his head and the furrow in his brow returned. “Are you okay? Lance, what happened?”

He bit his lip and looked down at Blue in his lap, who merely craned her head back with round, sweet eyes and a happy purr.

“I just… realized something important, was all. Blue helped me get there.” Lance peeked up to see the concern clear on Keith’s face, and the transparency of that made his heartbeat quicken. They were still very close, weren’t they?

He felt Blue’s connection nudge him slightly. It was a knowing sort itch that made it seem like she was almost laughing.

“We need to talk about what happened.” His voice came out in a rush, watching Keith’s eyes widen and blink repeatedly. “Before you left. What did you -- ?”

“You.” Keith interrupted, and like being punched from the inside, Lance physically _felt_ his heart smack against his chest, the sudden _ba-bum_ picking up almost painfully.
“I wanted -- I want to be able to be me, and for that to be enough. Not the Prince, or the Heir Apparent, or the Future King. You were, are, the first person who treated me like that.”

There was a visible shift in the darkness of his eyes, from hesitation to a spark, to fire and then smoldering ashes.

“It was never about the stupid party, Lance. I mean, that’s basically a microcosm for everything I hate, but it was -- it was never just that. That’s why I didn’t tell you who I was when we met. I -- it was so nice to just be treated normally for once. You were the first person I’ve ever met who didn’t just know me, and it gave me a chance to be me. And now that I know what that’s like, I feel like I’m second guessing everything.”

Lance’s eyes widened, and he felt something tug within him that was definitely not Blue.

“I was supposed to not care about the stupid marriage, but now all I can think about is how the fuck am I supposed to marry someone who rather only sees my title or has to marry me for alliances and politics. It’s not… it’s just not fair.” Keith clenched his fists and was glaring at his furniture like it was all somehow personally responsible. “I don’t want to live like this anymore. Everything I do it’s -- it’s so calculated. Big picture, small picture, it doesn’t even matter. Even on my fucking birthday, I can’t do what I want, or spend it where I want or -- ” his eyes looked up to Lance quickly before flickering away again. “Or with who I want.”

“And, I get it. I probably sounding like an unappreciative asshole, because there are people who would kill for my life.”

“W-Whoa, hold on,” Lance was alarmed to hear his frustrations turned inward.

“Literally, there’s been more attempts on my life than years I’ve been alive.”

That, Lance noted, was a disturbing admission. He’d remember that for another day, but for now, he leaned forward and Blue finally hopped out of his arms. Keith was still ranting, now glaring at Lance’s knees.

“Keith, listen -- ”

“I don’t want to sound ungrateful. I know people have it worse and I should just appreciate what I have, but I’m just… ”

“Keith.”

“And then you showed up, and now I don’t know what to do, I want this, I want you, but I can’t -- I know I can’t and I’ll only end up hurting you or, fuck, maybe even put you in danger --”

“Keith!”

“This all was a mistake -- this, I never should have dragged you into this because I have to marry Allura but I don’t think I can fucking let you go either. I want you so bad it fucking hurts, but it’s never mattered what I’ve wanted so why would this be any different?”

“Mullet, shut your quiznak!”

Lance grabbed both sides of the Prince’s face and forced him to look up, to hold his gaze, and he watched the fire that had been there burn itself out, reduced to ash and dust and pain.

This… had been causing him so much hurt? It broke Lance’s heart.
“Don’t you fucking dare think for a second your feelings aren’t valid. Just because you’re a prince doesn’t mean you’re not a person, money or whatever doesn’t make it feel less real or deprive you of the right to be upset with the way things are. You are enough, you are enough. So shut your quiznaking quiznak before I shut it for you.”

“I’m --” Keith’s voice shorted, so he he swallowed and blinked. “I’m… zero-percent Altean, but I’m one-hundred percent sure t-that you’re using that word incorrectly.”

Lance snorted and shook his head. Once he was sure Keith wasn’t going to go off again, he pulled his hands back and sighed, never looking away.

He kept his tone low. “So, just let me understand -- you want… me?”

Looking almost terrified, the pale-skinned boy nodded.

“But you don’t because…?”

“Because what I want doesn’t matter, Lance, that’s what I’m trying to tell you. It’s never mattered. You can’t -- I can’t do anything about it either, I’m… I’m sorry. The kiss was a mistake.”

Okay, that… that stung. Lance considered kicking him, it would be so easy to just bend his knee forward and knock the air right out of his dumb fucking lungs, but he didn’t want to literally kick him when he was already metaphorically down.

Instead, the teen grit his teeth and ignored the worried pangs of feelings Blue was sending to him.

“Well. You want to know what I think, Keith?”

He waited until the dark-haired boy met his eye, glare-to-glare. Lance pointed a finger right into his dumb, pretty face, too.

“I think you’re wrong. I’ve spent fuck knows how many of the past quintent trying to ignore the way I feel, so you don’t get to fucking kiss me and then act like you don’t feel something too. You’re pushing me away because I’m the exception to your little, perfectly crafted world. Right? That’s what you said. Tell me I’m wrong, Keith.”

Lance tipped his body forward, their faces kept apart only by inches. Keith swallowed, his eyes wide in surprise, but remained silent.

“Yeah. That’s what I thought. I’m the piece that doesn’t fit. I’m not noble. I’m not wealthy or highborn. You think I haven’t driven myself insane over how stupid it is to have feelings for someone like you? And, yet, here I am, and I like you. I fucking really like you, even though your hair is ridiculous and even while you’re trying to push me away. If you want to be seen as enough, but you’re trying to deny yourself someone who finally gave you what you wanted, then the only thing you’re doing is proving yourself right: that what you want doesn’t matter. But you get to be the one to choose that. You.”

Finally, Lance breathed in slow and deep, closing his eyes. He leaned back against the cushions.

“I know you must have a lot going on. I can’t even imagine how much pressure you’re under all the time, but if your choice is between definitely marrying someone you don’t want, or maybe giving your own feelings a chance, then I can’t do much but point out the fucking obvious. One is a riskless choice, you’ll be unhappy and that’s it. End of story. The other, who the fuck knows. I sure don’t. It could be terrible, but there’s a chance it might not be. And even if it is, then at least it went bad on your own terms. Because what you want should matter, and you’re the only one stopping it, you
They were both quiet for a long time after that, and Lance felt his heart hammering like he’d run a fucking marathon.

His eyes were still closed, so it was impossible to tell if Keith had murder or hope in his eyes. Lance didn’t know which one he was pulling for, but that was neither here nor there.

Had Blue’s confidence in him given him the courage to just word vomit all the fuck over the place? Maybe. Did he regret it? Well, not yet, but give him a few dobosh to process and he’ll get back to you on that.

“Lance.”

Okay, maybe a little sooner than a few dobosh. Ticks, then.

“Lance, look at me, please.”

His eyes snapped open immediately, falling on an extremely red-faced, pouty Prince Keith. Lance would have laughed if the Prince hadn’t sat forward, now close enough that Lance could feel the breath of his words pass over the bridge of his nose.

“I want… you.” Keith moved a hand to Lance’s thigh, just above the knee.

The brunette stayed very still, waiting.

“From the beginning I… I just tried to tell myself it was a bad idea. I don’t know how this would work. Are you… really okay with that?” There was a waver to his voice that Lance did not miss. This was the most vulnerable he’d ever seen Keith before, and his eyes dark like molten metal, obsidian and reflecting the low-light of the bedroom.

Faintly, he breathed out, “Yes.”

This wasn’t really happening, right? Cause Lance did just resolve a varga ago that he definitely wouldn’t let himself develop feelings for the Prince, and if he did, he was certainly not going to act on them. He definitely remembered telling himself that.

Slow and deliberate, Keith’s other hand came up and brushed over his cheek, and Lance couldn’t resist the warmth and leaned into it, eyes fluttering closed and sighing.

What had he thinking about? Something about a varga ago… Didn’t matter. Keith’s hand felt good. Warm and softer than he’d expected.

A shift in the hand on his knee, moving towards the outside of his thigh with widened fingers, caused Lance to bite his lip involuntarily. The fingers resting on his face moved, thumb brushing against Lance’s bottom lip causing him to stop the nervous habit. He barely managed to suppress a shiver.

“Can I…?”

When the question remained unfinished, Lance’s eyes fluttered open to find Keith pulled back a few inches, evaluating every line of his face. There was a familiar restraint in those dark eyes, but softened by something that Lance dared to call fascination.

Lance gave a tiny nod, and that was all it took.
Keith’s lips were not shy or gentle like they’d been earlier; they were a bruising, unstoppable force, hot and wanton, messy and fueled by desire. The hand that had rested on the side of his thigh was now gripping, pulling, holding him and the pressure was intoxicating. There was no Lance anymore, just sensation, and his hands immediately twisted into that dumb, sexy mullet, ripping the ponytail holder out so he could have it all to himself and bringing Keith closer. Fingers wove into Lance’s own hair and Keith’s other hand left his thigh and moved to hold his face, hungrily stealing away Lance’s breath as his heart thumped and lungs worked overtime to make up for the dizzying sensation. The places Keith’s fingers went, down his neck, under his chin, along the curve of his jaw, they left scorch marks in their wake, burning him, and his breath was so warm, it was hot, it was so hot --. The moment Keith’s mouth opened slightly, lips parting over Lance’s own, he was overcome with the need to pour water over the flames, asphyxiate the fire that burnt out his oxygen, and he greedily plunged his tongue between the lips to do just that.

The sudden aggression seemed to stun the dark-haired boy, his hands freezing and the breath stilling, but he soon rose to the challenge and the fire came back twice as fierce and it still wasn’t hot enough because the more Lance felt, the more he wanted. There was something dangerous about it, they both knew it, all the lines they were crossing and rules they were breaking and it didn’t matter because Keith wanted him, and he wanted Keith and they were breathing each others air, giving in.

And then Keith nipped Lance’s lower lip, and he gasped, almost whining at the slightly cool press of wet tongue as it slid over the abused skin. The touch was somehow incredibly sinful and achingly tender -- it was lust, affection, desire, and care in a single, hypnotic motion. A test, a tease, an ask and an answer.

When Keith did it again, Lance moaned.

They both stilled, realizing the extent of their actions over the previous few dobosh, and holy fuck when did Keith pull Lance to the floor with him, and how did he end up on his back, and oh my god Keith was straddling his hips, looking down at him with blown wide pupils, kiss swollen lips, red-faced and breathless.

“K-Keith,” Lance panted, flushing crimson because he already sounded so undone just from making out. He’d kissed girls before, and a guy once when there was some ale involved, but never had it felt like that, reducing him to dizzy mess.

Instead of an answer, Keith leaned forward and supported his weight with one hand and using his other to ghost fingers down the column of Lance’s exposed throat. The blistering heat of his touch had cooled slightly as they traced circles into his skin.

Without really thinking Lance, turned away to give him better access. “What are you...?”

“You never should have gotten hurt that day,” Keith murmured, so quiet Lance wasn’t sure he was even meant to hear it. He blinked as the realization hit him -- the bruising on his neck. He’d nearly forgotten about it.

“I’d never been so mad in my life,” Keith admitted, voice tinged with regret. “I wanted to kill him. I still do.”

Carefully, Keith bent the rest of the way forward and left a trail of agonizingly sweet and searing kisses over every inch of his discolored skin. Each press given by his lips felt like it was a tiny apology, and Lance found himself arching slightly into the gentle attention, somehow overwhelmed and unsatisfied at the same time. The sensation was soothing but Lance wanted more, wanted to be
burned alive. Keith paused only twice, pulling back and blowing cool air over the fluttering pulse beneath his skin, and the ministrations had begun to border on overstimulating when the Prince finally stopped.

Lance felt the movement at the edges of his senses, Keith’s weight shifting to have a hand supporting him on either side of his head. He rose to a partial push-up, gazing down at him.

“This may be one… hah… moment where you shouldn’t get what you want,” Lance managed a meager laugh, joking over the crazy thrumming of his heart and shallow breathing. “Murdering people is bad, Keith.”

“Yeah but,” the raven-hair boy insisted, a stubborn look crossing his face. “He hurt you.”

Lance was only mildly unnerved to be discussing homicide only ticks after having Keith’s lips all over him -- he probably would have been more alarmed if he could sort through any thought that wasn’t a garbled mess of warm, angry, closer, again, hot, more.

“Buuuuut,” the brunette replied when he realized Keith was waiting for him to respond. “I ended up okay. Even if I could have chosen for things to go differently, I don’t think I would.”

Leaning back fully, Keith looked down at Lance with dark eyes still simmered from the heat of their kissing. If looks could kill, Lance would certainly have died happy.

“So you mean that? Even after -- ”

“Don’t finish whatever you were about to say,” Lance insisted with a look of derision, pulling himself up to rest on his elbows. “Thing is, I can’t go back and if I could, I wouldn’t. We both took some risks, right? I don’t want to start second guessing now.”

Keith opened his mouth to say something, but he was cut off by a very lazy meow.

Lance jumped, because holy shit, Blue had just scared the life out of him. Not just in the ‘caught you canoodling’ sense, either -- the careful web of wires that stitched together their minds jerked like a leather whip, the corresponding snap so intense that he felt it physically. Much like he had when the magic had pulsed through him before his cheek had been marked, a pins-and-needles ice laced his blood like poison, chilling him from the inside out.

[Paladin, you must rest. My quintessence was not the only one spent today.]

Dully, Lance looked down at his watch. Holy crow, it was already two in the goddamn morning. How did that happen?

Groaning, he fell back on the carpet, and Keith looked confusedly between the two of them.

“Is everything… okay?” He said tentatively, and before Lance could register what was happening, Keith was getting up. The lack of warmth overtop his body was much too present, but he accepted the hand offered to help him up nonetheless. The still air of the bedroom left him cold.

“Yeah, no, it’s fine. Blue is just being a doting mother and telling me to go do bed.”

Keith laughed, and Lance chuckled too. The idea of a telepathic cat mother chastising him was pretty funny.

[There is much to do still. Tomorrow you will bring this Angry One to the shrine in the woods, for your actions tonight have confirmed for me my suspicions. You have found the Red Paladin.]
That stuck him silent with surprise, swiveling on the spot and gaping at Blue.

“What?!”

[He has fire within him.] Her tale flicked in amusement, and Lance’s own skin heated up. Right, she had unfiltered access to everything he thought. It wasn’t awkward like he might have expected it would be, just a little surprising -- like he’d missed a step going down the stairs and he was trying to reestablish his footing.

“So… another paladin?” Lance crossed the room and put his hands on his hips, leaving Keith to his own devices. “You’re sure?”

[Certain. I said before, little cub, you are the one who brings out goodness in others.]

“You’re calling me little? Blue you’re like, this small,” he held his hands apart by inches and she hissed in playful disagreement. “But okay. You haven’t led me astray yet.”

[And I never will.]

Lance believed her, the sudden intensity of her presence a deafening roar that shook him down to his core, bouncing off every atom, saturating every fiber of his being. Blue was here for him. She was going to guide him through this, whatever happened.

“Let’s do it.”

He looked over his shoulder to Keith. “Hey, Mullet, let’s go to bed. I think you’ll thank me in the morning.”

Still standing front of the couch, the Prince raised a brow and looked between Lance and his bed.

“Um… yeah, it’s late. I guess I got carried away... Do you want to sleep in my bed?”

Lance did not squeak. He did not. And Keith didn’t look pleasantly smug about the whole thing. Didn’t happen. Nope.

“Look, Lance,” he crossed the space, eyes resting on Blue for a moment before stopping in front of the brunette. “I’m not good at this, any of this. Explaining my feelings. Being… this.” One of Keith’s hands brushed against his, and slowly, easily, he intertwined their fingers together, glaring at their hands like they might disappear if he stopped staring. “This is hard for me, but if you meant what you said, then I’m not going to be shy about it. I want you… probably more than I should,” he smirked at the blush that crept up Lance’s neck. “And we can just sleep. It’s late and I’m exhausted. But I want you to be there when I wake up, so come to bed?”

Somewhere between exasperated and thrilled, Lance gave Keith’s grip a light squeeze. “Okay.”

With painstaking ease, Keith pulled Lance to his bed and they crawled under the covers. Part of him lamented the cozy blanket left uselessly on the floor of the study, but he couldn’t care when the softness of Keith’s bed was so damming that Lance couldn’t imagine ever getting out of it. The mattress hugged every angle, every ache and soreness of his muscles, and even the deep calluses of his feet and the rough ridges of his hands didn’t scrape up against the fabric in protest like he’d grown accustomed to. It just bled over his body like silk, or water, and he could have slept right that moment, but there was one more thing he wanted to do.

“Keith?” He whispered once the two adjusted into a comfortable position. The Prince was on his back with a hand under his pillow, the other resting on his chest. Lance preferred the side, half his
face covered in the depths of the pillows, but he forced his eyes to remain open and watched the steady rise and fall of the raven-haired boy’s torso.

The Prince’s nose twitched and he looked over. “Hmm?”

Lance pushed himself up and forward so his forehead rested against Keith’s. “Good night,” he scarcely breathed the words and placed a tender, quiet kiss over the other’s lips, grinning when the Prince tried to chase the kiss as he pulled away.

Instead, flushed pink, Keith wore a soft smile and leaned back, giving no protest when Lance inched his body a little closer so he was tucked along his side.

“Good night.”

[KEITH]

Some mornings, everything went absolutely according to plan, with a full-bodied ease and smoothness. The Prince could stroll over to the balcony across his chamber, throw open the double-doors whether it was hot summer or fierce winter, and relish in the world outside. Stand over the castle grounds and watch the world wake up alongside him.

Other mornings, it was more like he’d been woken up by a six-foot tall monster, black and oozing that stood above his bed, screaming twelve contradicting commands at him. Wake up now, but rest more, and pay better attention, and hurry, hurry because there are people waiting downstairs, people who can’t break their fast until the Prince is present. Some mornings Keith is prepared to collapse on the floor before he can even make it to his wardrobe because, no, there’s no such thing as being a perfect Prince Charming and anyone who tried to tell you otherwise was a fucking liar.

Today was definitely the latter kind of morning.

He slept fine -- better than fine, actually. Heavy, restful sleep for what he later learned to be a solid five hours. Considering the Prince’s infamously insomniatic tendencies, this was what he would consider a positive return on his pillow-top-mattress and 800 thread count investments.

The problem was that he woke up in the first place, leaving behind a dream and returning to the cruel world of reality.

Chasing the remnants of sleep, Keith squeezed his eyes tighter, but it did little to block out the bustling liveliness of the castle going on outside his room.

Stupid reality. Dreams were so much better. In his dreams, he had everything -- he had Lance. They danced and teased each other; they laughed and kissed beneath the fairy lights. Confusing dreams, where Lance cried and yelled and he yelled too, but it didn’t matter because their tongues flowed with honesty and Keith didn’t feel so lonely. Sweet, sweet dreams where Lance wanted him and Keith could have him too, where little, honeyed sounds escaped that pretty mouth when he pulled at the entrance with his teeth.

Gods, how he wanted it to be real.
Keith groaned when he realized he was half-hard just from the force of the lingering dreams. This was not helping his already limp muscles that refused to move, but he had so much to do today that he might as well start. A cold bath, he decided, would help with his arousal.

Well, it would have anyways, but his arm was pinned to the bed.

Blearily, Keith blinked several times and studied his sheets and body for the first time, and holy shit, oh my god -- there was a curly head of brown hair was fast asleep against his left side, arm tucked partially underneath the shoulders of the person facing away from him. His mouth literally fell open as he continued to stare, realization hitting him like a crossbow bolt straight through the goddamn chest.

Lance.

The Prince’s heart slammed against his ribcage, surprise drowned out by the flashes of feeling and memories and oh my god those weren’t dreams at all.

“Brrt?”

Keith flinched at the sudden, bright sound. On Lance’s farside, a small furry head popped up beside the sleeping boy and looked to him in… interest, maybe? Blue. She was real, the magic was real, the kissing was real, Lance was real and in bed beside him.

Asleep.

On his arm.

Uhh. How does this work? Should Keith wake him up?

After carefully shuffling up nearer to the headboard, the Prince leaned over and took one look at the peaceful, pleasant expression on Lance’s face before deciding no, he could not willingly wake him up. That would be criminal.

Okay, so, he could stay in bed, just roll into Lance’s weight and hold him, chase off the early morning chill by pressing his chest against his back and indulging in their shared warmth… but that thought was just as quickly dismissed when he heard armored boots clank by outside his door, the sound growing distant but making him all too aware that he needed to get up and start his day.

Again, Blue let out a little chirp of noise and Keith glanced in her direction. She stood up and stretched her paws out, forward and spreading her trimmed nails over the blankets. Then, without skipping a beat, she placed a paw on Lance’s cheek that was turned towards the ceiling and pushed down on him.

The Prince laughed at the responding groan that came from the boy, until Lance rolled in protest of action towards Keith so he was practically laying on his chest.

Well. Guess he’s stuck.

He couldn’t say he was too upset over it, though again, he started to feel the tell-tale pooling of warmth south of his navel that would become problematic quickly with Lance asleep ontop of him.

Blue saved Keith from having to address that problem directly, much to his gratitude. Now Lance’s back was pointed skyward, so she climbed the pillows and used his shoulder blades as her personal landing pad.
“Oi, para,” he mumbled, swatting his hand behind him and resting his arm on top of Keith, just over his heart which was still working a little harder than necessary but had calmed down considerably as he adjusted to this strange, but not unwelcome, development in his morning routine. “Vete, estoy despierto, estoy despierto…”

Random Spanish babbled from his half-conscious state, and Keith tried to contain the urge to chuckle but his shoulders shook with the contained laughter. It was rather obvious when Lance realized what was going on, as the hand on Keith’s chest adjusted slightly and fist the material of his shirt, only for Lance’s whole body to go tense immediately.

His head lifted, looking straight down at first, like he was wondering what sort of thing he’d been using as a pillow only to turn to the Prince with wide eyes, his lids heavy as he woke.

“You?” He asked, confused and unsure, taking another moment to study their slightly tangled bodies and turn flush under the gentle break of dawn that flooded the room.

Yawning, Keith used his free hand to rub at the corners of his eyes. “Hi.”

Pale yellow and orange saturated the dark surfaces of Keith’s room, making everything appear slightly more airy than normal. Dust particles danced in the encroaching rays, no longer sharp and exhausting with the cadence of autumn fully enveloping the lands. Mornings rose slowly, and days ran dark earlier and earlier as seasons shifted, and the morning light, even facing due East, was subdued as a result.

Lance’s skin was slightly pinker, almost with an orange undertone beneath the soft rise of day, and the usually shocking blues of his eyes were slightly paler, reminding Keith more of a fog than an ocean, but still lovely and bright.

“You hair is a disaster,” Lance said with a cheeky smile, extending a hand between them. Even if he was teasing, Keith still felt a pleased jolt run down his spine as Lance started petting down his bedhead. “Should’a kept it in a ponytail.”

“I recall someone pulling it out last night,” Keith hummed, eyes closed as he lazily sank into the gentle tugging and weaving of long fingers over his scalp. “I also recall someone calling it cute.”

A puff of laughter escaped the other boy, and the Prince smirked, feeling his breathing slow again. It would be so easy to just fall back asleep like this.

“Keith! Time to get up!” Fucking Shiro.

Three sharp knocks rang out against the door simultaneously, and Keith let out an irritable noise -- mostly because Lance had stopped, although Shiro’s interruption was pretty fucking annoying. Keith would never forgive him for that.

“’I’m up! I’ll be out in a few minutes!” He shouted back, cracking open an eye to see Lance’s silent worry.

Quietly, Keith redirected his attention to Lance. “I mean, it’s fine with me if he knows you’re here. Shiro knows I was, um, interested in you, when I came and asked if you’d come to the ball,” he paused, not really thinking as he took Lance’s hand from his hair and placed a light kiss against his palm. “I’m still amazed you came. I’m sort of not convinced that any of this is real. But whatever the case, I just want to keep you to myself a little longer.”

Lance bowed his head, but Keith was stupidly happy to spot the twinge of red at the tip of his slightly pointed ears. They weren’t anything like a normal Alteans besides that they were pointed,
but their angle and size were that of a human’s.

“If Blue wasn’t berating me right now inside my head, I wouldn’t believe it was real either…” Lance said in a small voice, shaking his head and focusing on Keith’s gaze once more. “She’s sort of insistent on showing you this… thing. Uh. Says I shouldn’t tell you too much. Is there some time today you can get away from your responsibilities?”

Keith frowned and sat up fully, sliding his weight over towards the edge of the bed before his resolve totally slipped away. “Um, I’m not sure what my schedule is like if I’m honest. I’ll have to start getting ready for tonight by four or five. There’s usually some morning shit I have to do, and I have a session with the orator after breakfast to go over the last of my speech for tomorrow. Ugh.”

Scrubbing a hand over his face, Keith was almost regretting waking up at all.

“That sounds awful,” Lance supplied sympathetically.

Almost.

“But okay, what about like, uhhhh, noon? Can you do noon? Shouldn’t take that long, but I would budget an hour just in case?”

Blue plodded up beside him at the edge of the bed and rubbed her face into Keith’s thigh, as if trying to help persuade him.

With a resigned sigh, he pushed himself to standing and gave Blue a gentle pat-pat before turning to his closet. “I’ll see if I can, but no promises. I’ll have someone bring you breakfast, okay?”

“Hmm, I’d rather not sit around and wait. Hunk is here, right? He’s in the kitchens?” Lance asked as he piled up the remainder of the sheets into something that could only be described as a nest and buried himself underneath it. Keith snickered as he picked out some decent raiments for mealtime. (He’d wash up before the ball anyways, and he was feeling much too lazy to deal with washing his hair right now.)

“Mmm. Yeah, you could go down there if you wanted, but I’d feel better if you have someone escort you. After last time...” his voice trailed away, and the annoyed sound from beneath the blankets told Keith that Lance understood what he was getting at.

“Fine. Can it be Shiro or Adam? They’re like the only knights I’ve met that aren’t super awkward. Your Blades are all standoffish and weird.”

“That’s because they’re Blades, not entertainers. They listen and watch, not hack and slash -- not that the knights really do much of that most of the time.”

“But that’s the cool stuff about being a knight,” Lance complained. “I can hear you rolling your eyes from over here. Go away, Mullet.”

Keith ignored his request and approached the pile, throwing off most of them and eliciting a surprised yelp from the boy beneath. He grinned in amusement as a disgruntled Lance twisted himself back up in the blankets almost immediately.

“I’ll have Shiro or someone not awkward come and get you in a bit, how’s that?”

“Fine. Blue and I will just stay here and go through all of your bath stuff.”

“That’s fine,” Keith said honestly, raising a brow. “You can take or use whatever, I don’t touch most
of that stuff.”

Lance groaned and threw an arm over his eyes. “I know.”

“Well… anyways…” Keith took a step back, glancing to the door. This was silly. He got up and went to breakfast everyday without any issue most days, not counting his usual bad attitude. Now he felt drawn back to bed like there was some stupid gangly-limbed magnet hiding under his sheets.

Oh, wait. There was.

Speaking of which, said magnet poked his head out and sat up for the first time. His face was dusted pink, and Keith suspected it wasn’t from the early morning light. “Wait, Keith?”

He stilled, meeting Lance’s eye.

“Are we like… uh, together now?” The boy pulled his hands out and linked his fingers together, as if to demonstrate the concept of togetherness to Keith. The Prince barely managed not to roll his eyes -- he was emotionally stunted, not stupid -- but stopped himself only from due to Lance’s apparent uneasiness.

Considering how to best respond, Keith revisited his unspoken vow from last night. No more lying, no more denying himself just because it was was expected of him, and what’d he grown to accept. No more lashing out or pushing away; he was stupid to have thought that was a proper course of action in the first place. He had to make it known, in no uncertain terms, how much he wanted this, but words hadn’t ever been his forte.

“I… I want you,” he nodded in agreement to his own statement. That was true. True was good. “As long as you’ll have me. I don’t know if I’ll deserve it, or… if it will be easy. But I want you. Okay? So yes.”

Lance seemed appeased, his smile small but sincere. The next moment, he made a shooing gesture that read as “go away” with his hands and laughed when Keith grumbled over it. He managed to at least keep the smile off his face until he turned around, not wanting Lance to have the satisfaction.

Keith opened the door only enough to squeeze his body out, spotting Shiro across the hall with his head bowed low in discussion with Kolivan. Seeing the two together was not uncommon, respective leaders of the factions of Marmora’s military, but the dark look on both their faces was less than reassuring.

Taking care to lock the door -- the servants that would usually clean his room could stand to wait -- he hesitated only for a moment to press his palm against the wood grain surface and sigh.

“Ah, Prince Keith,” a familiar low voice called, and he straightened his posture, gaze, and gait to match the title once again.

“Morning, Kolivan, Shiro.” He greeted with a nod, which the knight kindly returned only for his face to become grave again. “To what do I owe the pleasure of both of you lurking outside my bedroom door this early?”

Kolivan’s lip twitched like he wanted to smile, but the man’s impassivity was unrivaled. Keith would even admit he was a bit envious of it at times.

“Let’s walk and talk,” Shiro suggested, setting a predictable path that led towards the dining halls. The Prince raised a brow but sped up to walk to the knight’s right, Kolivan occupying the space to his left. “There’s been some… rumors.”
The Blade shot the Shiro a glare before addressing the Prince. “Our intelligence networks equate to more reliable information than gossip. Let’s discuss this later, hmm?” He said frostily, nodding towards another corridor that led towards one of the larger Blade conference rooms, the look suggesting: behind closed doors. Accordingly, an unsettling knot began to form in the Prince’s stomach, and he was practically reeling from the abrupt change of pace his life had taken once he’d closed the door to his bedroom. Time was slower within his chambers, a dance playing out in real time, strides and caresses and living just to live. Outside, to live was to survive -- pivot, dash, shove, yield. Things he picked up in training and in experience that made his muscles and head ache in intervals.

For now, he put those thoughts aside and focused on the mess hall coming into view before him, deafening chatter and shrill laughs reverberating against the high ceilings. Secretly, he was very much looking forward to whatever Lance and Blue wanted to show him at noon.
"The Day After Your Birthday" Day [P. 1]

Chapter Summary

In which, Keith's only been eighteen for a day and: his hands are cold, magic is weird, and he gains some insight into these rumors that Kolivan mentioned. Lance, meanwhile, revisits his first night at the ball where he encountered an unexpected ally and gains some much needed clarity on the whole "saving the universe" business that he didn't exactly sign up for.

AKA: "Plot? In MY Cinderella AU? It's more likely than you think!!"

Chapter Notes

a small note to those who have been reading along: I've been reading some other fics and I've seen them refer to the face markings of Alteans as "scales" and I really like this description, so I've adopted it for my own use in conjunction with just referring to them as "cheek marks." don't be weirded out by the description cropping up randomly from here on out! :)

[KEITH]

Keith really had to work on his impulse control.

Really.

If you asked him a week ago, he’d have told you he was rather good when it came to making informed, conscientious decisions. His whole life was built around the expectation that he would choose what is best for his people, how to manage power and weigh consequences against the pros and cons of the kingdom and the greater realm. He was born to lead, even if he wasn’t a born leader, and that required he learn the crafts of diplomacy, patience, and negotiation all at a young age.

But you throw a stubborn, pretty Altean-hybrid into the mix with Keith’s inability to back down from a challenge, the weird fleeting high that came from a night of dancing, laughing, yelling, kissing, and well…

Whoops.

“I can’t believe I agreed to this,” mumbled the Prince as he dodged a branch. Isn’t this how their story began? Keith blindly stumbling after Lance in the forest?

(Well, not considering the part when he rounded on Lance with a knife in the middle of a failed arrest. That didn’t count.)
Lance, only a half-step ahead, laughed and squeezed Keith’s fingers, sending sparks of electricity between their joined hands.

The brunette tossed a smirk over his shoulder. “Oh calm down, your Highness.”

Keith just rolled his eyes; the asshole didn’t even realize there were all of maybe ten people that were permitted to call Keith by anything but his title, and Lance threw it around like it was a jab. “This is my gift to you! Magical adventure with the Blue Paladin? What more could you ask for!”

Resigned, and perhaps a tiny bit pleased, Keith just retorted with a sarcastic, “I’m honored.”

It was a bit before midday, and Keith had managed to get through his morning uneventfully. There were more than a few passing comments at breakfast about the Blue Paladin, a name that seemed to have taken great interest amongst his peers. Who is he? So handsome. A gentleman, an excellent dancer, and mysterious, too. Who is he? Will he come again tonight? Is he vying for someone’s hand? Who is he? Both Shay and Allura had accused him of being in an unusually good mood, which he did his best to disprove by shooting a glower towards each of them.

Was he actually in a good mood? Abso-fucking-lutely. Did it have anything to do with the fact that Keith was the only person at the table who could actually answer each remark? Well, that was his business.

His name is Lance. You think he’s pretty dressed up? You should see him red-faced and panting. Actually, he’s more of a cocky idiot than a gentleman, but yes, and yes. He’ll be there tonight. And he’s mine.

The regular morning session for the Council had been pushed back til later in the day, so Keith decided to bring Lance breakfast himself. Maybe he was a little eager to get back to his room. Maybe. Keith had some self-control. (Read: none whatsoever.)

Anyway, it was easier to explain taking extra food for himself than sending someone to escort him to see Hunk, because realistically, the only person who could be trusted with that task was Shiro, and Keith was a little wary as to how the knight would react. Shiro had been the one poking and prodding him for the past few weeks about his feelings, reminding him that he didn’t have to go through with marrying Allura if it would make him genuinely miserable, so Keith didn’t necessarily think the man would disapprove... but sending the knight to find Lance in Keith’s bed with no explanation also sounded like a less-than-great way of easing into the subject.

The echoes of the Shiro lecture that never-was played against the back of his mind. Pair that with Lance’s amusing reaction ("Breakfast in bed? You really are trying to woo me, aren’t you, your Highness?") and Keith was pretty sure he’d made the right choice.

Lance had seemed a little disappointed that he hadn’t gotten out to see Hunk, and more than likely Pidge who was bound to be in the castle somewhere, but he was understanding enough, and Blue nipped at his finger when he tried to be petulant over it. She said the sooner, the better – or something equivalent to that when Lance shared her reason for hissing at him.

Now, they’d been following Blue through the woods for nearly fifteen minutes, but the journey out had taken at least thirty. Passing through the castle grounds during broad daylight had been the hardest part and Keith ended up leading Lance out of the castle through a secret exit his Mother had once shown him, near the laundry. It fed out towards the side of the castle that hosted the training grounds. Keith had cashed in on Pidge’s recommendation to sneaking through the city perimeter by crossing through the barracks, a faster altogether less covert option than traveling down to the city and out the regular gates.
With some careful timing, utilizing the guard change at the half-hour mark and two well-timed, deft sprints, the pair managed their way over the grounds and through the barracks. There had been an uncomfortably close call there with Commander Iverson, but Blue had worked some kind of magic (literally) and managed to confound him long enough to escape.

Blue repeatedly had to stop and wait for them, seeing as they were not conveniently-kitten sized. Compared to her, they were slow moving, stepping high over prickly bushes or bending beneath low-hanging branches, whereas the little feline could dart between or under nature’s maze as she chose.

Lance had been the one to insist that they hold hands so Keith wouldn’t get lost, like he was five years old.

...Not that he was complaining.

It was the end of October, okay? His hands were cold.

Lance’s brow furrowed and he stopped in front of a bush. “We’re close.”

“Good. It’s like, almost noon.”

“It’s actually exactly noon.” He held up their linked hands, his watch facing outward. Indeed, the time had just shifted from AM to PM, and with it came a slight sense of urgency. Keith had to get back to the castle no later than one, and that alone was pushing it.

With a lopsided grin, Lance changed the subject. “Sooo, are you having a good Day After Your Birthday Day?”

“That’s not even a thing,” Keith muttered, not willing to admit that the stupid question was cute.

Lance didn’t skip a beat, grinning and swinging their hands. “It can be if you want it to be. What’s the fun being a royal if you don’t get to make silly make-believe holidays?”

The Prince let slip a laugh and shook his head. “Being royal isn’t about being fun.”

“But that’s my point! It could be – who the heck is going to say no to you? Besides your Mom, maybe.” The brunette was practically bouncing with energy, and Keith envied his enthusiasm.

“Why are you like this?”

“Like what?” Lance fluttered his lashes at him, probably in an attempt to look innocent, but Keith was so tightly wound at that point that he couldn’t imagine it as anything but sinful.

Blessedly, they arrived before social convention mandated he fork over some sort of answer, and Lance began to practically drag him through a small cluster of trees. When they finally stopped in a… well, to say it was a clearing would be generous; it was more like nature had just skipped a few yards in the usual pattern of separation in the forest, the only noteworthy thing being a large slab of stone jutting from the ground.

When they came before the rock, Keith felt Lance’s grip slacken and their hands fell apart. He decided to stand back and watch for a moment.

“This is it?”

Lance shot him a look and waved a hand, looking more serious than Keith expected. The Prince
quieted and followed Lance around the opposite side of the rock where there was a small opening carved out of the stone, and Keith caught just the last flick of Blue’s tail before she disappeared within the hollow.

“Oh,” he took a step forward but found Lance’s arm in front of him, blocking him from proceeding. His eyes were narrowed, almost in something of suspicion. “Wait – Blue says… mmm. Oh. Really?”

“What is it?” Keith shot back in a whisper, for no reason besides that Lance’s sudden tone made him nervous.

“Sorry, sorry – She just suggests you go in alone. It should… make more sense once you do.”

Punctuating Lance’s statement, Blue reappeared through the hole and meowed. She leapt forward and wove in and out of Lance’s legs, which made him laugh and kneel down to share in her affection.

Keith stopped and just watched the two interact for a moment, quietly mystified by the slight buzzing he could feel flowing over his skin that radiated from the pair. The marks on Lance’s cheeks had begun to glow again, and the air clouded with strange vapor, almost frosty and crystalline as it glittered in the air. It reminded him of a tiny galaxy, sublime and surreal and beautiful.

So, so beautiful.

“Go ahead,” Lance grinned up at him, like the idiot didn’t constantly take his breath away.

Straightening his shoulders, Keith pursed his lips and nodded before stepping forward and awkwardly shuffling his legs beneath the stone. He tried not to glance back at Lance, but he could feel the other’s eyes watching him and it made him self-conscious.

“Is this… am I doing it right?”

Warm laughter bubbled behind him, and while it did little to help Keith’s confidence, it did make for a nice distraction as he lowered himself completely into the sort of… bunker? Well, no, it was closer to a naturally occurring temple or shrine by the looks of it, or a weird sepulcher.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the low but steady backlight, and Keith realized these were not rocks at all but a rare variety of crystal. How did it even get here, half-buried in the forest?

From his geological studies, because you bet your ass Keith had the best Balmeran tutor subject available, the Prince recognized the almost ghostly, creamy ore as the extremely rare quintite. He would know. It’s the same material that outfitted the very crown atop his head, inlaid though it was with blood-red rubies.

For reference, luxite, the only material deemed durable yet sharp enough to be used as the base of all the Blade’s signature weaponry, was a cheaper derivative of the pure stone.

It appeared to be in an extremely matured state, a long-drained quintessence crystal vein. Fresh veins of quintite were extremely volatile and dangerous; it usually took hundreds of years for even an ounce of an entire quarry of the substance to purify to the point where it became stable. From there, it was crafted into only the finest of materials, and as far as Keith knew it was indestructible by any conventional means – magic might do the trick, but Keith wouldn’t really know.

What he did know was that this was the largest mass of quintite he had ever seen – had ever heard of even existing. The Prince was struck in a sort of silent awe as the flawless, smooth stone illuminated
a small altar of sorts a few feet back from the entrance. His breath hitched in his throat, and like a marionette, he felt his legs move of their own will, stumbling forward to kneel before four magnificent watches, with one perfectly carved hollow in the stone where a fifth one must have one rested.

Gulping, Keith cast a look behind him, but Lance and Blue were both still outside and the world seemed to have stilled. No breeze, no whining birds, no crinkling leaves. Part of him thought to feel claustrophobic for a moment, but there was something oddly peaceful and serene about the place that chased away the possibility.

And then, as sure and abrupt as a lightning strike in a deluge, an assurance swelled in his heart until it threatened to crack the cage of his ribs: this was a sanctuary, and no harm would come to him here. Of that he was certain, and he had no idea how he knew that. Intuition?

The invading, though entirely welcome, rush of emotion grew from a wicker of reassurance into a proverbial brushfire, and Keith found himself burning with an overwhelming feeling of connectedness that, once having broken through his armor, was threading over and through him, a spun web of sudden awareness he’d never had before that there was… there was something within that shrine, a presence that was within him and without him.

The crimson surface of the left-most watch caught the light of the cavern and flashed, almost glowed, like a plume of embers released from a scorched log, crumbling under the weight of its own ash and releasing a final burst of life that was carried away by the wind. Keith saw flames, but he was flame, and the flash of sparks over his skin rejecting the cold air that clung to his body, his heart thrumming and hands shaking – and he didn’t know what he was doing until it was done but the watch was in his hands and then sliding over his wrist and it fit perfectly.

Its end was pointed to a dangerous, finely pointed edge, and it dragged lightly over his pulse in the most plainly dangerous way possible. Keith immediately felt enamored by the sensation. It was a constant dare, like the watch was warning him – that wearing a fucking razor-sharp piece of metal right over his most vulnerable veins was a stupid idea that only an adrenaline junkie would indulge in, but Keith was fascinated because it was more than just adrenaline it was power and the watch had it over him, just as he had over it.

Keith put it on. He chose this. He could take it off, but he knew he wouldn’t; if he got hurt, it would be his own fault. He was only a hair’s breadth away from actually cutting his wrist by accident but he knew, knew that it wouldn’t happen. The timepiece was dangerous, it practically screamed at him that it could hurt anyone without even trying, and Keith fucking loved it.

“What the… actual fuck,” he said, surprised to find himself panting.

His lungs were burning in an intensely satisfying way, he realized. The way he felt after a good training session, or the fierce body-high he’d felt after kissing Lance reverently on his bedroom floor.

If there were any doubts – which he didn’t really have, but even if he did –that this was magic, they were certainly gone now. The presence of something was in his veins, something supernatural and terrifying.

Magic was weird.

By the time he got his breathing under control and crawled back over to the cave opening, Keith heard a strange, incredibly delicate whistle and a content sigh that followed soon after. He peeked over the ledge, spotting Lance’s feet a few yards away, and he watched as the brunette stepped lightly over the fallen leaves in a purposeful sort of way. There was no Blue in sight, but as Lance
started to move further away and more of his body became visible, Keith realized she’d taken to his shoulders like a perch. It was adorable and he nearly burst out laughing, but the sound died in his throat when he realized Lance was holding a fucking weapon.

A bow with a quiver of arrows, to be precise.

He decided to do as any Blade would and still his body, silence his breathing, balance his weight so he needn’t shift unnecessarily. The heavy feeling of metal over his wrist had not gone, nor had the strange but insistent sense of power that had come with it, but instead of distracting Keith found himself better able to focus than he’d ever remembered, like seeing the world through a new set of senses, honed and sharp to even the slightest shift around him.

Did he mention that magic was weird? Though he’d be lying if he said it wasn’t something he could definitely get used to.

Anyways, Keith used his newfound focus to observe Lance for a few moments. The bow didn’t look like much, lacking the curvature and style he remembered when Lance had shown him his father’s bow. This was a standard, soldier issued weapon by the looks of it, but holy shit if it didn’t seem like something greater in his hands.

Keith picked up on the cycle of it rather quickly. Lance arbitrarily had taken to targeting small notches in the bark of the trees, or a stray patch of moss, or even just a fluttering leaf barely sticking to the branch of its host, and once he had selected where to aim, he emptied his quiver in a sequence of shots around the little clearing. The motions were graceful, easy, confident – he was just as fascinating with feathered tipped arrows and a taut string between his fingers as he had been dancing the previous night.

This, Keith realized, was the first time that every single line that had sorted Blue Paladin and Lance as separate entities in his mind had vanished. There was no persona or mask, this was just, him, focused on some exigent sort of melody that Keith could not hear, but somehow also couldn’t get out of his head.

It was honestly a mystery to him how long he stood there, simply watching Lance go through the motions. He was only made conscious of the time when Lance frowned down at his own watch and Keith realized, oh shit, I’m just standing here like a fucking moron.

Quickly, he scrambled up out of the quintite cave and made sure not to meet Lance’s eye while doing so. He waited until he’d thoroughly brushed the leaves from his cloak and legs before looking up.

Lance’s eyes were fucking sparkling, zeroed in on Keith’s wrist.

“Blue was right! Wow, what’s it like? Does it feel weird? Can you tell you’re the Red Paladin? Do you have a voice in your head – ?”

Snap.

Lance’s brow dipped, turning with his mouth open in a half-formed question, but Keith had already leapt the few inches between them and slammed a hand over his lips. The Prince’s eyes were narrowed, scanning the trees, listening.

That was the sound of a twig breaking underfoot. It could have been an animal, but if it wasn’t…

Vaguely, he considered that this was not the first time he’d clamped his hand over Lance’s mouth to silence him, and his eyes widened in realization and removed his fingers, but pushed his back against
Lance’s so as to not leave a blind spot.

His knife, naturally, was already at the ready. A flush of fury coursed through him, his senses pressed to the precipice of awareness as he listened to the trees, but he stilled when he heard Lance huff, almost annoyed.

“Oh,” he murmured, and Keith wanted to snap at him to be quiet but was full aware that doing so would mean more talking, so he decided against it.

In hindsight, he should have known Lance would keep talking. It was kind of his thing.

“Blue says… huh. Okay, that’s… not that bad, I guess.” Lance shook his head and grabbed Keith by the shoulders, spinning him around. The Prince’s eyes bugged in surprise, his blade lowering only millimeters so as not to catch on Lance’s clothes.

The other boy’s brow was furrowed in concentration. “Blue says we were followed, but don’t freak out. It’s not as bad as it sounds.”

“Not as—how can that not be as bad as it sounds?” He retorted, shrugging the hands from his shoulders and whipping around with renewed vigor. This stupid, good-looking idiot is absolutely going to be the death of him.

“Whoa, whoa, it’s not like that—guys, can you just come out before Keith stabs someone?” Lance cupped his hands and raised his voice a little and they both stood completely still, the reverberations of his voice fading to nothingness. Keith was positive that if they’d been followed, whoever had been following them wouldn’t be stupid enough too—

“I told you it was just a romantic date!” Said a voice.

“Shh!” Scolded another.

Keith’s brow furrowed, needing a moment to register why they sounded familiar, distracted when Lance placed a hand on his forearm.

The brunette gave him an impatient look. “Put that thing away before you hurt someone, Knife Boy, and by someone, I mean me!”

“I wouldn’t hurt you,” the Prince shot back, but he reluctantly slid the blade back into its sheath.

“Who’s there?”

There was the tell-tale sound of crinkling leaves and slightly muttered voices before one stood out, loud enough to discern.

“Oh c’mon, they already know we’re here—we might as well just…” and the accompanying body popped out of the bushes about 10 feet off, smiling sheepishly and waving.

Lance, looking wholly unimpressed, crossed his arms over his chest. “Hi, Hunk.”

“Um. Hi, Lance. Hi, your Highness.”

Letting out a disbelieving laugh-huff, Keith watched as two more figures emerged from the shadows, one small and apathetic and the other somewhere between pissed and shamefaced.

“Pidge? Shiro?”

The trio started awkwardly coming closer and when Lance made no move to stop them, Keith wrung
his hands and turned to him. “Is this some weird surprise party or something? What the fuck is going on?”

Lance shoved his shoulder. “Hey, cool it, Mullet! I had no idea we were being trailed, Blue just clued me in. Speaking of which, some warning would have been nice,” he hissed the latter part up his shoulder, Blue still curled around him like a bizarre scarf.

Shiro stepped forward purposefully, one hand resting on the pommel of his blade, the other on his hip, looking every part the Head of the Marmoran Royal Guard. It annoyed Keith to no end.

“So,” he began, focusing solely only on the Prince. “Would you like to explain to me what you’re doing outside the castle, outside the city, without an escort? Without telling anyone? Trudging in a random part of the forest with someone you barely know? I mean no offense to you personally Lance, but honestly, Keith: what were you thinking?”

“Oh no, you don’t get to high-road me here, Shiro.” Keith held his ground. He was embarrassed to realize he hadn’t noticed they’d been followed – he should have been listening out for movements in the trees, but he had a big blue-eyed distraction that had ripped apart his usual focus. He would have just been moderately annoyed under normal circumstances, but Shiro’s immediate disapproval was a sparking flint to Keith’s steel wool temper. “You followed us! I’m perfectly capable of defending myself. I brought my weapon. You covered for me just last week so I could go off on my own, so it’s not like you don’t know I can handle myself!”

“Uh,” Lance scratched his cheek, looking abundantly uncomfortable, but Shiro seemed not to notice; the knight’s initial awkwardness for having caught them was quickly melting into his own sense of stubborn frustration.

“I needed to make sure you were safe! Lance, you seem incredibly nice and I assure you, this is nothing personal, but Keith – seriously? You’re held to such a high standard for a reason. What if we weren’t the ones following you? Last week was different and you know it – I knew where you were planning to be, and there was an agreed upon time for you to be home. This – ” he gestured back and forth between him and Lance, which rubbed Keith in absolutely every wrong way. “This is just reckless.”

This time, Lance sucked in a sharp breath.

“That’s unfair and you know it,” The Prince spoke with venom. “I’m perfectly capable of handling myself. I can go where I want, when I want; don’t try to act like you’re being the morally responsible one here for sneaking around after me. If you were really worried, why didn’t you just announce that you were behind us as soon as you caught up? I can make my own decisions, Shiro. Hell, I have to, I’m the next fucking King, or did you forget?”

Hunk and Pidge, meanwhile, were looking back and forth between each other and shifting their weight uneasily. They had not been anticipating an argument and were opting to stay quiet.

Lance cleared his throat when Shiro’s jaw tightened to the point that it looked painful.

“Um, sorry, Shiro, but if I may? I asked Keith to come with me, to sneak out, so don’t blame him. I promise we would have been just fine if we had been followed. We actually aren’t alone, we have a guide who could definitely defend both of us if we need and she’s… well, actually she’s…”

Tilting his head to the side, Lance’s eyes went slightly unfocused, his attention flickering between the three of them, and then Keith, too. They all looked at him, expectant, but one of Lance’s hands absently ran over his freshly acquired face scale, totally abandoning the conversation in favor of his
sudden daze.

Pidge buried her hands in her pockets – she and Hunk both were in day clothes, and Shiro in his uniform – and kicked a stray branch. “Well, while Lance is buying dissociating, I for one will own up to the fact that I was most definitely following you. In my defense, you used my shortcut through the barracks, so I knew where to look.”

“But that still doesn’t tell me why you followed me. A little trust would be nice,” he shot the last part in Shiro’s direction.

Hunk jumped in before the Head of the Guard had a chance to retort… which was probably a wise move, because both he and the Prince were glaring at each other with untoward irritation.

“Your Hi– ah, Keith. Let me at least explain our side, yeah? We shouldn’t have spied on you guys, that was wrong and an invasion of your privacy. I really am sorry, and I’m sure Shiro and Pidge are too.”

The Prince bristled, still vexed, but it was hard to be angry when Hunk sounded so fucking apologetic.

Keith noticed that the larger boy kept sending Lance weird looks, but he continued in his apology nonetheless. “The only reason we followed in the first place was because Shiro found your room empty and came to see if you’d come down to the kitchens, and Pidge was there with me. When he started panicking – ”

“I wasn’t panicking,” the knight interjected with a pout. Pidge and Keith rolled their eyes simultaneously, because yes, he definitely was panicking. The Prince didn’t even need to be there to know that much. Lance, meanwhile, had not yet returned from wherever his mind had taken him and didn’t appear to be listening at all.

“Annnnyways,” Hunk went on, “We agreed to help look in the obvious places – didn’t want to put the castle on red-alert mode if you were just off somewhere safely, you know? Pidge was the one who saw you, she was checking the stables and spotted you out on the training grounds, and we caught up with her, and then we all caught up with you, and… yeah. So we were genuinely just worried about your safety.”

Keith steepled his fingers and held them in front of his nose, allowing himself several deep breaths. *Patience yields focus*… that wouldn’t work right now, because his patience had already fucked right off. He just had to let his anger burn through at this point.

“Okay, before you start,” Pidge shot forward, pointing an accusatory finger at him. Her face flashed with concern beneath her usual show of disinterest. “What the *fuck* is going on with Lance?”

Shiro sent her a hard look for the curse, but it was clear he had worries etched into his own brow when he too glanced up at brunette.

“Huh?” Lance shook his head at the call of his name, and Keith looked back and forth between him and the others.

Hunk held up two hands and delicately approached the pair, eyeing the weapon on Keith’s belt nervously every few seconds, but his attention was otherwise fixed entirely on Lance’s face. “Um, dude, you’re *really* spacing out right now and you look kinda like pale… that, and you know, there’s a kitten on your shoulders, and you have another cheek mark?! What the hell?!”
“Oh, yeah,” Lance murmured, wandering towards Hunk and meeting him in the middle. Lance cupped both sides of the larger boys face in his hands and stared at him like he’d never seen the guy before in his life.

Keith was… uhh… well, frankly, he was really confused. Shiro and Pidge looked about the same, but Hunk’s eyes just widened and frown deepened as he and Lance stared back and forth at each other.

“Did you like… eat something funny?” Hunk remained impressively still while Lance latched onto him. “You’re acting sort of, uh, weird. And, oh god,” he squinted at the mark more closely. “That is real – I thought it could have been face paint or make-up or something and, oh god please tell me that’s not a tattoo! Bro I told you I thought having one cheek mark is cool, you can’t undo that now! And –”

“Hunk.” Lance’s fingers spread over the worried boy’s cheeks, gripping slight harder. “Hunk, I am fine. I just realized something is all and I feel like a quiznak for not noticing it sooner.”

“B-but your cheek –”

“Is fine,” Lance insisted, now smiling and throwing an arm over Hunk’s shoulder to reassure his distraught friend.

“It’s not really a tattoo, but it kind of is.” He thought for a moment. “It’s permanent, definitely.”

The larger boy paled, and Shiro shifted uncomfortably. The knight caught eyes with Keith, some of his earlier disappointment having faded with these new developments. Privately, Keith wasn’t exactly sure how he felt about Lance sharing this information with the others. It was childish, he knew, because Hunk was Lance’s best friend, and Pidge was a close second, but it had felt… well, special when it was just theirs to share.

Lance’s secret, with Keith, and Keith alone. Their secret.

“A lot has happened in… wow, what, a few days? Geez.” Lance placed a hand on his hip and looked between Keith and the others. “Part of me doesn’t even know where to start.”

Pidge crossed her arms impatiently. “How about the fucking mark on your face?! That seems pretty important!”

“Magic,” he answered triumphantly, like he was giving a show-and-tell presentation. “But that’s hardly important right now. I just can’t believe… it’s so obvious. It’s all of you!”

Shiro’s mouth had turned almost invisible with how thinly his lips were pressed together, and Pidge and Hunk both seemed to reach the same conclusion: he’s gone mad. If Keith hadn’t seen and felt some of what Lance was referring to himself, he’d have probably thought the same.

Shiro shifted uneasily. “All of us are… what?”

Lance chuckled to himself and shook his head, covering his eyes with a hand at some private joke.

“Paladins.” He was beaming. “Blue was so right. You’re all even dressed to match!” Lance laughed and pointed to each of them, Hunk, Pidge, Shiro.

“Yellow, green, black, and…” and finally, with a smile that made Keith’s breath still in his chest, Lance pointed to him. “Red.”
“What does that… even mean?” Keith scowled at the watch that fit on his wrist like it was made to be there. The weight of it was grounding, a reminder of it was real, if not fantastical. The idea of parting with it now actually made him physically tense, like he was preparing to pull out an arrow that had already embedded itself in his flesh. Through no will of his own, Keith’s other hand moved to rest on top of it, cradling the silver band and scarlet face of it protectively.

“Paladin?” Hunk repeated the word. “As in… the Blue Paladin? Shay mentioned him when she visited the kitchens last night.”

“Quiznak, just, I know this is sudden and probably super weird but you have to trust me.” Lance finally sobered, his face and voice more serious than any of them were used to. It was sudden enough to at least give them all pause. He gestured with a hand towards his neck, where Blue was still dutifully perched.

“This is Blue. She’s the physical embodiment of pure, uh, quintessence. She defends the universe, but since she’s stuck in this adorable little body,” he paused and plucked her off his shoulders, and she gave a whiny meow of protest. “She can’t defend it on her own. And I’m her paladin. She guides me and I help her… you know, defend the universe!”

There was a beat of silence.

A very long beat.

“No, no, I’m serious!” Lance’s brow furrowed and he set Blue down in the leaves, shaking out his wrist, and Keith’s own hand twitched instinctively. “This watch is how I communicate with her. It’s all telepathic so I can’t actually tell you but… you know what? Why am I explaining it?”

His face was set, determined. “You’re all paladins too, why don’t you see for yourselves?”

“Lance, I don’t know…” Hunk eyed the opening to the cave like it was going to chew him up and spit him back out when the tanned boy pointed to the entrance.

Lance’s jaw tensed. “Hunk, please, just go in there. If you go in and then come out and still think I’m crazy, then I’ll check into the psych ward myself. Okay?”

Reluctantly, Hunk agreed, and Keith watched him lie flat on the ground and slide his body under the lip of the cave. He was gone for a few minutes only, but when he came back looking breathless, shaken, and more than a little alarmed, Keith had to wonder if looked the same when he had finished; a strange pull of his… his… soul? His something seemed… amused at the thought. He got the feeling that some invisible force was laughing at him.

The larger teen had nothing to say really, but when Pidge asked if she should buy into Lance’s insanity, he numbly nodded and sat down next to a tree. And so Pidge went through the same stages of doubt and the almost nauseating sense of realization, so Keith took a seat beside Hunk on the ground while she too disappeared. Shiro was swaying back and forth, clearly nervous, but did not speak the entire time. When the girl emerged, glasses slightly askew, Keith saw the understanding in her wide amber-eyes; the Holts all put their stock in science rather than magic, but there was no denying this. Warily, she clambered over to them and sank to the ground, too.

Hunk and Pidge were both very quiet after they emerged. They studied the faces, chains, and finer details of their timepieces, and Keith realized he’d barely spared the other watches a second glance when he’d gone into the shrine himself. His eyes traced a thin line of silvery chain that fed into the breast pocket of Pidge’s tunic, and he could actually hear the clinking of the thick banded-metal as Hunk turned his watch over in his fingers.
Lance had taken to standing in the middle of the clearing during the process, answering a stray question here or there as they came, but there were shockingly few. Hard to question the truth when it’s presented to you on a silver platter – well, silver watch, but the point was the same. When you’re suddenly thrust into a reality where your every instinct tells you deny deny deny, but the truth is so blatantly obvious in front of you, you can do nothing but accept and try to understand.

Keith didn’t feel drawn to his watch as an object to devote his attention to – maybe he was biased, but he’d taken to observing Lance quietly, studying his practiced movements as he resumed his target practice. From Hunk’s disappearance to Shiro’s reappearance, Keith simply watched as he unloaded quiver after quiver at various points and elevations in the clearing with deadly accuracy.

“You weren’t kidding,” Keith murmured when an arrow buried itself into a tree about three feet away from him, spearing a small patch of clay-like dirt that had clearly been his intended target.

Lance, blinking a few times as if he’d been woken from a trance, looked to Keith with a brow raised. “What?”

A faint blush rose to the Prince’s cheeks when he realized that he blurted what he’d been thinking, but he continued. “You know, you said you could outshoot anyone in the kingdom. You’re not half-bad.”

“Half-bad?” Lance repeated softly before laughing in earnest, taking up his bow again. “Wow, thanks.”

For the first time, Hunk and Pidge were both paying full attention to something other than the devices resting in their palms.

“What happened the other night? Where were you, Lance?” Pidge asked, no trace of the usual jokes in her tone. Lance had taken off his cloak despite the cold, exposing his sinewy muscles as they tensed and untensed with the repetitive movements, and eased the curve of the bow back to rest with a scowl on his face.

Privately, Keith may have lamented Pidge’s interruptions as he watched Lance’s his biceps lower… maybe.

Hunk gently prodded when Lance still did not answer. “Buddy?”

The responding flinch from Lance was picked up on by Pidge, and she looked furious. “It was your aunt, wasn’t it?”

“Uhhh,” Lance shrugged, holding the bow up and taking aim. His hands were shaking.

Pidge leapt to her feet, shoving the watch in her pocket and marching towards him. “I fucking knew it! I thought something felt off – what did she do to you? I can ruin her, Lance I swear to god, just say the word.”

Two hands held up defensively, Lance’s eyes were wide and he backed up a bit. “Whoa, whoa, I’m fine Pidgeon. I mean, yeah, my aunt did punish me – she found out about what we did on Monday, and about… uh, this.” His voice shorted as he rubbed at his neck, indicating his bruises. Keith’s senses flared white-hot once again, sharpening to the point of painful perception, fury coursing through him at the reminder.

“But I’m here now, so really, it’s not a –”

“If you say it’s not a big deal I will fucking smack you,” Pidge warned.
Lance let out a ‘meep!’ and made to escape her wrath, leaping across the clearing towards Hunk and Keith and cowering behind the larger boy’s mass. Hunk, however, seemed to be in a similar state of anger to Pidge – it was a weird emotion for Keith to see on the usually sunny teenager.

“Lance, this is serious.” Hunk turned on the ground to face his friend. “If your aunt did something please let us know, we want to help. We can’t help unless you tell us what’s happening.”

“Really, guys, it’s not like that –”

Lance was interrupted when Blue fucking hissed at him.

They all stared at her, although Lance more significantly than the others, before finally he sighed and wrinkled his nose before turning back to Pidge and Hunk. “Fine. I’ll tell them. But you’re lucky you’re adorable!”

Keith’s stomach twisted, something between discomfort and cold rage, as he listened to the three friends argue and as Lance half-answered their questions – at no point was he dishonest, but Lance was definitely giving them an abridged version of the story he had told Keith. That he had gotten in trouble for being at the castle, and again for being out of the house after hours. His aunt was disappointed. The cellar. The darkness. He didn’t mention the fact there was no food and no contact with other people and that he was supposed to be there for several more days, but Hunk and Pidge both seemed mortified enough by those facts alone.

Then a realization hit him, and, oh, fuck. He hadn’t considered it until now, but had Lance been giving him an abridged version, too? They hadn’t had a chance to talk about it since he first told Keith what had happened, and now that he thought about it, the Prince realized there was an onslaught of follow-up questions he’d never gotten to address.

First and foremost, if Lance hadn’t been given food, how did he even survive? Was he starving? Did he at least have water? Did the basement have a bathroom? Why didn’t he try to escape on his own? Why didn’t he call for help? Why didn’t he tell anyone before now?

From all the Prince has heard, Hira Valurian was a cruel, despicable woman who had no regard for Lance’s well-being. Even if Lance was just her servant, never had Keith heard of anyone throwing a living, breathing person into total darkness for days on end just to teach them a lesson – even the dungeons gave prisoners regular exercise and meals.

How many times had Lance gone through that before? How long did they last? Why wasn’t he more freaked out about it?

Part of Keith sincerely wondered how Lance hadn’t gone mad over the years.

A heavy hand came to rest on his shoulder, the unmistakable weight Shiro’s prosthetic jerking him out of his ruminating.

“Keith,” he said in a low tone while Lance continued the conversation with Hunk and Pidge. The three friends were all standing, Lance petulantly kicking stray leaves while Pidge and Hunk stood across from him, faces twisting with each turn of the story.

Beside him, Shiro was cradling his massive timepiece in his hand like it was as delicate as a baby bird, and Keith almost laughed at the reverent look on his face.

“About earlier, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have assumed… and I do trust you, and Lance, I just worry. The rumors Kolivan mentioned this morning are actually rather serious, I thought…” Shiro paused, face twisting like he smelled something unpleasant, before shaking his head. “But we can talk about
that later – these watches? You have one, too, then?"

The Prince flicked out his wrist, the refined edge catching against his skin, but not hard enough to break it. “Yep. Red.”

“What do they… mean? I can’t – are we supposed to be able to talk to, er, understand Lance’s… cat?” It was clear Shiro was struggling to accept the strange turn of events. This was probably not how he pictured his afternoon going, Keith noted with a bit of amusement. In fairness, it’s not how he pictured his own day going, either.

He shrugged, watching Lance accept a teary-eyed hug from Hunk, while Pidge looked downright murderous. Keith could practically feel the waves of violence radiating from her.

“I don’t know. Blue – the cat – told Lance he was supposed to bring me here. You guys, too, apparently. I wonder if she knew you guys would follow?” Keith mused, not really expecting an answer.

Shiro gave him one anyways. “I think she did. I don’t know how I know that, but it’s like… I just know? Sorry. I’m probably not making sense.”

Keith shook his head, biting his lip. “Actually, you’re making perfect sense. I know. I feel that too. It’s like… it’s somehow intuition. Just like, yep, that’s the way things are, but I don’t know how I know those things.”

Shiro frowned for a long moment, rubbing his jaw.

“Don’t think too hard, you’ll hurt yourself,” the Prince teased, and the knight kicked leaves at him. Still, Shiro offered him a hand to stand-up, and Keith was glad the earlier resentment between them had dissipated. He didn’t like being mad at Shiro, but they were different in enough ways that their tempers clashed on occasion.

“Well, I don’t mean to be too topical,” the older man sighed and rested a hand on the young Prince’s shoulder. “But we need to keep an eye on the time.”

Keith groaned at the obvious Dad joke, and Shiro grinned proudly.

“We can figure out what this all means as we have to. For now, we have to get back to the castle. The Council meeting is going to be held in the Kral Beta room.”

“W-Wait, why?” Keith stiffened, afraid he already knew the answer. Nothing good ever comes from that room.

Lips pursed, Shiro just shook his head. “I can’t tell you that now. We just need to go. Kolivan is probably already waiting.”

Without waiting for an answer, Shiro gathered the attention of the other three. He managed to urge them back from the way they’d come, with Blue’s guidance, and Lance assured them multiple times that she knew what she was doing. When a responsive calm radiated through their respective minds unbidden, it was hard to argue.

Walking over and under the weight of the forest, Lance addressed them as a group for the first time. “So… It probably goes without saying, but you guys shouldn’t tell anyone about this. And about my identity at the ball, if you care at all about my well-being.” A dark laugh passed over him, though Hunk and Pidge didn’t share in his humor. “I wish there was more I could tell you, I thought like,
maybe you’d each get your own ‘Blue’, but with just the watch… I don’t really know how this works. Blue seems really sure that things will work themselves out. She says your…”

A pause, and Keith realized Lance was focused on something none of them could see. “Your ‘guardian’ will find you when you need them. I guess… that makes sense. Blue was the one who let me out of the cellar. She only showed up when I was getting to the point where things go really desperate… so I guess we’ll see what happens?”

“Lance…” Hunk began, but the brunette shook his head. His eyes were focused on the ground, stepping over a fallen tree. “Can we just, not talk about that anymore for now? I want to have a good night. I just want to dance and have fun and worry about my aunt and stuff later, okay?”

Shiro, not having been present for the whole of the conversation about Lance’s aunt, gave Keith a confused look but the Prince merely pursed his lips and gave a tiny shake of the head, hoping he got the point to drop it for now. The last thing Keith wanted was to force Lance to talk about this, even if he felt his blood boil with rage every time he saw the dimness cast over Lance’s features at the mention of his family.

“Well, then,” the new apparent Black Paladin cleared his throat, not at all subtle in his interest in changing the topic. “I guess this answered a lot of my curiosities about the mysterious Blue Paladin. Should we expect you again tonight?” The knight gave him a teasing smile, and Lance returned the expression gratefully.

“That’s the plan! Someone has to liven up the room after all, you nobles are all so stiff and awkward.”

They all laughed lightly, and Pidge began recanting a story from the night before of a bold Altean artisan who tried to get her to dance with them. Evidently, their endeavor didn’t end well for the poor guy, and he ended up with his trousers hooked to a door handled – apparently, they ripped straight down the pant leg when he tried to flounce after her. Hunk used the lightened mood to animatedly explain to Keith the menu for the upcoming night, until Lance complained that talking about food was taking years off his life.

Shiro let out a cough that grabbed Keith’s attention. He silently nodded at Lance, but the Prince raised a brow and mouthed: what?

The older man made a show of rolling his eyes, bringing his hands casually in front of him and folding his fingers together. Then, he nodded again towards Lance, his eyes zeroed in at the brunette’s hip… where one of his own hands hung loosely, empty at his side.

Oh.

Keith swallowed his nerves and matched Lance’s stride so they were side-by-side, intertwining their fingers in a fluid movement. The tan-skinned boy startled slightly at the touch, and his cheeks began to burn pink in the muted light of the forest.

Keith felt himself grow bolder from Lance’s reaction, leaning close when Hunk began to quiz Pidge on the chemical composition of some foreign spice, and whispered in Lance’s ear. “I can’t wait to dance with you again tonight.”

To Keith’s surprise, besides a rosy glow, Lance’s turquoise eye scales twinkled lightly in response. Discovering how to draw all of these different reactions from the other boy was quickly becoming
one of Keith’s favorite past-times.

To his shock, when he began to pull back, Lance instead leaned in for a whisper of his own.

“Funny, I thought you’d be more excited for what we’ll do when the dancing is all over, back in your room.”

Holy.

Shit.

That did things to his body that he was neither prepared for, though not necessarily upset about.

Lance was absolutely, one-hundred percent going to be the death of him.

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[LANCE]

Lance wasn’t sure what to do with himself, seeing as he was now back in Keith’s room.

Alone.

Pidge and Hunk hadn’t been able to stay, but that didn’t mean Lance missed the rather suggestive looks the gremlin kept shooting him while they all walked back to the castle, or the victorious smile and repeated nudges Hunk sent him when Keith and Shiro had to go their separate ways. Their hands had untwined slowly, almost sadly, upon approaching the castle steps, and the feeling made him ache. He gave Keith one last glance before they both walked off in their respective paths of the castle; Shiro and Keith both felt it safest for Lance to stay in Keith’s room, and Hunk and Pidge had at least been able to walk him there before returning to do their own things, utilizing the servant passages to avoid running into anyone who might recognize the Valurian servant boy.

There was no guard or Blade at Keith’s chamber door, and the Prince had given him the key to his room – the implications of which Lance could scarcely think about without blushing like a fool. So, when he snuck in and closed the door behind him, Lance unabashedly gripped the key to his chest and sighed happily, sinking down to the carpet.

And he wasn’t really alone, of course. He had Blue. Hunk had wanted to carry her when they got inside, and when the responding purr was one of warmth, Lance shrugged and watched in amusement at the gentle giant and the fearsome kitten as they climbed steps and went down hallways.

After regaining a bit of his senses, Lance got up and strolled back over to Keith’s unmade bed, unceremoniously collapsing into the sheets a second time. He sucked in a heady breath of air while the dust in the natural light danced above him.

All morning, Lance had been basking in all of this, overwhelmed in the best sort of way by how everything in this room was so Keith. The clothes he was had borrowed. The bed. Even the room
itself smelled of him, something smokey and oddly clean at the same time, like fresh linen and a recently extinguished campfire, if that made any sense at all. It permeated the blankets, the stale air not actually stale in Lance’s opinion, but a sweet reminder of the Prince’s stupid face.

Hard to believe he fell asleep in the darkness of the cellar so few quintent ago, because this was a change of pace he could definitely get used to.

After a comfortable twenty dobosh or so of just mindlessly daydreaming, petting Blue as she nuzzled into him, Lance finally began to pick himself up and decided to do something with himself. He ran himself another bath, poking through the skincare and other beauty products in Keith’s bathroom as promised, clicking his tongue at how many were shamefully gathering dust. He selected a few of the basics soap, conditioner, shampoo, in addition to a face cream, some exfoliates, and a delicately scented essential oil mix that reminded him of the forest after it rained.

Pulling off the shirt Keith had let him borrow, Lance stood in front of the wide mirror over the sink. While he appeared much better today with a good night’s sleep, his eyes were inevitably drawn to the trailing marks that led down his neck. They were healing, slowly but surely, and were no longer identifiable as strictly a handprint. He was glad that Blue’s transformation included something like make-up, because healing or not, the bruises were ugly and they made him feel... well, they made him feel gross. Each one was a reminder of what-could-have-been that night, and Lance supposed he should feel grateful rather than ashamed because all-in-all the damage done had been minimal, but it still made his body itch and skin prick uncomfortably.

*Stay quiet for me. Yes, just like that.*

How different would things be if he had submitted?

*A good servant, aren’t you?*

Would Keith still have even wanted him? Or would he have been too fucking up at that point?

*Do you always take orders so well?*

The ghost of that voice stung his ears like acid. It was the same voice Lance heard in his worst moments in the cellar. The one that whispered to him when he was drunk off cheap wine, that had trained him to jump at sudden contact, that had slammed his head back into the wall until stars swam in his vision.

He shivered, feeling the familiar pull of Blue trying to soothe him. Lance sent her a grateful smile as she stood in the doorway before directing himself away from the mirror and into the tub, sighing as his body adjusted to the blissfully hot water. Eyes closed, Lance tried to relax for a few – if he felt Blue trying to help him along, well, he wasn’t about to complain about it.

The juxtaposition of cold air dancing over his shoulders while the rest of his body was submerged in unyielding heat drew an eventual chill from him, and Lance sunk even deeper until his chin was touching the water’s surface. The sensation of rippling water that lapped over his neck was almost eerily familiar to the scorching, gentle burn of Keith’s lips as they pressed their way down and over the abused skin.

It had felt so *right* with Keith. Not used. Not a quick fix. Not a toy or a puppet to be pushed and pulled. He felt wanted. Safe. Almost *precious* under the soft attention of Keith’s mouth.

Lance sighed, pulling his legs up to his chest and holding them, cheeks burning in a way that had little to do with the latent heat of the bath. He was feeling more than a little embarrassed for the
cheeky remark he’d whispered back to Keith in the forest, but at the time it was, just, Mullethead can’t just go and whisper adorable things in his ear all casually! That wasn’t fair. So Lance got payback… just, payback of the extremely suggestive variety. He couldn’t decide if he was proud of himself or mortified by what he had implied.

Both, he conceded. He could be both.

Lance finished his bath after a few more dobosh, pushing away the salacious thoughts for the time being – he was not about to get a hard-on while in Keith’s bathtub, no matter how much privacy he had here. That was just… no. Lance wouldn’t allow it. He was seventeen, he could exhibit some amount of self-control.

The bruises flashed at him in the mirror while he dried off, much to Lance’s annoyance. He began to push through Keith’s unused back stock of bathroom things to see if he had any medical supplies like the bandaging Adam had given him, but of course not. For all the things Keith had in his bathroom, bandages was not one of them, and anything that seemed remotely close to concealer was just silly – the Prince’s pale complexion was way too far off to match Lance’s anyway.

Sighing, Lance turned away with every intention to go back to Keith’s closet and find something suitable, but paused when he felt a little ping radiate in his head. Like a light crystal flickering on, the sound was bright and sudden, and he blinked down at the bathroom floor to find Blue looking at him with something like a thoughtful expression.

[May I try something?]

Amused, Lance nodded. He wasn’t entirely sure what he expected, but Blue was never one to disappoint.

There was a pulse of the same unbound, iridescent energy – quintessence, he reminded himself – that he’d come to associate with Blue, running over his arms and chest like water. The unmistakable feeling of magic, an icy, self-contained wind that flashed over his torso while his cheeks glowed teal, casting aquamarine sparkles over the white tiling of the bathroom.

Navy threading began to materialize around him, stitching to life over him. It was delicate like silk but thicker and impossibly soft, and the sensation caused him to break into gooseflesh as it wrapped itself over his skin.

Lance blinked at his reflection as the final traces of the mystic energy seeped out of the air and dissipated around him.

“A turtleneck?” He smirked, rotating his upper body and admiring Blue’s choice. After the Ball, he wasn’t readily going to challenge Blue’s sense of style, but she’d once again chosen something he wouldn’t have necessarily picked for himself. The sweater was fitted over his chest and arms, and sat just a tad loose around the waist where it would end over his pants in such a way that was comfortable, breathable and cozy all at once. His bruises were just barely visible, only poking out just beneath his chin.

[It suits you.]

“I guess blue really is my color, isn’t it?” Lance hummed, as he ran his hands up and down the sleeves like he was trying to gather warmth, when in reality he’d just taken to admiring the positively decadent quality of the sweater. It was like cashmere, but even softer. He fucking loved magic.

Lance peeked into the main part of Keith’s bedroom before leaping into his closet, a bit embarrassed
at the notion of borrowing the Prince’s boxers but Blue seemed far too amused by his discomfort to indulge him in a magical pair. He scowled at her while he pulled up some lackluster trousers, hopeful that Keith wouldn’t mind him borrowing more clothes.

“Earlier when you made that bow and quiver appear... You aren’t over-exerting yourself, right? You not, like, going to vanish into the air as like, sweater-mist, like you did when you made all that stuff yesterday?”

[No. Such small tasks require minute amounts of quintessence. The larger the expenditure, the greater pull on my physical form.]

Nodding, he gave himself a final once over and smoothed down the sides of the sweater, sighing contently.

“I’ll take your word for it. Just let me know if you get tired out or something, I can carry you.”

A prodding jolt went over him, like a sudden ripple in the still waters of their mindscape, and it took several moments for him to realize Blue was laughing. He grinned and strolled back into the main chamber.

And, again, Lance found himself without anything to do. He sat on Keith’s bed for a short while before his hands twitched, restless, and the silence from being cooped up in Keith’s room was starting to make him stir-crazy. He did not leave the room and go off on his own, tempting though it was; Blue reminded him frequently and stubbornly that it was a bad idea.

Well, so was developing feelings for the Prince of the country, and that didn’t work out so bad for me, right?

Instead, Lance allowed Blue to coerce him into a nap. He was used to getting up early, and that morning had been no exception, but it’s not like they had anything to do and when she insisted that it would help the transformation later last longer, Lance needed little convincing.

He and Blue snoozed in Keith’s bed for over a varga when they were shocked awake by an abrupt, sharp series of knocks at the door.

Groggily, he sat up and rubbed his eyes, looking for Blue through the fog of sleep. She was poised at the end of the bed, hackles raised as she eyed the door skeptically for several long ticks before, finally, relaxing.

[This presence is not a wicked one. They may enter.]

Hesitantly, Lance swung his legs over the side of the bed and shuffled to the door. He cracked it open by a tiny margin, peering through the opening to be sure Blue was right, before his jaw fucking dropped and he swung open the door the rest of the way.

“Princess Allura? What the heck are you doing here?” Lance gaped, not entirely sure if he was actually awake or not.

As usual, she looked beyond beautiful, dark skin and shock of white hair giving her an almost divine radiance, only intensified when by the waterfall of white-grey silks that fell over her frame, hugging her body in a flattering, but still ladylike, manner. Behind her, the ever-diligent Sir Coran stood with a knowing look, his rust-colored hair (and accompanying facial hair) neatly styled with hands clasped behind him, looking the model of preparedness for another day’s work.

Allura shook her head in an exasperated but well-meaning manner.
“I don’t know, Blue Paladin, what are you doing in the Prince’s bedroom, hmm?”

Lance felt his cheeks redden at the innuendo while she arched a white brow, and he quickly looked around before ushering them inside.

“Shh! Come in, come in, Keith doesn’t necessarily want people to know I’m here until he’s figured out… some stuff.” He crossed his arms over his chest and frowned as the Princess settled herself into the cushions of the couch, Coran opting to stand behind her. “Did anyone see you?”

“Course not, my boy,” the advisor twisted his moustache with a thumb and pointer finger. “I may be old but I’m just as shifty as a Unilu at their first market!”

“Is that... supposed to be a good thing?” Lance wondered with a tilt of his head.

The Princess cleared her throat and motioned for Lance to sit. He took the chair that Blue had slept on yesterday, adjacent the couch, while the cat herself hopped up beside Allura and stretched before sinking into the fabric.

Fixing his gaze to the Princess, Lance took stock of four very familiar mice on her shoulders, twittering in her ear. They appeared to be playing peek-a-boo with her lustrous, silver locks.

“Wah – those mice! I know them!”

Allura laughed and scratched the largest one, cupping it in her hands. The others scooted around her arms and shoulders, squeaking while they slid around like they were at the carnival.

“I know you do. Bizarre creatures, but I think they’ve got some of their quintessence crossed with something else. It appears I can communicate with them as a result.”

Lance considered the last time he saw them. They’d all just been turned into fucking horses by Blue’s magic, so he thought, yeah, okay, they definitely got their quintessence crossed with something alright.

The Princess continued. “Well, to an extent anyway. It’s more like a sensory connection… I can sort of glean information from them, but not speak directly. How else would I have known where to find you?”

Lance bit his lip and nodded as the small red one began to crawl up his pant-leg and scurried into his lap. “I guess that’s fair. Nothing makes sense anymore anyways.”

Allura rolled her eyes and let out a low breath, turning to face him properly. “Speaking of which, we should discuss last night.”

Lance shifted his weight, suddenly nervous. “Yeah...”

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**APPROXIMATELY 20 HOURS EARLIER**

It was hard to really tell if everyone here was truly beautiful, or if the place itself was so beautiful that
it elevated everything else simply by association.

The impossibly tall ceilings with oculus skylights gave teasing glimpses of the starry-night overhead; the pale purple light danced in their enchanted baubles that floated overhead; the magnificent faces and dancers with music and laughter aplenty; floors so clean you could eat from the tiles.

Admittedly, Lance cringed whenever he heard the too-loud click of high heel over the spotless floor nearby, and he sent out a silent prayer of good tidings to the poor servants who must clean the palace. Lance couldn’t even imagine what an event like this does to the serving staff, but if his own life was anything to go by, he hoped Keith and the Queen were at least the sort of masters who respected the rights of their servants enough to allow them time if their bodies were sore and tired.

Lance guessed they were, but with some people, you really never know.

There was some saying about that, he thought distractedly while he danced with a sinewy Olkarion Lord that smiled and squeezed Lance’s waist on occasion. He remembered the proverb was from a book Pidge gave to him, though he wasn’t sure of the exact wording anymore.

The thought escaped him before he could really try to recall it, forced back to the present with a sudden laugh as his dance partner dipped him. Lance felt a little flush creep beneath his mask at the boldness of the Lord, but he’d danced with at least two dozen people by now and had learned rather quickly that this was not abnormal. There was something about the upper-class that was very insistent. They were used to getting what they wanted, quickly and without question, and from their perspective it seemed that, if they were after a dance with the Blue Paladin, then by gods were they going to have their dance with him.

It still felt a little unreal that he was here at all, let alone dancing this with some of the most powerful people in the entire realm. Nobles trying to actually court him, whispering where they were staying in the castle, room numbers in his ear, or insisting to know his name, or where he was staying so they might “stop by.”

More than once, Lance couldn’t help but to imagine the scandal on their faces if they knew who he was.

In his own house, his aunt and cousins avoided him like the plague. Here, he felt like a stage performer at a burlesque show, the weight of eyes that looked him over without any sense of subtly, the hunger, the desire. It wasn’t like there weren’t other dancers to look at it, but the way some of the people hands lingered on his hip or shoulder, or the manner in which they bit their lip when he made a joke, it told him that they wanted him. It was a strange feeling, that much was sure.

After thanking the Olkari for the dance, Lance scanned the crowds again in search of… meh. Mullet was dancing with someone already. There hadn’t been a chance after Lance first arrived for him to dance again with the Prince, but he would be lying desperately if he said he didn’t want to.

Keith, he learned, was not like the other dancers. Maybe it was because he was the first person Lance had danced with that evening, so he hadn’t had anything to compare it to, but he thought there was something more to that. There was just something about the way of him; the way he gripped, instead of held on; the tuck of his chin when he looked from one of Lance’s eyes to the other, visibly trying to unravel Lance’s secret; the way that lavender lights caught the amerthine circles of his irises.

Lance wanted that again. He wanted to be the one the Prince was currently speaking to, even if, from across the room, he looked a little annoyed by whatever conversation he was having with the pretty human woman.
Another royal nearby caught his eye, just finishing her dance with Shay’s brother – Rock? Rax? Something like that – and Lance decided there was at least one other pretty person he wouldn’t mind holding for the time being.

Trying to be as suave as possible – which, by the way, he totally could feel Blue’s echo of humor rise in his soul in his attempts to do so – Lance approached with what he hoped was a friendly smile.

“Princess Allura of Altea, you look positively beautiful tonight.”

She beamed, pink lips pulled over perfectly, straight white teeth.

“My thanks to you. You are the Blue Paladin, are you not?”

“I am, Princess.” He held his breath, willing himself to sound confident. “Would you honor me with a dance?”

She chuckled, the lace that hugged her shoulders bobbing with the motion. “It would be a pleasure, Paladin. Lead the way.”

And so he did, accepting her dainty hand in his own and guiding them a bit further into the crowd.

After a few moments of swaying, the two dancers adjusting to the pace and movements of the other, the Princess tilted her head and smiled.

Leaning close, she said, “It’s nice to see you again, Lance.”

He stilled so suddenly they were almost bump by another couple, and Lance blushed furiously as he resumed the rhythm. The laugh that Allura gave was melodic, but surprisingly… undignified? No, that’s too negative – more like, unrestrained. It was a little louder than the appropriate murmurs of the other dancers and the look of mirth that twisted her lips into a grin was unguarded and open.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you,” she said sincerely. “I’m certain no one else can tell that’s you beneath that mask, so don’t worry.”

Too late. Lance was the very definition of worried.

“I wouldn’t have asked you to dance if you knew who I was, there’s not exactly a lot of maids or footmen around dancing with Princesses here. Sorry,” he managed a weak smile. “How’d you know it was me?”

Allura pulled back to better judge his expression, her own face pinched with confusion. “First of all, don’t be silly, there’s no need to apologize. You mustn’t think I’m so shallow as to care about the status of someone in order to hold their hand for a few dobosh?”

He bit his tongue, unsure if there was any way to respond to that without insulting her by accident, so he just shook his head. Because no, he didn’t believe that about Allura, but Lance also had no doubt that he’d have been thrown out for even breathing near her if the other guests knew who he was.

“To answer your question,” the Princess added with a wan smile. “It’s your quintessence. I recognized it from the other night, from when I had sensed you were in distress.”

Lance’s eyebrows shot up, so high they were almost visible behind the frosted lace of the masquerade mask. The Princess nodded to acknowledge his confusion and further explained.
“I am trained in Altean alchemy, as are some of the others in attendance here I’m sure, and we can pick out the… well, you could call it a flavor I suppose, though I’ve always thought of it as more of a ribbon… either way, anyone trained in the art would have the ability to pick out an individual’s ‘ribbon’ of energy from any other. All have a different… texture, air, life to them. Yours is just as unique, which is how I found you in the first place. But, worry not,” she lifted the hand from his shoulder and held her pointer finger up between them astutely. “Unless someone else here knows what to look for, your quintessence shouldn’t particularly stand out to them. Does that make sense?”

Lance wrinkled his nose.

“Sort of?”

“It’s like…” she hummed for a moment, thoughtful. “It’s like looking for a juniberry flower in a garden that also bloomed with moonflowers, yuliean roses, tygian ophelite and crescentitias. To someone just glancing, they all just look like flowers. But if you know what you’re looking for, it’s a different matter entirely.”

“Huh. I have no idea what most of those are, but I think I get the analogy,” he replied with a frown, catching a glimpse of dark hair behind her for a moment. The Prince had taken to dancing with someone else, again. He should be neither surprised nor annoyed, but of course he was both.

Allura followed his gaze and frowned. “I am glad you were able to come, though the disguise makes me believe it was not under the best circumstances. I wanted to apologize for the other day about Prince Lotor’s behavior – Princess Tylivia was quite upset when you ran off.”

Lance blinked down at her, needing a moment for the words to process. “Oh, no, that’s… no need to apologize, Princess. It wasn’t your fault he was a jerk. Tell ‘Livia for me?”

She caught onto his distraction fairly quickly. “Did you come for Prince Keith?”

“Ah,” Lance said, and in spite of his already severe embarrassment, his cheeks darkened. The Princess at least had enough restraint not to laugh at him. “Was it that obvious?”

“Well, you did make a beeline for him the moment you arrived.” She grinned. “Subtly is not exactly your specialty, is it, Blue Paladin?”

He couldn’t resist the laugh that bubbled to his lips. “You have a point. But… yes, to answer your earlier point. I had to sneak out of my house to come, and my family is here – hence the mask – and um, yeah, Keith uh, he invited me. I don’t think it meant anything by it, you know? He was probably just trying to be – to be nice, after what that Lotor guy said. Besides, I can’t tell him I’m me… at least, not yet.”

The Princess bobbed her head back and forth over her shoulders, looking like she was debating with herself.

“Also,” Lance spoke in a rush before she had the chance. “Please, please don’t tell anyone I’m here. I can’t be seen by anyone because if I get found out, I will – my aunt will –”

They stopped dancing entirely, and Allura studied his face. Lance had no idea what she saw there, but he hoped it conveyed how important her secrecy was.

“I understand,” she said, voice soft. “You don’t have to say anymore. Your secret is safe with me, Blue Paladin. But I must ask…”

Pausing, the Princess looked around and took Lance by the wrist, guiding him away from the
dancefloor and into a hallway. She kept her head low and waited as a pair of giggling girls strolled by, caught up in their own tipsy conversation.

“The name Blue Paladin is not a coincidence, is it? Your watch – is it…?”

“Magic?” Lance finished, holding up the accessory in question between them. The Altean’s eyes widened as she inched imperceptibly closer to the timepiece.

A whisper, hardly audible, passed through her lips. “Unbelievable. To think it’s right there…”

“You know about this thing? Oh, thank god, ‘Llura I have so many questions. My –”

She pressed her lips together into a thin smile, but shook her head.

“Not here. We must speak privately another turn, but please, Lance, be careful. Paladin is much more than a pseudonym. Listen to what your guardian asks of you and trust them above all else.”

“I– I understand,” he swallowed hard on his throat, but there was something fiery in the Princess’s eye that told him she was almost… proud? Empowered? Something like that. It was a good sight, for sure, and he could at least follow her instructions. He trusted Blue, mind, body, and soul.

A mischievous grin appeared on the woman’s lips as she clasped a hand over the watch, cupping the face almost protectively.

“Now, enough of that for the time being. You’re here for the Prince, isn’t that right? Luckily, I have a more-or-less all access pass to his attentions if I desire. I’ll take him to the side for a break after another dance or so. And when it’s just the two of us alone, you make your move!”

“My – my move?”

“Yes, you know, lay on the charm or whatever it is you did to have all of those nobles fawning over you. I’m going to act like I don’t know you, of course, so he doesn’t question me. Once I see you coming, I’ll slip away – we’ll see to it that you at least get one more dance with him.”

–

PRESENT

Sheepishly, Lance scratched the back of his head. “Thanks again for the help last night. It, uh, worked out. I got to dance with him again and… yeah.”

Two brows raised high along her forehead and made a demonstration of looking pointedly around Keith’s bedroom. “It seems you did more than dance.”

“N-No! We didn’t, we didn’t do that,” he cleared his throat, willing his cheeks not to turn red. His eyes darted to Coran and then back to her. “You said you weren’t going to tell anyone, by the way.”

The Princess straightened her posture and he saw a flash in her gaze. “I know what I said, but my choice was between bringing Sir Coran as a private, trusted advisor, or a whole mess of the Marmoran guards. I am never without an escort, so I assure you, Coran is most loyal and can be
trusted with anything. By my command, he cannot disclose any information discussed here, even to father, even if ordered otherwise. You have no reason to worry.”

Lance grumbled but found he had no argument. Honestly, he didn’t have any problem with Coran knowing – he liked and appreciated the Altean’s easy-going nature and ability to hold a conversation. It was just in Lance’s petty nature to try to deflect Allura’s earlier innuendo to anything else.

“Anyways,” he sat up, but kept his arms crossed over his chest. The red and blue mouse had taken to his right arm, sitting and mimicking his posture. “Sorry I didn’t get to find you again after we talked last night, about a varga later the watch said I was running out of time and I had to get out of there. Keith invited me to stay in his room, and well, here I am.”

“Indeed, here you are,” Allura repeated, almost bemused. “Have you and Blue recovered? Your quintessence is so similar it’s almost indiscernible to me which of you is which, at the metaphysical level anyway.”

He scratched his cheek, watching Blue paw the couch with her nails. Hopefully Keith didn’t mind a few claw marks.

“I felt fine after the whole thing. Well, I was pretty drained, but nothing like Blue. She practically collapsed when it was over and slept for almost two varga. She woke for a little bit after that, but slept again with me through the night. We just took a nap after she made me this,” he motioned to his sweater and shrugged. “So I guess her magics all back to normal. We’ve got this telepathy thing going on.”

“I see,” Allura stroked her chin, leaning lower on the couch to scrutinize Blue like she was a fascinating science experiment. Tiny, bright irises blinked at her, and Blue tilted her head to the side. Something in Lance’s blood pulsed with a sudden chill, like the cells in his body had dropped a degree or two all at once, and he shivered.

“Apologies,” the Princess shook her head. “I was trying to explore your connection a bit further and I pushed a little more than intended. I hope I didn’t hurt you.”

Lance hugged himself, mostly for warmth but admittedly feeling a little out of his depth. He hadn’t come to associate his bond with Blue as something that an outside force could act upon and it felt… weird. “Um, that’s okay. So can you tell me about the watch? And why you’re not freaked out that I have a magical cat?”

The Princess hesitated, looking over her shoulder to Coran for a long moment before turning back to him.

“I can,” she said, sounding unexpectedly tired. “But I do not want you to think me foolish – the tales of the paladins are regarded most often as children’s stories and legends.”

“Uh, ‘Llura, no offense, but I’m sitting in the room of a Prince, with a different country’s Princess, discussing a magical bond I have with a telepathic cat and four sort-of-magical mice. I’m pretty sure I’ll believe anything you throw at me.”

She huffed a laugh, but her face was set in determination. “Very well, then. You must know of Oriande?”

Lance glanced at Blue who had settled herself into a little ball and was watching the Princess with near reverent attention. He wrinkled his nose.
“Sort of? I know it’s sort of like, Altea’s version of heaven? But with more magic involved.”

Coran, who had previously remained silent, let out a little snort and held up a hand in immediate apology. A chagrined blush rushed to Lance’s cheeks, but he diligently waited for the Princess to respond.

“Well, that’s… not wrong. It’s a folktale, really, about where magic in the world comes from. The children’s story goes that a grand, white beast guards the entrance to Oriande and none shall enter unless marked as worthy. The white guardian is a combination of some of the core elements of existence, and can be divided into the according colors: Blue, of water,” she stopped to nod towards Blue seated on the cushion beside her. “Red, of fire; Black, of space; Yellow, of earth; and Green, of life. Each facet, when together or divided, works in tandem to keep Oriande safe from outside forces and keeps the flow of magic stable between our planes of existence.

“The moral of the story, when told traditionally to children, follows the circle of life, and how one element exchanges for another. A message about harmony and balance, you could say, though others consider it a warning: take not more in life than you can give back, because in death, your body will return to the elements but your debts, promises, and vows die with you.”

Allura pursed her lips for a moment, folding her hands in her lap and looking down at them before continuing.

“My father never believed it was just a legend, and it was because of his research that much of Altean alchemy as we know it today exists. Indeed, those trained to read, harness, and manipulate quintessence call the craft alchemy for a reason; we are no magicians. We take the raw form of energy and use it in exchange for something else. Quintessence cannot be created from nothing, and when expended, it does not vanish from existence, but merely changes to another form. In this way, all matter is organic in that it all matter possess something that makes it, well, it. Quintessence merges or mimics the original forms essence, hence the name, and when those materials eventually collapse, the essence of the objects return to Oriande and are recycled to put back into the world to be used again.”

Lance, for his part, was doing his very best to keep up. It wasn’t a matter of believing Allura – magical cat telepathy was much harder to accept and he had a solid 20 or so hours under his belt – but it was more a problem of wrapping his mind around the abstract concepts in a way that made sense.

“So… Oriande is like, the place where things go to be reincarnated? And Blue is one part of the guardians of this place? But instead of just humans and animals getting recycled, it’s everything, and that’s how quintessence is made – or, I guess, converts back to… itself?”

“More or less,” she picked at invisible threads on her dress. “The point of me regaling this story to you is to demonstrate the relationship between quintessence and objects, living or not. The guardians, like your companion here… well, they are both the exception to the rule, and the most absolute example of the rule. I know that sounds bizarre, but allow me to explain.”

Lance nodded, and the Princess took a deep breath.

“The paladins are, in effect, the acting agents of their guardians – similar to the way an object is bound to specific essence. That which makes a rock, rock-like, or this couch, couch-like. You and Blue share such a strong likeness that she is just as bound to you as you are to her. As I understand it – perhaps she could tell you better than I – the relationship between a guardian and a paladin is symbiotic. You were called upon to bear this watch for a purpose, but in doing so, Blue has offered, or intends to offer, you something in return. Not that the reciprocity is by any means static. Your
needs change, as her needs change. That is how, together, you embody the entire process, the
Oriandian cycle if you would. But, in a broader sense, Blue’s intentional choices enact a sort of…
pressure to the forces that naturally drive the course of the cycle by guiding you towards a certain
end. It’s sort of like, the difference between a flower being planted, blooming, withering and dying,
decaying, and decomposing into the soil again. That is the regular cycle, but with Blue’s assistance,
you are able to intervene at steps that will eventually, inevitably, result in the same decomposition,
but perhaps you draw out the longevity of the flower’s life, or are tasked with ending it much sooner
and speeding up the cycle.”

She watched Lance intently as she finished. “By your constant act of giving and taking, you are
enacting the will of a great force upon the world, while at the same time, that force is as much of you
as you are of it.”

Coran had remained silent through the Princess’s explanation, like this was not at all an unusual
conversation to be having on a Saturday afternoon. Lance might’ve laughed if the atmosphere was
not so tense. Instead, he furrowed his brow and mulled over Allura’s words the best he could.

He certainly felt the interconnectedness she was referring to with Blue, in every possible expression
of sensation – his chest ached in her image, his mind swirled with the color of the ocean, his fingers
itched to hold her and keep her safe, just as she so wanted those same things for him.

As for the offer, the exchange…

“Is this what you meant?” Lance wondered aloud, directing the question to the feline on the couch.
“When I asked you what I was supposed to do – and you said live?”

She faced him, tail flicking back and forth quietly.

[Yes, my paladin. We take the most immediate form to aid our chosen. At that time, what you needed
was freedom, so I became your disguise. If you needed shelter, I would become your home. If you
were lost, I would become your map. If you needed a weapon, I would become your bow or blade.]

Lance vaguely noted his eye scales responded to the declaration, a light rise of color in his periphery,
but was more concerned with the conversation. “But that’s all what I need – what about… you?
What do you need?”

There was no direct answer she could share with him, only a feeling, raw emotions pouring into the
shared space of their mind. The further she pressed their bond, Lance was learning, the deeper the
sensory experience shared between them; it was like taking a syringe of ice to his veins. Their energy
– quintessence – was the essence of water and winter and Lance found he couldn’t resist it, didn’t
want to resist it, wanted to freeze and shatter and rebuild himself with her. They were mountain air,
snowcapped summits, and frozen lakes; they were chilled atmosphere, delicate frost, and sharp
icicles, all the cold seeping into him bone-deep but not nearly deep enough.

He was shivering, but it was oddly pleasant. She felt of home. She was home.

There.

He understood now. Realization bloomed through the shadow of his heart, clarity coming through
the flicker between a heartbeat, the truth that had been there all along, untapped until she thought he
was ready.


“I believe the important thing is not to focus on the issue of what you should do as a paladin,” Allura
continued in a soft tone. “But rather, and Guardian, please correct my assumptions with him if I am wrong, but in Lance resolving his own needs, the needs of the Guardian will be addressed simultaneously. Not are you only bound by quintessence, but by fate – your trajectory is her trajectory. If you succeed, she succeeds. If you live, she will live. Whatever is at the end of this is a fate the two of you will face together, and by addressing your more… present, literal needs, the Blue Guardian will be accomplishing something in her own way. Even if it does not seem like it to us, there are always greater forces working in the Oriandian cycle than we could ever comprehend.”

A chirp of agreement came from the kitten, the sound adorable and, situationally, hilariously inappropriate. Even so, the sound turned into a purr, the rumble low as it carried through the air and into his skin, blending with his buzzing pulse. Lance was honestly pretty confused about the whole thing, but there was one part he could take away with ease: Blue needed him. He would do whatever he could do, give back to Blue whatever he could – his quintessence or time or whatever else she needed. He could do that.

*I can do this.*

*[We. We shall do this.]*

Princess Allura was smiling at him when he returned his attention to the present, and he mirrored the expression.

“Thank you, Princess. This was… I feel a lot better. A lot less lost. But there’s been a lot of uh,” Lance shifted uncomfortably, but Blue encouraged him along. A mouse squeaked at his ear, when did it get up there? “New developments since this morning you should know about.”

Her brow came together and she nodded for him to continue.

“I uh, found out last night after Keith and I got into an argument that Blue thought he was the Red Paladin? So I took him to the woods where this shrine is, right, where the watch came from –” Lance shook out his arm and held the watch out for her to demonstrate. “And we were followed by my friends, you remember Hunk and Pidge? Well, turns out they’re the Yellow and Green Paladins, too!”

He hadn’t even gotten to the part about Hunk and Pidge when her jaw dropped, so needless to say her disbelief only became more apparent as Lance bulldozed on.

“Um, and they had Shiro with them, cause they were looking for Keith and he was actually the Black Paladin, too…? I think? I don’t know, Blue seemed really sure of herself and the whole thing was very, uh, *fate-like* if that makes sense. Like how you said she puts pressure on events or whatever, shaping the cycle? I think that’s what this was.”

Allura remained still for several ticks, perhaps even a full dobosh, before one of the mice began licking her hand and roused her from the stupor.

“All of the Paladins have gathered? They – the watches? Did they all fit?” She questioned, dumbfounded.

Lance shrugged. “Yeah, but, none of the others have a guardian with them like Blue. I don’t know what it means.”

The Princess stood slowly, as if in a daze, nodding to herself fervently. Eventually, her face broke into a smile and she reached down to scratch Blue between her ears and sighed happily at the responding mewl.
“If Blue here believes they are the paladins then I am inclined to agree. I suspect the guardians do not need to manifest physically for each paladin unless it is necessary, so perhaps the other guardians will not appear unless they are called upon. The watch itself is the connection to their presence, even if it is not as obvious as it is for you and Blue.”

She smiled fondly at the kitten and drew herself back up to full height, looking every part the Princess once again.

“It was my sincere honor to meet you, Blue Guardian. As I’ve mentioned, my father is a scholar, not a practitioner, so all his research has only ever been theoretical. The advent of alchemy in response to his findings has been confirming in a way, but it was impossible to know how, if at all, the origins of Oriande connected to any of it. Some wrote him off as a crackpot, indulging in the old legends and ascribing correlations that weren’t really there, but... seeing you, the Blue Guardian, right here, and you wearing the blue timepiece...” She cleared her throat, and Lance realized she had been close to tears. It made him pink slightly upon realizing that, quiznak, this was a very big deal to her. “This confirms a great, privately held belief for me. Thank you, Blue Guardian and Paladin. I am humbled, and if there’s anything I can do, please let me know and I will try to help you or the other paladins as best I can.”

A sudden sob made them both jump, and Coran had kept his position behind the couch but was openly sobbing into a handkerchief. “I – Ah, I’m s-sorry, y-you’ve just g-grown so well, I’m so p-proud of you, Pri-Pri-Princess!”

He stopped to blow his nose, sounding uncannily like an upset elephant, and the Princess burst out laughing. Lance couldn’t help but to join her, if nothing else to dispel the tension in the room as the Altean advisor cried ugly, snotty tears and sang Allura’s praises. A small chorus of mice squeaked in amusement, and Blue purred at the positive energy flooding Keith’s bedroom.

Allura did her best to comfort Coran with soothing pats on the back but it was for naught, as his clamorous reaction still had her barely suppressing giggles. It took more than five dobosh to get Coran to stop crying, and he hugged Lance tightly when he finally managed to lead them to the door to Keith’s room.

“Thank you, m’boy. You’re a fantastic choice for the Prince, I think.”

Lance’s eyes widened, and he and Allura looked each other uncomfortably for a few strained ticks.

“About that...” Her lips twisted in displeasure. “Has the Prince spoken to you about the, ah, arrangements?”

“I’ve gotten the gist,” Lance admitted awkwardly, crossing an arm over his chest and rubbing his forearm. “You guys are supposed to get engaged after Sunday? That was my take anyway.”

The Princess winced, and the four mice riding her shoulders were all atwitter in what Lance assumed was irritation. “That is the plan as of now. Though we both have regrets on the matter.”

“Mmm,” Lance nodded, not sure what to say. “I... bet.”

“Yes, well,” she let out a sigh that made her seem much older than her twenty-or-so years. “Let’s just focus on surviving the weekend and let us worry about that after, hmm?”

“Hah, alright. Fair enough. Thanks again, by the way.” He nodded and was prepared to open the door for them when Coran held up a hand.

“Ah,” the man piped up. “Just one more thing, before we go. I couldn’t help but notice you’ve added
a cheek mark since we last spoke. Don’t make a habit of that, any more would just look silly!”

The Princess laughed, and Lance jerked a thumb over his shoulder with a roll of his eyes. “Hey, it was her, not me. Said that it was ‘brought out’ by her… or the watch. I dunno, something like that.”

“I wonder… forgive me for prying, but if I could ask,” Coran smoothed down his moustache as he spoke, expression hard to read. “Are you an only child?”

Lance snorted out of reflex. Sir Coran didn’t seem to mind.

“Far from it. I’m one of seven. Right in the middle as far as age goes.”

The rust-haired man’s eyes sparkled like Lance had just notified him that he’d won the lottery. “And what are their eye scales like?”

“Oh. Two of my siblings have both, and the rest have none. I’m the only one with just one; I’m the only person I’ve ever met with one, to be honest. I thought it wasn’t a big deal because all I had to compare it to for a long time was other people in my village, but, I guess it’s also doesn’t matter now? I got my second mark so I guess it’s all squared up.”

“Hmm. Interesting…” Sir Coran stroked his chin, but the Princess put a hand on his forearm and nodded towards the door.

“We really must get going if I’m to have enough time for wardrobe and makeup. I have a different outfit for every evening…” her lips twisted into something like a grimace, but judging from the glint in her blue-lilac eyes, Lance suspected she wasn’t really bothered by that fact.

“Quite right, my apologies!” The advisor shook his head as Lance opened the door for them. “Thank you for indulging an old man’s curiosities, and…” he winked and leaned in for a stage-whisper. “See you tonight, Paladin!”

Lance chuckled as he shut the door, taking a deep breath once it was fully closed. His hand fell limp to his side.

[Paladin?]

Lance turned to find Blue sitting on the back of the chair, a fog between their expanse of ocean as she studied him. Knees wobbly, Lance’s back hit the door and he slid down to the ground.

“Are the others going to be okay, Blue?” he asked, though he needn’t actually vocalize his fears. She knew him just as well as he knew himself, but the impulse to speak was a comforting one that he’d relied on a hell of a lot longer than he was bonded to the cat staring back at him.

“I didn’t mean to… did I put them in danger? This paladin thing, it’s – it’s –”

[They are infinitely more secure with the watch than without it.]

That… that made sense. Blue’s presence both physically and emotionally helped to steady him, but even still, Lance felt shaken by the conversation they just had with the Princess. With understanding came a different sense of responsibility.

He was changing fate. The others, too, in ways they couldn’t possibly understand. This wasn’t a joke or a legend or a fun night out at the castle. This was… much bigger than that.

Why? The legend had said Oriande was protected by the guardians… so what were they protecting it from?
A grumble of assent came to him, but it was tinged with frustration; Blue didn’t know, either. He wasn’t sure if that was reassuring or even more terrifying, but then again, Lance supposed that didn’t matter, did it? They were in this together. Hell, they’d dragged Keith, Shiro, Pidge and Hunk into it, and Allura, Coran, and arguably four mice, too.

They would see this through.

“Guess we’ve got a party to get ready for, huh?” Lance smirked when Blue hopped down to meet him. She ran up and pounced on his foot. “What do you want to wear tonight? Same thing?”

She purred momentarily, but they decided together that no, they felt like something a little different tonight. Lance grinned.

“Well, let’s do it, then.” His body began to cloud in mist, veiled by the bioluminescence of Blue’s magic, eager instead of shocked to undergo the transformation this time. The sensation was not something Lance imagined he could ever tire of, and when the ripples of quintessence that ran over him like a river stopped after a few ticks, he smiled down at his wares.

“Oh, Blue,” he whispered. “You spoil me.”

[KEITH]

Shiro guided them swiftly to the Krel Beta room, much to the Prince’s dismay. To the shock of absolutely no one, Kolivan was already standing just outside the door, hard lines etched into his already severe expression.

Without a word, Keith strode past him and through the double-security doors, revealing a large room that he has frankly seen far too much of in recent memory.

The Krel Beta room was once just a standard, although overly large, meeting room in the castle. It has in recent months been commandeered by the Blades, essentially since the beginning of the Olkari-Galra conflict at the borders, and now acts as a secondary headquarters to the actual floor of the castle reserved to the Blades. Though Keith was not entirely sure why, he suspected the use of the room had something to do with granting Shiro and similar “domestic military” personnel access.

For some time now, he and his Mother have regularly attended supplemental meetings here to learn of the newest atrocities playing out on the borders of their west-northwestern “allies.” Many a tale have been recounted here of decimated Olkari villages, or of bloodthirsty Galran warlords who torched, murdered and pillaged more and more territory everyday. For every militant group that was reported on the rise, Zarkon and the rest of his court condemn the violence and label the insurgents as “rebels” and “zealots” who purportedly sought “to cleanse the lands of inferior races.”

Seeing as the skirmishes were not in any territory outside of Daibazaal or Olkari, there was little the aligned governments could do in terms of intervention and punishment that would not infringe upon their sovereignty. Worse yet, there were no direct links tying any of the prime offenders to the empire’s leadership, so retaliation from an outside force would be seen as an act of aggression – direct being the operative word, that is.
The Blade has since established an underground intelligence network relating to all things pertaining to the conflict, and sure enough, the links are there. There’s no way to prove any of them, of course, without endangering the embedded informants and revealing the extent of Marmora’s spy network, so they’ve been forced to sit and wait while intel continues to trickle in. What they’ve collected already has prompted the trade embargos and less-than-friendly negotiations that have been rearing up for the past few months.

Needless to say, this room did not exactly bode as a good omen to the Prince.

The large conference space was centered around a rectangular table, at which the Queen was already seated at the head and speaking heatedly to the advisor at her side. To Keith’s surprise, Matt Holt was also seated at the table a few chairs down, pouring over a book. The room quieted upon Keith’s entrance – well, sort of – as any sitting members aside from his mother and Matt stood respectfully, as was proper conduct.

“Please, carry on,” he instructed a bit awkwardly.

“Keith,” his mother said with a small tilt in her smile, the previous adviser who stood beside her bowing and moving away hastily. “Come, sit.”

Shiro stayed behind him, resting a hand on the back of his chair and he heard the outer door lock with a loud bolt. Kolivan appeared beside his Mother in an instant, leaning down to whisper something in the Queen’s ear. The blatant secrecy in his presence made Keith even more nervous, but when his Mother nodded, Kolivan seemed to relax a marginal amount.

Leaning forward, the Prince did his best to seem unperturbed. “What’s going on?”

“There’s been a threat against your life,” his mother replied simply, never one to beat around the bush. Keith blinked and his gaze flickered up to Kolivan, who remained unreadable as ever. “We are trying to determine the credibility of it now.”

“...Alright.” This wasn’t exactly uncommon, though admittedly it wasn’t exactly pleasant news. “What do we know?”

Shiro answered this time, sounding a bit annoyed. “Not much. That’s the problem. I’m worried it’s not a credible threat at all. The signs were too obvious; a trap, more than likely.”

“We don’t know that,” Kroila replied calmly, though her face revealed she’d harbored similar doubts. “But the threat remains in either case. We cannot assume it’s false and put Keith in danger.”

Kolivan nodded. “One of the castle guards yesterday evening reported some… interesting information.”

“They were off-duty to attend the party as a guest, not as a soldier,” Shiro informed. “All of the guards are on a rotation so that each has the chance to attend for one evening if they desire, otherwise they have the night off.”

“I understand. So what did they find out?” Keith urged.

The Queen let out a little huff, almost like a laugh, but her face remained grim. “The guard in question had taken one of the lady’s maids attending to the Galran court to bed, and during their escapades, she admitted wanting to run away with him, and a desire to flee not just Daibazaal but Marmora as well. It’s not an uncommon tale for lovers, wishing to start anew, but the problem arose when the young man informed the lady that he couldn’t make a life with her, at least not until the ball was over... she pleaded with him, telling him it wasn’t safe. It was clear she was distressed over the
matter, but when the soldier tried to soothe her by laying out his schedule for the next two days and how absolutely… what word did he use?”

Dark eyes, sharp in the center of his mother’s face, looked at him carefully before pulling a piece of parchment towards her from the opposite end of the table.

“Domestic. That was it. How domestic his duties were, she burst into tears. He’s assigned to tend to the third floor ballrooms and the terrace on a shift tonight on a rotation, and he’ll be one of the many guards present during the Olkari-Altea-Galra diplomacy summit tomorrow. She begged him not to attend the third day, citing that it was dangerous and that she would never see him again.”

“The details our people have gotten from her is, in sum, the young woman believes the Prince will be murdered in broad daylight on the third day. If the generals are lucky, they hope to take out some of the closer members of his court, too. Any collateral is good collateral.” His mother sighed and put down the paper. “The conversation she reported to have overheard these details from came from Commander Prorok himself.”

The Prince sucked his teeth as he absorbed this information, nodding slowly. After a solid minute, he asked, “And what did she disclose about the specific threat?”

Kolivan rubbed his jaw as he studied a floorplan of the castle, pulling it to the front of the table for all to see.

“If the girl is to be believed, then the most likely time of an attack would be during the summit. It is being held in the Northern Gallery beginning at six. The highest heads of the three title nations, along with her Majesty and his Royal Highness acting as the intermediaries, are all in attendance. As such, security will be focused here for the two hours the meeting is expected to last, leaving other parts of the castle comparatively vulnerable. Most likely, there will be an attempt to extract you from the Gallery and, by extension, the protection of the guards and Blades that will be present.

“This is where the credibility question arises, my liege. We’ve done sweep after sweep of the castle and referred to Sir Shiro’s mens’ accounts of the past several quintents’ activity but there is nothing amiss. Nothing out of the ordinary to suggest any such plot – no whispers in the corridors, no poisons, and there are no weapons permitted through Sir Shiro’s security check points at night when guests are enter the western wing of the castle.”

“Okay…” Keith nodded in time with the explanation. “So what are we doing with the information now?”

Kolivan sounded grim. “There are secondary measures we are in the midst of considering. First off, the possibility that the girl was lying. Information such as this is dangerous when the stakes are so high. For such a claim to be made, and she is rather very brave, or very well connected and was ordered to lie.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Shiro muttered, letting out a low groan as he slumped into the seat beside Keith. “My concern from the beginning has been that it just seems… too convenient. A critical witness comes forward the day before there’s a supposed attack? And there had been nothing on the Blade’s radar prior that even hinted towards something like this? I don’t know. I hate the idea of not acting because it may endanger his royal Highness, but what reaction are they hoping to elicit from us? I have a gut feeling they’re trying to get us to cancel the remainder of the ball and call off the summit, more than likely.”

The Queen laced her fingers together and sat up in her seat. “Possibly. I think it may be greater than that; if they sincerely believed we would call off the whole affair from one simple threat, there would
have been no ball to begin with. They could have sent threatening missives or leaked false information to our informants over the past several phebes if they wanted to try to inspire fear in us. Assuming the girl was lying, I think they’re trying to distract us from something else.”

At her command, Kolivan swiveled on his heel and marched to another table, shuffling around some documents until he returned with a large map, detailing the trade routes across the realm that fed into the country, and then into the capital itself.

“In light of these new developments, we broadened our search to look other loose ends in the Galra-Olkari conflict. There is a possible alternative explanation that may be worth considering.” Kolivan spoke as he splayed out a map was set on the table before him depicting the realm. Keith studied a dotted line that led between Puig and Marmora, with a point on a specific trade route circled in red ink.

“There’s a trading caravan to the northeast between here and Puig that was raided weeks ago. The merchants are fairly regular traders who have a predictable pattern of movement, making them, unfortunately, an easy target for robbery. They carried medicines, salves, several types of medical instruments, along with some of Puig’s healing ocean salts and some other raw materials – wool, flax, the like – and lesser gemstones. The primary item of interest was a haul of recently mined, unprocessed quintessence bearing crystals. Nothing of luxite quality, but valuable nonetheless.”

He pointed to the map before continuing, finger trailing north. “Our intelligence indicates that they were bandits who fled into the forests, here, veering north-northwest until running into this river.”

Keith’s eye trailed the length of the serpentine river that wrapped up and down the northern crest of the country, slithering ever-west until it emptied right into...

“Daibazaal.” He concluded, tone dark.

“That’s what we thought originally, but there has been no trace of any of the stolen materials in any of the black markets. It’s possible they were brought directly to one of the lesser warlords, but there is no way of knowing for certain.” The lines of Kolivan’s face seemed especially taut, probably due to stress. “There’s still another possibility. Given the current threat, we have been exploring the option that the bandits were never heading to Daibazaal in the first place. If that’s the case, they likely broke off the path here,” he pointed a few inches south of the river, indicating a nondescript patch of trees and dragging his finger due west. “And headed for Marmora.”

Scowling, the Prince studied the map for several seconds. “Why do we believe the raid to be connected with the current threat in the first place?”

Down the table, a book snapped firmly closed and Matt Holt grinned up at him. “I’m glad you asked! See, Koli here has asked me to look into the substances stolen, mostly for intelligence purposes. But I’ve found something that’s, ah, a bit alarming.”

Kolivan’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “Koli?”

Resisting the urge to rub his temples, Keith ignored that and urged Matt to go on. “And? What have you found?”

Matt blew out a long breath of air and leaned back in his chair, folding his hands over his stomach with a somber expression.

“Well, of course, the quintessence crystals were what I was initially interested in, but the grade and quality of their stocks suggested they were more suitable for just, like, enhanced jewelry, actually.
Nothing special. They could be shaped for weapons or ornamental things, like things to wear during a festival, but for the most part they’re just pretty rocks. I spent a fair amount of time looking into them because that seemed like the thing the bandits were actually after. When they didn’t show up on any of the markets, we wondered if they could be used for something else – well, turns out, they can! Once-upon-a-time, some shadier territories would crush them into a fine powder and mix them with some other inexpensive stuff and, well,” he cleared his throat with a look at the Queen. “Get super doped up.”

“What, like drugs?” Shiro asked, and Keith for the first time realized that some of this must be news for him as well.

“Not like drugs, Shiro. Just, drugs.” Matt replied patiently. “Shooting what is essentially unrefined, unstable quintessence straight into your system makes for one hell of a trip, apparently. Definitely fatal if you’re not careful, but that basically led us nowhere because dem Blade bois have already looked into it and couldn’t find any new drugs – or I guess, really, really old drugs – reported in circulation around, so rather the bandits used it themselves, which I find unlikely because, why steal all the rest of the merchandise?”

“Yes – and the point?” Kolivan pressed. Matt seemed very close to rolling his eyes, but decided to look at the ceiling instead.

“Hey, you try reading scientific texts in a complex foreign language and try to deduce potential threats from what you find. It’s so much fun.”

“Matthew,” the Queen sighed, and the young man ran a hand through his hair.

“Unless they’re trying to set up an internal civil dispute in Marmora by embedding the crystal powder in communities and letting the drugs wreck mayhem on the commonfolk… which, granted, is a possibility – people have killed for a lot less than drugs – I’ve switched gears, looking into the other substances. Buuuuuuuut, I haven’t really found anything yet. Puigian medical history is super weird, so that alone has taken a lot of time to just decipher what each thing is and what it does, and that’s to say nothing of what the substances can do when combined with other medications. So… I’m working on it.”

Keith tried to hide his disappointment that there wasn’t more evidence to go off of, but he had to credit Matt for his diligence. The Prince wondered if Kolivan shook him awake in the middle of the night to bring him to the Krel Beta room; something about the image was amusing, but not enough to break the tension Keith felt mounting between his shoulders.

“So our best theory at this point,” he spoke steadily, looking at the table. “Is that the information leaked to the girl was a lie to get us to react; rather we call off the remainder of the ball and the subsequent diplomacy summit, or we rise in preparation of the threat and we spread ourselves too thin while a possible group of bandits that may have infiltrated the city are planning… something. Possibly drug related, but we’re not sure.”

“That is correct, your Grace,” Kolivan replied, but he seemed to notice the unsatisfied look the Prince gave him. “Is there something else?”

“Are there plans in place in which the threat is deemed as credible? I don’t mean to say I’m in disagreement with the Queen, but if I’m going to have a target on my back for the next two days, I’d like to be prepared.”

Krolia winced, but her dark eyes full of a familiar fire – one he saw everyday in the mirror. “I know you are capable of protecting yourself. We will take every precaution to make sure you are not
harm if the threat proves true.”

Shiro still seemed unsure, and Keith felt a bit of guilt for their fight earlier. No wonder he’d been so worried about finding Keith safe and sound. “Your Majesty, if there is a real threat – ”

Raising a hand, the Queen’s expression softened. “This is not a matter up for debate. Where your men and women are a great source of strength for the kingdom, the Blade operates in a different mode – we seek information, and to that end, we have an advantage. If Keith is to be the possible target, then we know what to look out for. Ideally, we can catch Emperor Zarkon in the midst of this plot and use the pre-mediation as justification to finally invoke military intervention from the realm against Daibazaal, and finally, finally, we can put this conflict behind us.”

She turned to look at her son directly, and a sudden push of blind force surged in his chest, a strange flicker of warmth and wind – fire breathing in the air, and air burning through the flames.

“I understand.” Keith’s voice did not waver. This was the burden he was born to bear.

Firmly, the Queen nodded and stood from her seat. The rest of the room awkwardly scrambled to follow her suit dutifully, with the exception of Keith and Matt, who was so absorbed in his reading, Keith doubted he even heard the rest of the conversation.

“We are not canceling under any circumstances. The diplomacy meeting is one of our final chances to restore peace to the realm through negotiations alone, and we will not be baited by benign threats. The Galra need to know that Marmora cannot be bullied into submission, and sending our guests and our citizens into a panic when this could be nothing is the last thing I want. Covert operations from here on is of the utmost importance. Keith,” she was leaning forward over the table, both hands supporting her weight. Her head turned to him, unblinking. “You are to go about your business appearing as if nothing is wrong, but keep yourself keen to anything unusual around you. I don’t need to tell you to keep your weapon on you at all times.”

He nodded, tight-lipped, and she returned to address the rest of the room.

“If this is all to serve as a distraction, then we must keep all eyes and ears open for any hints that would suggest towards something greater that is going on. We will monitor criminal activity in the city and look out for any of this crystal-powder, although strange medicines or concoctions should also be treated with extreme scrutiny.”

“Matt,” she called with a wry smile, and the brunette’s head popped up and he blinked around, appearing confused as to why everyone was standing. “You are to stay here and continue reviewing the materials, and we have an expert en route to aid with the translations as well. They’ll be here in the early hours of the morning, and of course the library or anything else you may need are available to you, but I’ll have to ask you to remain here unless you absolutely must leave. I know it’s not exactly my finest moment as a host, but we’ll be in your debt.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Matt did a quick salute before returning to his book, brow furrowing in concentration almost immediately.

“Kolivan, please keep me informed if you learn anything new – and I mean anything. Have one of the Blades question the girl again, we need to see if she’s lying. Hold the soldier for questioning as well, though that will be mostly as a formality.”

Unsolicited, a memory from that morning floated to the front of Keith’s mind; it was Lance’s voice, whiny from being woken up on the subject of being escorted to the kitchens.
Can it be Shiro or Adam? They’re like the only knights I’ve met that aren’t super awkward. Your Blades are all standoffish and weird.

Keith almost laughed, but instead turned to his mother with a solemn expression.

“Mom, you should have someone else question the girl. A guard, maybe a female. If she thinks she’s being interrogated or in trouble, she might be more inclined to lie. Someone who might be able to relate to her.”

No one seemed to expect Keith to burst in with a suggestion, and his cheeks paled slightly under the sudden attention. His Mother smiled after a few seconds however, practically glowing with pride.

“A wonderful idea, my son. Do you have anyone to suggest?”

“Um,” Keith wracked his brain for the most immediate female guard he could come up with. “How about Plaxum? I trust her, and she’s pretty down-to-earth.”

Shiro rubbed his jaw while nodding. “That’s a good idea, actually. I was going to suggest acting as Keith’s personal guard again until the weekend is over just in case, so this would make a good reassignment for her. Plaxum is very capable, your Majesty.”

“Then that’s settled. Kolivan, seek out Plaxum and inform her of the necessary details only. Afterwards, please contact our informants nearest the Daibazaal borders and see if there’s been any strange activity amongst the combatant groups. Lack of fighting, or especially intense fighting, a missed shipment of supplies – anything that seems out of the ordinary.”

He straightened his posture and gave a firm tilt of the head. “It is done, your Majesty.”

“Shiro,” Krolia turned to Head of the Guard. “Per your suggestion, I’d certainly sleep better if you keep a close watch on Keith. Try to manage the guards best you can without informing them of the exact circumstances – we cannot let Emperor Zarkon know what we’ve found out. Have them patrol or post up in pairs, even if it means cutting into their breaks. Once the weekend is over I’ll offer them and their families double wages for the trouble, but this is too important to risk a slip-up just because we were underprepared.”

“Understood, your Majesty.” He said with a crisp salute.

The woman finally eased her weight off the table and held herself to her full height. “I will speak with King Alfor personally about the potential attack on the summit. While I do not wish for this information to spread, it would do our allies a disservice for them not to be able to prepare for the possibility of a threat. Were the roles reversed, I would never forgive a so-called friend that had the opportunity to inform me of something that could endanger my son’s life, so I owe it to Alfor to use the information I share with him to make an informed decision on how Altea will handle this development. That is all. You are dismissed.”

In a matter of seconds, feet were clambering over the marble floors and out the bolted doors, opening with an echoing clang in their brackets. There was a finality to the sound that settled eerily in the otherwise silent room.

Kolivan left immediately, and Shiro caught his eye and jerked his head – Keith had spent enough time with the knight to know this meant he would be waiting outside for him.

Matt was the only person left in the room beside Keith and his Mother, but that didn’t stop the Queen from sagging like a ragdoll whose strings had finally been released, pulling Keith against her with all her strength in a loving, almost desperate embrace.
“I am so proud of you. You are handling this so well,” she said with no small amount of sadness in her voice. “I’m so sorry this is happening during your party. I know in the past it’s just been bigots or madmen who send threats or try to break through crowds, but never like this, never from one of the other nations...”

Keith was already hugging her back, resting his forehead on her shoulder. “It’s not your fault. I’m sorry, too.”

She pulled back and brushed the hair from his face, eyes sharp. “I won’t let anyone hurt you, okay? I promise. I promise, I won’t. I already lost your father, I won’t let anything happen to you.”

His throat closed up, and he could only nod his head up and down. “I know. I love you, Mom.”

Again, the Queen held him tightly against her, running a hand over the back of his head and through his hair. “I love you too, Keith.”

They remained like that for several moments, and Keith felt another vice of emotion clasp over his heart, something reassuring and soft and safe, just like his mother’s hold. It was tender and protective and deep down, Keith knew that his mother was right. He would be safe. They would be fine. This wasn’t the first time he’s been threatened, and it wouldn’t be the last, but there was confidence in his thrumming pulse that told him this was not how he would go out.
"The Day After Your Birthday!" Day [P. 2]

Chapter Summary

In which, Lance is effortlessly charming, has Opinions™ about the upper-class, and makes a great wingman. Meanwhile, Keith must face the downside of falling for the most beautiful person at the ball: he's not the only one who wants to get their hands on the Blue Paladin.

Also featuring: Pidge as the cool gremlin, Shiro as the good big brother, Romelle as the fierce lesbian, Allura as the hopelessly pining princess, and Lotor and Adéla as the absolute banes of Keith's existence.

AKA, Saturday is a really long day.

Chapter Notes

the most self-indulgent thing about this fic is writing lance dressed up, because oh my god, he's fucking beautiful.

anyways, definitely need to credit some artists out there for providing a serious source of inspiration for lots of looks in this chapter! some of them are loosely based, like krolia's and allura's, while others are basically me falling in love with fan art and needing to see them come to life, like lance and romelle's, some of them I was unable to find the original posting for, so my sincerest apologies!

lance (artist conniethie / kiyomltsu on tumblr) // allura (artist moresquigglylines on tumblr) // keith's was a mixture of this corrin armor // (artist nemupan from tumblr) and this keith and shiro badass rpg look (by jinzillaa on instagram) // pidge (fucking vogue magazine i know what the fuck?) // krolia (artist unknown) // romelle (artist mermorelle on tumblr)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[KEITH]

What was he talking about?

Oh yeah. Dying.

Keith had already decided how he would die. He remembered it quite clearly, considering it was decided upon less than twelve hours ago: Lance McClain. That annoying smirk was going to be the death of him.

Well, that's what he was thinking about while he detached himself from the physical discomfort of
being brushed and groomed and dressed and coiffed by the staff assigned to making him look presentable for the evening. This time, Keith didn’t complain. He was feeling a little more motivated to look nice; he had a Blue Paladin to impress, didn’t he?

His hair had been brushed but otherwise lay in its usual style around his shoulders, but the real point of order came from Keith borrowing a leaf from Adam’s book – he decided to wear his military ceremonial regalia instead of a suit, much to the tailor’s dismay. The woman didn’t dare fight him on it, but it was clear that for all of the hard work she put into pinning his pants to go wasted, his decision irritated the her.

Oh well. Keith only had so many fucks to give, and the pants he was supposed to wear that night was getting none of them.

The Blades and the Guard had separate uniforms. Personally, he preferred the fit and feel of the Blade one, but the Guard one was certainly a better and more appropriate choice for the occasion. Soft curves of matte white metal covered his legs, most of his arms, torso and hips, constructing the outer layers of the “armor,” though it was clearly not intended for battle. Where his skin was not covered by the sharp white platemail, his garments were black and simple, running down his skin to his toes and even completely covering his fingers. Finally, and most important to the otherwise monochromatic ensemble, was the blood-red cape that clasped at his shoulder and hung over one part of his torso, billowing behind him all the way to the back of his knees.

His father’s cape. The King’s cape.

A large part of him had not really intended to wear it until after his coronation, if ever. His mother had insisted it was his when they announced his father as dead, and he could wear it as if he so chose, but the idea had never appealed to him. It didn’t feel like his; it was his Dad’s and wearing it was a little too much for Keith to bear. Tonight, however, in conjunction with the potential threat on his life, Keith not only felt drawn to don the heavy fabric, but to do so with pride.

The initial impulse had given him pause, something outside of himself that had tugged his attention in the cape’s direction, but when he pulled out the blood-red fabric, he felt the overwhelming urge to put it on. Perhaps it was just because the act was a nice, subtle fuck you to whomever amongst his guests was trying to kill him, but who’s to say? The fact of the matter was, this was his kingdom, these were his people. He couldn’t deny the throne, so he might as well face the threat with everything he has, everything he is – and he is his father’s son. May he never forget that.

Shiro’s face was pinched into something confusing when the Prince emerged from the dressing rooms, and he gave Keith a pointed once over that made him self-conscious.

“What?” He demanded.

The knight shook his head and smiled, gesturing with his head towards the western halls of the palace. “It’s nothing. I think the cape was a good choice.”

“I just figured, hey, if I do need to stab someone, it’ll be less obvious this way if I get blood on my clothes,” Keith replied, deadpan, and Shiro immediately looked stricken.

“You’re joking, right?” He tested, eyes narrowed at the young Prince.

Keith snorted. “What do you think?”

“I honestly don’t know,” he answered with a haunted look in his eyes that made Keith laugh in spite of the circumstances. If Shiro was going to be hovering all night long, they might as well make the
best of the situation.

After the opening night, the welcoming procession was less formal. The guests were each announced by the court herald upon arrival, but Keith didn’t have to welcome them one-by-one, thank god. His mother was waiting for him at the top of the stairs, and she went wide-eyed when her eyes found his. For the second time that day, the Queen pulled her son into a fierce, affectionate embrace and reminded him how proud she was of him. Keith’s heart felt fuller than it had in a very long time.

Queen Krolia stuck to black as the color of her choice, though the style of this gown was a little more reminiscent of the traditional “ballroom” style, pure obsidian at the top and lightened to a soft gray by the time it touched the floor in what must have been an annoying amount of tulle, at least in his opinion. The cut of the bodice was... well, to be perfectly honest, Keith would have preferred something a little more modest – this was his Mom. He could appreciate that she was in excellent shape and could afford to look good if she chose, but he wasn’t going to give it his seal of approval – not that she would ever ask. The Queen does what the Queen wants.

Anyway.

Her stupidly full skirt nearly tripped him twice going down the stairs, and she laughed at him both times. Keith wanted to snap at her that, because damnit, what if he fell down the fucking stairs in front of everyone? The anger in his expression seemed to make her only more amused.

The music was plenty loud enough as they descended that he whispered a quick, “Are you sure you’re not trying to kill me?” and she used her free hand to cover her mouth so she didn’t burst into laughter mid-descent.

People continued to trickle in for a good hour or so, and his Mother quickly left him on his own once Allura arrived. The Altean Princess looked every part her title this evening, traditional Altean materials fitted to her skin expertly with so many intricate details it was almost dizzying to look at. Her sleeves were floor length, along with the baby blue gown that was a composite of ruffles down the back in a train, but simple and smooth over the front. Her collar was almost as decorative as the crown atop her brow, with tiny gems in lain in the delicate fabric that fell into a series of sharp lines, sleek and emblematic of the iconic Altean style. Her hair was a cascade of white curls over one shoulder, framing a pointed ear and pale white drop earrings that floated down the exposed column of her throat.

Keith smiled and greeted her, and she looked especially pleased to see him tonight. She studied his outfit from top to bottom, even taking time to inspect the watch on his wrist, and nodded smartly in approval. She gave Shiro a similar greeting, oddly overjoyed to see the both of them.

They could delay dancing until the flow of arrivals slowed to a crawl, at which point there would no longer be any excuse to stand and watch. Keith was quietly regretting not returning to his room and asking Lance to come down on fucking time, because he was growing increasingly nervous and jittery waiting for the Blue Paladin to be announced.

“You look like such a grown up,” Allura teased quietly beneath the call of the herald as some who’s-who’s name rang out over the ballroom. Keith heard Shiro stifle a laugh, and the Prince considered aiming a kick towards the knight but decided against it.

Keith scrunched his nose. “And yet you treat me like a child. ‘Grown up.’ Who even says that anymore?”

“I do,” she beamed, unapologetic. “So how is your first full day of being eighteen suiting you, your Highness?”
He scoffed. “It’s the Day-After-My-Birthday Day, or so I’m told.”

“Oh? Dare I ask by whom?”

There was a lilt to her voice that made him scowl, so he decided to ignore her for the time being.

Lady Shay and Lord Rax were already present when he had arrived, and when the siblings spotted the Prince and Princess, they made their way over to greet them. Unlike yesterday, Keith hadn’t gotten to speak to Rax once, and his only interactions with Shay had been in a series of quick conversations when they danced.

Once they were near enough, a familiar head of auburn curls poked out around Shay’s leg, tiara and all.

“Hiii Prince Keith!” Tylivia greeted with a big smile, though it was missing a tooth or two. “Ohh, Akka, Akka! You look really, super pretty!”

“Aw, thank you dear,” Princess Allura answered, bending at the waist – how she managed such a feat with all that fabric pinning her down, Keith hadn’t a clue – and beckoned her forward. “Now let’s see you my little yuvarāti.” she held out her hands for Tylivia, which she accepted and took a few shy steps out from behind Shay. She was fucking adorable, of course – a poofy maroon gown with a crown of white flowers woven around her tiara, standing in stark contrast to her dark, thick hair which was braided down one side. Some smaller flowers poked between the folds of the braid, and she grinned while she showed herself off.

“Mr. Knight-Sir, do you think I look pretty?” She demanded of Shiro, who seemed surprised to be addressed directly.

“Yeah, Shiro, do you?” Keith crossed his arms, enjoying the opportunity watch him squirm.

Only a little red-faced, Shiro knelt and gave a nod. “Yes, Princess, you do look beautiful. Is there anyone you want to dance with tonight? Maybe… Prince Keith?”

Keith narrowed his eyes at the smarmy look on Shiro’s face. You fucker.

“Mmmm maybe, but I wanna dance with the nilaṭokaṭi, um, the blue person, the blue guy! He was pretty and – and Cousin Glidia got to dance with him yesterday but I didn’t. That’s not fair.”

“You mean the Blue Paladin?” Shiro said with false innocence. “You know, I heard that Prince Keith got to dance with him.”

Tylivia turned, practical stars in her big green eyes. “Really?!”

Shiro’s look of flawless victory made Keith very much consider punching him. He had to turn away because he couldn’t fucking bare the burning color in his cheeks.

“Yes, the Blue Paladin danced with many people,” Princess Allura swooped in to Keith’s rescue. “He is a very nice young man, Princess Tylivia. I think you would like him.”

Shay, meanwhile, was looking at Keith strangely. “Keith, how are you feeling? You look a little ill.”

“I’m fine,” he hissed, and when she looked unconvinced, she turned to Shiro.

The knight held up a hand, standing again. “He really is fine. He’s just got a bit of a –”

“Shiro I swear to god.”
“What a waste of a perfectly good swear,” a new voice supplied from behind him, and Keith felt a smack of shock hit him when he turned around.

“Wow, Pidge,” he blurted “Uh, nice look.”

“Thanks,” she smirked, adjusting her watch conspicuously. “I thought so, too.”

It was a— a— actually, Keith didn’t know what it was called. He later learned it was a jumpsuit, but name notwithstanding, it was very Pidge. Formal, but definitely not a gown, the thing was not overly-long for her short stature, which was a rarity in most of her clothing. It flared from her hips into something like slacks, while the top had a sleeved, comfortable fit that was paneled green and white. The styling of it actually reminded Keith of Allura’s sharp-lined Altean clothing to an extent, but it was still conventionally human. She didn’t do shit to her hair besides brush it – which Keith appreciated because, same – and her glasses still sat prominently on the edge of her nose. She looked much more comfortable, if not a hundred times more conniving, than she had yesterday in her gown.

“Wow, indeed. You look stunning!” Allura gushed automatically, bouncing on her heels before freezing. “Wait – how did Keith say it yesterday? I believe his words were, you look… terrible?”

The shorter girl snorted and rolled her eyes. “That’s the ticket. Thanks, Princess.”

“Whoa,” Tylivia murmured, pulling on Pidge’s pant leg. “You’re cool! Are you a boy or a girl?”

“‘Livia!” Shay admonished, and Rax ran a hand down his face. “That’s not very polite.”

“It’s fine.” Pidge shrugged. “‘Livia, is it?”

The girl’s head bobbed up and down, eyes wide as she studied Pidge with great focus.

“Let me ask you this – does the fact that you think I’m cool change if I’m a boy or a girl?”

She paused, face concentrated, but eventually shook her head.

“Then you can call me whichever you feel like. I’ll answer to both, or neither. Some people just call me a gremlin.”

At that, the little Princess giggled fondly and looked to Lady Shay, who still seemed distraught over the whole thing.

“Really, it’s fine,” Pidge insisted, flagging down a server to bring them all drinks. “I actually appreciate the bluntness of children on the topic. It’s easier to teach them that sort of thing doesn’t matter when they’re younger.”

“That’s very mature of you Pidge,” Shiro stated, probably intended as a compliment, but the gremlin in question shot him a look so fatalistic that Keith was certain it could kill lesser men.

The Prince just let out a little laugh and allowed his gaze to wander, accepting a cup of something sweet and sugary as the Grand Ballroom began to fill. It was nearing the maximum capacity at this rate, so he figured it was approaching the time to wish for a swift death on the dancefloor.

“My Lords and Ladies, I announce the arrival of the Lady Romelle of Altea, escorted by the Esteemable Blue Paladin, Castellan of – “

“No! I told you that’s not what it –”

“Shh!”
“But that’s *not* my title, we went through this yesterday old man!”

“Yes, people *were* starting to look. A lot of people, in fact. Much of the room quieted, a buzz of anticipation flittering over the gathering nobility. The long-awaited arrival of the mysterious, charming *Blue Paladin* was finally over. Even the music had softened to accommodate.

“*The Blue Paladin… and Lady Romelle?*” Shiro mused on behalf of just about everyone. “That’s unexpected.”

Keith didn’t hear a word of it. Judging by the look on Allura’s face, she didn’t either.

In their defense, um, a distraction just arrived. A… very, very distracting distraction that distracted them.

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[LANCE]

APPROXIMATELY 5 MINUTES EARLIER

“Alright then, let’s do this,” he murmured to himself after passing through the security check at the front gates.

Speaking with Blue verbally had just become a habit, and when he couldn’t, he had taken to talking to himself. Maybe a little bit of crazy person thing to do, but eh, no one knew who he was so it’s not like it particularly mattered.

He glowered across the length of the balcony, sizing up the old man who yelled everyone’s arrival. The herald, Lance was pretty sure they called him. And, okay, Lance had *sort of* bumbled his own introduction last time – he was put on the spot, alright? He just made up a bunch of stuff that sounded right… but that didn’t give this herald guy the right to do the same thing!

Lance took a deep breath, not wanting to walk in with a scowl on his face, and did a final once over of his outfit just to make sure all was well.

Whereas yesterday, Blue had decked him out in every shade of her denominated color, this outfit was practically the opposite, an understated ensemble of cream and light yellow accents. The Altean underpinnings of his heritage seemed to be more hinted rather than central this time, represented by the clean lines and perfect fit of the shirt and pants, but without the intricate paneling. The only disturbance in the crisp design was a yellow, misshapen “v” that emblazoned his chest, extending to the seams beneath his arms.

Delicate yellow hemming stemmed from the end of his full-length white sleeves, stretching over each of his middle fingers in a loop but leaving the rest of his hand exposed. A thin edge of that same
shade, like pale sunshine on a spring morning, accented his boots and lined the collar of his shirt, the
top of which peeked out beneath the snowy cloak that hung breezily around his shoulders.

The cloak was probably Lance’s favorite part about the outfit. It was made of an extremely fluid
fabric, a rippling cascade of light, soft threads that extended a few inches lower than his hips. Over
his shoulders, the ivory material was gathered into an asymmetrical mound just above his heart,
loosely clasped together by a large, golden crest, inscribed with a sharply cut replica of the same
irregular “v” that adorned his torso.

The geometric, cut-out “v” had made a prominent appearance on his garment yesterday as well; he’d
have to remember to ask Blue about the significance of the design when this was all over.

His hair was more-or-less unstyled, natural and soft slight waves. It was just the right amount of
unkempt that he liked.

Finally, and importantly, Lance ran his hand over the mask that sat over the bridge of his nose. It
was another masquerade-style creation, beautiful and similarly understated compared to the one Blue
had made for him yesterday. A compilation of creamy, soft whites and the pale, flaxen color of
wildflowers in the springtime, the stitching was simple and elegant. Bobbin lace hugged the top
curvature of the mask, arcing with each dip and peak, while the lower half the mask was lined by
delicate pearls that framed the bottom half of his eyes. Where his mask from the night before had
been mystifying and mysterious, this one was modest and tasteful, the mixture of white and gold
amounting to something almost... celestial. Simple, clean, light. Pure.

Alright. Yep. He looked pretty fucking good. Now, he was ready to get on with it... only, damnit,
Lance stopped again when he spotted a familiar head of blonde hair frowning over the ledge that
opened up to reveal the Grand Ballroom below.

“Romelle?” He said before he could stop himself, and she leapt in surprise, brow furrowing.

“You’re... the Blue Paladin? I – I’m sorry, I don’t believe we’ve met?” She fixed her face into a
smile that was so obviously false it made his heart twinge, but he accepted her hand politely, shaking
his head.

The mezzanine to the Grand Ballroom was bright, closer to the overhead chandeliers than the actual
ballroom floor, so it was easy to catch the bright glint of her blonde tresses as they spilled down her
back in two loose pigtails. The gown she wore was a soft, forest green with a sweetheart bodice,
accented by gossamer tulle of the same color that covered her bare shoulders all the way down to her
wrists, where they cuffed off into delicate sleeves. The skirt extended slightly as it tapered to her
ankles, and was tied off at her waist with a simple sash of darker green. Threaded into the gaussian
fabric along her torso and arms were real flowers, soft pastel pink and brilliant white blossoms,
leaves still attached, which elevated her appearance into something akin to a woodland goddess.

“Oh, no, uh,” Lance cleared his throat and focused his attention back to her face. “I – mean, sorry, no.
I heard your name... somewhere. I don’t know. You just, you looked upset. It’s definitely not
my business, but are you alright?”

“What? No, no, I’m fine.” She chirped right away, making the lie that much more bitterly obvious.
Her arms were crossed over her chest in a self-hug and she wouldn’t meet his eye.

Stepping up towards the edge so he could look out into the ballroom himself, Lance followed her
line of focus and spotted – with a little skip of his own heart, mind you – Princess Allura and Prince
Keith standing side by side, chatting with Shiro, Shay and her brother, whose name, for the life of
him, Lance could not remember.
“Ah.” He said with an understanding sort of sadness. “Listen, I’m sort of… friends with Allura. So I know about, you know, *you and her.*”

The girl’s eyes widened, her previously demure posture going ramrod straight. She met his gaze with an ice-cold glare, cheeks pooling with the color of embarrassment.

Lance put two hands up and tried to look as forbearing as possible. “Hey, hey, no judgement here, I swear. I’m basically super fucking gay for the Prince, so trust me, I *get it.*”

That seemed to be enough to convince her, because a few ticks later and Romelle was laughing, a vibrant sound that made Lance grin. He decided to use the conversational momentum to his advantage, leaning into her with a pointed *nudge-nudge.*

“You know, *I* saw a few dudes ask the Prince to dance after I danced with him yesterday. If he can dance with guys and no one made a big fuss about it, I’m sure there’s no reason you couldn’t dance with the Princess. *You* should ask her!”

“W-What, but, no, no. As much as I lo— um, *admire* the Princess, I could never. This is an important occasion and I don’t want to get in her way.”

“Get in her way?” Lance raised two brows, high enough that they were surely visibly above his mask. “Lady Romelle, excuse me if I’m overstepping, but I’d bet every fucking pence to my name that she would trip all over her words in her hurry to say yes to you.”

(Romelle didn’t need to know that Lance didn’t actually *have* a pence to his name for the bet to have the intended effect.)

The blonde was still very pink in the face, but her previously downturned lips quickly became a fierce, thin line. *Determined.*

He’d seen that face on her before, after he woke from the groggy haze of oxygen deprivation when he’d been attacked. She had been singing Allura’s praises for whooping that Galra’s ass and saving Lance’s in the process. It was hard to pinpoint the exact source of the change, but something fervid and impassioned overtook the young woman’s entire presence, and in both cases, it was when the subject came to Allura. Her eyes glimmered with fire, and Lance could only think this was a look that suited her much better.

“You know what?” One hand settled on her hip, the other displayed as a proud fist. “Fine. I’ll do it. You’re—you’re right. If Prince Keith can dance with whomever he pleases, then why shouldn’t she be reserved the same right?”

Lance did a little cheer and squeezed her shoulders. “That’s what I’m talking about! Oh, oh, I just had a great idea. Okay, they’re standing together right now, right?”

Conspiratorially, they poked their noses over the edge again and spotted the “couple” still standing in the same cluster of people. (He noted that Pidge had since joined them, but that wasn’t about to get in the way of his plan.)

“Here’s what I’m thinking—let’s go in together. You look awesome, I look awesome, if we arrive together and walk right up to them *both,* and ask them *both* to dance I swear they’ll both lose it. Quiznak, can you imagine? His Royal Highness is absolutely going to kick my ass for embarrassing him but it’ll be *so worth it.*”
Romelle looked appropriately scandalized, but the light in her eyes glowed only brighter with mischief and intent. After a moment’s hesitation, biting her lip, she nodded and offered Lance her arm. “Let’s quiznaking do it.”

And so they quiznaking did.

Following a not-so-smooth entrance, because that fucking herald messed up his introduction again. Lance shot Romelle a sly look as they both tried to keep equally cool facades once they reached the bottom stairs. At most, their faces were mild but otherwise unimpressed as they strode right the fuck up to Allura and Keith.

It was perfect.

Allura’s jaw was fucking hanging open. Keith’s cheeks were indistinguishable from the color of his cape and his eyes were wide, something between surprised and what Lance hoped was a bit starstruck. And if that wasn’t enough, Lance passed over him with only the most dismissive of glances, just because he knew it would piss him right off.

“Good evening, Princess Allura, Prince Keith.” Romelle curtsied and Lance gave a little bow, because oh, you better believe they were going to do this right.

Lance smiled to the others that formed a half-circle with the royalty. “I hope we’re not interrupting?”

Pidge looked like she was going to lose her fucking mind with the will to keep from laughing, and Shiro had to turn around to keep from outright giggling. For his part, Lance felt his own composure slipping just a little, a proud flicker of a smile threatening to overcome him. He stayed sane for Romelle’s sake only.

When no moved, no one so much as spoke a single word, Lance shrugged and gave Romelle a light smile. “I guess we’re not interrupting, then.”

“I suppose not,” she said with a thoughtful frown. Lance could feel her shaking slightly and gave her arm an encouraging squeeze. “W-Well, since we are not interrupting, if her royal Highness would permit it, I would be honored if I could have this dance.”

“Hey, I was going to say that!” Lance teased, but he kept his gaze trained on Keith, who had only turned impossibly redder. There was a lot of reasons it was Lance’s favorite color, and this? This was quickly becoming one of his favorites.

“So, what do you say, Prince Keith? Wanna dance?”

Out of the two royals, Princess Allura gathered herself first, flushed pink on every inch of visible skin. Her eye scales were barely visible against her cheeks as a result.


Lance unwound their arms as Romelle eagerly took the Princess’s outstretched hand, watching as they floated off towards the dance floor where people were slowly beginning to congregate for the first of the dances.

A little snicker broke through Lance’s carefully crafted mask, but he pursed his lips and forced himself to stay calm, his hand held out firmly, waiting. Keith’s eyes had gone from wide with surprise to adorably narrowed, evidently irritated like he was struggling to read the page of a book. They were little more than slits of dark irises, his black lashes curling prettily in on themselves in a
way that was no way fair but Lance was going to have to deal with it because he got himself into this mess.

Quite abruptly, however, yet another royal burst into the scene and demanded Lance’s attention, nearly knocking him over as she bulldozed right into his legs.

Princess Tylivia was bouncing and grabbing for his hands. “Oh, it’s you! I was waiting! Can we dance, can we dance? Please?”

Well, so much for Lance’s plan. Mullet was just going to have to wait his turn, because this was definitely more important.

“Why, of course. I would be honored to dance with a Princess! And your name is Tylivia, is that right?” He bent over so she could take his hands, only to let out an undignified noise of surprise when she practically dragged him down, thrusting her weight into his arms to be carried instead. Lance just laughed and let out a well-meaning sigh, picking her up automatically. Children had flocked to him for as long as he could remember, and Lance knew he was weak to deny them.

Shiro, apparently, had finally regained enough composure to address the situation. Pidge was leaning into the Prince’s ear to whisper something. Shay and her brother had been drawn away from the conversation by an Olkari that Lance recognized but could not name.

“You know, Princess Tylivia, it’ll be awfully hard for the Blue Paladin to dance with you if he has to hold you.” Shiro pointed out.

This realization seemed to dawn on her slowly but surely, brow deepening as the ticks went on. “I wanna dance,” she decided, scrunching her nose as she switched to her Princess-manners. “Can I be put down, please?”

Lance could barely keep from laughing at the sudden politeness of her request, stealing a glimpse at the Prince whose coloration had finally returned to its normal, pasty pale that Lance somehow found irresistible.

“Rain check on that dance, your Highness?” Lance asked with an arched brow.

He barely heard the responding “fine,” because Tylivia was already tugging Lance to the dance floor with the strength of a grown adult (seriously, what the hell are they feeding this little girl?). Lance managed to shoot his friends a quick wave and a smile before they were lost to the crowds.

There was something oddly… heavy in the air of the dance floor, now beginning to crowd with pairs. Perhaps he was just being paranoid, but Lance swore he could feel the weight of dozens of eyes on him as Tylivia led them out. He caught several people staring openly, and while he looked away after only a glimpse of each of them, it made his heart beat a little frantically in his chest.

A sheep in wolf’s clothing is still a sheep, he supposed.

No, he wasn’t being paranoid, was he? A few more glances told him that these nobles were indeed sizing him up, their looks ranging from those of mild curiosity to outright sinful hunger.

In a sense, Lance supposed he should be flattered. He wasn’t.

The attention of strangers and the attention of Keith were not the same thing. Luckily, Princess Tylivia made for a cheerful distraction, and she helped him to relax.
Par for the course, she was too young to really know how to dance – which only made it cuter in Lance’s opinion when she shyly asked if she could stand on his shoes. He obliged, pulling her weight into the air by her wrists and eliciting a thrilled little shriek as her feet settled back down on top of his.

“This okay?” He asked, turning more or less in place. There wasn’t really a better way to dance with someone less than half his height.

She nodded so vigorously her tiara almost flew off, and Lance couldn’t help but chuckle.

“I can call you Blue?” She quizzed, and Lance barely finished nodding before she had her next question ready.

“Okay. Are you a Prince, Blue? Or a lord, or what?” She pushed some hair out of her face, looking surprisingly shrewd in anticipation of his answer.

“Nope,” he said, popping the ‘p’ sound. “None of the above. Why do you ask?”

This answer seemed upsetting, though not surprising to the little princess. “Talli and Taṇḍri say I have to grow up and marry a Prince or a Lord when I’m older.”

“Well, that’s not so bad, right?” Lance mused. “Some Princes are nice.”

“Like Prince Keith?”

Lance snorted. “Sure, like Prince Keith, but between you and me, he has a bit of an attitude problem.” He whispered the last part, which sent her into a fit of giggles while Lance twirled them around.

“But anyway, Prince Keith might be a little old for you, niña. I’m sure there’s lots of other nice Prince’s out there that are closer to your age. And I’ve met lots of Lords. Some of them were really nice.”

She seemed unsatisfied, but nodded anyways. “I guess. Do you have to marry a Princess or a Prince when you’re older?”

Lance bit his lip, amused but feeling increasingly homesick as he got caught up in the conversation. Tylivia could be a shoe-in for his nieces, spunky at some moments and adorably shy at others.

She tugged on his hand when he stopped swaying. “Blue?”

“I don’t have to marry anyone unless I want to,” he said softly, resuming the rhythm though the song sounded like it was nearing its end. “I’m lucky like that.”

“Hmm.” The Puigian considered this information like it was treasured advice, and Lance found himself chuckling. The girl was inquisitive, that was for sure. “How do you pick someone then?”

Lance squeezed her hands, and she shook her head in protest to the slight tickle. “Hmm. I haven’t thought much about it. I would probably just marry someone I really care about. You should too, if you can.”

“What about, if you… aww.”

Mid-question, the music definitively drew to a close and she shuffled her weight back off his shoes. A bit meekly, she held her hands behind her back and swung her weight from side-to-side. “Was this
okay? I don’t like dancing that much… but everyone wants to dance with you so I thought I would try. Did you like it?”

“Are you kidding? That was way better than just okay,” Lance insisted, patting down her hair but taking care not to jostle her elaborate tiara-and-flower combo. “If you want, before you go to bed, we can dance again, okay? Just come find me.”

Her eyes lit up as she craned her neck, her toothy-smile bright under the dazzling overheard lights. “Really?! You mean it?!”

“Of course, just – oh,” he was interrupted by a hand at his shoulder, surprised to find it attached to another, much larger Puigian that was really more muscle than man. He wore an elaborate toga-style robe that crisscrossed his torso, accented by a well-groomed beard that was braided into three smaller sections. Lance did not overlook the magnificent, significant ivory crown that sat nestled atop his brow.

“Excuse me.” The man was smiling, for which Lance was grateful. He was all kinds of intimidating. “I see my little girl has grown attached to you, Blue Paladin. I apologize if she was a bother.”

Lance waved a hand while the Princess pouted, running up to her father and clinging to his leg. “Nu-uh! Blue said I’m a good dancer, Taṇḍrı! And, and, he said he’ll dance with me again later if I want. Can I?”

Puig’s King sent Lance a very Dad look and, were Lance not an uncle himself, he might not have appreciated it. It was skepticism, exasperation, amusement, and a sigh all in one: kids. The teen just shrugged and smiled, hoping to convey nonverbally that he really didn’t mind.

“We’ll see,” the King conceded. “Now how about you dance with your old Taṇḍrı? We should try to get your Tallı jealous, hmm?”

Again, the man sent Lance a grateful smile before leading his daughter out towards the fringe of the crowds, presumably where her mother must be. Lance scarcely had time to put his hands in his pockets and smile wistfully at their retreating forms before someone else was tapping his shoulder.

Someone who was not Keith.

He tried not to be disappointed when the woman, a wickedly tall Galra, Duchess of Something, asked him to dance. There weren’t any restrictions on him having fun with people who didn’t have a mullet, so he tried to shake off the latent negativity. A small pulse from the corners of his consciousness reminded him that Blue had every confidence in him, was with him, wanted him to be happy. Accordingly, a rush of cooling composure spread from his chest down to his fingers and toes, and with renewed enthusiasm, Lance accepted the girl’s hand and laid on the usual McClain charm.

He learned pretty quickly that rich people were a different breed entirely. A weird but fascinating, if not frequently intolerable, breed.

They were upturned noses, toxic overconfidence, and callus sneers. Interestingly, they all had very soft hands and beautiful faces, but he supposed they didn’t work with their hands and had the finest make-up money could buy, didn’t they? Lance made sure to be particularly careful with some of the thinner, smaller women – humans especially, but even many non-humans – who had squeezed
themselves into corsets that were so tight he wondered how some of them could breathe.

Rachel’s first boyfriend broke up with her because she was gaining weight – so the guy claimed, anyway. To Lance, he couldn’t tell any difference in her appearance, but he guessed the objectivity of the issue was of no consequence because the blow to her self-confidence was very real and had stayed with her for many years. Those sorts of things can really change you; he remembered Rachel crying when she was pregnant with her first son as her body became a canvas for stretch marks. She worried that Tony wouldn’t love her anymore, that she was unsightly.

So call him a bleeding heart if you want, but Lance made it a point that, with each woman he danced with who squeezed their way into their 15-inch waisted gowns, he did his damned best to engage in intellectual conversations with each of them. They were all plenty smart, so it wasn’t exactly hard – just about every person in that entire wing of the palace plenty of private education to ensure that. It was for this reason that, with complete honesty, Lance was able to give them his thanks for being an interesting person to speak to in addition to being a pretty face,

Men were noticeably different, too, though in generally more unpleasant ways. Simply put, they were touchy. Now, Lance himself was usually a happy recipient of affection; for commonfolk, a passing touch or bump didn’t really mean anything – you ran into people, literally, all the time at market or in a tavern when you moved to your table or down the bar. Lance tackled Hunk before and got his head smacked by Madam Garrett at least a dozen times. Sometimes you’d nudge someone in the ribs, other times you’d accidentally step on their toes. It happened, but they were casual touches, fleeting things that didn’t meant anything. Here, every touch meant something – they were more often than treated as entitlements. Something that they took without asking.

Women, for the record, were just about as liberal with their expectations that he would do and be whatever they wanted, but to Lance it just stuck out more with men. The power dynamic was just all the more obvious when it was larger, stronger hands that were gripping and pulling.

As the night drew on, Lance managed to shake the felt paranoia of eyes burning holes into him for the most part. He was still aware of it, but the sense of discomfort became a background pitch under the more pleasant fanfare of laughter and conversation. He let himself become Blue a little more intentionally, his confidence brimming with her presence running over and through him.

It wasn’t until after he concluded a dance with a particularly… persistent Arusian that Lance was finally relieved of his Mullet deprivation.

Also, he would vehemently deny until his dying breath that that particular thought ever crossed his mind. Mullet deprivation? Really, McClain?

The Arusian spotted him about as their dance neared its end. They had been in the middle of their monologue, in which they had been making absolutely sure that Lance was aware of their important political clout and their ample fortune besides, trying to convey how well they could take care of someone, if someone so happened to be looking.

“Good evening, Master of Coin Fuhbar,” said a voice behind him, filled with familiar fire that had Lance’s heart beating again; he wasn’t entirely sure when it had frozen over in the first place, but he could tell the moment the icebox began to thaw. It took only a few words from that stupid, dumb, perfect voice.

“Keith?” Lance replied stupidly, like it was his best guess for an answer to a trivia question.

“Hi, Blue. I was wondering about that dance.”
The Arusian, apparently named Fuhbar, looked from Lance to Prince Keith in mild frustration before bowing and quickly puttering away. The song hadn’t even officially ended yet, but that didn’t seem to deter him.

The Prince had slid his hand over Lance’s and gave his fingers a light squeeze. “Come on.”

Nodding, Lance had a half tick to gather himself before the Prince, without warning, began to practically drag him away from the dance floor and down to one of the lesser ballrooms on a lower level. He let out surprised yelp and a choke of laughter because, of course Keith didn’t just want to dance when they were already in the middle of a dance floor. That would have made too much sense.

The Prince seemed to have absolutely zero regard for others as he stormed through the rooms and up and down staircases, and Lance tried to send an apologetic look at anyone who was unlucky enough to get in his way. When they finally came to a stop Lance was pretty sure they were in a smaller ballroom that was nearby to the terrace on the third floor, but there were so many ways to get up and down this part of the castle Lance really wasn’t sure.

Finally, Keith stopped once they were sufficiently tucked into the smaller crowd of people and to face Lance directly, and, oh boy.

Oh, boy.

Keith was giving him that look.

The same look he’d given Lance when he had sat back over his hips after kissing him senselessly into the floor of his bedroom, the dark, critical scrutiny of his gaze smoldering and wanton -- quiznak, that was hot -- and now, to see it again so abruptly just about sent him into cardiac arrest.

Gods, he hadn’t gotten to properly appreciate how good Keith looked before when he was ambushed by a certain Puigian Princess. The armor sat over his trim figure exceptionally well, hugging his chest, arms and legs in a way that accentuated his lean muscles rather than made him look unnecessarily bulky like some soldiers’ wares were known to do. Beneath the flat white platemail, there were gaps in which a smooth, velvety black fabric hugged his body like a second skin. And, of course, there was the shock of scarlet that was the cape half cresting his torso, elevating him from looking just like a very stupidly handsome, mullet-sporting soldier to something greater, someone powerful.

Which made the next moment that much sweeter, because Keith looked like he could conquer empires with that look in his eyes when, instead, a delicate thumb came to brush over Lance’s cheek, the pad of Keith’s gloved thumb just barely grazing the bottom of the mask. Holy quiznaking hell did the fabric of that black undersuit feel amazing on Lance’s bare skin, like silk or satin but strangely supple and so rich. Honestly, Lance had no idea how to describe the material, but he couldn’t care less about the specifics because the moment was so achingly tender Lance couldn’t resist but to lean into the touch, forgetting himself for just a few ticks.

Keith still hadn’t spoken a word yet, not until they were close enough to breathe each other’s air, and Lance had to wonder if his own heartbeat was really that loud, crashing like thunder above the delicate orchestral accompaniment, or if it was just in his head, a side-effect of the addicting sensation of Keith’s hands on him.

“Are you okay? You looked really uncomfortable back there.”

Fuck, Lance was so weak. Weak, weak, weak. When he had Romelle by his side, he had managed
to pull off that cheeky stunt earlier and now he was one-hundred percent paying for it, blushing and feeling like his lungs were working overtime just to compensate.

Lance didn’t think he could speak without his voice cracking, so he just nodded his head, snickering a little when the texture of Keith’s gloved palm tickled his face slightly.

Quite suddenly, Lance was struck by a desire he’d never experienced before, an intense and sudden wonder as to how that black fabric would feel if Keith had moved his fingers just a little higher, over Lance’s eye scales. Honestly, he didn’t know why the thought even occurred to him in the first place – his left mark never been particularly sensitive to any touch before – but now that the idea was there he could scarcely think about anything else. But there was something… well, *erotic* about the idea, so he decided *not* to ask Keith to indulge him. It almost caused him physical pain to resist the temptation.

*Not now. Maybe later.*

The Prince gave him another moment to collect himself before adding his other hand to the side of Lance’s face, and both of Keith’s eyes fluttered close. He rested his forehead on Lance’s, and the shorter of the two (by an inch, *only one inch!* only one inch!) felt his cheeks flush crimson. Well, if Keith wasn’t going to give a shit about people seeing them in such a compromising position, then Lance certainly wasn’t about to complain.

When the Prince finally *did* speak, it was less than words and more of growl, the composure he’d been exhibiting for Lance’s benefit finally slipping away. He pulled back to look at Lance properly. “God, Lance, do you have *any idea* what you do to me?”

Barely managing to resist the urge to shiver, Lance tried to focus on how Keith felt like a personal space heater and it was very much a welcome change at the moment. “W-What do you mean?”

Keith let out a laugh – it was more of an exasperated puff of air, really – and finally pulled back, just enough to take one of his hands and for his other to rest heavily on Lance’s side. He felt hyperaware of every move, every muscle, every twitch, every brush of fabric over his body – particularly that point just above his pelvic bone, where Keith’s thumb lazily kneaded into his skin.

“I might need you to show me how to get one of those masks, because if I have to go another night like this I’ll lose my fucking *mind*. I can’t stand it – the way people look at you, the way everyone looks at you. And then, some of them, putting their *hands* all over you.”

Lance pulled back and began to playfully smooth down the Prince’s hair like he was an angered kitten. “You’ve been dancing with other people all night too, you know. Remember, there are literally *dozens* of people lined up to dance with you, all the time. *All* the time.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Keith said with a pout, which tipped Lance off that he wasn’t deeply upset so much as just annoyed. “I don’t want to dance with them. Just you.”

Ignoring the pitiful way his heart fluttered at Keith’s declaration, Lance tried to redirect his attention to something else that wouldn’t end up with him being a flustered mess. He could already feel his cheeks tinting pink.

“Um, by the way, I like your… armor?” Lance spoke it like a question, and Keith looked down to inspect himself before nodding, confirming Lance’s assumption. “Right, armor. It’s really… you look like a King. It’s pretty hot.”

Keith snorted, but he was smiling and seemed less grumpy. How had it only been vargas since
they’d seen each other? Quiznak, it felt like quintent, at least.

“Hey, so…” Lance leaned forward, tipping his head up just slightly to whisper in Keith’s ear. “I really need to talk to you and the others about the watches. I’ve found out some really important stuff. Is there a time that would be good?”

Keith breathed in, slow and deep, the rise of his chest and their current proximity causing it to brush against Lance’s own, dig the crest keeping his cloak in place a little bit into his heart.

“I don’t know. There’s been some… developments with my, er, guards and Blades. Not sure about the others, but we can talk about it tonight?” He asked, a hopeful note to his tone that Lance did not miss. The tan-skinned teen pulled back with a sly smile and, seizing his courage, sent the Prince his best, most outrageous wink.

For the record, Lance had no specific intentions for what any of their occasional innuendos meant, but he did know it made his blood run south whenever the subject was brought up. Really, he did it to himself – he was the one who let that damning tease slip in the forest. Yes, he had been absolutely, undoubtedly, putting on a front to try to suave his way into Keith’s heart – whatever that meant at the time. Now, it made Lance wonder where Keith’s thoughts would go each time.

If the responding dig of his thumb into the thin skin at Lance’s hip was any indication, then he was both terrified and thrilled to find out.

“That scene you made earlier with Lady Romelle, by the way?” The Prince mentioned after a brief pause, amused. “I’ve never seen Princess Allura act like that, you guys really – really got her good.”

Lance poked a finger against Keith’s sternum, scowling. “We got you both good and you know it!”

“What is your problem with my herald, by the way? He’s nice.” The Prince said with raised brows.

“Nice?!” The teen had to scoff and point his chin the other way. “No, no way. He’s old and incompetent, sorry your Highness, but you need to get a replacement ASAP. I at no point even mentioned a lion and he got all ahead of himself saying I was a casteallean, like, what does that even mean?”

The second-half of Lance’s joke ended up lodged in his throat as he watched the Prince laugh openly, mirthfully, as though there were nothing better in this world than this moment. He could only think of one thing that would make it better, but Lance wasn’t willing to risk ruining what they already had. Taking off his mask would undo all of this. He knew it was for the best this way, at least for now.

They finished the dance too soon, and Lance whined when Keith unslotted their bodies. All of their rough edges and frayed threads just seemed to fit together so nicely, and Lance couldn’t help but feel like he was doused in cold water the moment they weren’t touching. He understood intuitively that it was a part of being bound to Blue, so it wasn’t that he was unhappy or uncomfortable – the cold never bothered him, not really – it was the idea that Keith was so warm that Lance wanted to burn himself a dozen times over if it meant he could chase the fire that radiated from the Prince’s skin. They couldn’t be close enough for long enough for the chill to be chased away, and he felt the cold air over every inch of his exposed skin when someone strolled up to Keith and asked him to dance.

Lance wasn’t long without a dance partner of his own, but they were tepid, lukewarm substitutes for the real thing.
Keith didn’t *mean* to lose track of Shiro.

Seriously. He didn’t.

It seemed like something he would do on purpose, but this time was different. Storming off with Lance in tow wasn’t something he had been planning, and ending up on an entirely different floor was certainly not what Keith intended.

But, here he was, Shiro-less. Shit.

All he could think about was Lance flush up against him, stupid handsome boy with his stupid pretty, dark skin and stupid robes that made him look like a fucking *angel*. Stupid. Fucking really, who does Lance think he is? How dare he look so fucking good and be so fucking far away at any point. Unacceptable.

Unrelated, but Keith deemed himself not in a fit state to be forced to tolerate strangers, and after concluding his second dance since parting with the *Blue Paladin*, the Prince gifted himself five minutes to go to the bathroom, splash his face with a little cold water because gods did he need to cool off.

Yes, the thought of being murdered by passing strangers on his way there did occur to him, but Keith was confident in the Blade’s intel. If there was a plausible threat, it wouldn’t be enacted until the next night, so Keith didn’t need to be quite as careful.

And you know, all things considered, the Marmoran Prince thought he was handling things pretty well. Between the very real possibility that the Galra Empire was trying to kill him, and the small temptation to turn some of guests into eunuchs when he saw the way they sleazily ran their hands over Lance, Keith hadn’t done anything too rash. Maybe cutting in the middle of someone else’s dance – an ally, no less – was a tad extreme, but Lance looked so uncomfortable, Keith couldn’t bare to just stand there and watch.

With the recent exception, Keith was feeling very… well, not exactly calm, but that was close. More like… *sure*. The reach of his senses had extended beyond what he would have considered normal, and he was now tuned to the point of awareness where he could be nothing *but* sure, because he was picking up on everything without even thinking about it. There was no headache like he might have feared with apparent sensory overload, just clarity. Simple, self-assured *clarity*.

If he wanted to count the freckles over Lance’s nose, now he was sure he could without straining his eyes. If he wanted to listen for Shiro’s tell-tale footfalls, greaves muted due to his very specific gait, no problem, he could pick it out in so long it was near enough.

Don’t get him wrong. It wasn’t like he had super senses – it was more like, the potential limits of his senses were all on their absolute sharpest. He would compare it to an intense, inexplicable sort of focus that, praised be, he didn’t fucking need to *yield patience* to experience. At least not as consciously.

The possibility that this was connected to the whole “Red Paladin” business did not escape him; indeed, the thought occurred to him no sooner than he was quite certain it had *everything* to do with the watch that sat over the delicate black fabric of his undersuit. The watch which, miraculously, had
not so much as caught against the fabric despite its extremely sharpened edge. Weird magical
timepieces and weird intuitive awareness. Magic is weird.

Some things don’t make sense. He guessed that was okay, considering in his world, Lance was one
such example.

Keith sighed as he turned the corner that fed back into the nearest ballroom, scarcely even in the door
before partygoers were upon him like crows.

A particularly sharp, demanding voice pushed its way to the front of Keith’s ambush, and it ended up
belonging to an older Altean woman, her fuchsia hair striking against her very golden gown. She
stood steadfast at the front of the half-circle that formed around him, smiling and waving
magnanimously, and Keith had no choice but to offer her the usual bow of thanks and tried not to
pull a face when she began to push a young woman along, right into his personal space.

And so began the inevitable pandering.

“Your Highness, it is such a pleasure to meet you in person! The entire ball is a spectacle, thank you
so much for inviting us. I know you’re very busy, but I think you might find my daughter Adéla to
be a wonderful dancer and partner. Would you indulge this old mother’s heart and perhaps accept an
offer to give her this next dance?”

“Um.” Keith found the introduction a little odd – usually when parents forced their children upon
him, it wasn’t in such a cloyingly sweet way – but he just did his best to try to appear
accommodating and nodded. “The pleasure is mine, of course. Forgive me but names are not my
specialty – Lady Adéla, and Lady…?”

This seemed to annoy the woman, though momentarily. The flash of an ugly grimace made her
beauty mark twitch before smoothing back into an easy smile.

“Hira. Hira Valurian, your Highness.”

Ah. The Prince was glad he’d not actually taken Adéla’s hand yet, because he was pretty sure he just
balled his own hand into a fist with bone-crushing force.

“You’re the Valurians.” His voice sounded far-away, like at the long end of a tunnel. Somehow, he
was surprised. These people were supposed to be here, Keith knew that, and yet seeing Lance’s aunt
in the flesh and blood was something like a knife twisting in his stomach, but the blade was white-
hot and cauterized the wound immediately.

“–es, my daughter here is my eldest and will inherit to the largest part of my late husband’s fortune. I
have another daughter a bit closer to your age, however, if you find yourself looking for another
partner to dance with. Adéla here is twenty-six years young, can play piano, lute, piccolo and flute.
She’s fluent in –”

It was more than a little difficult for Keith to focus on what she was saying, seeing as he was literally
unable to care at all about whatever impressive notches the young woman had under her
metaphorical belt. To Lady Adéla’s credit, she looked a bit uncomfortable with the situation, but she
was masking it fairly well. Her eyebrows were what gave her away, pinched in spite of her flawless
composure otherwise.

The sooner this was over, the better. Keith cut the older woman off mid-sentence, a rude gesture in
which he found great pleasure just this once. “Right, great. Could I have this next dance, Lady
Adéla?”
With a small smile and accompanying nod, the younger woman reached a hand out for Keith to take. As it was, she was as delicate as a paper rose, and perhaps just as lovely by most standards – just an inch taller than him with blonde, fully-bodied curls and softly tanned-skin that was probably a shade or two lighter than her cousin’s. Her cheeks were accented by violet geometric marks, and her ears were pointed and pierced with several shiny accessories. If Keith were not repulsed by the idea of doing anything besides holding her hand and waist, she would probably fit the rather conventional expectations of an attractive partner.

She spoke to him in a well-trained, soft-spoken voice once Keith escorted her all the way to the center of the ballroom, and she launched into her predictable monologue. It opened with an anecdote that was very obviously false, or at least a far stretch of the truth from the reality of the situation.

Keith was trying not to groan and roll his eyes the entire time.

“Your Highness?” Adéla’s voice fell a little flatter than before, and she pulled back to better see his expression. “Are you alright? Forgive me, but, you seem… distracted? Upset, mayhaps?”

That’s one word for it.

“Thank you for your concern, but I am alright.” The Prince lied easily, deciding to use the opportunity to his advantage. One of his primary dealings was in information, after all. “I was actually just trying to remember why your family’s name seemed so… immediately familiar. There was an incident at the castle on Monday involving your… cousin?”

Her jaw tightened and posture stiffened slightly, but she did not miss a step in their dance. Keith tried to do his best to remain impassive.

“Ah. Yes. Cousin Lance – I assure you, his surname is not Valurian. Lance McClain. I apologize if he upset you or your guests in anyway, your Highness. He is a bit of a… he can cause trouble.”

“What happened to him was not his fault,” Keith bit back. He cleared his throat when Adéla visibly winced. “Ahh... er, no, I mean to say, it wasn’t any trouble. One of our guests behaved...” Like a worthless, spineless excuse of a Galra who preys on people when they’re alone and lost. Like a disgusting fuck of a military official, deserving of a punishment far worse than being forced into holding until the weekend was over. “…with a gross disregard for basic respect. We are deeply apologetic that your cousin got hurt, and hope you and your family did not suffer from any added stress.”

She let out a pitchy giggle, and Keith could barely stop from cringing.

“All he does is cause Mother stress, your Highness, but I do appreciate the concern. We are just glad you didn’t rescind the offer to attend this evening for his miscarriage of civility. Sneaking into the castle, seducing a Galran official? We are grateful you didn’t punish him.” She sighed, like this conversation was extremely redundant for her.

“You must forgive us, your Grace. Cousin Lance has received no proper education in academics or etiquette. Plus, he is a half-breed, so his tendency for the indecent is… to be expected.”

Oh?

The Prince stilled. “You know I’m a ‘half-breed’ too, right?”

“Oh but you’re different, your Highness,” she dismissed the blatant contradiction without batting an eye. “My cousin was born to a peasant woman and a deserter, so his mixed heritage is more… hmm, symbolic, you could say, of his nastier fate. Poor Lance, he never really had a chance with those
odds. But, you, you are of noble – excuse me – of royal birth! It’s entirely different.”

The force with which Keith had to keep himself from snapping was enough to move mountains, shift tectonic plates, unleash fissures in the goddamn earth because – because what? It made him feel physically ill to remember that Lance had defended his cousins from Keith’s offer to have his aunt arrested.

No, she has daughters who need her.

Keith wondered what his expression might have looked like. Considering the way Lady Adéla’s face drained of color, it was probably not very welcoming.

And then, Keith heard his fucking voice, and he actually scared himself a little. “Is that so?”

He didn’t even know he had the capability of sounding like… like that. It was quiet and dark, laced with venom. Each poisonous cadence dripped from the syllables with delicious satisfaction.

“Because from where I am standing, Lady Adéla, the only thing that is nasty is your blatantly racist, purist rhetoric. I am disturbed to hear any one of my citizens could harbor such beliefs. We are a proud nation, proud of our diversity. Perhaps you hold Marmora in as low regard as you hold your cousin? Is it only half-humans that you find so disgusting, or is it all half-breeds? Please, tell me.”

“I – I,” she looked horrified. Good. “N-no, my apologies, your Highnesss. I didn’t mean – I simply t-thought… Mother said t-to apologize for Cousin Lance if… please, let us forget I said anything.” Her lips thinned shrewdly, eyes low. “I sincerely did not mean you or the country any offense. I don’t know – didn’t know… I was merely told to say what I thought you would want to hear.”

Honestly, Keith had figured as much. Still couldn’t say he was sorry for a word of his response, but judging by the fact that neither Lance nor Hunk had hardly ever mentioned the cruelty of his cousins, he assumed this brainwashed young woman was just a proxy for her mother’s own fucked up brand of despotism.

A voice interrupted the tense silence a few measures before the song was due to end.

“Keith! There you are.”

It was Shiro, the knight weaving through the crowd of dancers towards him, his full-armor clanking obnoxiously over the gentle strings and soft woodwinds.

Expression carefully blank, Keith waited until Shiro was near enough that he wouldn’t have to shout. “Here I am.”

Keith said a brief ‘thank you’ to whatever higher beings might be looking over him that had put Shiro into his life. The man was practically a bloodhound to sensing Keith’s distress and pulling him out of the situation when appropriate.

Then he quickly cursed those same gods for crafting Shiro into such a disaster of a human being, his voice a furious whisper. “Excuse me, Miss, I need to have a word with the Prince. It is urgent.”

The young woman frowned and nodded as she stepped away. Her bright eyes were dimmed by disappointed, and she murmured a quick word before Keith was led away.

“I – I am sorry. There was no excuse for what I… I’m sorry.”

She disappeared, off to find her mother no doubt.
“Keith, where have you been? You can’t just do that! I turned away for one minute and you just disappeared.”

“Shiro, I’m fine. Relax.” He instructed calmly, holding up a hand and making a demonstration of taking a deep breath, making a beeline for the perimeter of the room where they could speak more easily. “I just needed to take care of something and got a little turned around.”

The many furrows in Shiro’s brow lessened slightly, but his voice was still somber. “Well, as long as nothing happened… What was that about, anyway?”

“It’s my fault, I know with the… circumstances…” Keith’s voice trailed off, which seemed to placate the knight well enough. “And don’t worry about it. Just learning a little more about my citizens each day.”

Shiro pursed his lips but decided not to ask, for which Keith was grateful. The Prince sighed and looked around the room for a familiar face, and finding none, turned back to his friend. “Any idea where anyone is? Maybe Allura? I could really use a break from all of this,” he waved a hand, “right now.”

Pulling out the monstrous, black-glass timepiece from a pouch around his belt, the knight frowned and tilted his head back and forth. “No, not really. As of now Hunk is about to hit the ‘shift change’ with his aunt and mom, so he’ll probably be heading to bed. He’s been awake since 4 AM, poor kid. Let’s see, who else? Last I saw Pidge, she was out on the terrace with her parents with a larger part of the Olkari embassy guests. Matt is, well, you know. I haven’t seen Princess Allura for a bit so she’s probably in one of the other ballrooms – Alfor was being a little, uh, boisterous earlier. I think he and Coran might have had some nunvil before the party. Needless to say, the Princess was horrified and there was something of a reverse time-out going on.”

Keith barely managed not to laugh, lip twitching up to a small smile instead. “Thank god Mom isn’t touching the alcohol.”

“Without Kolivan hovering around her to scare off most people, she’s quite….” Shiro’s face darkened. “Well, scary. One of my men informed me that some poor soul commented on the, ah, eye-catching nature of her gown, and she responded by explaining in full exactly how many knives she had on her person. Apparently, beneath all of that skirt is the working equivalent of a butcher’s cabinet. The man didn’t dance with her for much longer. In fact, he might have taken ill and gone to bed.”

Alright, this time, Keith openly laughed, and Shiro grinned and chuckled along. “That sounds like Mom.”

“Yes,” the knight agreed. “It sounds a bit like you, too. Are you carrying?”

The Prince pursed his lips. “What do you think?”

“I’d guess…” the knight hummed. “In addition to the one you on your belt, you probably have at least one other full weapon somewhere, and maybe a small dagger too. I’d guess, what, leg-strap for the blade, and maybe a smaller knife tucked beneath the bodysuit, maybe on your wrist?”

Keith glowered and looked away. “…Forearm.”

“Knew it.”

Stupid Shiro knowing everything about him. “I hate when you guard me.”
The Head of the Guard let out a pleased little laugh and patted Keith on the back. “Don’t be like that, your Highness. You know you’re stuck with me until Monday.”

“Maybe getting murdered wouldn’t be so bad,” he huffed under his breath, shrugging Shiro’s hand off of him. “So where’s Adam tonight?”

At the mention of his husband, the Prince noticed Shiro’s expression twisted into a frown.

“I’ve seen him around, but our schedules are all off right now.” A sigh. “I’m working, he’s resting, vice versa. He’s got some free time, I’m wandering through the woods with four teenagers. I’ve got some spare time, he’s dealing with the aftermath of the first night – nothing serious, mostly hungover guests looking for some pain relief, but it’s kept him busy.”

With the pained, resigned note to Shiro’s voice, Keith felt his heart go out to the both of them. His Head of the Guard, and more importantly, long-time friend, was probably much more stressed than he was letting on, and the grays in his hair seemed extra prominent as a consequence. The added responsibility of the party was surely enough to drive anyone insane, but add Shiro’s ‘nose to the grindstone’ attitude when there was work to be done and the new threat on Keith’s life, and the Prince sincerely wondered how he was hanging on.

“You should come go find Adam,” Keith declared suddenly, watching a bewildered look cross Shiro’s face. “Take a few minutes to be with your husband, Shiro. I survived for a little while without you hovering, and this time I’ll even promise to stand right here where you can see me.”

The knight’s face flitted with several passing emotions, which for Shiro, really accounted for a slight dip or smoothing of his brow back and forth. Confused, surprised, sad, pleased, and appreciative. Keith offered him a small smile.

“Go, man. It’ll be fine. The party is already in full swing so it’s not like you’re going to have guests sneaking in. You’ve got a literal army working the palace, and given what we know, I don’t think there’s any trouble intended tonight. If not for yourself, at least humor Adam. He deserves to have at least one dance.”

A fondness settled in Shiro’s eyes that almost made Keith want to punch him in the shoulder. What a sap. “Alright. Thank you.”

“Speak of the devil,” the Prince nodded in the direction of the crowd, and there was the very knight in question. He was passing by the staircase on the other side of the room. Shiro’s face practically lit up.

“Thanks, Keith. Just one song, and don’t get into trouble.”

A fondness settled in Shiro’s eyes that almost made Keith want to punch him in the shoulder. What a sap. “Alright. Thank you.”

“Speak of the devil,” the Prince nodded in the direction of the crowd, and there was the very knight in question. He was passing by the staircase on the other side of the room. Shiro’s face practically lit up.

“Thanks, Keith. Just one song, and don’t get into trouble.”

“This is why Pidge calls you Dad, you know.” The comment fell on deaf ears as Shiro was already moving to meet Adam on the outside of the dancefloor, and he was almost immediately out of earshot. From afar, Keith watched a flicker of surprise appear the doctor’s face before quickly shifting to a soft smile. Moments later, Shiro was guiding them to the center of the room, both grinning like the lovesick fools that they were.

God I hope I don’t look that pathetic when I… No. He decided not to finish that thought.

Instead, the Prince accepted a chalice of water from a serving girl and did as he promised, standing still on the outskirts of the party. A few people approach him, predictably, but he had to apologize and decline, explaining each time that he was under orders not to move. (They were his own orders, but who cares?)
Acting the part of wallflower was almost woefully easy. Despite his title, the Prince had never craved the spotlight; he had just born beneath it and had grown used to it as a result.

He sighed, the tail end of his breath punctuated by the rustle of something in his periphery. The clipped note of shoes and fabric, a presence nearby that he was not familiar.

“Prince Keith,” A voice spoke in time with a hand on his shoulder, and Keith had his blade in his hand before you could say Marmora… pressed up against the fleshy crook of Prince Lotor’s neck. The other man’s eyes widened in surprise, but he didn’t look particularly fearful.

“Oh,” Keith exhaled and immediately let Lotor go. “Sorry. Reflex.”

“That’s alright.” He hummed, touching the spot on his neck where Keith’s blade had just been. “Lest we never forget you’re half-Galra, eh?”

Keith chuckled, mostly to appease the Galran Prince.

“Are you enjoying your celebration?” Lotor took up two drinks from a passing waiter and looked around the room. He offered one to Keith, but it turned out to be some sort of liquor so the Prince ultimately declined.

“Well, I must say, I’m quite impressed. This is more lavish than even the Alteans hosted for Allura’s coming of age party. It’s quite spectacular.”

“It’s fine,” Keith answered noncommittally. “The dancing is getting a little old.”

At that, Lotor let out a dry snort of laughter. It was the closest thing to a real laugh Keith could remember hearing from him since they were kids.

“That is a fair assessment – it must be a bit tedious when you’re already betrothed. I find myself having quite a good time comparatively. I’ve got no… how do they say, ‘ball-and-chain’ to keep me in place?”

Okay, hearing Lotor say ball-and-chain to refer to Allura was pretty funny, Keith had to admit. He laughed and tipped back some of his water with a surprisingly natural smile.

They chatted idly for a few minutes and sipped their drinks, and Keith found that their conversation wasn’t automatically awful. Lotor thought incredibly highly of himself, as was evident by the way he spoke about certain things, but as long as the subject matter stayed a healthy distance from anything ableistic or imperialistic, he wasn’t terrible company. Subpar, but not terrible.

“Ah, I’ve been meaning to ask you about something.” Lotor’s tone lowered slightly, his elbow on the table and chin propped in his open palm. He was looking out at the dancefloor, while Keith remained upright with one arm crossed over his chest, the other holding his water.

“Yes?”

The Galran Prince sounded almost bored. “This Blue Paladin figure – you have had the chance to dance with him once or twice as I understand it?”

Keith tensed, their earlier camaraderie vanishing. He did his best to remain nonchalant. “Yes. I danced with him.”

Lotor’s gaze shifted, his head tilting towards the Marmoran Prince. “What do you think of him? Are you intending to keep him as a consort?”
“W-What? No.” Keith could feel his cheeks betray him, reddening as he considered what Lotor was implying.

“Ah, good, good. I was prepared to ask what it would cost for you to part with him, but if he is untethered, even better. I didn’t want to overstep.” The Galran Prince sighed, almost bored as he stood up straight again. There was a lull in conversation while he swirled his drink. “Our own court consorts are only interesting for so long. I’ve been craving something new, exotic… I had been looking for a new piece for my collection, and I think I rather like this one.”


See, the Prince was quick-thinking and competitive, two features he prided himself on. And, as of the past week or so, on any manner in which Lance was not involved, he was also totally rational human-Galra being.

But seeing as this conversation officially violated the latter maxim, he was irrationally and decidedly fucking pissed.

He followed Lotor’s gaze from their place outside the perimeter, and a dark, inky cloud in his chest began to form. It was the start of a storm, bolts of fire instead of lightning sending little twitches to his nerve-endings, the familiar desire to reach for his knife was almost overwhelming, because Lotor wasn’t watching the dancefloor, he was watching the dancers. One dancer in particular. And fuck if he didn’t look really good right now, too.

Keith didn’t know when Lance had even made it to this particular ballroom after they’d last drifted apart, but there he was, dancing with none other than sweet Shay, the two smiling and laughing about something Keith could not hear. The stupid grace of his everything was on full display, down to the snowy robe that sat over his shoulders, billowing and rippling as he moved like the tail of an icy comet. It was pale, frozen stardust, dazzling, just like the star that carried it.

And Lotor was stargazing.

“He isn’t my consort,” Keith cut to the chase. He was growing real fucking tired of the conversation already. “But I’m pretty sure he’s not available. There doesn’t seem to be a shortage of people who want him.”

There was no hiding the pang of annoyance that tagged itself on the end of his statement.

“Oh, I’ve noticed.” The purple-skinned royal replied, brushing the strand of hair that always fell over his face slightly to the side. If he was aware of the waves of disgust radiating out with Keith as its focal point, he gave no indication. “I just didn’t want to instill any bad-blood between allies. Whoever has him won’t for long – everyone has a price. Money, fineries, a title, power. They say any caged bird will sing if you give it what it wants.” Lotor half-raised his glass in a mock toast, which Keith did not indulge. “I’m hoping to find out what will make this particular little bluebird sing.”

Lotor downed the remainder of his drink and clapped Keith firmly on the back. “If you happen to find out who has tried to stake a claim, do let me know. I’d be grateful to find out what sort of tutelage I’ll to be working against.”

Any feigned attempt at composure was lost. He stood rooted to that spot in a blind rage for several seconds, quickly trying to decide if the dagger on forearm could be thrown with enough precision to embed itself into Lotor’s jugular from where he was standing. There was a risk of someone else
getting hit, but that hardly had the force to deter him.

_I’d be grateful_, the fucker said. Keith scoffed. _You should be grateful I haven’t broken your goddamn jaw yet._

Whatever small force in the universe was looking out for him was at least kind enough to not force him to stand and watch Lotor try to advance on Lance, as the Galran Prince marched off towards the hallway and out of sight.

Where the _fuck_ was Shiro? Keith’s hands were fisted so tightly he could feel the delicate material of the bodysuit strain against his fingernails.

“Adam said to say thank you,” he heard the very knight declare in lieu of a greeting, _fucking finally._ It was as if his raw anger alone had been enough to summon him. “I saw Lotor over here talking to you. What happened?”

“He asked if I was going to _keep_ La– Blue as a consort.” He spat. “When I told him no, he was _fucking pleased_, because he was trying to figure out what the price for Blue might be.”

Shiro was quiet for several seconds when he finally spoke, voice faint, “Well… That certainly sounds like Lotor. What did you do?”

“I managed to talk myself down from murder.”

“That’s… something,” the knight blinked, though he sounded bemused. “Did you say anything about the _situation_?”

Keith shrugged. “Just that I didn’t think the Blue Paladin was available. Didn’t seem to deter him.”

“I doubt it would,” Shiro replied. “Lotor is one of those people that suffer from selective hearing. If he didn’t like what you had to say, I’m sure it didn’t even reach him. Don’t worry. You made it another day without killing him, and just two more and all the courts will start to disburse.”

“Your Highness!” A new voice cried, quite close, and he found it belonged to a Balmeran diplomat with a friendly smile and twin daughters linked at the arm beside her, approaching from Shiro’s far-side. “I have to head up for some rest soon, but I would love it if I could at least introduce you to my girls before I do. This is Geera, older by just a few minutes, and Mex.”

Barely resisting the urge to sigh, Keith forced himself to meet their smile with a false one of his own. “It’s a pleasure to meet you all.”

It was turning out to be a long, _long_ fucking night.

Chapter End Notes

OKAY

THAT WAS
A LOT. um. and im still not done yet. sorry not sorry?

also, im not sure if anyone would be interested in weighing in, but I'm in the middle of planning out my next fic already... hah. anyways, I am wondering what sort of thing
people would be interested in? consider voting in my strawpoll if you want?? and let me know??

what im considering:

roleswap AU: altean prince lance and allura the struggling garrison student who is rivals with shiro; keith the broody mechanic/engineer, tech wizard hunk, knife-loving pidge; shiro still gets taken by the galra... oof sorry shiro ily

galtean/time skip AU: if the events leading up to the war didn't happen for another 9,995 years, so our paladins would be coming into things just as the war is starting to take off. all original paladins recently died (except zarkon), princess allura thought she'd be the "castle bearer" and prince lance would end up as a pilot, only for lance to have to pilot the castle and take a backseat because blue picks allura oof. lots of klance and hybrid galra keith

stranger things AU: really an excuse for me to write 80s-cigarette-arcade-monsters and mana vibes? it would be high school/supernatural elements, feat. smitten keith and "shit lance got stuck in the upside down." allura would be eleven because... aliens? galra?
What's Your Favorite Color?

Chapter Summary

Lance reflects, stands up for himself, and HILARIOUSLY misjudges a situation, which leads to Keith facing the fact that he is, without a doubt, completely and helplessly in love with Lance.

(So, they do as hopelessly pining teenagers do, and have sex. They're still so soft. I don't know. My hand slipped?)

Chapter Notes

UHH. my first time writing smut and --
THIS IS VERY EXPLICIT. GOOD LUCK.

(I've upped the rating of the fic... and I've blocked off where it gets beyond 'M' graphic with lots of ****, so you know... proceed as you wish!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[LANCE]

He laid on his back and followed the stars as they made their nightly trek across the sky, letting the easy inhales of early spring air carry him to some sort of hazy place between sleep and waking. It would so easy to fall asleep — the grass was soft and familiar beneath his skin on every pinpoint the two met — but to sleep would be at the expense of the view. The twinkles of white, blue, red, yellow, swirls of space dust and asteroids reaching out endlessly before him between the darkness that separates him from each star, and each star from another. Were they suns? Or little planets, like this one? Did they have mountains? Oceans? Were they already burnt out, had been since before he was ever born, but it had happened so far from his little cozy nook in the grass that the past was just finally catching up?

Space was a mysterious thing. A mysterious, heartbreaking, magnificent thing.

There were no answers out here, which was comforting in a way. Lance had always been one to talk himself into circles in search of understanding, but he didn’t come out here to try to figure out the universe. Just to remind himself that he was a part of it, a speck on a speck of a planet, small but alive and lucky enough to bear witness to the suns and moons and stars.

His favorite time of day was actually “end-dusk,” an exacting phrase he proudly made up for an inexact time. It was just that brief sliver of an opportunity, no more than ten dobosh, when dusk had almost completely slipped behind the tree line, and a few weak ribbons of orange and pink battled with the indigo that would overtake it, always, eventually. The moon would come out in any state of waxing or waning and take over for another night, but there was a small window where the two
beings tipped the horizons on either ends of the earth. It reminded him of dancers in town on nights of festivals or celebrations, the back and forth, as the sun gave chase to the moon, and the moon always just too far away to reach, and they went around and around and around, never catching more than a glimpse of the other, but never giving up on the chance that one day, someday, maybe they could catch them.

Someday, but not today.

The sun was long gone, and his siblings were in bed by now. He could go inside, but he didn’t really want to.

“Lance? Is that you, mijo?”

Craning his head backwards, he saw the inverted world where the stars were down and his mother was up, floating on the ground out in front of him.

“Sí, Mamá.”

She sounded amused, her feet crinkling the grass as she approached. “What are you doing out here?”

“Just watching the stars,” he said, sitting up on his elbows and waving a hand around in the air.

She sank on the ground beside him, folding her long skirt beneath her while she looked over at him. “What’s wrong, Lance?”

Brow furrowed, Lance kept his gaze trained upwards. “Nothing, I just said I was — ow! Mamá, dios!”

“I did not raise a liar. Now tell me what is wrong.”

Squirming slightly, Lance rubbed the back of his head where he’d been whacked. “Alright, alright, geez. I was just thinking... about Dad, I guess.”

“Ah,” the woman exhaled through her nose, her weight shifting to a more comfortable angle. “So, what were you thinking about?”

“I…” Lance scratched his arms uneasily. Lying would just earn him another smack and he wasn’t exactly looking forward to that. “I don’t know. I want to miss him, I think, but I… I don’t? Do you miss him, Mamá?”

It felt like the right thing to ask, but Lance already knew the answer. He’d heard her cry late at night when she thought all of them were asleep, but Lance couldn’t go to bed until she stopped. It tore him apart to hear his Mamá, the strongest, smartest woman he’s ever met, let out choked little sobs and sniffles in her room down the hall. That she felt like she had to hide her grief from her children.

“I do. He was the love of my life.”

“Then why did he leave? Like why couldn’t we go with him or why doesn’t he ever write? Seems to me like he just doesn’t want anything to do with us.”

In retrospect, such a viewpoint was harsh and unfair, but Lance was angry and confused and only twelve-years old at the time. It had been three years since the man walked out of the kitchen and left the house key on the table, and Lance felt like he had just been starting to get to know his father. Beyond just the guy who tucks you in, Lance had been beginning to appreciate who he was as a
person; what Medram McClain thought and felt and stood up for as an individual, not just as Papa.

When he left, Maria and Sonia hadn’t even been born yet, so Lance supposed he should feel grateful to have gotten to know him what little he did. Instead, he felt the sting of bitter betrayal. The man had let them — Rachel, Luis, Veronica, and Lance — in enough so they could start to love him, cherish him, respect him, only to disappear. Marco was a little too young to form a more meaningful sense of attachment, and to Lance, it felt unjust, and he felt slighted. How can it be fair that a man gets to know everything about you, literally bring you into existence, and yet you know so little about him? All Lance ever got was stolen glances at those buried secrets, fractions of the man who gave Maria and Sonia and himself their cheek marks.

His Mamá knew everything there was to know about Papa. She knew what she had when they were together, and what she lost when they were not. Wasn’t she the one who deserved to feel sad about it? Not Lance, who was mourning the loss of someone who he didn’t even know? Maybe that’s what he was mourning; the loss of the chance to know him, to discover quirks and idiosyncrasies so that there was something for him to miss and remember fondly. Mourning the loss of the idea of having a father rather than the man himself.

Whatever.

The fact of the matter was, whether Lance liked it or not, it still hurt. It hurt because he loved his father enough for his departure to leave him feeling resentful and unwanted. Lance had known him well enough to know, deep down, that his father was not a bad person, and that he was a good husband to Mamá, but that only made it harder. If he was just a selfish quiznak who had left them high and dry, someone Lance could dust of his hands and say “good riddance,” the mystery of his abandonment wouldn’t have felt so personal.

*Rosa McClain paused, looking at her baby, and running a hand over his cheek. The light blue of her son’s eye scale always seemed brighter at night. She spoke with great care upon answering. “The world is full of cruel people, mijo. People who would want to hurt you and your brothers and sisters, just for being who you are. Your Papa was... forced to make an awful choice, but... he did what he thought was right to protect the people he cared about the most. He gave up everything in a heartbeat to try to keep us safe.”*

*Lance’s own heartbeat felt too small in his chest, a weak and bitter thing. The man left them, his Mamá, his brothers and sisters all alone in the mountains to fend for themselves, fucking off to gods knows where for gods knows why. It just seemed too nice and redeemable for Lance’s taste to say the man did it for them, to protect them.*

*Lance wanted to hate him. Maybe he did. It was hard to tell.*

“Mamá?”

“Yes?

“He’s never coming back, is he?”

“No, mijo. He’s not.”

…

Lance released a steady sigh, looking at those same stars but feeling like he’d skipped worlds
somewhere along the way. How had he gone from that life to this? Standing on the terrace of a palace with a party in full-swing behind him? Where he made friends with royalty and stumbled into some magical destiny and — and shared a bed with a Prince?

This was so far from home that it made him ache; this life felt much too big for the likes of him.

Inevitably, he wondered if his father was still alive. If he was, what he was doing at this very moment? What would he think of Lance now? Would he be proud? Did Lance even want him to be?

But then, just like all those years ago, Lance hadn’t come out here in search of answers. Just the humble reminder of how small he was, they all were, in the grand scheme of things. He was but a single person, and he wasn’t going to let the hauntings of a ghost, whether he was living or dead, stop him from enjoying himself.

No sooner had Lance shaken off the last of his lingering thoughts about ghosts did a presence appear behind him, consequently scaring the ever-living shit out of him.

“Good evening, Blue Paladin.” The words were spoken low and the tone was ingratiating. Lance shivered involuntarily, the feeling of hot air tickling his neck. They were so close he could practically sense their shape as it shadowed over his.

He’d been leaning against the stone molding of the terrace that overlooked the garden, conspicuously close to the same place he’d cornered Keith the previous night to reveal who he was, only for this person to pluck his hand right off the ledge and coax him to turn with a gentle but sure tug.

Lance blinked, surprised and annoyed, as a purple-skinned young man with a cascade of silver hair spilling down his back pressed his lips to Lance’s knuckles. “It seems so rare to find you alone, and I would be a fool not to capitalize on the opportunity. I am Prince Lotor of Daibazaal, Heir to the throne. I was hoping to have your next dance?”

Ah, yes, this purple-skinned quiznak. The very same who had been a total dick to him a few days ago. Lance had to resist the urge to roll his eyes; jilting an actual royal seemed like the makings of a very bad idea, seeing as he’d made a reputation of accepting everyone and, in Prince Lotor’s mind, he has never met the “Blue Paladin” before (not that they had really met last time), so what excuse did he have to deny him?

With a tight smile, Lance nodded and watched the small grin curl on the Prince’s lips as he tighten his grip over the paladin’s hand and guided him to the dancefloor — oh, no, wait, they strode right past the dancefloor.

The terrace was a bit chilly, he supposed, though that hadn’t stopped many couples from taking to the night air in favor of the stuffy ballrooms. Lance didn’t mind much one way or another, so he allowed Lotor to lead him.

He ended up planting them in the middle of the Grand Ballroom, and Lance scarcely had a tick compose himself when the Prince whirled around and, without warning, one of his hands flew to Lance’s lower back. With a quick tug of force, Lance’s hips were forced to rut forward in a highly embarrassing way, else he would have fallen completely forward, and he felt his throat tighten, an automatic, uncomfortable response.

He was unhappy, though admittedly unsurprised, to find that Lotor was very much a prick when it came to dancing, too.

“IT’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Blue,” the Galran prince hummed, near enough that Lance could
taste the slight burn of alcoholic bitters fan over his face. Their noses were probably only two inches apart, and while the Galran Prince didn’t appear to be drunk, at least not visibly, the proximity and the smell was still enough to make Lance’s nose wrinkle.

Mouth caught between a grimace and a forced smile, Lance gave a clipped response. “Hi.”

“Now, now, there’s no need to be shy,” Lotor teased, tilting his head to one-side while his eyes scanned every exposed expanse of Lance’s skin — anywhere the mask or his clothes did not cover. “Where is that charm and humor I’ve heard so much about?”

“Is that what people are saying?” Lance replied mildly, trying his very best to deflect without coming off as outright rude.

Arching a single white brow, Lotor replied with a low tone, almost inaudible over the general din of the party. “Actually, there’s no shortage of things people say about you, Blue. How can it be that not a single person I’ve spoken to seems to know a thing about you? The mystery of you is maddening to most.”

A forced laugh spilled from Lance’s mouth, and he was thankful he had memorized this part of the conversation by now. Almost everyone asked him about his identity, or at least for him to drop some sort of hint to who he was so they might meet again.

“Mmm. There are private reasons for the secrecy, I’m afraid. My lips are sealed.”

“Is that so?” Lotor’s hand slid from Lance’s back to over his hip, giving his side a light squeeze. “I suppose I cannot expect someone with such a reputation of anonymity to be so easily swayed. But what would you say if I told you that your secrets are of no consequence?”

Now it was Lance’s turn to raise an eyebrow. “I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

“Mmm,” The Prince smiled knowingly. “Haven’t you ever heard that the best mysteries are best left unsolved? That they lose their intrigue once the illusion is broken? I have little interest in unraveling your mysteries, Blue Paladin.”

Lance inhaled through his nose. The grip on his hip moved up slightly and tightened to the point it was almost painful, pulling him in against his will. Their hips were practically rutted against each other and, for no reason but feeling entirely uncomfortable, Lance’s cheeks turned scarlet.

The Prince had moved his mouth just beside Lance’s ear. “You see, Blue, I like to collect pretty things. It makes no difference to me what they are called, where they come from, so long as they are beautiful.”

His pulse burned in his veins, the warning bells of flight or fight response screaming at him to get out of there, to do something.

He hadn’t the chance before the Prince murmured honeyed words so close Lance could practically feel his lips form the syllables over his skin. “So, tell me, what would it take to collect a pretty thing like you?”

Lance opened his mouth, only to promptly close it again. He didn’t have anything particularly prepared to say besides “fuck you,” but even in knowing what little he did about this guy, Lance could see Lotor mistaking it for a challenge — or worse, an invitation.

So, no. He wasn’t going to say that.
Taking care to lean as far away as possible, because this conversation was not about to continue in such a way that Lance couldn’t breathe anything but Lotor’s own fucking air, he took a deep breath.

Once he felt a little more composed, he tried again. “I’ll accept the compliment, but I am much more than just something for people to look at. I have no interest in being collected, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Infuriatingly, the Galran Prince just shrugged and gave Lance’s side another squeeze. It made him want to punch him, really, really badly. Was assaulting a royal considered a felony? He was pretty sure it was. Maybe Keith would pardon him if he did it anyways.

Mercifully, the song was ending, but the grip on his side refused to let up. Lance wondered if it would bruise; he sincerely hoped it wouldn’t.

With his other hand, Lotor slowly traced his fingers down from their perch on Lance’s shoulder, barely ghosting over sleeved skin in an almost ticklish, taunting sort of way.

“We’ll see,” he said, undeterred. “When it comes to pretty things, one way or another, I always find a way to make them mine.”

Wow. Fuck this guy, and fuck his stupid sense of entitlement.

Lance was about half-a-tick away from telling him to do just that when a little jolt of energy ran up his arm and straight into his heart, his mind blanking but for the sudden overwhelming sense of awareness. Something was happening. His soul was practically on fire.

Blue?

Urgent. It was important — oh no. His eyes were drawn to his watch, and with a panic he realized exactly what was happening. This was just like yesterday when he froze halfway back towards the ballrooms with Keith, it was her best attempt at a warning when she wasn’t able to communicate directly. He knew at some deep level of intuition that he had just about twenty dobosh again to get out of there.

It would be right around midnight, judging by his watch.

As much as it pained him, Lance conceded that Prince Fucking Asshole’s comeuppance would have to come another day, it could be someone else’s battle to fight.

“Well, song’s over, so,” Lance curtly took a wide step backwards.

But of course, Lotor stepped with him, like they were still dancing, but a tango instead of a waltz. “So it is. And yet, the conversation isn’t.”

The hold on his side finally shifted and Lance nearly sighed in relief from the release of the steady pressure, thinking that the Prince had let him go despite his words, but the hand didn’t leave, just shifted. This time, it sat around his back and gently, almost sweetly, nestled over the base of his spine.

“Let me go, please.” Lance said, mouth pressed together thinly. He met Lotor’s searching gaze with a stone-cold glare.

“Ah, but who would be so foolish as to ever let you go?” The Prince’s smile grew wider, and Lance felt like his skin was crawling beneath his clothes. He didn’t have time for this.
As patiently as he could, he clarified in hopes it would help speed things up. “I don’t want to dance anymore, I’m tired and I’m going to bed. *Let me go.*”

“But I haven’t gotten an answer from you yet, Blue.” His voice grew dark, and his grip was definitely bruising now. *What would it take?*

“*Fuck off.*” Lance spat, and he pushed Lotor the chest with both hand with enough force to knock him away. The Galran Prince narrowly avoided running into another couple, and he glared at Lance with enough venom to make him almost regret the decision, but he stood firm.

Coldly, he left the royal with some parting words. “You’re not impressing anyone by acting like you own them, and especially not me. So leave me alone.”

And with a quick spin on his heel, Lance was gone.

It wasn’t clear to him where he was going, not really, but his legs were pushing him past bodies and through hallways and up stairs and down corridors. His adrenaline was screaming at him to go, go, *keep going*, and something fundamental to his anger told him that this was not entirely his own fury, but that once again the lines between he and Blue’s emotions had been crossed.

The weight of Keith’s key in his pocket felt heavy, and, right now, lovely. It was much more inviting than any of the nasty whispers he’d received over the night, especially leading up to his departure from the ball.

A glance at his watch told him he had barely ten dobosh. Fuck, Lotor’s insistence had really slowed him down. Whether it was by Lance’s own motivation or Blue’s internal urging, he quickly picked up the pace, but every so often he glanced over his shoulder. He hadn’t run into any guards, or anyone for that matter, since exiting the ballrooms, but his skin still itched like he was being sized up, watched, *wanted*, indicative of the uncomfortably lustful way some people leered at him for a little too long.

It was a little scary, if he were honest. Lance would swear that someone was watching him. He could feel their eyes on him, but, there was never anyone there when he turned around.

Without Keith to guide him or Hunk and Pidge to distract him, his anxiety was starting to bubble into panic. The hallways all looked the same, and last time he’d been alone like this he’d, gotten lost and, and *shit* — that *guy* had found him alone and — and gods he really hoped Blue knew what she was doing, because he had only the vaguest sense of where they were going.

*Breathe, breathe, just make it to Keith’s room, it’ll be fine, it’s one of these hallways I’m sure of it… Okay, not this one. The next one, definitely.*

It wasn’t the next one. Or the one after that.

Lance had five dobosh left.

*Oh my god Blue I’m freaking out I don’t know if you can hear me but what the fuck am I supposed to do?! Why the fuck does it feel like someone is following us? Am I just really paranoid or is there something happening that I’m unaware of? Please please just let this next hallway be it —

It wasn’t.

*Son of a bitch.*

Three dobosh to go. Quiznak.
Before the mounting sense of doom could actually overwhelm him, Lance found the fucking hallway, thank god.

Along with two guards, posted up conveniently at the Prince’s door.

Noooooooo.

But Blue hadn’t let him down yet, and with an echo of a nudge, she forced him out into the hallway and right up to the guards. They both turned at his approach, faces drawn in suspicion and Lance felt his heart constrict in a vice, but it calmed just as quickly. Both guards eyes went slightly crossed and they appeared dazed, and Lance realized it was whatever trick Blue had used to get him past the security check on the first night.

Heart pounding in his chest, Lance didn’t waste a precious tick. He plunged his hands into his pocket for the key and wiggled it frantically into the door, sighing contently when he finally pushed it open and slammed it behind him, holding the key and laughing just as he felt the magic start to unfurl around him.

“Fucking… christ…” he breathed, slow and steady exhales, watching in quiet reverence as the magic vanished off his skin, trails of blue essence whirling in the air until condensing back down into the form of a sweet, sleepy kitten beside him on the carpet. Lance had scarcely managed not to hyperventilate back there, and the clock had just struck midnight when he’d made it to the Prince’s chamber.

Blue stood on wobbly feet before curling up beside him, not bothering to find herself a place on the sofa or chaise today. A huff of an exhale, a light chuckle, fell from his pounding chest with relief and aching, confusing humiliation. There was no need to feel ashamed, he hadn’t even done anything — but, but had he done enough? Should he have pushed away Lotor sooner? Maybe this was all a bad idea, maybe he shouldn’t have flirted so openly and honestly with everyone. Did he really expect to make himself vulnerable and not to get hurt? Had he really been so blind?

Lance shivered, realizing after several ticks that he was shirtless. Blue had given him the sweater earlier, so he had no actual shirt to revert back to, and that was the smallest motivation he needed to gather himself up from the floor. Curled up kitten in tow, Lance set Blue gently on the edge of Keith’s ridiculous bed and went to find himself a shirt.

It took him a solid dobosh of staring vaguely at the closet to remember, shit, yeah, I’m cold and my legs are still working. He wandered to the back of the closet and slipped on a comfortable long-sleeve shirt, a little thin for the temperature but it was good enough. Even if he was fairly sure Keith didn’t mind one way or another, Lance wasn’t in a hurry to wear anything of the Prince’s that seemed too nice in off chance that he ripped or stained something.

By the time he’d meandered back out to the center chamber of Keith’s bedroom, he wasn’t surprised to find Blue had completely fallen asleep. Before her eyes had blearily snuck peaks at him, but now she was definitely gone, and the gentle peppering of her comfort and almost nuzzling affections faded with her consciousness.

Lance crawled up beside Blue and sat, petting her head gently and closing his eyes, trying to convince his body to relax.

Imagine, not one, but two Galra trying to force themselves on him in one week? Hah. What sort of fucking joke was this? To think, in some twisted version of reality Lance would be back in the castle thinking, huh, the first encounter he’d in the servants passage hadn’t been that bad, because, fucking hell, at least no one had to see the way he had been touched. Lance could still imagine the dull throb
of his head against cold brick, contrasted against hot, wet movements beneath his chin, but in a weird clandestine sort of way that at least had some semblance of privacy, and Allura had found him anyways after he’d blacked out, so it ended up working out.

Lotor was a different matter entirely. Not because he was physically overpowering, but that he wanted to take everything from Lance in more ways than one. He wanted to strip Lance of his identity, not a care in the world for who he was, and saw him as nothing more than just something to dance with, toy with, flirt and tease with. It seemed too much like unspoken threats every time he held Lance in place, a hint towards of what could happen rather than the brute force of yes this is happening. A whisper of promise for what could come, that this was the Galran Prince being gentle, trying to show Lance that he was wanted.

But he wasn’t even wanted, was he? Lotor didn’t want him to pull off his mask in some twisted desire to know more about him. In that respect, even the more obscene nobles he’d met seemed kind by comparison. They all had at least wanted to know him.

And Lotor?

Lotor wanted to take off his mask so it was one less thing getting in the way, an obstruction to peeling back Lance’s sense of self, his ideas and interests and beliefs balled up in and thrown in a bin, along with his name and his past, so that he could be some fucked up little prize for the guy’s own enjoyment.

The fucking betrayal of his own body, too. The flushed cheeks, the friction of his hips over Lotor’s… ugh. It wasn’t — he didn’t want it, it didn’t feel good, but the physical sensation was demanding and his body literally could not do anything but respond, and the memory of that alone was enough to have him clutching his head between his knees, legs drawn up to his chest.

Why was this so confusing? It shouldn’t be, and that only made Lance more frustrated. Lotor was a selfish asshole who tried to use his title to his advantage and force Lance to do things he didn’t want to do. Lance had even succeeded in pushing him away and standing up for himself, but the triumph was bittersweet.

His toxic thoughts were cut off abruptly when the door flew open, an act that could really only be properly described as one of fury. Lance jumped so violently, so suddenly, he nearly spilled off the bed in his shock; Blue hadn’t even twitched, probably too exhausted to register what was going on around her.

The wood shuddered in its hinges before shutting with a slam so loud it probably woke up half the castle.

Well, at least he wasn’t alone anymore.

The Prince was back, eyes dark and expression fearsome. The tanned skin boy’s heart leapt into his throat, wondering what could have brought such a look to his face.

“Keith?” He attempted to get the Prince to stop glaring at everything and calm down. His breath was labored, so he might have even ran there.

“Lance — what is your favorite color?!”

Unable to help himself, Lance let out a little confused laugh. “My — my what now?”

It didn’t appear Keith had even heard him, crossing the room quickly and standing in front of the bed. He knelt so they were closer to eye-level, though now Lance was looking down at him for
“Lance,” he breathed out a tumble of sound, hands taking each of his arms and inspecting him, lifting and examining his hands, neck, face. Unsurprisingly, the sudden touches and attention were making him pink around the edges. “Are you hurt? I didn’t see — Pidge told me, but you were gone, and then I was, I thought…”

“Wait, wait,” Lance shook his head, still struggling not to laugh. “Can we go back to my favorite color? What the heck was that about?”

As if remembering himself, the Prince took back his hands like he’d been electrocuted and looked away, his cheeks colored to match that damning, sexy cape. “It’s — it was nothing. Nevermind.”

They were quiet for a moment, and Lance had to sigh and shake his head. He crossed his legs and sat up like he was meditating.

“Red.”

Wide, indigo eyes flew to his face and Keith looked beyond confused. “Wait, red? Why?”

“So you’re not denying that you asked me anymore.” Lance raised a brow, enjoying the way the Prince’s brows furrowed before he shrugged. “But uh, I don’t know? Do I need a reason to have a favorite color?”

“Yes,” Keith practically wrung his hands and Lance could have fallen back laughing. What was his deal right now? “Tell me.”

“Alright, alright. I guess because… I always liked it because it’s so rare, at least where I’m from, you know? Red dye is expensive, Pretty Boy.” To prove his point, Lance reached over Keith’s shoulder and took part of the supple cape in his hands, absently smoothing it between his fingers while he continued. “Most things I grew up with were like, blue sky or green grass, yellow sun or white clouds. Lots of gray on stormy days. Black night skies. Even fire isn’t exactly red, it’s more orange than anything. There was only two times I’d see red in the mountains, when I would hunt because, ya know, blood — not to be super morbid or anything — but because I always loved shooting. But like, even better, it’s the color of emotion. Like when my sister’s would laugh so hard they couldn’t breathe, their whole faces would turn red, or when Marco asked if I would hold his hand when we went to the village, he was super shy and turned red. It reminds me of my family, we were all really expressive.”

“That’s…” Keith’s face was twisted in concentration before he decided, “That’s a really good reason.”

Lance grinned crookedly. “Thanks? Now are you going to tell me why you showed up in a frenzy just to get my answer?”

“I’d rather not,” the Prince deadpanned, and Lance had to snicker.

He pushed on the guy’s shoulder armor, pleasantly chilled like his own skin. “Why? Did you lose a bet to Pidge or something?”

Frowning, the Prince’s gaze flickered back and forth from each of Lance’s eyes for a moment before settling into some sort of look of resignation. “No. I just… it’s embarrassing.”

“Well, now you have to tell me. I’ll tell you something embarrassing if you tell me!”
Pouting, Keith sat back on his feet from his knelt position and ended up cross-legged on the floor, armor and all, while Lance looked down at him from the bed.

“I just wanted… I don’t know how to… know you better? I realized something and it bothered me earlier. I couldn’t stand when I saw other people dancing with you because they don’t know you, and I… ugh, I went to talk to Pidge about it to let out some steam and she called me a hypocrite.”

“A hyp — why?” His heart was a force to be reckoned with, thundering in his chest, but tried to keep himself in check until Mullet finished his story because… because was Keith trying to say what he thought he was trying to say?

Eyes glaring at the bedpost, the wall, the carpet — anywhere but Lance — the Prince mumbled his next few breaths. “Well… I’ve only known you for such a short time, I feel like… I feel like I know more than I do, but I realized I don’t. That’s annoying. Like how can I get upset about other people making you laugh and dancing with you when I don’t even know your favorite color? Or what sort of food you like? Or if you’re allergic to anything, or the name of your village that you always talk about, or what ever happened to your shoes, or why you even put up with your aunt’s fucking bullshit, or what you want to do with your life, if you’ll stay in Marmora or go home someday and — shit, that, uh.” Keith cleared his throat and crimson ran all the way up to his ears. “You get the point. Didn’t know you enough. Felt like I should. Yeah. I’ll stop now.”

Lance wasn’t much better. He hadn’t expected… that. His whole face felt too hot, his palms sweaty. A flustered, blushing, awkward mess because Keith just wanted to know him better.

He was sure his heart was much too big for his body, swelling painfully, cracking and bursting through each of his ribs one by one.

“Keith?” Lance winced at his own voice. Stupid nerves robbing him of his confidence. He sounded like he was five-years old, timidly getting ready to ask his older brother to give him a piggyback ride. Cracked and shy and nervous as hell.

And then, what does Keith do? He looked up. How dare he. How dare he look so good after admitting to such a fucking thing? This was cruel, criminal. Unacceptable. Perhaps illegal, even. While still pink, he looked so open, almost relieved, like some great burden had finally been lifted in saying all of these things. The darkness of his eyes caught the barely-there light of the moonlight that spilled in from the window, reflecting in such a way has to make little white spots shine over his iris and pupils, giving him the appearance of almost… gentleness. It was a weird look to see on him, but not at all an unwelcome one; he looked older, somehow, worry and interest and fatigue all lining his face but cast over by a veil of tenderness that made Lance want to die right on the spot, just so it could be the last thing he ever saw.

Instead, he pinned on what he hoped was his most charming smile. “What’s your favorite color?”

The Prince’s eyes widened, like he wasn’t sure if Lance had asked him the simple question or if he just propositioned him. His face was so hilariously responsive that Lance had to laugh a little, rocking forward and then back again. He held his feet like this was some stupid slumber party and they were gossiping. Geez. He was so weak for this boy, wasn’t he?

“Don’t give me that look,” he complained. “If you want to ask me all of your questions, you can, but don’t you think you’re going to get out of answering mine.”

“I…” Keith opened his mouth and closed it again, and, by the looks of it, began grinding his molars. “Fine. You’ll think I’m just saying this, but it’s blue.”
“Oh?” Lance’s grinned widened. “And why in the world would it be that?”

Keith schooled his expression, but his lip twitched. “Because.”

“Because why?”

There was a pause, and the Prince scrutinized Lance like he was trying to decide if answering was worth it. Don’t worry, Lance was fully prepared to pull out the puppy-dog eyes to make Keith admit the reason. What he was not prepared for, however, was for the wickedly sexy smirk to appear on the Prince’s face instead, and for him to sit back up on his knees.

“Because when I do this,” Keith planted a hand on either side of Lance’s legs, not touching him, but the added weight on the mattress caused Lance’s body to shift forward even more. In response, Keith swept into his personal space so rapidly Lance hardly had the chance to react, only enough to suck in a sharp breath of air, failing entirely to hide the accompanying shudder. “Your cheek marks glow.”

Then he leaned back, back, back, and then he was standing, and Lance’s whole body leaned to chase the sudden loss of proximity. Keith shrugged innocently. “And it’s a pretty shade of blue, so, you know.”

This fucker.

Lance vowed if Keith made his heart stop beating he was going to haunt the hell out of him until the Prince died, and then annoy him for the rest of time in the afterlife just for being so fucking good at this. How can he go from being dorky Keith “what’s your favorite color” Kogane to, Just-Fucking-End-Me Prince of Marmora in two ticks flat? Tragically unfair to Lance’s heart, if you asked him.

“Well, I should change,” Keith said in the most winningest voice Lance has ever heard from him and he wanted to fucking die. “Do you need anything?”

“Q-Quiznak you,” Lance muttered, crossing his arms and looking away. The Prince laughed and it was beautiful and Lance wanted to fucking kill him.

Keith quickly gathered up some items from his wardrobe and closet that resembled sleepwear and disappeared into his bathroom, and Lance waited exactly five ticks to make sure he wasn’t about to pop back out before crawling up to the headboard and burying his face into a pillow, hoping the fabric would just devour him.

Stupid fucking Mullet and his dumb sexy husky voice and stupid, stupid awkward social skills. Like, how can someone be so fucking AWKWARD and ENDEARING at the same time? It’s absolutely the bane of his existence, and Keith should not be allowed to continue with such blatant disregard for Lance’s well-being. Stunts like that were taking years off his fucking life.

And Lance still had important paladin business stuff to tell the Prince, but all he wanted was for Keith to come out of the fucking bathroom and he wanted to make-out with his dumb fucking face and then push him off the balcony and laugh about it. Asshole.

Ugh.

After glancing at his watch, Lance realized it had already been five dobosh and still no Prince Fucking Mullet Face; taking off all that armor piece-by-piece has got to be a serious chore, so he supposed it wasn’t a surprise. At least this gave him time for the burn of his cheeks to fade away, returning to the same brown that ran in his family.

He’d all but forgotten about Lotor and the earlier bitterness that had wrung him out to dry just from
spending a few dobosh with Keith’s dumb ass. Why does he get to have this effect on him?

No. Lance was almost eighteen. He wasn’t about to let Keith continue to — continue to make him react like this. With a harsh grimace, the teen sat up and glared daggers at the bathroom door. When Keith came out, Lance would act all cool and collected like the Prince did, explain what he learned from Allura that afternoon, and only after, if Lance even felt like it, and only then, would he kiss the hell out of the pretty, dark-eyed jerk.

So when Keith walked out after another few dobosh, Lance was ready.

Prepared. He had this in the bag. He could do this. No more messing around. Important paladin business only, and maybe kissing later, maybe.

Lance was ready.

Except, he wasn’t. Nope. Not at all.

Because why was Keith shirtless?!

Shirtless.

...Paladin who? Never heard of her.

Undergoing something that can only be adequately described as a “sexuality meltdown,” the brunette made a point of looking absolutely anywhere and everywhere else but across the room, at the bathroom door. He had to start back at the beginning, complete system reboot.

The basics: What was his name again? Why was he in this ornate, albeit poorly lit, room? Was it nighttime? Why was there a cat sleeping on the bed? Whose bed was this, anyways? Man, he was cold. Was he always this cold?

All of these things seemed so obvious not five ticks ago, and yet, he was blanking.

“Lance?” Shirtless said, sounding genuinely concerned.

Oh, right. That was his name. Cool.

Cool, cool, cool. ‘Lance.’ His name sounded nice when shirtless-guy said it.

Then he snapped back to his senses, feeling the heat in his face stifling any memories he had of the common tongue, or Spanish, or even the little Altean he knew for that matter. Fuck, there was something important he was supposed to talk about, right? But — but how can Keith go and ‘change’ just to come out without a shirt when they were… alone in his room after having a… nice, sweet conversation… and Keith was still shirtless oh my fuck. Was he planning on staying shirtless?

Please, please, no. Lance was certain he could not survive that.

“I hate you so much right now.” Lance muttered, loud enough for him to hear, because Keith knew exactly what he was doing, didn’t he? “You know what, fine. Fine.”

Two can play at that game, Prince Keith.

Lance sprang up from the bed, determined and annoyed and maybe a little turned on, but that was less important than evening the playing field, and he walked right up to the only-slightly-taller boy, tore his own shirt off and threw it over his head, and poke the Prince in the chest. He ignored with every fiber of his being how fucking firm his stupid pectoral muscles were and stared him down.
“If you’re going to go and do something like this then you are going to have to face the consequences!”

The Prince’s eyes widened, and Lance was pleased to see he was having a hard time maintain eye contact. Hah. Serves him right! “W-What are you even… even talking about?”

Lance just shook his head and refused to look away, hyperaware that his finger was still firmly planted on his incredibly warm chest, and clenched his jaw.

“This, you! What else, dumbass?!”

“W-wah —  hey!” Now Keith was getting annoyed in return, though he seemed mostly just confused, and Lance suddenly regretted every decision he ever made. Didn’t he come out here like that… on purpose? To get a rise out of him?

“For your information, I realized my other shirt had a hole in it, I was just coming to get a new one, Lance.”

Oh no.

“So, why exactly is your shirt off?” The other boy questioned, voice flat.

Lance, utterly chagrined, crossed his arms and turned around. He could pry the truth from his cold dead hands. “Don’t change the subject, Mullet!”

“Change the — ? Ugh. You’re unbelievable!”

Their shouting must have been enough to rouse Blue from her sleep, because Lance felt a slight tension in his heart twist. [Be nice. You care about him, don’t you?]

“Oh, you stay out of this!” Lance let his head drop back on his shoulders and groaned.

The Prince sent Lance a retaliatory glare, which went completely unseen as his back was still turned. “Stay out of what?!”

“I didn’t — I was talking to Blue.” Lance scrubbed a hand down his face, and used the opportunity to compose himself. Nope, Keith was not allowed to do this to him. It just wasn’t fair.

Well, only an idiot wouldn’t take advantage of an opportunity like this, right? And Lance was no idiot, no sir.

“Ah, fuck it.”

Or, maybe, he was incredibly incredibly stupid, but hey, the time for asking questions should definitely have been before their shirts were off.

[KEITH]

What the hell was happening?
He just wanted to change into sleep clothes, and then Lance was taking his own shirt off — fucking, fucking hell, *that* had his whole body thrumming — and then he was getting yelled at? The guy was so confusing sometimes.

“Ah, fuck it,” Lance muttered, almost darkly, and Keith’s attention flickered to his face. He’d spun on his heel and glowered at Keith.

He glared right back. “What now?”

And then Lance was in his personal space and oh, oh god, he was *kissing him*, and Keith’s brain went blank for all of three seconds before, *finally*, he could find the relief he’d been yearning for all fucking night in Lance’s cold, petal-soft lips. His hands moved of their own volition, not minding wherever they ended so long as it was followed by that hypnotizing sensation of Lance’s bare, almost-chilled skin that made his fingers tingle as he roamed his hips, back, neck, anywhere they could.

After having to bare witness to so much eye-fucking at the ball, everywhere he looked people looking like they wanted to eat Lance alive, Keith was feeling greedy and insatiable. Lance, flush up against him, was *trembling* as Keith pushed between his lips, searching with his tongue and chasing the warmth of his mouth slotted against his. God, he was regretting putting on pants at all if he had known this was how Lance was going to react.

That alone made him dizzy. After everyone — and Keith means *everyone* — tried to sleaze and twist and, more than likely, *bribe* their way into this exact position all night, *he* was the only one who Lance seemed to want; the only one whose saliva trailed from Lance’s lips every time they shifted, testing and exploring each other’s mouths, the only one who was drawing out breathy pants from that pretty mouth when they pulled apart, long enough to breathe in each other’s air before going in for more, more, *more*.

It was deliciously gratifying and Keith still couldn’t help but think it wasn’t nearly enough.

He absolutely had no control over himself when Lance was clouding his senses like this. Lance, beautiful, funny, sweet Lance, honest and stupid and *perfect* Lance, wanted *him*. If that wasn’t enough to send his confidence soaring, then the fact that Lance practically *moaned* his fucking *name* after the Prince bit his lower lip was more than enough to spur him on.

And gods, if Keith wasn’t fucking *loving* every second of it.

Driven by those sweet sounds, Keith wanted to explore more, to see what else might make Lance exhale his name like it was a prayer to offer at worship. He began to back Lance up in the direction of his bed, breaking apart from the brunette long enough to make sure they didn’t land on Blue, before spilling over onto the mattress with him. Chest-to-chest, every curve and dip of each of their torsos accommodating the other’s, the feeling almost made Keith want to stop just so he could memorize the look on Lance’s face. Dark flush over his cheeks and nose, lips glossy, eyes half-lidded, breathless, Keith decided that Lance had absolutely never looked better. The thought that no one else got to see him like this sent a jolt of arousal straight through him, pooling south of his abdomen.

“*K-Keith — ”* Lance gasped, smile crooked, and the combination of *that* look with *his* name made something lustful uncurl deep within the him. A laugh slipped out on his next exhale, and Keith’s heart thudded in sweet satisfaction. “You’re so *warm.*”

“Is that a good thing?” He wondered, realizing as he said it that Lance might be uncomfortable. Should he open a window to let in some cool air, or... *stop? Oh god.* Keith would if Lance asked
him, but god if he didn’t want to stop.

All those doubts flitted away when Lance arched his back, intensifying every inch of contact between them, and both of them groaned when the pressure of their erections rubbed against each other.

“Ah,” Keith’s hips reacted on their own, grinding down to chase the wonderful sensation. Lance gasped and twisted into him, and the fact that he was shirtless and clearly hard, beneath him, was almost enough to make Keith cum alone. Then again, he wanted to draw this out, go as far as Lance would allow him, indulge in every messy, sinful thing he could think of — Lance’s little moans had brought out a heated, wanton part of him he’d never known.

Lance groaned and, to Keith’s surprise, his eyes were sharp when they fluttered open. A hand shot forward and pulled his hair, angling his head up to Lance’s so they were eye-to-eye. “Why the fuck aren’t you kissing me right now?”

Fuck. That was a good question.

Keith wanted to give some smart response, but the need to just do exactly as Lance suggested overwhelmed him, and he didn’t hesitate to push his tongue right into that willing mouth, drinking in his soft sounds of pleasure and surprise as Keith fell further and further into heady bliss.

It was petty to keep thinking about it, but dammit if Keith didn’t want to throw himself a fucking party over the fact that Lance was becoming undone beneath him. Jesus, his ego was going to be fucking flying once this was all over.

“A-Ahh,” Lance stuttered out, and Keith realized he’d taken to rutting into him simply by circumstance of their position. He almost felt bad about it, but the want in Lance’s gaze only made him want to keep going.

With enough force to tilt the axis of the goddamned planet, Keith forced himself up so he was on all fours, boxing Lance in beneath him. “Lance, I… I don’t know how much you want… but I god I want you so bad.” He felt a twitch in his cock at the way Lance shivered, but kept himself focused. The sound of his heart pounding in his chest was almost as distracting as the uncomfortable press of his incredibly hard dick in his pants, but he needed to make himself perfectly clear. “I don’t want you to feel like you have to do anything, just, tell me to stop — if you don’t want anything, I mean. I’ll need you to t-tell me because I want you so bad. All of you, so f-fucking bad.”

Fuck, his voice cracked. So much for sexy confidence.

Even so, chest heaving, Lance’s eyes fluttered open and he blinked up at Keith with blown-wide pupils, so dark and encompassing the ring of blue surrounding them was almost imperceptible. The soft curve of his nose, lips red as wine and twice as intoxicating, freckles that mapped out the stars — and, shit, Keith felt his heart absolutely swell in frantic, beautiful, terrifying realization.

I’m in love with him.

This was — this was maybe not the best moment to realize that — or maybe it was exactly the right moment? How does this work? Oh, god, Keith didn’t know what he was supposed to do with that information, and when one of Lance’s hands came to stroke his cheek he almost wanted to fucking cry like, who does that? In this position? He forced himself to get a grip because fuck, he loved Lance, loved everything about him, wanted to hold him and pleasure him and keep him safe and who the fuck knows, every dumb domestic thing he could think of, too, like fold fucking laundry or ask him about his day because Keith loved him.
“E-Everything, I want everything,” Lance eventually said, clearing his throat and his cheeks darkened, and Keith managed to knock himself back to the present. “I don’t, I haven’t — I’m a virgin, so I… I don’t want to mess anything up, but I want this…”

Keith almost laughed, but he just shook his head and lowered himself to kiss Lance on the forehead, because, fuck, he loved him and that just felt like such a right thing to do. He was nervous and it was thrilling. “I am too, so don’t worry. We can mess it up together.”

That seemed to make Lance freeze, and worried he’d done something wrong, Keith backed up and looked from each of his wide blue-eyes. “What?”

“You’re a virgin? But you’re… you,” Lance said and it sounded like it was intended as a jab, but it came out a little weakly and Keith’s cheeks felt red-hot as he stared at the freckles on Lance’s shoulder instead of meeting his eye.

“Well, I’m also gay, and anyone who was — ugh — offered to me over the years have almost always been women. And even if they weren’t, I don’t know, I don’t think I could… with someone I don’t… you know what I mean?”

Lance shifted beneath him, and Keith involuntarily looked at his face to track the movement. He looked… happy? Fond, or sweet, or something. It frustrated him.

“W-What?!”

Simply, Lance asked, “You’re sure you’re okay with this?”

A hand came up to tuck a strand of hair behind his ear, and Lance’s touch trailed a line of ice down his cheek, tingling and sensitive beneath the calloused pads of his fingers. “I am if you are. I just want — I was surprised, is all. You’re the Prince and I know that shouldn’t — doesn’t — matter but I just… I just want to be sure that you want me?”

“Lance, I’ve never been so fucking sure of something in my life.”

Now that he was certain that this was okay, and definitely encouraged on by the fact that absolutely no one else had seen Lance like this before, Keith didn’t — couldn’t — hold back. Their mouths came together again like they’d always meant to be fitted against each other, and a steady, slow force pulled their lips apart with moans and catches in each other’s throats at the situation. Lance’s fingers explored his sides, almost ticklish but the sensation was wonderful, and it just made his dick jump even further in the seat of his pants.

Whatever composure he’d recovered to make sure Lance was comfortable were lost in just a matter of seconds, because fuck his inhibitions; all he could focus on was Lance, making sure to pull at those delicious lips with his teeth and clinging to the ecstasy that was Lance keening through the broken syllables of his name, drowning in the feeling of his mouth yielding beneath his hungry kisses, thrusting his tongue between lips and teeth and inviting Lance’s back into his, groaning as his hips rolled on their own.

These pants were going to become a real fucking problem, real fucking soon.

(**EXPLICIT CONTENT BELOW**)

For now, however, Keith still had places he wanted to explore, limits he wanted to test, miles of Lance’s skin left to taste. Experimentally, he kissed up the side of his face, almost getting Lance to giggle until he pressed his lips against one of the sharp blue-eye scales, and Lance completely froze.
Before Keith had the chance to ask if what he’d done was a wrong move, Lance’s hips rolled up into him, and his hand’s gripped desperately on Keith’s lower back to force his weight down, closer, increasing the resistance and the friction.

“F-Fuck,” Lance muttered. “Again, pl-please.”

He was more than happy to oblige. Gently, softly, he pressed his lips over the mark, trying every mixture of pressure and wet tongue, dry lips, even scraping his teeth over the skin.

Lance looked completely lost to the sensation, and it was the most glorious thing he’d ever seen, ever heard. A litany of moans, cracked cries, shudders, and little gasps came over him, and the best Keith could tell is the markings must have been extremely sensitive, but probably not directly pleasurable? Not that he was planning on stopping anytime soon.

The Prince switched to the other side of Lance’s face, relishing in the contact because, like this, Lance’s cries were essentially buried into the space beneath his jaw and his lips shuddering and gasping with pleasure directly into his skin was dizzying. His own stimulation combined with the lovely chorus of noises Lance was drawing his attention in different directions, both of which still continued to make his erection painfully present, still locked beneath the layers of fabric.

“Ah, ah, g-god, a— ah,” Lance keened when Keith suckled the spot lightly, and he pulled himself down into the mattress, breathless and shaking. “N-No more, I don’t wanna… not… yet,” he panted, and Keith groaned and drove his hips down, hopelessly aroused by the fact that Lance sounded so wrecked and needy just from the attention of his mouth alone.

If he introduced his hands to the equation...

Pushing himself up into something of a sit up, Keith managed to hold his weight on one hand while he reached down and palmed Lance’s hard-on through his pants, watching Lance’s face intently, and his reaction of an arched back, with eyes tightly closed and mouth forcing out torturous moans pointing away from Keith did not disappoint.

However, he stopped, waiting, and after a few ticks Lance looked up at him with a glare and a very ‘what the fuck’ expression.

“I want to see you,” Keith explained, his own voice almost unrecognizably husky, but the admission was worth it from the way Lance reddened and bit his lip before falling back a little more into the mattress, sighing with a nod.

Lance kept his eyes open, but they were heightened by a scowl while Keith still held his hand just-so over his clothed erection. “Can we get on with it, I needed my pants off fucking yesterday.”

Well. How could Keith say no to that?

He helped Lance out of his pants first, pulling them off and then his own, but both of their underwear remained entirely in the way.

“W-What is it?” Lance had scooted back further on the bed, his elbows holding up his upper body as Keith stared at him.

The Prince couldn’t decide if he was endlessly amused or even more fucking turned on. Instead of explaining this dilemma, he simply asked, “Are those my boxers?”

“Ohhh… uh… maybe…” Lance seemed not to have realized, judging by his reaction, that he was wearing Keith’s fucking boxers and for some reason that did things to his mind that were downright
sacreligious. The idea that any of those people earlier, touching Lance, while Lance was in his clothes beneath their lingering hands was... so fucking satisfying.

His mouth was dry, and he ended up ripping the boxers right off of Lance’s body, tearing the fabric down the side. The tanned boy seem so surprised he let out a little yelp, but Keith just threw his own off before crawling back on top of him, and Lance’s eyes were wide as Keith sat back over him him, drinking in the image before him, both of their dicks so hard they were almost flat against their respective stomachs.

His whole figure was supine over the sheets, muscles sculpted just enough to keep him trim but not so much that he wasn’t soft, his chest smooth all the way down to the base of his cock, where curling dark hairs framed his thighs. Jesus, his stomach was tight, but soft, and he ran his hands down the thin dip of his waist and hips, taking lustful joy in every squirm and pull and tug of Lance’s body beneath him. The supple reach of his long limbs, paired with the deep stains of color that bloomed up his chest and over his face, was positively maddening.

With Lance’s whole body on full display, spread out beneath him, Keith’s sanity and filter went right out the fucking window.

“God, fuck, you’re so fucking pretty, Lance,” he practically growled, leaning down and almost shivering at the chill of soft brown skin over his own burning body. His lips hungrily sought out the side of Lance’s neck, taking time to glare at the bruises remained there with seething hatred — this, these marks of someone else on Lance’s body, this was something that could not be forgiven — and he began to suckle over any and every inch of skin, purple, brown, or red.

“Ke-ah-Keith,” the broken cry of his name was too fucking much, and his teeth joined his tongue and mouth in reclaiming every little bit of Lance he could touch. Curses dripped from his mouth and he panted, forehead hitting the mattress over Lance’s shoulder when a hand started to stroke him between their stomachs.

He had to keep himself from bucking into it, gritting his teeth. “Lance, ah, fuck, want to — fuck you. Is thaa-ah that okay?”

Lance’s hand stopped for a moment, and he nodded. Keith glanced at his face and could instantly tell something was wrong, pinched and almost... distant?

“You don’t — we don’t have to,” he said immediately, rubbing his thumb over Lance’s cheek, adoring the way the other boy leaned into it. “I can bottom, it’s both our firsts and I — I don’t want you to feel like — ”

“Fuck, Keith, I’m trying not to cum here, you saying that isn’t h-helping.” Lance choked on his own words, and Keith realized the loss of Lance’s hand stroking him had been because he’d moved to his own cock, gripping the base steadily in an effort to keep himself together. Stupidly, the Prince flushed with pride, almost wishing Lance hadn’t stopped himself; the idea of having him cum virtually untouched, simply under the pleasure of Keith’s mouth and hands on his body?

Fuck, thinking about it almost made him cum.

“Which... which do you want?” Keith asked once he watched Lance’s face smooth out, the almost pained furrow of his brow disappearing. “I need you to be okay with it so I don’t... tell me what you want.”

Lance let out a few laughs and his head tilted back and forth over the mattress, like he couldn’t believe they were having this conversation.
“G-God, I can’t… you... would you just fuck me already? I’m literally going to die here if you don’t.”

Oh.

Well, then.

Sure. Yes.

He could definitely accommodate. Definitely. Okay.

Don’t fucking panic or freak out or act like it’s a big deal, because it’s not like — it’s not like the most beautiful person he’s ever met just demanded that Keith fuck him, or else he would die. No big deal.

If he hadn’t said it with such amusing impatience, Keith might have hesitated or asked again, just to be sure, but he was also certain his soul would just slip right out of his mortal body if he tried to speak on the matter again.

Instead, like a child showing off their goddamn drawing to a parent, he just blankly stated, “I have lube.”

“Of fucking course you do, w-what are you waiting for? Go get it,” Lance panted out, eyes closed as he laid back on the mattress.

Keith was glad Lance seemed to at least have enough sense to tell him what to do, because he probably would have just sat there and eye-fucked him when, oh, oh my god, I could actually be fucking him instead of just imagining it.

The Prince thanked the universe for his years of Blade training, because lord knows he needed the force of will and ability to focus when stumbled from the bed, pushing through the mess of bottles in his bathroom, not wasting a single second until he found the one he was looking for and grabbed it before sprinting back to the room.

Oh, oh, oh god, Lance was fingering himself, eyes closed and back arching and holy fucking hell the sight was terrifying because it was so fucking erotic Keith felt like the wind had been knocked out of him. Vaguely, he was aware that his heart had never pounded harder, louder, or faster than it was at that moment — he was even a little surprised Lance couldn’t hear it from where he laid, pliant and writhing on the bed.

He was tempted to just stroke himself and watch, but again, Keith was trying to instill the fact that — that he could be the one making Lance fall to pieces under his fingers and he was back to the bed in the next fucking heartbeat, something guttural and primal taking over as he squeezed the lube out over his fingers, not even announcing he’d returned. When he mounted the bed, kneeling, Lance blinked out of his own little world.

“Finally,” he breathed, chest falling like it had taken the Prince six years instead of six seconds to find the bottle. “I’m surprised you could find anything in t-there with — aah!”

Keith had removed Lance’s finger with one hand and slipped in his own lubed ones, starting with just one to be safe but quickly adding a second since Lance had already been working himself. Whatever smart comment he’d had prepared was gone in a desperate string of pleas and moans.

“A-ah, K-Keith, oh, fuck, ah, hurry,” Lance babbled, back arching when Keith obliged, digging deeper into him, curling his fingers, trying to find that spot. He hasn’t done this to anyone else
before, but he knew it had to be there, he just had to…

“Fuck!” Lance jolted so suddenly Keith’s fingers almost slipped out of him, and Keith relished in the momentary victory.

Using his free hand, Keith pulled Lance’s body closer to his over the sheets, up to where he was kneeling so that Lance was spread, legs on either side of Keith’s knees. The glide of his tight walls, jostling when Keith moved his body, brought a sound out of his Lance that Keith would probably fantasize about for the rest of his life, a sob and a moan, mixed with a “yes” that just pushed him to fuck Lance with his fingers even faster.

Searching more purposefully this time for that bunch of nerves and his cock twitching when Lance’s head rolled back, Keith stroked it slow and deep, his other hand matching the rhythm over Lance’s erection. Now that Keith had gotten himself calmed down, at least enough to be able to focus again, he wanted to watch Lance lose himself to the pleasure, wanted him to be desperate for something more than just his fingers.

Because, have no doubts, Keith had every intention of giving him more. He just wanted to enjoy Lance’s cries and sounds and the supple flesh of his thighs as they kicked lightly at the bed while Keith continued to brush against his prostate, adding a third finger and relishing in his responsiveness.

For just half a second, the Prince had enough clarity through the wanton haze to comprehend, at some more abstract level, that he couldn’t believe this was happening. That he and the boy spread out under him, gasping and chanting his name in blind pleasure, had somehow fallen into a bizarre sequences of coincidences and then consequently into his bed, here, like this. Keith being Lance’s first, and the only, source of pleasure added to his own hunger to continue to do more, that even fucking Lance wouldn’t be enough, he needed all of him, all of the time. They needed to do this every day, all night, he needed to see Lance in this state more than just once, more than a hundred times, and even then he would want to see it again and again.

Well. That was a plan he could figure out later, because Lance had just crossed into new territory.

“P-pplease, Ke-Keith, ah, ahh I need, mo-more, please, ne-need to fe-feel you. Please, please, please,” he panted, his voice almost hoarse as he begged, and fuck, thank you, he said to no one in particular, but he felt the need to say it anyways because thank you for giving him the patience to have waited to hear it. His whole body was abuzz with desire, making everything, everywhere he touched Lance incredibly sensitive, and when he finally pulled out his fingers, Lance’s formerly blissed-out, rolled-head, trembling stopped with a whine.

“You want more?” He asked, wiping the excess lube from his fingers onto the sheets. He added a little more from the bottle and stroked himself, just enough to coat himself down to the base, and waited, but the response didn’t come.

A quiet Lance would not do. His desire needed to hear him, pull him into every one of his senses, so Keith backed up rather than move forward. “Lance, do you want more?”

“W-Why are you — just, p-please…” he struggled on the sheets like he was trying to crawl down after him, but Keith held each of his thighs in place and leaned forward, trailing bruising kisses into the skin there and insistently, sucking until purple marks appeared on the delicate brown flesh, loving the dark contrast over Lance’s skin.

The Prince had never wanted any one thing in his life so badly, but he couldn’t waste the opportunity to make this beautiful boy writhe, loving the way he responded to everything and anything Keith did.
So, instead of giving in, he murmured into the plush of his thighs, “Tell me what you, Lance. If you want it, you have to ask for it.”

The brunette had enough, clearly, because his legs locked over Keith’s hips and pulled him up again, almost unbalancing him enough to have him fall over Lance’s chest.

Dark, dark blue eyes glared at him, lashes casting tiny shadows of the last few freckles that hadn’t disappeared beneath his flush, he was panting, forehead slicked with sweat, and when he spoke, he sounded desperate and furious and perfectly needy. It was music to the Prince’s ears, stirring some desires he hadn’t even known he had.

“Want you,” Lance breathed, not blinking, not looking away. “Want you inside me, want to cum on you, please, please, Keith, I want to feel you fuck me, please.”

Well… so much for Keith’s resolve. He couldn’t even manage a word in response, instead reaching down and navigating the head of his cock right up against Lance’s loose hole, the skin on skin slipperiness causing them both to shudder. The lube had warmed between their body heat and now it just felt like a welcome stickiness like the sweat over both of their bodies, a reminder that they had done this to each other.

If breaching Lance was pleasure, then bottoming out in him was pure fucking hedonism.

Every inch of him that went deeper, Keith felt a surge of pleasure as the tightness of Lance’s ass stretched to accommodate him, and he didn’t realize he was holding his breath until the sigh fell from his lips as he stilled, hips flush against Lance’s thighs on the bed, waiting second after agonizing second for the man to adjust.

He had enough sense left to ask, still inches from Lance’s face, as he studied it for signs of anxiety, hurt, pain, pleasure — anything. “Are you okay?”

Lance’s breathing had turned shallow and his face was pinched, brow low over eyes half-lidded, his voice catching and scratching up octaves until Keith had stopped, waited. He nodded and shook his head, which was basically the definition of mixed messages, so Keith tried again.

“Lance, am I hurting you? You need to t-tell me,” his breath caught, and his voice along with it, when Lance adjusted his weight and it was like white stars burst in his fucking vision.

“Need a-a tick… fucking… god…”

Keith hadn’t known until it was happening, but he realized now that he had mostly certainly waited eighteen fucking years just for this. He could wait a few seconds more.

Finally, finally, Lance let out bone-deep shiver, a broken request ripping from his throat.

“Move.”

The Prince almost wanted to just die, because honestly, he wasn’t going to be able to last like this, and he’d only just been seated long enough for Lance to be ready. Just, fucking christ, give him some credit that he had even lasted this long.

But Keith would sooner blow up his own fucking castle before he denied Lance any sort of pleasure, so he rocked his hips back and thrust in a second time, hard, both of them groaning at the sensation. It was almost too much, and he didn’t know what to do with himself — he wanted to fuck Lance into the mattress with everything he had, until Lance had no words left besides Keith’s name on his lips, but at the same time he wanted to enjoy it, savor that sensation, draw out every breath from
those soft lips, drive Lance to a slow madness with every stroke.

So he tried, dammit, he tried to go slow. Tried with everything he had if only to make sure he wasn’t hurting Lance. Pulled almost all the way out, only to bury himself in that intoxicating, tight heat, waiting for each flutter of those pretty lashes to stop before doing it again, fuck, and again, oh my god, only for his instincts to overpower his will and before long, the pace as no longer gentle. He had maybe held out that way for three minutes before the slow roll of his hips became sweet, sinful thrusts that was met with lecherous, wonderful sounds that filled the room as Lance took every inch of him, again and again.

“Yess, fuck, fuck, yessssss Keith, don’t stop, please, fuck — ”

For his part, Keith was hardly better, groaning and panting and whispering in Lance’s ear everything and anything that came to his mind. “You feel so fucking good Lance, god look at you, so pretty and taking it so good, I want to fuck you all night, just like this.”

Lance held on, literally, to anything he could, hands switching between the sheets and Keith’s back, shoulders, and finally settling into his hair. He dragged some of Keith’s attention back to his mouth which, in his own throes of pleasure, he had been shamefully neglecting.

Agonizingly, the Prince forced himself to slow down, but it was like trying to deny the best drug in existence, the most unbelievable pleasure he could fathom that didn’t just make his heart race or mind spin but cried out his name through it all and if that wasn’t addicting that Keith honestly didn’t know what was. But, he did it anyways, holding himself up with two hands so that he could really look at Lance, see him, watch him, enjoy him, pleasure him, share this with him.

Lance was too blissed out at first to realize that Keith’s chest had lifted from his, only realizing what had happened once Keith moved a hand to his face. The Prince tried to keep his touch as light as possible because, who was he kidding? Fuck it if he was stupid and sentimental but this pretty, obnoxious, radiant being was, at least to him, at least right now, precious, and maybe the most important thing in the world. Maybe he had been since the first day they’d met, or maybe it just grew every time they were together; he didn’t know, and right now, he didn’t care. All Keith knew was that he would fucking cherish Lance as long as he let him.

“Keith,” Lance preened out his name, and as if to reward him, Keith sank down to suckle one of his scales in response. They fluttered and glowed at odd moments, and they made the blue of his eyes seem even brighter. “A-Ahh, not… not going to… last, f-fuck,”

Lance managed between gasps, navigating his face back to meet eye-to-eye. “Are you — are you e-close?”

Honestly, he almost laughed. The automatic response that popped into his head, I was close fifteen minutes ago, seemed a little overly eager and not like the right thing to say.

He moved his mouth down, down beneath his jaw, working tireless hickies into the column of his throat. “Yes, I’m, aah, I’m so close, d-do you want me to…?”

In hindsight, Keith should have probably asked about coming in Lance sooner, just in case he wasn’t comfortable with the idea, because he couldn’t even get the words out to correctly express the question.

“Yes, yes, yes,” Lance chanted, hips rising off the bed to meet Keith’s thrusts, which started to speed up again under his encouragement, turning from steady movement to a brutal, ruthless pressure against Lance’s prostate. “Yes, yes, come, come in me, yes, fuck, fuck — Keith! A-Ah-h!”
The stream of hot seed that splattered between their stomachs destroyed the very last piece of Keith’s mind, and, almost possessively, he moved his hands to Lance’s hips and forced himself ever further, impossibly harder into his tight little hole and Lance practically cried in ecstasy as Keith came, buried as deep as he could go, body cresting over a wave of pleasure.

“Fuck, Lance, yes,” he choked out the words between desperate breaths, mind whiting out as he spilled his seed inside of him, pulse after pulse of hot liquid coating those walls that flexed around him almost greedily, and Lance shuddered as he took in all of it. Keith was barely lucid enough to consider the fact that he’d definitely never come so much at once by his own hands, only able to focus on the shaking of his body, barely supporting his weight on top of Lance as he felt the last of his climax finally release.

They were both panting, bodies slick with sweat and, in the case of their stomachs, sticky with Lance’s cum. Keith took a moment to breathe, eyes peeling open to find a very dopey-smiling Lance looking up at him, his own chest rising and falling rapidly.

Carefully, Keith leaned forward so he could kiss Lance, this time as soft as he could, just tasting the light salt of their sweat stuck to his skin and the saccharine, indescribable honey-like sweetness of his mouth. During the momentary distraction, at which Lance immediately melted to Keith’s touch, he pulled out of Lance slow enough not to hurt but fast enough that neither of them would suffer too much in terms of overstimulation. A little gasp pushed into his mouth when he finally pulled out of Lance, quickly followed by a groan.

“Uuugh,” Lance whined almost immediately, and Keith had to laugh — he almost giggled, totally undignified but helplessly amused by the other’s response. It was just so Lance that Keith had to bite his lip to keep from losing it completely.

“Yeah, yeah, laugh all you want, remember that next time you want to come inside me,” Lance ground out, no conviction behind the threat whatsoever. It probably had the reverse effect, because, now all Keith could think about was the fact that he said next time.

After a few deep breaths because, gods, they just finished and now Lance was already making him think about a potential next time which was making his brain spill forth with a lot of images that would end up with him fully hard again at this rate — what was he, fourteen all over again? — Keith shook his head and got up, hurried over to the bathroom and brought out a damp towel and a dry one.

He wiped down Lance’s stomach and between his thighs legs as gently but thoroughly as he could, checking the other’s expression several times to make sure he wasn’t displaying any signs of pain or discomfort before eventually cleaning off himself. Lance was just smiling with an arm thrown over his eyes, looking totally at ease.

(***BACK TO YOUR REGULARLY SCHEDULED SLIGHT NSFW KLANCE***)

Keith paused before finally getting up to throw the towels in with the laundry. Hesitantly, he decided to lean over and press a simple kiss into Lance’s bare stomach. It made him blush, which was silly because they’d literally just had sex and had made all sorts of lewd sounds and requests but for some reason this made him lose his cool. He scowled at the spot he’d kissed for a moment before pulling the covers around and pulling them over Lance’s legs and most of his torso to keep him warm in the chilly bedroom. He got up immediately after, moving away, setting off to find Lance a fresh pair of his boxers (which, like, yes, please).

As he brought them over to the bed, picking up Lance’s abandoned shirt along the way, the tanned-skinned boy finally lifted the arm that had been shielding his eyes. They were bright blue, dancing in
the low-light spilling in from outside and accented by a breathtaking smile.

Clearing his throat, Keith held out the clothes and looked around anxiously. “Do you want to take a bath, or anything? Can I… do you want anything?”

Lance just yawned and sleepily shook his head, lifting his hips and putting on the boxers beneath the covers before doing the same with the shirt. “Thanks. I’ll probably regret it in the morning, but I’ll pass on the bath. I’m just too exhausted… Do you wanna…?”

In lieu of finishing his question, Lance pushed himself around so that his head was near the pillows and untucked the blanket, inviting Keith into his own bed, a fact that was annoying in the most endearing way possible… but of course he wanted to.

Keith pulled on his own shirt and pants from earlier and crawled in beside Lance, whose eyes were open and gazing up at the ceiling in quiet meditation. They were a little unevenly off Keith’s side of the bed, but he didn’t bother complaining as Lance laid an arm around him, and he tentatively rested his ear over Lance’s chest, right above his heart. It was still racing, which was a gratifying thing.

This was so much of what Keith had been missing, and he hadn’t even known it until he had it. Now that he did, the thought of Lance ever being anywhere but right here was actually painful. It wasn’t even — it wasn’t even just the sex, which, gods Keith could certainly get used to — but the fact that he was pleasantly cool and comfortable, soothing the burning ache and fire within him that never seemed as present when they were together.

Quiet, easy. Comfortable. Whole.

He should say something.

“Lance?” Keith lifted his head, and the brunette’s attention shifted.

A sleepy hum followed. “Mm.”

*I think I’m in love with you.*

He swallowed, deciding to say something a little less frightening to him right now.

“That meeting I had with Shiro this morning, I uh, forgot to mention. The Blades said there’s a threat on my life and that I might be targeted tomorrow for an assassination attempt… so…”

“What?!” Lance flew up, which, okay it was probably a little scary to hear, but he looked like Keith had just told him that his mother was dead. “Why didn’t you — oh, oh god, you didn’t — *we didn’t* — because you thought you’d…?”

Color drained from Lance’s face, and Keith was enormously confused. “What? What are you talking about?”

He ran a hand through his hair, gaze distant, and it was making the Prince extremely nervous. “Lance, please, what is it?”

“You —” he choked, leaning away in the bed so he was nearly hanging off the other side. “You didn’t, we didn’t just do that in case you die tomorrow, right?”

“Oh,” he winced, because, *duh*, bringing up getting *assassinated* probably did make for very good pillow talk. “No, no god — *no*. I sincerely hope I *don’t* die because I definitely want to do that, like, *all the time*. That was — it had nothing to do with that, sorry, I’m...”
A little laugh escaped him as he watched the tension loosen in Lance’s shoulders, not as embarrassed as he thought he’d be about the fact that he just admitted to wanting Lance so much, so entirely.

Maybe it was the silly afterglow or something. That was probably a thing?

“I honestly forgot to tell you until now because I couldn’t at the ball, but it was the ‘new development’ I mentioned during our dance from the Blades and my guards. And then I didn’t even think about it when I got back because I was… worried…” he looked away, scowling as he recalled what Pidge had told him. God, he hoped it wasn’t as bad as she described, because it sounded like Lotor had practically tried to get Lance to fuck him right in the middle of the ball. The mere thought of it had his vision tinting red, and he realized he was white-knuckling the sheets when a dark hand slid atop his, and he relaxed immediately.

“Worried about my favorite color?” Lance teased, but Keith was just glad he seemed to accept the apology and chalked it up to misunderstanding. “Sorry, I just didn’t expect that… I shouldn’t have made it about me — us — anyway. If someone is trying to hurt you, that’s serious. What is the… threat? Plot? I don’t know what you call something like that.”

Keith nodded and sat back against his pillows, eyes tracing swirling shapes into the darkness of his ceiling. “It’s all a lot of speculation, but from what Shiro and Kolivan told me, it sounds like a guard slept with a maid from the Galran court yesterday. After they hooked up, she tried to convince him to run away with her, said that things weren’t safe and basically alluded to some sort of attack happening on the third night of the ball. We think it’ll be during an event early in the evening — there’s a special summit peace thing that runs concurrently with the ball, and the security will be all off tomorrow for that reason. It’s supposed to be a negotiation opportunity for the Olkari-Galra conflict that’s hosting both leaderships, and the leadership of Altea and, obviously, Marmora.”

Lance, still sitting up in bed, was looking at him with a thoughtful gaze.

“So if the maid was Galra, is the attack suspected to be from the Galra?” He asked, and Keith nodded.

“The story basically came out to be that the girl could be lying to get our guards distracted, which means something else big is going on and she planted to give a false lead, or she was being honest and there’s really an attack planned which is… also not good.”

Lance let out a “huh” and turned over so he was facing Keith on one side, head propped up by his elbow and brow raised. “And what do you think? About her lying or not, I mean.”

The Prince grimaced. “I don’t know — I feel like it’s unlikely that someone will try to outright murder me in the company of a bunch of other people, but hey, I wouldn’t put it past Lotor or Zarkon to try to have me stabbed in broad daylight.”

“…We really shouldn’t make talking about homicide after doing hot and heavy things a habit,” Lance said, eyes narrowed.

Keith smiled a little. “It seems more likely that it’s a distraction for something else, but we don’t know what that could be which makes the whole thing that much more confusing. Matt, Pidge’s brother, is actually helping out with some translations relating to some… actually, it’s a long story, we don’t have to talk about all of this.” Keith sighed, realized he was probably boring Lance with this much detail, but the other boy snapped up like the Prince had slapped him.

He shook his head and made a point of looking around the room before meeting his gaze, deadpan. “Do you honestly think I have somewhere else to be right now? Getting murdered is sort of a big deal, and I want to be here, so keep talking.”
That was a good point. Keith smirked, and shrugged before continuing.

“Well... there was a trading caravan out between Marmora and Puig that got raided a few weeks ago. For a whole bunch of specific reasons, the Blade think the bandits took the stolen materials and brought them into Marmora. Possibly to start some sort of civil conflict that will weaken us internally so they might try to strike when our defenses are down. And by ‘they,’ and ‘strike,’ I mean, Daibaazal and war. They want to declare war, or more accurately, want us to declare war so it looks like they’re playing defensively and that we’re the aggressors.”

“Geez… typical day in the life of a Prince?”

“You could say that,” Keith frowned, and he shifted a bit in place. “We’re just not sure what sort of thing they could be planning. Matt’s research is pointing to some sort of like, drug activity — like unleashing a super potent drug into the streets and let the citizens go crazy. That’s basically worst case scenario, because we really can’t do anything to contain or control that. He didn’t seem super confident in that possibility, though, so we’re really not sure. Matt’s looking into more things that could be done with the things that were stolen right now. Well, he might be sleeping right now, but you know what I mean.”

“Yeah… wow. I had no idea that any of this was going on. Are you okay?”

Keith raised a brow, glancing to make sure Lance wasn’t teasing him, but his expression looked drawn in simple concern. “Well, yeah, nothing has happened yet. Ask me again this time tomorrow and we’ll see.”

A little laugh passed over Lance, but he shook his head. “Well I mean clearly you’re okay, but are you, like, handling it well? That’s a lot of stress. No wonder you’re so bent out of shape over everything.”

“Hey!” Keith snapped, but his scowl just twisted into a frustrated smirk because Lance had just so clearly baited him and he fell right into it, judging by the pleased grin on the other’s face. “I’m good enough. It is a lot of stress but it’s like this all the time. This is literally my whole life, Lance.”

“Hmm,” the other frowned, nodding like he wanted to say more but was chewing on the words, trying to decide if they were worth it. Instead, Keith used this opportunity to grapple with one of the things he’d been working himself up to earlier. Now he just had to seize his courage, go through with it, and manage not to sound like a controlling, manipulative ass.

Okay. Deep breath.

“So... anyway, I wanted you to know because... well, I wanted you to know because it’s important, of course, but I also, uh, there’s going to be some... dangerous stuff going on in the castle and likely centered around the ball. Are you sure you and Blue should be down there? I’d — I’d feel better if you guys didn’t go.”


Nevertheless, Lance pursed his lips while he appeared to think the idea over. If he doesn’t heed Keith’s warning, he'll honestly probably end up asking at least two... maybe four, or five just to be safe... Blade members to watch Lance at all times or else he’d never be able to stand letting him out of his sight during the summit, but he hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Lance; quite the opposite. He didn’t trust anyone but Lance, the Blade, his knights, his mother, and, as a consequence of the watch on his wrist, Hunk and Pidge, too.
Finally, Lance shrugged and gave the Prince a pointed look. “Blue’s really exhausted after earlier, so I can’t really ask her right now. In the morning, I’ll talk to her about it. If she needs me to go, though, I will; if not, I’ll stay.”

He smiled, relieved that at least Lance was considering it. That was more than he could ask for.

“Speaking of which, I’ve got some of my own news to share. So,” Lance cleared his throat and folded his hands in front of him like a business person. Keith snorted. “You know Princess Allura?”

“...No, never heard of her. Please, tell me, who is that?” Keith said with such perfect impassivity, he was sure Kolivan would be proud of him. Not that Kolivan would ever show it — that was the point.

“Ass,” Lance remarked, unphased. “Anyway. Princess Allura came to your room today with Coran, and she laid out a whole bunch of mystical philosophical stuff out that basically explains Blue, the watches, and, like, everything. She knows that we’re paladins; she knows a whole buncha shit. On the first night she came up to me and said she could recognize me because of my… quintessence, energy-flow stuff?”

The Prince blinked, surprised but enough out of his depth that he wasn’t sure what to do with that information. He just nodded and prompted him to continue. “So what does it all mean? What are we supposed to do with them?”

He nodded at Lance’s watch, and then at his own.

“Wellllll,” he hummed. “That’s the thing. At least for me, I’m not supposed to do anything abnormal. It’s like this big circle of life thing, right? How did Allura explain it? She was way better at this. So if, like, the whole universe can be summed up in planting a flower, okay, and the whole circle of quintessence in the realm is in that flower’s life cycle, it will eventually be planted, grow, bloom, wither, and die, right? Well, she said, as paladins we’re given the… I don’t know, not ability, but like, the controls to steer the life cycle a bit more intentionally? Except it’s not intentional. Uh.”

Keith wondered is his face demonstrated his struggle to understand — because he certainly was struggling to understand — and Lance himself pouted.

“Okay, okay, it’s like this. Have you ever made cookies?”

“No?”

“Right, so, it’s like — wait, what?!” Lance appeared deeply offended before sitting up, rubbing his temples. “Of course you haven’t, your Highness, silly me.”

Keith rolled his eyes and settled more comfortably back into the mattress, turning his head in Lance’s direction. “And you call me an ass, ass.”

“Shut your pretty mouth,” Lance admonished, and Keith might have smiled, just a little. “A-n-y-w-a-y, you can make cookies a hundred different ways. It’s different combinations of similar ingredients that will ultimately end up with a batch of cookies, even if they’re underdone or burnt to hell, they’ll still be cookies. So like, we’re the bakers, and we get to sort of… help shape the dough? Except, instead of a recipe, I have Blue. She guides me to add the right proportions and mix stuff in the right way, but at the end of the day I’m still the one making the cookies, the dough is still my stuff. Just like, baking the right batch of cookies seems to have like, large consequences for the overall… kitchen, in this metaphor? Anyway.”

“That’s more of an analogy than a metaphor,” Keith pointed out. Lance promptly ignored him.
“So Blue is like, the ‘physical manifestation of the watches’ quintessence’ which like, cool, right? Apparently you all have one too, some sort of spirit of sorts that would… uh… represent your body’s energy and how it connects with the quintessence of the watch? That’s about the best way I can explain it. Allura said it’ll only show up as a physical presence if you really need them, like how Blue let me out of my aunt’s basement. It was sort of ‘desperate times calls for desperate measures’ so she came to me.”

Nodding along, the Prince allowed this information to sink in. Huh. So he had his own ‘Blue’? What would she be? Some sort of cat, like Lance’s? No, probably not if it was meant to reflect their personalities.

Red. Hmm. Red…

Red.

“Holy fucking shit,” he bolted upright, ready to jump out of bed. “Holy shit how did I not think of that before?!”

“W-What? Did you figure out who is trying to murder you? I swear it’s not me, Keith,” Lance looked dead serious, which only made his weird admission funnier. The Prince let out a disbelieving laugh — more like some glorified puffs of air, but whatever — and buried his face in his hands.

“I am such an idiot, Lance, my horse’s name is Red. I’ve had her for a really, really long time. Do you think she’s…?”

The tanned boy’s jaw dropped, and he started to snicker and clutch his stomach, falling back on the bed and shaking his head. “How did you JUST make that connection?! Blue and Red? IT’S SO OBVIOUS!”

“I — I don’t know! I didn’t expect my longtime horse to possibly be a magical cookie recipe guardian… thing!” He glared at the giggling Altean-hybrid, who only laughed harder. “And she’s never like, done anything magical, it could be a coincidence!”

Pink-faced from the laughter, Lance just shook his head and flopped back on the bed, and Keith begrudgingly sank down beside him. He kept his focus on the ceiling, while Lance’s head turned his way, his voice uncharacteristically serious.

“You should try to talk to her tomorrow since you’ve got the watch now. I couldn’t understand Blue before I put mine on. Maybe it is a coincidence, or maybe it’s not. A horse would make for a cool guardian, a lot more useful than a sleepy cat.”

Keith sucked his teeth before letting out a little snort. “Isn’t it supposed to represent your connection with the watch? So that would make you the sleepy cat, Lance.”

“You wish,” he hummed, which like, what the fuck — that doesn’t even make sense? He was truly impossible to understand sometimes. “Oh, by the way, I’m not allergic to anything.”

“...Huh?” Keith blinked his way, confused.

Lance, to his surprise, looked a little pink around his ears and was looking away, at the large windows that opened to the balcony. “You asked, earlier, you know? About me. My favorite color is red. I don’t have any allergies… that I know of, but your crappy Marmoran air makes me sneeze a lot. My village is called Varadero. I don’t have any foods in particular I dislike, but I love Hunk’s cooking and basically anything with lots of spice. Also, garlic knots. That shit is the bomb.”
After a pause and a small shrug, Lance rolled away, back to him, and tucked himself mostly beneath the covers. “I don’t remember any of the other questions. Now, you go.”

“I…” Keith’s brain was kicking into overdrive, trying to store away all of this information at once. Yes! This was exactly what he’d tried to convey earlier, but instead he fucking burst into the room yelling about Lance’s favorite color. Somehow, Lance still decided to sleep with him after that embarrassing display.

He shook his head. “I didn’t grow up in a village?”

“Oh my god, just, list off some things about growing up in the castle then. Allergies? Other potential magical pets? Imaginary friends? Take your pick, because I’m not getting out of this bed unless someone drags me out and I’m not even remotely tired anymore.”

He was glad Lance was turned away, because Keith felt a weird surge of warmth through him. Stupid affection. Stupid falling in love with this beautiful person. Stupid heart and brain.

Turning onto his side, with Lance’s back more or less facing him, Keith reached out and, after a moment of hesitation, carefully rested his hand over Lance’s hip beneath the blanket. Gosh, how was he always so cold? It made Keith’s skin tingle. After a slight twitch from Lance, but otherwise making no move to push off Keith’s fingers, the Prince took a deep breath.

“Okay... I started training with the Blades when I was five, and ever since my Mom and I would sneak down servants hallways and use… well, honestly, pretty dangerous means of getting around the castle, but it was a lot of fun. It’s made a lot of my training less of ‘second-nature’ and just, sort of, my nature. Crafted my instincts and intuition in a certain way.”

Lance was quiet for a moment before a let out a little giggle, glancing back at him over his shoulder. “So you’re saying that the nickname Knife Boy was a fairly accurate one?”

He didn’t laugh at Lance’s dumb joke. Well, okay, maybe he did, but only a little. “I guess you could say that. What else? Oh, yeah, I’m not allergic to anything, but I am lactose intolerant.”

“Aw, what? That sucks!” Lance pouted. “You’ll never be able to have any of Kaltenecker’s awesome milkshakes… Oof, I hope she’s okay. I sort of had to just leave everything back at my aunts on Thursday. Didn’t exactly plan for, uh, any of this.” Lance shifted slightly beneath Keith’s hand, and the Prince’s heart jumped right into his throat when a cool hand rested over his, carefully intertwining their fingers together.

“S-so,” he coughed. “How did you get Kaltenecker, anyway?”

“Oh, now that’s a story,” Lance rolled back so he was facing the ceiling again, ending up fairly close to Keith. Their hands didn’t untangle, but came to rest over Lance’s stomach. “Alright, so, there I was — three decaphoebs ago, me and Hunk, it’s the night I really became friends with Pidge, actually. So, the dream team…”

And he listened to Lance talk, laugh, pause for dramatic effect, poorly imitate voices, and altogether regale the tumultuous story that ended up with him owning a cow and at least two mortal enemies. Keith listened and observed, enjoying the brightness of his smile when a particularly conniving part of the plan involving Pidge came up, or the way he sighed contently when Hunk tried to talk them down from doing something stupid, or how his free hand gestured animatedly while the one joined with his flopped around on occasion but otherwise just lay there with his.

“I’m just amazed my aunt let me keep her,” Lance concluded, looking energized and relaxed at the
same time. Honestly, the man was a living-breathing oxymoron, stupid and brilliant in Keith’s eyes, so he shouldn’t have been surprised. “It was pretty easy once I told her that using Kaltenecker’s milk would not only be fresher but a lot cheaper. And I can sell a backstock of it occasionally at market for extra coin.”

“Sounds like you got… really, really lucky,” Keith smirked. “And that you owe your ass to Pidge and Hunk, but definitely lucky.”

“Yeah.” His smile was fucking dazzling and he looked over like this was the happiest moment of his life, like just talking to Keith about his dumb stories was somehow extra special. “I am pretty lucky, aren’t I?”

Stupid and brilliant. Yep. That was Lance alright.

Keith hated that his own pale skin continued to betray him when he felt himself redden, seeing as Lance looked right at him when he said that. Scowling, Keith pulled up his arm and looked at his watch.

“We need to stop going to bed at two AM,” he concluded. “Shiro is going to kill me if I don’t wake up on time tomorrow.”

“Well, then you’ve found your murderer! Mystery solved.” Lance shrugged, checking his own watch, probably out of habit. “It was Shiro from the beginning. How did we not see it sooner? Oh, or better yet, maybe Shiro has an evil clone, ooooh, how scary.”

“You really like telling stories, don’t you?” mused the Prince, and Lance’s smile flickered. He seemed tense again. “Oh, yeah, I talk a lot, don’t I?”

“I like it,” Keith admitted a little awkwardly. “I’m not good at talking to… well, anyone, actually. Funny since I’m basically a born diplomat. I just like to listen sometimes.”

Lance looked at him for several seconds with an unreadable expression, and Keith just raised a brow at him. “What?”

“Oh, oh, nevermind,” Lance’s head turned back the other way. “I just said something similar once to my Mamá. Except it was the opposite. I talk a lot, so sometimes for me, it was nice to listen to her stories. She told us a lot of them.”

Keith hummed. “Like the ones about all the constellations?”

“Yup,” he popped the ‘p’ sound, and his voice grew teasing. “Oh, oh, does the Prince want a bedtime story?

Opening his mouth to tell Lance promptly to shut his, Keith thought for a moment and decided to call him on the bluff. “No, not tonight. Too tired. But maybe tomorrow? Assuming all of the kingdom doesn’t go straight to hell with murder, drugs and criminals, and impending war in the next day or so.”

“Criminals. That’s what you tried to call Nyma,” his voice contained a smile. “You know, from that time you tried to stab me.”

“I don’t recall,” Keith said coolly, and to his amusement, Lance whipped right around and gave him an affronted look.
An adorable, affronted look. “You would have stabbed me if I wasn’t so gorgeous, admit it.”

He snorted, which only seemed to further upset the boy facing him.

“Admit it!”

“Never,” he said, closing his eyes and feigning sleep. “Not ever.”

There was a silence, tense and fleeting, and the Prince almost cracked open an eye to judge Lance’s reaction but stopped short when he felt a tremble of breath over his mouth, and his heart stilled in his chest.

“Keith?”

To open his eyes, or keep them closed? The indecision was killing him, but he decided to just try to keep a plain face and hum a response.

“Mmm.”

“You’re dumb and I hate you.”

Ironically, Lance kissed him, gently at first, slow ticks growing into something heady and wonderful. It wasn’t salacious, no teeth or tongues involved, but slow and soft. When they pulled apart, Keith felt the weight of Lance’s forehead resting on his own and cracked through his closed lashes.

Dim, soft blue glowed between them, Lance’s cheeks an illuminate reflection of the tender moment. It almost stole his breath away, totally unfair, that he had magic on his side. Keith was just a totally head-over-heels royal that was lucky enough to be here, looking up at him.

The best he could manage was a little grin and said, “Go to bed, you.”

“You first,” Lance murmured teasingly, and Keith just rolled his eyes and adjusted his weight, forcing Lance back to his own space and, getting comfortable and letting his eyes slip closed. “It’s not a competition, Lance.”

Sleepily, the other boy muttered, “Sounds like something someone who is losing would say…”

“Why are you like this?” Keith shook his head, not that Lance could see it, they were both letting the waves of unconsciousness pull them from the shore, out to a peaceful sea.

“You know you love it.”

With a playful groan, the last thought that flitted through his head before he finally fell into blissful sleep was: yes, yes I do.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for everyone who voted in the strawpoll at the end of the last chapters :D I've decided to go with the galtean/timeskip AU as it was the most popular, but who knows, maybe I'll end up writing them all as all of my other WIPs fall into place XD
for now, if you're interested, please check out my new fic: cosmic dust never settles

summary:

"He spun away, unable to face his sister or her lion. Her lion. Not his. Blue was never his. Maybe that’s why he’d been robbed of her, because he was big-headed enough to think that he would take Blaytz’s place just because he wanted to, just because he’d prepared his whole life for the title of Blue Paladin did not mean he was deserving of it; that he believed he was entitled to her at all was his downfall. That’s not how Voltron works. Narcissists don’t become paladins. Upstanding, humble, worthy people become paladins. People like his sister, and his Father. Not people like Lance."

—

The war did not start 10,000 years ago. It's been ten years, technically, but the conflict has been raging almost as long as Lance has been alive. With Altea destroyed and the former paladins along with it, Lance is ready to bear the responsibility he's been preparing for his whole life. But then, fate had different plans, his life force bonded to the Voltron Lions instead of his sister's, and Lance without the right to pilot any of them. Throw in some warfare, a cute Galra-hybrid who is piloting his Father's lion, some aliens that call themselves 'human', lots of pining, and well...
The Red Paladin

Chapter Summary

In which, Lance actually manages to dream again, is a little bit of a disaster-bi-pining mess, and must begrudgingly accept that the castle is not actually haunted, and Keith gets Angry and questions his own mortality, leading him to discover what it really means to be the Guardian of Fire.

Also featuring: Hunk as the best friend anyone could ask for, Shiro as the guy who earns himself a REALLY well-deserved nap, Krolia as the gushing Mom, Lotor as the handsy fucker, and Coran as the good uncle who has a fascination with birds.

Hold on tight. It's the third and final day of the ball, so of course, there's going to be a Bonding Moment.

Chapter Notes

im sorry this took me so long to get out, i didn't want to split it into two chapters and i wanted it to be perfect so... THANK YOU to everyone who has read along, commented, kudos, subscribed -- this has become my third most popular fic on AO3 and I'm so proud of that! i definitely wouldn't be this motivated to work on it without all of your support!

and p.s. an extra special thanks to anyone who complimented the, uh, NSFW content from the last chapter -- I was REALLY nervous to share that because I've never written anything like it before and it was a huge boost to my confidence for it to be so well received so... thank you!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

[LANCE]

Lance remembered the exact day he stopped dreaming, the last night he’d had a dream that wasn’t just black unconsciousness.

He even remembered the dream.

It was pretty simple, honestly. It was just him sitting in the kitchen, eating a special cake his sister-in-law Sidonia had made for his birthday, something fresh and fruity since his birthday was in the summertime. His whole family was there, and they were just hanging out, laughing, talking. (No, in case you were wondering, his father was not there. Lance didn’t consider the man family at that particular point in his life.)

The real star of the dream had been the cake, though. So much cake. He ate so much freakin’ cake in
that dream, it was glorious. But then, everyone knows the old adage – you can’t have your cake and eat it too – so Lance ate and ate until he threw up. And that was basically it.

It’s not like he just woke up one day and decided to stop dreaming – he’s pretty sure people can’t just turn that on and off – it just sort of happened. Maybe his subconscious just decided for him, like, hey, kid, get a grip. Time to face reality, no use pining after things that don’t come true.

That sounded nice, and maybe that was even part of it.

Then again, if Lance was being honest, it probably had more to do with the fact that that had been the first night he’d ever spent in the cellar, which grew into a 75-varga marathon of restless panicking. As his memory served, back then, it must have been quintant since he’d eaten, but telling time in that black ocean was impossible, the tides stripping him of his senses. When it came to survival, he had no idea of his own limitations, but wine was wine and it had to be some amount of fruit, right? Imagine, having alcohol for the first time at the tender age of thirteen and getting so drunk you almost die, but you keep drinking it anyways because, how else are you going to survive? He learned his limitations pretty quickly after that dream – waking up covered in your own vomit, simultaneously thinking you’d gone blind, tended to do that to a person.

In retrospect, if he’d slept on his back, he almost certainly would have died, choked on dreams of a nonexistent birthday cake.

Anyway.

That was the last time he had a real dream.

And yet, here he was, three and a half decaphoebs later, dreaming again. He didn’t even think it was fucking possible to dream again.

Lance knew it wasn’t a sleep-dream, it was a dream, the sort of thing you write in a diary, wish upon the stars, that you pray to your many gods or your one God, to come true. The sort of thing a five-year old says when you asked them about their dreams and they say they want to make the world a better place or save sick puppies.

It was one of those dreams. Not surprising, really, because a sleep-dream would pale in comparison to this.

Five-year old Lance wanted to be a teacher or an astronomer when he grew up; that was his dream.

Seventeen-year old Lance just wanted to wake up like this for the rest of his life. That would be plenty. More than enough. He’d spend every fucking tick of the goddamn day being grateful if it meant he could have a few stolen moments in the morning like this, everyday.

Where instead of getting up, Lance stayed huddled in the warmth of the sheets, rich with the smell of Keith’s slightly smoky scent; the slow realization that, oh, that’s why I’m a little sore, because we had sex; enough time to relive the thrilling heat of the night before, of their skin touching everywhere, anywhere, because Keith was his and he was Keith’s; five dobosh to let his heart get back under control from racing, just so he could remind himself every morning that this, this, was his life. Somehow.

Lance was dreaming again. He missed it. It had been so long, gods, he missed being able to miss it. That’s how long it had been; he almost forgot what it felt like.

His watch told him it was just half-past seven. The muted morning light had just begun to brighten Keith’s bedroom, slowly filling the space like liquid in a glass through tall east-facing windows. The
general lack of glaring rays from the sun told him it must be cloudy today, though there was no pitter-patter of rain.

At some point, the hand Keith had put oh-so-gently on Lance’s hip the night before had returned, but it was now clutching his shirt over his solar plexus, lightly holding onto him. Keeping Lance close, tucked beside him, safe, comfortable, warm. Keith was literally doing all of nothing, and he still was making Lance feel the happiest he’d ever been, just by being asleep beside him.

Lance was pretty sure he spoke for anyone and everyone he’s ever met when he asked: what the actual fuck, right?

Keith was, quite literally, one of the few people in the world who could have anything they wanted. And this was what he wanted? Lance might not get it, but god, alright. Don’t have to twist his arm, happy to oblige. Yes please, and thank you.

Geez. His cheeks were actually starting to hurt from smiling so fucking much, and Lance had to force himself from giggling out loud, seeing as the Prince was still sleeping behind him.

What time had Shiro come to wake them up the previous morning? Should he wake Keith up, having soaked in the momentary quiet bliss? Part of him wanted to, wanted to pepper his face with tiny kisses to see if he’d be more annoyed or pleased, because when it came to the Prince, it seemed a very fine line between the two sometimes. The worst that could happen was that Knife Boy had a dagger hidden in the bed somewhere – would anyone really be surprised? – and Keith would promptly stab him, but man, what a way to go.

[I’d rather he didn’t stab you,] rumbled a familiar breath of cold, fresh air straight into his lungs.

Lance’s neck snapped in the direction from which the sound had originated, and he saw –

Blue! Lance nearly said it out loud but caught himself at the last second. Right, sleepy Prince, tucked behind him. She was seated across the room on one of Keith’s dressers, looking at him, tail flicking back and forth.

[Paladin, are you well? That man yesterday was… troubling. I am sorry I could not do more to help you once we returned.]

What, you mean Lotor’s bitch ass? Yeah, he sucked, but we got out of there, no harm done. Keith and I, uh, er, he got my… mind off of it?

The threads that stitched together his heart squeezed with a momentary rush of emotion, like a curtain that billowed with a light gust, pouring in few surprising rays of sunshine. Blue was definitely laughing at him.

[Is that what you call your coupling? The Angry One is a good choice for you, cub.]

I… want to disagree with that out of principal, but you can read my freakin’ thoughts.

They both knew he was joking anyways. The big grin plastered on his face as Blue leapt down to the carpet told them both plenty on how he felt about The Angry One.

Oh, yeah! Keith’s horse – her name is Red! Is that like, his version of you?

[Ah. Well. Perhaps. That is for the paladin to discover on their own, I’m afraid.]

Lance glowered a bit, because like, c’mon – not even a hint? He internally promised not to tell Keith,
but Blue didn’t budge.

*So are you up-to-speed on this whole murder plot thing? What’s the plan, Beautiful?*

A rapid chill, like a babbling brook cresting over his skin, ran down his body from head to toes in a pleasing sort of way; Blue liked the nickname, apparently. *Like Paladin like Guardian.*

[**Predicting the future is not within my power. While I would enjoy nothing more than to give you assurance of the Red Paladin’s safety, I can only help navigate your own course of fate. It is your choice whether or not you would like to attend this evening.**]

Lance nodded and settled down beside Keith a bit more intentionally, turning that information over in his mind. He honestly wasn’t sure what he wanted to do, because part of him was definitely feeling… danced out. It seemed like he’d danced with nearly everyone over the course of the two days, and anyone who he might be jilting by not going, well, their loss, right? That was sort of the problem with their lot and the whole entitlement thing – Lance didn’t owe any of them a dance, even if he felt like it was the equitable thing to do. Like they gave two fucks about equity.

Staying in Keith’s room, curled up beside Blue and just relaxing sounded appealing, especially after reflecting on his uncomfortable and, frankly, downright scary, departure yesterday; Lance would very much like to never be within a hundred yards of Prince Lotor ever again. It was also plainly obvious from the way Keith brought up the topic that he preferred Lance to stay here, probably on the premise of keeping him safe which, like – fuck you, Mullet, stop being so damn thoughtful – though he insisted Lance should do what he and Blue decided to be best.

Then again, for all the reasons he didn’t want to go, Lance also didn’t want to miss it. Just imagining having to wait until someone came to verify that, oh you know, Keith is or isn’t dead downstairs was almost insufferable. Lance didn’t think he could live with the possibility of something happening to Keith and he not being there to at least try to stop it. Yes, the Prince had guards, Blades, and he could certainly defend himself with those sharp eyes and shaper knives that he loved so much, but the idea of sitting around and being so fucking useless was maddening.

And, yes, okay – there was a slight draw to the fact that he wanted to dance with the Prince again, in spite of the risk and fear. That part was definitely selfish, but hey, at least Lance recognized it. This royal ball deal only happened once, and it was literally supposed to end with Keith “making a claim” and selecting the person he was to marry… and, maybe – geez, it was weird to think about – but would Keith maybe want to… marry him? Instead of Allura? Not right away or anything, but… maybe, eventually?

It just seemed so… so impractical, almost silly, but then, wasn’t the whole tradition silly? The premise that the Heir of Marmora’s kingdom was supposed to invite all of these people – many of whom were even less acquainted to the Prince than Lance had been at the start of it – and pick a spouse? The whole event relied on the assumption that Keith would have to at least entertain the idea of marrying a stranger.

And, considering the head that just nuzzled into his upper back, ebony hair tickling Lance’s neck, it was fair to say they weren’t strangers anymore.

But what was Lance supposed to do about it? What would going tonight really change? The whole affair was designed with the ending already written, the Prince and Princess were to be engaged and then married, live happily ever after, the end. That’s to say nothing of the political motivates that had been hinted towards, but were otherwise above his head. It’s a tale that a hundred times with hundreds of pairings and they always end the same, and even with all of his boyish charm, there just wasn’t enough time for him to unthread something of this magnitude, with this sort of ringing
finality. Lance couldn’t do anything to stop it.

And yet…

And yet.

Neither could Lance just sit around and wait. If he didn’t at least try to fight for it, then wasn’t that the same as just accepting the outcome? That Keith and Allura go on and get married and… who knows what that meant for him, or Romelle for that matter. No, Lance wouldn’t accept that. He still had one more day to cling to this crazy dream, and he wasn’t about to let it go. He’d sooner lock himself in the cellar at this aunt’s house than give up on it.

Like, there’s no rule saying that they could get engaged and then just… marry later, eventually… if they felt like it, right?

Oh god. Am I really thinking about this right now?

Cheeks reddening, Lance turned his face back into the pillow again. Why does Keith have to make a choice so soon? ‘Cause like, don’t get Lance wrong or anything, but it’s not every day you get seven different kinds of lucky and somehow fall into bed with the most eligible guy in the country.

And, hell, Keith did make it pretty fucking clear he did not want to marry Allura, and the Princess didn’t seem keen on the whole thing either. Still, it was a mildly terrifying thought: Hey, Keith, so I know we have known each other for just a few weeks but, uh, wanna get hitched?

Lance didn’t want to jump into marriage, but…

But…

[But you do love him.]

Fuck.

There was no denying that, especially when your sentient-quintessence-guardian pulls the thought right from your own consciousness.

He blamed Keith, entirely, in case you were wondering. Lance really didn’t mean to fall in fucking love with him, but then, who fucking bursts into a completely quiet room after midnight and screams about wanting to know your favorite color? Because he wants to know more about you? Who fucking chuckles and then kisses your forehead after you admit, through a belly full of nerves, that you’re a virgin? And then who the fuck goes on to say that it’s no big deal because you can mess it up together?! Who does that?! Was Keith invested in some sort of self-indulgent competition with himself to see how fucking completely he could make Lance fall in love with him or something?

If there had been a doubt before (which, hah, not really), it was pretty fucking obvious now how Lance felt about him. He didn’t just love him; he wasn’t just weak, or gone, or smitten. He was, think-about-you-every-fucking-dobosh, want-to-make-sure-wear-a-jacket-so-you-don’t-catch-a-cold, I-would-fucking-die-before-I-let-something-happen-to-you in love with him. Stupidly. Completely. Desperately, maybe, but unmistakably over the moon for the dorky, awkward, endearing mullet-headed jerk sleeping behind him.

Hah. Why was he lying there, just thinking about how he felt when he could actually do something about it? Lance had already flirted with the temptation of waking up Keith anyways, why not flirt with the real deal?
The hold on his shirt wasn’t a strong one, so he just pulled Keith’s wrist gently and turned with it so he was facing the Prince. Keith’s eyes were closed, mouth, too – breathing just through his nose with not even a hint of a scowl on his face for once. Wow, look at that. A smooth forehead. Who would’ve thought?

Leaning down carefully so as not to smush Keith’s upper-body, Lance pressed a kiss into the his brow, held it for several ticks until he heard that groan he was beginning to associate with the best things in the world – grumpy, aroused, or exasperated Keith.

(Idly, he wondered if it would be a super groan if he was all three? Lance very much wanted to find out... for science, of course.)

“Good morning,” Lance said, smiling against Keith’s skin, pulling back to judge the other boy’s reaction. His eyes were squeezed together tightly, mouth turned down into a grimace, and Lance had to bite down the urge to laugh.

Keith, eyes still not open, just ended up saying, “Sleep?”

“Nope, time to get up,” the brown-skinned teen laid down on the other’s chest and he groaned again. Curse him, sleepy Keith was definitely the cutest Keith, and Lance let slip a little laugh.

“Why?”

“Cause,” Lance shrugged. “I said so.”

Proceeding with an impish grin, Lance went on the offensive and began to plaster tiny kisses all over Keith’s face – pale skin, eyelids, the bridge of his nose, corner of his lips, temples, forehead, chin.

Finally, acting as if it was the hardest thing he had ever done, Keith’s eyes peeled open and he squinted at Lance like he wasn’t sure if he was really there or not. Lance felt a swell of silly pride, watching the Prince’s cross expression fade steadily into resigned amusement as Lance continued to beam at him.

“You’ve got to do something about your bedhead, Keith.”

A roll of his eyes – predictable. “I didn’t exactly fall asleep under normal circumstances for the past few days, Lance.”

“Sounds like an excuse if I’ve ever heard one,” he replied with a sunny smile.

Voice gravely, Keith asked through a yawn, “Where was this attitude yesterday morning?”

“Uh, yesterday morning, I was woken up, rudely, by a kitten.” Lance paused, shooting a well-meaning glare towards Blue. She hopped up by their feet and let out an innocuous brrt?

“I’ll have you know, your Highness, when I wake up on my own, I’m an absolute joy to be around.”

At that, Keith let out a laugh, head falling back into the pillows as he stretched out his arms. “A joy, huh? That’s one word for it.”


Keith rolled away and began to sit up, throwing his legs over the side of the bed. “You can’t use joy and joyful as substitutes for one another, that’s like, giving the word for something in the definition.”
“But it’s true. I am both a joy, and I am joyful,” Lance was grinning as he watched Keith make his way to the bathroom. “You haven’t denied it, ya’know!”

“I never said you weren’t,” Keith mumbled from out of sight, and, damn, Lance felt his heart give a stupid little stutter of – you guessed it – fucking joy.

Rude. Always making things so unfair when he says something sweet or kind, all casual like he’s not even trying. Lance groaned and fell back onto the pillows, not wanting Mullet to walk out and notice the color in his cheeks.

So unfair.

After several ticks of self-pity, Lance twisted his head to the side in time to witness Keith re-emerge from the bathroom with his hair in a ponytail. Seriously, what an absolute jerk. The guys been awake all of three dobosh and he looks the dictionary definition of cool, grizzled sexiness? How?

Sighing, Lance turned his face back into the pillows. Maybe this will kill me.

“If you can wait a little bit,” he heard the Prince begin after a moment, the sound of drawers opening and closing around the room while Lance patiently debated whether or not suffocating would be better than dying of the impending heart attack that was surely going to be brought on by Keith’s presence. “I’ll see if I can convince Hunk to bring you up breakfast this time. Sorry, I know it’s probably boring to be in here all day. Can you uh, let me know what you and Blue decide about the ball tonight… maybe before I head down? I don’t think I’ll have the chance to come back up here…”

A little quickly, he added, “And, whatever you decide is fine, I’d just like to know so I can plan accordingly.”

Lance let out a slow breath and nodded his head in the pillow before flopping over completely, only to catch the back of that bouncy ponytail disappear into the bathroom and the sound of running water.

“Just give me a few ticks to think-talk it over with Blue,” Lance called half-heartedly, gaze falling to the so-named kitten at the foot of the bed. She strode forward purposefully and walked on his chest like she owned him, which made him snort, because she purred in playful agreement.

They both already knew how he felt about it – worried and unsure but not willing to throw Keith out there to face the night on his own.

[Why not compromise, my paladin?]

Yeah, that’s sort of what he was leaning towards anyways. It just sort of made him uneasy – it hadn’t been nearly this difficult to commit to showing up the past two nights. This felt so much… bigger.

The restless tossing and turning of the idea over in his head only last for another half a dobosh, and it was only when the weight on the edge of the bed shifted that Lance realized he’d closed his eyes again. “Oh, hi,” Lance said, as if surprised. “I was thinking I’d – mmph.”

The rest of his statement was buried in a sudden kiss, which, after the initial surprise, he returned readily, hands moving to cup soft cheeks. It wasn’t like last night, lustful and ardent, though to say it was entirely chaste would have been inaccurate. The chapped texture of Keith’s lips was intensely, if not surprisingly, gratifying, like the hypnotic feeling of running your fingers over the spines of endless books in a library; there were secrets in the dips and curves that Lance could trace for decades and would surely never unfurl all the secrets hidden within. This kiss was slow, soft, but
missing in tongue or teeth. It was just **closeness**, reverence, tenderness. It was not needing to hold his breath because Keith was giving him all the air he would ever need, and Lance could only hope it was half as satisfying for him in return, to breathe in the feeling of how fucking much Lance was in love with him yet, at least right now, was entirely too afraid to verbalize.

Finally, with exaggerated slowness, Keith pulled up and Lance blinked at him from his spot nestled in the pillows, one hand falling but the other remained cupping the side of his face, maybe just a little unwilling to let him go.

“I – sorry,” the Prince said with a half-laugh, a warmth flooding his cheeks that Lance could feel beneath the pads of his fingers. “You just looked really… I wanted to kiss you again.”

Feeling a little pink himself, Lance just chuckled. “Why would you be *sorry* about that?”

Lance swore he saw Keith’s dark eyes *twinkle* in response before leaning up the rest of the way. He really was just too pretty.

The brunette sighed, the darkest of his tethered anxieties having slackened for the time being. Blue had vanished from his chest at some point, though he could sense her in the general direction of the couch.

“I was going to say, before I was not-so-rudely interrupted,” Lance paused, sending Keith a very McClain™* wink before continuing, “I’ve sort of gone through it all in my head with Blue already, and I know you probably just want me to stay up here because you’re worried and stuff, but… I don’t think I can sit back and just… hope for the best, you know? There’s no reason for you to have to go through this alone – and I know, I know, there will be people there with you blah blah – but I mean *alone* in, well, this sense…”

Lance’s hand moved to Keith’s that was resting on the bed, just running his thumb over the ridge of the knuckles. For his own comfort or Keith’s, he wasn’t sure.

“I’ll stay away from the summit if that’s what you really want, but I won’t just let you go through the whole night on your own. And don’t even say you don’t need someone else – I don’t mean that you can’t face you alone, but you shouldn’t have to. You deserve better than that. So, let me do this… with you?”

The Prince’s expression was carefully blank the entire time Lance spoke, up until the very end. Much to the brunette’s enjoyment, the color of roses bloomed over his cheekbones, painted with colors more beautiful than any night sky he’d taken time to study.

“And you’re sure that’s what you want?”

A little lapse of déjà vu stirred in him, and Lance’s expression split into a smile.

“Keith,” Lance quoted him from last night. “I’ve never been more fucking sure of something in my life.”

At that, the Prince’s eyes widened and, much to Lance’s amusement, his face burned pink around the edges. Still, he gave Lance’s fingers a light squeeze, the ghost of a smile tracing his lips when he looked away.

“Well, okay, yeah… I mean – it’s your decision. I can’t have you at the summit, though, even if I wanted you there – it’s already been restricted to just the ruling families and key personnel from the Olkarion embassy. In the meantime, I… can you at least promise me you’ll take an escort? They won’t bother you while you dance or anything, but I’d just feel… we just don’t know enough of the
specific threat, and I’d rather not risk anything. Is that okay?”

“Actually, yeah,” Lance admitted with a small chuckle, sitting up to come to eye-level with Keith. His hold on the Prince’s hand remained firm. “I think I’d prefer the escort, honestly. I got some creepy haunted-castle-eyes-watching-me vibes yesterday when I tried to find the room myself.”

The Prince rolled his eyes, but he was smiling in full again. “The castle’s not haunted. It was probably just – ”

Knock knock knock.

“Keith! Wake up!”

Ah, yes, there was Shiro.

“Be right there!”

Lance bit his lip as Keith rose from the bed, not wanting to get overly mushy and sentimental but his heart rate picked up on its own.

Their hands slipped apart, however reluctantly.

“So, will I uh, just meet you down there later, or…?”

The Prince frowned at the carpet for several ticks before looking up and meeting Lance’s eye, the dark pools of indigo molten and warm. “Yeah... I’m sorry about all of this, by the way. I wish we didn't have to…”

Lance felt his cheeks turn abruptly hot and he had to avert his gaze, suddenly shy for whatever dumb reason. Keith’s seen him naked for crow’s sake, and yet, one steady look from those intense, dark eyes and Lance was reduced to a flustered mess all over again.

“Hey, um, just in case — ” Lance coughed, hating how small his voice sounded. “Don’t die, okay? I’ll kick your ass if you die.”

“I won’t,” the Prince said little exhale of laughter, moving towards the bed again. Keith placed another of those stupid kisses into his forehead and Lance’s heart jumped right into his throat. “You be safe too, or I’ll kick your ass. I’ll see you as soon as I can.”

“Is that a promise or a threat?” Lance raised a brow when he pulled back, feeling a little dopey and bubbly once again.

Keith considered for a moment before turning and heading towards the door. “Let’s call it both. So, uh… bye, Lance.”

The parting words felt weird and overly final, and they made his stomach twist.

“Bye, Keith.”

And with a quick snap and shut of the door, the Prince was gone.

Blue was up on the bed beside him immediately, nuzzling into his thigh and knee just as he heard the lock click on the door.

[You need not worry. It is not so easy to put out a fire as some might think, and your Red Paladin has no shortage of flame within him.]
“Heh, thanks,” Lance scratched her between the ears, letting out a little sigh. “I guess he is hot-headed, isn’t he?”

The immediate effects of her calm, radiating from within and out towards the far reaches of his mind and heart, certainly helped. Lance allowed the reassurance to carry him through the morning, with the promise of seeing Hunk and getting his breakfast on was definitely helping to distract him. He had at least a varga to wrestle with whether or not he would tell Hunk about… well, everything… and no one could hold a candle to Lance’s legendary indecisiveness, so he was going to need every tick to sort through his messy thoughts.

[KEITH]

The Prince was unsurprised to find Shiro as a positive wreck of nerves standing outside his bedroom door.

“Shit, you look terrible,” the Prince remarked as he locked the door to his bedroom, hand lingering on the woodgrain for just a moment longer than was strictly necessary.

The knight gave him a tight smile when he turned around. “You’re always my favorite person in the mornings, Keith. Have I told you that?”

“I’m sure you’ve mentioned it,” he retorted, just as sarcastically. “Are you really that bent out of shape over this? You realize that like, only 10% of assassination attempts are successful, right?”

Shiro let out a dry chuckle. “You wouldn’t believe it, but, no. I am exhausted, but it’s probably only, oh, forty-percent because of you. It’s usually around eighty-five, for comparison’s sake.”

They’d already started to take the stairs down to the Dining Hall, and Keith caught a glimpse of the stables outside the windows.

Red…

“Hey, Shiro, after breakfast I was thinking I might take Red out for a bit. That alright?”

The man tried to cover a yawn with a hand, managing a small smile. “Sure, kiddo. We have another, ah, meeting in the Krel Beta room first. But after that, should be fine.”

“Again?” muttered the Prince, but Shiro said nothing. “More developments?”

“…Yes, something like that,” Shiro answered vaguely, and Keith would have sworn he saw a glint of genuine anger in the knight’s dark eyes. That was certainly an alarming and unusual expression on his Head of the Guard, so consider Keith’s interest thoroughly, though cautiously, piqued.

“Okay,” he said flatly as they walked towards the raised table, many guests restlessly twittering in anticipation of his arrival so they could begin to eat. His Mother was already seated at her usual spot, and smiled when she met his gaze.

He dropped his voice to a lethal whisper. “Also, don’t call me kiddo. I’m not six. Unless you want
me to start calling you old man, in which case, be my guest.”

The knight let out a tiny snort but just shook his head, leading Keith to his seat before taking his own.

As usual, breakfast was an overly grand affair with all the rights amount of excess to suit the tastes of their guests. There was quiche slices topped with some sort of herbs that Keith wasn’t even going to bother trying to pronounce, some with nuts, others overflowing with meats and cheeses, enough braised and roasted game to feed the entire military, arrangements of perfectly crafted little soufflés that smelled like fresh bread and something rich and creamy, biscuits with pancetta and a fragrant garlicky sauce, crepes piled high with stewed berries and sweetened cream, tarts heavy with filings of chocolate and fruits, at least twenty different kinds of aioli, biscuits with honeys and fresh jam spreads that were bright and sweet and tasted like heaven.

Honestly, the feast itself was so good that Keith barely minded the sour company and the accompanying bitter taste of their conversations.

Lady Shay caught his attention just before the meal was ending, which was, at least, a nice way to finish breakfast.

“Hunk has really outdone himself this time, hasn’t he?” She asked, gesturing the Prince’s clean plate.

Yes, Keith had to agree with Lance’s statement the previous night in saying that Hunk’s cooking was his favorite food. A weird little lightbulb dinged in his head: can Hunk make garlic knots? That seemed like something the man was probably capable of doing, though granted, Keith really had no idea what sort of work went into something like that, but looking at the spread in front of him, he was confident that the Garrett family could probably cook literally anything and it would be amazing.

The Prince made a point that he would have to ask Hunk about it. Lance would… like that, right? That’s something people do for each other? His insides felt weird and squishy just thinking about it, but it wasn’t unpleasant. Just the opposite. Ugh.

Refocusing on the young woman across the table, Keith nodded and noticed the distinctive fondness in her smile.

Bluntly, as Keith was known to do, he asked, “Do you like Hunk, Lady Shay?”

Turning redder than the berries in the scone she’d been about to pop in her mouth, her voice became unusually squeaky. “I– w-well, that is, he is very nice! Yes. He’s a very nice young man, practically a gentleman with his manners and talent.”

“Why don’t you court him?”

Rax, beside her, started to hack on whatever he’d been eating while the young Balemeran woman giggled at her brother’s expense. Keith had surprised himself with his own boldness on the subject – who would have thought a week ago he’d be spurring on other people into love? Guess he was a fucking sap just like Shiro, after all.

Shyly, Shay twisted her fingers together while she came up with her answer.

“I–I mean, he… I’m sure he wouldn’t want, our worlds a-are so different… it wouldn’t be, I can’t just…”

The conversation he had with Shiro, Hunk and Pidge from the night they’d all journeyed into the
woods stirred from the back of his mind. He recalled how nervous yet excited Hunk had acted on the subject, even by the mere possibility of having something meaningful to share with Shay, much the same sort of shy doubt that the Balmeran across from him seemed to be exhibiting. Even if it was just one dance, even if it was just one night, they both were clearly smitten.

“You should ask him to dance tonight, Shay. I’m going to give him the rest of the afternoon off and invite him to attend, as a ‘thank you’ for the service, so he should be able to attend.”

Her mouth opened and closed twice but no words followed, and Rax was glaring daggers at Keith in such a way that could only be construed as how dare you. The Prince just shot him a smirk and waited for his sister’s response.

Finally, she spoke meekly, “I’ll… certainly c-consider it, Prince Keith. Thank you for… the encouragement.”

Feeling weirdly pleased with himself, Keith indulged in a little extra helping of that fucking amazing egg-toast-thing with the seasoned game while he waited for the remainder of the guests to depart. His Mother caught his eye at one point and gave him a hand signal that he knew to mean hold on, while she rose from the dais and thanked their guests and the serving staff before making her usual departure from the room.

He counted to three-hundred, and at two hundred ninety-nine, he began to stand.

Before he was out of his chair, Shiro was already at his shoulder and ready to go.

“Ready to go?” asked the knight, unnecessarily in Keith’s opinion.

He let out a low breath and led the way out of the large double doors at the opposite end of the room, setting a begrudging path towards the designated meeting place. “Yes, just one second.”

Stopping off at a servant's entrance, Keith interrupted the first person he saw that looked like they might be heading towards the kitchens.

“Oh – oh, excuse me, your Highness!” The girl dipped her head repeatedly, and Keith did his best to try to appear as hospitable as possible.

“It’s fine, really, I was actually looking for someone to deliver a message for me. Could you pass along a few words to Hunk, one of the chef’s in the kitchen?”

Her eyes lit up at the mention of the young man. “Oh, Master Garrett? Of course – what sort of message is it, your Highness?”

“Please tell him…” Keith paused, considering how best to be discrete on the issue. “Ask that he bring a full extra breakfast to my room, and that I’d like him to hand-deliver it. It has to do with… honeycombs. He should understand, I think. Also tell him that, after he’s done, he is to take the rest of the afternoon off.”

Blinking, the girl nodded a few times – probably confused – but gave him a gentle smile before heading down the stairs.

Shiro, mercifully, didn’t ask why Keith was sending Hunk to his room – whatever had him so exhausted at the moment must have dulled his usually sharp senses.

It only took a few minutes for the pair to make their way up the appropriate stairs and down the right hallways. At the end of a shaded corridor, Keith spotted the familiar outline of Kolivan’s hulking
“Your Highness,” said the Blade in way of a greeting as he approached. Whereas Shiro appeared noticeably more haggard than usual, the leader of the Blades seemed almost comically unphased by anything and everything.

Shiro placed a hand on the Prince’s shoulder and gestured forward. “I’ll warn you, just… it’s a bit of a mess in there right now. You should see it yourself. It will make more sense than trying to explain.”

Keith raised a single brow but decided to take him at his word, raising a hand for Shiro to lead the way.

He needn’t even step through the doorway to realize that there was something definitely off. The usual black, gunmetal tiles were hardly visible, whited and yellowed out by the overwhelming amount of paper and parchment that had been scattered everywhere. Scribbled notes and figures littered the hallway lining up to the actual conference room which, from the looks of it, seemed to be in an even worse state.

“Now, if we consider this route, there’s a fourteen percent chance that they defected and went straight *North*, not West – ” A voice tittered so quickly Keith had a hard time telling if it was even the common tongue.

At the end of the hall, his Mother’s eyes flashed to him immediately. She spoke with a small, strained smile. “Ah, Keith, good morning.”

“Uhh… hi?” He hardly spared the Queen a glance, too interested in the fiasco going on at the far end of the table. There was no fewer than five large graphs tacked up to various boards with numbers and calculations written all over them, dozens of maps sprawled out around the floor, a very unconscious Matt Holt sleeping on top of a tome as big as his sister, splatters of ink on just about every surface – *seriously, how did it even get on the ceiling?* – and, central to the chaos, a person in a turtleneck sweater with eight arms and a beak-like mouth unintelligibly muttering to themselves. Surely, they must be from off the continent, because Keith had never seen anyone like this before.

“Ah! Yes!” The man’s attention perked up upon seeing the Prince. “Now that we can rule out ‘murdered-in-sleep’, ‘poisoned-at-breakfast’, or ‘choked-on-food’. That cuts the possibilities of certain death scenarios down by five whole percent!”

“Keith,” Shiro spoke through a very clenched jaw. “This is Slav. He’s… an expert.”

“Expert of *what*?” He couldn’t help but ask, watching the man heave a pile of used parchment clear off the table and onto the floor, making room for new blank rolls while he sat up in a chair, all of his hands flying over the papers.

Shiro sounded very tired. “Everything, you could say. If you ask me, he’s…”

“Helping,” supplied the Queen, who approached them, only to lead Keith to the end of the table containing the least amount of clutter.

“Slav is a renowned scholar, specializing in statistical probabilities, and he is helping,” his Mother repeated for emphasis, sending a wry look towards Shiro. “By exploring other possibilities that we’ve overlooked. Matt made great strides yesterday in the translations of the Puigian materials, and he’s composed a list of most of the combinations of materials that could potentially be weaponized. With Slav analyzing the likelihood of each, along with adding his own… suggestions… we’ve managed to compose a working analysis of any potential threats we can prepare for – directed
towards you, or Marmora as a whole.”

“And,” the man, Slav, chimed in, apparently having been listening. “You have at least a fifty-one percent chance in most realities of surviving the day. I don’t need to tell you how good those odds are!”

“Slav arrived shortly after his royal Highness retired to his chambers yesterday evening,” Kolivan informed, answering Keith’s unspoken question as to why he hadn’t heard of this man sooner. “Sir Shiro has been tasked with keeping watch over the progress of Slav and Matthew Holt since that time.”

Across the table, Keith noticed Shiro’s eye twitched.

“Must have been a hell of a night,” the Prince said under his breath, pulling the nearest legible piece of parchment forward as he settled into his seat. “‘The Likelihood of… Spontaneous Combustion?’ That’s, uh, wow. Intense.”

“More likely than you’d think,” Slav looked up and held his gaze, wide-eyed and downright terrified. “Much more likely.”

Keith slowly placed the paper down and turned to his mother. There must be something actually useful in all of this… whatever this is.

“Okay… so what sort of conclusions have we been able to reach?”

“The probability that the bandits headed for Marmora outweighs the possibility that they were heading to Daibaazal, but is less likely than the possibility that they were just regular bandits who foolishly took to the woods,” she began, only for Slav to jump back in.

He held his head in two hands, six others continuing to work. “The woods! Do you know how many possibilities there are once they’ve entered the woods?”

“Uh, no?”

Slav wrung four more of his hands. “Infinite! Infinite possibilities!”

At that point, Shiro moved to stand behind Slav, looking at least a little more threatening than normal. “Let’s let his royal Highness and her Majesty speak amongst themselves, and that way you can focus.”

“Focus? Focus!” Slav seemed ready to tear his own own hair-like appendages out, and Shiro looked about ready to help him. “It’s impossible to focus when there’s at least a four percent possibility that there is enough airborne toxins in this castle to give me leukemia!”

Doing his best to tune them out – how the hell was Matt sleeping through this? – Keith redirected his attention to his mother with a stony-expression.

“Anyways – that means, if they did come to Marmora – which we’re deeming to be a fairly likely possibility at this point?” He cringed at the sound of a book hitting a wall. The Queen nodded, looking equal parts stressed and amused in spite of the circumstances. “Then it is more likely that the threat was to distract us from whatever they’ve brought into our lands?”

“Not necessarily,” Shiro answered, scrubbing a hand down his face as he took the seat opposite Keith, sending the occasional glare towards Slav while he spoke. “We did as you suggested and had Plaxum talk to the girl, and it was actually a really great tactic. Luxia, the girl, opened up a lot more
to Plaxum and while a statement can be falsified, Plaxum says the girl seems very convinced that this attack is the real deal. Being in the castle at all has driven her to near hysterics; Adam actually helped to transport her to the clinic in town. By the time she was leaving, she was whispering to herself and clutching to Plaxum like her life depended on it. I’ve actually assigned Plaxum to stay with her for the time being, in case the Galra try anything retaliatory. Er, she kept repeating things like,” the knight pulled forward a piece of paper and rubbed his eyes before reading. “The Prince is going to be killed, gods, please, don’t let anything happen to Wenxin – that’s the guard who she had slept with – why now, why like this, not the Prince; we can’t, people will die, oh gods, oh gods…”

Shiro placed down the paper and leaned back. “You get the idea. We’ve concluded that she’s… rather actually unhinged –”

“Which is a possibility,” Slav interjected, unhelpfully.

The Head of the Guard grit his teeth and acted as if he hadn’t heard. “…or, she genuinely believes what she was telling us to be true. Now, who’s to say she wasn’t being given false information? The girl could truly believe what she was saying was the truth, so long as the information she overheard was bad information – it could still be a false lead.”

“That is certainly a possibility,” His Mother said, seated at full height with pursed lips. Her fingers were steepled in a look of contemplation in front of her chin. “I am more inclined to at least plan in the sense that she was giving us an honest lead, if only because to do otherwise would be to dismiss the possibility of Keith being targeted on the basis of speculation. That’s not to say we haven’t stopped considering the chance that this is to only distract us from something else, but Kolivan has developed a strategy in either condition that should maximize the castle security during the summit without the expense of stretching our resources unsustainably thin.”

Keith had to agree – operating under the assumption that it was bad information seemed like a reckless option, and seeing as they had no intentions of canceling the summit, it only made sense to prepare for the possibility.

In mock of his exact movements from yesterday’s meeting, Kolivan gathered up a map of the castle and placed it in front of the Queen and Prince.

“The summit was intended to be housed here, in the Northern Gallery, but her Majesty has made the decision to have the summit moved outside to the third floor terrace. The Northern Gallery has three exits and several vents, along with a servant’s passage immediately outside the east facing wall. While such a room makes would provide privacy and is of the right size and appropriate formality for an accord such as this normally, the amount of ways in which a potential threat may play out are too many.”

He shifted their attention to an overhead view of the third floor, pointing to the terrace.

“We will have Blades on the fourth floor, here, in an unused bedchamber. The windows overlook the scene and should have the best overall view of what is happening. On the ground, there is only the one main exit and entrance, and while it is much nearer to the Ball itself, the guard can keep their ranks more centralized and monitor each guest who enters and exits. Sir Shiro’s soldiers will be posted at the staircase leading into the garden, per usual, as well as having men and women over the walls in the event someone tries to scale the castle. This option ‘sections off’ the peace talks, allowing us to completely control the flow of anyone who wishes to enter or exit the area.”

“Alright.” Keith could understand the feasibility of that. Honestly, he might even feel a little better without the claustrophobia of the castle walls boxing him in. “And what do we know about the possible methodology? For either target.” (Referring to himself as a ‘target’ in the third-person felt a
little odd, the Prince would admit.)

For this, the Queen and Kolivan turned back to Shiro, who frowned thoughtfully towards the passed out figure of Matt Holt down the table.

“Matt could explain it better, but given the circumstances…” He sighed. “What he’s found is that he did basically as the thieves would have wanted, much to his own annoyance. Because the quintessence crystals seemed like the interesting product that was stolen, and he dedicated most of his time to find nothing but the lead on the possible drug scare. Which is still a possibility…”

He shot the briefest of looks to Slav before continuing. “But not, as it turns out, a very likely one. At least unlikely enough to encourage us to start exploring other scenarios. Additionally, we’ve found no reports of any sort of elevated drug activity within the capital, and though it’s been too soon for the missives to get out to the other larger settlements, I went back through my monthly logs and couldn’t find any mention of strange powder substances appearing in any arrests, so there doesn’t seem to be much evidence to support that. Matt did a similar delve into the medical equipment that was stolen, but that turned up inclusive at best. There simply wasn’t enough of the materials that could have been used in any sort of weaponized sense on their own, but, when looked at together with the Puigian oceanic salts, Matt and Slav have found… something.”

“Something?” Keith repeated.

“A lot of somethings,” Shiro said again, expression deflating. “So many somethings.”

“The… current research,” Kolivan, not one to beat around the bush, thank god, took the conversational reins and slid a roll of parchment that look like a series of chemical equations with different molecular breakdowns zigging and zagging all across the page. While Keith paid attention to his physical and biological lessons, this level of content was beginning to go over his head. “Suggests that, in mixing the herbal emollients from the medical equipment with different concentrations of the minerals derived from the refined sea substances, the resulting compounds can be extremely dangerous under the right conditions. Specifically, given the quantities they were hauling and how far in advance this seems to have been planned, Matthew believes they’ve been constructing a chemical agent. Should this theory be the case, the quintessence crystals were likely never powderized, but were likely drained of their energy and used to help conduct some sort of specific reaction.”

“Do we know what the agent might be?”

“Ah, well,” Slav chirped, his voice unusually bright for a man who constantly appeared to be two-seconds away from bursting into hysterics. “That’s the thing! Concentration levels are so variant! It could be just the making of a common pesticide, it could be noxious gas, it could be a bomb, it could be a plague ready to be released onto the kingdom’s subjects!”

Keith blanched. “A-A plague?”

The Queen did not react. Clearly, this was not news to her. “Thank you, Slav.”

“You’re saying there could be a fucking plague… or a bomb... in the country? Possibly in the capital?” Keith insisted sharply, looking at Slav like he’d grown another head to go with his extra sets of arms.

Slav seemed to direct his plea at Shiro, who just looked even more fatigued. “Well, what better time to enact a terror threat than when royalty from the entire realm are together? There’s only ninety-one instances that would be better for such an attack than this summit – and that’s across all realities!”
Kolivan cleared his throat, and Keith was glad to look away from the horror in Slav’s face for a moment. The Blade leader seemed undisturbed in spite of the the foreboding announcement.

“Be that as it may, an airborne pathogen for such a ‘plague’ would not make any amount of realistic sense with what we know. While it is a possibility, we are confident that it is so improbable that it is not being deemed with any sort of credibility; the entirety of the Galran court would be just as susceptible to collateral in that instance. It is more likely the materials are being concentrated into something that can be used with a target in mind – a poison, or even as Slav has suggested, some sort of controlled explosive.”

He paused, mouth falling into an even grimmer expression than his usual frown. “If the maiden Luxia is to be believed, it corroborates the possibility to a targeted attack, on the Prince, with some sort of chemical weapon. And if not, the only most likely targets on the population would be congregational or symbolic. The Center Square of the capital, the Olkarion Embassy, or the water filtration plants or grain storages, particularly with winter approaching. With the new security plan at the palace, we can reinforce these additional places without off-setting the necessary security around the royal family.”

Chewing the inside of his gums, Keith nodded as he let all of this sink in. Shiro began saying something to Kolivan, but it sounded more like logistics in terms of who to place around the terrace and the gardens to accommodate the change in location, so the Prince allowed his focus to drift momentarily.

He felt… much better about this plan compared to where they’d left off yesterday, actually, and he was immediately hit by a wave of gratitude towards Matt and, to a lesser but no less sincere extent, this Slav person. He may be the cause of untoward amounts of stress to Shiro, who Keith has almost never seen lose his cool (unless, of course, the Prince was intentionally trying to get a rise out of him), but it seemed like his ability to calculate probabilities was a rather powerful tool when used in the right applications. Kolivan and Shiro provided enough realistic insight to counterbalance the man breaking them all into a panic with inane possibilities, like that of Keith spontaneously combusting. Would such a fate even be considered homicide at that point?

His Mother, he realized after a moment, was watching him with something reminiscent of wistfulness in her smile before she stood, earning her the undivided attention of the two advising military personnel. Slav flinched and hid under the table, and Matt remained blissfully unconscious.

“If we’re lucky, the sudden change of location and, by extension, security, may be enough to dissuade the plot entirely, and the Galra will have little choice but to cooperate in the peace talks, though my hopes aren’t exactly high in that respect. The other, and more prudent, possibility will require us to remain vigilant and keep a close eye on anyone who tries to get close to the Prince. Sorry, Keith, but I’m going to ask you not eat or drink anything once the ball starts – the risk is too high. You can bring your own personal flask of water, but nothing else.”

“Damn,” he muttered sardonically, barely above a breath. “Hunk is a really good cook, too.”

His Mother smirked. “Well, at least you’ll live to eat his food another day, hmm? Unfortunately, Keith, you’ll be staying in close company to Emperor Zarkon whenever possible – in the event that there is something like an explosive or some other sort of chemical that could impact an area rather than a specific person, it is prudent that he stay near enough to Zarkon that the risk of collateral would deter any attacker. Of course, anyone who gets near Keith, especially any serving staff or foreign soldiers – anyone otherwise unaccounted for – must be monitored closely. Son, you know what to look for.”

He did, and nodded his assent. There were certain ticks to look for in a person trying to get too close:
the ways their eyes moved, where their hands sat, what sort of clothing they wore. Was it something trim and fitted to make for an easy escape, or something bulky with a dozen pockets to hide any manner of weapon? Were those chemical burns on their hands from working with unstable materials? Did they look restless, liked they’d been up all night debating with themselves to go through with such a monumental act?

Maybe it was just learned paranoia, but these were the small enough traits that most people wouldn’t notice.

Keith, however, was trained to notice.

“Is there anything else, your Majesty?” Kolivan’s tone was, however subtly, warm; missions really brought out the teddy-bear in him.

“I believe that is all. Slav, you are welcome to stay in the castle –”

“No,” Shiro breathed, a horrified sound too quiet for anyone to pick up but Keith.

“– but I’ll ask you stay on this floor. A Blade will keep watch outside your door and can bring you anything you may need. Sir Shiro needs to rest.”

The knight in question went from relieved to confused very quickly, brow dipping. “But your Majesty, Keith –”

“– will be fine while you sleep. You’re no good to anyone if you can barely walk. Kolivan is staying with him in the meantime.”

Now it was the Blade’s turn to demonstrate his confusion, though it came as little more than a slight frown. “Your Majesty?”

“I am not intending to leave this floor for the remainder of the day. The strain of the weekend, I’m afraid, has left my reflexes a little dull; I will be in my private training room. You will return to my side once Sir Shiro has returned from his rest.”

No one dared argue with his Mother when she made orders. Instead, Kolivan’s posture straightened. “Understood.”

She turned to the Prince, studying him for a moment with an inscrutable look on her face.

“Keith, do you have anything you’re planning to do today? Anything we should be aware of before dismissal?”

“Um,” he shifted slightly in his seat. “Actually, I sort of wanted to take Red out for a ride. Stretch her legs, and clear my head of all this for a bit.”

Her mask cracked ever so slightly into a smile. “So long as you stay on castle grounds where Kolivan can see you, I have no issues with that. I know, I know – you’re eighteen and need your freedoms. Just a little longer until you’re finally able to act like it, I promise.”

Keith smiled, recognizing the veiled apology beneath her words. This couldn’t be easy for her, and the guilt and concern were well-hidden, buried deep within the darkness of her eyes, the lines in her frown, only visible to those who knew where to look.

“That’s fine,” he said, meaning the words in more ways than one. “And maybe we could have a quick word, privately?”
With a steady exhale, the Queen closed her eyes and returned to her usual formality once again, looking around the room.

“Very well. Let’s get Matthew into a bed and a guard at his door as well, just to be safe. Other than that, you may all take your leave. Keith, stay, and we shall talk.”

The words were scarcely spoken before Shiro and Kolivan began to leave the room, launching into a tense discussion of what should be done in preparation for the remainder of the day. He listened, waiting for the familiar sound of the heavy, reinforced door sighing in its hinges before meeting the Queen’s eye.

She looked very tired, but was smiling at him thoughtfully. “So?”

“So…” Keith shifted awkwardly, unsure what to do with his hands. He folded them in his lap, but then that felt weird, and ended up putting one on the table and the other on his leg. Still felt weird, but whatever.

His Mother waited quietly for several seconds before trying again. “Is this about the Blue Paladin, perhaps?”

The look of shock on his face must have been rather telling, because she let out a little laugh and rolled her eyes. “You left the ball in a hurry yesterday. I was told you went right to your room, not long after the Blue Paladin departed as well. Considering he has somehow made himself almost as essential to the ball as you, it was rather obvious that you both disappeared at almost the same time.”

Right, shit, of course. How did it keep slipping his mind that his Mother had eyes and ears in every crevice in the castle? Not that either he or Lance had done a very good job of being quiet when they left the party last night – of course at least the Blades noticed.

Her eyes were sharp, a honed knife that Keith recognized well. Suspicion.

“I’ll listen to whatever you wish to tell me, but the only thing I must ask – especially, given the current situation – are you absolutely sure this is a person you can trust? You don’t have to tell me yes or no or why or how,” she held up a hand when he opened his mouth. “I trust you to make those calls for yourself, Keith. I do not know him, or anything about him, but he is on the guest list, he has made it through security, and he has at least managed to capture your interests.”

A notable flush colored the Prince’s cheeks as he one-hundred percent picked up on her innuendo. She wasn’t wrong, which just made it worse; Keith silently cursed the ground upon which she stood.

“But,” she resumed with all seriousness returned to her. “If you do – if you trust him – then I will leave it at that and ask no questions.”

Keith, trying and failing to punch down his own embarrassment over the whole thing, balled his hands to fists and stared at his lap instead of meeting her eye. Even after the awkward conversation they’d had earlier that week in which he confessed his… well, his sexual preferences in general, and how he felt about Lance specifically, the subject still made his face hot and the churning in his stomach uncomfortable.

That said, he also did not want to lie to his Mother. This whole mess was complicated enough without hiding things from each other.

Sparing a brief glance around, making sure no one had somehow crept up on them in one of the most secure rooms in the castle, the Prince spoke quickly with a very ‘god I can’t believe I’m about to do this’ air about him, like a hobby juggler who’d just been promoted to fire twirler.
“Mom, you said I don’t have to tell you, but I…” *Deep breath.* “I want to. There’s, ah, a reason I’ve *shown interest* in the Blue Paladin, he’s, well, the person I told you about… the other day, after Blade training… Lance?”

The intensity of the heat in his face reminded him about Slav’s comment earlier about spontaneous combustion, and Keith suddenly found himself appreciating the man’s genius a little more.

“Oh. *Oh.*” Her head tilted unassumingly for several seconds while this information processed, and then, with her incredible dexterity, tugged Keith so suddenly and sharply into a hug he almost fell over on the table.

In eighteen years, he had never heard his Mother’s tone in any octave that could be contrived as *giddy.* Until right now. Being squished in a bone-crushing hug. “He came for you! Oh, Keith, I was worried when you never said anything, I figured he wasn’t able to come. I didn’t want to bring it up in case, but, oh, goodness, this is just – *so sweet.* And he *is* cute, too. Why didn’t you introduce him to me?” And then the hug was over temporarily as she held him at arm’s length, benign fury flashing in the indigo of her eyes. “I raised you better than that!”

To the surprise of absolutely no one, Keith very much wanted to *die.* If only he could spontaneously combust on command.

“M-Mom…” he croaked, shaking his head and refusing to meet her eye. “Stop.”

With a chuckle, she pulled him in one more time for a final squeeze before letting go, settling back into her chair like she hadn’t just mauled him. Keith indignantly slouched in his own seat, scowling and blushing furiously.

“Never,” she said, leaning forward to push some of the hair out of his face, and he scrunched his nose. “I just – I’m glad this whole thing hasn’t been a complete disaster. I saw you dancing with him at one point, you looked *so happy,* and it made me happy. I know the whole thing isn’t your style, but it was – is – supposed to be something you can look back upon fondly and I was starting to think everything had been ruined. I’m glad you have someone who can make you happy in spite of all of this. Oh, look at me, I guess I’m gushing, aren’t I? I’ve always wanted to gush.”

“No gushing!” The Prince made a sound that was an impressive mixture of a hiss and a groan. “It can’t – I still have to marry Allura.”

“Maybe so,” the Queen smirked. “But, the fact that you’re happy, even if it’s only right now, is something important and you shouldn’t take it for granted.”

“I’m not taking it for –” Keith couldn’t believe they were having this conversation. She was the one who had arranged the stupid marriage in the first place! And yeah, okay, maybe Keith had been complicit during the whole thing because he knew it was his *responsibility,* but still. “It’s just… It doesn’t *change* anything, even if I…”

His Mother’s smile softened, a tender expression spreading over her features, one that was reserved only for some of their most special moments. Keith could count the number of times he’d seen that look on his fingers: the first time he held court without her leading, when he first beat another Blade in a sparring match, when they used to ride together and he was small enough that they could share the same saddle. When they “buried” his Father. When he danced with her the first night of the Ball.

And right now.

“You never know with these things, son. Sometimes just one person can very well change
“Ahhhhhhhh,” he let out a content sigh, laying back in Keith’s bed at the cusp of consciousness, close to dozing off any moment.

He would have, too, if not for his best friend loudly, intentionally, cleaning up the dishes left behind from their shared mid-morning breakfast.

“Okay,” Hunk heaved out a tired sound as he stacked the last of the plates, sticky from syrup and creams and sauces. “I bit my tongue for the meal to see if you would bring it up yourself, but my I’m dying here, man. What in the name of marzipan are you doing in Prince Keith’s room? You’re wearing his clothes, in his bed like it’s no big deal, and we just had breakfast in his room – and he’s not even here!”

Stretching out his arms and legs, Lance began to gather the blankets over himself as best he could and huddled beneath them. “Yeah, so what?”

His best friend sounded exasperated, if not minorly amused. “First you show up with another not-tattoo face mark, then there’s these magical watches, and you’re all lovey-dovey with the Prince, holding hands and stuff and sneaking off on dates in the forest? I’m super glad you and I got to spend some time together, so no complaints on him letting us use his room but… What aren’t you telling me? I heard all about the Blue Paladin and him dancing at the Ball. People think you’re together, you know!”

“Wellllllllll,” Lance replied, unwilling to mask the smile in his voice when it came to Hunk. “Maybe that’s because… we might be, you know, together?

After a moment’s silence, Hunk sounded hilariously deadpan. “Of course. Of course you are.”

Nervously, he remarked, “What, is that suddenly not okay or something?”

Hunk sighed, walking towards the bathroom to wash off the stuck-on food from his hands. He spoke over the sound of the running water in Keith’s sink.

“No, no, I’m sorry, don’t misunderstand. I sort of expected he was interested in you after what happened at the shop on Nadia’s birthday, but I was one-hundred percent sure after the way he reacted when you didn’t show up at the honeycomb place. It’s not that it’s any sort of problem – I just worry, you know?” With a wry grin, he returned to the bedroom, drying his hands on a towel that stuck out of his back pocket. “I mean, gosh, from the way your neck looks, you’d think you guys… you know.”

At that, Lance flinched but said nothing, burrowing further into the warm cotton that smelled of Keith. It took all of five ticks for his silence to become a confession.

“Lance, you didn’t!” Hunk gasped, noisily running into furniture as he made a beeline for the bed. He ripped back the covers, leaving a very blushy Lance fully exposed, and appropriately annoyed.
“Hey! It’s cold in here, give – that – back!” He tugged in succession with the words, Hunk finally letting go on the last cadence. Without something to counteract his weight, Lance flew back into the mattress and bounced irritably on the pillow-top softness.

The chef sat down beside him, combing the short hairs back from his best friend’s forehead, assessing the legitimacy of the pout on his face.

And in truth, Lance was a little upset. This was deeply personal, and he wasn’t trying to make Hunk uncomfortable or upset in talking about it, but it also felt important. Hunk was a virgin, too, so he might not be able to relate exactly to the weird ‘nothing-is-different-but-somehow-everything-is-different’ experience that Lance was feeling, but it also felt like the kind of thing he needed to be able to tell his best friend about.

“Hey, hey, buddy, sorry.” Hunk said, voice soft. Lance found his friend gazing down at him, looking sincerely worried. “I didn’t mean to make you feel bad or anything. You just disappeared for a few days, come back and now you’re just, dropping so many things on me all at once!”

With a well-meaning sigh and smirk, Hunk continued. “I like Keith. I’m happy you trust him enough to share something like that with him… I shouldn’t have reacted like that, I really am sorry, but, it’s just, being with someone with a power differential can be really complicated. Just because he’s the Prince doesn’t mean I won’t kick his ass if he took advantage of you, Lance. Are you… okay? Were you okay with everything that happened? You don’t have to tell me if you’re not comfortable, just know I’ll listen if you want to talk about it.”

It was, of course, impossible for Lance to stay upset with Hunk – not that he even wanted to – and it was painfully obvious that everything he said came from a place of caring. Lance had just been quick to get defensive due to the weird-squishy vulnerability brought on by all of this new, intense set of emotions.

“I… yeah, well,” He began, sitting up in the sheets and scratching his cheek sheepishly. “I sort of… initiated it… on accident? He walked in from the bathroom with his shirt off, and I thought he was trying to, you know, intentionally get me all worked up so I gave him a taste of his own medicine! I took off my shirt and then… made out with him a little… and the next thing I know, well,” he flushed, gesturing at the bed in lieu of explaining everything that happened.

To his relief, Hunk just laughed. It was spirited, almost like a giggle, the way a baby seal probably sounded when complimented by its mamá seal before being given a big fish for dessert. Literally, the happiest sound in the universe. “Lance, did you seriously sleep with Keith because you thought he was challenging you?”

“You’re damn right I did!” Lance beamed, puffing out his chest for a moment before they both peeled with hearty laughter. “But really, no, yeah. It was… better than I thought it would be, actually. Like, wow, way, way better – I mean, I never expected –”

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“Lance,” Hunk said beseechingly. “I’ll… listen if you really, really want that, but maybe spare me some of the, uh, more graphic details?”

“Right, right,” the brunette said with an embarrassed shake of his head. “Sorry. Yeah, so, I was super nervous and everything, but Keith asked me about six million times if I was okay and if I was comfortable with everything and honestly, I was. He stopped us both even though I was basically in a sex-crazed haze, and I tried to ask myself, you know, ‘am I just thinking with my dick right now?’ or, if I actually wanted it and, you know, I really did. Do. I do want it. Him, I mean.”

At that, his friend’s usual sunny smile waned, an overcast settling over the usual twinkle in his eyes.
“What about the whole, he’s marrying-Princess-Allura thing? Don’t worry, Shay has filled me in plenty about all the ‘upstairs’ drama.”

“Yeah… I’ve thought about that a lot, actually. Like, almost constantly.” Lance admitted, and there was no mistaking the anxiety in his tone. Blue had come over and crawled into the larger man’s lap, reveling in the gentle strokes Hunk pressed over her head and down her back. “I don’t know, Hunk. I… I don’t want him to get engaged to Allura, but I don’t think I’d be ready to marry him even if it wasn’t, you know, wrong for a million and one different reasons. We’re like, total opposites? He’s rich, I’m poor. He’s got a million people to take care of, literally, and I can barely even support my family with the sort of money I make. Plus like, I know ‘times are a changin’ but I don’t know if the realm is exactly ready for a gay King with a servant as a husband? Ugh, that just feels weird to even say.” Sighing, he picked at his nails so as to have something to do with his fidgeting hands.

“Part of me wants to try to convince him to call it off, the thing with Allura, or at least delay it, or something, but it seems impossible to undo all of that. Another part of me just… wants to hang on and enjoy things while I can? Not waste any time on what could go wrong because it just feels so… right? Ugh. It’s confusing – Hunk, what do I do?”

Both the pillars of comfort in Lance’s life looked at him seriously, one wearing a frown and the other staring at him with an icy gaze.

“There’s not…” his friend began, only to stop himself and shake his head before trying again. “I can tell you’re serious, man, and I wish I could give you some more solid advice but, like, I sort of see the logic in what you’re saying. You guys are opposites, but…”

Lance, known for his stubbornness, latched to a single word that gave him something like hope in spite of the dozens of others that felt like knives pressed between the notches in his ribs. “But…?”

He watched as one of Hunk’s hands absently traveled to the side of his pants, and Lance could see the outline of his pocket watch clearly shelled out against the fabric.

“Well, like you said, you guys were basically born to not even know each other, much less experience something this,” Hunk nodded towards the bed, and Lance felt himself pink. “Together. So, the way I see it, your own separate tracks of fate got messed up and you ended up crossing paths, like you somehow both managed to pissed off exactly the right people and you got shoved into each other’s lives, more or less. The reasoning you’re talking about for why it wouldn’t work out makes sense, logically… but, like, nothing about this is logical, Lance.”

Pausing, Hunk slowly stood up and began to pace, hands gesturing animatedly while he talked. “Feelings don’t – aren’t supposed to – make total sense. Like, things aren’t going to get easier for you guys if you try to fight uphill battles or swim upstream constantly. And I’m not saying give up and just go with the currents, but like, get your ass to shore and build a boat or something, change the way things are instead of just fighting directly against it. You don’t feel like you can eventually marry Keith because, what, the realm might not be ready? How will you ever know if you don’t even give it a chance – you’re dismissing the possibility that it could all go awesomely right out of fear of the possibility that it could maybe go wrong?” Taking a moment to rub his temples, Hunk went on, “And about you being a servant – even if you were, which, how many times do I have to tell you, you aren’t – it doesn’t define you. Same thing applies here. As I’ve heard it, the whole freakin’ Ball fell for the Blue Paladin because you were just able to be yourself, Lance. Don’t you think they’d feel the same way if you let them fall in love with the real you, instead of this label you think you are?”

With a final, steady exhale through his nose, Hunk whirled in place and walked right up to the bed, gripping his friend by the shoulders and meeting him eye-for-eye. “As for what I think you should do
— have you talked to Keith about this? Asked him what he wants to do? You’re acting like this is black and white, and I think there’s a whole lot of gray that’s being left out right now. Gray is underrated, if you ask me. Maybe you can’t stop their engagement, but who knows how long it’ll be before they actually get married – maybe you can figure out something in the meantime. Or, maybe, and pardon my language, tell your aunt to rightly fuck off and, I don’t know, join the guards and send those wages back home instead, and then maybe you can one day become a knight like Sir Shiro; you’ve already got an in there with him and Sir Adam, and that has nothing to do with Keith! I’m sure Commander Holt would vouch for you, and you’re a killer shot, man. Don’t give up on this just because you’re worried you’re not good enough for him, or for the realm, Lance – because you are. You’re my best friend, do you honestly think I would ever settle for less than the best?”

“Hunk, that was…” Lance gaped at him blankly for almost a solid dobosh, wide-eyed in wonder. “That was downright fucking poetic, dude. Where the quiznak did that come from?”

“The watch,” he answered automatically with a shrug. “I mean, it’s what I was thinking, but the watch has really helped me to vocalize what I want to say. I swear I don’t even stutter around Shay with this thing, it’s like the world’s best confidence booster. So, yeah.”

With a small smile, Lance slowly leaned back into the sheets again and let the words wash over him, Hunk’s wisdom almost as effective of Blue’s internal reassurances. “Hunk, you’re like, my subconscious, you know that? The little voice in my head that says ‘don’t do bad things’? That’s you. You’re the best, buddy.”

“Aw, thanks dude, you are too. I’m just happy that you’re okay, I’ve been so worried about you, man.” There was a pause, and Hunk’s voice turned lightly teasing as he finally sat back down on the edge of the bed. “You really care about him, don’t you?”

Lance didn’t even bother trying to deny it. “I don’t just care about him, Hunk. I’m in love with him. I mean it, it’s weird and I feel insane but I do and it’s really overwhelming but I just… I love him and – oh, god, don’t cry, Hunk!”

Too late, really, because his best friend had never looked prouder of Lance than he did at that moment, big fat happy tears lining his cheeks as he pulled the thinner boy into a crushing embrace.

“I’ll cry as much as I want to! I d-didn’t know y-you… m-my best friend is i-in love! Oh, Lance, this is l-like, something you’ve deserved for so long. You’ve got so much love to give everyone and I’m just so happy that you found someone who can make you feel this way.”

Shit, was he about to cry too? Hunk’s tears must be contagious, and Lance ended up squeezing the larger teen back just as fiercely as he let out a wet snicker into his shoulder.

“I think you’re right. I hope you’re right. It’s just crazy that this all happened so fast and… I’m glad to get to spend this time with you, man. It’s been too long since it was just us, and I needed my best friend back.”

“I needed my best friend back, too,” Hunk sobbed harder and Lance thought for sure his ribs would crack but the pain was a welcome, wholesome reminder of some of the great things Marmora has given him. “Your aunt is a monster for the way she treated you, and I still wish you had told us sooner what was going on. Pidge and I wouldn’t have let her treat you like that. I need my best bud in my life and she’s been trying to crush your spirit for ages. Don’t you ever shut me out like that again, you hear?”

After Hunk officially soaked Lance’s shoulder in salty tears – and maybe Lance let a manly tear or two out on Hunk’s tunic as well – the friends parted ways with a few more hugs between them. For
Lance, the “meal and feels” session had effectively hit all of his sweet spots and sleep was a welcome way to waste the remainder of the afternoon. That way, he would be less antsy just sitting and doing nothing, and he knew Blue could hold their transformation for a while longer in the evening the more she slept. So they cozied up under Keith’s blanket, Lance still in the pajamas he’d slept in, and curled up into the warmth of the decadently soft mattress.

Blue purred quietly as Lance rubbed the space behind her ears.

“I’m glad you came into my life Blue… it’s hard to believe I would still be in the cellar, right now, if you hadn’t shown up. Thank you…” he murmured sleepily, already feeling himself drift towards sweet unconsciousness.

A final thought flitted through his heart, taking root within his ribs and sprouting springly flowers throughout his body.

[I need no thanks. You deserve this, my paladin. Now rest.]

And with her command, they both fell into calm, empty rest. It wasn’t nearly as satisfying as having Keith beside him, but it was enough for now.

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**[KEITH]**

After bidding his Mother goodbye (with some more, and completely unreasonable, gushing), Keith set off quickly towards the front of the castle, a silent and stoic Kolivan trailing behind him. The man had mastered the art of being menacing and impassive all at once, and it made for a rather effective means of wading off unwanted passersby from stopping the Prince to chat.

Slipping out of the castle was easy. Slipping into the stables was… well, not so easy. The structure was crowded with horses and stablehands, all manner of chatter and nickering and clopping hooves creating a sort of maddening sort of mid-morning din. The room stilled in a ripple effect after the first young girl noticed him, running over to another boy and whispering in his ear. The Prince’s presence always turned a room to stinging silence when filled by those who did not know him (and perhaps even in the company of those who did know him), reducing all natural amiability and activity to unsure murmurs and awkward glances.

Sighing, Keith made a beeline for Red’s stall, hoping his eyes conveyed his own awkward version of an apology. How is it that he always felt like such a foreigner amongst his own people? Not for the first time, the Prince silently reflected and admired Lance’s incredible capacity for social grace and effortless congeniality. Keith was about as relatable as a rock.

Kolivan put up no argument when Keith instructed he remain outside Red’s stall. The look of disagreement was clear on his face, but unlike Shiro, Kolivan did not voice his opinion unless asked; a different kind of soldier, through and through.

When he entered the stall, the Prince narrowed his eyes at Red but did not speak until the gate was fully closed behind him. The mare, coat lustrous despite the dry autumn air, gazed back towards him looking somehow unimpressed. How does a horse even look unimpressed?
Umm… how does this work? I should have asked Lance if there’s like… phrase or something to initiate it?

Instead, with his usual amount of finesse, Keith said, “Um… hi?”

She bristled in acknowledgement, but there was no magic voice in his head. Absently, his right hand rubbed the skin surrounding his watch.

“Can you… understand me?” The Prince asked quietly, “I think I’m your… paladin? Does that sound like a thing?”

Carefully, Keith moved to run a hand gently down and over Red’s back, but the moment the pads of his fingers brushed her coat, he took in a sharp inhale of cold air, the chill filling his lungs in stark contrast against the warmth of his fluttering heartbeat, racing in his veins.

He held the breath for several seconds, before letting it out with a disappointed grunt.

Nothing.

Well, nothing unusual. She was a little dusty from the stables, though her body was pleasantly temperate compared to the nip in the air. His hands were half-gloved, so he was able to run a few fingers down her sinewy, auburn crest and appreciate the familiarity of the sensation.

Her company was a second nature to him, like writing again after a long break without touching the inkpot, training after a long time away from the castle, swimming despite not having seen the sea in years. Red’s whole presence was muscle memory, in a sense; he couldn’t really remember a point in his life without her, and falling back into their usual rhythm was something his body did all on its own. Their relationship was learned lifetimes ago, sewn into the very fabric of his memories, a warming core that gave life to his breathing body and his beating heart.

Keith sighed and picked up a brush, murmuring, “Is it because I’m not in danger? Can you understand me and you just don’t want to respond?”

As if in response, she restlessly plodded of her feet on the ground and whinnied. Maybe she really can understand me? Maybe there was a reason Keith couldn’t hear her, like Lance seemed to be able to hear Blue?

Or maybe he was just projecting and he was just talking to a horse. Meh.

In any event, he was wholly convinced that she needed to breathe fresh air again as much as he did, and with an irritable grumble, the Prince hauled out her saddle and carefully, thoroughly, prepared the reins, stir-ups and secured the necessary straps over her torso. Ready to ride, Keith led her out of the main stable gate and sensed more than he saw or heard Kolivan appear beside him, a horse of his own in tow but he did not seem intent on riding it.

“Per her Majesty’s instructions,” the Blade spoke in a gruff tone. “Please do not stray so far that I cannot see you, but I will remain here while you ride.”
Appreciative, Keith gave the older man a respectful nod and mounted Red. Both hands on the reins, he let out a sigh he hadn’t realized had been suffocating him until he was back in the saddle; it came with a similar sense of satisfaction to the one he’d felt that morning, waking up to the ocean smiling down at him from within pelagic blue eyes.

He first worked her towards a gentle trot, just to get her blood moving. It didn’t take long to build a steady pace, and soon, Keith was laughing to himself, a weird sort of relief as the autumn air nipped his cheeks and exposed fingers, a pleasant chill that off-set his usual too-hot skin.

The laughter that spilled from his mouth was equal parts “finally” and “fuck everything.”

It was all just so fucking frustrating, if he were honest. All of it. The ball. The marriage. His Mother at times, Shiro at others. The plot, the Galra, the peace negotiations. Nothing was simple, and it was now more common for things to make no sense than for them to make any sense at all. Lance was an enigma. Red wasn’t his spirit guardian-thing, or if she was, she didn’t want to talk to him for whatever reason. Staticians tried to calculate how easily he could die at any given moment; scholars stayed up all hours of the night trying to stop those possibilities from becoming likelihoods.

The whole goddamn thing was a mess.

To borrow his Mother’s phrasing from earlier, it was a sort of a disaster, but this? This was one constant, one familiar outlet that he had left, the one place and one action that wasn’t dictated by the laws of the land, the calls of political responsibility, or even the confusing mush that his heart had been reduced to in recent days.

When he and Red rode together like this, really rode, without inhibition, he wasn’t the Prince of Marmora, or Keith, or anyone, really. He just was. Just the thundering pulse in his veins, spurred on by a wind so biting his cheeks stung in brilliant satisfaction; just a part of the world where the grass was so green and frosty he could hear the crackle and snapping of blades beneath Red’s weight as she picked up speed, sprinting, flying over the fields around the castle; just an embodiment of freedom, a line of movement indiscernible from the blurry textured edge of the forest over the Northern part of the grounds, untethered to all that kept him bound to duty and order and all the rest of the bullshit.

It was something he turned to whenever he needed to escape. Just him and Red and no one else, it was something he thought he needed and would want for his whole life. Indeed, the feeling, the freedom and very vivid feeling of being alive was more than he could have asked for right now with everything going on. It was beautiful.

But gods, if it wasn’t lonely, too.

The longer they went, the less Red’s company necessarily felt like companionship. He loved Red, he really did, but this wasn’t – he shouldn’t be here, doing this. The autonomy was thrilling and he loved her for bringing it to him but – but, fuck, if it didn’t just make him aware of how empty it was without someone to share it with.

The brisk wind was a reminder of the kisses on his cheek, forehead, nose, all just from that morning. His laughter an echo of what it was when a he remembered the indignant look of a certain boy when he walked right into a tree, the day they met. The freedom of riding paled to the liberating sensation of phantom touches, of skin-on-skin, everywhere, all at once.

Reflexively, they began to slow. Keith wasn’t sure if he’d done it on purpose or not, but they’d ridden the expanse of the grounds until it brought them to a specific stone structure, the marble’s coloring almost indistinguishable from pewter, embedded in the side of the Northern Ridge. It was
the castle’s masonry at its finest, all smooth and clean edges with elegant scripture carved into the planes of granite, the ghostly stone standing starkly against the otherwise natural brown crags of the hillside.

Keith dismounted, probably against his better judgement, and approached the dips and cairns of the obstruction in the cliffside, studying every shade and shadow cast upon the outside of the tomb.

The royal crypt, to be exact. It wasn’t exactly a popular place to spend his leisure opportunities, for obvious reasons, but today, paying his respects to dead men and women seemed unnervingly like something that was past its due. Today could be his last day on the other side of this wall that had been carved into the mountain generations ago, a mark of his ancestry that had been tunneled directly into the land itself.

Hands shaking, the Prince pushed open the heavy, heavy, entrance and entered the catacomb.

The walls were lined in familiar purple crystal, long-burning deposits of energy that activated only when someone of royal blood entered the tomb. One by one, the rows lit up, casting color and light upon the final resting place of his long dead relatives. Each individual tomb was little more than a simple raised structure, flawlessly smooth stone that was cold and had since been sealed, some adorned with jewelry or letters or fossilized flowers, turning to dust as they rested on top of names.

Queens, Kings, Princes, Princesses – all those who ruled this land had all met the same death. It was final, and it was absolute. Perhaps that was why Keith had found his own Father’s death so unsatisfying, his feet guiding him straight past the great-great-great’s of his heritage – people who surely all represented something nice to him in theory but meant very little to him personally. There was only one monolith he really wanted to see, the only tomb in this cold, lifeless chamber that he knew to hold no body within.

Kenneth “Texas” Kogane.

He laughed a little when he found it. His Mother had been the one to insist that his nickname be included in the script. Keith was glad she made the call, as it seemed only fitting for the man Keith remembered.

The last time he’d been here, it had been with his Mother six years ago, or thereabouts. They had come to formally lay his Father to rest, though to say they buried him would be inaccurate. There was no body recovered, no true cause of death determined, but men of his status don’t just disappear, all guards assigned to him unaccounted for, all horses missing, all belongings vanished, no note, no trace, nothing, unless there had been some manner of tragedy. He used to want for some sort of finality, some closure, even if it was a mangled corpse or even a fucking severed head – something that promised his Father was really gone, and that hoping otherwise was a waste – but not all stories are so neatly finished, loose endings tied up in a nice little bow. Sometimes, there is no reliable narrator to announce “the end.” Instead, acceptance comes where it can, however reluctantly. It trickles in during the waiting, the wondering, and eventually the hurt doesn’t hurt as much, the absence isn’t as overwhelming, and you start to move on whether you want to or not.

The King was lost seven years ago, and deemed dead a year later. Now, Keith stood in front of an empty box shaped from the finest grade of marble that was somehow meant to memorialize the man his Father had been.

His chest hurt, Keith realized, and not from the icy air seeping into his lungs. This was a different kind of hurt entirely.

“Hi, Dad. It’s been… awhile.” Keith swallowed, not sure how to do this. “I don’t – I doubt you can
hear me or anything like that, but… things have been sort of hectic here. Mom and I are doing our best, but… yeah, it’s not going super well. Your favorite Galran emperor is still being as much of a dick as he was before you died.”

“Heh,” Keith laughed a little, deciding to sit down. “Shiro would be mad if he heard me talking like that, especially in here, to you. Doesn’t matter that I got my bad mouth from you, does it?”

Facing the engraving of his father’s name, Keith studied it for several seconds before continuing. “He still tries, you know, doing his best to keep me on the ‘straight-and-narrow’, I guess. I haven’t had to murder anyone so… I guess it’s working. Everyone else is good, too. He and Adam got married… a few years ago. Three, now, I think. They haven’t announced anything yet, but I think they’re looking to adopt soon. They’d make good Dads. The Holts are fine, too. Sam misses you, I think, he doesn’t visit as often as he used to, but Pidge and I are closer now. Matt’s just as much as an idiot as he was back then… Uhhh, what else?”

“There’s Red, she’s… the same, honestly. I mean, she might be magical, apparently. I don’t know… There’s a lot I don’t know anymore, to be honest.” His voice trailed off, and Keith allowed his gaze wander from the shapeless letters carved in front of him to the too-hard shapes stretching out all around him.

There were raised, empty platforms, expanding out towards the end of the hall that would eventually be shaped properly into stone caskets. One would eventually hold his Mother, and then him, and presumably his own spouse and children, filling up the spaces until the castle masons needed to carve out more of the mountain to accommodate their dead.

It was definitely a little unsettling to imagine himself lying in here, someday, and then forever after. It could be as soon as tomorrow.

There was something that hurt about that, something like failure that he hadn’t come to expect. If he died tonight, there would be no heir, and his Mother would be left completely alone. What the fuck would happen to the kingdom? Would the remainder of these sepulchers go unfilled because he would be the last of their line to die? The only one who would fail to do his duty, to rule as best he could and continue the line of succession, eventually to be buried and leave things for the next generation?

Gods, he just wanted someone to tell him that he was doing this right. Reality had crept up on him like poison ivy, making his skin feel itchy and wrong over his body. He missed when things made sense, when his biggest fear was getting lost in their big castle, not whether he would disappoint everyone with every single choice he made.

“I met someone,” Keith turned back to his Father’s name, voice thick in his throat. “Someone really… stupid, but also nice. I’m not even being fair – he’s not stupid I just… I wish it could have been more like things had been for you and Mom with him, though. You were a lord when you guys met at her Royal Ball or whatever, so it was easy for you guys. Um, his name is Lance… I haven’t known him for very long, but now I can’t even stand the fucking idea of being without him. It’s seriously almost pathetic? But I… well, I guess I love him, don’t I?”

It had been six years since they sealed this tomb, and just as long since Keith had cried openly. He’d been close when Shiro lost his arm, but Adam’s own hope and unwavering determination that everything would be okay had kept him grounded.

The Prince wiped at his cheeks and let out a wet, choked chuckle. “You would have liked him. His sense of humor is shit, just like yours. He’s worse at nicknames than Mom ever was with you, and that’s saying something considering I’m literally looking at the word Texas inscribed on your fucking
tomb. I wish you could have met him, Dad. I wish you were still here. I… I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t know what to do, there’s so much… I don’t want to marry Allura, but I can’t let the Galra keep doing this to the realm, but I don’t know how else I’m supposed to fix this. War would mean so many people die, what, just so I could marry who I want?”

Keith hugged his legs to his chest and buried his head between his knees.

“What would you do? Was loving Mom this confusing? Am I doing this all wrong? I d-don’t… I don’t know what to do, Dad. What am I supposed to do?”

…

The Prince remained in the crypt for what felt like hours after that, recanting the tales of the living to an audience of the dead, feeling at least a little bit insane at times but he couldn’t deny the cathartic release being there had brought him. He felt less lonely than just riding blind with Red, even if he was arguably more alone there than he was when exposed to the elements.

When he reemerged, Kolivan was waiting outside, mounted on his horse and facing away from the entrance. Neither said a word to each other as Keith loudly closed the passage and watched the final lavender lights flicker into blackness once again.

Quietly, Keith rode Red back to the stables and dismounted.

As he put away her saddle and cleaned her up after their ride, Keith was glad he had at least managed to get one clear answer out of all of this.

Red was, undoubtedly, his guardian.

There wasn’t any grand epiphany like he’d been expecting, no world-shifting, magical feeling of emotional connectivity that had never been there before. Because this was Red.

Their bond had always been there.

She was there, buried in the pit of insecurities that he tried to torch into nonexistence, the smoldering embers to a fire that never really died. A warmth that emanated from beneath the darkest parts of himself, those parts that he kept hidden beneath anger and constant facades, a flame burnt down so low it seemed like there was nothing left. But like true fire, stubborn and destructive, it weathered the years, leaving behind no burns but only blistered hope.

Hope. Red was his hope.

He couldn’t hear her in the same way Lance must be able to hear Blue; there was no words or directions or a channel of communication that suddenly rushed open. This was just, normal, his heart acknowledging something that had always been there, a synchronization so deep and innate to his own personality that there really were no distinctions in their thoughts.

He couldn’t hear her because she was, for all intents and purposes, him. A single mind shared between two bodies.

Red Paladin, huh? It had a nice ring to it.
If Lance had been nervous the first night of the ball, he was fucking buzzing with anticipation for the last night. He was standing in front of the mirror in Keith’s bathroom, properly inspecting for the first time the truly astonishing amount of hickies Keith had left all over him yesterday. Hunk wasn’t kidding; the finger-shaped bruises from before were indistinguishable from all of the places Keith had suckled his skin… Lance couldn’t say he was very sorry about it. In fact, it was turning his thoughts a little licentious just remembering the willful groans and pants of Keith’s mouth all over his skin.

Nope. No, no, nope, not about to get hard right now, nope. Not happening.

Surprisingly, Blue seemed to have a fix for that, too, and the sudden rush of immodest desires that had started popping into his head were calmed to a low tide, a rumble of sea spray instead of raging waves breaking over the shoreline.

“Ah, uh, thanks,” he cleared his throat and looked down at her, seated on the counter next to the sink. “Are you ready, Beautiful?”

“Br-r-r-t!”

[Of course, my paladin. Let us go and, how do you say, knock the socks off the Angry One?]

Lance snorted. “Heh. Blue, you really know the way to my heart.”

She hummed an appreciative note, her body and his scales already beginning to glow softly beneath the white-gold light of the bathroom, casting turquoise shadows over the spotless tiles and reflecting in the mirror with translucent iridescence, a kaleidoscope of sky, sea, snow, and sorrow, the color of his soul, of the life that shined through their bond. Lance watched her form disappear as a breeze, only to coalesce over his skin almost like a set of armor, plated by her affection and support, the mail cast from trust rather than from iron or steel.

Letting out a content sigh, the sound of relief and comfort and home, Lance inspected himself and almost laughed. Every day, Blue seemed to test the limits of how ostentatious they could be, and Lance had no complaints; Blue had him looking fucking amazing, and this sort of vanity was something the brunette had no trouble indulging in.

For the last evening, Blue had taken to combining the better parts of both outfits, a flattering ensemble of flashes of gold and soft shades of blue, but she still managed to keep the style fresh and surprising. In fact, it was almost reminiscent of the fashions typically worn off the continent, popular amongst those who lived in and near the deserts something he’d seen only on occasion from the far-eastern trading caravans that sometimes stopped in the capital. His mamá’s family came to the realm from those lands, some time ago, he was pretty sure.

From head to toe, he was swathed in breathable fabric, dyed the colors of the sea. His torso was covered by a simple, silky tunic with no sleeves and open sides that sat snugly over hips. With his sides exposed, a frost-colored bandeau of sorts peeked out, hugging his chest laterally and was embroidered with elegant golden thread, the needlework a design of something reminiscent paisley. A few tiny flashes of his tanned skin poked through the open sides of the shirt where the bandeau did not cover, but it was not so much that it was immodest.

His pants were loose but intentionally so, similar to harem-style slacks with a drop where they would
normally fit to his hips, instead hanging comfortably over his sides and tapering back again at his ankles.

Over his arms, shoulders, neck, hips – basically, any plane across his body where there was a dip or divet – golden chains glittered prettily beneath the crystal lights. Notably, there was wide band on one bare forearm, several chains gathered over his hips, a folded pattern of golden leaflets banded together that around over his hairline, and golden sandals that seemed hilariously impractical for the season but, hell, they looked good and Lance wore sandals almost exclusively anyways.

Of course, there was the mask, this time entirely threaded by gold. There was no supporting fabric to sit over his face, no silk or satin to cushion his cheekbones – this made it almost uncomfortable, but in a sort of satisfying way that made him aware of the mask, of what it stood for, and he liked his blue eyes and tanned skin beneath stood bright against the shine of the twisted metal.

The last part of the look had him turning around so he could glance over his shoulder, examining the truly dazzling cape that cascaded down his back. Gaussian, transparent fabric smoothed over his clothes and exposed arms, stitched with golden accents, but these were no random patterns or pretty twists and turns. These were stars, real constellations mapped out over the delicate tint of blue, casting the images of the night sky over his skin where exposed, and atop his clothes otherwise. He recognized all of them, and could name most of them – each one reminded him of home.

If, on the first night, Lance felt posh, and the second evening he was elegant, tonight he looked…well, not rough, not exactly. Just a little less refined, more himself. Because, really, Lance wasn’t all sharp lines and smooth edges like the rest of the guests; the colors and fineries still gave him the air of someone who could fit themselves into the crowds of high heels and polished shoes, but at the same time, he was simply more comfortable this way. He didn’t wear fitted robes or fancy boots on a daily basis; being able to wiggle his toes, turn and feel the fabric flutter around him instead of hug every curve and line of his body, this just felt right. Natural, like he could live and breathe in these clothes in a way he couldn’t the nights before, familiar and comfortable and a part of him.

“Blue, you’ve outdone yourself again,” he said with a light sigh as he twirled in place, admiring the swish and sway of the material. Having nothing covering his arms but the almost chilly weight of the golden bands was strangely liberating, too, and he liked the mobility.

Lance took a few more moments to adjust the mask and fuss over the way some of the bangle sat over his skin, but it was really unnecessary. Just something to do in anticipation for –

Knock knock.

“Oh, great,” Lance inhaled sharply, heart rate already skyrocketing. Shit, he was nervous. “Guess that’s our cue.”

He closed his eyes and tried to will the calm to spread over him, hand gripping the doorknob tightly.

I can do this.

He wretched open the door, letting the burst of fierce determination drive his will, and was met by the familiar grimace of Thace.

Formally, the Blade gave a small bow. “Blue Paladin.”

“Ah, hi.” Lance stepped out into the hall and snapped the door closed behind him. Thankfully, it appeared there was no one else in either direction of the hallway — the idea of being seen leaving Keith’s room made his palms sweaty with unspoken innuendo.
Without a word, the Blade took a step back and held up a hand for Lance to lead the way. Awkwardly, the teen shifted his weight back and forth. “Actually, I don’t know how to get there… could you walk in front of me?”

“Yes, that’s fine. No problem! Don’t worry, the castle is huge and confusing, I understand getting turned around in it.”

That’s what Lance wanted the guy to say, desperate to relieve his own awkwardness, but Thace merely nodded once and began to march what must have been an easy path for him, memorized by years of familiarity. Lance, comparatively, found the whole experience dizzying. Things were only just starting to become a little familiar, and when he thought he knew which corridor they were going to take, Thace kept marching or took a different turn.

They made it down the first set of stairs when Lance felt a pins-and-needles sensation creep up the back of his neck, just like the night before when he tried to find the room himself.

_Dumb haunted castle and its dumb confusing hallways._

Still, Lance swore his nerves weren’t _that_ shot. He _knew_ the feeling of being watched and that’s definitely how this felt, and stubbornly, he stopped walking for a moment and turned around.

There wasn’t anyone there, of fucking course.

“Are you well, Blue Paladin?” Thace returned to his side immediately, thinking something was amiss. Well, something _was_ amiss, but Lance just couldn’t place it. What the hell _was_ that feeling? Was it Blue or something? But no, he knew that wasn’t right, his intuition wouldn’t have his pulse racing just from a little paranoia.

“I… thought there was someone following us,” he admitted quietly, measuring Thace’s reaction. The man revealed no emotion, of course, but he nodded his assent.

“Thank you for notifying me. I will make sure the guards are aware and sweep this section of the castle.”

That was… surprisingly reassuring, actually. Lance offered the man a small, appreciative smile and they set off again. He glanced over his shoulder no fewer than six times on their way to the western wing of the castle, but the attempts were never fruitful.

When they arrived, Lance saw a few familiar nobles milling about, making their way towards the grand staircase where his current arch nemesis stood, shouting all manner of name and title to the high heavens. Probably incorrectly.

_The herald._ Lance hissed, eyes narrowed. Thace glanced his direction, but the man said a predictable amount of absolutely nothing.

Sighing in an attempt to collect his patience, Lance stepped up to be announced by the evil fucker who was determined to start his night out on the wrong foot, every time.

Thace raised a hand to get Lance’s attention. “I will wait for you at the bottom of the stairs, Blue Paladin. Please do not move into the crowds until I have found you.”

Raising a brow over the bannister, Lance was tempted to ask, _what crowds?_, seeing as he was arriving much earlier than he’d come the previous two nights, but decided against it and just nodded to demonstrate his assent. Thace quickly moved away and towards what looked like a servants passage, so Lance resumed the tedious task of actually arriving.
“It’s you again!” The curmudgeon greeted with a big smile.

Lance wrinkled his nose. “Yep. Me again. Just Blue Paladin, not castellan and no lions, got it?”

The Herald tilted his head to the side, pushing up the glasses on the bridge of his nose. “But isn’t that your title?”

“No!”

At that, the herald seemed offended. “Then you lied?!”

“I — no, I didn’t lie,” he groaned, waving a hand and stepping up to the top of the stairs. “You misunderstood and then got stuck on the idea! Let’s just get on with it, old man. Remember, just Blue Paladin, got it?”

The herald glared at Lance momentarily, probably about to make a mockery of his name, again, only for

“Blue Paladin?” Grunted a woman, the fucking huge woman, with vibrant yellow eyes and pale blue fur. She wore some sort of ceremonial battle armor, which only served to make her massive figure even larger. Holy fuck.

“Uh, yes, hi? Sorry, I don’t think we’ve met.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” another voice said, almost coy, and the young woman it belonged to stepped out from behind around the massive one. She had shocking orange skin and an appendage that resembled a ponytail trailing down her back. She wore a fitting, plunging dark purple gown that complimented the vibrant rust-color of her complexion. “You haven’t met us, but this is my bae Zethrid, and I’m Ezor. We’ve heard a lot about you!”

He grinned weakly, Ezor’s breezy attitude putting him a bit more at ease, but he was more than a little intimidated by Zethrid’s cords of muscles. She could probably bench two or three of him, easily.

“So I know you’re about to head down, but I hear me out, I have a better idea. Come with us,” Ezor continued, winding an arm through his and leaned up to whisper in his ear. “Because, I’d rather not ruin your pretty clothes, but we might have to if you try to resist. Zethrid isn’t all sexy muscles just for something to look at.”

Well, fuck.

He couldn’t very well argue with that, now could he?

Ezor gave his arm a little tug-tug and jerked her head… away from the ballroom. Quiznak.

With pursed lips, Lance warily stepped in the direction she indicated, the very threatening presence of Zethrid never straying more than a half-step out of their shadow. “Alright… and I don’t suppose I get to know where are we going?”

She giggled. “Oh, well, it wouldn’t be very fun if we just told you, now would it?”

Yay. More reassuring signs.

“Here we go,” Ezor declared after turning a few corners, coming to what appeared to be a nondescript servant passage. Outside, another young woman stood, her arms crossed over her chest with a bizarre cat slinking over her shoulders. “This is Narti, numero three of our entourage.”
Lance wasn’t exactly sure if he was expected to say hi to his growing, entirely unwanted posse, but he didn’t really have the chance to linger on the thought when he met eyes with the cat on her shoulder.

His heart and stomach switched places, and he was overwhelmed by bile rising in his throat. Every hair on his body stood on end, all of his nerve-endings jumped to high alert. *Danger,* they all seemed to say, the weight of the piecing yellow stare more than just uncomfortable – it was downright terrifying.

Because *that* was what he’d been feeling in the hallways. That sense of being followed, his every movement traced, his every breath measured and recorded. It was *that* feeling, coming from a fucking *cat?*

He didn’t get the chance to ask his burning question – *what the fuck is that monster on your shoulders, Mysterious Galra Lady #3* — before the passageway was opened and Zethrid basically shoved him inside. He had the necessary few ticks to panic, thinking *shit shit shit, not this again,* being forced into a dark hallway with unknown, hostile Galra raking over him with their gaze, so he could rightfully say he was actually relieved when the crystal lights flickered on and the three women filed in after him. Ezor took the lead, followed by the unsettlingly quiet Narti and her demonic fucking cat, then Lance and, last and surely not least, Zethrid’s massive figure blocking any hope of running and bolting the other way.

“So are you having a fun time at the ball?” Ezor asked after a few quiet ticks.

“Umm.” Lance coughed. “It’s… okay, yeah.”

“Just okay?” The girl threw a pout over her shoulder. “But aren’t you the life of the party?”

He chuckled awkwardly, arms tucked tightly beneath each other over his chest. “Oh, uh, yeah, so I’ve been told. Hah. Guess I’m just… tired…?”

Zethrid made a noise of… agreement? Which was definitely weird, considering she was intimidating as fuck. “Dancing isn’t exactly my thing.”

“I’m aware,” Ezor shot back. “Can you believe her, Paladin? She gets all dressed up and looks good enough to *eat,* but then refuses to dance with me? Not nice at all.”

“Mmm.” He gave a half-hearted shrug. His brain was busy latching onto the fact that Ezor said ‘good enough to *eat*’ and he had half-a-mind to wonder if these women might be fucking *cannibals* but, holy *shit,* that thought was absolutely *too* scary so he vehemently denied the possibility on the basis that he simply did not want to even consider it.

“We’re almost there,” said the chatty one as they reached the bottom of a stairwell. Third floor, then? “Oh, hi, thank you,” she sang the last words, scooping up two drinks from a passing servant, who looked positively horrified to see the four of them the passages. Lance tried to look apologetic, but he doubted they could tell behind his mask. Ezor drank each spirit like a shot, two quick tilts of her head back and a hearty sigh followed.

“Right, good, okay… Here we go!” She said, placing a hand on the door. “It was nice meeting you, have fun!”

Lance didn’t even have time to open his mouth to reply before she unceremoniously shoved him right out into a hallway.

“Ah, Blue Paladin, *there* you are.”
Lance heard them before he saw them, but he didn’t really need to. He knew that voice.

Immediately, his skin began to crawl, a million imaginary spiders spreading out from the back of his neck and down his throat. It was like the invasive feeling of that cat’s stare from before, but somehow this feeling was even less welcome; it’s not like he hadn’t known that he’d might have to see the guy again, but rather, Lance just hoped he had a little longer before the inevitable confrontation.

He clenched his jaw and spun around, glaring daggers at that smarmy, ingratiating smile.

“I should have figured it was you. Who else randomly grabs people and pushes them around like he owns them?” Lance did not hold back an ounce of contempt, glaring with every bit of ire he had. “What do you want?”

“I think you know very well what I want,” Lotor hummed, stepping closer, apparently not at all surprised or deterred by Lance’s very apparent distaste. “Surely, I didn’t leave such a small impression on you, after that scene you made yesterday?”

“Well, there was a hint in there somewhere,” he said between grit teeth. “But since you didn’t pick it up the first time, let me make it easy for you: I’m not interested.”

“Oh, believe me, I’m aware,” the Prince, much to Lance’s discomfort, seemed positively thrilled by this turn in conversation. A deft hand snapped to his wrist with startling speed, too fast for him to react. “It was plenty clear after last night, judging how easily you submitted to Marmora’s little Prince.”

Lance flinched back like he’d been hit, but the grip on his wrist only tightened. “W-what are you…”?

“Oh, ah,” he interrupted like a mother scolding a child, exuding – holy shit – inhuman pressure on Lance’s joint, definitely some exhibition of his Galran strength, and Lance felt like his bones were breaking. “Don’t waste your breath denying it. The Prince isn’t the only one with eyes and ears in the castle, you know. It just disappoints me that you would settle below your worth, Blue. You can do so much better.”

“What, like you? Fuck off,” Lance tried to wretch his arm back, but Lotor’s already vice-like grip turned absolutely crushing. Despite his pride, he let out a little cry of surprise and pain. Fuck, that hurt.

“Feisty thing, aren’t you? Just relax for a moment; you wouldn’t want a scandal to get out, hmm?” Lotor was trying to move even closer, and Lance continually had to take a step back until he felt the wall flush against his back. “Now wouldn’t that make for quite the nasty headline – ‘Betrothed Prince Keith, seduced by the Blue Paladin, only quintant before announcing his engagement?’ And poor Princess Allura, the shame she would face. How embarrassing such a thing would be for the both of them.”

Willing his voice not to shake, Lance stopped tugging his own wrist, not wanting to hurt himself further.

He narrowed his eyes. “What is it you even want with me?”

“We can go around in circles all night, love,” the Prince gave Lance a fond look and placed a kiss right beneath his now swollen – at least fractured – wrist before finally letting him go. “All I want is the answer to my question from yesterday, but it appears you’ve already given it. Marmora’s Prince –
“That’s your price, isn’t it?”

With pursed lips, Lance massaged his wrist and tried not to hiss at the discomfort it brought. “You’re not making any sense.”

“No, I suppose I wouldn’t, not to you,” he hardly seemed to be listening, already taking the chance to trace over Lance’s body with his eyes. It was fucking uncomfortable and Lance could feel a slight dizzying sickness swell in his mind, an echo of Blue’s anger and displeasure with the situation.

“Be my date for a little while tonight. I’ve decided not to attend the peace talks, so your little Prince will be indisposed anyways. Just a few dances, and no one will hear a word of how it was you ended up in the Prince’s bed last night.”

“I –” Lance opened his mouth, but stopped himself.

He was, at least conversationally, totally fucked, wasn’t he?

He could be bullied and blackmailed into doing what the Galran Prince wanted, which was, what? A few dances? But by agreeing he’d basically be confirming what Lotor said as true... and there would be no way to even know if the guy would be good on his word, and Lance had very strong suspicion that Lotor wasn’t exactly someone to stick to a high code of honor.

Or, he could deny it or say no, and what? Let the court of public opinion be his judge, jury, and more than likely, executioner? Fuck up things for Keith and Allura? Shit, he may not want them to get married, but he certainly didn’t want to drag their names down.

This guy was the absolute worst. Lance was about two ticks from spitting in his face, just for something to do while he mulled over his options, when another, much brighter voice popped up beside Lotor, sudden enough that the man flinched and turned, and Lance took a large step away in response.

“Well, hello, Blue Paladin!” Sir Coran greeted, twirling his mustache with practiced finesse. “And to you too, your Highness! How are you finding yourselves this evening?”

Lance almost started cracking up – actually, he did start, but winced when he accidentally jostled his wrist too suddenly.

“How goodness, yes, with my charge stuck in that dull-as-dirt peace talk, I’d love to hear about the recent weather patterns to the north of Daibazaal’s territory. Is it true there have been spotings of diwingi pigeons in the region? Such rare, beautiful creatures! Do you have any interest in birds, Blue Paladin?”

Lance bit his lip, fighting back a smile at the painful annoyance in Lotor’s expression.

“You know, I’ll admit, I always wanted to learn about birds in the realm, but I don’t know much. Why don’t you tell me about them? All about them. Everything.”
A few minutes earlier

Clearly, there was something inherently wrong with the world, something that was deeply and thoroughly fucking wrong that just came with being a person. Keith attributed it to a flaw in their quintessential design, a fucked up feature that came around seldom but infallibly.

It was that instinct, that weird little need, where you stand and marvel at catastrophe. That unnerving draw to stare at a building as it burns to the ground, to watch in fascinated horror when a train derailed, to pore over even the nastiest of wounds.

Blood and destruction and all that was fucked up in the world – it never failed to catch and hold one’s attention.

And so was the case that evening, because, even though it was basically self-inflicted torture, Keith could not make himself look away as the Galran Prince strolled right out of the summit and stood conspicuously near a servant’s entrance. Of course, his first instincts had been: he’s trying to murder me — this is it, isn’t it?

So imagine Keith’s surprise, and consequent Anger – yes, that’s anger with a capital ‘A’ – when instead of a hired assassin or something emerging from the passage, instead out stumbled a very confused, slightly staggered Lance.

They were too far away to read lips and barely near enough to judge expressions, but it was plenty enough for him to get the gist. Not seconds after Lance had righted himself did Lotor grab him sharply by the wrist and began to back him up into the wall.

Oh, boy. That pissed him right the fuck off.

Keith was vaguely aware of the festering desire to murder that was beginning to manifest in his hands, and as a consequence, he felt the delicate chalice in his hands crack from how hard he had been gripping it. He hardly noticed the cold liquid as it ran over his fingertips.

Shiro’s arm was in front of his chest, presumably ready to stop him from turning violent, but Keith had a little more self-control than that.

Not much more, to be fair, as his entire body was vibrating in the effort to not reach for the throwing knives tucked in his belt. But, goddamnit, this was a peace talk, wasn’t it?

The whole encounter had been clearly staged, the shameless theatrics on Lotor’s part obviously intended to bait him into doing something. Not to mention that one of the key pieces of suspicious activity he’d been told to look out for was to be lured away from the terrace, something that could target him specifically.

Keith’s attention was laser-focused on the pair, and there was almost definitely some sort of pain in Lance’s expression. His left hand cradled his right wrist, and each time he moved it, the brunette grimaced. He was definitely hurt.

“Shiro,” Keith growled the knight’s name, a threat, command, and plea all in one, while throwing the cracked crystal over his shoulder and into the garden without a single fuck to give. It’s not like he set it down on the satin tablecloth, and it was getting in the way of his range of movement to grab for his blade. Temptation. Sweet, sweet temptation.
Getting Shiro’s attention on the matter was entirely unnecessary, as it turned out. Keith was rooted in place at one of the standing tables with Sir Coran, Princess Allura, and his Head of the Guard. It was a too-perfect view of the hallway past his guards that stood at the open doors; if he hadn’t been watching Lotor, he surely never would have noticed the encounter. Lance was probably so blindsided he didn’t even realize they were all watching. The other three had all witnessed much of the same event that ended with a kiss placed gently into Lance’s very fucking clearly hurt wrist before the brunette snapped it back towards him, and not nearly enough breathing room between them.

And yet, Keith managed to stay, managed not to fuck this up, for two reasons and two reasons only.

One, this was a peace talk. Keith was going to give his remarks on the value of diplomacy soon, and while storming out of the terrace to beat the ever-living shit out of Lotor seemed like a hilarious practice in irony, it was also probably a less than effective method to bolster their negotiations with the Galra.

Two, and more prudent as far as Keith was concerned, was the fact that he could wait. Wait until the meeting was over, wait for all the i’s to be dotted and the t’s to be crossed. That way, he could take his time, really enjoy the experience of breaking every single one of the bones in Lotor’s fingers, seeing as they were awfully prone to touching things that were not his.

Beside him, Shiro was clearly upset. “God, I really can’t stand him. I’ll have someone go –”

“Hold on a tick,” Princess Allura interrupted, the lines of her face drawn in contempt. Her voice was scarcely above a whisper. “Prince Lotor is nearly as much a monster as his father, but the difference is, he’s clever whereas Zarkon uses brute strength to overwhelm his enemies. The Blue Paladin was supposed to have an escort, wasn’t he? If they’ve been separated once, it could very well happen again. Don’t just send one of your usual men; I’m sure he’s thought of almost every move you’ll make. Take him by surprise – do something he wouldn’t expect.”

Keith raised both brows, distracted from his fury momentarily by the Princess’s advice. Sometimes, he forgot there was a war being waged outside of their borders, and it was clear her distaste for the Galran Prince ran deeper than something that could have been rooted during just the ball.

“What would you suggest?” He decided to ask, seeing as she seemed almost as invested in the situation.

She bit her lip, looking from Shiro to Keith and then around at the terrace as a whole. Both her father and Keith’s mother were seated with Emperor Zarkon and his witch at a table, deep in discussion by the looks of it. Disturbing them at such a crucial time in the talks would be unwise.

“I don’t…” she began, but was interrupted by a clear of her advisor’s throat.

“Princess, if I may, why not allow me to go in after him? I quite like La– er, the Blue Paladin, and seeing as I’m a diplomat, there’s really nothing the spoiled little quiznak could do beyond benign threats.”

Around their little half-circle, three mouths dropped, and Shiro was the first to blink back into focus. “Wait, Coran are you sure? If there’s… that is to say, this isn’t your battle to fight. Lotor is clearly trying to…”

“No, Coran is right,” Keith surprised himself by advocating for the plan, given how wrong it rubbed his instincts, but it had merit from a strategic standpoint. “We’re supposed to be a united front against the Galra, right? This is literally just like that, except on a smaller scale. But Allura and I can’t go anywhere, and you can’t go anywhere as long as I’m here. Sir Coran basically has free rein of the
castle since he’s nonessential to the meeting – no offense.”

“None taken, of course,” the man nodded astutely.

“I don’t think he needs a guard swooping in to literally save him, but if Coran could at least butt in
and get them away from each other, I’d feel a lot better. Think you can gab Lotor’s ear off?”

At that, Coran’s eyes sparkled and his mustache practically bounced with his enthusiasm. “Your
Highness, if there’s one thing I can do, it is that. Leave this to me!” He turned to the Princess with a
wistful smile. “I’ll be back soon, Princess.”

She nodded, lips pursed. “Alright. Good luck, Coran.”

“Hah, luck! You should have seen me back in my youth, luck has…” and the man’s voice was
quickly drowned out by the light music playing out over the castle grounds, gentle as a summer
breeze and comically distinct against the tension lingering in Coran’s absence.

“Are you sure about this?” Shiro asked almost immediately, and Keith clenched his jaw.

“No, but I don’t have much of a choice, do I?”

To his relief, Sir Coran wasted no time at all, immediately pushing his way right into their
conversation.

Already, the Altean advisor was beginning to lead Lance away, wedging himself between the
brunette and the Galran Prince as they strolled out of the hallway and into the nearby ballroom. Lotor
didn’t seem discouraged, necessarily, but it was enough to at least put some space between them and,
Coran was exactly right – he was a diplomat, so Lotor couldn’t lay a finger on him without incurring
the wrath of Altea.

Even so, their little victory was entirely bittersweet. “I just can’t believe I didn’t see it coming.”

Allura’s expression turned increasingly grim. “They’ll stop at nothing to get their way. The Olkari
know that price all too well, I’m afraid.”

Following her gaze, Keith realized she was watching Ambassador Ryder who looked, frankly,
terrible. Her skin was pale and almost sickly, with bags beneath her eyes that were darker than
bruises. She appeared not to have slept in days and, honestly, Keith wouldn’t be surprised if she
hadn’t. There was so much pressure on her and the other Olkari tonight – assassination threats and
royal drama aside – that could determine the state of affairs for their entire country for years, if not
decades, to come.

They could not mess this up.

…And, fuck all, they somehow didn’t.

Allura shook hands with Zarkon, Keith gave Ryder a fucking hug. Alfor seemed ready to cry out of
pride, his Mother watched on proudly when they reconvened and he led some of the discussion.
Of course, Emperor Zarkon declined all involvement with the rebel forces that were credited with the
violence, but his agreement in the methods on how to “crack down” on the insurgencies was telling
enough that the talks were going well. It was often awkward, since everything had to be once-
removed in discussion – because Daibaazal was never the entity responsible, they were always
spoken of as being on the right side of the fight, allies with Altea – but even with the dissonance,
they all managed. Trade agreements were signed and partial de-weaponization plans were laid out; it
wasn’t going to end the conflict, but it was a hell of a good start.
Not once did the Prince spot the tell-tale signs he’d been looking for – no hidden knives, no one pushing possibly-poisoned food on him, no anxious servants who were possibly bribed to get close to him. There was no smell of chemicals in the air, only gentle flowers from the garden and the occasional waft of food that he was pointedly not eating.

And Keith couldn’t believe it. Not in the, ‘wow good job team, we did it’ sense, but in the, he actually did not fucking believe it.

There was not a thing out of place, and that was worrisome.

The summit was nearly over, had gone off completely without a hitch, so it made total fucking sense when a nervous Ulaz appeared beside Kolivan and whispered in his ear.

Kolivan worked his jaw in response to whatever message Ulaz had relayed, and Keith felt his senses turn reactive, his attention shifting to accommodate a sense of… warning? Something like that. Whatever it was, it pushed his senses to their extremes, waiting with baited breath for something to change. What was it? What was happening? Something had to be happening, right?

Not that they could act conspicuous. Fuck. His nerves were on fire, straining and twisting and ready to jump with the drop of a pin, the weight of his blade heavy on his hip.

Finally, when Kolivan decided to speak, it wasn’t until the natural conversation had picked back up. So quietly not even Shiro would have heard, the man whispered, “Plaxum has requested to see you, your Highness.”

Plaxum? She’s supposed to be with that girl, Lucia or something. That can’t be a good sign, right? Fuck. What the fuck.

“Okay,” he said calmly in spite of the mantra of fuck’s going off in his head. “Have someone bring her out to the terrace.”

At an agonizing pace, one that would surely make the ancient Balmeran Queen proud, Ulaz was dispatched to dutifully retrieve the guard in question without, hopefully, drawing any suspicion. As it were, Keith was standing nearest to Shiro, who provided just a small buffer between himself and Zarkon. The risk of collateral, his Mother had mentioned, would be their best deterrent.

Meanwhile, his Mother gave a final toast, bidding their guests thanks and to celebrating friendship and blah blah, Keith really couldn’t pay attention, but he did respect her ability to maintain her composure right now, because he was hyperaware of everything, each passing second making his heart beat faster and chest tighten uncomfortably.

“Y-Your Highness! Prince Keith!” A voice burst onto the scene, Ulaz trailing awkwardly behind the disheveled appearance of a very frantic-looking Plaxum, finally, and he was already moving towards her with a careful hand raised.

“Plaxum, what is it? Are you okay? Take a deep breath,” he instructed, guiltily giving her appearance a once over to make sure she didn’t have a bomb strapped to her armor or something.

She grabbed both sides of her head, helmet long-abandoned judging by the state of her appearance, eyes wide as she looked around at everyone on the terrace except Keith. Everyone had quieted, clearly alarmed. So much for not making a scene.

“Where is – but I thought – ” she spoke through rough inhaled and rougher exhaled, the sound of the night air practically grating on her lungs. Jesus, did she fucking run here from the clinic or something?
“I’m right here, Plaxum, it’s okay,” Keith did his best to sound soothing, taking another tentative step towards her. Shiro moved with him, the sound of his weighted armor shifting out of Keith’s periphery. “Just tell me what’s going on, maybe I can help?”

“No! No! That’s the point!” She shouted, shooting forward the last few inches between them and gripping Keith’s shoulders.

Briefly, her eyes shifted over his shoulder, where Keith knew Emperor Zarkon to be, and Plaxum winced so visibly she began to practically cower in Keith’s shadow. He had never seen her so afraid before.

“You can’t do anything! It was never, it was never about you – the girl – the girl said, she’s been saying, ‘oh gods, the Prince this’ and ‘the Prince that.’ She never said which Prince, your Highness, that – gods – it was never supposed to be you to begin with, I just – she only now – I’m so sorry, I’m sorry. It was never you, I should have realized sooner, but she didn’t – I’m sorry.”

Keith had all of one second for his thoughts to grind to a halt, for all manner of time to stop and all sensation to fade away. One second to breathe in, to fool himself into being alive, to feel the fire in his chest die and rekindle and burst into terrifying awareness, because, wait, no, how can that be, that doesn’t make any sense…?

But that one second was all he got. Definitely not long enough to come to any grand, illuminating conclusions.

Because in the next second, sensation returned, suddenly, abruptly, and violently; terrifyingly, destructively, devastatingly; overwhelmingly.

The first thing was the heat, the unbearable heat, a fire burning up all the oxygen he needed to breathe, roasting his heart in the cage of his ribs. People on the terrace were shouting and ducking and stumbling at the force of a monstrous wave of energy, so powerful it shook the foundation of the castle, rippling outward with a deafening rumble of thunder overhead, nonexistent clouds parting, raining down shattered glass from the overhead windows.

Dust, smoke, ash, and words flew over his head, his whole body shielded by Shiro’s weight. Everything was burning, ignited by fear and stoked with roaring panic.

“Explosion.” A voice said.

“A bomb,” cried another.

There was definitely lots of noises. And maybe laughing? Keith wasn’t even sure who it was. Maybe him.

Could you blame him? His fucking castle was on fire, and he wasn’t even the target.

Guess he wasn’t the only person who wanted Prince Lotor fucking dead.

Imagine that. Hah. Hahah.

There would be plenty of time for hysterics later. Not now.

He ignored every instinct, ignored the threat of bile rising in his throat, and he even refused to cough up the smoke he’d inhaled, because, yes, sure, fire bad, fire hurt, but, that didn’t matter because he was alive and there were people in his castle who very well might not be. He couldn’t try to identify any names right now or he might lose his fucking nerve.
The third floor was a mess of dust and falling pieces of ceiling. Smoke and ash swirled in and around orange-red fire, catching on fabrics and textiles, the carpeting and tapestries on the walls especially subject to the damages. A vortex of hell had opened, and he did not hesitate to step through the flames.

That said, his reflexes were impecable. Besides the oppressive weight of black smoke that filled his chest, again and again, he did not suffer a single burn. No objects could fall fast enough to crush him, no abandoned trays of liquor could ignite suddenly enough to catch him in accidental molotov cocktails. The combination of ash and smoke made his eyes water, or maybe that was just the gut-wrenching fear, but it did little to stop him from marching forward, over and through the perdition whipping around him.

Red Paladin.

Guardian of Fire.

As he turned into the third floor ballroom, a few guards from the hallway converged around him.

“Your Highness!”

“It’s dangerous in here, you must –”

“Don’t,” he growled, and they all froze. “Get anyone injured to the infirmary. I don’t care who they are, how injured they are, or how dead they look. Check every passage – servants, too – up and down a floor. Find anyone injured and get them to the infirmary. Do you understand?”

Something in his voice, probably the combination of the frantic adrenaline in his veins and the very real burn of smoke inhalation in his lungs, made him sound especially brutal and authoritative. No one questioned him, as the words were spoken like a terrible, guttural command – in that moment, he was every part Head of the Military and no part Head of the Blade.

“Y-Yes, sir.”

Keith didn’t bother waiting for them to salute, perhaps the only force more dangerous than the fire itself.

It was evident this was ground zero by the condition of the room, and the Prince could scarcely see a foot in front of him. Hellfire, he was pretty sure the old myths called this, so hot it boils your blood, the unbearable heat faced by sinners until the end of time; a vague, smart-ass voice in the back of Keith’s head had the gall to wonder which specific circle of Dante’s Inferno he’d just walked into.

He heard Shiro’s voice appear shortly after he began wading through the thickest of the smoke, no longer shouting after Keith to come back but taking over ordering the guards. By the sound of it, he was grabbing his soldiers whenever he found them, ignoring any complaints, and sending them as deftly as possible towards any of the clusters of the injured he could find. Get the injured, and get them out. That was what was important right now.

It was the only thing that was important right now.

Fucking hell, where is he? Come on, please, please be okay, where are you, where are you?

Every shape and shadow that reared from the flames was a disappointment when it wasn’t him. Every fallen pillar, turned over table, broken beam that wasn’t long limbs or an easy smile, laughing off – phew, that was a close one, huh, Mullet? – was like a knife twisting in his chest that had very little to do with constant feeling of asphyxiation searing his throat from the inside-out.
He could already imagine himself yelling back. *Close one?! You’re lucky I don’t kill you, idiot.*

*Oh stop being dramatic,* he would probably say, ironically. *You’re acting like I could have died or something!*

...

*Please, please, be okay. Be okay. Be okay.*

This sort of fire was so much louder than he’d ever remembered, not a torch or a candle but a conflagration ready to destroy everything it touched, anything it could tease with flame it would burn into non existence. Finally, however, above the cry of spilled drinks, sizzling over glittering tiles and the cacophony of singed fabrics tearing and melting into itself, Keith heard something different, something distinctively *alive*. A groan, and with it, a spark of hope through the flying embers and pops and cracks of materials that continued to break down beneath the heat.

“He-llo? I-Is someone…?” The voice was cracked and broken by a fit of coughs, but it was familiar.

“Coran?! Coran where are you, I’m here. Coran?”

The Prince did not hesitate to push towards the sound, eyes focused on the ground in front of him, heart stopping in his chest when he saw a hand splayed out in front of him, blackened by soot, but the brown skin visible beneath was unmistakable. A shining silver band was wrapped over the wrist, cerulean face contrastingly sharply upwards through the billows of orange and black.

The hand led to an arm, and then a body, all of which was draped on top of a struggling Altean advisor who looked pale and shaken, but otherwise unharmed.

“Your Highness!” The advisor croaked, his own voice clearly hoarse from the smoke.

Not that Keith heard him; more smoke than ever filled his lungs, but gods, he could finally fucking breathe again.

“Lance.”

The name was a sigh of relief and a desperate prayer, and the Prince knelt to pull up his full weight so Coran could maneuver out from under him.

Immediately, Keith knew something was wrong. Through his half-gloved fingers, he could feel how warm Lance was, which for anyone else would have been a good thing, but he had been burned, touched by unforgiving fire.

His head lolled in a deeply alarming way, clearly unable to support his own body weight.

“He’s unconscious, I think,” Coran spoke loudly over the flames, both of them apparently forgetting that they were very much still in the burning aftermath of an *explosion*, too concerned with turning Lance over so his face was visible.

The sight, however, made Keith’s own blood ran cold.

Was this how Lance felt all the time? It was terrible. Chilly, frigid, lonely.

His face was pinched and mouth slightly open, painted with soot and, gods, *blood*. There wasn’t much of the offending crimson color, but it was enough that all of his courage vanished into a puff of the smoke, coiling up into the black cloud that crowded his castle and his lungs.
Instincts and intuition took over at that point, thankfully, because the Prince really couldn’t figure out what his own body was supposed to do. His arms lifted Lance as gently as possible while Coran helped to arrange him in the most accommodating way they could manage; the Altean advisor pointed out the particularly nasty, large burn across Lance’s back, which made holding him a careful game of trying to keep him secure but not hurting him further, but Keith managed.

Getting out was much easier than getting into the castle, seeing as he was finally able to bend to the will of survival instincts that demanded he get the fuck out of there.

Unceremoniously, he stumbled out onto the terrace with Coran beside him, and the Prince was especially grateful for the man just then as he pushed away anyone who tried to come and intervene. Keith ripped off his cape, his Father’s cape, with one hand and made a sort of makeshift cot from the thick material, laying Lance down on his side.

(He would say it was a miracle the cape hadn’t so much as singed, but it would occur to him later that there was a more magical explanation for that.)

“I… he needs…” Keith tried to speak, but the words died on his lips, one hand supporting Lance’s head and the other moving to stroke his cheek. It was just what he did, held Lance’s cheek, and the other boy would lean into it. That’s how it was supposed to be — something familiar that would say this wasn’t real and that Lance was safe and in his arms, not – not –

Keith’s fingerprints left a smear, but it was still a better sight than pockmarked black over his chilled, usually flawless, brown skin.

Lance didn’t lean into it.

But his eyes did flutter open, just barely cracking through his lashes.

“K-Keith?”

Bright eyes.

Beautiful, blue eyes, the color of the sea. Gods.

Risks and hopes and fears be damned, Keith didn’t care if the universe world saw him, didn’t care that this was probably the worst time in the world to do this, he pulled Lance’s face forward and trapped his lips in a searing, desperate, loving kiss, unable to bear the thought that, this whole time, he could have very well been cradling a corpse.

“You taste like smoke.” Lance said the moment they were apart, nose wrinkling. “And I really, really hate Lotor, you know?”

Keith barely laughed, “I reserve every right to kick your ass after this is over.” He was too overwhelmed for the threat to hold any amount of force.

Before either of them could say anything else, Keith was gesturing Coran to come closer and the man knelt immediately. “Coran, make sure he sees Adam, please? Don’t let him fall asleep. He has to see Adam before he can fall asleep.”

“Wait, where — ?” Lance began, but was cut off by his own nasty, rasping cough.

Keith wanted to comfort him, to stay, to let him finish that question and say I’m not going anywhere, but tonight was not about getting what he wanted.
His kingdom, his subjects, were hurting, and there was still much work that needed to be done.

Chapter End Notes

WHAT THE FUCK

*runs away*
Twenty-Six Hours

Chapter Summary

In which, we are reminded that our boys do not exist in a vacuum, told through points-of-view from across the castle.

[HUNK]

Hunk had never been particularly squeamish around blood.

Of course, he wasn’t thrilled to see it, but his own sensitive stomach was more often turned by a bumpy cart ride or the tire swing at his aunt’s house than the rivers of red that followed a sliced finger or that patterned the stalls outside the butcher stands. It wasn’t pleasant, but it never made him want to puke.

Well, until today, anyway.

It wasn’t really even the blood, but it was just experience of being back here – the castle’s infirmary was not exactly his cup of metaphorical tea. He was starting to recognize the distinctive smell of the weird, sterile detergent that soaked through the bed linens and the scrubs worn by Sir Adam and the nurses; the saltiness of saline solutions mixing in the air with plentiful tears; the chemical sourness of iodine and a bunch of other ointments and creams that were levied out by the armful; and then, of course, there was the unmistakable tangy flavor of copper in the air, a product of bloodied bandages or exposed wounds.

All of that, mixed together, made him uneasy. Shaken, fearful, and he definitely had no appetite whatsoever.

But it didn’t make him sick.

No, that right was reserved for something else entirely – the inescapable taste of charred meat in the back of his throat that he could absolutely not escape. No matter how many times he showered or tried to stop outside for fresh air, it was everywhere. He even tried cleansing his palate – vinegar, water, citrus, toothpaste – more than a dozen times with awful combinations just to try to get it to go away, but it wouldn’t.

It was horrifying, because, it wasn’t actually meat, it was people, and that thought alone had made him throw-up twice already.

At one point, Pidge suggested that he might not even really be smelling the – gods, the burnt flesh – but that his brain could be manifesting the sense to accommodate what he thought the room should smell like. That somehow only made it worse, if you were to ask Hunk, but it did encourage him to stop fighting it, and he just tried to get used to it.

It’s been eleven hours since the bomb went off, and Hunk had a lot to be thankful for.

He was grateful that Pidge was here with him, even if it was clear she was a little uncomfortable, and
he definitely wasn’t complaining about the heavily armored guard at the foot of Lance’s bed.

He was grateful for Sir Adam, too. Grateful that the man was the most effective multitasker Hunk had ever seen, and that was including his mother whose ability to whisk, calculate measurements, and interact with customers simultaneously was not something to be spoken of lightly. Sir Adam was constantly moving, instructing people where to sit, when they needed to leave, what milligram of this or that to give a patient, how to position someone so as to not put unnecessary strain on their wounds – and all of that was while he was going in and out a proverbial revolving door for surgery at the end of the hall for those patients who needed it.

The palace was secure, Shiro and his soldiers had and were continuing to make sure of that. Being in the infirmary gave him real-time updates on the status of those who had been on site: one dead, fourteen injured, two of whom were in critical condition upon arrival. Lance had stabilized after Sir Adam had taken him back for surgery; he had been one of the first people treated, largely in part due to the severity of his burned back.

Above all, he was grateful for Lance simply being alive.

How could it be that he’d sat with his best friend just the day before, hugged him and cried with him and forced him to hear about how much he deserved a better, love-filled life. Thank the stars they hadn’t taken him away completely.

Hunk did not, however, thank those same stars that Lady Shay was here. Not because he didn’t adore her company, but because she wasn’t here as a visitor of Lance’s, who was still blissfully unconscious thanks to some pain-relieving medicine Sir Adam’s had given him during the extensive debridement process. No, she wasn’t a visitor at all, but a mourner.

At the other end of the room – conspicuously far away, in fact – Shay and her brother and father were gathered, a weeping mess of limbs and shaking sobs, and he couldn’t really even go over and offer her comfort right now.

The Queen of Balmera died of a heart attack about thirty minutes after the explosion.

Shay’s Grandmama.

It hurt his heart to see her, hear her, like this, letting out broken sobs as she held the hand of someone she loved while the body grew cold. Hunk wanted so badly to provide her some comfort, but he knew he wouldn’t be able to approach the Balmeran royal family right now for security reasons.

Even with her so near, she’d never felt further away.

Sighing, Hunk turned back to the bed. Lance’s head was turned away from him as he slept on his front, and his gaze unconsciously drifted to the flash of red peeking out from beneath the thin hospital sheets under his shoulders.

The sight made his throat tighten.

Before Lance had been taken into surgery, forget the unconceivable amount of pain he must have been in, suffering third-degree burns on the back of his arms and most of the width between his shoulder blades — his biggest concern at the time had come out as a weak joke. He had said, he “already owed Mullet one cape,” and was intent on at least getting this one back to him.

Hunk had been prepared to ask what Lance meant by that, but tired blue eyes found his, pleading and clearly doing their best not to reveal exactly how much pain he must have been in.
“Please, Hunk? Just – please.”

Naturally, he agreed, and the relieved smile that split over his best friend’s face when he agreed and began to carefully fold the cape was dazzling. Now, the very same crimson fabric had been tucked underneath Lance’s chest, a sort of secondary sheet, softer and richer than the stiff fabric that lined the hospital beds.

Hunk was a rational human being, of course. He knew that returning the garment while Lance was unconscious was… well, silly, because he was unconscious. There was even a minor risk of infection that came with having it – the cloak hadn’t been sterilized, didn’t smell of chemicals and everything else foreign about the infirmary – and Sir Adam had only reluctantly agreed to Hunk’s insistence that Lance be allowed to rest with it because there had been virtually no burns that managed to singe Lance’s chest (only smattered by minor nicks and bruises). And while Hunk would be the first to admit he didn’t even know anything about being in a medically-induced sleep, if such a state could even allow for subconscious levels of comfort, but he would have sworn there had been a suggestion of a smile, a subtle unfurling to the pinch of his best friend’s brow, once the borrowed cloak had been returned to him. The steady inhale seemed to come easier, the rise and fall of his chest less mechanic.

So, yes. Sure. It was probably illogical, and maybe even a little bit endangering, to tuck the corners of the cape carefully beneath Lance’s forearms like he stopped to do just then, but logic had never been the single guiding force of the universe. Hunk had learned that, sometimes, logic needed a good kick in the teeth. If someone was prepared to argue that he was being unnecessarily sentimental, well, Hunk would welcome them to do so. If they could convince him that the simple happiness someone felt when tasting a perfectly crafted madeleine was false, or that a plate of boiled potatoes couldn’t transport someone else to their Nana’s kitchen before their countryside had been ravaged by war, or if being reduced to tears at the sight of an expertly crafted wedding cake was somehow wrong – if someone could convince Hunk that such irrational, but inherently real emotions, were in fact hollow, then sure. He’d listen to their arguments, they could try their best.

But they’d best be ready to lose a few fingers if they tried to take away this garment, this one small comfort, from his best friend.

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[PIDGE]

Sleep was avoiding her again.

Not that Pidge really had much interest in indulging in the tedious task anyways, but it was more purposefully alluding her now. It was drumming on the lenses that sat over her nose, taunting, telling her to close her eyes just for a little while, surely the world would not be reduced to fire and brimstone if she rested for five minutes.

Sleep, Katie, and you’ll feel better. Lance made it through surgery just fine, he’ll live to see the next day through. Hunk’s not even here, so go ahead. Go to sleep.

Not going to fuckin’ happen, buddy.
Sighing, Pidge pushed her glasses up to rest atop her hairline so she could better rub at the blooming bruises beneath her tired eyes.

Random neurons fired equally random flashes of information in her head: Keith’s ghostly pale complexion when she passed him in the hallways after the initial chaos; facts and figures about necrotic tissue, perioperative hypothermia, silver sulfadiazine and wound catabolism post-trauma; the discolored blotches around Lance’s neck that certainly looked unrelated to the burns; the buzzing in her head of immediate, lightning-fast rumors that had already begun to pop up around the corridors when she went to the restroom – the Blue Paladin’s identity had been outed in a literally explosive fashion, and everyone seemed to have an opinion on it – on Lance, her friend.

It had gotten out of hand rather quickly.

Adam had even made a rule that if he heard a single mention of the name Blue Paladin anywhere remotely near the infirmary, that those visitors would be asked immediately to leave.

Closing the book in her lap and setting in on the table next to Lance’s bed, Pidge looked around the room. The Balmeran family had finally cleared from the infirmary about an hour ago, along with the body of the Queen. Weird to think of the woman as a corpse, but that’s definitely what she was; her body had been left to the mourners for so long that she had already begun to enter rigor mortis, and watching Adam pry off the stiff, bony hands of a dead woman from a brokenhearted Shay was plenty of nightmare fuel for the sleep Pidge would catch up on later.

Speaking of Adam, Pidge caught a glimpse of him – little more than a blur of white with all his constant to’ing and fro’ing – leave the infirmary on what was likely his eighth surgery in fifteen hours.

The man had graciously allowed her into his private office during Lance’s escharotomy to steal some books, seeing as the castle library was much too far away and her home’s private selection was even further; she had no intention of leaving the fifth floor unless it was with a goofy, gabbing Lance, back on his feet, in step beside her. So, for now, medical books were making do. Until a few minutes ago, she had taken to reading over the physiological responses to burns – treatments, management, long-term consequences – along with alternative remedies from across the realm and how those can be intertwined with traditional medicine. Puigian healing practices in conjunction with Altean medicine seemed to be at the forefront of the field, but the primo methodologies seemed to be experimental and the results not yet widely validated.

It was when she stumbled upon reports from victims describing the nature and extent of their pain in recovery that Pidge had decided she needed a break from reading, too.

Hunk was gone at the moment. He’d fallen asleep in the chair slumped over to the side, and Pidge initially had no intention of waking him. When Lady Shay was leaving, however, Pidge did decide to nudge him awake, giving him the option to finally go after her; he had smiled to her gratefully and moved to follow the Balmeran out of the room, promising to be back soon.

Pidge ended up just shrugging at his retreating form, settling back into her chair. It really didn’t matter when, or even if, he came back for a while – Lance was out like a light and would probably be so heavily medicated that he wouldn’t even be able to tell what was going on around him. It’s not like them sitting there really accomplished much, a fact that she was forced to acknowledge no matter how much it grated on her nerves.

Even so, leaving Lance seemed like an impossibly worse idea. It was literally just the two of them. If Pidge were to leave, she would be leaving him alone. Even if Lance might be out of his mind from the drugs, the idea of him waking up in the infirmary without a single person around him – not one
friendly face, no familiar smile, no words of encouragement – seemed to her downright cruel. He might not remember it, but no one should ever have to feel alone after going through something like this.

So Pidge sat and waited. She read and blinked away sleep and glowered at any Galra who moved within ten-feet of her friend. They were going on sixteen hours since the blast had gone off – her pocket watch told her it was just after 10:30 AM, and she personally was going just a little less than forty-five hours since she’d seen a bed. A nurse offered her breakfast a few hours ago, but she declined and read through her hunger pains.

Now, eyes unfocused, Pidge was considering all the pieces of this strange puzzle. The weight of her watch felt particularly heavy in her breast pocket, and she idly began to twirl the chain between her fingers.

Her gaze was drawn to Lance’s own watch, set on the table beside him; it had to be removed for his surgery and Adam’s examinations. A single fissure spread through the glass, spiderweb fractures splitting near the opposite edge, and she didn’t need a book to tell her that was probably not good.

Her thoughts wandered further, returning to Keith. Well, more specifically – she thought about their brief encounter in the hallways when the initial chaos was over and the fires had been put out. Pidge had known the Prince for a long time, and she had never seen him look like that before. The person she’d seen wasn’t even Keith. A stranger in the Prince’s skin, that person was no part dry humor or smartass wit; they were raging, coiling black fury and fearsome authority. The rings around his purple irises had turned to calculating, deadly obsidian, no glimmer in the familiar darkness of his eyes.

Pidge couldn’t even begin to fathom the political fallout that this would all incur. Mirthlessly, the girl let out a low, disbelieving chuckle. Lotor, alive but barely, and now the Balmeran Queen, dead? Fifteen injured, however many more suffering from smoke inhalation. A question popped into her head – who was to blame for this? – but it was quickly replaced by what would likely be a much more prudent question in the coming hours, the coming days: who would be blamed for this?

Would it be Ryder or the other Olkari? Taking advantage of a time of political peace to make a devastating move against the Galran court? Pidge knew that’s where her Dad and Mom had ended up, surely sitting in one of the millions of meetings going on in the castle right now, trying to halt the likelihoods that may end in further violence. She had not a clue where Matt was, beyond that the Blade said he was safe.

Would it be Keith, and Queen Krolia? This was their castle, and she supposed there was some amount of “political blame” to be put on them for not keeping the visiting royals safe, but she felt like those accusations wouldn’t truly amount to much. Too many of their own subjects had been injured, and if they had wanted Lotor dead, there were a lot easier, less blaringly loud ways of doing so.

Hmm. So did they want to be heard? Whoever did it?

Balmera, Arus, and Puig really had no part to play at the superordinate level. Sure, every country was capable of producing a radical or two, those who opted towards violence instead of peaceful protest, but the probability that such a figure could have elbowed their way through all the security measures seemed impossibly low. So it had to be someone invited.

That really only left Altea, but again, they were Marmora’s strongest allies. Why the fuck would they set off a bomb in an allying kingdom’s castle just to make a political move?

It didn’t add up, in Pidge’s opinion.
And then there was the other problem – the seventeen-year old, battered half-human, half-Altean problem sleeping two feet away from her. What was going to happen to him? What would his aunt do? Maybe Pidge could pull Keith aside, ask him to arrest her or something – doing something preemptive right now really felt like the only option, because surely, the woman would be a raging bitch whenever she decided to show her face.

Not for the first time, and surely not for the last, Pidge dropped her head and held it with her hands, elbowed propped up on her knees. She was so tired, and as a result, it felt like she was missing something obvious – her usual keen senses, dulled by fatigue and unwanted emotional strain.

Everything felt much heavier. She wasn’t old enough to start having joint pains, right? Then why did her shoulders hurt so much?

“Excuse me, Master Holt?” prodded a nurse, gently.

Her head flew up and her eyes open. She blinked several times until a soft-spoken young woman with cropped blonde hair finally came into focus. “Yes?”

“It’s time to change the patient’s dressings. Would you mind stepping outside the curtain?”

“Oh, uh, sure. Right.” Pidge awkwardly fumbled with the book in her lap, deciding to just set it on the table next to Lance’s watch as she stepped back far enough for the nurse to do her thing. There was a light clink of metal-on-metal as the rings of the curtain danced over the rod that circled the bed, and Pidge caught one more glance of her friends sleeping, bruised, battered body before he was gone again.

This room was too uncomfortable if she didn’t have Lance to anchor her, or at the very least, Hunk to distract her whenever the nurses came by to do to this. Pidge hated this, everything about this, and deciding for some air, stepped out into the hallway.

[ADAM]

Since he’d met his husband, Adam tried not to swear as much. Takashi was always one to wrinkle his nose or even gasp in offense if they were anywhere near someone younger than thirty and he let slip a curse, so the doctor had made it a point to try to be more discerning in his use of his more… colorful vocabulary, for ‘Kashi’s sake.

That being said, he definitely didn’t have fucking time for this.

Whisking away the castle’s head physician, and only on-site surgeon, from his patients in the middle of a huge domestic disaster for – for – what did the note even say? He irritably pulled out the crumpled missive from his pocket. Professional medical advisement. What does that even mean?

“Do you have any idea how long this will take?” He shot towards the Galran soldier that had come to fetch him.

She responded with a sneer and nothing more.
Adam might not be the best military tactician, but he wasn’t stupid. It was clear they sent this proverbial tank-of-a-woman to gather him intentionally, presumably a sort of scare tactic, but he was not so easily intimidated. Indeed, the Galran court might want to watch their own backs – if so much as a single drop of any of his patients’ blood was spilt because he was not present, there would be hell to pay.

It really only took seven minutes or so to get to the Council chambers, but it took everything in him not to ruminate on the fact that those could be seven life-saving minutes depending on the conditions and responsiveness of each patient, treatment, procedure. Seven minutes may seem like plenty of time to kill for those sitting their asses in comfy seats three floors above him, but to the body of most humanoids, that amount of time could very well be killer. It takes only three minutes for someone to be pronounced dead after drowning, the initial submersion taking only about forty-five seconds. Seven or eight minutes for oxygen deprivation to the brain to render someone lifeless. A drop in blood pressure would kill someone faster than bleeding out ever would – as little as sixty seconds for a wound to throw the body into the icy grip of death if the offending object – blade, shrapnel, arrow – nicked an artery.

If there was one thing Adam had learned since he began to study and practice medicine, it was that life was unbelievably fragile. Seven minutes could absolutely be enough to kill someone, and that was just the time it took to get there.

This better be real fucking important.

He did not wait for the door to be opened for him, for the page to announce his presence to the chamber. Such luxuries were not afforded to real people, and tonight Adam was no knight. He was a doctor, and there were lives depending on him. You could bet your last sixpence that when he walked right the fuck through those doors, all eyes fell to him, ire practically radiating off him in waves.

The tables had been arranged to make a sort of square-shaped meeting space, with one of the four-sides missing. To say it was a “U” would be close but altogether inaccurate, as the edges were all sharp, stiff. The whole room was a mess of chairs and papers and ink, all rigid and wrong. There was no subtle curvature in either the shape of the room nor the faces of those occupying the seats around the table.

Well, that’s not entirely true. Almost all were stern brows, tight lips, hard jaws. Most were familiar, at least vaguely: the usual Masters of Coin, Foreign Affairs, Agriculture, and Defense from Marmora’s respective ministries; Kolivan, along with a handful of other Blades; ambassadors from each embassy, as well as all the ruling families – with the notable exception of the Balmerans, who were still preoccupied with their mourning.

An unwarranted few facts rattled off from his recent memory.


No. Adam shook away those thoughts. He couldn’t think about the dead right now. Only the living. Only people he could help save.

Unconsciously, he caught ‘Kashi’s eye, and the man offered him the weariest of smiles.

I’m sorry, the expression said.

They’ve held entire conversations before in nothing but sounds and body language, so he knew
Takashi understood his meaning when the doctor released a shallow sigh and straightened his posture, turning sharply to their Queen.

*I know. It’s not your fault.*

“Sir Adam, thank you for coming. I will cut right to the chase, as I know your time is scarce,” the Queen licked her lips, shooting a glance to her son seated beside her.

*Oh, Keith.*

Adam’s own fury dampened, just a little.

Keith was like his little brother, or even, in some ways, like a son. Takashi had known him since he was but an infant, and the two were extremely close. Adam had come into the royal family’s lives seven years ago, not long off when the King went missing, and it had been just as long since Adam had ever seen the Prince look so miserable.

At a glance, he looked merely tired, exhaustion etched into each and every line of his face. He probably appeared stoic to most, and, sure, Keith had gotten better at hiding his emotions, but he never appeared as bone-chillingly apathetic as the Queen or Kolivan. He was probably better than Takashi by now, but maybe Adam wasn’t the best judge of that – to him, his husband was about as transparent as the sun shining through a spotless window – but tonight, the chisel that had been used to craft the Prince’s cold stone-face from pale marble appeared to have been poisoned by terrible, heart-wrenching guilt.

The Queen cleared her throat, and Adam realized she was still waiting for him to speak. Right.

“Yes. Of course, your Highness,” he kept his tone bereft, though respectful. “How can I be of service to the Council?”

“You can be of service,” growled the Prince, who began edging forward in his seat. “By informing our Galran allies that their suggestion to remove any of the patients prematurely from the infirmary would be dangerous and medically unethical.”

Adam raised a brow.

“Well…” he began, clearing his throat and looking around the room. “It really depends on the patient. Some of the less severely injured may be ready to be discharged by this time tomorrow, but several of them will likely need constant care for at least a week. For all of them, however, the main threat is the risk of infection, and the infirmary is the only place that has the necessary, sterilized equipment to treat each patient properly, unless we work on a plan of transporting some of injured to the city clinic. But for the time being, no, it would not be my recommendation as a medical professional that any of them be moved. And... forgive me, your Highness, but, is there some sort of... risk that I should be aware of?”

His mouth went dry as the weight of his own words sunk in. Oh, gods. Adam knew that Takashi and the others had been tirelessly investigating what happened, but he hadn’t considered the fact that one of his patients might be responsible.

Before Keith had the chance to reply, Krolia jumped in. “Not necessarily. We’re simply trying to piece together what happened, and our allies have kindly reminded us that there are only three people who really know what exactly happened at the time of the attack.”

Out of his periphery, the doctor saw a fist slam into the table, quickly followed by the heated voice of the Galran Emperor. “Yes, and we know one was the Prince, another was Altea’s premier advisor,
and the other was a peasant boy. Per this doctor’s advisement, move him to your capital’s clinic if you desire, but I will not put my son’s well-being at further risk because of one servant, Queen Krolia. He cannot stay here.”

Takashi raised a hand sharply before anyone else could speak, using his ‘authoritative voice’ – one that Adam loved to tease him about, seeing as it was uncharacteristically low, and in his totally biased opinion, a little bit sexy.

“Sir Adam’s initial suggestion was generalized to apply to all of his patients, not any specific patient. Sir Coran has already given extensive statement as to what happened, and the condition of the other two critical to the investigation were consequently the two that were most badly injured. It would not be appropriate to move either of them at this time.”

At this point, King Alfor chimed in. He was seated far back in his chair, expression thoughtful. “I am in agreement with Sir Shiro, Emperor. According to my advisor’s statement, he and the... accused… were both already starting to walk away from the Prince at the time of the explosion. It seems unlikely that he was anything but a victim himself, but since you have doubts, it would not do to move him further away from the castle. The smart option would be to monitor him even more closely, no?”

_Accused? _Surely, Adam must have misheard. They weren’t speaking of Lance, were they?

“Oh, forgive me, King Alfor – I forgot it was conveniently two Alteans who were seen with my son at the time of his near-assassination. If your advisor’s statement was not already unverifiable, then it certainly is when I have to hear you sit here and defend the servant boy!”

“I care not if he was a servant, Altean, Marmoran, or even Galran for that matter!” Alfor was now out of his seat, two hands splayed out on the table. “Sir Coran is a loyal, honest man. You will not have you disrespect my subjects.”

“Disrespect your subjects? It was my son who was targeted, nearly killed, and I have wavering faith in your own involvement in such a plot. Surely no peasant could plot such a thing on his own?”

Altea’s King was quaking in his rage, and beside him, the Princess was quietly trying to coach him down.

With a tone that could only be aptly described as dangerous, the King spoke between clenched teeth. “What are you implying, Zarkon?”

Well. Adam had certainly heard enough, and before the fight could continue to escalate, he cleared his throat.

“I’m sorry,” the doctor interrupted, putting both hands in front of him in what he hoped was an apologetic display. He returned his focus, and consequently that of the whole room, back to the Queen. “As much as I sympathize with the interest of the Council in gathering more information, I have patients that are waiting for me. Are there specific orders I should attend to, your Majesty, or may I go?”

The Queen pursed her lips for a moment. “I only ask that you begin to correspond with the staff at the clinic in case we need to transport, but at this time, you are dismissed.”

Adam nodded and spun in place, but he was stopped by the abrupt, harsh scraping of wood on stone flooring.

“No!” Zarkon demanded, rising from his seat, the single syllable crashing down around the chamber
like shattered glass. “This is unacceptable! With the amount of evidence at hand there is at least enough to make an arrest, and you’re going to allow the boy to recover in the same room as the victims? Have you no sense?!”

And then, silence. A silence so quiet that surely a needle could drop and it would have been heard throughout the kingdom.

With his back turned, Adam had missed the expressions, wide-eyes and open mouths gaping at the Emperor and then back to the Queen, but he could sense the shift so tangibly it felt like the air had been sucked from the room, the sudden tension positively suffocating.

Which made it an even greater surprise to everyone, himself included, when he was the one to break the silence.

“Excuse me. Is it wrong to assume you are all seeking understanding of what transpired…” he glanced at his watch. “Almost twenty hours ago? Because, of course, it is vitally important to ensure the safety of you all – but for any sort of meaningful justice to eventually be achieved, is it not first necessary that those involved be alive? The accused you’ve mentioned to – I presume you are referring to my patient, Lance McClain? If that is the case, then I must insist you refrain from making, and especially acting upon, any such hypotheticals until he is even conscious.”

He reserved his hardest of glares for the Galran Emperor and Altea’s King. This was not an appropriate forum for the two to duke it out.

“I am here because you asked me to give counsel on the medical wellness of those victimized by the blast, and I have done that. Keeping me here during your posturing will do no one any amount of good – the infirmary is three floors down. So please, if you are all truly invested in learning more about the conditions of those involved, I ask that you seek me out there and not ask me away from my patients again.”

And with that, he flashed a look to the Queen – she wore a nearly indiscernible smirk – as he turned on his heel.

“Good day.” Storming back out the double-doors, the knight ignored the that erupted behind him, the sound of an angry Galran Emperor and handful of affronted embassy officials in his wake. Right now? Not his fucking problem. His patients were his problem, and that was that.

Sorry, ‘Kashi. Today was definitely a day that justified a few fucking expletives.

[ROMELLE]

Standing at the tallest window in her sleep chamber, Romelle watched the horizon be engulfed by a wickedly beautiful burnt red, the half-sun scarlet and molten as it bled into the colors of rust and sandstone. Some of the latter reaches of the sky, eventually, softened, granting space for pastel purple to flourish in the margins – it was not a far off color from her own eye scales, actually.

The sunset meant Monday was almost over, and she was smiling.
I’m an awful person, aren’t I?

She must be, to feel happy during such a bleak time. Who else would root around the dark depths of the Marmoran’s suffering, hear that death knell reverberate coldly over the autumn dusk, and still manage to find a dreaded, stubborn silver-living?

Romelle, that’s who. And she needn’t even look far. All she needed was to close her eyes and...

“I love you.”

Yep. There it was. A little flutter of hope in her heart.

Sighing, she sank down beside the windowsill, burying her head in her knees. The daygown she’d worn for meals – a light, soft pink to shown her mourning – was bunched around her ankles, but she barely felt like getting dressed that morning and that rueful feeling had barely faded as the varga went on.

Was it wrong, to be happy at such a time? It felt wrong.

Sweet Lance, who turned out to be the kind, amusing Blue Paladin, had gotten hurt, again? Just awful. The Queen of Balmera, dying? An absolute tragedy. Her heart went out to poor Prince Keith, for his hurt beloved, and to kind Lord Rax, Lady Shay and her beau, that springely Hunk fellow, who was somehow emotionally involved in both messes.

How terrible their luck, and how tragically fortunate she must be. She thanked her providential stars for the umpteenth time, not sure if she should offer them tears of gratitude or apology.

Because… this Monday had been a quintant she’d been dreading for phoeb. It was something that had been a long time coming, and all of the sudden, it was passing.

And Allura wasn’t engaged to Prince Keith.

Her Princess was – gods, how selfish could she be? – still, at least a little longer, her’s, and her’s only.

How terribly wonderful, this feeling.

She’d been seated on the window, lost in her prayers and distant wonders of a future with her Princess, when a knock at the door roused her. When Romelle raised her head, she realized the night had set completely; she must be being summoned for supper.

The pit in her stomach had found comfort in the foods, even if there had been almost no one who attending meals. The Princess and her Father were stuck in the countless meetings, along with the Marmorans. The Puigian and Arusian royal families were also dispatched, and virtually all of the Balmerans had been absent the entire day. For safety reasons, the Olkari who were not attending the discussions across the castle had been asked to stay at the embassy.

As such, only a few Lords and Ladies bothered to come to the meals, but Romelle rather enjoyed the routine. It kept her sane and was a good excuse to leave the room, to brush her hair, to wash and get dressed. The stifling emptiness of Marmora’s castle was no substitute for the comfort of Altea’s grand arching corridors and bright passageways, but it was at least something familiar.

Such moments as these were yet another reminder of just how unlike the Princess she was – Romelle was not built from the same self-denying means as the royal family. Indeed, if there was one thing she was, it was proudly, unabashedly alive. She loved to indulge, to dance, to stop and breathe fresh
air, to eat until she was too full to move. Since the loss of Bandor, life had always felt like such a precious gift, and to squander away what blessed time she had to not eat, to not sleep – to deny herself the most basic of pleasures – felt more foreign than the darkness of Marmora’s hallways.

So, yes. Absolutely, she would get up and answer the door, she will go down to the meal and make idle chit-chat with those who were willing to show their faces.

Romelle smiled weakly at the wood-grain when another few knocks came, and she slowly pulled herself to standing and swatted away the light wrinkles around her gown.

When she opened the door, Oriande give her strength, a sight so beautiful greeted her on the otherside of the door that she was left breathless.

“P-Princess!” She stuttered, not expecting to see her so soon. Had the Councils reached some sort of conclusion, had something changed?

Just as Romelle began to vocalize her confusion, she was practically knocked backwards with how fiercely the Princess flew forward, slamming the door closed with her foot as dark arms wrapped around her shoulders.

Stunned for only a tick, Romelle nuzzled her head into the familiar crook of Allura’s neck, looping her arms around her lovely thin waist and squeezing tight.

White hairs brushed over her cheeks, and it was one of the little things she remembered late at night when she was lonely – the petal-soft tickles of Allura’s hair when they were this close.

The Princess always smelled of fresh blooms, juniberry and moonflowers with just a hint of something chilled – like spearmint, or the frosty humidity of winter air. Everything about her was subtle beauty, and Romelle wanted to hold her closer, longer, sigh into the soft skin of her shoulder, forget about everything.

Maybe, she wondered, she hoped, her Princess might want that, too.

They may have stayed there for an eternity, or maybe it was only a dobosh. It didn’t matter. This, this made all of the worrying worth it – for the phoebs she’d spent talking herself up to being able to handle the sight of Allura in the arms of someone else, to the last few miserable varga without her. It was all worth it, so long as she could just hold her like this.

“Are you okay?” Romelle whispered when she heard a sigh, the brush of air over her clavicle causing her hair to dance and heart to flutter.

When Allura replied, her voice was fatigued, soft like sea spray – barely there, and yet, the ocean would feel so incomplete without it.

“I am better than okay, love.” Slowly, the arms around her untangled, and Romelle felt her cheeks turn pink when hands clasped her cheeks. “I’ve missed you so much today, seeing you now – I’m so much better than okay.”

It had been over a decaphoeb that they’ve been together, officially-unofficially, and still such admissions made her brain fizzle out. She had no perfectly crafted response, words so sincere and beautiful.

“I-I missed you, too.” Romelle saw the light catch in crystal tears that rimmed the corners of her Princess’s sharp, blue eyes, and swallowed down what courage she could muster. “I’m so sorry this is all happening… but I am so happy, so happy, that you are safe. It could have been you.”
“But it wasn’t,” Allura countered with a wan smile. “And neither was it you, thank Oriande… I tried to speak to Keith, earlier, about… but he’s…”

A slight tremor crept into her usually melodic voice, and Romelle wanted to banish the sun from the sky just so they might stop time for a little while, just so she could have the due opportunity to bring this beautiful girl some of the comfort she so deserved; while Romelle was happy that Allura was safe, the already crushing sense of responsibility she always feels on a daily basis must be twice as overbearing on such a quintant as today.

She couldn’t fathom the strain, how entirely overwhelming the whole mess must be. It was a blessing that she’d found the time to come to the room and visit at all, but Romelle was used to the spontaneity of her Princess’s visits and departures by now. She’d grown to love even the sight of Allura’s back for how often she’d seen it when the Princess inevitably walked away from her, shoulders often tense as she returned to her duties, to her life in the public that they could not share.

“I don’t think I can go through with the marriage,” the Princess stated, rather abruptly. Her hands slid from cupping Romelle’s (still rather pink) cheeks to her shoulders, then down her arms to clasp her hands. “I don’t want to. I saw how... he nearly lost his... I couldn’t lose you, I couldn’t go the rest of my life without loving you, you, completely. I know I must sound terrible in light of all that’s happening, but my whole heart is telling me to put an end to this madness. I love you, Romelle. I love you so much that I can’t even be heartbroken over the awful things around us because it just makes me realize that I love you even more.”

Romelle opened her mouth and then closed it again.

How long had she waited to hear such a thing? Was she dreaming? She had to be sure of this before she jumped on the prayers she’d long since asked, to accept them as reality.

“I… I love you, too, Allura. I do. Are you… just, are you sure? I know how much is depending on this, and you – ”

A familiar glint of fury, terrifying and wondrous, flashed in the lilac-blue of her eyes, effectively cutting off Romelle completely.

“Romelle, of course I do. I know the risks.” Soft brown fingers squeezed her own, lacing together. The blonde swore she felt her pulse spike in her veins. “But I’ve thought so much – so much – about what is at stake and I realize now, what good is it, really, if Keith and I marry and we ‘win’ this duplicitous struggle with the Galra? It will be a single battle won, and perhaps we will succeed in delaying the inevitable, but they are vying for war. It will cost us own happiness for a small victory, and for what? To spend the rest of our lives lamenting it?”

Pausing, the Princess closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When long-lashes fluttered apart, Romelle felt her erratic heartbeat steady in response to the gentle, fond look Allura gave her. She never looked so vulnerable, so open, to anyone else – not even the King – and it erased any lingering hurt or confusion like sun breaking over the dawn.

Allura’s voice was quiet, but a little shaky. “The actions that have been taken in the past quintant leave me no doubts on the matter. The Galra want war, I’m afraid, and if I am going to rule Altea and face this threat, this future, I want you with me.”

Romelle’s responding smile was wide, and her cheeks hot, and her heart had never been so full. She would give her Princess anything, everything, always. “I would want nothing more, love.”

“Is this – I’m asking you to marry me?” Allura blinked, almost owlishly, like she hadn’t herself
realized what she was doing until it was done. “And you’re saying yes?”

“I mean,” Romelle’s lungs were surely going to collapse, and her throat hurt from repressing the urge to giggle. “I always envisioned there would be kneeling and a ring involved, but yes, of course, of course, Allura. I’ve always been yours.”

From the Princess’s lips fell a laugh, equal parts relief and appreciation, and she pulled the biggest grin Romelle had ever seen.

“If that’s true, then there’s nothing I won’t be able to face. Thank you.” She pulled Romelle a little closer, stopping only when their foreheads touched, and let out a tender sigh as her eyes slipped closed.

For a few moments longer, Romelle’s eyes remained open, tracing the patterns of Allura’s calm expression, the gentle slope of her nose, the sweet contrast of blush-colored scales against the actual reddened blush of her cheeks. Her Princess was all composure and contentment, much less the coiled up ball of unspoken emotion that she saw, these days, far too often in her.

This was how she looked best, how she should always look, Romelle decided as she too closed her eyes, leaning forward just enough so their noses touched and emitting a little huff of laughter from the dark-skinned girl. It mattered not to her in that moment if she’d been born lucky, or done enough right in the universe to deserve this, or if it made her selfish to be happy when so many others were plagued by the disaster that had struck the Marmoran kingdom.

For now, she had the only thing that really mattered, right there with her, right where she belonged.

[KEITH]

The castle was making him restless.

*Everything was making him restless.*

His hands twitched, itched, gloves sitting uncomfortably over his clammy palms. Tight, restrictive, rubbing against his skin in all the wrong ways. At least the brisk night air made for a sharp, comfortable contrast compared to the steady warmth of the castle. He savored it for a few moments as he saw off the urgent courier before turning on his heel and marching towards the stairs. He wasn’t really even conscious of where he was going as his legs began to carve a path towards the fifth floor, too preoccupied with trying to sort through the swirling maelstrom that had been the past day.

Anger. Shouting. Meetings. So many fucking *meetings*. What did they even talk about? It’s been twenty-six fucking hours and he had no idea.

Twenty-six hours since the bomb went off in the western wing of the castle, and his ability to focus had been blown to fresh hell along with a large chunk of the third floor.

Those fucking endless hours in the Council Chambers thereafter, a twenty-three-hour marathon of never-ending diplomatic, bureaucratic *bullshit*. Foreign affairs, political disagreements, travel
That is to say, he was not sleepy. No, the Prince was past the point of seeking comfort in the sheets of his bed – not that he would relax in it now, seeing as the last time he’d been in it was – no. He wasn’t going to think about that, not now.

The point. What was the point he was even trying to make? Ah, yes, his inability to focus. Case in fucking point.

He was the living-breathing embodiment of exhaustion. Fatigue. Worn so thin he was like a threadbare blanket, well beyond the point of usefulness, but it was still his familiar mind and his body that was stitched together in that mess of fabric and he could not, no matter how badly he might want to, throw away.

Not now. Not ever. He was the fucking Prince, and there was no running from that.

His room would provide no consolation right now, and while part of him was tempted to go see Red, one of the few pillars of unwavering support he knew was waiting ever impatiently for him in the stables, going to her felt like some sort of excuse. The meetings had been – mostly – unavoidable. Sure, he could have physically pushed his way out the doors and marched down to the fifth floor a long time ago, but there were invisible barriers that were as stubborn as he was blind to maneuver around them.

That was earlier, though. It didn’t matter now. Now, the meetings were over, temporary decisions had been made, lines had been drawn. Those were big-picture things, but the real now that Keith was concerned about was right across the hall.

He stood outside the infirmary, leaning against the wall, opposite the door. No subtly. No sneaking, no escort – he dismissed them with a quiet order once he had reached the fifth floor – nothing.

He had been told explicitly not to come here.

*It’s too conspicuous. It’s not safe. It’s dangerous.*

To their warnings, he could not adequately express how few fucks he gave.

It had been twenty-six hours since Keith had seen him. Since he left him.

(Well, it was actually twenty-five hours, fifty-three minutes and, oh, about fifteen seconds. Yes, he was counting. *Of course* he was counting.)

Keith hadn’t meant for things to end up like this. He didn’t know how he had meant for things to end up, but it wasn’t like this. Separated by a literal wall. Frozen, torn between running toward and running away. A million what if’s dredging out from the darker parts of imagination; Slav’s anxiety and dizzying calculations suddenly made so much more sense to him now.

Gods, how clear it was now – Keith had put him in danger. He hadn’t seen through the gaussian blur of his own paranoia to properly look around instead of just straight ahead. Naturally, the Prince would hold Lotor accountable for some of what occurred, but in the end, Keith had no one to blame but himself.

What sort of King would he be if he wasn’t able to protect his most precious subject?
Was this what it meant, he wondered, to be in love? To be filled with constant, crippling fear for the well-being of someone else? The slippery, aching dread he’d felt beneath the heavy weight of raging flames, that he might never see those blue eyes again, hear that voice again. That fear had been dashed shortly after he’d made it outside, but, was this loving someone? Because what it really felt like was crushing, cherished terror, a lovely brand of panic, and it hurt in the best sort of way. The pain, and the subsequent relief, was humbling – he had almost seen a star fall from the skies, almost watched it burn, and he had barely managed to catch it and reignite it again.

How eerily familiar, this feeling, but so much more intense then the last time he’d found himself waiting outside the infirmary. It was all the same horrible, coiling wrath and rage and disgust in the black tar pit of his insides, but a hundred times more potent, more choking, more desperately unsettling.

He was overcome by it – the vulnerability, the openness and honesty – gods this is what love is, isn’t it? Because in spite of the icher that clung to his insides, blackened his lungs like the smoke that had clouded the castle, he was still filled with so much hope. Wondrous, irrational hope.

Lance was alive. He was alive, and he was just on the other side of those doors.

Keith had a dozen doubts, of course, that buzzed in the back of his brain – will he even want to see me? Will he be mad it’s taken me so long? Or is it too soon? Should I let him rest? What if he’s not even awake? Do I wait? Or is that stupid? – but he stubbornly ignored each one of them.

There was really only one thing he wanted, and it was less than twenty feet away.

Clenching his fists, the Prince swallowed tersely on the sudden bone-dry desert that was his throat. Every goddamn time? Lance might not even be fucking conscious and all of Keith’s nerves are coming undone just at the prospect of seeing his dumb, stupid, dopey smile.

He really loved that fucking smile.

Taking a deep breath, the Prince pushed himself off the wall and strode forward, jaw tight, and maybe his heart was racing, maybe. Only a little.

Incidentally, he didn’t get to throw open the doors in any sort of dramatic fashion because the very moment his fingers grazed the handle, the hinges were snapping in place to accommodate a forceful shove.

“Ah, I’m s – oh, it’s just you.” Pidge made it about halfway through the apology and the doorway before her brow smoothed out in recognition. The look was quickly replaced by her usual level of mild disinterest, an expression of informality that was virtually ubiquitous across each and every Holt. At least Colleen and Commander Holt sometimes used his title – Matt and Pidge were both lost causes when it came to showing him respect.

Not that Keith minded. It would be fucking weird if Pidge just started calling him your Highness one day. Indeed, this crass introduction was a sort of breath of fresh air. Familiar.

“Hey, Pidge,” he said, clearing his throat. Gods, he sounded like hell. Smoke inhalation would do that, apparently. (To be fair, Adam did say that his throat hadn’t suffered nearly as much as it probably should have for being “an absolute idiot of a royal with a hero-complex because who in their right might run into a burning building?”) “Have you been here long?”

“Yeah, you could say that.” She smiled, though it didn’t reach her eyes. “And I thought I looked like shit. You need a shower.”
Keith rolled his eyes, a smirk tugging at his own lips as he stepped around her and into the infirmary. “I can always count on you to boost morale, can’t I?”

Wherever she’d been going, she must have decided against because she followed him right back into the room.

“It’s one of my many talents,” Pidge shrugged, stopping at the end of the row of beds. “He isn’t awake, ‘cause I’m sure you were wondering.”

“Your Keithness! I – urgh, your High – no, okay. Starting over. Hi, Keith.” Another familiar voice began, bubbly at first but morphing into a groan. Hunk had shot up from his seat beside a particular bed, a particular set of messy brown curls, a particular set of broad shoulders.

After several long seconds of silence, Keith finally blinked up to the – oh christ, Hunk looked horrible. Eyes baggy and red-rimmed, he even looked like he’d somehow lost weight, withering away with how harrowingly concerned he was for the well-being of the boy beside him.

“Hi, Hunk.” The Prince tried his best to keep his voice even, using the momentary distraction from the bed that continued to draw his eye like a magnet, Keith looked around to better take in the infirmary as a whole.

Almost jarringly, he realized people were looking back at him from every corner, each chair pushed out and all legs standing – not the patients, thankfully – ramrod straight in respect. It shouldn’t have surprised him, but it did, and his insides twisted uncomfortably. Right. A lot of people had been hurt, not just Lance. He should have paid better attention to learning each victims name, but his own faulty emotions had gotten involved; he’d been too consumed with his own unsteady arrhythmia to give each individual their due respect.

“Oh, um.” Coughing, Keith shifted his weight. “Please, keep your seats. I am here as a visitor, not as an authority.”

There were some fleeting smiles, and a definite smattering of uneasy frowns, but ultimately all the visitors and injured in the room soon returned to their private bubbles of conversation. Around the infirmary, almost every bed was filled, chairs shuffled around to accommodate the unusually large number of patients. While the castle’s small clinic was by no stretch of the imagination underprepared to treat such injuries (it was up to par with even the more advanced Altean hospitals), neither had it been designed to host so many injured, and it seemed the beds were just barely enough. Speaking of, a conspicuous island of empty beds caught Keith’s attention, centered around the most obvious occupant in the room. There was little need to guess who occupied that particular cot, even if it was impossible to discern the Galran Prince behind a closed off curtain and so much military personnel you’d think they were guarding a treasury vault, not an injured piece of shit.

Keith wasn’t here for him, though.

At long, long last, almost twenty-six hours to the tee, he crossed the room. The Prince tried to keep his eyes forward as he did so, stopping only when he reached the unoccupied chair on the other side of Lance’s bed – there was still a conspicuously Pidge-shaped imprint in the fabric, but he didn’t sit. For some reason that felt – felt wrong, for some reason.

Instead, very carefully, Keith made a little bit of room beside Lance’s hips and squeezed into a half-sitting, half-leaninng position. Even through the sheets, he was always so cold. His skin was no longer blackened by soot and smoke, and his bare shoulders were patterned by freckles where the bandages did not cover. The light made his eye scale gleam ever so lightly, and for the first time in so long,
Keith could finally, finally breathe again.

Yes. That was much better.

Pidge let out a long sigh and took the seat beside him, quiet. In fact, all three were silent for several seconds, maybe a solid minute, before Keith finally spoke.

“I told him that I’m going to kick his ass when he wakes up,” the Prince remarked, lips pursed. “Don’t try and stop me.”

Utterly deadpan, Pidge barely looked his way. “I’ll help.”

“Guys,” Hunk admonished, but he was only half-invested. He sighed and added, “...Go easy on him.”

Pidge ground her teeth together so forcefully, Keith was surprised it wasn’t audible. He could visibly see her jaw moving.

“I don’t get why all of the bad stuff has to happen to him. It’s not fair.”

“It’s not,” Hunk agreed. “I feel like there’s something I should be doing. I don’t know how I could even help, but I wish there was something I could do to help, you know?”

Keith bit his lip and nodded. He wanted to say more, but the security concern was still, at least for now, too high to involve Hunk and Pidge. There wasn’t any justifiable reason to tell them what had happened behind those closed-door meetings that wouldn’t put them at unnecessary risk.

Especially, considering, how little headway they’d been able to make.

What had they learned? Plenty.

What could they actually do with the information they learned? Pathetically little, at least until Lance and Lotor were both consistently conscious again.

Was there any good news to share, really? Keith was their friends, maybe, but he was their Prince, too. He at least owed them something, if not for the fact that he wanted to, but because they were in fact doing him a service, giving back a small kindness to the cruel universe, doing what he had so desperately wanted to do for the past twenty-six hours.

He racked his rattled brain, tried to find some sort of sort of information that he could at least offer in silent gratitude. Reviewing the facts, all they’d managed to really accomplish was talk themselves into a diplomatic stalemate, no one willing to make the first move, no one willing to be the first to arm their forces no matter how deeply saturated the air had tasted, thick with bloodlust.

There would be no engagement, so that was something, but only because Zarkon so clearly wanted to rip Keith’s still-beating heart from his chest and choke him with it. Shiro had basically forbid him from speaking at one point, because every word Keith said only seemed to make the Galran presence in the room angrier – which, honestly?Fuck them.

The witch was never present, instead staying by Lotor’s side. That hadn’t settled well with Keith, but there wasn’t much of an argument he could make against it that wasn’t the equivalent of stomping his foot and complaining about how it wasn’t fair, but life wasn’t fucking fair, end of story.

As far as the incident itself, his Mother and Kolivan had reached much of the same conclusion he had almost immediately as the talks began, and the glaring truth of the matter only becoming more
apparent as time drew on.

Emperor Zarkon had tried to murder his own fucking son.

He had tried to stage a terror attack that would implicate the Olkari and Altea both as conspirators, both at the same time.

Why steal materials from Puig but to drag the Puigians into the mess, to position the otherwise neutral country as victims of circumstance alongside the Galra? If Puig sided with the Galra, they were only separated from Altea by tiny Arus who would rather remain neutral or turn belly-up when faced by a direct threat. If Daibaazal came at Altea’s borders through Olkari from the west and through Arus in the East? There’d be no way King Alfor could win a fight raging on both ends of the country.

Why have the bandits take to the eastern forests, a hazardous path that could really only be navigated by expert Altean trackers and hunters, if not to incriminate Altea? Why wait until the summit was nearly over, why surround yourself with allies but to provide yourself an alibi?

It made sense, too. The Galran Prince was the perfect target for this.


Did he deserve to die because of it? ...Well, maybe. If you asked Keith, it really just depended on how physically near he was to Lance at any given time; so long as he stayed away, then, no.

Galra have a stupidly long life span, so there was still plenty of time for Zarkon to produce another heir or to pass the crown through succession by combat instead of by blood, so they hadn’t the same pressure as Keith and his Mother, both of whom were forced to rule without the King. And Lotor was... well, he was a huge prick in Keith’s opinion, socially, but politically? He had never actually seemed to support his father’s position on the conflict, nor had he seemed to respect the man in general. They had open disagreements on policy and how to navigate relations the realm over, particularly in regards to Daibaazal’s relationship with the Alteans.

It was such a perfect plan, it made him want to punch the hell out something. It explained everything to the point it was beyond frustrating, because for the time being, they couldn’t do fuck about it. They couldn’t prove anything, but it made all of the speculation finally add up, all of those little pieces of the puzzle that hadn’t quite fit – of course they made sense now. Hindsight was always 20/20.

And yet, even the best-laid plans go awry, don’t they? They hadn’t considered that the Galran Prince might survive, and instead it would be a Balmeran royal who would die. They clearly had not been expecting Coran, someone so closely linked to the Altean royal family, would be caught up in the mess, either.

But more than anything? Emperor Zarkon had never seen Lance coming, not by a long shot.

Not that Keith had, either – he’d basically been emotionally sucker-punched every consecutive day for a fucking week, caught in a dance much too large for even the Grand Ballroom. It was a back and forth, stolen glances and borrowed touches, throats scratched from shouting and from laughter, the nights beneath starry skies and the days filled by chilly autumn. Soft kisses and rough fingers, or bruising lips and gentle caresses. It definitely wasn’t synchronized, whatever this was, because Keith’s life was always big-picture and largely stuck on fast-forward while Lance seemed to make everything slower, steady. He made minutes that were once grueling suddenly pass too soon, made
little things like freckles suddenly matter, made Keith’s own practiced loneliness suddenly *unbearable*.

They were disharmony. And, gods, if Lance didn’t piss him off. He wound him up, calmed him down, terrified the living shit out of him, and somehow had the nerve to *look good* *doing it*. All fucking day, Keith’s emotions were just continuing coiling themselves into increasingly discordant knots. He knew that nothing about how he felt could be right or normal, but also knew he could never settle for anything fucking less than this.

“Keith!”

Surprised by the voice in his fucking *ear*, the Prince flinched back and, thank god for his honed reflexes, barely managed to catch himself from falling over Lance’s bare, bandaged back.

“What the hell, dude? Are you okay?” Pidge had taken him by both shoulders, jostling him just a little. “I was sort of joking when I said you looked like shit, but you just went like, *dead* for a few minutes.”

Roughly, he swallowed at the lump in his throat. “O-oh… yeah, sorry. Just… a lot of my mind.”

“You and everyone else,” she said, teasing, but with more than a little edge of concern in her tone. “I don’t suppose you’ve seen my parents or Matt lately?”

Hunk raised his head from where he’d been leaning forward on Lance’s other side, blinking sleepily towards them.

“I mean, not *super* recently.” He thought for a moment, tried to map back out the discussions over the past day. “The Commander and your Mom were in one of our meetings really early on, advocating for the Olkari to be allowed to leave the premise. After that, I’m not sure, I know your Dad’s here still somewhere, maybe sleeping now to be honest. Your Mom may have stayed at the embassy. I’m… not sure if I’m able to tell you where Matt is, but he should be safe. Sorry.”

She nodded slowly, pulling her knees to her chest in the seat, feet just poking over the edge of the cushion. “It’s cool. Thanks.”

Somewhat abruptly, Adam passed by, and Keith just caught the glimpse of a smile and a wave as he turned to another next patient, questioning a nurse who had been attending to them.

Hunk began to ask him a few questions, really, just mild things that he suspected were intended to get their minds off of the terrible, foreboding tension shared between all of them as they waited for the head on the pillow to stir. Simple curiosities, like which season he liked best or why he had two middle names, which consequently went on to him explaining what the hell *Yorak* meant.

The distraction was nice, but time and time again Keith found his body moving on its own, floating hands seeking to hold Lance’s fingers only to force himself to stop – he ended up just playing with his hands, curling each finger them and open and closed one by one, sometimes rubbing the pads of his fingers over Lance’s callouses. It wasn’t exactly what he wanted, but it was something, and slowly he noticed the fingers began to thaw, returning to room temperature with Keith’s absent-minded ministrations.

It was around this time that Pidge kicked his dangling leg, not hard, but enough to be intentional. Leaning close, she glanced around the room before narrowing her eyes at him.

“I heard about what happened, *outside*. It’s just a rumor for now, but, are you freakin’ *insane*?”
Keith dropped Lance’s hand like it had suddenly moved and decided to pinch him.

Part of him was tempted to ignore her, because really, you never know when someone might be listening, but he was always too stupidly emotionally involved when it came to the resting boy beside him to ever be appropriately thoughtful. His burning cheeks certainly didn’t help his case, either.

“I didn’t really think about it,” he admitted just as quietly, but twice as fiercely. “I just felt like I had to, I thought he died. I thought...”

Hunk shifted in Keith’s periphery, and when the Prince looked up, he was surprised to find the young man glowering at him.

Surprisingly serious, the the chef stood up and leaned over the bed, whispering a furious string of words. “This is totally not my business but I have to just say – don’t you dare think about, like, having some sort of self-sacrificing moment where you end things because of what happened, because you’re afraid of putting him in danger or something like that. Please, don’t do that. I don’t know what you guys – what you even are or what you want to be – but don’t do that. It would be like you’re punishing him for caring about you, and that’s...”

“Whoa, no, no.” Keith recoiled, not even wanting to hear Hunk finish. Fuck, this was so embarrassing, he couldn’t even meet either Pidge nor Hunk’s eye. Instead, he scowled at Lance, which was a motion that was at least familiar.


After a thoughtful moment of scrutiny, Hunk seemed to judge his stupid, flustered response as satisfactory. Thank god, too. Keith would sooner die than try to explain exactly how he felt about Lance.

Sure, he’d mentioned it to his Mother, and Shiro seemed to understand, which meant Adam probably knew, and Allura seemed to have a vested interest in the whole thing for gods know what reason, but trying to verbalize how exactly he felt?

Nope. Death sounded way better.

Pidge let out a groan and stretched her arms over her head before resting her forehead on her knees. She began to say something, but stopped after the first few syllables and raised her head.

“Do you guys hear that?”

Keith, who had definitely not been gaping at a sharp, teal eye scale, blinked, and listened more attentively.

“Not appropriate –”

“...my responsibility... my – canno... what to – I!”

“...curity right now, really – please, just –”

Hunk cocked his head to the side, much of the infirmary now turning towards the door.

“That sort of sounds like...”

He didn’t finish the thought, though he really didn’t have to. Adam was already marching towards the doors with a confused look on his face, opening it just in time to reveal just who dared yell on his
floor.

“Takashi, what the hell are you – uh, wait, excuse – hey!”

The entire room – well, of those who were conscious – flinched, surprised to see the doctor nearly be knocked over by a… surprisingly diminutive old man, who seemed unphased to be causing such a disturbance as he marched right through the doors. His silver hairs shined, yellow sclera narrow until they landed on Keith’s face.

The archivist was practically heaving from the exertion of getting there, and a very confused, strained Shiro soon appeared beside his husband and began to say something too quietly for Keith to hear.

“Your – your Highness,” he wheezed, evidently winded. “I needed… stupid knights… got in my way…”

The old man glared at everyone, and Shiro especially. He seemed ready to fight whoever stood in his way of getting to the Prince, and honestly, if he wasn’t so strained himself, Keith might have even laughed.

Instead, the Prince looked around awkwardly, feeling the weight of eyes on him, many of the faces he gazed upon confused or alarmed, including Hunk and Pidge. However reluctantly, Keith slid down from his edge of Lance’s bed, fingers lingering over the soft, cold sheets for just a moment.

“Let’s, uh, speak privately,” he nodded towards the hallway, but Adam walked in with Shiro, a look of understanding and – worry? – furrowing his brow.

“Actually, your Highness, why don’t you take my office? It’s empty right now.”

He hadn’t even accepted before the resident curmudgeon began muttering to himself, ancient knees and deeply curved back scuffling their way down the row of beds, recoiling if anyone got too close.

Keith met eyes with Shiro, who simply sighed and nodded before joining him. They followed the archivist into Adam’s simple, tastefully decorated office, and the old man growled as he pulled out his glasses and a scroll, throwing the latter down on the coffee table next to the couch before taking a seat.

“Did you… find something?” Keith began, slowly approaching the table. “Also, Shiro, what are you even doing here?”

The knight had scarcely opened his mouth when the old Galran began to mutter out an explanation, never looking anywhere but the Prince.

“I was doing as you asked, your Highness, and it is my honor bound duty not to divulge my findings with anyone not in the royal family. This knight happened upon me in my work and began to ask too many questions, so here we are.”

“Okay, that is not at all what happened,” Shiro said, running a hand down his face. Taking one of the single chairs in front of Adam’s desk, Shiro turned it around and took a seat.

“There was a report by one of the men who guard the hall with your sleeping quarters of this gentleman banging on your door, and… well, given the sensitive nature of everything right now, I asked the guards return to their post and decided to look into it myself. But now, the archivist is unwilling to share any information about what is actually happening unless it was with you or the Queen. I tried to stop him but –”
“But nothing! This is not a conversation for your ears, sir!” The archivist bit right back, and Shiro just closed his eyes, probably counting to ten to keep himself calm. Keith could practically hear him whispering to himself *patience yields focus.* The thought brought the faintest of smiles to his lips before his attention returned to the conversation.

“I don’t care if Shiro knows. You can tell him anything you could tell me. But you’re already here, so what is it?”

The man leaned back and forth several times, suddenly looking unsure as he considered how to respond. In an effort to ease some of the tension, Keith took the other chair from Adam’s desk and sat across from the older Galra, giving him an opportunity to gather his thoughts.

“Discretion is no small matter, your Grace. Are you *certain* you would allow me to speak on such a thing to someone *outside* of the royal line?”

The archivist visibly shuddered, like to even imagine such a thing was the equivalent of disemboweling someone. Actually, the man had a bit of a point, but not because he was unwilling for Shiro to know… just, something occurred to him for the first time.

He bit his lip and turned to the Head of the Guard. “Are you, uh, aware of what he was looking into?”

“Not a clue.”

“Okay. Uh. Well.” Keith cleared his throat, sitting up and suddenly feeling a little nervous. “I was curious when, you know, about Lance. So I asked him to, you know…”

“Keith.” Shiro groaned, covering his eyes with a hand. “Please tell me you didn’t have him research Lance’s family.”

Keith’s silence was as good as a confession, it seemed, because Shiro leveled him with an expression that read: *are you serious?*

“Why didn’t you just, I don’t know, ask Lance about them? Try starting a conversation?”

Defensively, Keith snapped back, “Well, I did! …eventually, sort of. I mean, I didn’t actually *ask* him about his family, specifically, since I already knew their names, and Lance has talked about them a lot and – what, don’t look at me like that!” He threw up his hands. “I don’t know! At first I just wanted to cover my bases, make sure his family wasn’t like, notorious serial killers or something. I was *trying* to be responsible!”

“By using your unique position of power to check up on your *crush?*” retorted the knight, and Keith shot him a dirty look through his pink cheeks and turned back to the archivist. “Ignore him, please. What do you have?”

“By using your unique position of power to check up on your *crush?*” retorted the knight, and Keith shot him a dirty look through his pink cheeks and turned back to the archivist. “Ignore him, please. What do you have?”

“‘Well.’ The Galra focused his eyes on Keith, golden slits scrutinizing, expression unreadable. “A collection of small things that just build on the original profile – there are some more recent records of the eldest daughter to find now that she’s married. Registration for school for her children, a marriage certificate. It is unclear if the mother and father of the line are even alive with such little to go off of, or if they were ever legally wed, divorced, or otherwise. I have narrowed down the mother’s maiden lineage, likely Rosa Alavaréz, born in Marmora, technically, though it was so close to the Arusian border the line is almost indistinguishable. There is a lineage of Alavaréz in the neighboring communities that would constitute grandparents, but, that was not a particularly
“Oh, uh.” Keith shifted his weight back and forth, pointedly avoiding all eye contact with Shiro. It’s not like he needed to actually look the man’s way – Keith could practically feel the waves of disapproval radiating out from his seat. “Okay. That’s… a good start. Was there anything else?”

The man nodded solemnly. “After that, I turned to the father’s story, and this is where things become more… complicated.” The archivist paused to massage his temples, pupils flickering back and forth as if the documents were before him right then. “Your Highness, Medram is not a common choice of name these days. After averaging the age of when Altean males begin to reproduce, and then searching back by time using only a first name has taken… some time, and I managed to reduce the possible list of men in the whole northeastern region to a little more than sixty. While there is much I am still unsure of at this point, I have found is that there is no record of any Medram McClain having existed as far back as I looked – the past three-hundred years – but there was a Medram Serrano whose name stood out amongst the sixty others, in that it is unusually incomplete.

“There was a birth certificate, registered in the farthest eastern province in Altea, forty-seven years ago. Military registration at the age of sixteen. After that, there is no trace of him. No death certificate, any sort of registration of a license – hunting, mount ownership, the usual things – no business affiliations, no traceable records of travel, no criminal history. No parents. No siblings. No record of discharge from the service, nor active duty in the field. Nothing.”

A pause, and Keith’s brow was dipped. Maybe it was his own lack of sleep finally catching up to him, because while he recognized that there was something off about this. This report wasn’t exactly a revelation of any sort, it didn’t really change anything about what they knew already, right? The archivist had warned him that these records would be difficult to pull, but this felt… different. Like something was missing from the equation, a variable that had been left out, keeping him from making sense of it all in context.

“So, what, then?” He eventually wondered aloud. “Are you suggesting McClain is a fake surname, and you believe his real name is Serrano?”

“That is part of it, yes,” the goblin-of-a-man grunted, shifting forward on the couch. He pulled forward the lone roll of parchment. “I would like for you to see something. Is there an inkpot in here?”

After a moment of fumbling through Adam’s things, Shiro brought forth a writing utensil and the old Galra leered over the parchment, smoothing it out to reveal a blank sheet. He stuck his tongue out between his lips in concentration as he began to scratch letters into the paper, Keith and Shiro both leaning forward to read the upside down script.

The man’s hand moved over the page with painstaking slowness, but a name began to carve itself out from the ink.

*Medram Serrano.*

“*Serrano,*” Keith mouthed the name, not really exerting the breath necessary to form the sound. He was really more confused than anything.

However, just as quickly as the ink had begun to dry, Keith had to physically rub his eyes to make sure he wasn’t imagining things, because – *what?*

The words sank into the page, black dye sucked into the parchment like a sponge, washing out the color to return to the same flaxen parchment. Spotless.
The name fucking vanished.

“How is that… what was that?” The Prince mumbled out half-formed questions, reclining back into his chair again with a confused grimace twisting his features. “Who exactly is he?”

“A very good question, your Highness.” The archivist let out a humorless chuckle, rolling up the scroll again and letting it rest on the table. “And, as it turns out, a very, very difficult one to answer.”

“What do you mean?” Shiro asked with a frown. “How did you do that?”

“It wasn’t me,” the Galran snapped at the knight before turning his attention back to Keith, the many lines of his ancient face carved from stone. “All of this has led me to one conclusion, your Highness. This was no accidental slip by those ham-fisted scribes in the rural regions between Altea and Arus – this was intentional. I’m sure I do not need to tell either of you that the tampering with and suppression of official documents is already considered illegal, but to use this manner of abjuration to conceal an identity? That is considered an extremely duplicitous use of magic.” He sat back fully and removed his glasses, rubbing at the corners of his eyes. “This man had something to hide, your Grace. Something very serious, I suspect, to go to such means.”

Keith ran a hand through his hair slowly, not really aware of the action, just something to keep his hands busy. This was… not what he had expected to find.

What did this mean? Now came the moral dilemma: was it not his duty to look into something like this? If it was a severe as the archivist seemed to suggest, then perhaps there actually had been a good reason to be worried about Lance’s family history. Maybe not a bunch of serial murderers, but, this was clearly not normal. Then again, this really was Lance’s personal business – he’d only looked into in the first place just so he could be prepared, and nothing in the universe could have prepared him for Lance anyways, so what did listening to this really accomplish? Now he felt like an intruder, a foot soldier stepping through a minefield – one wrong move and he could unearth something that really should have been better left alone.

“I don’t think Lance has ever even mentioned his Dad before,” the Prince murmured aloud. That was… he was pretty sure of that, right? Honestly, Lance only ever really spoke about his mother and his aunt and cousins. “Fuck, I really should have just talked to him.”

At least the knight beside him had the humor left in him to scoff. “You think?”

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**Bonus**

[SHIRO]

Who even had the free time to tell time anymore? Not him. Definitely not him.

That was probably why the Black Paladin timepiece came without a chain or a band, wasn’t it? The thing was certainly not built for convenience, a practical lump of obsidian that dragged against the fabric of in his hip pouch, and convenience was definitely not a word that came up in Shiro’s daily
routine. If he wanted to stop to check the time, he had to actually stop, fish it out, appraise the hands that moved seamlessly over the onyx surface.

He had just finished seeing his newest headache back to the archives and was turning back to make sure Keith was okay before leaving him in the infirmary again.

And maybe, just maybe, take thirty seconds to be with Adam. Nonofficial business. They could even just step into his office, just hold each other for a short respite. Just so he could breathe and relax, be reminded that it was just another day. If anyone brought that humbling feeling out of him, it was Adam. His husband was stronger than anyone, himself included, for putting up with this, all while keeping up with his impossibly demanding work — he managed to stay objective, stay sharp in spite of the chaos. Shiro’s job was done, at least immediately, in securing the castle and the royal family, but for Adam, it was a constant battle. Lives were at stake.

That being said, Shiro wasn’t optimistic that they would get that blessed thirty seconds, but he wasn’t so beyond hope that he wouldn’t at least talk himself up to the possibility.

To be clear, Shiro’s concern for Keith’s well-being was not, for once, a safety concern. Heck, there was more security in that room than patients, not to mention he had his own weapons; his concerns had little to do with the Prince’s physical state of being.

No, he could see it, the mental and emotional strain in the young man. Well-hidden though it may be, Shiro could glean it from the pallor tone of his skin, the darkness beneath and within his eyes, the slump in his posture, the weight of the crown upon his brow. If the knight felt like he’d been run too thin lately, it always came with the alarming rememberance that Keith was nearly half his age and dealing with just as much. To think, the guy finally found someone who brought out something in him besides his usual throes of short-temper or willful isolation, only for all of this to happen.

And then Lance. God, the poor kid. He really couldn’t catch a break, and he honestly seemed like a good guy who was continually trying to make the most of every single bad hand life dealt him, and he’d nearly been killed for it. Hope wasn’t supposed to kill people, but give them something to live for.

With a long exhale, Shiro blinked away the demands of fatigue that crept upon him as he approached the fifth floor. If there was one thing he could do, it was at least try to protect these young paladins that had somehow been thrust into his day-by-day – even if he was still struggling to understand what exactly that meant.

When he pushed open the infirmary door, slowly and quietly, Shiro found much of the room asleep. The crystals had been dimmed, and aside from the light chatter of some waking patients, the room was mostly still and filled with the steady rise and fall of the chests of sleeping patients and visitors.

Walking towards Lance’s bed, Shiro’s exhausted eyes turned up with his smile, crinkling a bit at the corners. He’d definitely tease Keith about this tomorrow.

Four sleeping figures greeted him.

Pidge was sprawled out sideways in the lounge chair, legs dangling over one arm and her head gathered beneath folded hands along the opposite side. Her glasses were still on, askew, and an open book was splayed over her chest.

Across the other side of the bed, Hunk’s head was resting over his folded arms, sound asleep next to the space by Lance’s side. The short ends of his bangs that were pushed out and up from his signature bandana were just brushing against Lance’s hip above the sheet.
And Keith. Oh, Keith.

He must have been sitting next to Lance on the bed, occupying the narrow space between the edge and the injured boy’s hips, and had since fallen forward, literally wedged into the space beneath Lance’s upper arm, tucked just barely into his side. Practically rolled up into himself, Keith somehow managed to squeeze enough of his body into the two feet long opening, maybe a foot wide, the rest of his knees and arms totally lost over the side of the bed.

Shiro actually giggled. Heh.

“‘Kashi,” called a voice behind him. The only voice he really wanted to hear, and the only one who ever called him that.

Hands slide over his flesh arm, squeezing his bicep tight as a weary head rested against the side of it.

“Come with me to my office. I just need to take a load off my feet.”

The knight smiled, a surprised, happy little surge running from his heart all the way to the tips fingers and toes.

“That sounds…” he hummed, smiling down at his favorite handsome grin in the whole world. How the man managed to still find time for him, Shiro would never know. “Yes. Please.”
That's Not His Name

Chapter Summary

Hira Valurian gives a history lesson, Keith is just trying his best, Hunk is a very good friend, and Lance really, really deserves a break.

Chapter Notes

hi guys, I am SO SORRY about how long this has taken me. I opened my tumblr to do some winter fics (and then fell behind on those too kill me pls) and I was participating in a few secret santas across fandoms, so I've been super tied up in other things. plus, uh, voltron ended, holy shit? im still reeling.

if any of you enjoy SU, I also have to give a big thanks to my really dear friend e350tb and greatly recommend their work. they're the hunk to my lance, and I owe them for keeping me sane. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[LANCE]

An ocean storm raged, the currents angry and thrashing beneath his hoarfrost skin. His limbs were lightning, thrown sparks over the chaos, casting brilliant light over the waters and the skies in the momentary flash before the world washed out again. Beneath the choppy waves, his lungs were the seafloor, the pressure and grit amounting to too much breadth without nearly enough breaths. It burned his skin, stung his eyes, turned him inside out and upside down.

Lance was sure this was how he would die, drowned in living waters, trapped by the anchor of his own skin and bones.

Consciousness came in fleeting passes. Sometimes it was his Mamá, tracing his eye scale with her finger when he was eight, sitting at the kitchen table; other times it was skirting through alleys in Marmora to quickly cross through the districts. Mostly, he saw Keith’s face and could recall the taste and touch of his smoke-stained lips. Lance couldn’t really remember why Keith looked so scared, but the shift he’d seen of blank black eyes, sorrowed, and the subsequent flicker to fierce, disbelieving purple, was surely something Lance would never, ever forget.

Other times, it was Sir Adam, or Coran, or, unpleasantly, Lotor. Generally speaking, their faces made him feel boxed in. Lance just wanted to breathe mountain air or see the endless skies he’d so grown to love, whether that be in countrysides or Keith’s balcony or through Pidge’s telescope.

There was so much — too much — sensation the nearer Lance got to those corporeal thoughts, riding the waves in spite of the tethers that had been determined to drag him beneath the sea. He felt bricks being laid in his limbs, turning his body clumsy and heavy; the sea spray tickling the corners
of his cheeks, the acid being thrown over his spine and the terrible laugh that accompanied it. It was not so unlike his Aunt Hira’s haughty voice, and those moments were surely the worst, those which almost prompted him to fall with the weight of the seas, grow gills or fins and try to live below the waters for the rest of his life — wasn’t air overrated?

He had no sense of time and space when he was the world, the sea, the sky, and the body drowning beneath it all, any echo of organized thought too abstract for him to manage any firm grip of where he was, why he was there, how he’d come to be there, but it got easier after he’d reached the point at which he thought surely his consciousness was ready to be swept away by the currents for the very last time.

But there were people relying on him, somewhere, up upon the shore, and Lance couldn’t give up on them. If there was one thing Lance was, it was stubborn, so you better believe he would kick and claw and scratch and fight until his lungs were completely water-logged.

It had been an image of Keith, overtop him, holding him, giving him the air he so desperately needed, chasing away the pneumonia by leaving burning marks all over his body, his neck, his chest, his heart. Lance had only gotten to see that, feel it, share it with him one time, and one time was not enough. Maybe that was a selfish motivation. Maybe it was all the wrong sorts of conviction, but Lance didn’t care. It kept him going.

Because McClains don’t give up.

And so, that was his life. For awhile, anyways.

The first real, waking thought he’d had came with such stiff discomfort over every inch of his skin that he almost regretted trying to peel his six-metric-ton eyelids open at all:

I’m facedown.

It was a trying adjustment, to reorient himself to laying instead of floating, to breathing and not holding his breath as the next wave crested over his head, but he managed. His eyes blinked away the remainders of the fog, finally, light breaking over the harbor of his awareness as he realized where he was.

The castle infirmary.

Oh, quiznak.

That explained why his body felt like it’d just gotten trampled by a pack of yalmors and then pushed through one of Hunk’s garlic presses. There were wires and other unknown medical things all over him, and with an uncomfortable adjustment at his hips, he discovered a catheter. Ugh.

He must pretty fuc... to justify something that serious. What happened?

The first time he tried to move his arms, his heart felt like it was going to fail and he tried to cry out in pain, but his voice had vanished. Great. Instead, Lance let out a pathetic, completely inaudible wheeze and squeezed his eyes shut again.

He took several measured breaths — but not too deep, as his back felt like it was going to tear apart at the seams if he expanded or collapsed his diaphragm too much — before gathering the will to open his eyes again. Lance was pleased when he could verify a second time that he’d not been returned to the mercy of the tides. He was still in the infirmary, which was a good sign.

The lights were dimmed, so it must be some sort of sleep-appropriate hour, and he couldn’t switch
the direction of his head (not that he even want to try because his head weighed about as much as Kaltenecker), so the awkward angle gave him a straight-line view of a row of beds, many of which were occupied; the infirmary was definitely more crowded than the last time he was here.

Just barely, in his periphery, he could see Pidge, completely annihilated by sleep judging by her mouth-hanging-open-drool-dripping-out expression. He felt something warm at both sides of his body, too. One was a sort of small, latent warmth, like sitting down on a cushion after someone else had been using it for awhile, but the other was borderline invasive, heating him like a furnace over his whole right side, but it wasn’t unpleasant, because after twitching his fingers, he realized they were… being held.

Keith.

Lance wanted so badly to try to crane his neck, if not just to get a better look at him then to make absolutely sure it was him, but he could already tell a move like that would be like asking to be tortured. And, honestly, there really wasn’t any doubt, because no one was literally always blazing with raw fire like he was, no one had hands that could still fit so rightly with his even when they were just barely threaded together. It was Keith.

He was here with him, Pidge, too — he didn’t need to turn around to figure the other body in his little bubble was probably Hunk.

Rather suddenly, he felt overcome by the urge to cry, his eyes swelling with hot tears that pushed their way stubbornly down one side of his face, over his nose and piling on the pillow. He wasn’t sure if he was crying because his body felt so broken, because he’d never felt so whole, or because he’d never been so confused, or happy, or terrified in his entire life, or maybe he imagined it, because his body did not stutter with any sobs like it should have. Instead, a heaviness like the mass of a collapsing star began to spill from his chest, so dense and overwhelming that Lance felt himself dragged back down beneath the black seas.

The second time he meandered into consciousness, it was considerably brighter and painfully louder. Lance didn’t know how to make sense of his own body, his head feeling like it had been stuffed with cotton, his mouth drier than any desert. Everything was fastened to his senses a little wrong, a little warbled; the red in the corner of his vision (when did he even open his eyes?) was like a wound he never wanted to heal; the voices around him were distant and bloomed like fresh flowers; his bones were made from glass shards, fragile and breakable but could lift the world anyway, tear and break through skin if need be.

Sensation was a little off, too. Sounds tasted like sunshine. Air felt like crisp laughter. His lips were chapped with the scent of a campfire.

It felt incredibly awful, to be so disoriented, but strangely vivid and invigorating, too. Everything felt like rediscovery, the epiphany of his own body and mind as thoughts struggled to maintain any meaningful sense of reality, shying in vain from abstraction.

There were voices. Those were the most important. Still, he struggled to understand them.

“Another dosage of medicine?”

“He’ll probably wake up once this next one wears off.”

“...been reading about… apparently, quintessence can… it’s safe.”

“The pain is too much right now. Burns are…”
“The Council refuses to... go. Zarkon wants his blood.”

“Well, Zarkon can —”

“Not here.”

“...Faster?”

“Sure, but...”

“...unpracticed on... heritage.”

“...”

The longer they went, around and around, the more he felt nausea begin to churn in his stomach, bile burning his throat. Unintentionally, as he tried to get a little more comfortable, he let out a small groan. And, to be honest, Lance thought he fucking died because all his senses cut out so abruptly that Lance was sure there wasn’t any sensation left to feel, that he’d just swallowed his heart, sacrificed it to the sirens that called him desperately back to sleep.

Then, suddenly, he felt something.

A smooth, pad of skin, warm and familiar, brushing his hair away with a touch so light it nearly tickled.

“Lance?”

Keith.

“Are you awake? Can you — can you hear me?”

The surprise was enough to force him to grind out a sound through the seismic weight pressing down on his vocal chords.

“—mth?” Lance wrinkled his nose at the hoarse sound of his voice, trying to clear it with little success. “'Eef? Urgh.”

“Oh my god, he’s awake,” Lance heard Hunk say, and he almost cracked a smile. He sounded like he’d been crying and had recently taken up chain-smoking. “Lance, buddy, it’s me, it’s Hunk, don’t go towards the light. Come to me, follow my voooooice.”

There was a brief moment of silence, and Lance’s brow furrowed as he began to feel water pool at his feet, a flood rippling over his ankles and up his calves with frightening speed.

Oh, god, no. He was drowning. He was going to drown again. The water — the ocean — it came back for him. Lance wanted to cry, fuck his own shame; there was nothing more terrifying than slipping back into that tempest, trapped beneath a glacier that froze his body and his heart and kept him pressed down through the raging waters.

Barely there, he heard Keith again, a few words managing buoyancy in spite of the creeping tides. He sounded like he was speaking above the surface. “Lance, I’m right here, you’re going to be okay, I’m so — I — I’m right here. I won’t let anything happen to you. You’re going to be okay.”

Ugh. Stupid Mullet and his stupid emotions. Lance just wanted to sleep again. Fighting the water was exhausting. His limbs were already sodden, his brain already soused, but damn it if his heart wasn’t positively on fire when Keith sounded so fiercely sure, so righteously angry, so annoyingly
worried.

“Mhmm,” Lance managed to hum, trying to reassure Keith, and maybe himself. “‘Kay, eer high’nez.”

Something like laughter filled the room around him, which, he would admit, was beginning to feel increasingly far away and foggy (or, maybe, it was just his head that was cloudy— Lance would later learn he was incredibly drugged up at the time), but Lance managed to exhale a stuttered chuckle of his own.

That was nice. It was nice to hear familiar voices, the simple, happy sound of relief and humor filling the otherwise mournful infirmary. Nice enough to let him fall asleep again, not quite as terrified as he thought he’d be of the prospect when he was unsure of when he might wake up again, no real recollection of how he came to be there in the first place, why it hurt to breathe, how long it had even been.

Questions, questions, questions. Answers were still much too far away, like the blip of an island that he might someday backstroke his way towards, but the muscles in his body were so raw, so strained, so beyond the point of usefulness that he would simply have to wait and leave his fate to the stars above, the tides below, and the sea within.

After the third, and the largest leap of consciousness, Lance felt exactly two things.

First, he felt better, generally speaking. His body didn’t ache with the same overwhelming, everything-hurting-so-nothing-hurt sort of dissociation, and his eyelids, finally, felt they were no longer kept closed by weights of seismic proportion. Admittedly, Lance didn’t feel great, he wasn’t up to scrub the tiles in the foyer of his aunt’s house, but he also didn’t feel particularly worse than he usually felt in the mornings when he woke up on the kitchen floor.

(A half-formed question began to form in his mind, mostly expletives at the thought of his aunt, but Lance quickly dismissed it because, simply, there wasn’t fuck he could do about that whole mess right now and worrying about it certainly wasn’t going to help.)

Second, and much more pressing at the moment, Lance’s face felt like it was on fucking fire.

Specifically, his cheek marks.

They were much too bright, Lance could tell even behind his closed lids, which he squeezed tighter through the stabbing discomfort. It was familiar to the sensation from the first night of the ball, when Blue had first led him to the watch and he’d slipped it on his wrist; surely, this was a pain he wouldn’t soon forget. It was being branded all over again, white-hot scorch marks being pressed into corners of his cheekbones, the skin beneath his eye scales molten, the experience maiming, and god it hurts so fucking much.

Overwhelmed as he was by the right and proper agony, Lance hardly noticed himself, his posture (he was sitting up for the first time in almost three days, not that he knew that), only vaguely aware that he was being held by someone, legs touching down on carpeted floors.

His head felt like it was splitting at the seams; it was a small mercy that his voice was too raw to work properly, because Lance was positive he would have been choking on the words if he tried to ask them (there were people around him, he realized for the first time) to stop. Whatever it was, it felt like his blood was expanding like frozen water, cracking and trying to burst through his body, his heart at least six times too big for his body but his lungs far too weak to accommodate the strain.
They were literally torturing him. He’d rather fuck right back off to sleep if this was what on the other side of the ocean. Drowning sounded a hundred times better than this.

Someone kill him. Just not whoever was doing this… whatever this was, to him; someone kill him quickly, please, for christ’s sake.

“...And, there,” a wisp of a voice announced, and like a snap of a whip, his entire extrinsic sense of self shifted, slotted back into place like a setting a broken bone, except, fuck, he had been broken, and his goddamn mind, body, and soul had to be reset.

The first and most panicked thought that crossed his mind came in the form of a single word, a name —

Blue?

Lance felt like he’d choked on ice water, coughing so suddenly and violently it radiated out form his chest in waves, pain cresting over his body to the point his vision began to white and he squeezed his eyes closed again.

He could barely feel Blue at all. No secondary awareness, no weight on his wrist, no confident reassurance in his heart; the only thing that remained, the only evidence that this hadn’t all been a fever dream, was the slight tug at his soul, the faintest of connections tying them together, but the threads were straining, fit to snap at any moment.

She was gone. No. No, no, no — what did this mean? Where did she go?

Did she leave him behind? Did he do something wrong? Did he — did he fail, whatever it was he was meant to do?

“Lance?” A hand gently rested on his shoulder, the voice belonging to… who was it? His head wasn’t making enough sense of things just yet. “Please, can you all take a step back, I need space to check his breathing. His body might be going into shock.”

Several shifts began to happen all at once, movement and weight adjustments and lights brightening behind his squeezed-shut lids.

“It’s his human half, struggling with the quintessence, I think,” another voice said, the one that had released him from the unholy bondage of earlier. Female. Soft, a gentle soprano, and twinged by regret.

Princess Allura?

“Quintessence is regulated by a natural current, a flow that runs through things, people, objects… to use this manner of Altean alchemy to heal him while his body is still in such a state should have essentially flushed out everything in his system, the good and the bad, and accelerated his healing. Some discomfort is to be expected… for Alteans. His human half, however, was likely much more susceptible to the strain of over-exposure. I’m — I’m sorry, I hope... I hope this was the right thing to do.”

Quietly, the familiar voice from earlier spoke, near enough that Lance could sense them moving around him. “Lance, are you able to hear me? It’s Adam, Sir Shiro’s husband. We… well, we really have to stop meeting under these circumstances. Can you understand me?”

“Adam?” He managed, throat no longer raw and ragged. With painstaking slowness, he parted his eyes for what felt like the first time all over again. “Where — what happened?”
Gathered around him, in the forefront, was Adam, his gaze serious as he carefully navigated a stethoscope over Lance’s chest. He was had pulled up a simple, monochromatic chair and was sitting beside Lance in a solitary room, much smaller than the infirmary and with only a single bed.

Behind Adam, Pidge, Hunk, the Princess, Romelle, and Coran were all gathered, their own expressions varying from relieved to happy to tragically unkempt.

“You got blown straight to hell, bud,” Hunk said through a chuckle, not at all masking the fact that he was openly weeping. “B-But, you’re actually awake, finally.”

“Finally…?” Lance repeated, his voice barely above a murmur. “How long…? How did I…?”

Before anyone had the opportunity to answer him, Adam released a significant sigh.

“You’re resting heart rate is ridiculous, but that’s somewhat normal with this sort of… treatment. It should begin to stabilize after a few hours… maybe longer, because you’re not all Altean, but anyways — the important thing is, your breathing is finally improved.”

Leaning back fully in the chair, Adam threw the medical tool over his shoulders, and leveled Lance with a look of utmost seriousness.

“Lance, you suffered third degree burns on about eighteen percent of your body, and your blood oxygen levels were low enough that you almost died. Do you remember anything that happened? It’s been almost two days since the incident.”

The words clattered loudly around in his head, a steel sword swinging into an iron-banded shield, filling his ears with a sharp ringing.

The Altean advisor stepped forward, his tone surprisingly emotional. “My boy, on the last night of the royal ball…”

Sir Coran was slowly approaching him, arms spread hesitantly like he was going to pull Lance into a hug. “There was an explosion, an attempt made against Prince Lotor’s life and — and you saved my life. I owe you, greatly.”

Blinking rapidly, because, shit, his own eyes were starting to itch, Lance’s attention managed to hold on Coran’s face, the wrinkles there pained but worn proudly, like scars after a battle — these were his own marks, ones of perseverance against the unforgiving march of time.

Each time his lids closed, it was like a flash of a vision in the black, and the memories Coran spoke of began to resurface. Fire, heat, yelling, screaming, cracking marble and collapsing columns; earlier, watching a wiry Olkari approach the Galran Prince beneath glittering chandeliers, a hand snatching his wrist, another thrown around his shoulder and guiding him away; and even earlier than that, he remembered being lead into a passageway, backed up into a wall…

“Altea owes you,” the Princess corrected, voice firm but quiet as she too approached the single cot in the room, resting a hand on the advisor’s shoulder. Romelle nodded her agreement from a few paces back. “We are in your debt.”

Lance nodded, but he was scarcely listening. The memories were returning in earnest now, a full picture with all the jigsaws neatly aligned, conversations and threats all resurfacing.

“We can go around in circles all night, love. Feisty thing, aren’t you?”

His throat felt like it was closing up, lungs laboring with the trickle of disgust and mild panic that
began to snake its way around his heart, his ribs, squeezing tighter and tighter for each memory that nigged its way back to the forefront of his consciousness.

*How easily you submitted to Marmora’s little Prince… wouldn’t that make for quite the nasty headline?*

*Marmora’s Prince – that’s your price, isn’t it?*

*Isn’t it?*

Instinctively, Lance glanced down at his wrist, now-bandaged. It throbbed with a different sort of pain, the bone actually bruised as opposed to the burns over his back. He’d begun squeezing his fists together until his knuckles began to pale, eyes narrowed. Unable to help it, his gut twisted and cheeks burned with shame.

“Lotor?” Lance eventually asked, chipping away at the stony silence.

“He’s in about the same condition as you, if not a little better,” Sir Adam supplied, sounding very tired. “That’s something we need to discuss, actually, and part of the reason we agreed that the intensive recovery process would outweigh the steady medical healing. We had to move you to a private room, primarily for this procedure, but it’s also less maddening to work without those vying for a chance to see to the unmasked ‘Blue Paladin’.”

“Oh!” Lance snapped up, wincing as he did so — his burns were still too fresh, the skin grafted too recently for such abrupt movements even with the accelerated healing. “Blue? Where is she? Did you — did I…?”

“She’s fine. Well, she is in the spiritual sense of the word. Her physical form is gone for now, but I’ve been tending to her time piece,” the Princess cut him off before his panic could turn into an outright spiral. “There was physical damage to the watch, I’m afraid, and that is much harder to mend than any human body. It will take, well, ironically, time before she’ll be in a state where you might be able to see her again. I’m sorry.”

A mixture of relief and disappointment tinged the bile already churning in his stomach, the overwhelming information combined with his overall discomfort in his own body, his own skin, almost too much for him to bare, but he was at least grateful to know that she was okay, that he hadn’t — hadn’t failed her.

“Thanks, Princess. I mean that. I don’t think I can be of much help, but let me know if that changes?”

She tilted her head slightly, a smile spreading in response to his words, and offered him a single nod.

“So, what exactly has been happening? Where’s…”

“His Royal Highness?” Adam’s eyes had softened as he walked around the bed, another medical tool in hand that Lance was pretty sure measured blood pressure. He placed the cuff carefully over Lance’s bicep and began to squeeze air into the compressor. “He and Takashi are both in… meetings, I suppose you could call them. There’s been a lot that’s happened in the time you’ve been unconscious, I’m afraid.”

“…Like what?” Lance gulped, betraying his own nerves as the doctor’s focus intensified on the dial. Instead, he looked up and towards the others, Hunk and Pidge most significantly. To say it was difficult not to worry by the grim looks that returned his would be an understatement. “What’s happened?”
Hunk took the dive, ultimately, firming his jaw and coming to sit beside Lance’s bed. Coran stepped up beside him and gave the two a supportive glance and nodded once.

“Shay’s grandmamma – the Balmeran Queen – died as a result of the attack.”

The heaviness with which he spoke was almost a physical thing, a tumor metastasizing in Lance’s chest with each syllable spoken.

Someone – someone died.

Suddenly, he felt much more grateful to be alive, sore and battered though he was.

“I’m so sorry,” Lance offered to no one in particular, but it felt like the right thing to say.

With a sad smile, Hunk nodded. “Me too.”

“As for Prince Keith and Sir Shiro – Princess Allura has been with them almost non-stop except for the permission to do this treatment,” the larger boy stopped to look at the Altean over his shoulder, and she bowed her head graciously in acknowledgement. “It was sort of a trade-off, bud — it’s supposed to help you heal faster, but you’re going to be really, uh, ‘tender’ I guess. And there’s going to be more permanent scarring than if the wounds healed naturally.”

“Which reminds me, you’re not to get out of this bed unless I expressly tell you otherwise. The strain on your stamina will be extreme in the first few days. This sort of procedure is still considered experimental, and for someone of your age and heritage, it’s not exactly what I would ever promote as a viable medical treatment, but there’s been pressure from the other royal courts to get you conscious. Your friends and his Royal Highness agreed that it would be best you be awake sooner rather than later.”

As a reflexive response, Lance adjusted his shoulders and could feel the tightness of the skin of his upper back, almost like a scab that was ready to flake off, or a sunburn that itched to be peeled and reveal the raw flesh beneath. It was covered by some sort of soft, cool gauze that helped to soothe the area and felt sort of breathable.

Permanent scarring, huh?

The thought didn’t disturb him as much as he imagined it would – the damage was already done. An eerie sense of calm followed, but he was resigned to the way of things and appreciated Hunk being honest with him.

“Okay,” Lance said after a long pause, blinking back into focus. Hunk was watching him with a patient, sympathetic look on his face, and Pidge had begun to pace around the foot of the bed. She held his gaze for a moment.

“Well, otherwise, besides you being semi-fucked up, they’ve been interviewing patients as they’ve been discharged to sort of try to rebuild what happened. Between the Galra being pissed and the Balmera’s mourning, the courts are all in a bit of a gridlock. Everyone’s still in the castle, though admittedly Keith isn’t telling us much about what they’re trying to talk about. No surprise there. This is sort of top-security level stuff.”

At this, the Princess crossed an arm over her chest and began to chew at the edge of her thumbnail.

“Yes, about that… One of the reasons the other families and members of Marmora’s councilors endorsed my use of magic to advance your healing was because they’re very interested in hearing what you have to say about what happened that day. Prince Lotor has been awake longer than you,
and I’m afraid his testimony has been… confusing.”

She locked eyes with him, and immediately, Lance felt his blood run cold, the color draining from his face by the almost pitying blue sheen to her gaze. “He’s said that you agreed to dance with him, and that on your way into the third floor ballroom. Moments before you would have danced, there was the explosion, and that’s all he remembers.”

“I find it very convenient that he seemed to forget about fracturing your wrist,” Coran mused, though there was an edge to his tone Lance did not miss as he leaned forward and eyed the bandaging conspicuously. “They’ve asked for my testimony too, of course, but – ”

The advisor didn’t manage to finish whatever it was he was trying to say, as all of them flinched or leapt in some capacity when there was a sudden shouting heard from the hallway, mostly muffled though it was by the door. The sound of reverberating metal and angry voices clashed beyond the granite walls, as if a gaggle of guards had just gotten swept up in a duel just outside the corridor.

“God, not more of this, if it’s the Emperor’s men again I swear…” Sir Adam ground his jaw as he stood up, offering his chair to one of the ladies as he went to the door and slipped into the hallway.

In the subsequent silence, all of them trying to remember where the conversation had left off before the interruption, Lance took the moment to further examine, well, himself. He’d been so focused on getting caught up on the past that he had, effectively, missed the entirety of the present.

His face felt annoyingly greasy, and his hair and body were both was dying for a proper wash, but he wasn’t extremely uncomfortable. In fact, the clothes he had been changed into were blessedly soft, a simple tunic of rich navy-colored cotton and gray, warm pants – both of which he was suspiciously sure he’d seen in Keith’s closet at some point when he poked around for sleep clothes.

The thought made him fluster a bit, and he tightened them a little protectively over his chest.

As he curled into the fabric, he noticed for the first time that there was something like a blanket thrown over his shoulders…?

Oh, quiznak.

It was Keith’s cape, bunched around his shoulder, the heavy fabric a familiar deep ruby and lustrous besides. Lance’s concerns were almost completely forgotten as he ran his fingers over the lush fabric, greedily lifting it a little closer and sucking in a big breath of the familiar smokiness, rough and clean at the same time; refreshing, like spring air, but comfortable like a roaring hearth on a chilly winter morning.

Lance looked up just as Hunk said something, the larger boy latching onto Pidge with wide eyes. “Did you see that?” He shook her shoulders. “What was that?”

A little nervous, Lance bristled and tried to look inconspicuous. Did he maybe just get caught totally drooling over a cape that smelled like Keith? That he’d been presumably cuddling with for the past two days while unconscious?

...okay, maybe. He had been kind of obvious about it.

Still, Lance had to uphold some manner of dignity. He straightened his posture and sent them a both a waspish, “What?”

Beside them, the Princess was scowling, a hand coming to her chin in a look of deep, reflective
thought. Romelle stepped forward, her own bright eyes blinking rapidly.

“Your scales,” she said, sounding slightly awed. A hand traveled to her own face, fingers ghosting over the apples of her cheeks. “They’re glowing.”

Instinctively, Lance reached up to touch one of them, the earlier burning long since passed and instead replaced by just the slightest pulse, barely discernible from the beating of his own heart.

A different sort of heat rushed to his face, turning tomato-red when he realized it must have been an accidental reaction to his earlier thoughts regarding a stupid, mullet-headed Prince.

Lance tried to duck his head, averting his eyes. “It’s — it’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing, you big gay idiot.” Pidge’s entire body practically sagged upon speaking the words; Lance suspected she’d been dying to get them out since the tick he was conscious. “You’ve got the same stupid look on your face that Keith does when he talks about you, and in case you don’t remember, Prince Dumbass kissed you right in the middle of the terrace after dragging you out of the burning building. It was — ”

“Romantic,” Romelle sighed, hands cupped beneath her chin.

Coran turned to her and twirled his mustache in his fingers. “Passionate, I’d say; I saw it up close!”

Nodding, Hunk spared him a sympathetic smile. “It’s the worst kept secret in the whole by now kingdom, buddy.”

Lance rather thought waking up with fire beneath his skin, blood boiling through his eye scales, now sounded like a refreshing alternative, comparable to an invigorating dip in bath water compared to how fucking hot his face felt at that moment.

“I was going to say moronic, but whatever,” the resident gremlin said with a resigned shrug, coming to sit on the side of his bed near his legs. “Any chance of hiding your big secret is out, Blue Paladin.”

Lance’s buzzing panic stilled for a moment. “Oh, shit.”

“Yeah.” Pidge agreed

And then everyone else, in unison, “Yeah…”

Before Lance could even begin to think of the implications of that, on top of the overwhelming chaos of his thoughts as he tried to sort through everything he’d been told in the past fifteen dobosh, the sharp sound of a boot kicking the door open caused them all to jump. Everyone spun in one manner or another towards the awful groan of hinges, whining at their own abuse, and shared in a huge moment of tense silence that followed.

Expression unreadable, chest heaving, greaves grating over the tile floors, black hair, dark eyes, and pale skinned as ever, the Prince stood in the doorway, locking eyes with Lance in a heartbeat.

“Lance?”

His name was said as little more than a laugh, a half-chuckle, a breathless sound of disbelief colored by something so much lovelier than just surprise, rooted far deeper than just concern.

As an aside, Lance took note that Sir Adam was definitely right about his resting heart rate being
erratic, because the current sensation of it *pistoning* in his chest was downright painful, not that such a thing even fucking *mattered*.

The only thing that mattered was getting out of the prison of his pseudo-bed, but he couldn’t, not really — his legs were shaking too much from atrophy and his stamina had been too badly sapped from whatever it was Allura did to heal him. He was rendered a pile of boneless-Lance-goo on the cot.

“Keith,” he managed in response, wishing his legs weren’t so fucking useless and dead so he could actually *go* to him, but he didn’t have to — Keith crossed the room in a half a tick, and he was holding Lance’s face in his hands, and a deficient ache Lance hadn’t realized he even had was suddenly and completely absolved. He could do little but smile and laugh, seeing as Keith had practically bowled Pidge over in his haste, and everyone else joined in at her chagrin.

“You’re both really gay,” the girl huffed as she dusted herself off. Pidge could keep on with her smartass remarks for all Lance cared, because, frankly, how the *fuck* was he supposed to care about anything else — not when Keith was looking at him like he was seeing the rain for the first goddamn time, or the way a flower perks up when they’ve been too long without sunlight.

How had two days of unconsciousness felt like so long? How had he ever thought drowning and letting his limbs give in to the demands of the currents ever be an acceptable end when he would’ve missed this? Christ, Lance felt about ready cry, ready to fall to pieces in his hands.

He dismissed his over-eager sentimentality as a result of the left-over morphine in his system, mixed with the weird headspace of being healed by magic. It was the easier answer, anyway. Easier than accepting that he had been well and truly afraid of dying, and much, *much* easier than admitting he might even, in a weird, hedonistic way, *enjoy* the burn of shame in his gut of everyone worrying about him.

Fuck, he even wanted to feel *guilty*, to have been so helpless and have caused so much concern over the past few days, but… honestly? It really just felt *nice* to be taken care of, to be surrounded by people who seemed genuinely worried about him, who saw real reason to fear that he could have died. Shame pooled in his gut, because he shouldn’t be *happy* about making people *worry*, but… it was reassuring in a strange, warped kind of way, that he was important enough to these people to *justify* that kind of fear.

That he was important enough for Keith, to warrant such a reaction.

“I was — I’ve been — Lance, please never do that to me again.” Keith leaned down and pulled the air straight from Lance’s lungs with his lips, chasing away the latent chill of phantom pneumonia from his chest, the fear of the unknown from his heart. “I thought you were going to *die*.”

Chuckling, he pulled back and flashed Keith a crooked smile. “Listen, I told you, we really need to stop talking about death *every time* we kiss. I’m starting to get concerned you have, like, a death kink or something.”

Off to the side, Hunk had covered his face and Romelle’s each with one of his large hands. “Please, never say ‘death kink’ again, *please*.”

“If you didn’t get so close to dying then I wouldn’t have to bring it up at all,” Keith grumbled, sitting down on the edge of Lance’s bed but turning to face the others. Sir Adam reentered from the hallway a moment later, frowning at Keith.

“Your Highness, just because I haven’t been *in* the meetings doesn’t mean I don’t know what sort of
decisions are being made. You really can’t be here.” He paused, sighing as he shut the door behind him. Resigned and at least a little amused, the knight added, “...for long. And if anyone does ask about it, you were never here.”

“Thank you, Adam. Seriously. And you too, for doing this, Princess.” Keith held each of their gazes for a significant beat of silence before turning back to Lance.

Some of the spark had gone out of his eyes, Lance noticed, but Keith still seemed mostly just relieved. Before he had the chance to speak again, Romelle stepped pointedly forward and reached for the Princess’s hand, pulling her back from the bed.

“I imagine you’re in need of a bit of privacy, your Highness?” Lance didn’t miss the way her grip tightened, almost urgently, over Allura’s.

Lips pursed, the Prince sighed and looked at her gratefully. “Please. Thank you.”

“Don’t touch his bandaging, and after this, Lance needs to rest,” Sir Adam warned, but he offered no further complaint when he stepped back through the doorway and held it open. The rest of them filed out, Hunk and Pidge sending Lance some mixture of knowing-shit-eating-we’re-proud-of-you smirks, Coran a thumbs up, the Princess offered a patient chuckle, and Romelle sent them both beaming, almost adoring smiles. Lance, for his part, felt like he had been smothered with a hot towel, his whole body clammy and growing only hotter as each and every insufferable one of them left the room.

He pulled at his bottom lip with his teeth, unconsciously wrapping his arms around his middle in a self-hug as the door swung closed.

After a moment’s silence, Keith turned to face him properly, a hand creeping forward and finding his. He was, as ever, unbelievably warm.

“There’s so much I want to say that I don’t even know where to start.”

“It’s alright,” Lance squeezed his fingers, pulling a small smile as he looked down at their joined hands. “I should probably go first anyways; it sounds like you’ve been dealing with hell out there because of me. I’m sorry.”

Lance sensed more than he saw Keith edge closer, the slight stiffness of the mattress creaking to accommodate his weight. When the Prince spoke, he sounded almost amused, and unbearably sad.

“You’re apologizing, to me? This is so fucking — ” He paused, laughing a tired, mirthless sound. “So backwards. Lance, you almost died in my castle, because of my mess, and, hell, you’re my citizen. It’s literally my one job to keep you safe and...” sighing, Keith’s hand left his own, coming instead to holding his biceps with a feather-light touch but a pressing sense of urgency. He held Lance in place, apart only by a few inches, but there was something grounding in the motion, almost... not desperate, not exactly... more like, earnest. Like Keith so needed to actually hold him in place, else he might just slip away. A confusing punch of pride and affection and shame bubbled in Lance’s chest again as he thought about the damage he’d done and the hurt that he’d caused.

“Forget about that, it’s not — I don’t want you to feel like you’re responsible for what happened at all.” And quite suddenly, Lance nearly fell forward as Keith tugged him closer, sealing the distance between them with another kiss. Heat poured from the Prince’s lips, and Lance felt like he was trying to devour fire, immediately falling into the sensation.

Admittedly, this was not exactly what Lance had in mind when Keith said he wanted a moment’s
privacy, but, fuck no, he was not complaining.

*Oh well.*

Keith pulled back, but only briefly, long enough to shift one of his hands to hold Lance’s face again. The Prince hadn’t even bothered opening his eyes, and while Lance had opened his own just for a moment, surprised as he was, he quickly fell back into the quiet softness of the Prince’s lips, another kiss pressed into him, the sensation just as searing as before.

“I’m the one who’s sorry —”

And another.

“Not because you’re my citizen —”

And another.

“Not because of the political bullshit —”

And *another.*

“Not because it’s my *duty* to keep you safe —”

Spoken with a pant before he came forward again, this time Lance eagerly meeting him in the middle, twisting forward slightly in the bed as all memory of his injuries and his fears were forgotten.

With difficulty, they separated to breathe, for Keith to form some more words. “It’s because I’m fucking *selfish.*”

Again the Prince dived forward, their lips slotting together for longer than before, a slight groan spilling from his throat when Keith’s lips pulled at his mouth, parting their lips so their tongues met, their breaths sighing together. Almost greedily, Lance could do little but try to keep himself from completely ignoring what Keith was saying in favor of savoring the delicious heat.

“*Selfish?*” Lance managed to pull away. “What do you...?”

In response, Keith’s grip tightened, almost to the point of pain, but it was sort of satisfying, a very *real* sense of being physically present, being *here.* The fingers spread over his face trailed back, tucking a piece of hair (greasy hair, Lance thought to himself dully) behind Lance’s ear, the touch gentle and protective.

“It’s true. I know I should be doing more than just sitting in meetings and getting fucking yelled at by god and country, but that’s basically as useful as I can fucking be. I know I should be mourning for the Balmeran Queen and worried about my citizens and figuring out how the fuck all of this even happened, but honestly, all I’ve been able to think about has been *you.*”

Quietly, after a heavy pause, Keith managed a few more words. He leaned his forehead into Lance’s and squeezed his eyes closed even tighter.

“I had to imagine telling your family that you died... I don’t know if I could have even gone through with it, if it came to that. There’s been no consoling Princess Tylivia because she basically *idolizes* you. I found her crying in the hallway outside her parents room last night. She couldn’t sleep because she’s been having nightmares. People have been scared. Hunk and Pidge have barely been sleeping. Shiro’s more worried than he’ll ever admit, and Adam basically hasn’t sat down in the past two days. I just — I just needed to see you again. To know that you were okay.”
His last words were spoken quickly, and Lance could barely hear them over his own thundering heart, deafening in his ears.

“Now that I’ve had you, I literally can’t fucking stand not having you, ever again.”

He watched Keith’s complexion darken, degree by degree, scowling at the empty space between their chests, where his hand rested over Lance’s arm — basically anywhere that wasn’t Lance’s eye. (That was probably for the best, because Lance was probably burned scarlet all the way up to his ears, too.)

“K-Keith,” he stuttered out, not usually one to be without something to say, but the Prince’s shocking sincerity and the warmth of his words, his lips, had rendered Lance’s mouth practically useless. Momentarily stalling, he pulled back so that Keith had to look at him, this time being the one to hold Keith’s face in place.

He needed to know that Lance wasn’t upset with him. That this wasn’t his fault, even as the waves of guilt and relief and fear rolled off him.

“You’re okay — all of that, it’s okay to feel that way. You don’t have to apologize for anything that happened, and you definitely don’t have to apologize for how you feel, either. If you feel a certain way, you feel a certain way, you can’t help that. I am sorry that I made you worry, but I’m not sorry that it happened — like, yeah, of course I wish I hadn’t nearly got blown up, but I’m alive, and you’re alive, and that’s ultimately what matters, right? Hunk said I’m going to have a nasty scar on my back, but a scar’s a scar, like how Shiro’s prosthetic is still his arm. You don’t stop being yourself after something like this. We’re still the same as we were, uh, two days ago I guess. It doesn’t feel like that long to me since I’ve been out, but, yeah.”

Uncertainty flickered in the dark amaranthine sheen of his gaze, but Lance kept his hold on the Prince’s cheeks firm. This was important.

“People might expect you to be perfect, but there’s no way to be perfect.” Lance paused for a thoughtful moment, brow dipping slightly. “No one is perfect. We just do the best we can with what we have, and if your focus got a little messed up because you were worried about me, that’s not, like, grounds for martyrdom. You’re doing your best, right? Then that’s plenty. Not selfish at all.”

With a little laugh, Lance finally backed away enough to see Keith properly, watching a warm pink paint his cheeks. Lance let go of his face, making a mental note that the Prince was really fucking cute when he was flustered.

“You might be a Prince, but you’re a person first. You’ve got feelings just like anyone else.”

Keith continued to study him, his attention shifting from one of Lance’s eyes to the other, back and forth for several seconds when he finally released a long, drawn-out sigh and looked down at his lap. However, Lance noted with a little flush of pride, that the Prince was at least smiling.

“This isn’t the first time you’ve done this, you know.” Keith said, almost absent-mindedly, like they weren’t sitting in some sort of pseudo-operating-room, but back in his goliathan bed, hands intertwined lazily over Lance’s stomach. It was almost too easy to envision it, so much so that it could be easy to be disappointed that it wasn’t real; that if Lance just closed his eyes, he could imagine the softness of the cloak thrown over his shoulders being the silken sheets, the warmth tingling over his body, pooling however stubbornly in his stomach, could have been from more than just a little heated kissing.

Keith’s voice pulled him back from his at-least-M-rated daydreams. “It’s like the night I came to see
you, uh, and asked you to come to the ball. I was actually really nervous and still pretty angry about that whole thing at Hunk’s, and you ended up making sure I was okay. I was supposed to be making sure you didn’t hate me.”


Keith rolled his eyes, and it was a welcome, familiar sight. “Is that so?”

“Yup.”

Both brows raised, Keith twisted a little forward so he had one leg on the bed, the other resting over the side. The angle was a little unnatural, but he didn’t look especially uncomfortable.

“Hmm.”

Then, twice as fast, and at least ten-times as lustful, Keith wretched Lance forward into a bruising kiss, mouth literally tasting more like flames with each bit oxygen stolen from his lungs. There was no subtly, no tentative permission, no gentle apologies broken by breaths of air — it was almost dangerous how good, how right it felt. Keith could kiss him a hundred times, in a hundred thousand lifetimes, and it would still make him weak in his fucking knees, his head foggy with his borrowed heat, his skin tingling with the force of his grip.

A small voice in his head reminded him: he was tired. His body was physically worn down, and his mind was pretty spent, too.

Sir Adam said he should rest.

Lance couldn’t find a single fuck to give.

There were a few single steady thoughts that passed through his stream of consciousness, a scrambled string of words that managed to puncture through the overwhelming buzz of thrilling touch. It was the only thing that wasn’t hot exhales or the electrifying bite against his lower lip, the soft pad of warm hands exploring his neck, shoulders, arms, resting finally on his hips — never, he noticed, getting anywhere near his back.

Fuck, I love him. I’m so fucking in love with him.

His mind chanted, each word practically begging to materialize from the tip of his tongue, but every chance for a syllable to slip out was swallowed by Keith’s own eagerness, and Lance’s will and nerve only fell further apart at each touch, each slight groan, each breathless gasp before it became so much that he was dizzy.

When Keith finally pushed himself away, Lance falling back onto the bed with a little oof — when did he start leaning forward? — it was at least a nice boost for his ego to see that the Prince looked almost as blissed-out as Lance felt, flushed and breathing heavily.

“You were saying something,” Keith managed to smirk, asshole that he was, “About hating me?”

Lance swore if it got any warmer in that room he would probably start to suffer even more third-degree burns. “S-Shut up.”

At long last, some of the brightness that had colored their brief moment faded as Keith glanced at his watch. “I think I need to go. I’m — fuck, I didn’t even get to really tell you anything. About what’s going on out there, I mean.”
Sighing, the Prince pushed himself to standing but turned back to the bed. “There’s one more thing that you really need to know, it’s about Emperor Zarkon.”

“Oh. Um, sure. What is it?”

“The Galra were the ones responsible for the attack. We know that they did it, but we’re trying to gather sufficient evidence to prove beyond any doubt that it was Zarkon who tried to kill Lotor.”

Lance blinked rapidly, watching Keith’s frown and waiting for him to say *sike* or something of that effect. When no punchline came, he shook his head. “W-Wait, what? The Emperor tried to kill his son? *Why*?”

“It’s complicated, and I promise to explain it better later, but what’s really important — what’s *really* important is that Zarkon was careless. He didn’t account for so much to go wrong, and now he’s desperately trying to cover his tracks.” Keith paused, presumably gathering his thoughts, and Lance might never admit it, but he would have been lying if he said there wasn’t a certain admiration he had for Keith’s ability to switch between his roles and responsibilities so fluidly.

He hardly seemed the same red-faced, vulnerable but somehow maddeningly smug teenager as before, but every part the Marmoran Prince, calculated and skeptical. The first one was the Keith he was more familiar with, but this other Keith, the Prince, that was the one everyone else saw all day long. He had an air of imperialitiy around him that was… fitting, actually. It wasn’t that it was flashy, not at all — rather, this part of his personality was *demanding* of respect and attention.

What?! *No*, Lance did *not* think it was sexy.


Nope. No way.

“To make a long story short, the Blue Paladin was a convenient target for the Galran to blame. We’re still hosting the other courts for the time being, and we probably will be until someone is held accountable for the Balmeran Queen’s death. We’re trying to keep the rumors from leaking outside the castle, but the longer things go, the more difficult that gets. I’d be surprised if Pidge and Hunk hadn’t heard whisperings yet, but the point is, do not confirm or deny anything. Don’t talk to anyone you don’t absolutely trust, and even then, it might be best to just avoid the topic altogether. The less people involved, the better, and the faster we can finally pin this down on Zarkon.”

“Oh… so… I’m being, like, accused for murder?” Lance almost laughed at how casual that sounded. For some reason, with all the craziness his life had taken to lately, such a claim didn’t feel all that outrageous.

Keith nodded. “Essentially, yeah. But it’s obviously a weak lead and Zarkon is grasping at straws.”

“Adam mentioned something about that earlier, though I didn’t realize…” Lance wrinkled his nose. Things had really turned into such a mess, hadn’t they?

In spite of however little Lance felt like he deserved it, Keith sent him a small smile. It made the sharpness of his features that much more prominent, more annoyingly rugged and handsome. What a jerk, going and looking so fucking good all the time, especially when Lance hadn’t washed in days. Lance had to resist the urge to sigh at his own frustrations.

“My Mom and Shiro and I are working on getting something figured out. For now though, just be patient a little longer? I’ll fix this.”
Damn him, making Lance grin so wide that his cheeks actually began to hurt. Unfair royal jerk with his stupid, soft mullet that Lance definitely did not find incredibly satisfying to run his hands through. Absolutely. Unfair. Lance shoved Keith away lightly after the Prince annoyingly stole another quick kiss, and Lance made sure to remind him smartly of where he could find the door.

“Fine, fine. There’s testimony being gathered right now… so much… testimony.” The Prince paused, his hand on the doorknob with a distant look in his eye. “And after you rest a little more, it’ll be your turn. Everyone really wants to hear your side of the story, except, incidentally, the Galra. Which is why we have your room so heavily guarded. Anyway.”

He sighed and shook his head, and Lance grumbled and shooed him away. Keith could get the fuck out of here with that smug little smirk — was he trying to give Lance a fucking heart attack?

[KEITH]

Keith knew that, when it came to qualities befitting a King, he came up a little short of the ideal. Don’t misunderstand; the Prince recognized his own strengths, too, like being able to take command, strategize, act decisively. One of those strengths was recognizing his own weaknesses: he was quick-to-anger, preferred resolute action over drawn out diplomacy, and, more recently, he had developed a very exploitable weakness when it came to anything pertaining to a certain pair of blue eyes, a certain bright laugh.

All of this amounted to the same thing, that is, the Prince of Marmora was not exactly shaping up to be the next-best-friend to the nobility of the realm.

That was part of the Marmoran legacy, though. They were never known for rubbing elbows particularly well with those at the top. For his Mother, and then her Father, and his Father before him, the blood of the royal line had long played a delicate game between satisfying the wealthy while looking after the poor. Marmora’s intrastate affairs, educational infrastructure, and criminal reformat programs were unrivaled against those of the other nations; even Altea, whose money was “better spent” on technological and scientific advancements, fell leagues behind on the social welfare of their own people.

Sometimes, one generation would lean a little too heavily in the favor of the nobles, and another towards the commonfolk, but overall – for at least two hundred years or so – the balance had been fairly stable. Any fluctuation in that system was balanced out by the Council’s proposals of how the manage the remainder of the kingdom: if the nobility did not pay enough in taxes to support the large state of social welfare that Marmora promised its’ citizens, the Master of Coin and Master of Labor would work to make sure wages stayed high enough to bolster the economy; the same could be said of the reverse, to make sure relationships with the nobility remained favorable, the Master of Defense and Masters of Foreign Affairs would do their best to work with the estate owners to support their personal holdings and grant flexible dealings with incoming and outgoing tariffs to those who were also industrialists (which, seeing as these were the richest men and women in the country, most were).

It was Keith’s turn to uphold this equilibrium, but, then, enter one single half-Altean teenager, and
suddenly the entire kingdom was turned on its’ head.

Within the Council chambers, at least in the eyes of some of the more traditional members of the various courts, Keith had become his own worst enemy. He couldn’t comment very much on the subject of Lance without being regarded by the Galra, some of the Alteans, and even his own courtiers, as an abject progressive, or a rebellious, impassioned teenager. To them, he was the prince with a foolish heart, who, instead of just taking the servant as a consort – ugh – he went and developed feelings, like it was the most criminal act imaginable. He was denigrated as someone who was biased and could not see reason.

And guess what?

Keith didn’t give one single fuck.

After the incident, in the moments leading up to the explosion, when his every nerve and instinct had screamed at him that something was wrong, Keith had ignored it in favor of the bigger picture. He had made it a personal decision that night to disregard the fact that he could have done something to prevent someone he cared about getting hurt, buried his instincts six-feet-under, and left them in an unmarked grave of doubt. And for what? Fucking nothing.

Lance ended up hurt, almost dead, anyways.

Those same instincts were tested when it came to how to conduct himself in the aftermath. The Prince been so fucking tired yesterday, honestly, he didn’t even mean to fall asleep beside Lance in that awkward little sliver of infirmary-bedding. Rational thought was the farthest thing from Keith’s mind when he wandered to the fifth floor, sat down next to Lance, played with his frigid fingers until they started to grow warm under his touch; who cared about consequences, when he was counting the freckles over the tip of Lance’s nose while Hunk and Pidge fell asleep in the chairs around them.

Keith had been acting on instinct then, and it just felt so right. And, besides, there had already been rumors he’d more or less avoided about kissing Lance, castle burning behind him, but after publicly visiting him in the infirmary and literally falling asleep beside him, there really wasn’t much Keith could do to dodge the subject any longer.

It was the first issue brought to the Council’s attention that morning, and the Prince wasn’t going to deny a single fucking thing; Lance deserved better than that. Lance should never have gotten caught up in any of politics, and if Keith had been honest from the beginning, none of this would have happened.

So again, and Keith really can’t overstate this – fuck the consequences.

(See, as the future King, this is what he meant by strengths and weaknesses: that wasn’t exactly the best mindset to have when ruling a sovereign nation, but… just this once, okay? Just this once, let Keith worry about the consequences after, not before.)

What this all really meant, when it came right down to it, was that Keith couldn’t act as an unbiased character in Lance’s defense. No fucking problem. Keith was biased, and for once in his fucking life, he was ready to use his unique position of power for his own selfish gain – sue him. He was prepared to fight tooth-and-fucking-nail to make this right.

That was what brought him here, to a tense Council chamber, lines drawn and the realm divided.

It had been six hours, give or take, since the Prince had snuck away to the the fifth floor to find Lance awake.
Sir Adam had stopped in a little over an hour ago to update the Council on the condition of the remaining patients – Lance, two older women, and another young man were the only ones who had not yet been discharged. The man and one of the women were still suffering from respiratory problems, and the other woman was having fainting spells when she stood for too long, so Adam was keeping them for observation. As for Lance, he was still resting, but Adam had informed them that his condition had improved markedly.

It was small moments like those that helped to remind the Prince that things could have been much, much worse. There could have been complications from the initial injuries, Lance could have been angry that they’d elected to speed up his recovery without his consent, hell, Adam could have taken up a profession outside of medicine; having the connection of a brother-in-law, rather than a random castle physician, attending to the patients added something to Keith’s peace of mind. A doctor was a doctor and, sure, they would care for the hurt or wounded but – but knowing how competent Adam was, how loyal and committed he was to doing absolutely everything he could for his patients, it was something Keith did not take for granted. All in all, those small gratitudes amounted to making everything in his post-incident nightmare just a little bit easier, and right now, Keith was willing to take whatever bones the universe might throw him.

The sharpness of his mother’s voice roused him from his daydreaming, bringing him back to the Council chamber for the umpteenth time that day.

“No, Emperor. What you are suggesting is essentially palen-bol, and that is not an option.” The Queen said in a tone not totally unlike poison — steady and lethal.

The Prince had taken to looking out the window across the way, over King Alfor’s shoulder between his seat that neighbored Sir Coran’s. It had long since grown dark, and a quick glance at the red timepiece on his wrist told him it was nearly ten in the evening. They weren’t even close to being done for the night.

Sitting high over her folded hands, situated neatly on the table, his Mother cast a stern look around the room. “If there are no additional suggestions to cross-examination methods, then we’ll move on.”

The Galran Emperor bristled, leering between her and Keith. “You’re not even going to hear any of the other kingdoms say on this matter? How can you make unilateral decisions for them all?” His claws formed fists over the table. “And all for a peasant, no less. Your son first, and now you too? You shame our race, Queen Krolia.”

The Queen’s eyes narrowed slightly, meeting Zarkon glare-for-glare. It was the sort of look that would have greater men on their knees, a look that pricked at the hairs on the back of your neck that warned, danger, danger, danger.

See, as Queen Krolia, Keith knew the woman was a force to be reckoned with. She could be pretty intense when she wanted to be, particularly when it came to the concern of her citizen’s safety. She was, in a word, protective. Keith probably inherited that from her.

But that was just as the Queen. As Keith’s Mother? She took, well, let’s call it a special interest in Lance (read: my son finally found someone to make him happy so you better fucking step off), so…

Let it suffice to say she had never seemed so intimidating.

“Perhaps,” the Queen levied, almost amusingly. “Or perhaps you are the one to shame our people, Emperor. Is it so unbelievable that I would rather give every citizen due process instead of immediately jumping to – what you’re suggesting – advanced interrogation tactics? We haven’t even heard him speak yet.”
A pause, and the Emperor’s contempt became only more apparent. His soulfire eyes glowed a dangerous shade of violet, practically aflame beneath his ceremonial helmet, but he and the rest of the room remained quiet.

“We will not speak on this any longer. Marmora controls the trade routes,” she said simply, not a fuck given to the tension palpable in the room as she waved around their trade relations around like a bargaining chip. “If I wanted, all of our economies could simultaneously grind to a halt. I just have to give the word. Is that what you want, Emperor? Because that will be the cost of your suggestion.”

Silence.

“Good. Moving on, then,” she pulled forward a piece of parchment from a rather large pile to her right, glaring at the words scribed there. “Prince Lotor’s testimony…”

And again, Keith had difficulty reigning in his attention, almost immediately glazing over at the mention of the Galran Prince.

Lotor had undergone the same quintessence treatment as Lance, essentially, but at the hands of Zarkon’s witch – his injuries had been spread over more of his body but were essentially less severe compared to Lance’s, and he was already cleared to leave the fifth floor. As such, he’d given his testimony a few hours earlier, and it was very Lotorian, if Keith dared call it such a thing. Meaning, it was the same as Coran’s testimony, only that it was ten-times douchier, and he cast himself as the most harrowed victim imaginable. To Keith’s surprise, the Prince did not paint Lance in any sort of unbecoming, lascivious light, but he was also incredibly vague over what it was they talked about before Coran showed up, before they exited the hallway and entered the third floor ballroom.

“I asked if he was enjoying the company he’d made at the Ball. He revealed that he had, very much so, though he was indirect in answering. After, I asked him to dance, and he agreed.”

Keith considered asking him if he had anything to say about Lance’s fractured wrist, but decided against it. The most important thing at that moment was making sure that Lance was cleared of any suspicion – Lotor would pay his dues soon.

Just, maybe, as fate would have it, not soon enough.

“...the hope is that the young man’s testimony will give us a bit more insight as to the nature of the device that triggered the explosion. McClain was reportedly turned away at the time of detonation, but seeing as Sir Adam’s report of the young man’s burn patterns is consistent with the leading theory that he jumped in front of the detonator… Shiro, where are the scientists on…”

“They’ve made some headway, more now that Puig is lending their support.” He smiled gratefully towards Puig’s King and Queen, but there was an edge of exasperation behind his tone. Keith knew exactly why: all of the realms had insisted on access to their spare research facilities to do examinations of their own on the chemical substances to make sure there was no tampering being done, and that had slowed down everything to an agonizing pace. Of course, Keith could see the merit in having all reconnaissance be done publicly – so no side manipulates any of the information in such a way that strictly benefits or implicates another – which is why it was so risky for Keith to have visited Lance earlier. (That is, in seeing Lance privately, he ran a risk of being accused of “priming” Lance on what to say during his testimony, but, like, fuck that? The ongoing investigation was the absolute last of his concerns when it came to being in that room with Lance, and, give Keith some credit, he was a trained Blade; he had not been followed.)

Diplomacy was annoying. His head was starting to ache, like there was a considerably small and unbelievably annoying little nag in the back of his head. It was steady, metronomic almost, slower
than his pulse and faster than his breathing — it was internal, though, and his tired brain chalked it up to an oncoming migraine.

“...offered to host the Olkari, your Majesty,” said one Arusian official down the aisle from where Keith sat. He didn’t turn, but tuned in more pointedly. “If there is any backlash in the insurgent occupied regions, they’ll have amnesty in our borders. And in the event that we have to take an extended recess and return to our respective states —” She paused significantly, all gazes in one way or another shifting to Zarkon, who had made it very clear that morning that such a recess would not be acceptable, before continuing. “Um, the asylum-seekers will be permitted temporary citizenship otherwise. As the farthest away from the insurgents in their territory, it only makes sense.”

“Thank you, Inta,” Arus’s king praised. “Of course, that is less than ideal but we have great faith it will not come to that.”

The tiny man smiled at both Keith and his Mother, somewhat to the Prince’s surprise. They didn’t have poor relations with the Arusians, per say, but Keith was not oblivious to the way the others nations looked at Marmora; Arus, Puig, and even Balmera and Altea to an extent, often saw Marmora and Daibazaal as military states and ruthless tacticians, cut from the same blood-soaked cloth. It was probably on account of the lineage of Galran heritage that ran through both thrones; Keith supposed there was some truth to that. After all, their respective national creeds were “Knowledge or Death,” and “Victory or Death.” With mantras like those, both countries had fated themselves to an inescapable amount of perfunctory ill-repute, ruthless in their respect doctrines.

That being said, the Arusian King’s open and genuine expression took Keith by surprise. Perhaps it was a demonstration that times were changing, after all; that being Galra could mean something to the rest of the world besides spilt blood and a thirst for power.

Just as the Queen began to speak again, the room stilled in response to a firm knock-knock on the outer chamber door.

A head poked in a moment later, attached to one of the guards set to stand outside the Council Chamber. “Excuse me, Regis is here. They say it’s urgent.”

Out of the corner of his eye, the Prince noticed Kolivan’s body language shift slightly, his gaze lowering with something akin to suspicion.

“Bring him in,” the Queen advised, and the door opened just a bit wider to allow Regis to slip through. He strode forward so he was in the center of their rigid ‘U’ of meeting tables and bowed respectfully at the maybe nobles and royals lining the room.

“My sincerest apologies for the intrusion,” he began, and Keith recognized just the faintest edge to Regis’s usual stoicism – the sort of thing no one but he, his Mother and Kolivan would take note of. The man’s mask was also up, which was not typical protocol in the castle unless the Blades were actively training. Both factors added together led to a sinking feeling in Keith’s stomach, his senses snapping to attention.

“But the patient and witness, Lance McClain, who has been under the care of Dr. Wright, is currently being discharged.”

Keith didn’t realize he was leaning forward in his seat until a solid thirty seconds had passed, no one in the room having said a word, the nobles and council holding their breath as they waited for Regis to continue, but that, apparently, was the extent of his report. Shiro took the initiative to finally try to wrangle what exactly that could possibly, because, Lance couldn’t be discharged in the state he was in, even if he wanted to leave; Adam would never allow it.
“What… do you mean? He can’t be – has there been a misunderstanding? What was Sir Adam’s recommendation?”

“Of course,” Regis betrayed no emotion. “Dr. Wright has strongly advised against this action, but the young man’s legal guardian has stated that they will not endorse treatment at this time. She has requested his immediate release into her care.”

Under his breath, Keith muttered a string of curses, because he knew exactly who she must be.

“He lives with his Aunt,” the Prince supplied, mollifying some of the confusion amongst his so-called peers. “Though I’m fairly certain the familial title is just for convenience. Either way, it is the Valurian family just outside the Eastern city that is here for him. I’m sure of it.”

“That is correct,” Regis affirmed, his tone taking on a note of urgency. “On a related note, the youngest Master Holt had to be restrained when the altercation nearly became physical, so both parties have been kept on site, separated by guards for the time being. Should we move them to detention cells?”

Keith swore he heard Shiro almost start to laugh, but the knight caught himself at the last moment. The image of Pidge literally trying to fight someone — Lance’s aunt, no less, who was probably a foot taller than Keith, and who knows how much height she had on Pidge — was a pretty funny thought.

“No, please, that’s not necessary,” the Queen said, sounding a bit amused herself. “I’m sure it’s just a misunderstanding — please explain to Lady Valurian the circumstances that are keeping her nephew present and invite her to stay in the castle, if she so wishes, until these matters are resolved.”

The blade shifted, his voice turned almost wary. “Of course, your Majesty — the issue is just that — well, Puig’s Princess is in the atrium as well. I’m afraid she’s having a bit of an… episode?”

The Puigian King sprang up from his seat so quickly, the table shook. “What do you mean? Is she in danger?”

“No, no,” Regis assured, turning to face the Puigian King and lowering his posture respectfully. “Your Majesty, the young Princess is just upset. I believe… well…”

Yelling came from the hallway, and Regis tensed as his voice trailed off. The Prince frowned at the door, a concerned mutter breaking over the already tense room, his own ears straining for some sort of inclination as to what was the cause of the ruckus. It sounded familiar, but not quite – an alto set to just the wrong pitch, off-key in the subtlest, most irritating sort of way.

It sort of sounded like…

“I swear to fucking god – ”

Several of the older members of the Council cringed. Keith and Shiro caught each other’s gaze, the latter mouthing a name.

Pidge?

A bodily crash, consisting of all of the 147 cm that was Katie Holt, rammed through the Council doors, amber eyes wild and sharper than Keith had ever seen them before.

“Fucking Christ – oh, just, yell at me later, Shiro.” She snapped at the knight, who did in fact wince at her use of language. Barely taking time to inhale, Pidge took a few determined steps forward and
kept her gaze trained on Keith and the Queen.

“You were being detained by – how did you…?” Regis turned to the door, momentarily stunned, but Pidge ignored him completely.

“Excuse me, sorry folks, it’s just – his Aunt. She won’t listen to anyone; she’s literally trying to drag him out of the building. Sir Adam is, he’s trying to stop her, but he can’t, and the guards can’t get near anyone because of some legal bullshit. Princess Tylivia is…”

Pidge broke off, wheeling around on her heel and meeting the pale-faced expression of the Puigian King. “She’s fine, your Majesty, but freaking out. And Lady Valurian,” the name was spoken with a sneer, “is pissed, and yelling at everyone, and Lance is barely even awake and

– and, just, it might be best if some of you just come down here, please? I think she’d respond better, to like, royals. And, uh, hurry, if you can?”

Now, remember what Keith said earlier, about following his instincts from here on out?

Well.

You can take three guesses, if you really think you’ll need that many, to imagine exactly what Keith did at that moment.

Go on, now.

Guess.

…

Keith supposed he had gotten to his feet at some point, as everyone else in the room was standing, sans his Mother. He also supposed he must have said something, because his mouth moved, and words came out. They probably weren’t elegant, if he was being honest. He was never as great an orator as he probably should have been, considering the many long hours of tutoring he’d spent on the very subject. It didn’t matter. Honestly, he didn’t even fucking remember any of that. Shiro would tell him about it later.

Really, to the Prince, it felt like he had scarcely blinked, and he was at the stairs leading into the main atrium of the castle, lungs winded and muscles thrumming as he took them two at a time.

In an odd contrast to the nerves and stress that pulsed angrily beneath his skin, the first thing Keith really noticed was that, simply, the front doors were open. They were grand, dark wooden structures with heavy brass detailing, at least fifteen meters tall, and outside there were small slivers of light spilling across the castle grounds. Though it was not yet November, Keith could see Marmora’s first snow had begun to fall.

For just a second, just long enough for him to catch his breath, Keith watched a few flakes drift down to the earth. It was a strangely peaceful moment, considering the mess he’d just walked into.

Quickly shaking back into his senses, the Prince maneuvered his way through the small gathering of guards and knights and Blades that had converged on the scene, taking note of several nobles who looked down from the open second floor landings.

The first person Keith spotted was Adam.

And oh, did he look murderous.
It might have actually been funny, considering the doctor and Shiro’s “better half,” as they say, was a typically sharp-tongued but otherwise well-meaning individual, but today seemed the exception to such a rule.

Next, he saw Lance and the Puigian Princess, and Keith tried to ignore the fact that his heart-rate jumped in response.

The operative word being tried to ignore, because, honestly, what the fuck? How dare Lance ever interact with children? It was too fucking cute. Keith didn’t even like cute things, they’d never really been his metaphorical cup of tea, but you put Lance and Princess Tylivia together and suddenly Keith was motherfucking putty. Now he all he could think about was how good Lance seemed with kids, how right and natural he always was around Tylivia, and fuck he wasn’t even paying attention anymore.

Lance was standing – well, no, crouching – in center of the grand atrium hallway, looking a little rumpled and sleepy, and perhaps even a bit embarrassed. His hair was sticking up slightly, and his clothes were pressed at odd angles (which just made it all fucking worse, because, seriously? Bed head? At a time like this? It was all too much.) His eyelids seemed heavy under the bright ceiling chandeliers, blinking a little deliberately. He didn’t even seem to notice any of the people crowding the hallway, favoring the attention of the young royal standing in front of him.

Lance whispered quiet words that were meant for no one but the two of them and wore his usual breezy smile, and she nodded along to whatever he was saying with an occasional sniffle, rubbing her nose and eyes.

If you were to judge the situation solely by the little moment shared between the two, you would have spectacularly misread the room.

“He’s my ward,” a voice demanded, shrill and abrasive. “You have no authority to keep him here against my word as his legal guardian!”

Adam’s voice came next, the model of frustration. “It would be medical endangerment, ma’am, so please, while that is usually the case, you are not able to leave with him at this time!”

“And why not? Is he under arrest? Or have you already sentenced him to hang?”

A snap of silence followed her harsh choice of words, and everyone in the hall was struck silent – except Lance and Tylivia, the latter of whom just released a feeble giggle at something he said.

The woman continued. “No? Then don’t get my hopes up like that, Sir. It’s rude to mislead a Lady. He’s my charge and we’ll be going now. Lance, let her Royal Highness return to her affairs.”

The teen’s expression soured, but Lance said nothing as he stood up properly. He placed a gentle hand on top of Princess Tylivia’s tousled dark hair, only to draw back quickly when the Puigian guards nearby lurched forward. The little girl spun around with a glare ready for the infringing sentries, but her expression cleared like sunshine breaking through the clouds on a stormy day after her gaze fell to the crowd.

“Taaaaaaaaananḍri!”

The Puigian King had elbowed his way to the front, and he knelt down dramatically as the little girl ran to him, mahogany-colored pigtails bouncing with each hurried step until she leapt into his arms. (When had he even gotten here? Keith hadn’t even realized that he’d beat every other person from the Council chamber down to the entrance hall, the others only now starting to descend to the stairs
behind him.)

“Taṇḍri! Taṇḍri, the mean lady — the mean lady is trying to take away my Lue!”

Bewildered, the King scooped her up and looked around at the scene. “Your what, darling?”

A waterfall of sparkly tears lined her big, emerald eyes, but they didn’t slide down her cheeks. “M-My friend! Blue! L-Lance! He is my fr-friend and – and — !”

Lady Valurian interrupted, stepping towards the father-daughter duo with a smile so oily Keith was overcome by the desire to wash his hands, like he’d run his fingers through grease.

“Your Majesty – my deepest apologies. I was simply trying to keep my troubled servant here,” she paused, shooting Lance a glare, to which he simply returned a raised brow. “From wasting any more of the kingdom’s time and resources. But your dear, sweet daughter has grown unusually fond of him, and I do apologize if he’s been a bother. Forgive us.”

She made a point of bowing low at Puig’s King.

“Show the King and her Highness some respect, boy!” Lady Valurian barked, reaching behind her and grabbing Lance’s arm while she did so, and, with a quick jerk, she wretched him down so he was almost on his knees.

Keith could actually hear Adam’s jaw click shut with how hard he clenched his teeth at that.

“Your concern for the kingdom is noted,” the knight said. “But the fact of the matter is you cannot take him with you. We have no intention of charging you any sort of bill, and it is my duty to make sure he is okay. Lance is not spending any resources unnecessarily. I want to help him.”

Lance glanced up, and Keith thought he saw a small, grateful smile flicker on his face before his aunt spoke up again.

“Thank you, Sir, but I’m sure it is only your duty to help those in need. I am not taking him against his will. He wants to go home – that’s where he belongs, and – ”

Lance cleared his throat, speaking up for the first time. “Actually, uh, I’d really rather – ”

Whatever it was Lance would rather do remained unsaid, as his aunt spun in place and raised her hand.

And then, in a single fluid motion, she struck him.

Right in the middle of the hall.

With all eyes on them.

The main entrance of the castle had never been as quiet as it was in the next few seconds.

…

It was his aunt who decidedly broke the silence, whispering harshly.

“I told you not to say a word until we were home! You have no idea – no idea what sort of trouble you’re in already. Not another word, Lance.”

Now, if you were familiar with Keith Kogane at all, you would know he was known to get… mad,
on occasion. Losing a sparring match in which he tried really hard; anyone speaking ill of Shiro because of his prosthetic; finding out Lance had been locked in his aunt’s basement for two days straight; and oh, yes, he’d been quite upset when he’d heard Lotor talk about Lance like he was a little toy, a viable candidate for one of his consorts.

But all of that? It was nothing compared to this feeling.

“Enough.”

The word was spoken in voice of corrosive acid, and people practically leapt out of his way to avoid getting burned; to say the Prince was angry would be a genuine insult. Mere anger was so far beneath the league of his present ire that the two truly feelings couldn’t even be compared.

Throw out your fucking thesaurus and burn your goddamn dictionary, because there were no words for this.

Lady Valurian turned in place, looking supremely superior for all of two seconds before she met Keith’s gaze; whatever she saw there sobered her up pretty fucking quickly.

Keith got right to the point, keeping his attention on entirely on the woman in front of him. “Hira Valurian, what are you doing here?”

“Your Highness! How wonderful to – ”

“Save your breath.” His tone was darker than midnight’s hour upon a new moon; this Beelzebub of a woman had lost the right to basic niceties a long time ago. “I have no care of what legal precedence you think you have, but Lance is not leaving this castle with you. You speak about wasting our time – what do you call this, then, if not wasting mine and everyone else’s? Your disruption has called away the head physician from the infirmary, drawn out nearly every royal in the castle, and interrupted every manner of guard, Blade, and soldier from attending to their duties… Unless you are here to contribute something to the investigation, then I’ll give you five seconds to get out, or my guards will place you under arrest.”

The woman looked like she incurred some manner of whiplash, which the Prince would admit to finding at least a little satisfying. He was aware of the weight of Lance’s stare beside her, but Keith was determined not to break eye contact with the ghostly pale complexion of the “Lady” across from him.

She took several moments to compose herself, but when she spoke, her voice had taken a on healthy dosage of humility.

“I… see.” Pausing, she narrowed her eyes to the point that they were merely slits. “I beg your pardon, your Highness. It is clear that you are a… benevolent ruler, to express such concern for the well-being of a servant… But your concern, I’m afraid, is misplaced.”

“Oh, and why’s that?” Pidge snapped, somewhere to Keith’s left. “Because you see such little value in him? Because you treat him with no self-respect? Because…”

Lady Valurian’s neck snapped up in Pidge’s direction. Her words lashed, a leather whip over a silent audience. “Don’t be naïve, Holt. I almost envy you, to get to see the world through such pretty, rose-colored lenses. You have no idea what this boy is, and you still try to defend him? The Prince has an excuse; he has a duty. You, on the other hand, haven’t a single inkling as to matters you’re speaking on.”

“Oh – really? Is that so?” Pidge didn’t back down, shifting her focus to Lance. “Why don’t you
enlighten me, then? Tell me, what gives you the right to be so fucking superior all the time? You’re literally a fucking monster, lady!"

“You will not speak to me that way!” Lady Valurian thundered in response, and before Keith had the chance to step in a second time – this time, with every intention of having his guards escort her off the premises – another voice intervened.

“Okay, okay, everyone, stop.” Lance stepped forward, palms facing out between Pidge and his aunt. "I appreciate all of your… whatever this is,” he waved a hand around. “But, nope. No more. I don’t want to hear it. I’m really, really quiznaking tired, and you heard Keith – er, the Prince,” Lance corrected himself when a number of people flinched at the use of Keith’s first name. The two met eyes for a fleeting moment for the first time since Keith had come upon the scene, just long enough to sustain the flicker between a heartbeat, and the Prince was relieved to see his eyes had all their usual brightness, somehow not dampened by the godawful turn in conversation.

“Aunt Hira. Just, go home. Please. The girls need you, and this honestly has nothing to do with you.”

The woman was silent for maybe two seconds. Her voice crawled out as a warning. “I thought I told you not to speak again.”

“Yeah, well,” Lance huffed, clearly growing more and more frustrated. “I’m sort of sick of listening to you. Being treated like I’m nothing all the time gets a little exhausting.”

“Is that so?” She tilted her head to the side, gazing at her nephew like she’d never seen him properly before, inspecting him like a butcher might do to a cut of meat. “Hmm.”

An uncomfortable nigglng began to burrow into the back of his mind, the base of his skull. Danger, it whispered, but even with his focus razor-sharp, Keith could detect no real threat. The woman wasn’t armed, even if the air around her was practically saturated with raw bloodlust, so she couldn’t actually hurt anyone. What was this feeling? It made his pulse quicken, almost to the point where it was painful in his chest, playing well against n his long-practiced paranoia.

Was it… fear?

Why?

“Being treated like nothing is a step up for your lot, McClain,” she said, actually spitting the words at his bare feet, and Lance gaped at her in shock. The woman closed the few feet of distance between them and spoke a few words, too quiet for anyone else to catch, before turning back around and marching straight towards Keith.

She practically prostrated herself before him, the change so sudden that Keith almost staggered back.

“Your Highness. Concerning your investigation into this boy’s guilt. I believe there is something I can do to help. I have information that would be useful.”

The Prince, crowded as they were in a hallway with nobles and guards and royals, had little choice but to ask, “…What sort of information?”

“It is in regards to his citizenship.”

Keith paused, glancing at Lance over his aunt’s lowered postured. He looked about as confused as the Prince felt, so he hesitantly continued. “And what of it? The town he comes from is close to the
border of several countries – are you referring to which nation he technically belongs?"

“No, no. Your Highness, he doesn’t belong to any nation.” She lifted her head, turned around to meet Lance’s raised brows – Keith could not see her expression, but her tone sounded plenty wicked that he could imagine. “He is not a citizen.”

“He is a slave.”

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**[LANCE]**

Lance was having a very hard time getting his Aunt’s voice out of his head.

Hunk was calling after him, like the best friend that he was, and one that Lance surely did not deserve. He was on way back to his “private room,” which he had since realized was as much of a holding cell as it was a recovery room, on the fifth floor. He saw little point in waiting for an escort, and he’d slipped out of that miserable chamber before his aunt was really even finished with her — what had Keith called it? Her *testimony*. Right.

“Wait up — Lance, wait!”

Over his shoulder, Lance tossed a nonchalant, “I’m fine, Hunk.”

He was not fine.

It wasn’t really a state he’d felt before, and Lance wasn’t really sure if there were sparse words that could grasp the whole distant sense of self that had wrenched into his stomach and moved up through his chest, taking his heart into a vice grip.

It was all a lot to take in, and even more to try to explain it.

Almost numb, but not quite.

He was trembling fingers without any real sensation; a pulse in-tempo with wheels over cracked cobblestone; a body that had turned hypothermic from the inside out. Cold, certainly, but bitter, too. Like his skin didn’t belong to him, like he’d gone masquerading his entire life and didn’t even know himself beneath his mask. How do you concede to the fact that your whole sense of self was built up, falsified, like the little underwater world that lived beneath a tide pool. It had been idyllic, but his worldview was so small that he’d mistaken his little tiny pool for an entire ocean, when in fact, all it took was just one steady wave and it was all washed away. All the life of that teemed within the delicate, swirling ecosystem — *ruined*.

He’d stayed up many nights, talking to the moon and the stars, asking them to keep his family safe while he was gone. What terror to know it was he would be the one to endanger them.

The universe had a fucked up sense of humor, didn’t it? Wasn’t he just telling Keith earlier that disaster doesn’t undo them? That they were still them, after it was over?

That hurt more than he cared to admit, because, the failings of his own advice did not bring him any
amount of comfort. There was no sweet resignation of what was, and what will be, for Lance. Instead, it felt like he’d turned his own life into a ghost story.

After all that his Aunt had revealed in the past two varga, it was the words she said to him privately in the very beginning, before they’d even left the front hall, that had struck him the most.

“Everything that happens after this will be your fault. Remember that.”

[APPROXIMATELY ONE HOUR EARLIER]

“Lance?” Keith placed a hand on his arm, trying to get his attention.

_They were standing in a corridor on the – eighth floor? He was pretty sure it was the eighth. Meaning, they were, apparently, around the corner from where Keith met with his “Council.”_

“Are you sure you don’t want to go back and rest? You don’t have to give your testimony yet and it… it might be better if you’re not here for your aunt’s.”

Voice harder than he intended, Lance brushed off Keith’s concern.

“No, this is — important. Probably. I don’t know, I want to hear what she has to say.”

In hindsight, he really should have just taken Keith’s advice.

Lance was stubborn, but honestly, hearing all that woman had to say probably did him more harm than good.

Lance walked in after Keith, but was told he had to stay by the door with a guard on either side of him. The Prince seemed intent on protesting, but Lance sent him off with a tight smile — as much as he appreciated Keith’s concern, right now, he just wanted them to get on with it.

_Sir Shiro stood in the openings between the tables, looking, in Lance’s opinion, supremely uncomfortable. Aunt Hira situated herself into a relaxed position in a chair that had been provided in the center of the chamber._

_The knight cleared his throat, and Lance watched from his spot near the door as they got on with some of the formalities._

“If you’re ready, please repeat these words so our scribes may begin: ‘at the behest of the realm and its rulers, I vow my honesty…”

“At the best of the realm and its rulers, I vow my honesty.”

“…and I commit my affirmed words to speak only of true faith and allegiance to the Crown.’”
“And I commit my affirmed words to speak only of true faith and allegiance to the Crown.”

The knight nodded firmly to the scribe in the corner, denoting that they would begin the actual testimony.

“Thank you, Lady Valurian. Now… the floor is yours. For the benefit of our records, can you please state your name and title to the Council?”

“Of course – my name is Lady Hira Valurian.”

“And you’re here to tell us about Lance McClain.”

“That is not his name.”

“Uh, well – your nephew, then.”

“He is not my blood, either.”

A tense pause followed. Lance could feel his insides coil, snakes writhing where his ribs should be, their bodies pooling in his stomach.

Shiro scratched the back of his head and trudged on. “I – right. So tell us about… you said he was, er, a slave earlier? Can you explain that a bit more? Slavery has been formally outlawed for over eighty years – decaphoeb — and has been out of practice for most of the realm for even longer.”

“In Marmora, maybe,” she scoffed.

“Excuse me?”

“The realm is larger than just Marmora. Just as the children of royals are royals, the children of slaves are slaves. The father was an Altean slave.”

Stumbling beneath his own shaking legs, Lance had to stop and rest on the landing before he reached the fifth floor. Adrenaline must have carried him up to the eighth floor in the first place, because he was going down, so shouldn’t this be easier? It felt like his heart was going to give out at any fucking moment.

It was silly, honestly, like a child afraid of monsters under their bed, but Lance could imagine tendrils of smoke, or black icher ribbons floating from the walls, from the cracks in the tile, closing in around him, trying to wrap his limbs and drag him into the floor. His throat felt especially vulnerable, the passageway of words, the carrier of oxygen, draped by shadowed necklaces that looped round, and round, and round his neck, tightening the further they went on, the longer things between them went unsaid. His imagination dreamt up disembodied voices, and they poisoned the well of his thoughts.

Do you always take orders so well? That’s because you don’t think! Have you ever considered, Lance, that maybe you’re the problem? What would it take to collect a pretty thing like you? A good servant, aren’t you? You’re mother just shipped you off here so she wouldn’t have to deal with you anymore.

Hunk wasn’t backing down, either, and Lance sighed and tacked on a smile when he felt Hunk’s
hand come to his shoulder. “Lance, come on — Pidge told me... in the front of the castle... just what happened in that room? Tell me what’s going on, I want to help.”

Lips pursed, Lance looked from each of his best friends’ dark eyes, studied his worried frown, even admired his fiercely loyal glare.

And Lance wanted to open his mouth. He really, really did; hiding his emotions from Hunk was about as feasible as Aunt Hira waking Lance up with breakfast in bed.

“Talk to me, Lance.”

“Everything feels like too much,” his heart ached to admit.

Lance released a large breath of air and rested his forehead on the cool castle wall; it was refreshingly cold on his skin, seeing as almost everything ran hotter than his blood these days.

“I feel like I’m running too fast, and I can’t breathe, and if I stop to catch my breath the ground will open up and swallow me fucking whole, buddy. Why is this happening? Why does this keep happening? And what the fuck does this even mean? What am I supposed to do?

McClains don’t quit, he reminded himself.

Another, more cynical part of his mind, countered with a recent revelation: Yeah, but McClains don’t even fucking exist.

“I just need to lie down, Hunk. I’ll be okay.”

Lance allowed himself two more steadying inhales, and after the final exhale, he turned around and kept walking — because what the fuck else was he supposed to do?

“Serrano — that would be the appropriate name to use when referring to the boy. Serrano.” Aunt Hira said the foreign name twice, just to really emphasize her point or — or maybe rub salt into Lance’s wounds, who even knew anymore?

“Don’t bother trying to find any records of the father’s life; I’m sure none are left.”

After a quick glance at Keith and the Queen, both of whom were utterly stone-faced, Shiro turned back to the woman with severity pinching his brow.

“How could such records go missing? Can you... please explain that?”

“It would be my pleasure.” The smugness of the woman’s tone could be discerned with painstaking details, slipping like oil over each and every syllable individually. “Medram Serrano became Medram McClain a little over twenty five years ago. A nice, average surname. Nondescript. That’s why he chose it, I’m sure. Why else would a runaway slave take on a new name? But then, why a man in bondage would ever have children in the first place at all is beyond me, but I never pretended to understand it. He tried to scrub the filth associated with the his borne name from the history books, and I can’t very well say I blame him for that. My late husband, Lord Trayling Valurian, made the recommendation on their behalf to another abjurationist who specialized in document tampering; I don’t know the man’s name who actually completed the request.
“I only met Medram twice, each time through Tray – that is, Lord Valurian. My husband was amongst the few physicians who combined abjuration with traditional Altean evocation; he used his craft to become a surgeon specializing in restorative healing. His work was well-known amongst the medical community, and he became known as one of the best dealing in scarring and other physical malformations left by magic – burns from enchanted fires, cursed consumer goods that would corrode the wearer’s skin, damage left behind by quintessence exposure... et cetera.

“Medram and his... well, she would later become his wife, but at the time the woman’s name was Rosa Alavaréz, they made their first of two appointments with Lord Valurian twenty-five years ago.”

Lance felt his heart still in his chest, just for a moment, just long enough for his aunt to catch her breath.

Twenty-five.

Rachel?

“She was with child, maybe... five months at the time? It was just a consultation, at which Lord Valurian supplied the woman with a... quintessence suppressant.”

Several people winced, and Lance did not miss the way that Princess Allura’s hands flew to her mouth in shock. Others seemed just as confused as he was by the claim, but he hadn’t long to ponder the thought.

“The second appointment was a few months later, when he performed the actual delivery; natal care wasn’t Lord Valurian’s speciality, but he could do the basics. He delivered all three of our girls safely, but that’s not why the couple sought him out.”

Tiredly, she sighed. While Lance could only see the back of her head, fuschia hair swept back and neatly-styled, he watched her raise a hand and move it to her face.

“Rachel Serrano was born, and the girl was operated upon within the first varga of her birth.”

The room stilled. The silence was impossibly heavy, blanketing each person in the room with the most terrible brand of truth.

It was Sir Coran who spoke what they were all thinking.

“He – he performed scar removal surgery? On an infant?”

“Marks are easier to remove the more recently they are acquired.”

Lance thought of his sister. His big sister. He thought of her beautiful dark skin and big eyes, wide smile, flawless complexion; he thought of her children, who bore no marks, and how Mamá said Rachel had been sickly for many years when she was small. A complication from her delivery, Mamá had told them.

Lance thought of his big sister. Brave and beautiful and incredibly smart.

He was crying before he could stop himself.
Anger wasn’t doing him any good, and crying again sounded way, way worse. He was tired, but sleep sounded impossible now.

Earlier, when Lance was certain that he was going to drown beneath the weight of the ocean of his own fucking soul, he thought that he’d reached some proverbial limit, some ceiling of shit he was going to have to endure.

But that — that had been nothing. Easy peasy. Razzle fucking dazzle, compared to how this felt.

That had been a breeze, little more than an afternoon spent splashing his twin sisters as they played in the streams, or dunking Marco over and over until he cried uncle. (After all, Luis had gotten to do it to Lance; it was a rite of passage that the older brother dunked the younger.)

Did Lance have any uncles, he wondered?

Mamá had always said he and his siblings didn’t have any aunts or uncles. Her brother died before she’d even met Papá, and Papá was supposedly an only child.

Then again, his father was also supposedly a lot of things.

What else might she have lied about?

No. No, no, no — his Mamá had — she had a good reason. Of course she did. That wasn’t — she wouldn’t — she had a good reason.

“Wanna play something?” Hunk asked, sounding almost as desperate as the voice in Lance’s head. It was uncharacteristic enough of his friend that it managed to snap him back to the present.

Lance was lying on his stomach on his bed — the bed, not his bed, he corrected — and Hunk was sitting beside him in a chair.

No one else had come in, Lance noted, and his gaze wandered to the door. Huh. Hunk must have locked it when they got here a few dobosh ago.

“Like what?” Lance eventually thought to ask.

Hunk looked at him like he’d just started speaking Galran, but in moments, his face brightened and his face split into its usual blinding grin.

“I don’t have anything so… thumb war?”

Lance scoffed and turned his head into the pillows, arms folded under his chin. He would have preferred to lay on his back, but that wasn’t really an option right now. Tuning into the awareness of his wound made his skin itch around the bandages, and he wanted desperately to peel off the medical tape.

“Your hands are like, twelve times bigger, dude. Talk about unfair. Next.”

No hesitation. “Pictionary?”

That... sounded promising, actually, and judging by the way Hunk sprang to his feet, he must have sensed Lance’s air of agreement.

“Pen?” He asked, only to watch his friend’s face deflate.

“Ah, shit,” he sank back down into his seat, taking his chin in his hand.
Lance chuckled. “Damn.”

“Damn,” Hunk agreed, but determination flashed only brighter in his dark eyes. “iSpy?”

“How could your husband possibly endorse such a procedure? On a child? And to give a pregnant woman suppressants? That’s so — so reckless! I can’t understand it.” Princess Allura held a hand to her head, looking and sounding equal parts exasperated and furious. Beside her, Altea’s King and Queen were in much the same state, righteous fury painting each of their regal features.

Lance’s chest was beginning to hurt, like his middle was collapsing and trying to suck in the weight of the rest of his body. He wrapped his arms around himself, wishing he’d thought to bring Keith’s cloak when his Aunt dragged him from the fifth floor.

Aunt Hira turned to face the royal Altean family and lowered her head mournfully. Well, it probably appeared mournful to most — Lance could hear the edge of false-sincerity in her voice, though. It was not an uncommon tone he heard at home.

“Of course, your Highness. You see, this was the same counsel my husband gave to the parents, but they insisted. Marks of the Chosen are both a blessing, and, at least for those running from their past, a curse. There is no better way to track an Altean’s genealogy than through their marks, but I need not tell you that.”

She turned, gaze trailing each face in the room as they stared back, intense and searching.

“The suppressants were to help slow or mitigate some of the physiological adjustments that the fetus would take on in the womb, like reducing the point of our ears or reverting to the recessive genetic trait of a human’s hair color, but there was too much exposure during the beginning of the pregnancy to sever all ties of quintessence to the child. It’s very difficult to stop Marks from developing at all, let alone during the second trimester.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong here,” a Puigian ambassador leaned forward in his seat. “But couldn’t those suppressants… kill the unborn child?”

The only response Aunt Hira had, somehow managing to sound judgemental and disinterested, was, “A risky decision. Risk killing the child, or let it develop the marks of a slave? Risky, indeed.”

Talking about his sister as a potential dead-baby, as an “it” instead of Rachel, with her warm hugs and long fingernails, made a pit grow in his stomach.

The knight combed a hand through his tuft of white hair. “I’m — sorry, I feel like we’ve strayed from the original topic. So you’re claiming Medram Serrano was a slave who ran away, and to keep his daughter from being — what — ‘caught up’ in his past, had her eye scales surgically removed?”

Aunt Hira’s sneer pervaded her words. “I’m not claiming anything. I’m simply telling you the truth. As for that sloppily told facsimile, yes, that is correct. My husband had a compassionate heart, and wanted only the best for our girls as long as they lived. He pitied the young family, I think, but he couldn’t leave well enough alone. There are just… some people who can’t be saved… as a medical professional, I think he always struggled with that.” She sighed, frowning at her lap for a moment.

“I digress. My apologies. The important thing is, Lord Valurian did not charge the Serrano’s for any of the procedure, seeing as most slaves don’t exactly have the funds for such intensive operations. In
fact, he gave them money, *enough coin to flee.*”

“Why?”

The woman snorted, though the sound was without humor. “A question I often ask myself. I don’t know. Maybe he saw hope in the family, maybe it was because our eldest Adélée was but a child herself and he took pity. I don’t know. I don’t. I want to, but we do not often get what we want.”

Hunk, after a very long pause, said. “Okay, I give up.”

“Mm?” Lance blinked mildly. “Oh, it was your headband, dude.”

“I guessed that already!”

Scowling, Lance dropped his face into a pillow. “No, no, you said *bandana.* Totally different.”

Despite his petulant frown and crossed arms, Hunk laughed. “Oh my — *you’re the worst!*”

*Tell me something I don’t know.*

“Don’t be a sore loser,” Lance hummed. “Your turn.”

As the larger boy rubbed his chin, studying the room thoughtfully, Lance sighed, and the action stretched out the grafts over his spine, pulling the fresh skin taut abreast his shoulders. The groan that followed was involuntary, along with the subsequent string of questions that bubbled to the fore of his mind.

Did his father have scars on his own back? Would his sisters and brothers have scars on their backs, too, if the man hadn’t run off? Did his absence justify having seven fucking children in the first place, if this is what it meant for them?

Hunk reached his decision, but it barely registered. “Okay, let’s go blue.”

Christ. Lance was a *slave.* Rachel, Veronica, Luis, Marco, Maria, Sonia — they were all *property.*

And what did his aunt say — something like the children of slaves are slaves, too? So, what, that meant his nieces and nephews, then? Miguel, Elena, Sylvio, Teresa, Medici?

Gods, fuck his stupid fucking aunt, too. Because she was *right.*

It really was all his fault. If he’d just stayed at home in the cellar, or left Keith and his whole too-big world well enough alone, or had resisted Lotor more, or had even just listened to his aunt this one time — he only had to do *one thing* differently, at any of those moments, and probably dozens more, things would have been fine.

To say he didn’t see it coming would have been a lie, because, maybe a part of him knew what he was — and what he wasn’t.

“L-Lance, buddy, it’s okay,” Hunk switched to a kneeling position so their heads were about level and put and arm carefully over his shoulders, pulling him into the most awkward half-hug imaginable. “I know you don’t want to talk about it and that’s okay, but I’m here to listen if you do. I’m really worried about you.”
“The Serranos were instructed to take to a specific splice in the lands. Between Arus, Altea and Marmora, there’s a region of mountains that is easily overlooked. It was a perfect place to hide from slave-traders, but more importantly, it’s one of the realm’s rifts.”

Lance almost felt bad for Shiro, clearly grappling with way more than he signed up for. “...Rifts?”

Drawing herself up slightly, her chin pointed high, Aunt Hira nodded.

“There are a series of small rifts in the flow of matter across the realm that, under certain conditions, can sever the ties to quintessence through the land. It was not a perfect solution to the couple’s...’problem,’ as quintessence is everywhere and exists within everything, from the food we eat to the air we breathe, but under the right circumstances, during a pregnancy, a child’s underlying connection to quintessence can be obstructed, at least enough to minimize their presentation of heritable traits. This is the basic principle behind suppressants; it is the same phenomenon that occurs in the rifts.”

“In the case of the Serranos — or, by that time, the McClains, it would stop them from presenting as anything but human. Their eye scales, multi-colored irises, pointed ears – all of these phenotypic presentations should have been negated. This is not a plan that is without risks, similar to those incurred by taking suppressants, but with less strain placed on the mother. For the child developing in the womb, the lack of oxygen in the atmosphere makes it difficult for one’s sinus’ and lungs to develop properly, but it was better than the alternative.”

A look was exchanged between his Aunt and Shiro, an uncomfortable sort of understanding, but Lance couldn’t see his Aunt’s own grimace. The older woman gave a serious nod to whatever question went unspoken between them.

“Right.” Hira sounded frustrated, more than anything. “No, their first born presented with marks because they hadn’t had the chance to plan properly. They had two more children without issue, hidden as they were by the rift, but the fourth...”

It was hard to listen. Hard to focus. No. No no no.

“...was born with one eye scale. It was enough for the family to call upon my husband for aid. He supplied the McClains with more suppressants, as my memory serves, but he never had the chance to go out and examine him. It was too risky - I refused to allow them to come back to Altea for another procedure, at the risk of my girl’s being associated with their lot. After a few years and much begging, I think Tray’s bleeding heart got the better of him and he intended to go out and perform the procedure, but he never made it to the mountains. Died on his way, murdered. Bandits, so the reports told me.”

Anxiety was a dangerous burden to bear, a creature of occasion that bared its teeth most often, for Lance, in silences.
This was no exception.

He’d since stopped crying, but talking sounded like so much work.

Lance didn’t cry for very long. He simply did not feel like it, and Hunk had returned to sitting in the chair near him.

“So… you ready to tell me what happened?”

How could he even begin to answer a question like that? What happened? Like his fucked up version of reality was something that could even be explained in normal terms?

“There’s honestly not much to say, Hunk. I don’t know.” Lance squeezed his eyelids together tightly, a wave of exhaustion hitting him again. “I guess my dad turned out to be a slave. It’s not technically illegal in Altea, or something, and there’s some black market stuff that goes on between a lot of the northern nations, and I guess my dad was on it. In it. Whatever. Children born to slaves are slaves, too, so I guess I’m someone’s piece of fucking property? I don’t know who. I left before it was over. That’s about it.”

It took three ticks for Hunk’s unhinged jaw to snap back into place with an audible click. “Wah — wait, wait, wait. What?”

“Yeah, exactly.”

“So… forgive me, Lady Valarian.” Shiro coughed, the rest of the room deadly silent. “Assuming everything you’ve said is true, Lance McClain — or, Serrano — is a slave, because his father belonged or currently belongs to someone in Altea? I… this definitely adds some new information to our investigation, but, I’m not quite sure I’m seeing how it’s relevant to the immediate case. This history doesn’t seem to have anything to do with the current situation.”

His aunt seemed almost bored by now. “Doesn’t it? Because, as I recall, only free men and women are entitled to lawful representation. His Royal Highness,” she paused, turning to Keith and nodding. “Implored me not to waste the Council’s time further, so with the interest of all of your agendas and tending to your many, many affairs, I believed it would do everyone some good if he was just dealt with.”

“And, importantly, I thought this would help build a better understanding of his character. He comes from a family of liars and deceivers. I only regret not sharing this truth sooner, but when the father fled their home, I took pity — I wanted to believe my husband died for something that was worth it, Rosa pleaded for my silence, so I asked for something in return. And she sends me this — this ungrateful, selfish, and stupid boy, just like his father —”

Shiro held up a hand, his tone bereft. “Alright. That’s enough.”

“It’s not. He’s a troublemaker. A thief, a delinquent, incapable of learning manners and incapable of appreciating hard work. The whole lot of them, in fact, are the type to take advantage of someone’s benevolence for their own gain. I would not trust a word that — ”

Fuck it.
Lance turned at that moment and slipped out of the door, his aunt’s words fading behind him. No one, not even the guards to either side of him, did more than glance his way.

Hunk leaned far, far back in his chair, head tilted back and looking at the ceiling crystals. There was a faint buzz from the lights as they burned with what was, Lance now knew, quintessence, and illuminated the sterile hospital-style room around them.

“That’s… a lot to take in.”

“Mmm.”

Hunk’s hand tapped an irregular rhythm over his legs. “You know this changes absolutely nothing, right?”

Lance barely managed not to snort. His voice came out plenty bitter anyways. “And how do you figure that?”

“Uhh, just because some ancient piece of paper somewhere says you ‘belong’ to someone doesn’t mean you’re any different, Lance. You’re still you — the guy who cheats at iSpy and is so lazy he’d rather sleep with his face stuffed into a pillow than roll over.”

Okay, that time, Lance couldn’t help but laugh a little. “I didn’t cheat at iSpy, you’re just a bad guesser.”

Hunk’s nostrils flared and he visibly pouted. “How is guessing headband any different than guessing bandana?! No — no forget it. I’m not mad. You’re just a cheater.”

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

“Hunk.”

“Lance.”

They stared each other down for all of fifteen seconds before Hunk’s composure broke, and in his effort to stop himself from laughing, his lips began sputtering and spit flew in Lance’s face.

“Hey!” He whined, blocking his eyes from the unwanted saliva shower, though his indignation fell to the wayside in favor of laughing alongside his friend.

“Dang it, Hunk, I’m trying to be sad over here. It’s impossible when you’re around.” Lance muttered in complaint once they caught their breath, turning his head back into the mattress.

The larger boy shrugged. “I know. It’s one of my many talents.”

The bed swallowed his subsequent grumble. “So true…”

“Anyway. Thanks for telling me what happened, you know? That must have sucked. And your aunt really sucks. But I meant what I said — you’re still you, bud. Do you really think this will change how people will think of you? Maybe like, assesholes like Prince Lotor, but no one was friends with
you because of your *swanky wealth and swanky status.*”

Lance couldn’t resist the temptation. “Did you just use swanky twice in the same sentence?”

“You can’t out-deflect me, young man,” Hunk poked his ribs, and Lance definitely did *not* emit a tiny squeal. Nah. Nope. “Your self-worth isn’t defined by a label, Lance.”

“I… I *know.*” He took in a slow breath, holding it for a moment. “I know. And I’m trying to… remember that. But it — I don’t know. I can’t explain it, really. I just feel like… so fucking *worthless,* Hunk. Like, *you’re* being so nice to me, but I’m not even — I’m not even considered a *person.* Pidge, Sir Adam and Shiro, the Princess and Coran and Romelle, fucking *Keith.* You’ve all been so — I don’t d-deserve — *fuck.***

He felt his eyes grow moist and groaned in frustration, rubbing his thumb and forefinger into his tear ducts in an effort to stop himself.

“W-what am I supposed to *do now,* Hunk? I don’t need a someone to interpret some testimonial bullshit to tell me I’m never stepping foot in my aunt’s fucking house, *ever again.* I’m not about to be a burden on everyone here, I can’t fucking be that. So, what? Go back *home?* I don’t even know if my Mamá even wants — oh, *oh gods* — my family, shit, this whole secret — are they going to get fucking, I don’t know, arrested? *Sold?* And I can’t not think about my own f-fucking problems, selfish, I’m so fucking *selfish,* Hunk, I’m just so *tired* and I don’t want to *deal with this right now.* I just want… I just want things to be normal. I just want things to be simple. I want Blue, I want to go *home,* I want to see Keith, I just want a nap and to eat some of your fucking garlic knots and I’m just —”

“Buddy, it’s okay.” Hunk took him in his arms, an awkward angular hug seeing as Lance was facedown on the bed and his friend had taken to kneeling by his head. “I mean, it’s not *okay,* but it’s *going to be okay.* You don’t need to figure out everything right this minute. What you need is to rest, and take a few deep breaths, and know that me and Pidge and — well, I guess I can’t speak *for* Shiro and Coran and the others, but — we love you because of *you.* Your Mom loves you. We’ll help you figure out what this means for your family, too, but you can’t worry yourself sick like this. Just breathe. Let it out, man.”

“H-Hunk,” he choked on his best friend’s name, willfully letting himself fall apart. For once, for what was really the first time in so long.

“I’m here, Lance. And I’m not going anywhere.”

They remained like that for awhile, some mumbled words but mostly just Lance embarrassingly heaving wet exhales into Hunk’s shoulder. It wasn’t pretty, or quiet, or tender — crying was stupid and loud and obnoxious. It made Lance’s head hurt, his sinuses restrict, his lungs ache. Wasn’t there supposed to be some — some *cathartic release* or something? Guess fate decided to skip him on that.

After perhaps ten dobosh, the friends separated. Hunk watched him quietly for a moment, patient and ready to jump back into action by the looks of it.

With a wet chuckle, Lance said, “*Everything sucks and I hate it.*”

With a small grin, Hunk replied, “Well, that’s fair. Maybe you should try to sleep some. It could at least help with the whole looking-like-a-zombie-thing you’ve got going on right now.”

Lance sniffled dramatically. “*Rude.*”
“But true,” his friend countered. Lance could hear the smile in Hunk’s voice without even needing to look up. “I can stay here with you while you’re asleep, or I could let the other’s in… if you want. Or lock everyone out but Sir Adam — he’s probably raising hell outside right now, to be honest.”

He sank further into the pillows, his voice muffled but discernible. “I should probably sleep, so, yeah. And… yeah, you can let the others in. It’s fine. I’m fine.”

Pushing off his knees to stand up, Hunk hovered near the bed for a moment longer. “Do you want help turning around or anything before I let them in?”

“Mm… nah, I’m alright.” Lance heaved his front up in a sort-of push-up position, leaning his weight to one side and holding up a fist. “Thanks, man.”

Hunk bumped it and grinned before patting the top of his head like a toddler. Lance grumbled, but didn’t shoo him away, just dropped his face back into the pillows again. A moment after Hunk’s hand moved away, Lance startled. He felt something on the blankets shift, and a familiar softness draped his shoulders; Lance buried his face further into the pillows, face burning red in immediate response, because, of course Hunk would gently place Keith’s impossibly cozy cape back over his shoulders, even taking the time to tuck him in like he was a child. He even spared Lance the teasing this time, too.

Hunk moved away without another word, and Lance too chose not to speak as he heard the door open lightly and slide shut again. There was a mutual understanding between them that was, in way, more reflective of their friendship than any amount of conversation could ever portray.

Thank you.
Thank you.

As it happened, Lance didn’t have to fight for sleep; his mind and body both were entirely prepared to fuck off in mere ticks after Hunk left, and he drifted off to a mercifully dreamless sleep almost immediately.

...only to be woken up nearly as soon as he’d fallen asleep.

Well, it felt like it was pretty quickly after, anyways. Lance didn’t actually know; he hadn’t had much of a chance to check the time, considering he was fucking thrown out of bed.

His head managed to only smack into the hard stone floor after his back’s initial recoil, which, considering the only thing separating his freshly-grafted skin from slapping into cold tiles was a comfy jumper and a pad of gauze, it was the very fucking definition of agony.

A terrible, pitiful sound passed through his lips as his mind whited out, something between a choked cry and a wheezing gasp of air as he was blinded from everything but pure, excruciating pain. Vertebrae by vertebrae, muscle by muscles, Lance felt each notch in his spine shatter and be rebuilt, tick by tick, as the ripples of the sensation began to pulse outward.

“To think, after all of your prideful protest, you’ve turned out to be even less than a servant,” hummed the voice of, arguably, Lance’s least favorite person — though he could hardly focus the words at all, distracted as he was by the disarming pain.
Prince Lotor had taken to squatting beside him, looking down like he might be inspecting gum on his shoe. “You’re even more interesting than I gave you credit for, Lance.”

Gritting his teeth, Lance rolled over slightly so he was facing the Prince.

“Keep my name… out of your fucking mouth,” he spat, jaw clenched so tightly it almost hurt. “What do you want?”

The Prince clicked his tongue. “Back talk is not a becoming use of that pretty mouth, you know. But you are awfully bold, to be put in your place and still have such spirit.”

He continued as if he were lecturing a small child who’d been caught sneaking sweet bread from the kitchen.

“You see, I had you pegged all wrong. Here I thought you might be the masked vigilante type, to take up a name from the old Altean fairy tales, or perhaps a thief with a dry sense of humor; I had assumed the persona a means to keep your identity hidden as you charmed lords and ladies left and right, but, it’s much simpler than that, isn’t it? You’re just a young man with a profound ability to be in the wrong place at the wrong — or right, I suppose, depending on who you ask — time. The son of a slave. And still, you resist me?”

To raise his question a bit more literally, Lotor stood up to full height once again, using one of his greaves to nudge Lance’s ribs. It was not so much as to injure him further, but enough to take him by surprise and have him roll away in self-defense.

Stupid survival instincts.

He rolled flat on his stomach, cold tile chasing his racing pulse all the way up his throat and Lotor placed the heel of his boot on the base of Lance’s spine, the metal hard and sharp over top his borrowed sweater. Lance had all but stopped breathing — he could feel the sharpened steel catch over the threads every time he dared exhale, a barely-there barrier between his raw burns and the weight of Lotor’s foot. The position made his boot feel almost eager to press him into the floor.

Fuck.

“Now, I implore you to hold your tongue, if you would,” the Prince said breezily. “I just want to present you with a… bit of an opportunity,”

Wisely, Lance said nothing, but marginally adjusted his shoulders to show that he was listening.

Lotor seemed astoundingly pleased by his silence, if his tone was anything to go by; Lance had to resist the urge to gag.

“Good boy.”

Chapter End Notes

im so fucking,,, sorry,,,

(i PROMISE this story isn’t a tragedy)
Chapter Summary

In which, Lance struggles with, but ultimately accepts, his own self-worth and makes a good impression on an important figure, and Keith is more honest than he intends, and perhaps just a little bit violent.

KICK.

Chapter Notes

please accept this offering as my apologies for the... last chapter...

and another very big thanks to my very good friend, e350tb in the Steven Universe fandom. they're a wonderful author and a great source of motivation to keep me going, please check out their stuff if you're interested in SU!

as always, thank you for your on-going patience and support! i love you all and I am so thankful to have so many kind, wonderful readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[KEITH]

There was something deeply tranquil, and, perhaps, eternally lonesome, in the fleeting peace that had etched itself in the frost-kissed windows, that painted his bedroom with bright, momentary moonlight. The world outside was silenced by the Prince closing the door behind him, the loud click of the lock slotting into place the final sign that there was really anything outside of the room at all.

His footfalls carried him heavily to the edge of his bed, where he laid back and bounced momentarily in rebound to his weight. He hardly noticed, his eyes slipping closed. It was so easy, once the room was black behind his lids, so easy to forget about the buzzing energy thrumming in his veins, the maddening din of angry voices shouting across a closed chamber door, a pressure so heavy he felt his knees buckle just by the thought alone…

Keith welcomed the invitation to forget, just for a private moment. There was no righteous anger, no aching loneliness, no unsaid words and no regrets – he could just relax and breathe and it was so freeing that his stomach clenched with guilt before he could think to stop himself.

Not everyone was so free as him. Many people didn’t have a bed to return to, or a room to hide in, or pillows in which to bury their shame. Most people didn’t have what he had, and it had never seemed so obvious as he sat back up and peeled off his day clothes, one armored-piece at a time.

He’d been avoiding sleep, or, maybe, it had been avoiding him. Who could really know the
difference?

Keith tried to convince himself that he had done the right thing as his eyes struggled to adjust to the lowlight, black surfaces lanced by beams of moonlight and shining stars that streamed in from the eastern wall, turning his room gray and warm in their wake. Sleep was crucial if he hoped to be at all effectual in the coming days – focus was not something to discount in the event of negotiations when the stakes were this high, and he’d been operating on a mixture of pure adrenaline, caffeine, and emotional fury for several days straight. If he kept going, he would crash sooner or later.

His room felt too big. It had always been too big for him, but now, it felt glaringly empty as he sat back on the bed again. He pulled back the comforters before tucking them over himself, grimacing at the cold sheets.

Not for the first time, and surely not for the last, Keith really just needed to be alone.

Were there other places he’d rather be?

Oh, sure. Absolutely.

If he could be particular, Keith wanted to be in bed and not be alone. In a perfect world, a certain dark-skinned boy would already be asleep there, so Keith could have just crawled in beside him and pass the fuck out, but, that would be what he wanted, and not what he needed.

And right now, Keith needed to be here, and he needed to be alone.

He adjusted his weight, struggling to find a comfortable angle. It was like every tiny sound was a cannon, every creak of the mattress or shift in the bed frame an eruption in the aching silence. He eventually opted on curling in on himself in a ball of bedding, facing the windows that opened to his balcony. He’d never closed the curtains from the other night, and he watched a pale flutter of snowfall over the railings. It wasn’t much, only just beginning to gather in dustings around the bannister, but it was at least a pretty distraction from the uncomfortable roominess of his bed. (It really seemed like it was to swallow him whole at any given moment.)

Letting out a frustrated grunt, Keith threw off the comforter and heaved himself back to his feet. Gods, he was fucking exhausted and still, still, sleep felt so impossible. The longer he stayed in bed, the less comfortable he became, and Keith decided he just needed to do something, anything to burn off some of his frantic energy. Questions shifted around his brain like a puzzle box, answers and other possible patterns moving as he mindlessly made his way to his closet, pulling on some breathable clothes quickly and moving into his private training space.

The room was set up like a simple studio, dark floors and equipment stored in one corner. It was even bigger and emptier than his bedroom, the size more appropriate for a troop of performers than a single person, but Keith at least tried to make the most of the space. A large mirror lined the wall to his left upon entrance, and the right was an equally wide breadth of windows that looked out over Marmora. It was actually rather beautiful, and he approached slowly to overlook the side of the castle, watching the snow drift towards the earth for a moment.

Marmoran snowfall was something that he’d very much come to associate with the passage of his birthday, and it seemed only fitting that that evening would mark their first for the season. For as many years as the Prince had been alive, there had never been an odd season that struck with snow before the end of October – always after, sometimes far into December, other times in the days leading up to November. No matter the year, though, October’s passing habitually brought with it harsh cold and bitter snowfall, but its consistency was in a way a sort of tether; something with an otherworldly sense of finality that Keith admired, even if, for the life of him, he wasn’t able to tell
Winter was, in no complex terms, the season of death. A time of ending one year and beginning another. Such was the dry air, the invariable feeling of the end creeping upon him. Marmora became, in a sense, the skeleton of itself from summertime; much as the people became their truest forms of self. As a body would lose its brain and heart and blood with the end, the world was sapped of its excess.

In that it was the time the realm shuddered its windows to the outside and stoked roaring fires in its hearths, it was a time he’d come to see as one that respected only the strictest necessities. Keith at least liked to believe he was not one to overindulge in the luxuries of his royal title, and he rather liked the bareness brought on by winter. The brittle trees and the snow-lined paths through the capital reminded him of simpler desires, instincts to survive rather than to dress up in clothes and play pretend in a pretend society with pretend laws.

And that, Keith thought, was the aspect of it he enjoyed most of all. Because they’re all just people, when it comes right down to it, as susceptible as death to the elements as anyone else.

(Privately, Keith thought he should maybe take up Adam’s advice on seeing a therapist, because he probably shouldn’t enjoy the season all the more for the grim undertones beneath it.)

All things being equal, the sprinkling of white that had begun to gather outside was still very pretty. There was just something about snow, something that made things seem… softer, like everything curved around the edges. It made the stinging chill more bearable, and endowed a quiet that carried with it a distinctive variety of peace… especially, considering, the hell from whence he’d just come.

Gods, just thinking about it all made Keith want to hit something. He resolved to digging his heel into the ground and spinning around, gnashing his molars in silence. A sparring baton was in his hands before he was really aware of his own movements, setting up a training dummy and forcing down his anger into something productive – or, if not productive, at least guiding his vitriol into something that wasn’t just him seething, chasing sleep without any hopes of finding it.

He’d scarcely begun to leverage the weight of the weapon in his hands when a question bubbled to the fore of his consciousness, one that was eager to be spit at his feet in contempt.

Who the fuck does Hira Valurian think she is?

It was probably wise that Shiro and his Mother had elected to send her home after her testimony. If she was anywhere within fifty feet of Keith, he might have murdered her. It was still pretty tempting, honestly. He did know where she lived…

No, no. Murder bad. He sighed at the lost opportunity anyway, swinging the baton with practiced precision, paying attention to pressure points, distance, balance, and form.

The woman’s testimony had been… a lot of things, but for lack of a comprehensive term, Keith landed on one prevailing emotion: it had been painful. The words themselves, the contempt with which they were spoken, the disdainful look on Hira’s face; gauging Lance’s own reaction, and his quiet disappearance from the room, and then his subsequent isolation from everyone, sans Hunk…

Just, fuck.

If the whole mess had hurt for Keith to hear, he couldn’t even begin to grasp how Lance might feel. The Prince couldn’t even be bitter about not being able to see Lance, to ask him how he was, or maybe try to pull a smile to his face – but the Prince couldn’t go up there right now, insistent though
his heart might be on that particular sticking point. Hunk knew Lance better than him – probably better than anyone, except Blue, but Keith didn’t think she really counted seeing as she was a part of him – so he had to take the aspiring chef at his word.

*He’s sleeping, and he really needs it, so let’s just give him a bit of space for now? You could honestly use some sleep too.*

Keith had almost laughed in Hunk’s face back there, but he had managed to stop himself.

Now alone, however, the Prince scoffed; like he’d be able to fucking *sleep* right now.

What did the status of Lance’s citizenship change?

Well, in Keith’s opinion, it changed all of fucking *nothing*.

In terms of the political quagmire waiting for him in the morning?

That was, admittedly, much harder for him to say. Mainly because Altea, Arus, and Daibaazal never formally outlawed slavery.

The practice was all but nonexistent in most of the realm, sure, but Keith knew any attempt to actually scratch out those laws would be gearing up for a hard-won battle. To those three nations, infringement on citizens’ rights, even the property of oneself, was considered borderline sacrilegious.

While selling oneself into bondage had long since been out of fashion, it had been, once upon a time, a means of gainful employment, almost indiscernible from taking a loan out against the state treasury. Many families had fallen into disrepair from the interest, however, indebteding themselves to their masters and never able to work long enough or hard enough to buy back their freedoms. Unable to repay their debts, entire families were consumed by vicious cycle. Surnames became as common parts of an inheritance as homes and fortunes, the people absorbed by the estates of their masters.

A particularly hard snap of the weapon in his hands, meeting the junction of the dummy’s left shoulder, split the bar in his hands with a disturbing *swack-shing* as the metal bent and snapped clear in two. This wasn’t some impassioned demonstration of strength; broken batons was symptomatic of a sloppy form and reckless technique. The batons were made to sustain weight evenly, but the metal was brittle and intentionally fallible – if the user was not keeping the pressure of their grip just so, or the execution of a swing misattributed the force, the baton would break.

Irritated, Keith threw down the stunted weapon and instead focused on taking a few deep breaths. His form was clearly lacking, and Kolivan would push him extra hard once this was all over in Blade training – goddamnit, he needed to *get it together*.

Keith walked forward towards the mirror, his usual scowl glaring back at him. He began stretching his arms to chase some of the latent burn.

His Galra genes had never really presented physically, at least not like most of their people – his Father’s human complexion and white sclera set against his mother’s dark pupils were the Prince’s most defining features. Sometimes, though, when he was worked up, there were glimpses of that other half of himself, barely contained beneath the surface. His eyes would yellow, his teeth would sharpen, and once, his skin had even taken on a lavender tint – that had only happened the one time that he could remember.

Even now, with a light sheen of sweat over his brow and his pent up frustrations barely contained, there were slight signs of his maternal heritage bleeding through. He could feel his canines poking into his lower lip; all he would need to do is bare his teeth to see the full effect.
With a pang of disgust, the Prince wondered if he would have been as contemptuous as Prince Lotor, had he been born in a different time – or, even, just in a different country. Would he, with his inherited crown and title, have been so lacking in basic compassion that he could have ever looked down at Lance as property? Desperately, Keith wanted to say no, that he was better than that, but… was he, really? There would be no way to ever know for certain, but glaring at the ripple of his visage, a distorted reality such as that seemed like a haunting possibility. It was tragically easy to see himself acting that way if he’d been raised differently; he was every bit as Galran as Prince Lotor, wasn’t he?

Stop that. Not now.

The Prince let out a slow, steady exhale, shaking his head from side-to-side before he turned away. Priorities, Keith reminded himself. He had priorities and finite time; he would not jeopardize the former by wasting the latter.

First, there was Lance. He would likely sleep through the night, and even if he didn’t, the guards in that stretch of castle had promised to send someone to find Keith when he did wake. For now, at least in that respect, all the Prince could do was wait.

Next, the issue with the Galra. Not only was it no closer to being resolved, if anything, Hira Valurian’s testimony had forced them several steps backwards. The Council had been wholly dismissed for the night to absorb and reevaluate the new information.

Puig and Balmera had elected to leave in the morning after tomorrow, and the representatives for Daibaazal begrudgingly agreed to their dismissal. With the laws of slavery adding another dimension of complexity to the situation, there was no need to have the countries present beyond the promise of holding the terrorist accountable. The event occurred in Marmora, involved Alteans, and targeted a Galra; the Olkarion embassy was still hosting Ambassador Ryder along with other diplomats, and tomorrow Arus would be working with the Holts and their leadership to open a dialogue on potential asylum seekers in the event that things do not end… favorably. For that reason, neither Puig nor Balmera were particularly necessary and their courts needed them, Balmera moreso than ever with the death of their Queen.

Daibaazal was a sovereign nation, and the Marmoran Prince had no interest in beginning his time on the throne as the realm’s next despot; if they were to depose Emperor Zarkon, their evidence needed to be irrefutable. As tempting as it might be, Marmora wasn’t able to just go and behead another country’s ruler just for fun – well, Keith supposed he technically could, but he really shouldn’t – no matter how fitting a bloody execution might suit Zarkon.

For all the hurt Daibaazal had caused him in the past week, Keith could not allow himself to forget – it was mere child’s play compared to the thousands dead across their borders, and the thousands more who had to hold their loved ones close every night, hoping they made it through to the morning.

Zarkon would not be allowed to get away with what he’s done. No matter what.

With that thought in mind, Keith pulled up the next baton available and approached the dummy again. Now was not the time for fixating upon doubt; too many people were relying on him.

The prince finally managed rest, falling into bed around two in the morning – only when his body was so exhausted that he had no other choice, and with Puig and Balmera leaving by midday, Keith had to be up bright and fucking early.

In retrospect, he was glad he slept when he did last night; he would have murdered someone if he
went another sleepless night and had to face breakfast the next morning.

Every single day, breaking his fast was always an ordeal. People weren’t permitted to eat until he and his Mother were both present, and she was even more punctual than Shiro – so really, that meant a room of fussy adults and bratty teenagers waiting for Keith to drag his half-awake ass out of bed and down the stairs, a smile so fake it was painful plastered on his face when he walked into the dining hall.

It wasn’t easy, but Keith had been doing this shit for eighteen years. Playing the part, the longest chess match of his life in which he was both piece and player, as frustrated by his own position and his inability to move freely as he was by all the embedded strategy that was inherent in every single thing he did, was second-nature to him by now.

That being said, so far, breakfast this week was extraordinarily awful – all of the guests just meant he had to cater to a larger audience, with more people ready to badger him about the price of lumber exports or who-the-fuck knows what else, but it wasn’t that much more unbearable than any other day.

Not today.

See, today was a special day. As a sign of good faith (which, haha), all of the “younger” royals were to have breakfast together. No adults. Some next era of the realm thing, which translated roughly into the following: Prince Keith and an optional guest of his choice – his guest happened to be laid up in a hospital bed, so that was off to a great start – sitting at a table with Princess Allura and Lady Romelle, who were so annoyingly happy together that they honestly put the word gay to shame, the very much in-mourning Lady Shay and Lord Rax, and the little Princess Tylivia, whose outburst the previous night made her a wild card – would she be emotional, screaming, crying, cheering? Fun? Playful? Talkative? Despondent? Who knew? Not Keith.

But that wasn’t the best part – the best part was that Lotor was going to be there.

To say he was looking forward to it would be putting it… oh, who the fuck was he kidding?

Keith was fucking thrilled. This was the best birthday gift he’d gotten all week.

Now – yes – hold on.

You might be wondering why Keith would be excited over this particular development? Lotor was, after all, the scum of the earth as far as Keith was concerned, barely worthy of being scraped off the bottom of his shoe, but the Marmoran Prince did have a good reason.

See, Prince Lotor had been confined to recovery for the past few days, but when he gave his testimony it had been plenty clear to Keith that he was doing better. Well enough to be up and about on his own even though they were probably not for too long off from his own quintessence procedure, but he had a leg-up on Lance’s recovery. His injuries were more numerous, but none were as punishing as the one on Lance’s back – so he was, for all intents and purposes – better.

It went back to that morning, just as he woke up, when he heard the tell-tale knock at his door of someone calling him to breakfast. Normally, this was followed by Shiro shouting for him and Keith grumbling some amount of “fuck off,” or “yeah, yeah,” but that morning? That morning, there was no shout, but a rather sharp series of knocks that persisted all the way up until he wretched open the chamber door.

Needless to say, he wasn’t expecting his Mother to be there, full regalia and ready to go. Keith was
in his boxers and a rumpled t-shirt and felt comically underdressed in comparison.

“Mom? What’s going on?”

The Queen did not appear to have slept, judging by the almost-maroon circles lining her eyes, but her
gaze was infallibly sharp. She spared him a quick once over before laughing at his bedhead.

“May I come in? There’s an update I wanted to share with you.”

Blinking, Keith noted that Kolivan was not with her, just two of her usual escort. He expressed his
confusion in the form of a question. “Kral Beta?”

“No, it’s not that sort of update,” she pursed her lips, thoughtful. “It’s more… personal than that.”

His throat was dry, nervous. “Um, sure.”

Keith stepped aside and held the door open, shutting out the guards that tried to follow her in. He’d
done it to his own guards enough times that he learned to steel himself from feeling guilty about
shutting them out – they never complained, and were just trying to be diligent, but some
conversations needed to be had without fanfare or pretense.

The Queen sat on the corner of the couch, and Keith decided to awkwardly side-lean in the chair at
the end, facing her.

“Is everything okay? Please tell me no one else has died,” he gave a dry laugh, not really joking as
much as he would have liked.

The humor was not reciprocated, which did not bode well for the already deep pit growing in his
stomach.

“It’s about Lance.”

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[LANCE]

One of Lance’s prime personal failings, he knew, was his inability to keep his own mouth shut.

Aunt Hira had made that clear on multiple occasions, but she wasn’t the only one. Lance had been
told similar things at that point in his life from multiple sources.

He talks back. He should only speak when spoken to.

He talks too much. He’s too loud. His laugh is obnoxious.

He doesn’t think before he speaks.

So, this time, he tried.

“Good boy.”
He really, really tried.

“I’ve thought about it, and I think I prefer Blue to your given name. It suits you better,” Lotor mused. He exerted just a bit more pressure in his heel, just enough to cause Lance to hold his breath.

Don’t say anything. Don’t say anything.

They stayed like that for several tense ticks before Lotor spoke again.

“Did you know, I could kill you, right now, and it would be completely legal?” Slowly, his foot moved, lower, coming to rest on his tailbone above his shirt. Consequently, Lance let out a small huff of air, a breath of relief that his shoulder blades were no longer held hostage. “I could do anything, really. You think the encounter you had with my General was unfortunate? Imagine if he had done worse to you. Ten times worse; a hundred times worse. Every heinous thing you could imagine. And, for him, the worst case would end with little more than a slap on the wrist, some sort of citation for property damage.”

The Prince’s next move was to, fucking finally, remove his boot completely from trapping Lance underneath him with sound of smug satisfaction. Lance rolled away, ignoring the ache of his muscles – he was too fixated on keeping his glare as sharp and unforgiving as possible, and his lips sealed. Call him whatever names you want – dumb, immature, dramatic, he’d heard them all before anyway – but Lance knew what he was, and what he wasn’t. And Lance? He wasn’t senseless. He knew he was in deep shit right now.

His eyes flicked to his wrist, only to mourn the absence of his watch again. What time was it? Could he reasonably try to call for help? How had Lotor even gotten through here? Keith had had said there’d been a lot of people guarding this floor.

Ugh. He supposed it didn’t matter how Lotor had gotten in, only that he had, and now Lance was in no complex terms fucked. In effect, his life had gone from bad to worse to rock bottom, only for a gaping sinkhole to open up beneath him and drag him straight into the molten inner layers of the earth. He’d plummeted from cloud nine and right into the fire and brimstone of hell, only to rebound off of that and end up here, in some fucked up brand of purgatory.

Don’t say anything. Don’t. Don’t.

Lotor approached the bed and grabbed one of the chairs, dragging the wooden legs over the floors with a shrill, grating sound, stopping a few feet shy of Lance’s hip. Sitting down, almost lazily, the Prince let out a weary sigh and looked Lance over with a soft gaze, colored by a strange sense of fondness that made Lance plenty uncomfortable.

“I suppose I can’t blame the Marmoran Prince for wanting you all to himself,” he began with a little huff. “We’re lucky that explosion didn’t mar any of your finer features. Your marks are especially beautiful.”

Lance scooted back a few inches, hoping the disgusted expression he made demonstrated exactly how he felt about Lotor’s opinion.

“Oh.” Lotor leaned forward, a wicked smile tracing his lips. “That’s right. Marmora’s Prince has already made a claim for you. And you want him too, don’t you?”

Lance tried his best not to react, to just listen in passive silence… which didn’t seem to satisfy the Galran Prince at all. Evidently, Prince Lotor enjoyed the back-and-forth game of it all, and when Lance refused to play his part in the man’s fucked up power trip, it did not end especially well.
Without even bothering to get up, Lotor delivered a swift kick to Lance’s ribs. Taken by surprise, he had little choice but to furl with the force of the hit and landed, unfortunately, on his back. It wasn’t as excruciating as it had been when he’d been first thrown from his cot, but it certainly wasn’t pleasant, and a strangled hiss ripped from his throat. However slightly, he arched his spine to get the weight of his body off his back, even if doing so stretched the skin around his shoulders and ribs to the point of pain.

The Prince leaned back in his chair like nothing had happened. “I asked you a question. I don’t like to ask twice. Marmora’s Prince – you want him, do you not?”

“I – fine, yes.” Lance pushed himself to all fours deliberately, trying to lace as much venom as possible into his voice as he made sure to position his back in the opposite direction. “Since when do you care about what I want?”

At that, Prince Lotor let out a chuckle – what the fuck? – and stood up. He stepped forward even as Lance tried to scoot back.

“Well, it’s important to know these things. I’ll do my best to prevent him being killed if you do care for him; that would be an unnecessary heartbreak for you, and that is something that I would not want.”

“I’m pretty sure Keith doesn’t need you looking out for him,” Lance spat the response on instinct rather than thoughtful deliberation which, considering his current position, was probably not the best idea.

However, Lotor seemed utterly unaffected, instead breaking into a knowing, almost sympathetic smile. “He and I are not so different, you know. Neither of us want this war that my Father is so intent on having. I don’t foresee a promising future for my own people when Daibaazal is an enemy to all; I have the interest of my citizens first, which is why I’ve come.”

Lotor sighed, looking away for what felt like the first time. A small thread of tension holding Lance rooted in place let up, relieved to be able to breath unobserved, if only for a few seconds.

“My Father intends to absorb what remains of Olkarion, but Altea and Marmora have been less than helpful. Indeed, their joint interference has made him no longer the mighty warden of the west, but just another ruler. And he is a man who not only demands respect, but fear from his enemies. A call for warfare at the death of his son was rather clever; I’m almost disappointed in myself for not seeing it beforehand.”

Lance began to draw himself to standing, slowly, hesitantly, minding his spine. He took a generous few steps away, a foreign sort of emptiness swelling in his stomach. It wasn’t quite nausea, but it wasn’t quite unlike it either.

“If he couldn’t justify a declaration of war against the Olkari, Altea or Marmora by killing me, he’s rather ready to latch to any paltry excuse he can find. Now, Marmora aiding and abetting the terrorist who tried to murder his only son? It’s a weaker argument, sure, but it’ll be enough. Wars have been fought over lesser things. I’m afraid there’s not very many options for you that don’t come to a rather bleak end. Because you – you’re the perfect little prize, the best way for him to get everything he wants. A personal blow to Marmora’s Prince, a half-Altean, and with this image you’ve crafted yourself, the Blue Paladin, you’ve even invited people to watch. A spectacle, I think is what they call you. And I know my father well enough to know that he would love nothing more than to make an example of you, I think. To show what he thinks of the Prince’s new pet and Princess Allura’s wayward Altean. Crushing you beneath his heel would probably bring him more joy than anything else.
There are a few possibilities, though it’s hard to know how everyone will react. My best guess is my Father would like for you to become a martyr – that’s his best gambit, you see. A slave who made a fool of half his court, murdered, made to teach a lesson to the masses. It’s hard to know if my Father will be as insistent on the war at that point; it really depends on how deeply such an act would affect the other kingdoms.

Lance tried to ignore the painful twisting in his chest of so casually having the conversation of his potential death.

Then again, you could confess, and that is probably the best outcome overall. You could be written off as a radical, a zealot outside of the realm’s control. It’s not a hard picture to construe from the reality of things, anyway. Of course, in that situation, you’ll still be killed – but in a nice, less brutal fashion. I would guess hanging; I know the Marmorans like to see men swing.

Now, Lance knew showing fear in the face of the enemy was probably the absolute worst strategy, but he really couldn’t help his muscles tensing at the suggestion of being fucking hung. No. He wouldn’t die like that. He’d sooner throw himself from Keith’s balcony than die with a noose around his throat.

Of course, you could do neither. Stay, live, and so long as this country hides you away, my father can claim they welcome the justification for a war. But again, that might be even worse… would you really want to be responsible for a war? Again, that is not my choice to make.

In any case, I think you can see where this is going. All of these paths lead to you at their center, and with war as your shadow. So long as you live, that inevitability will follow you to the far reaches of the earth. I don’t want war, I’m sure Prince Keith doesn’t, and I imagine you don’t. Unfortunately, as things are, the most selfless option would be death. That may be a hard truth to accept.

Lance’s throat felt unbelievably dry, throat desperately trying to swallow his own words. “So… what, you’re telling me I should… just go ahead and die? Accept the guilt for your Dad and let the realm be on its merry way?”

The Galran Prince clicked his tongue, shaking his head from side to side. “Not quite, love.”

Lance wrinkled his nose, but did not interrupt. “One day, I’ll assume the throne in my Father’s place, and I have no problem maintaining peace between kingdoms. Apologies in advance for the tangent, but, indulge me: do you recall the bomber’s face?”

Lance did, vaguely, but he didn’t really know what to do with that information and no one had explicitly asked him about it yet. He opted not to react at all.

Lotor scrutinized his blank expression for a moment before coming to some sort of conclusion.

“I saw them. I wonder if you did too, not that your testimony will hold weight anymore after Lady Valurian’s proclamation, but I would still like to know. They were Olkari.”

It wasn’t a question. Biting his lower lip, Lance nodded, and Lotor looked severely exasperated.

“Right. My Father is a thorough man; I will give him that. They appeared Olkari anyway. You and I – we don’t have the same capacity someone of full Altean heritage, but we can alter our appearances to mimic that of other races, so long as we know how. Of course they were smart enough to make the explosive substance so hot it vaporized the man or woman responsible; I’d be damned if it wasn’t some Altean spy working for the witch… but, ah, I digress.”

Lotor stood from the chair he’d taken to the center of the room at long last, slowly exhaling before
fixing Lance in his gaze; his skin pricked uncomfortable at the intensity of his stare. Why was Lotor telling him any of this? Did he not mention it in his own testimony to avoid implicating the Olkari? That seemed… awfully not-sleazy, not-piece-of-shit of him, so Lance was rightfully suspicious.

The Galran Prince moved a few paces closer.

“**I know what my Father did, what he tried to do; I could claim his guilt in front of the realm and have him tried for treason before sunrise if I so desire, adjust my testimony just so. It would take only a few words to stop a war from breaking out, to have my father removed from the throne and assuming it myself, and to keep you from meeting such an unfortunate end.**”

A sensation akin to terrifying realization looped through the notches in his spine, yanking until the vertebrae squeezed with a violent shiver – he had scarcely the opportunity to ask himself the questions of *why* before the answers materialized by some wayward instinct of survival. A man such as Lotor would never let things go unaccounted for so carelessly; the only reason he would share any of this was Lance was so glaringly obvious it was almost embarrassingly.

**He has no intention of letting you go.**

“And all I’m asking for in exchange is *you.*”

And there it was.

Taking a moment to let that sink in, Lance opened his mouth and closed it again. Was he seriously – seriously suggesting he’d send the realm to fucking war unless Lance agreed? Was he psychotic? Didn’t he just say he was opposed to war?

As if responding to Lance’s private thoughts, Prince Lotor’s smile returned in the subsequent silence, taking on an almost… sinister edge.

“I told you as much when we first met, Blue. *I always find a way to get what I want.* Everyone has a price... I’m just making good on that oath. Better, in fact – because you have such power over these people, and you don’t even realize it. Just say the word, and you could save *thousands,* maybe *tens* of thousands of lives. Marmora and Altea will remain unharmed, their royal families unthreatened. Is that not what you want?”

Unpoetic exhaustion wore down his body and mind at the suggestion alone. Lance was hanging on by a metaphorical thread already, and his mental and emotional fortitude was unprepared to wrestle that kind of responsibility.

His chest hurt. His head really hurt. God, Lance was so fucking tired.

In front of him, he’d failed to notice that Prince Lotor had stop pacing, that he was now watching him. It didn’t even register that he’d come closer until there was a hand on each side of Lance’s head, feet framing each of his own and essentially boxing him in against the wall. When had he backed up into the wall, anyway?

“It should be easy,” the Galran Prince leaned closer, uncomfortably so, and murmured the words in Lance’s ear. The puff of air that trailed down his throat lingered, leaving a sensation over his skin that was unpleasantly warm and unfairly comforting – not unlike the cloying wine that burned Lance’s chest after hours of sleepless, restless darkness in the cellar beneath his aunt’s house. He didn’t want to enjoy it, but his body couldn’t help it; his instincts thrummed with the need to survive, ruling out reason and emotion.

“There will be no war. All I ask is for you to be one of my consorts. Everyone wins. I could even
make you happy, if you let me.”

There was just something about… this guy.

This fucking guy.

He was a first-class dick, certainly. A shitty, awful person, and the prospect of giving him what he wanted made Lance’s stomach turn, made his throat seize on any words that even hinted at agreement. Half-Galra, half-Altean, he was one-hundred thousand percent fucking psychotic, sociopathic, but this feeling, the one that pumped black ink in his veins? For Lance, the feeling was bodily, almost sickening; it went deeper than just disgust or annoyance, burned more wrathfully than mere hate or loathing. It made him want to tear up his own skin and punch walls and kick up dirt; it made his hands ball to fists, his legs tremor with the urge to run, his jaw grind to the point of pain. This feeling – it made him want for anything, anything, that could contain the breadth of dark fury that had begun to burn, smoldering somewhere beneath his surface.

An unsolicited visual stirred in the fore of his mind, some mixture of memories and paths of a possible future, and Lance genuinely felt ill at the reality of what Lotor was asking of him.

God, he wanted Lance – to do what? What does it even mean to be a – a consort? What would that mean? What, be turned into Lotor’s personal whore? A reliable, easy fuck?

And maybe, just fucking maybe, Lance could stomach the thought. These were impossibly high stakes, after all, and even if the mere suggestion of what that would entail made his skin feel hot with shame and his stomach coil in revulsion, Lance thought he could maybe do it. He wasn’t so selfish that he would let other people die, if that was the cost, but that was not all there was to it, and he knew it. The words themselves may have remained unspoken, but it was clear that was not all of what Prince Lotor wanted.

He wanted Lance to want him.

For just a few ticks, Lance considered, really considered, his options. He tried to imagine the tiny kisses he’d left all over Keith’s face when they woke up in his bed together, the Prince’s sleepy groan of protest, Lance’s little bit of laughter, the subsequent smirks and smart-ass remarks. And he had to ask himself if he could handle it. The thought of being touched and kissed, having his hips held and lips bruised and breath stolen by anyone but Keith, and if that wasn’t difficult enough, but pretending to want that? To act like he would enjoy the praise when he listened and gods-knows-what punishment he might face if he didn’t?

“Well?” Lotor prompted. He’d leaned down so they had only a few inches’ distance between them.

And Lance?

Lance was a little fucking sick of being backed into walls, stuck in basements, cornered, and trapped.

He wasn’t a toy, and he certainly wasn’t Lotor’s plaything.

“Go fuck yourself.”

And, his own injuries be damned, Lance reared his head back into the wall and snapped forward with enough force to make his own temples ache, smacking Lotor right in his stupid, stupid face.

The Galran Prince staggered, evidently taken off guard – serves him fucking right, he thought grimly – and Lance shoved him back with every ounce of strength he had in his, admittedly, weakened state.
It was enough to knock him off his feet, and the Prince fell back looking more dumbfounded than anything; Lance would have preferred to have inflicted a little more physical pain, but hey, he’d take what he could get considering he was struggling to stand upright.

Chest heaving, Lance bothered to leer over him, if only to prove his point.

“I would literally rather walk out of this room and ask your Dad to kill me with his bare fucking hands then spend a single second with you, asshole. *F*uck you. If that’s the cost of peace, then so be it. I’d rather be dead.”

In response, Lotor looked… well, murderous might be putting it politely, but that was pretty close. His lip curled into a sneer, and a hand thrust out and grabbed Lance’s ankle, tugging him forward. Lance narrowly avoided falling on top of him, one leg managing to remain far enough astride to keep his balance in an awkward-half kneel. Still, he’d take it over the alternative of falling directly on top of Lotor’s body.

A hand grasped his face and jaw, crushing as it yanked him forward.

“You are foolish, so pitifully persistent. If you die it’s the same, and you would risk – ”

Lance managed to jerk out of his hold, didn’t even care to let the Prince finish before grappling with his arm with the unfractured wrist.

“I really don’t care what the *f*uck you think,” he managed to grind out, his voice a gaelforce storm, weeping rain and crashing lightning and pouring forth all his pent up rage, finally manifest in his seething words. “You think you can – you can just come in here and act like you know anything about me? Or about what I want?”

“Newsflash,” Lance’s snatched one of his arms back, dropping an elbow into Lotor’s precious fucking face, and there was a satisfying crunch that amounted to Lotor’s nose bleeding. He laughed, a mirthless sound. “I didn’t ask for any of this, what did you call it? *Power*? Or – or sense of control? *F*uck you. I didn’t ask for any of this, but I certainly didn’t survive it to be pushed around by the likes of you. So – ”

“Know your place,” Lotor snapped back, one hand seizing Lance’s collar and the other one of his shoulders, enough to wretch him back and away, and they came to a sort of kneeling-grappling-struggle where Lance was, unfortunately, now at a disadvantage. Lotor was taller and had stupid Galra strength on his side, not to mention he was wearing fucking armor while Lance was wearing loose cotton clothing. In a moment of weakness, Lance’s grip slipped over the armor and Lotor’s hand latched to his throat, and the Galran Prince brought them both to standing as he crushed Lance’s windpipe beneath his grip.

“You don’t seem to understand your own situation. I’ve tried to give you the choice, the best possible choice, for someone in your position – but if you must be stubborn, *so be it.*” Lance clawed at the Prince’s plated fingers, gasping weakly when the pressure shifted long enough to let him breath before returning with a vice. “Have you been so spoiled by Marmora that you fail to realize what ruthless ends slavers are willing to go to get back their property? With the news of your identity, I’m sure it won’t take long until those still operating on the black market to work out where it is your family has been tucked away all these years.”

The color drained from Lance’s face, the marrow of his bones replaced by lead. He stopped struggling immediately.

“What was that little village called, hmm? *Varadero*?”
A spring coiled too tight, his nerves finally snapped, his head shaking from side to side, a tremble reaching all the way down to his fingertips.

“And imagine the price,” Lotor continued with a hint of admiration. “People would be willing to pay good money for the family of the Blue Paladin, considering the name you’ve made for yourself. Perhaps I’ll buy them myself.”

His vision was starting to dim around the edges, and Lance tried desperately to move. Barely, he managed to gasp, “N-No. Wait.”

Lance had dignity, but he was willing to swallow his pride when it came to his family. He’d always been willing to do that; there was nothing he wouldn’t do for them. “Please, don’t. Don’t.”

However slight, the pressure over his throat lessened, the floor solidifying beneath him. Stupid, unwanted tears pricked the corner of his eyes, and a nightmarish vision began to unravel in his mind’s eye, a show puppeteered by the darkest corners of his imagination.

Lance saw his Mamà, perhaps with a towel thrown over her shoulder, one of the nieces propped up on her hip. He saw her answer the door when a knock called to her, saw faceless men with crumpled parchment, his father’s name, his siblings’ names, his own name plastered all over them. Words like property and ownership and repossession bubbled through a garbled haze, like their speech was filtered by a smoke screen.

Maybe it would be nighttime. He imagined it was nighttime.

He saw his siblings dragged out of the house. Luis would probably try to calm Maria and Sonia. Veronica might be lucky enough to be at work in the city, not to have to witness the whole thing, and Marco would probably try to fight them – something Lance had learned was not ever a good idea with these people, but Marco didn’t know that. How could he? It was Lance who knew what it was like, dealing with these people, knowing when to fight and when to submit to their demands.

Absurdly, all he had to do was blink, and he was a child again, thirteen and bright-eyed as he strolled into the kitchen. He saw his Mama grasping a piece of paper, her hands shaking, eyes red-rimmed.

“Mama, what’s that? Are you okay?”

“O-Oh! Lance, mijo,” she scrubbed at her cheeks and laughed. “Yes, yes. Fine. It’s just a letter, from your… Aunt. She’s asking for help for her estate… her husband just recently passed, it seems, and was offering for one of you kids to stay with her and earn some money. I was just… um, surprised, to hear from her.”

A bounce in his step, he eyed the letter curiously even as she moved it away from his prying gaze. “Oh, whoa, really? Where does she live? What’s her name?”

Fuck. Even now, the memory was clear as sunshine on a cloudless day.

“…It doesn’t matter, mijo, no one is going to go help her. You’re not old enough, first, and the others –”

“No! Wait, I wanna help! If I can help, I want to. Plus the money would help with things here, right? With Papa gone the money could…”

“Mama?”
“Mama, d-don’t cry. Why are you crying?”

“It shouldn’t even be a choice,” Lotor whispered, so close Lance could practically taste the words in his own mouth. Always a smartass, Lance had to bite back the urge to reply, that’s because it’s not a choice at all.

Lotor continued, uninterrupted. “Your family will be safe. You’ll be safe. The realm will know peace. Neither Princess Allura nor Prince Keith’s life will be threatened, their nations will remain unharmed. Have you really any reason to refuse?”

His stomach roiled and his heart clenched painfully because – because yes, he wanted to say, so desperately wanted to say, but he couldn’t. Any reason, any thought that bubbled to the surface, any loophole, they’d all been explained away. He really didn’t have a choice. People would die – a lot of people – if he said or did anything besides submit.

Submit, submit, submit.

It could be the subtext to Lance’s entire life up until that point, and probably would be until the end of his given lifespan.

Click.

The door opened. And, his heart seemed to stutter to a stop, time standing still with the ring of a bitter pang of hope, of desperate hope, that reverberated in his chest.

Please be Keith or Hunk or Adam or Shiro or someone please please please –

“Excuse me, I hope I’m... not… interrupting...?”

It was, as a matter of fact, a voice that Lance knew, but it wasn’t familiar, not like Keith’s or Hunk’s or Pidge’s would have been; it wasn’t the breath of relief he was hoping for, that Lance had so desperately wanted.

But, maybe this time, it was for the best that Lance did not get what he wanted; because instead, standing in the doorway was perhaps the single person he absolutely needed.

“Y-Your Majesty!” Lance fucking jumped away from Lotor, whose grip had slackened in mutual shock, and he hastily bowed, keeping his eyes forward in what he hoped desperately to convey a look of I’m-sorta-in-love-with-your-son-nice-to-meet-you-ma’am, but also please-fucking-help-me-this-guy-is-psychotic.

How to convey that in words?

“Um, hi.”

You’re doomed.

“I’m – Hi, sorry. I didn’t – this was – I didn’t mean for us to meet like this.”

Queen Krolia’s eyes were wide, looking between the two of them, and Lance could only pray to fucking god she didn’t misread the situation.
Lance had seen Keith’s mother at least a dozen times, and, fucking *christ*, she was scary. The woman had the ability to suck the life from a room with her glare alone, or put a crowd at ease with little but a smile. Her frame was not unlike Keith’s, except taller; wide shoulders, muscular, thin waist and legs. She was lavender skinned and yellow-eyed, and her Marmoran armor and many, many blades only served to make her look all the more intimidating.

Just like, *holy shit*, it was the *Queen*.

And, incidentally, Keith’s *Mom*.

Lance wasn’t sure which thought was scarier, to be honest.

Stress? Stress was for *suckers*. He was somewhere closer to dying of cardiac arrest and being downright *starstruck*.

“That’s… alright,” she replied slowly, turning her head over her shoulder and speaking a few words that sounded like some sort of command.

The utterance had barely finished by the time the Galran Prince was sweeping forward, bowing low and polite, showing deference Lance had ever see him pay to *anyone*. “Your Majesty, you came at a convenient time. It seems – ”

“Hold that thought,” she interrupted, tone polite. A quick sweep of dread began to blanket Lance’s skin, the cage of his ribs closing in around his frantic heart – *no no please don’t believe him please he’s lying*.

Queen Krolia stepped into the room, and a few voices from the hallway – guards, it sounded like – called her title but they were cut-off by the definitive *click* of the door sliding in place.

Her gaze shifted, locking with Lance’s, and he felt a chill run up his spine. It was looking at Keith’s own eyes, but somehow deadlier, like a sharpened knife where the Prince’s gaze was still molten metal, not yet shaped by that same sense of fatality.

“Now, Lance, if you wouldn’t mind getting back into your bed. I know Sir Adam would be upset to hear you’re not resting, and I’ve had enough lectures for a lifetime.”

“Um… yes, ma’am,” he didn’t waste a tick, scooting his way across the room and quickly falling onto his stomach with a small groan of relief. “Sorry about, um, *that*.”

“There’s no need to apologize, and please, call me Krolia. Keith would never let me hear the end of it if you called me *ma’am*.”

Lotor stepped forward, cutting off the line of sight between them. His voice was tight, and for once, completely void of its usual condescension. “Your Majesty, there’s no need to concern yourself in this matter. It is far beneath your – ”

“Careful, there.” Queen Krolia took a step closer, at least a head taller and looking down her nose at him. There was a dangerous edge to her tone now. “This young man happens to mean quite a lot to my son. In fact, the only reason I am even permitting you to still *breathe* at this moment is a courtesy to Lance; it wouldn’t do for his first impression of me to be with blood on my hands, but do *not* misunderstand your place here.”

The Prince stilled as if she had slapped him. In a way, Lance supposed, she had.

“I do not know what sort of benign threats you may have made against this young man, but I want
you to understand something.” She spoke with the cold, calculated decisiveness of a seasoned killer. 
“You may be royalty, but do not think for a moment that I would hesitate to shred your vocal chords 
if you disrespect him in front of me. And Lance?”

Her voice flicked back to its earlier breezy, dignified tone. Lance had no shame in admitting he 
flinched anyway – he couldn’t decide if being addressed directly by her made him want to crawl 
into a hole or laugh maniacally. He was so tired that both sounded appealing.

“Um, yes?”

“Do let me know if this Prince ever lays another finger on you again. I promise, it will be the last 
thing he ever does. You are to tell me – not Keith, not your friends. You can inform Shiro or any 
Blade and they will get the message to me. Do you understand?”

It wasn’t a question, even if it was phrased as such. It was an order. Lance nodded his head up and 
down furiously, no longer entirely sure how his mouth worked.

The Queen seemed satisfied, smiling before looking back to Prince Lotor. To say the shift in her 
expression from reassuring to punishing was terrifying would have been putting it mildly.

“Now get out.” Lance didn’t know if he’d ever been so satisfied in his life, laying back on his 
stomach as he watched the Galran Prince stumble over his feet and his words, practically shoved 
from the room as two Blades came into view, each taking the stunned Prince by the arms. “Antok, 
Regris, take him to his wing of the castle.”

“Wh– but you can’t – ”

“I am the Queen, and this is my castle.” Krolia raised a single brow, arched high into her hairline. “I 
do not recall a time where Daibazaal’s pup ever had the authority to tell me what I can and cannot 
do.”

For all of five ticks, a silence so shrill glass could have shattered swelled in the air. Lance was 
desperately uncomfortable, the bandaging over his back itched, his hair felt greasy and amess from 
the struggle with Lotor, his limbs tired and leaden, but he couldn’t move, couldn’t fathom the 
willpower to ever be bold enough to chisel at that moment of tension.

The Queen was the one to finally break it.

“Get him out of my sight.”

It wasn’t until the door slid back into place a final time that Lance realized he was now alone in the 
room with the Queen, and that fact brought his blood pressure right back up to the point of danger.

However, her earlier chilly temperance had since thawed, her movements no longer stiff and hinting 
at constant threats. She walked to the middle of the room, lifted the chair Lotor had taken from 
Lance’s bedside and moved it back into place before sitting down herself.

“My apologies for… well, I’m honestly not sure where to start,” the woman admitted, her gaze 
steady but considerably softer than before. “Now, Lance, I can imagine you’re extremely tired, but, if 
you can stay awake with me for a few dobosh I would really appreciate it. There are some questions 
I need to ask you.”

Lance unconsciously dragged Keith’s cloak over his shoulders to fight off a bit of latent sharpness of 
cold in the air, but tried to put on a smile that didn’t betray his nerves. “Oh, right, of course... your 
Majesty – ”
“Krolia,” she corrected with a patient smile.

“Alright.” His own responding grin was genuine, if not threadbare and small. “Krolia, then. How can I help?”

The Queen stayed with him for a little more than an varga. She, thankfully, had a watch on her person and informed Lance of the time – nearly one in the morning – just as they were finishing.

Truthfully, they probably could have wrapped the conversation in ten dobosh (are you hurt, what did Lotor say/do, et cetera), but it had since digressed into a series of anecdotes and stories.

Lance would admit he felt a little silly over the whole thing, as there was an air of understanding that the Queen had directed the conversation this way intentionally, that she had made the decision to stay and keep him company a little longer than was strictly necessary.

Seeing that she was the literal Queen, and was almost definitely sacrificing sleep to be here, Lance was both humbled and warmed by the gesture.

All of that, he supposed, was how he ended up giggling shamelessly, burying his face in his pillow while the Queen recalled a beautiful, harrowing, tale of a five-decaphoeb old Prince Keith throwing a tantrum in the middle of the capital, demanding the vendor give him the tiny plush hippo from her stand or else he would have her tried for treason.

The Queen chuckled at her own story as it came to its conclusion. “Thank stars Madam Gynda was so understanding. Ken looked like he wanted to die of embarrassment. I’d bet a crown – not my crown, mind you, but the coin – that Keith probably still has the stuffed animal somewhere.”

“Oh my – oh my god,” Lance had to cover his mouth with a hand to keep from bursting at the seams. “That was the best thing I’ve ever heard. I love everything about that, gods.”

“I’m glad,” she said, evidently pleased as she got to her feet. “You deserve a little bit more love, from the sounds of it. I am sorry about your aunt’s testimony. I can imagine some of that was hard to hear.”

He worried his bottom lip between his teeth and shrugged.

“It… was, I guess. To be honest, Lotor threatening to buy my family was a lot… a lot scarier to think about. I mean, he was right, it’s not safe in Varadero anymore now. And… I-I know it’s probably a lot to ask, and I know they can’t become citizens or anything, but, maybe…” Pausing, Lance swallowed on the words that were lodged in his throat, praying for courage that didn’t come. A deeply rooted part of him shied away from asking for help, but this was for his family. He considered Hunk’s advice from the other morning, about doing things for himself, about looking fate in the face and telling it to fuck right off. (Okay, he might have paraphrased Hunk’s exact wording, but that’s beside the point.)

“If they moved here, could you maybe… help them find a place to stay? Or well, not you, I’m sure you’ve got like, royal stuff to do but someone in the castle – on your staff could help them get situated? They’re good, hard working people. My younger brother is old enough now to do small jobs, or like, maybe seek an apprenticeship, and my sister Veronica is a hell of a good scribe. Rachel is a teacher, and Luis will do any odd job assigned to him. They’ll work if you’d let them – if they’re allowed to work still, I don’t know the logistics of any of this to be honest, but I don’t want to leave them behind to pay for what my father did, and it’s my fault that all of this came out, so…”

Lance breathed in a slow inhale, finally raising his gaze to meet the Queen. “I appreciate everything
you and Keith have done for me, but, just, if there’s any way to protect my family from this, please.”

Gaze inscrutable, Queen Krolia studied him for the better part of an eternity, in which Lance felt less than confident about the whole thing. Maybe he had overstepped? Maybe this was a bad idea?

Angry doubt pounded against his sternum, and before Lance could stop it, his overwrought nerves began spilling forth more words from his mouth, trying to backpedal or justify his way out of his embarrassment.

“Or – or at least – please don’t tell them exactly about whatever will happen to me, the execution or whatever it is. It would break my Mamà’s heart and I, I can’t do that to her, to all of them. Please just, if there’s anything they can do, any protection, anything, I just can’t let them die or be sold because of me. They’re not slaves, they’re people, and I have nieces and nephews too, and please, don’t let them get caught up in this. I can’t afford to have anyone die for me.”

Something in her expression clicked, her head tilting slightly in a sort of… recognition? Lance dared not call it hope, not now, not yet, but it was something and he latched to it like a drowning man clinging to their last breath.

“Execution?” She repeated, almost confused.

Lance winced but nodded. “I m-mean, of course I don’t want to die, but I don’t want you and Keith, or Allura, or the Olkari or anyone else to have to go to war. If it’s just me, if that’s all it would take… people shouldn’t have to die for me. If the Emperor needs someone to pin this on to keep a war from breaking out, I’m okay with it being me. I want to be – to be useful and – ”

“Lance,” the Queen silenced him with a hand. “Please, stop. I should have been more forthcoming with your earlier, so let me be perfectly clear now. You are not going to die. I want you to nod if you understand.”

His throat felt thick, like words wanting to bubble up but each one popped before they’d reach his lips. Lance moved his head up and down mutely.

"Anything Lotor might have said to you – it was purely manipulative. You’re only seventeen, aren’t you? Gods, that you would offer your life so calmly for this kingdom… I – no. Marmora does not negotiate with terrorist, and Marmora will never sacrifice one of our own to absolve the guilt of a despot. They brought this upon themselves, not you. None of this was your fault”

A surprisingly soft brush of fingers pushed back some of the hair over his forehead, and fuck, Lance didn’t realize when he’d even started to cry in earnest, but he blinked furiously and rubbed his eyes with a hand. Hunk’s mother was the closest thing he had sometimes in Marmora to this feeling, and for fuck’s sake, it just felt… felt nice. His heart hurt every day of homesickness, and this – this eased that constant pain, if only for a moment.

“You are a kind young man, Lance. I’ve always wanted Keith to find someone with an honest heart; I’ve only known you for an hour and you’ve already exceeded those expectations.” She grinned, almost cheekily, when Lance’s face flushed at that remark.

The humor, however, was fleeting, and her expression grew serious once again.

“Now, I will say this again – Marmora is going to protect you and your family, Lance. That is my promise to you. I’m going to have to share with Keith, Sir Shiro and Kolivan, at minimum, what’s happened tonight. Along with a few good men and women who will start the process of gathering your family; they will come to you first and may need some additional information, but they’ll be
discrete. That’s what my people do best, after all.”

“I – thank you. Thank you so much. I’m sorry about all of this – I’m sorry if I’ve made things harder for you then they have to be,” Lance felt the words of guilt pass through him, pulling the strings of his heart like a puppeteer while they went. So much of this felt like it could have been prevented. So much of it still felt like it was his fault, like he could have been more careful; he could’ve tried harder on the night of the incident to stay away from Lotor. He could’ve stayed in that basement, where a very small, very bitter part of his heart felt like was where he really belonged.

The Queen sighed, but the sound carried with a note of fondness that Lance would admit he cherished. “I only want to hear an apology from you if it’s because you hurt Keith’s feelings and you’re begging for my forgiveness – I am still his Mother first, after all. Though, between you and me, I have to say I might like you more.”

A quiet, heartfelt goodbye followed, and she bid him to rest… and promised to find out what happened to his security. Seeing that the Galran Prince had been involved, she suspected less-than-honest exploits were involved, and Lance shuddered. Her honesty was appreciated, but he sincerely hoped she was wrong; the image of two guards laying dead in a random passage somewhere haunted him for nearly a varga before sleep finally came.

Lance slept, and he dreamt of Marmora and a lonely night sky.

He was standing in an alley – a place he’d been before, somewhere in Marmora – and leaning against the craggily brick walls with his head tilted up towards the sky. A thin slit between the height of the buildings parted above him, providing a little window at which he could look try to spot a constellation or two.

There was an immediate recognition, a thin layer he could peel back of his conscious that told him: this is a dream, if only because he would never be allowed out of the house this late. There were chores he needed to do, and his back ached at the prospect of going home, gathering up the materials to scrub down the floors or hunch over one of the girl’s gowns to patch a hole, needle and thread in hand of the low-light of the kitchen.

Meh. If Dream-Lance was going to be home late, he wouldn’t get in anymore dream-trouble for five more dream-minutes.

Were he to walk out on either end of the buildings, Lance would gain a better vantage point, but he rather liked this moment to be alone. It was peaceful here, and he simply didn’t feel like moving, had no desire to disturb the fragile, momentary quiet.

Lance abandoned the quiet study of the stars in favor of looking around him. There were bins topped high with yesterday’s trash, a humid smell of the air that told of a storm that had just passed, and a sheen of moisture that clung to the surfaces that weakly reflected the light of the world around him. It felt of spring, or early summer – his bare feet were not chilled to the point of pain, and he did not wish for a proper coat.

Other than those few, muted pricks at his senses, Lance suspected that Dream-Lance wasn't really supposed to be invested in that world anyway. Too corporeal and heavy and bogged down by burdens of responsibility. He turned his gaze back to the heavens, and at once there was a
resounding tingle in his cheek mark – *marks*? Dream-Lance touched his eye scale, not quite able to remember how he’d gotten a second one to appear over his skin. For all his life, he’d always gotten second-glances for just having one; why couldn’t he remember just suddenly having another? Maybe it was just a dream-mark?

No, Lance knew better than that. Some sort of wall stopped him from delving further, probing as to what gave rise to the long-forgotten twin of his other cheek, and he sighed. His hand fell limp to his side, not wanting to waste the little window he had of the sky in favor of dream-questions that did not have dream-answers.

There was an emptiness, a poignant sort of absence, like a night sky with a new moon as he stood in the echo of his consciousness. Of course the moon was still *there*, somewhere. Creations of that magnitude don’t just fade into nonexistence. If you looked hard enough, you could find it outlined against the backdrop of constellations and space dust, but it wasn’t the same as seeing the lunar face in all its pale, gentle glory. The sky missed a part of itself, the part that was a quiet promise to sailors of a well-lit voyage against dark seas, or the hope of wayward travelers as their campfires and crystals dimmed for another evening.

Lance slept, and he remembered why the night sky seemed so lonely.

The dark left behind in it an ache, the trace outline of the moon that was still hidden somewhere amongst the stars. In time, the light would come back, and the ache in his chest, pricking beneath his skin, far into the reaches in his soul, would eventually lessen.

*Blue.*

He missed her. She slept when she needed to recover; maybe this was a sign that she was healing? Some dream-sign that she was dream-okay? Or, no, wait – *really* okay?

Ugh. His head was starting to hurt, and voices from the streets started to carry into his enclave. Dream-Lance didn’t really feel like waking up, but it also wasn’t worth sticking around if he was going to be bothered by conversation. Even his *dream* body was drained, sore and strained past its natural points – he supposed Sir Adam wasn’t kidding when he said something about Lance being physically drained. When did that happen again?

He sighed. The alley was already starting to lose its luster, the air no longer pleasantly fresh. His rest must be nearing its end, but he couldn’t say he was necessarily excited about it.

These days, he’d fallen into a sort of cycle – sleep, and then wake up into a new fresh-hell that awaited him.

A hushed series of whispers began nudging him awake.

“I *know* he needs rest,” a voice complained, low and concerned. “But *this* is important.”

“So is *sleep,*” another countered, exasperated. “Isn’t it more important that, you know, he’s *alive*?”

The first voice became desperate. “Adam, *please.*”

Lance felt the fogginess of lost sleep start to disperse, the disembodied voices making a little more sense.

“*Please*?”

Groaning, he lifted his head and reached and arm back to massage his neck. Sleeping on his front,
head always bent to one side, was starting to get really old, really fast.

“Nnnnng?”

“…Well, I guess it doesn’t matter now, he’s starting to wake up.” Sir Adam sighed, somewhere off to Lance’s left. “Just be quick and be careful, okay?”

“Thank you. Thank you.”

Lance’s eyes peeled open, the fleeting after image of the back of a certain mullet hugging Sir Adam stuck in his mind as he continued to blink back at the annoying lights.

“K-Keith?” His voice cracked, and Lance cringed before clearing his throat. Pushing himself up, he felt dryness in the back of his throat, puffiness in his eyes like he’d been crying.

Ah. Right.

“Half an hour, Keith. If you’ve not brought him back here by then…” Adam’s warning trailed off as he gave the Prince firm clap on the shoulder, turning out of the room and quickly closing the door behind him.

“Lance, I’m sorry I woke you up,” Keith was by his side so quickly Lance thought he somehow acquired the ability to teleport. “I’m sorry, about, well, everything. Yesterday, or this morning I guess – it’s all been – it’s been bad.”

“Yesterday…? Oh, right.” Lance let out a small laugh, mostly at the sheer hilarity of how grossly understated such a word was for describing the day he’d had. “Yeah. Bad. Have I been sleeping long? What time is it?”

Keith cracked a smile, though the bags beneath his eyes suggested he must be exhausted.

“It’s just quarter past six in the evening. I’m glad you’re finally getting some sleep, and… I didn’t want to wake you, but this – I’ll have to go to dinner soon and I don’t know if I’ll have much time later.” He paused, frowning. “I don’t know if you were awake long – you heard me explaining to Adam…?”

Lips pursed, Lance shook his head. “No I… I don’t think so? Just you had half an hour to do something?”

He’d scarcely spoken the words before he let out a little yelp when, instead of answering like a normal person, the Prince tucked his hands underneath Lance’s arms and began to pull him up out of the bed.

“W-What the hell are you doing, ya quiznak?!”

“Helping you up.”

Thankfully, Keith stopped making a ragdoll out of him and sat him down on the bed so he was sitting up, legs hanging over the side.

“First of all,” Keith began, standing, and, really, just exaggerating the height difference between them. The Prince hesitated for a moment, and just when Lance was prepared to ask him “what gives,” Keith quickly pressed his lips into the skin of Lance’s forehead, whispering a quiet confession.
“I’ve… really missed you.”

Lance’s own vocal chords conveniently decided to take a hike, vacationing in his stomach and rendering him at a painful loss of words. Keith opened his eyes and laughed a bit.

“Your marks are glowing again.”

“W-Well, I can’t help it!” Lance managed a meager defense, crossing his arms but unable to contain the smile that crept to his lips. He took the momentum of humor and went with it. “Now what do you want, can’t you tell you’re disturbing my very important bed rest?”

The Prince snorted and laughed, and Lance’s stomach did a silly flip in response. It was just… so nice to hear him laugh, especially when he looked so tired otherwise. Something trembled in his pulse akin to pride at being the source of the sound, and it caught with the already teeming knot of confused emotions that gathered in his stomach – dulled shock, fearful resignation, quiet admiration, guileless curiosity, hopeless abandon, and hopelessness, in general.

Lance supposed he could not hold Keith in any sort of blame for his emotionally conflated state, nor did he really want to, but it did feel… disorienting. Like they were two pieces of a puzzle that had fit together only a few days ago, and while their shapes remained unchanged, Lance’s wooden exterior had gotten dipped in water, warped and peeling slightly around the edges. Where the Prince just looked – looked happy to see him, which was in itself a hard pill to swallow – Lance felt comparatively lost in himself, in Keith’s own unsubtle warmth, the demanding fire of his presence.

“There’s not enough time for me to really explain,” Keith cut into the tangent of his thoughts, pulling a face. “And I think you’d like it better if you saw it yourself? I’m taking you somewhere, and you’re not allowed to walk there.”

He spoke the words so simply, like it was the most obvious thing in the universe, only to be followed by the Prince turning around and crouching down, extending his arms partially behind him. He was… what, offering Lance a piggyback ride?

Laughing despite himself, Lance leaned back into the bed. “Okay, I might be in the middle of a bit of an existential crisis at the moment, but I can still walk, Keith.”

“I didn’t say you couldn’t,” the Prince hummed. “I said you’re not allowed. It’s doctor’s orders, not my call, so quit complaining and just come on.”

“Wow, you’re so sweet – aAH, MULLET, WHAT THE FUCK?!”

Apparently, the Prince had enough waiting, and just groped around behind him and more-or-less tugged Lance onto his back and stood up all casual-like – never mind that he nearly gave Lance a heart attack.

“I don’t have very much time to do this,” Keith reminded, like that somehow justified kidnapping Lance. Snatching up the velveteen red cape from the bed and shoving it into one of Lance’s hands, he turned and walked right to the door. He pushed it open with his foot, and Lance had to duck in the doorframe to avoid hitting his head. Utterly chagrined, he decided to keep his face low, buried in the nape of the Prince’s neck in favor of risking making eye contact with anyone. He swore he heard Sir Shiro laugh somewhere nearby.

Keith remained quiet as he navigated them to who-the-fuck-know’s where, and it helped Lance get a bit of a grip on his very obviously flushed cheeks.

_Fucking muscular asshole royal trashbag who does he even think he is he can’t pick me up and walk_
me around all over the fucking castle oh my god he smells really fucking good, and ugh, how is this stupid Blade of Marmora outfit even comfortable for him? It's so tight? Not complaining at all, I mean, shit, those fucking biceps, like, fuck? Where are we going, are we on the stairs? We’re going... up?

“Hello your Highness, hello Master Lance,” said a familiar voice – Sir Coran – and Lance heard rather than saw him already moving down the stairs and away, as if seeing Lance carried around like this was not an unusual sight at all. The teen had a fleeting wonder as to whether his cheeks would ever return to their normal complexion, or if they’d be burned red forever.

“Keiiiiiiith,” he whined quietly in the Prince’s ear after a three dobosh of climbing stairs, and he could hear Keith’s breathing start to grow labored with the effort. “Where are we going?”

“The top,” he said. “You’ve never been up there. It’s nice, and there’s something I wanted to show you.”

“Oh? And what’s that?” Lance teased. “I can’t tell if I should be excited or terrified. I can hear the town crier’s already: Handsome, Unsuspecting Slave, Kidnapped by Dashing Prince, Yeeted Over Castle Wall – ”

“Lance.”

“I’m kidding!”

In his words, a smile could be heard. “I know. It’s cute.”

“Cute,” Lance groused, but maybe he was just a tiny bit pleased. Only a really, really little bit, though. “I’ve gone who knows long without a proper bath, or night cream, in the same clothes I’ve been stuck in for days. No, Keith. Not cute.”

“Lying is a bad habit, Lance,” Keith replied coolly. “You should try to break that.”

He dropped his head into the stupid Prince’s stupid, stupid shoulder. “That’s rich, coming from you, Mr. Spymaster Blade of Marmora.”

“Mr. Blade of Marmora,” he repeated with a chuckle, but instead of lingering on the thought, the Prince sighed and Lance felt them turn a different direction, no longer going down, and he lifted his head from the Prince’s shoulder. They’d reached a stretch of the castle that opened to a very long, very wide hallway, perhaps two or three times the width of those that mapped out the castle below them. It was carpeted with a warm, dark gray with that absorbed a soft purple glow from the crystals lining the walls. The fixtures, bannister, crown molding – all of followed a minimalistic, sharp aesthetic.

It felt, in a word, very Mamoran.

Keith took a few steps away from the staircase. “I’m going to put you down now, okay?”

Nodding, Lance slowly fixed his posture, wincing as he adjusted his spine. It wasn’t as bad as he thought it would be, more sore than anything, but it certainly didn’t feel good.

“Ohay,” the Prince was still facing away, voice so quiet Lance wasn’t sure if he was speaking to himself at first. “Okay.”

Once situated, Keith turned around and Lance spotted his familiar, frustrated scowl, a dark fierceness to his eyes that made Lance’s heart stutter in his chest. He was unable to stop the small smile that
spread on his lips when Keith reached for his hand, and nodded.

“IT’s not far.”

The Prince set a fast pace, taking sweeping steps over the carpet that muffled both their footfalls to little but a dull *thump-thump.*

The warm surge of happiness that came with Keith’s touch was brilliant, yet fleeting, as the wordless silence began to weigh on the footholds of Lance’s confidence. He had been living in such a bizarre sort of touch-and-go reality, his sense of time splintered rather than abiding by a steady flow; he didn’t know what was happening besides what was told to him by others, and it made his whole sense of self feel slightly… what, alienated? Distant, at least?

Disoriented and coiled tight by his own nerves, Lance wondered what Keith was thinking, what there could be worth seeing. He subtly tried to pick up his pace to encourage them along faster.

It was when they finally came upon a door, weakly outlined by in the purple lighting at the far end of the hallway, that Lance breathed a small sigh of relief. At least there was a destination in sight.

“We call this part of the castle the battlement. IT’s the highest point accessible from within the castle – technically, IT’s possible to get to the top tower, but you would have to climb the exterior wall and… yeah, no. There’s not even anything up there to see, so… This is IT.”

Keith slowed his gait. His voice took on a what sounded almost like… what… nerves? Excitement, maybe? He took the cloak that Lance had, admittedly, forgotten he was holding and threw it over Lance’s shoulders.

“It’s cold outside,” he explained. “IT’s snowed a little. And, well. Let me just…”

Before Keith could finish, he pushed open the door, and they were immediately met by rush of bitter wind, so cold and shocking he felt like it was trying to adjust his body to having Blue’s temperature tied to him all over again. Keith took a few steps forward, up a narrow, creaky set of stairs and, mercifully, did not try to abduct Lance this time. Instead he waited, patient and perhaps a bit… hesitant, looking back at Lance and then his watch. Lance tightened the cloak over his shoulders and shuffled forward, taking the steps without much difficulty – his back really was doing wonders better thanks to Allura – and sneezed twice.

Quietly, they climbed until the highest reaches opened around them, a large plane of dark stone, stained by ombre rust to near-black on opposing ends of the terrace. A very small amount of snow had gathered, but most of it had blown away in the wind – some small catches had gathered in pockets of shade, where the perimeter wall was buttressed by columns of scaffolding that each came to a point. They were massive structures, like stone arrows pointing towards the heavens; vaguely, Lance remembered one of his mother’s stories about a fletcher’s workshop for the gods; the sweep magnificence of the architecture, certainly lent itself to a sense of the divine and otherworldly greatness.

The real sight to see was the horizon, though. IT was end-dusk, that tiny sliver before day was entirely banished from the sky by the moon’s nightly arrival. To the west, streaks of amber and blush twisted over lavender clouds, a single lateral line of burnished ruby disappearing over the trees. The sun was barely visible. On the other end, night had come, sky tinged in a gradient of slate and stone and obsidian. There, the stars were beginning to peek out, popping into existence like interplanetary decorations that hung from the tapestry of evening.

Keith coaxed him out further, the wind not quite as chilling at that moment, and pulled him towards
one of the “windows” formed by the balustrade that overlooked the castle wall.

“This is the best view of Marmora, and of the stars. So I thought… I don’t know. I just thought you might like it.”

“It’s beautiful,” Lance confessed, throat tight. He saw a city, could hear the verbal metropolis even from their peak above the world, lights and sinking sunlight illuminating the streets and the center square, bars and taverns, homes and inns; he could feel a force of life that thrummed in the crisp, thin air, of a capital that gave freedoms and protections of hundreds of thousands, from the clinic on one end to the undertaker on the other.

And yet, the threats of another day clung to him like a second skin. In one breath, Lance could see the city beneath him just like it was, lit up and thriving; in another, Marmora burned. The air tasted of copper, ash and soot, and he couldn’t breathe.

Quietly, he asked, “Will Marmora go to war?”

“Maybe,” Keith answered after a moment, voice softer than the pastel light. “I’m trying to prevent it, but it might be inevitable. I, um, talked to my Mom. She told me some of what happened.”

“Right. With Lotor.” Lance laughed, the sound a bitter thing over the stillness of the rooftop air. He sighed, shaking his head from side to side and turned away from the city. Above, the beginning of a black, infinite seas stretched farther than his eye could reach, than his mind could imagine, all traces pockmarked by twinkling stars. Swirls of interstellar dust, asteroids, planetary bodies or suns were threaded together by the compulsory disharmony that was, in a word, *space*, so far beyond his reach that Lance could do little else but adore it. It was something untouchable, unreachable, but incorruptible. It would not be stained by the ruins of their world – their petty, cruel world.

Keith shifted in his periphery, and Lance felt his gaze drawn to the dark-haired Prince. He too had taken to looking back at the stars, though he was biting his lip, and Lance could practically envision him chewing on the words he wanted to say. There was, just like the last time they’d looked at the stars, something achingly beautiful about how the deep purple in the Prince’s eyes caught the light, sending a glimmer back into the world.

“I’m sorry,” Lance blurted, reddening and looking away when Keith turned to him. “I’m sorry about all of this… I didn’t mean for any of this, you know? When I stopped you back in the city when we first met and then everything after, I just – I feel like this is my fault. I feel like all of this is my fault. You shouldn’t have had to deal with any of this. I don’t know what Blue was thinking.”

“Hey, don’t say that,” Keith rushed in immediately, stepping into Lance’s personal space like he belonged there, like it was the most natural place for him to be. “Don’t talk like that, Lance. This wasn’t your fault.”

He wanted to say he knew that. In fact, maybe Lance *did* know that, but, his heart wasn’t exactly known for being reasonable. It was so beautiful up here that it actually hurt, the world down there was quite literally Keith’s to rule, and he was up here, wasting his time by trying to comfort Lance? This wasn’t Lance’s place – he was destined for small things. This special, reserved place, the top of the world; it was not meant for the likes of him.

A gentle hand moved to his cheek, painting a burning line into his skin. The thought that Lance had wasted so much of Keith’s time already made his heart hurt, his stomach clench in shame.

“I— I don’t know why you brought me here,” he admitted, leaning into Keith’s touch, just for a moment before gathering enough will to reach his own hand up and grasped the back of Keith’s
wrist, guiding his fingers away. “I really shouldn’t be here. Keith… I know, I know you’re… trying to look out for me. That you probably wanted to cheer me up, but, didn’t you hear what my aunt said? I’m literally a slave, Keith. I can’t do anything, can’t offer anything more than that. And you – I don’t need you to save me, or pull me out of some fucked up fate. If it was between me and all of these people, all of these people,” he said for emphasis, turning and waving an arm over the wall, “You have to choose them. I know your Mom was trying to help me earlier, but I don’t want it. Not like this. Not if it means…”

A painful well of tears began to pool at the corners of his eyes, and his voice dropped a bit in his effort to keep it together. “I want my family to come here. I want them to feel safe and to be able to not have to worry about… being slaves.” Lance managed a deep breath, feeling the chill of ice run over his veins. “My family doesn’t deserve that. But I do.”

They remained in tense silence for, truly, who knew how long. Lance felt like it was hours and seconds and lifetimes, and it could never be cold enough to make him want to go inside, wasn’t icy enough to make him want to do much else but chase the frostbite in his fingertips all the way up to his joints and into his heart.

Eventually, however, time persisted. Winds shifted, and Lance could sense Keith move closer, step beside him so they looked out over Marmora at almost the exact same angle. They faced the western sky, the horizon quickly vanishing.

His hand found one of Lance’s own and tucked them both into a twist of the cape to keep them warm.

When Keith spoke, his tone was almost wistful. “You’re wrong, you know.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” he scoffed, but glanced in Keith’s direction anyway. It was clear he had something to say, and Lance was weak but to listen. He would always listen to anything Keith had to say, his hair loose and messy and annoyingly, perfectly unkempt.

“No one deserves that, to die for something that has nothing to do with them. This conflict has existed since before we were born. It’s not your responsibility to die for it today.”

“But – ”

“Let me finish,” his jaw was set, gaze determined yet fond as he watched the quickening of twilight, the sun sinking beneath the western tree line. “If there is war, it’ll be because the Galra want war. Not because you did or didn’t do something that some –” He paused for a moment. “Some quiznak tried to threaten you into doing. Lance, I know we’ve been over this but – I am the Prince. Of course we’ll do whatever we can for your family, but that same thing extends to you too – if you consider Marmora your home, then it is my duty to protect you. I don’t care if you’re a slave or a servant or the Blue Paladin or a Serrano or a McClain – you’re still Lance, you’re still …the guy who hunts for fish for his nieces’ birthday because he gave away all his money. The guy who literally jumped in front of a bomb to protect someone you barely knew.”

His lips quirked up ever-so-slightly. “I want to do this for you, and your family. I know you can take care of yourself. But I want to take care of you, too. I want to be able to give you things or do things for you, and I don’t want you to feel like you owe anyone anything, especially not me. Okay? You deserve nice things without having to give anyone else something in return. That’s why I’m doing this. Why I’ve got to end this with the Galra – and I want to do it with the Lance that swept up my whole court and country as the Blue Paladin; the Lance that sneezes twice when he goes outside, and who yelled at me to shut my quiznaking quiznak for trying to ignore my own feelings. I want to do this with the Lance who knows…” He paused, shutting his eyes with a momentary grimace before
turning to face him fully, his smile returned in earnest. “Exactly who he is and what he’s got to offer. That’s the Lance I fell in love with.”

There was a pause.

A very long, very soft-smiled pause, until, evidently, Keith realized what he just said. Quickly followed a very obvious shade of crimson that crept up his neck, completely engulfing his pale complexion. Lance honestly wasn’t much better. He could feel his eye scales glowing for how hot his face felt, forget the cold autumn air.

“I – I mean – I didn’t mean to – I mean I did mean it, but I didn’t mean IT like NOW. That’s not – I didn’t – wait – I don’t mean – you don’t have to say it back or let’s just pretend I didn’t say that last part?”

Lance was laughing. And crying, a little, but mostly laughing.

Keith’s chagrin was palpable, a force so great he almost felt bad for laughing, but all of Keith’s honesty had certainly paid off because, god, he was probably just letting his own anxieties bleed him dry but it was just so validating to hear that, all of it, it was enough to mend some of the scraps and cuts that had nettled their way into his heart. It felt like he wasn’t just lost in his own head, in his own emotions, always feeling too-much too-fast and that maybe there was another way, a better way.

If anyone could, Keith could make him believe in another way.

“Keith?” He said, not really paying attention as the Prince rambled. “I’m – I – ”

Lance found the front of his Marmoran hood and tugged him forward, bringing their mouths together with a sudden, errant shudder of impulse.

Like a flipped switch, all the insistent buzzing in his mind that had been carving cracks of doubt down his spine, through his bones, joining with the song of slighted loneliness and petty envy, disappeared. Lance did not think for a second, selfishly – why is this happening to me? The thought was still there, but it was louder, more direct, and much more enthusiastic – almost, I can’t believe this is happening to me.

Keith was here, for him. Keith was here, kissing him back after a moment’s surprise, searing against his wintery skin where he held Lance, gentle and sure. It reminded him of how beautiful it could be to be vulnerable.

Too often had he lately felt himself left worn at the insistence of his own life led by honesty, at least in this building that was both castle and symbol of all that Keith’s world had to offer. With such a simple gesture, Lance couldn’t even remember why he’d been anxious in the first place.

And yet, all at once, his mind chose that very moment to become fixated on the fact that they were alone, and how Keith tasted like pure sin, lips warmer than a roaring hearth even in their slight dry drag across his own – fuck, that was downright addicting. If that wasn’t enough, it was all too easy to fixate on his knees where touched his thighs, separated only be the wickedly thin outline of his Blade of Marmora outfit, one that Lance had never actually seen him wear up close and pity the thought – it looked terrible, awful, not the sexiest goddamn thing he’s ever seen, no sir.

The kiss was heady, a fountain of wants and emotions overflowing at the eager line of connection, so warm and all-encompassing that he was left breathless, stupidly and sloppily trying to pull Keith closer, to demand entry past his lips and into his mouth, but he needed to – he needed to stop before his thoughts became even more lost.
“I am so stupidly in love with you and I hate you so much for it, you dumb, stupid, Prince. I love you. I love you.”

Keith’s own expression turned, well, comically blank. His eyes were wider and darker than Lance had ever seen them, and he was damned near ready to drown in them. Instead, he yanked him forward again with no pretense besides wanting to chase his warmth down his throat, into his chest, through his bloodstream.

He tasted of escape, of protection, and Lance wanted those things, wanted him, wanted to find that and hold onto it and maybe never really let it go.

Just when Lance was forgetting how to breathe again, it was Keith who pulled away, and he was smiling. Just, outright grinning.

It was unquestionably the best thing Lance had seen in days, maybe weeks. Maybe ever.

“Your marks are glowing again.”

Lance squeezed his eyes and dropped his head slightly, trying to hide his unfairly obvious bodily response. “You don’t have to point it out every time.”

“I want to. They’re pretty.”

Ugh. Someone stop him; Lance’s heart was far too weak to hear such things.

“Did you mean it?” Keith asked with a certain brand of uncertainty that struck Lance as unfamiliar, and deeply honest. “I mean, I d-don’t want you to feel like you have to say that or feel that way because I did, or do, I didn’t mean to say it, I feel like everything is so, ugh, fast? And I know that we haven’t even known each other for very long but I just – I know that I feel that way, I can’t help it. I don’t know how this is supposed to work.”

“No, it’s okay,” he replied gently, sighing contently as he leaned into the little space between them, resting his head on Keith’s shoulder and closing his eyes. “I meant it, too. It’s pretty hard not to fall in love with you. Trust me, I tried.”

The Prince’s frame quaked slightly with a small laugh, and Lance failed to bite down a smile.

“I should take you back now. The sunset was what I really wanted you to see. Adam might actually hurt me if you’re not back in…” Keith cringed when he checked his watch. “Seven minutes. Let’s go.”

After two sneezes and one set of stairs, they were back inside with the door sealing behind them. Lance, in spite of everything, felt hope anew flutter in his veins, run timeless with his pulse. Keith took his hand automatically again, and he looked down at their interlocked fingers.

“Thank you for… I think I needed out of that room for a little. The fresh air was nice, and after, erm, Lotor – I don’t know. I felt weird.”

A flash of something ghosted over Keith’s expression, so brief Lance wasn’t quite sure if it had really happened or if he’d imagined it. A small smile instead replaced it as he led the way back down the hall.

“You’re welcome. I’m glad you liked it, and, don’t worry about Lotor. He won’t bother you again.”

Snorting lightly, Lance had to stop from rolling his eyes. “Geez, you make it sound so serious. Did
you do something?"

Breezily, Keith said, “It’s nothing.”

[KEITH]

APPROXIMATELY TEN HOURS EARLIER

So… about that breakfast.

You remember, the one that Keith was very much excited about? Well.

The Queen had come to his room at about eight in the morning.

“It’s about Lance.”

The retelling of the previous night’s events, staring one Galran Prince and Lance, only took, in all, about ten minutes. That had all transpired between midnight and one in the morning, according to his Mother.

Breakfast was to begin at eight-thirty.

...

Keith bid his mother thanks, for the, well – advice wasn’t quite the right word, but it was close. He dressed quickly and in silence, a calculated sort of calm had settled into his bones down to the marrow as he took the stairs down to the Lesser Dining Hall.

His Mother’s presence, while short, had certainly helped to keep Keith calm, but she wasn’t entirely like him. For all Keith was in his blinding rages and explosive impulses, the Queen’s anger was icy and lethal; it was evident that her own fury had been tested and tried in the hours before Keith woke, when she had found Lance, by the deadly glint to her stare and the subtle hostility of her frown, her body language.

Keith took a small comfort in the fact that Lotor had probably been scared out of his fucking mind.

In any event, the Queen made Keith promise, cross-his-heart, that he wouldn’t seek out Lotor with the intent to kill him. She had, essentially, ordered him to sit and have a civil conversation so that another hurdle of this fucking nightmare could finally be behind them.

And Keith was reasonable. Murdering Lotor in cold blood would just make this mess more complicated.
That said, she only made Keith promise not to *kill* him.

“Good morning, your Highness,” a familiar face greeted at the door to the Lesser Dining Hall, and he did a double-take when he recognized the guard as Plaxum.

It was surprising enough to give Keith pause. “You’re back on duty? Already?”

Behind her, the large doors were closed and locked – presumably for security – so the other guard began to fiddle with the mechanics to allow him entry. While he did so, Plaxum dropped her as-expected stoicism in favor of a more familiar wry smile. She had been placed into his usual guard for long enough that their relationship had grown into one of mutual respect, and, by extension (indeed, perhaps by necessity), genuine. It was unlike the feigned, *kiss-your-ass* displays that Keith was used to receiving, anyway.

“It’s better to be back then to sit and wait. At least this way, I feel like I’m doing something… even if it’s not much,” she admitted. “Luxia took up her Majesty’s offer to accept Marmora’s protection, so she’s being processed for expedient citizenship in the Capital.”

That was, for once, some good news. Keith hoped his smile was genuine, if a little small. “I’m glad. Enough people have gotten dragged into this and come out worse for it.”

The mild amusement of her expression dropped, replaced by an unsure grimace. “Yourself, included. Which reminds me – that’s why I’m here. I’m back on your personal guard again, relieving this lot,” she nodded over his shoulder at one of the men Shiro had assigned in her place, “but I’ll remain out here until you’re done.”

As if on cue, the hatch unlocked and the bolted behemoth of a door cried in its hinges as it slowly swung open. Keith gave Plaxum a final quick look of appreciation and nodded to the other guard before entering the hall.

He stopped halfway into the hall.

“Plaxum?”

She straightened to attention. “Sir?”

“…Don’t let anyone else in.”

Without question, she agreed, and Keith entered the dining hall proper.

He was, predictably, the last person to make it to breakfast. The Balmerans were already seated, Shay sipping on water and smiling when he entered, Rax looking predictably downtrodden and upset. Princess Allura had brought Lady Romelle (surprise, surprise) to dine with her, and the two were just beginning to take their seats. Daibaazal’s Prince had taken the head seat of the table – *power move*, Keith thought, keeping his expression intentionally blank – and he barely looked up when Keith entered.

Princess Tylivia was the only one amongst the “younger royals” who was not yet in attendance.

That was, admittedly, probably for the best.

Keith strolled in, minding a serving maid who had just moved to refill the Balmeran’s water, and sat down in the seat beside Shay, which was, coincidentally, the seat beside the head of the table.

“Good morning, Prince Keith,” she greeted, and Princess Allura and Lady Romelle echoed the same.
Rax’s salutation came a little late and was muttered, but it was there. “Princess Tylivia won’t be joining us this morning, she’s taken a bit ill after, um, yesterday’s affairs.”

Nodding, Keith sank into his seat and waited patiently to be served. He promised the Queen to be civil, so there was a brief silence as plates and goblets and glasses were shifted around them. His gaze stayed trained to Lotor, observing his mild disinterest and his lax posture. There was just something about him that exuded smugness, so stifling it made Keith’s lip curl.

Once the servants had stepped back, went to their respective places or back to the kitchens, the young royals began to break their fast, and Keith decided it would only be equitable to begin by breaking Lotor’s wrist.

In a single, fluid motion, Keith was on his feet and had Prince Lotor’s whole arm twisted, gasps and yelps erupting from the table as he slammed the joint into the wood grain surface, concentrating the point of pressure where the base of Lotor’s hand met his wrist.

The others were clearly too alarmed to do much else but gape as the Galran Prince groaned and gasped, his body arching out of its seat and into the twist to try to deny some of the strain.

“What are you – ?!”

Nope.

Keith executed a quick snap and felt the pressure yield beneath his arm – the bone, just sprained before, was certainly broken now. Even as the other Prince let out a cracked gasp, Keith wanted to be sure his message was received so, for good measure, he leveraged the weight of Lotor’s arm with one hand – not that Keith really expected him to react very quickly with a broken wrist – and snatched the blade at his hip with his other, driving the sharpened metal neatly through Lotor’s palm. He released it once he felt the wood of the table splinter on the other side.

Keith released Lotor’s arm, but decided to let his knife sit there for a little longer, utterly ignoring the cries at the head of the table, instead glancing over the disturbed stares of the four others. He shrugged as the scent of copper mixed in the air with fresh fruit and cinnamon.

No one said anything or moved to release Lotor, even as he began to curse and reach around to rip the blade out himself. In fact, if Keith didn’t know better, he thought everyone looked rather pleased.

Just before the Galran Prince could touch it, Keith placed his hand over the handle and moved it just so, dragging the metal at a deliberate angle in threat, an invitation for frayed nerve-endings in addition to the corded layers of muscle and skin he’d punctured.

“Listen to me,” he said in a low voice. The other Prince might not even be able to hear him over the raggedness of his breathing, but Keith couldn’t find any fucks to give. “If you ever so much as look at Lance again, I will make you wish the worst thing that could have happened to you was that bomb, burning you alive.”

With a consciously slow extraction, Keith minded the serrated edge, ensuring the blade would tear into as much muscle as possible before pulling it out.

“GaAAAah,” the Galran Prince let out a garbled gasp of relief and pain, cradling his hand to his chest and finally standing upright. He looked paler than usual, which was reasonable considering the large stain of blood he’d left on Keith’s table, and furious besides.

Intrigued by the righteous anger on Lotor’s face, Keith flipped his knife in midair, catching the pommel and angling the blade forward. His heart was racing, but not erratically – predictably,
oxygen compensating to keep his brain perceptive, eyes trailing every twitch, ears catching every breath. Keith’s glare was dark, threatening – *I fucking dare you*, it said.

After two or three exaggerated huffs of air passed through Prince Lotor’s pained grimace, his expression bloodthirsty and enraged, Lotor kicked his chair aside from the table entirely and marched the other way.

Keith held his knife at the ready for a moment longer, envisioned hurling it precisely between the man’s shoulder blades, and sighed in resignation. He *did* promise his Mother not to kill him, so he watched in mute silence as Lotor pounded on the door to be released from the hall.

Once gone, Keith took his seat again and looked at the other royals at the table.

“Sorry about that,” he said while servants hurried to remove the place setting at the head of the table without batting an eye; Marmorans were loyal, and discrete, after all. Keith didn’t bother to move his seat to the head, but he was careful to lean out of the way of the two maids who blotted up the pool of blood that was beginning to sink into the wood of the table.

“How is everyone?”

All of them opened their mouths and closed them again before Allura finally took the initiative to speak.

“I… well… at the risk of sounding morbid, I’ll admit, my day is better already.”

Chapter End Notes

two more chapters to go?? can you believe it, I can’t?

i love this story, so very much. a sequel? well... i’ll never tell... (except on tumblr where I confess all my sins)

but I will say I am excited to finish this and do a few smaller projects for a time. I’ve had some thoughts stirring of a Persephone!LancexHades!Keith AU, and of course I’m sort of in love with my incredibly self-indulgent timeskip-Galteen AU, and, hell, idfk. the million of other ideas I can’t think of right now that have popped into my head lately.
star-crossed

Chapter Summary

Keith needs to work on his impulse control, Lance is an emotional mess, and, well, they end up in Keith's bed. Yep. You probably can imagine what happens next.

(Also, Pidge is the MVP.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[KEITH]

The next morning, Lotor had not come down for breakfast, even with Balmera and Puig’s departure planned for midday. A shame, really. Keith was rather beginning to like breakfasts after all.

In any event, once the meal was over, the men and women in the hall mulled about before heading up for the next inevitable Council meeting. Keith found himself naturally gravitating towards Lady Shay and her brother, who were whispering excitedly about something with Princess Allura and Lady Romelle.

“Oh, Prince Keith, good morning. Though not as good as yesterday, I’m afraid,” Lady Shay greeted with a cheeky smile, wiggling her fingers to remind him – like he would have forgotten the satisfaction of stabbing Lotor’s hand in a quick 24 hours.

Still, he smirked in response. “You’ve got me there.”

Keith paused when he noticed Princess Allura’s posture snap straight up, her expression no longer playfully conspiratorial but hardened by worry. “Erm, Sorry, I’m not interrupting, am I?”

A gentle hand gripped the Princess’s shoulder, her pink gown bunching slightly beneath Romelle’s fingers.

“It’s alright, love,” she said with a warm smile, nodding to Keith. “I definitely want him to know.”

Allura bit her lip momentarily, but her tension melted with another supportive squeeze from her blonde companion. In an instant, her expression became positively radiant, the joy almost infectious as a broad smile tugged on the corner of her lips.

“I’ve asked Romelle to marry me. She’s said yes.”

Keith blinked inanely, surprised even though he probably shouldn’t have been – it was just, surprising, like a tiny pocket of sunshine bursting through an overcast day, he knew the sun was always there behind the clouds, but to see it so suddenly and with such vigor was almost disorienting.

“Please keep it a secret for now,” the Princess continued, her voice a warning as she leaned in
closer. “We want to make an announcement to our families properly when we return to Altea. But who knows how long it will be ’til we’re all together again like this?”

He paused for probably just a bit too long to have been normal, but Allura didn’t seem to mind. If Keith had to guess, she was probably so overjoyed that it didn’t matter whatsoever how he reacted – this wasn’t some sort of search for approval or support. The couple had simply decided to share this intimate little piece of information because they wanted to, not because they had to.

That was a nice feeling.

“Congratulations,” he said sincerely, smiling in return. “Really, you guys seem like you’re so happy. That’s amazing.”

Romelle was practically bouncing with delight, and she scooted up next to him and nudged his ribs.

“If I recall, isn’t the whole affair of the ball supposed to end with you making a proposal, not Allura?” Her voice dropped to a decibel that was barely audible. “If that’s the case, I heard there’s a certain boy on the fifth-floor that I bet would look quite nice in white –”

“W-whoa, ah,” Keith laugh-coughed, taking a wide step back and clearing his throat. “Mmm, we should probably go to the meeting, looks like the halls are clearing out, yeah?”

The blonde stuck her tongue out at him, because they were apparently forgoing the fact that they were supposed to act like dignified adults in any capacity. Keith was at least petty enough to wrinkle his nose in return.

Romelle stepped beside the Princess, resting a hand on her forearm. “Good luck in your talks. I’ll see you later?”

Allura looked like she could have melted, the love in her eyes almost uncomfortably intimate to be in the company of friends. Shay shot Keith a quick, knowing glance while the two young women said their goodbyes.

“I’ll come down for your departure of course, but I’m doubtful I’ll have the chance for this later – so, forgive me, but may I hug you, Lady Shay, Lord Rax?” Romelle stepped towards them with her head bowed slightly in deference.

Rax pulled a face. “I suppose it’s Prince and Princess now, as our Mother will be assuming Grandmama’s place… but, yes. It’s been nice meeting you.”

“Thank you for bringing the Princess such happiness,” Shay murmured as they stepped into a swift hug. Keith’s chest tightened, his ribs squeezing his heart in a sort of bittersweet acceptance. While he was most certainly sick of having so much company, Keith would be lying if he claimed not to like Princess Allura and Ladies Romelle and Shay, and even Rax was more interesting to talk to than the Master of Coin or, gods forbid, hosting court. He would sincerely miss them once they were gone.

(Errantly, he wondered, is this what it felt like, to have a social life? Or friends, even? Keith would admit that it was… nice.)

The five of them exited the Lesser Dining Hall as the remainder of the nobles and royals filed out, their collective making a slow progression towards the main stairwell to allow their various guards and escorts to collect themselves. As they climbed the stairs at a pace that would drive anyone mad, Keith couldn’t help but to wonder after the thoughtfulness of the castle’s architecture – was placing the Council chamber on the eighth fucking floor really the wisest choice? Some of these people were old as fuck, and his own comparatively spry muscles ached before they even reached the sixth floor.
Anyway. The grueling procession gave his mind time to drift, and even as Lady Shay was chattering animately beside him, Keith was rather concerned with another matter.

In his ears, Lady Romelle’s teasing soprano timbre reverberated all the way back to the base of his skull.

“Isn’t the whole affair of the ball supposed to end with you making a proposal?”

The Prince could come to not other conclusion besides that she was absolutely, terrifyingly fucking right. Keith had gotten so caught up in the day-to-day that he’d forgotten entirely about the whole traditional structure that had warranted the ball in the first place. No matter what manner of war or peace or crime or punishment would come to pass, the whole fucking mess was rooted in the fact that he was still very much supposed to be engaged by the end of it.

And his proverbial plan B – sorry, Allura – was quite literally no longer available.

Well, then.

On the one hand, fuck.

On the other hand…

Keith did reveal that he was hopelessly fucking in love with Lance like a complete fool yesterday evening. It was mortifying to even think about how easily he’d just blurted it out, but even the embarrassment couldn’t hold a candle to the overwhelming weight of his heart in his chest when he thought about the fact that – the fact that Lance loved him, too – and maybe…?

Maybe that – they – could actually work?

It was utterly fucking insane, don’t get Keith wrong. He recognized that they’d known each other for, in grand total, maybe two solid weeks? But then, that was far cry from the promised three days he was supposed to have to pick someone to marry. Surely, if he would have been expected to pick someone to marry in three days, two weeks was actually a rather generous head start?

No, it’s still two fucking weeks, dumbass.

Keith sighed, taking his seat while others continued to mill about around him as the Council gathered. Nothing could ever be simple, could it?

There was no amount of tutoring, no lessons or lectures that could help him navigate this sea of confusing, endless emotion. Indeed, the more he tried to get a handle on his own whimsome heart, the less Keith felt like he even understood the way he felt.

Because that’s what this all really was, wasn’t it? Emotion. Sentimentality. Feelings that didn’t make sense because they were feelings, not thoughts or decisions. They weren’t supposed to making fucking sense, that was the point.

Trying to put something so abstract into words was like gathering up all of the leftover snips of dreams that were long-forgotten come morning. Lance was like sunlight peeking through the trees, tragically easy to overlook if you didn’t slow down and realize what it was you could be missing. It actually caused his chest to physically ache to imagine not having been able to notice Lance, to have been so caught up in his own affairs that he could have passed over him like any other citizen, because the extraordinary thing about Lance wasn’t that he had brought some stupid, poetic sort of wholeness that Keith was missing.
No, it wasn’t anything beautiful or figurative like that; when it came to Lance and Keith, it was not the sort of thing that would be memorialized in a hymn or an epic, authorized by romantic language and idyllic imagery.

In fact, it was exceedingly simple.

Lance provided a motivation that was personal, not obligatory.

As Prince, he used to wake up in the mornings by dragging his feet, bound by duty and shackled by the weight of it all; now, his days felt not like one burden after another, but a call to become the leader that he was born to be.

And Lance was like an incentive, and a rival, and a partner all in one – call it whatever you want, the name didn’t matter to him so much as what it meant – that blue-eyed, brilliant idiot gave his own stupid life purpose that extended beyond just his title. That frustrating smirk lit a fire in him that Keith could not snuff out, and it had the audacity to dare him to do something about it even when he knew he was helpless to resist it.

Every one of their interactions was like some sort of unspoken challenge, and Keith recently had the revelation that he was addicted to winning.

Oh, you’re the Prince?

A single, arched brow would ask, and so what?

You’re supposed to be the King, right?

His cheeky smile, lit up beneath a strings of illuminate baubles that overlooked the castle gardens, would demand, prove it.

This didn’t go as planned, did it?

And the wonderful, terrifying, comfort press of their lips together as the castle literally burned behind them, would make its peace, alright, get up and try again.

Is this really what you want?

The sound of laughter, after he’d woken up in that stupid bed on the fifth floor, after Keith had been forced to confront the possibility that he might not wake up again, would compel him, go and fucking get it then.

Oh, Lance. How naturally it came to them, too, that Lance was the one to taunt him. Tempt him. Test and try him. Force him to do, and not simply say.

After all, Keith could think of no greater waste of energy than aimlessly trying to “be better.” He might as well try to teach himself a new language, denying any tutors or books available to him. He could do it, sure. Eventually. But why would he submit himself to something so needlessly difficult? Why would he elect to stumble through darkened streets, when there was such a brilliant light that could conduct him? All he had to do was reach out and accept the spark, flint to fire, and look up. Let the stars guide him to where he was supposed to be, wherever that might be.

Just by being his habitually silly, chilled-skin and warm-hearted self, by talking and laughing and reassuring Keith that being a person entitled him to mistakes, and mistakes warranted emotions, Lance had given him something so much more than he ever thought he needed.
A will to do what he was meant to do, beyond mere obligation.

And it was so fucking obvious now – how couldn’t he have fallen in love with Lance?

And, a wayward question nettled its way to the surface: if that was really the case, then, what was stopping him? From doing what Romelle suggested?

Momentarily stunned, the realization crept up on him so unexpectedly that he felt his throat close up, his muscles constrict in mute shock, his stomach dropping through the floor.

Holy shit. He does want to marry Lance.

They didn’t have to get married tomorrow, or next week, or next year… but, this whole fucking disaster of a week was supposed to have ended with him having picked someone to marry. Right?

He could still do this. This one thing, this one thing that was completely irrational, beautifully chaotic, and irrefutably, one-hundred percent somehow exactly what he wanted. Would Lance be okay with that? It was utterly ridiculous, but Lance had already mentioned that his thoughts on the matter weren’t far off Keith’s – that it was utterly ridiculous – and so he would surely get where Keith was coming from, right? Lance didn’t have to say yes right away or anything, he could take time to think it over and, god, thinking about this at all was terrifying and somehow absolutely thrilling.

What should he do? Propose today? Right now? He knew where Lance was and –

No, wait. Impulse control. Get a grip, Kogane.

The whole goddamn mess was some sort of crazy daydream that had turned into the Prince’s reality, and it had occupied him all the way up until one of ambassadors stood to declare the meeting as started, which shocked him back into the present. Shit, he didn’t even remember sitting down in the Council chamber, and it was already in session.

They’d begun with opening remarks, which were going about as well as expected; Emperor Zarkon’s fist hit the table so sharply, Keith considered asking him to foot the bill to replace it when this was over. The Council chamber was all plush carpeting and soft violet light from the overhead crystals, and, at present, the ornate wooden masterpieces that constituted their tables were splintering and cracking under the Emperor’s ire.

“The war lords that threaten my lands will be insatiable if they hear of this — that a slave could attack the Heir Apparent and not be punished for it!”

“We are still trying to verify —” Shiro began, but the protest was cut-off by another of Zarkon’s men, Commander Prorok. He was a brute in both appearance and in tact.

“And you could verify in mere minutes if you agreed to let a druid, or even one of the Alteans examine his marks! They’re easily traceable —”

King Alfor’s grip tightened so sharply, the metal of his gauntlets groaned in protest. “That would be a violation of his rights as a Marmoran. Our people care about the sovereignty of other nations; it would be a disservice to Queen Krolia and Prince Keith to do any such action, not to mention we would never perform such a task without the consent of the involved persons.”

“Consent?” A wheeze of air rasped from behind the witch’s hood, her head raising just enough to glare across the length of the table. “Rights? Slaves do not have rights, your Majesty, in either of our kingdoms. I can do the examination in seconds, and no harm will befall him. It would put all of this
doubt to rest.”

His Mother straightened in her seat, hands steepled in front of her mouth and nose while she listened. “Be that as it may in both of your kingdoms, we see all people as deserving of fundamental rights. Lance, as a person, is a protected entity under the Marmoran crown.”

“I don’t know, your Majesty,” an Arusian legal counsellor weighed in, rubbing their chin. “While Arus’s formal stance on the matter does coincide with yours, that anyone is entitled to certain basic protections, I’m not sure if this young man is worth such a risk — slave or otherwise. The evidence is rather compelling against him. I mean no disrespect, of course, in regards to the Prince’s preoccupation with the subject,” he paused to lick his lips, shooting a fearful glance in Keith’s direction, who barely managed not to roll his eyes. “But, would it not make more sense to simply allow the examination so we might move forward with a better picture of who the boy really is?”

At this, Puig’s King folded his hands beneath his chin and leaned forward.

“But will his heritage truly tell us anything about who he, as you say, ‘really’ is? I know my daughter, and she may be young, but she does not put her trust in just anyone. She sees goodness in this young man, so I am not so inclined to believe he is responsible for the unfortunate incident.”

“The evidence is hard to refute, though, don’t you agree?” A Galra ambassador leveraged in response, and the King merely took in a deep inhale through his nose and declined to answer.

At his silence, one of their druids crooned, practically jumping on the opportunity to reiterate Lance’s supposed-guilt again.

“Take a boy — a slave — with reasonable motive to act violently towards the Galra, who has no prospects, and he manages to sneak his way through Marmora’s famed security. He wears a false name and a disguise, spends days extracting information from all manner of guests from all of your courts? He was seen engaged in a physical altercation with Dainbaazal’s Heir Apparent the night previous, was never seen actually ever leaving the castle, and was near enough to have detonated whatever device was used to harm Prince Lotor. The motive, means, and opportunity are all there. There is no one else who meets such a description.”

Across the table, Keith caught a glimpse of Princess Allura’s expression. He wondered if she’d ever looked so frightening before, and he decided he rather pitied Lady Romelle if she ever had to be on the receiving end of that fury.

“The opportunity and so-called motive could be contrived as one version of what might have happened, but the means that you claim are not there,” Allura stated sharply. “He is, as you’ve made clear time and time again, of a wealthless heritage — how do you propose he had the expertise, access or ability to make a controlled explosive device all on his own?”

The druid held up a single grey, almost puterified finger as if to silence her, even if the Princess had already stopped speaking.

“A noble Altean family of some of the oldest blood in the realm is also attesting to the young man’s behavior. His only guardian for nearly decaphoebs hedges that he is a thief, combative, and has a history of misbehaving. Assuming he is all of these things, there are no shortage of nefarious ways such a — ”

The remainder of the man’s words were lost to Keith; this time, it was not for his lack of focus, but of attention, as a Blade imperceptibly moved into the very edge of his vision, noiseless as they whispered into Kolivan’s ear.
A look of surprise flickered over the man’s expression, blinking, but the moment was so fleeting Keith was certain no one else would have noticed.

The discourse silenced when he stood up from his seat a few ticks later, turning at attention to the Queen and Prince.

“Your Highness, your Majesty,” Kolivan entered the conversation, or, perhaps more accurately, commandeered it with his brusque tone. “There is an urgent matter, and I must apologize, but there is need of your attention elsewhere. I elect that we suspend the remainder of the meeting until the afternoon.”

“What is the issue, Kolivan?” King Alfor tipped forward slightly, a brow raised. “Is there any cause of concern?”

“Your Majesty,” Kolivan’s voice was dry; clearly, he did not like answering to anyone besides the Queen, but Keith knew he was too smart to act on such insubordinate instincts. “It is not a safety issue, rather, a domestic one.”

Shiro’s brow was drawn. “Shall we dismiss for now, then?”

“I would rather like to know what is going on,” one of the Balmerans interjected, voice razor thin. “If it could impact our travel, we have a right to the information.”

Turned away, Keith could not see the single arched eyebrow, high on his Mother’s forehead as she gazed at Kolivan shrewdly. He paused, processing whatever it was he saw in her expression, and eventually looked around the room.

“As Marmora’s guests, we do not wish to put our domestic troubles onto your respective kingdoms, but there a large party of our citizens have gathered for the court that was canceled due to recent events. They’ve demanded an audience with her Majesty and his Royal Highness. Our men have restricted their entrance to the main atrium, but their… behavior is bordering on violence — we must ask away the Queen and the Prince at this time to deal with this issue properly.”

Were you judging the situation from the Queen’s utterly deadpan reaction, Kolivan might as well have just informed her of the average market price of grain. Several others in the room began to chatter restlessly, however, and Keith simply watched the Queen and waited, doing his best to keep his own shock subdued.

“Well.” She rose to her feet, various boots and graves scuttling in their hurry to mimic her. “I suppose it can’t be helped. If our citizens are demanding an audience, then we must answer their call. I do not desire to discontinue the meeting for this, however; I will see to the citizens, and the Prince will take my place as overseer for the proceedings. I apologize, my humbled guests, please excuse me.”

Keith heard several disgruntled mumbles and mutters trail after her as the billow of her cape disappeared around the corner. Not realizing the weight of her words until she was already gone, Keith scarcely blinked, and all eyes were boring into him, because, oh shit.

“Right.” He managed to clear his throat. It would be painstaking, but Keith would have to try to be as unbiased as possible for the time being. “In spite of the Queen’s absence, let us proceed per usual; I’d like not to waste what remains of the Balmeran’s and Puigian’s time while they are still here. Ambassador, you were saying?”

The room remained tense for a beat or two of silence, enough time for Keith to privately panic, as
though he were hosting court for the first time all over again, but the Daibaazal representative seemed to remember themselves and returned to their not-so-judicious retort to Princess Allura, some of the derision lost from their tone.

“Y-Yes. Well… The boy, slave or not, has demonstrated a pattern of criminality that would easily give him access to the materials and various individuals who could have developed such a weapon.”

Shiro huffed at Keith’s side, leaning forward with a fist sitting on the table, notably clenched in frustration.

“But he has no criminal record. Witness statements are only as useful as the witness’s credibility, and while Lady Valurian is of Altean blood and noble heritage, her word cannot be weighed against the lack of evidence that would support such a ‘history’ as you say…”

The talks continued with much of the same measured restraint from Marmora, with Altea and Puig rebuffing many of the claims made by the Galra. Arus seemed predictably wary of any developments made without the proper evidence, although one of their more outspoken representatives outright claimed that the slave should just be put to death so the matter could be done with. That, Keith recalled, had even disturbed the Olkari who had a habitually rich relationship with the Arusians.

It was not until another two varga passed, Keith considering dismissing the Council so their allies (begrudging or otherwise) could take a short break before the Balmerans and Puigians would leave, that the Queen returned with a polite but brusque apology.

“The matter is being dealt with by our people now. No need to concern yourselves,” she had assured, taking her seat in such a way that did not invite additional questions.

With her return, they proceeded for a bit longer, in part to catch her up on the “developments,” which is to say, to reiterate the same twenty arguments each court made every few hours, and then she directed the dismissal.

Keith was burning with questions, of course. What the hell happened? Why didn’t she send him? Dealing with court proceedings was something he’d done dozens of times by now, but overseeing the Council was not something he’d really practiced. She was, however, predictably inscrutable. The Queen spared not a glance his direction that was not appropriately focused on the conversation, rather than her obvious absence earlier.

His answer finally came later, after the meeting, when the Queen asked the room to rise for dismissal.

“There is one more thing, unfortunately. After the Balmerans and Puigians take their leave, I will need to ask you all to be patient with us. The Council will be suspended until further notice.”

“Suspended?” King Alfor blinked several times, like he’d gotten whiplash from the word alone. “What exactly is happening out there, Queen Krolia?”

She seemed to weigh the words carefully, measuring each one on her tongue before replying.

“Our citizens are displeased by recent events. They are not going to be easily dismissed, I’m afraid, so the Blade and Guard respectively have begun the debriefing process to get them to settle, but this is a temporary fix. I am going to need all of my men and women on this.”

Shock rippled through him, Keith’s impassive expression twisting into a frown. What sort of crisis were they dealing with that would require all nonessential military personnel in the castle? His nerves prickled with concern, relaying back into memories of Slav’s neatly outlined catastrophes
At least one person grumbled about their inability to control their subjects, and Keith shared a severe glance with Shiro, both of them evidently alarmed, and several nobles and royals in the room shifted uncomfortably.

The answers he was waiting for were not far-off, a burst of noise greeting him once the main doors opened to let out the Council into the hallway.

Jesus fucking christ. It sounded like a mob.

[LANCE]

Wrists, Lance decided, were weird.

Like, really, really weird — why were they so veiny? And bumpy?

Now, to be fair to Lance and his...decidedly wayward train of thought… he was extraordinarily bored. He’d counted the tiles in the floor already, smoothed out the corners of the fitted sheet beneath him, tried to wash his hair and face in the little basin of water Sir Adam had provided with mild success — there just wasn’t anything left for him to do.

He simply had to fixate on something. So, then.

Back to his wrists.

They itched. And that, he decided, was annoying.

Lance had taken to studying them back and forth as he lay on his stomach, arms folding out in front of him on the infirmary bed. One was still wrapped in precautionary bandages; he was pretty sure he could take them off and it would be fine, but this wasn’t his area of expertise and figured it would just be best to wait for one of the nurses or for Adam to do it himself. The other was painfully weightless — Princess Allura had still not returned his watch, which meant, there was no Blue.

He didn’t need her, of course. Lance had gone seventeen decaphoebs of his life without her manifest self, but, it was hard not having the luxury of someone to always talk to after growing used to it, the lack of someone who would listen and understand and could push him in the right direction without him having to so much think about it.

Plus, it may have been a small benefit of the whole thing, but Lance rather enjoyed having a timepiece to actually tell him the time. Waking up alone in a windowless room on the fifth floor of the literal fucking castle was disorienting enough, so being without his watch was like a right cross following a left lead straight into his stomach.

That said, Lance suspected it was the middle of the night. Hunk or Pidge, and even Shiro, Lady Romelle or Sir Coran had been there most of the instances when he’d woken up, or at least there would be a nurse, but when the room was completely absent like this, he could only guess that everyone was sleeping.

Except him. Because Lance needs to rest, they said. Sleep, they said. So he did, he slept, and slept,
and slept, and now sense of time was utterly fucked as a result.

Reducing him to his current, wrist-transfixed state.

*They’re like, bumpy. Why do they pop when I roll them? Is that the joint part of the bones in my hand? So weird. Whose grand idea was this?*

Lance, questioning the omnipotence of divine life, did not start when there was a knock on his door.

“God?” he asked automatically.

A hand appeared, and then a hesitant-Keith poked his head in along with it.

He seemed, justifiably, confused. “Um, what?”

“Oh.” Blinking inanely, Lance’s expression turned up into a sheepish grin. “Uh, nothing. Hi.”

A brow raised, Keith entered the room proper, and Lance thought he looked oddly… *uncomfortable*? Nervous, even?

“I wasn’t expecting you to be awake.”

Lance leaned up on his elbows as the Prince approached the side of the bed. “So it is nighttime. I can’t tell time in here like, at all. I sleep and wake up and people feed me and then I sleep again. That, and, get yelled at on occasion. What day is it, even?”

Keith looked around the room, probably in search of the clock that Lance had so fruitlessly tried to find himself a dozen times, before turning back to him with a small smile. “It’s Friday.”

A moment later, he amended his statement, leaning slightly into the bed. “Well, technically, it’s Saturday now. Past midnight.”

Humming, Lance looked over the Prince more thoroughly, noting his loose clothes and — *be still, my weak fucking heart* — his hair up in a ponytail. Definitely, *definitely* illegal.

Nodding at Keith’s appearance, Lance teased, “Couldn’t sleep?”

It was hard to say if he preferred this soft-Keith, who was all wrinkled clothes and tired eyes and sincere smiles, to hot-Keith, with burning energy, sharp tongue and serrated glares. Both were admittedly pretty great. “Is it even considered all proper and stuff for you to be walking around like this?”

Keith looked at himself momentarily before settling the matter with a shrug. “I don’t really care.”

A chuckle bubbled up his throat, and Lance lowered his head to mind his volume, giggling into the sheets.

“You have *such* a way with words, Mullet.” Lance thought for a moment, his shoulders now shaking from the force of the laughter. “If I recall correctly, your first words to me were ‘let me go’ and then you pulled a knife. Aren’t you glad I didn’t listen?”

Flirting and teasing with Keith was notably more satisfying now that they’d utterly fumbled over all of their fears and feelings for the past two weeks (give or take), and it was with a small swell of pride instead of relief as he watched Keith fluster in response. His hand found Lance’s over the bed, and glaring at their fingers as they twisted together, Keith smiled — Lance thought it seemed a bit begrudging, which was just needlessly cute.
“Maybe.” He said eventually, squeezing his fingers. “I guess I am.”

There was that edge to his tone again, nervous or… upset, even? Whatever it was, Lance did not miss it, and he arched a brow. “What is it? You’re acting all weird.”

“Mmm?” Keith glanced up, blinking before his eyes found focus on Lance’s face. “Oh, sorry. I just — I guess there was something I think would be nice to show you, but I don’t know if taking you out this room again is a great idea… I already pushed my luck with Adam yesterday.”

Intrigued, Lance crooked a grin. “Oh? And what did you have in mind? Another rooftop abduction?”

Keith snorted. “First of all, no, and second, it wasn’t an abduction, in fact I recall you saying that you enjoyed it. Also, third, don’t expect me to carry you everywhere. That was a special occasion.”

In response, Lance pouted. Keith barely stifled a laugh.

“It’s honestly nothing, just forget about it. I don’t want you to push yourself, and this isn’t going anywhere. Actually, speaking of which… how are you? You know, feeling? Are you okay?”

Still curious, Lance considered pushing the issue, but he decided to just take the hail mary for what it was and move on.

“I’m fine. Like, really,” he extended his arms and tested his shoulders to demonstrate. “Basically at 100% now. Magic is crazy. I barely feel like anything happened, and with all the initial, like, fatigue from my system being gone, I feel perfectly fine. I’ve got a hell of a scar apparently, Hunk said, and I would do unholy things in exchange for a proper bath, but… good, you know? I’m good.”

Lance’s lips quipped up at the corners at the sincerity of his own admission. It was nice, and simple, and he was genuinely happy to be there and have this conversation with Keith. It felt so normal, so much of what they hadn’t been able to have since they’d first met.

“Has Adam mentioned when he’ll finally let you out?”

“I think he was saying probably tomorrow, after doing some like, basic discharge stuff like undoing the bandages and everything.” Lance nodded, absently rubbing his healed wrist, said bandages still irritating his skin from the constant contact. Trying to make himself seem casual, Lance tagged on, “But I mean, honestly, I feel like I could go right now if you still wanted to show me… whatever it was you wanted to show me. No big deal, though.”

The Prince seemed to consider Lance for a moment, looking up and down his visage, then his shoulders and chest — almost the point where Lance felt self-conscious, but he stopped before Lance grew uncomfortable, a resolute look on his face.

“I think he was saying probably tomorrow, after doing some like, basic discharge stuff like undoing the bandages and everything.” Lance nodded, absently rubbing his healed wrist, said bandages still irritating his skin from the constant contact. Trying to make himself seem casual, Lance tagged on, “But I mean, honestly, I feel like I could go right now if you still wanted to show me… whatever it was you wanted to show me. No big deal, though.”

The Prince seemed to consider Lance for a moment, looking up and down his visage, then his shoulders and chest — almost the point where Lance felt self-conscious, but he stopped before Lance grew uncomfortable, a resolute look on his face.

“I think I have a compromise. Let me bring the thing to you, and you can use my bath while I go get it. If you feel up for it, you can, um, stay in my room tonight. If not, though, I can bring you back down here? Does that sound okay?” He rose to his feet, hand still intertwined with Lance’s.

Words escaped him for a moment, an excited shiver running down his spine at the sudden suggestion of using Keith’s ridiculously posh bathroom and sleeping in that enormous, decadent bed again. Not to mention the possibility that if they were in Keith’s bed that could mean — wait no, don’t go there.

After briefly flashing through some horrible mental images to keep his own, erm, pressing issues in check (which wasn’t as difficult as one might think, seeing as Lance had a backstock of unpleasant encounters with bawdy, handsy, uncomfortable men and women during the course of the ball), he
breathed a large exhale and quirked a smile at Keith as he started to get up.

“Sure, Knife Boy. Let’s go.”

Keith helped him up (with such a tender, delicate touch it was almost embarrassing — Lance wasn’t made of glass, thank you very much, but Keith was handling him like he would bruise if he did more than brush against him), and they stepped out into the hallway, Lance on his own two feet this time. It felt nice to get up and walk, to leave that clock-forsaken room for a change, and his chest was feeling lighter and eager for whatever surprise Keith had in store for him this time.

There were about a half-dozen guards in the hallway, two at the main infirmary door and four others between Lance’s “room” and the stairwell — a bit dryly, he wondered, where the hell were you all when Lotor showed up? As they moved past, each one snapped to attention at Keith’s presence, and it was… well, Lance didn’t know what exactly to call it. Impressive? Bizarre? There was a stiffness and formality to the actions, the automatic deference, the sound metal armor ringing with a hollow depth as it expanded down the length of stone walls in the otherwise quiet castle. Lance found it a bit fascinating, if not more than a little foreign, to see the action firsthand. Were his own actions that automatic when Aunt Hira walked in a room back at home? Would he have snapped straight up when Keith walked by, had they met under different circumstances?

From behind them, the quiet footfalls of two attendants followed them, and Keith didn’t seem to even notice. Were they personal guards, then? Lance eyed them dubiously while they approached the stairs.

“Have you figured out the lay of the castle yet? It’s probably confusing.” Keith said offhandedly after they began to climb.

As Lance recalled, Keith’s room was on the seventh floor, but besides that and the infirmary wing, he was more-or-less clueless. Pulling a grin, he replied, “Nope. Still totally lost, I think you’ll have to escort me forever if I want to go anywhere.”

“Yeah, not happening.”

“Keiiiiith,” he dramatically leaned into the Prince, causing him to stagger on the steps. “You’re not treating me like much of an honored guest.”

The Prince snorted and tugged his hand to urge them along. “Yeah, yeah, whatever you say. Where were we going again? My room? Where you’ll use my bath? And sleep in my bed? I’m a terrible host.”

“Just awful,” Lance agreed, but failed to suppress a peal of laughter that fell from his lips. Keith chuckled, shaking his head from side to side.

“People are sleeping, Lance.”

Lance could practically hear the eye roll, and he didn’t bother resisting the urge to giggle outright this time — he did make sure to mind his volume, at least.

Unable to resist, he hedged, “Oh, right, people are sleeping. Like you’re supposed to be, right?”

They reached the seventh floor a moment later, and Keith looked like he wanted to make a retort of his own, but he ultimately remained quiet and Lance resigned to follow by his example. If this was the floor on which Keith slept, it probably housed other bed chambers; the idea of waking up the Queen by being too loud effectively scared Lance into silence for the remainder of their walk.
One guard remained at Keith’s door, although this one didn’t snap to attention like the others. In fact, they were looking openly at Lance, paying Keith no heed whatsoever.

“Plaxum, if you’re going to stare, at least be subtle about it,” Keith commented as he fiddled with his key at the door, and the guard shook her head and leaned back on her heels.

“Oh, uh, sorry, your Highness. And sorry, um, Lance. Blue Paladin?”

“Lance is fine,” he said, awkwardly chuckling. Keith’s hand slipped from his, and it felt like it weighed a metric ton by his side. “It’s no problem.”

She nodded once, firmly, and took up her post per usual. Just as Keith opened the door and allowed Lance to step through, she, lacking in that same subtly, stage-whispered towards the Prince.

“Nice one, Sir.”

Keith sighed, audibly, and stood in the doorway with a frustrated look on his face. “First, ignore her, please. Second, I’ll be right back, so take your time, okay?”

Lance nodded, not really listening as he gazed around Keith’s neatly kept room, a feeling of comfortable familiarity settling into his bones. This place was too dark for his tastes, but there was something so intrinsically Keith about the space that it felt like a comfortable shade, a refuge from overbearing sunshine on a summer afternoon.

“M’kay,” he murmured, a lazy smile and wave tagged on while Keith watched from the threshold, bemused. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, closing the door and locking it behind him with a resounding click.

Alone again, Lance smiled softly at the door, Keith’s words echoing resounding heavily in the silence.

Approaching the bed, Lance ran a hand over the edge of the goliathan mattress, his attention drawn to the conspicuously untouched bedding. It was still made, creases perfect, comforter folded over just-so; Keith hadn’t been trying to sleep at all before he’d come to see Lance, had he?

“Royal liar,” he chuckled.

Quietly, Lance stepped into the bathroom and undressed for the first time in days, grimacing as he caught whiff of himself — ugh. This was long overdue, and you better bet he was going to enjoy every precious tick he had.

As the water ran, hot as he believed he could handle, Lance began to raid Keith’s cabinets and various bins and baskets until he’d come up with enough products to satisfy him. Knowing Keith better now, he could appreciate the fact that the Prince really did not care if Lance used whatever he wanted because most of it went unused anyways.

Piling his arms up with washes for his hair and body, conditioners, moisturizers, oils for his skin, a comb for his hair and a bristled brush for his body, finishing it off with a plush white towel he snagged from above the shelving built into the fine marble walls, Lance sighed as he waited for the remainder of the tub to fill.

He looked over himself, first in body then again in the mirror, and he was not exactly pleased by what he found.
While his healing had been accelerated, it had not been comprehensive. Aside from the usual areas for critique – his knobby joints, the slight poke of his ribs against his chest, the gracelessness of his lanky limbs – Lance took to inspecting his arms, and particularly, one side of his torso and hips: he was a canvas, painted by yellowing bruises and small stitches in some places where debris had embedded into his body after the blast. The parts of his skin he’d been unable to wash in the basin were scuffed by dirt and flaked dry from the seasonal air. His legs were good enough otherwise, and his right forearm was still bandaged up. He itched it, annoyed, before moving on to get a proper look at his back for the first time and –

Holy fuck.

Holy fucking hell.

His back. Hunk really hadn’t been kidding.

A small, thankfully attentive part of his mind remembered to stop the bath water, but he didn’t get in right away, instead backing up as close as he could to the mirror until his pelvis ran into the large slab of countertop, neck craned awkwardly so he could get a proper look at the damage.

Between his shoulder blades and dipping at least three-quarters the way down to his hips, the skin was unbelievably light, jagged scars patterned in angular webs of injury, branching out towards his sides and tapering off into different degrees of scarring. It reminded him of accidentally pouring bleach onto a fabric, but this was much more visceral. For the first time he appreciated the size of his own body; Adam had said almost eighteen percent of his skin had been badly burned.

The whole moment, inspecting himself like this, gave Lance an uncomfortable sense of deja vu. When he’d removed the bandage from his neck for the first time, Keith let him take a bath here… except, then, he had Blue with him.

A pang went off in his chest for her absence, but Lance knew it was wrong to feel that way. She was still with him, just not in the most immediate sense of the word.

Craning his head over his shoulder one more time, just to really see his back again, he shivereded in the chilly air and stepped up to the tub. Lance lowered his feet into the scalding heat one at a time, giving himself the moment to adjust, and as he continued to dip himself into the water, he elected to keep his right arm mostly over one side of the tub — at least enough so his bandages wouldn’t get wet. Dealing with that sounded even more annoying than the slight drag and pull of the adhesive on his skin.

Invariably, Lance’s mind began to wander as his body grew used to the heat, starting as a feverish pinprick over his nerves and settling into a comfortable, tepid warmth after several dobosh. It was past midnight, Keith had said, which meant that had things gone even the slightest bit differently, he could very well have been back in his aunt’s house, scrubbing the floors in the first floor hallway right now. Maybe he would have already moved to wiping down surfaces in the sitting room and drawing room, it really depended on how long it would take him to do the dishes, and then whatever activities the girls did before bed. They would certainly be asleep, whatever the case, and he would be awake, tending to his usual chores.

It was about this time of evening that Lance would begin looking forward to his own nightly bath. Strange, how he’s come full circle.

There had been no fancy products available to him then, but it hadn’t stopped him from enjoying himself. The Valurian’s had a nice, large basin in one of their many bathrooms, the one that he’d used regularly. While there, Lance would appreciate the swath of water over his skin as best he
could, unfurl his coiled up muscles after another day of back-breaking work. Fridays weren’t so bad, since they were the day after market — assuming he came back with the right amount of money, the Lady of the house usually acted with a softer touch. It lasted no longer than Sunday because he would predictably end up doing something wrong to incite her anger, but, Friday, and sometimes Saturdays, were nice.

“Ugh.” Lance pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes. It was hard to think of that in terms of the past instead of the present. It was still somewhat inconceivable to him what Keith had offered yesterday — he was really willing to let Lance into his life so completely? To let him live here? Would he really never go back to that house, never be made to sleep on the cold kitchen floors ever again?

What would become of his precious few things? Perhaps his aunt had already burned them. His Father’s bow — did he even want the damned thing anymore? Lance liked having it for the sake of having a bow, but the weapon felt… different, now. It was his Father’s, the man who ran off with his Mama, who avoided capture by the luck of finding a compassionate doctor with a less-than-compassionate wife.

Lance recognized some truth in what his aunt had said during her testimony — who would go on to have seven children when they were all at risk of becoming slaves as a result? There really was an air of irresponsibility to it that made him feel weird and too-adult to be making such judgements about his own parents, but, how couldn’t he? Their plan hadn’t even been fucking foolproof; Lance was still born with one eye scale, and one was all it would take to trace him right back to whoever it was out there that held the leash to their metaphorical collars.

And that raised even more questions. Where was his father? Was he still alive, dutifully serving underneath some Altean master? Had he been sold overseas? Or had he died decaphoebs ago?

Absently, Lance ran a few fingers over his cheek mark, the old one, the one he’d had since the day he was born in spite of his parent’s best efforts.

Just because Lance happened to be the one who made the mistake, exposed them, endangered them all, didn’t mean he was going to shoulder that guilt entirely. He at least put some of the blame on his Father for passing on this life to them.

Had his siblings gotten word yet? Had his Mama? What would she say to him? What would he say to any of them? It had been decaphoebs since they’d last even gotten word of each other — the mere notion of trying to explain this all in a letter had him shaking with laughter, and definitely, definitely not with a few tears sliding down his cheeks as he continued to drown in the thoughts of them, in how he missed them, in how, secret or untoward past aside, they still had not written in so long. His letters, almost all unanswered, save the one.

Lance let out a low exhale, trying to force the tension from his body as the breath left him, carding wet fingers through his hair and taking up some of the task of washing himself more deliberately.

There was also the situation with Kaltenecker he had to figure out. Granted, there was probably something Keith could do about her, or one of the livestock experts could try to help him — his throat closed up — help him sell her, but whatever he chose to do, he should act sooner rather than later. Without anyone to look after her (because Lance would bet his life that not one of the girls nor his aunt were doing jack shit for her), she would run out of food and end up lonely, and Lance frankly wasn’t sure which of those thoughts broke his heart more.

He really did not want to sell her if he could avoid it, even if having to worry about taking care of a cow did make everything more complicated. She was the first thing he ever felt like he’d gotten
because he deserved her; ironic, considering he and Pidge essentially tricked that guy at the pub, but it had been something done of their own devices. No Mama, no Valurians, no Blue, no Keith, no Serranos or fractured past — it was just him, his friends, and his dumb luck.

Grumbling under his breath, Lance reached for the another bottle of soap and began to rub down his skin. This was supposed to be relaxing, he reminded himself, so Lance forced himself to clear his head and proceed through the motions of cleaning himself, rinse-and-repeat, for about ten more dobosh before he heard a lock shudder out of place from the bedchamber.

He counted to thirty, and there was a knock at the bathroom door.

“Lance?” Keith called from the other side, and something about the simple greeting had Lance’s heart fluttering slightly. “I just wanted you to know I’m, um, back. Again, take your time, just wanted you to know.”

“Thanks,” he said sincerely, though his voice lacked its usual punch. Clearing his throat, Lance tried again, “Thank you. Give me just, like, another ten dobosh.”

Softly, he heard Keith acknowledge his statement through the door.

Lance made quick work of the remainder of his bath, unfortunately skipping over some of the more luxurious of Keith’s products in the interest of getting a move on, but he did give himself a solid ten dobosh to use a mask for his face — Keith did assure him to take his time, right?

A change of clothes, a generous amount of moisturizer, washing his mouth out, and a final, final glance at his back for settling the borrowed tunic over his hips, and Lance calmed his trembling pulse the best he could manage before quietly poking his head back out into the room.

“Keith?” He spoke lowly, eyes needing a few ticks to adjust from the bright, white glamour of the bathroom.

Along the wall, the door to Keith’s private study chamber was open, and his head popped around the corner. He looked at Lance with a soft, dark gaze that drew him closer without Lance even realizing, and in ticks, he was in front of him, lingering in front of the open door.

“Hey. Feeling better?” Keith asked, running a hand down Lance’s arm until their hands met, and he felt himself fluster under the gentle affection, the sincere concern for his well-being.

Nodding, Lance crooked a sheepish smile. “Yeah, definitely better. I’ve been really needing that.”

“Good.”

After a beat, Lance began to fidget in place, trying not to betray his own nerves. “Sooooo, what’s the big secret, Knife Boy?”

The Prince pursed his lips, stepping aside to let Lance enter his study. Brandished over the opposite end of the table, the heraldic insignia of Marmora’s three jagged lines were carved into the grain of the dark wall, inlaid by purple crystals, and a small fire stirred in the hearth.

Whatever Lance had been unconsciously building up to, his expectations forming a knot of tension and curiosity that continued tightening in his stomach, revealed itself to be... a bunch of paper.

Well, that was a little underwhelming.

Blinking slowly, Lance looked from the pile and then to Keith, confusion evident as he was led to
the desk, the parchment and missives all splayed out unevenly across the luxurious darkwood desk that stood the opposite wall.

“Do you know what I spent all day doing, Lance?”

“Uh, no. Do I have to guess?”

“No,” he shook his head, stopping at the chair with a tired smile, the lines of exhaustion not outweighing the happiness there. “Testimony. After the Balmerans and Puigians left, we didn’t even reconvene for a real session afterwards — everyone has been listening to testimony all day. It’s impossible to get anything done in terms of the Council itself because we’ve had to split people up into groups to hear the testimony of so many people.

Lance wrinkled his nose; the whole notion was so… bureaucratic.

“So, you mean, like, all the people that were at the ball?”

“Nope, we got through any key personnel in the first two days. These are new statements.”

“All of this? Wow. So, what, then? This is all stuff related to the incident? There weren’t even this many people there.”

“Wrong again,” Keith said with a certain knowing-smugness to his accompanying smirk which was both infuriating and incredibly hot — which only made it more infuriating. “I mean, in a roundabout sort of way they’re related to the incident but they’re really just about you.”

He scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Good one.”

“I’m serious,” Keith said with two raised brows. He picked up a nearby letter and handed it to Lance, who, skeptical, brought it up to read.

WITNESS 005

START

A: Please state your name for the record.

005: My name is Moontow Ti. That’s spelled, “T-I,” not like, the drink.

A: Thank you. Moontow, can you please explain why you are here today?

005: Gladly! I am here to provide a witness statement for Lance McClain, or the “Blue Paladin” as people have started calling him these days. I’ve known Lance for three, almost four years, and I have some thoughts.

A: I understand. Please, take as long as you need. Anything you think is important that may lend us to better understand the accused party.

005: I wish you wouldn’t call him that, but fine. Lance first came into my shop in the summer, three years ago. He was definitely shorter back then, but he was always a charmer so I can remembered him distinctly. One of the sweetest customers I have, honestly, I was thankful when he came to town. Dealing with the Lady of the house was always unfortunate, and when she would come for her fittings, I always rued those appointments. Lance was always much easier to deal with, polite but he didn’t take himself too seriously.
That day, he was there for a gown for the eldest daughter, Adela. She’s a sweet girl when she wants to be, quiet usually, and Lance seemed really unsure of how to ask for the specifics of her gown so we talked through the whole process. He was a great listener and surprised me by asking a lot of questions — he seemed interesting in learning to sew, so I snuck a needle and some extra thread into the gown’s bag when it was ready a few weeks later. He tried to return them to me the next day — the next day, mind you, that boy lives all the way on the other side of town, and he walked — but I wouldn’t hear it. I sometimes spot his patches in his own clothes, even today, and he’s gotten better but he’s a little heavy-handed with the needle. Oh, um, sorry, that’s not the point — the point is…

Keith cut into his reading, and Lance hadn’t realized his jaw had gone slack, hands trembling. “Madam Ti, according to my Mother, was one of the first people to demand entry to the castle. She really seems to like you.”

A world-weary smile pulled at the corner of the Prince’s lips, another paper in his hands. His eyes scanned the page, handing it to Lance. “When you mentioned how we met earlier, I was reminded of this statement. I was there for this one, though I didn’t actually question the witness.”

With his heart-hammering, Lance accepted it, looking down at the neat script.

WITNESS 018

START

A: Please state your name for the record.

018: Name’s Nyma.

A: ...Your, full name, please?

018: Oh. Yeah, Nyma Chabert. Sorry, I’m just, like, not super comfortable around guards or whatever.

A: You’ll have amnesty during your time here; do not worry. Her Majesty and his Royal Highness are only interested in receiving a comprehensive profile of the accused’s behavior. Anything you share will not result in any sort of punishment.

018: ...Alright, good. That’s what Rolo said, I’m just, right. Sorry. I’m here to talk about Lance, not me.

A: Alright, take all the time you need. We will document all you have to share.

018: Thanks. So, I’ve been friends with Lance for like, two years, probably. About. We’re not super close, but after I heard about Lady V’s bullshit I just, you know, I had to say something. Seriously. He’s a good person and doesn’t deserve any of the shit she makes him put up with. I would have been arrested, erm, a few weeks ago, when I was taking some stuff from a local pharmacy – on credit, mind you – because my best friend really needed the medicine. Rolo’s been sick for weeks and what was I supposed to do, just let him suffer? Anyway — sorry — Lance stopped whoever was chasing me and paid the balance. I apologized to Lubos as much as I could and he was honestly pretty understanding when I explained what was going on with Rolo but... I don’t know, Lance is just that kind of person, you know? He probably didn’t even know what was going on with Rolo since we don’t get to see him that often, but he didn’t think twice before looking out for me and I... I don’t know. I owe him. I really hope this makes sense, am I rambling?
A: You’re fine. Is there more?

018: How long do you have?

A: All day, ma’am.

018: Good. I’m going to need it. That was just one instance, but even from the first time I met him — he tried to flirt with me, it was sort of hilariously bad — he’s always looked out for people around him. There was a fight in the street, a little ways away from where we met and he immediately got himself involved — and hurt, like a total idiot — but he managed to get the people to calm down. It was just something stupid, like, a few sixpence lost in a bet or something but –

“Hey,” Keith interrupted, his thumb parting Lance’s bottom lip from his teeth. “You okay?”

Lance gave a watery chuckle, nodding his head and rubbing at the corner of his eyes with the back of his hand. “I’m — yeah.”

A pause, and the Prince’s hand hesitated on his chin before tilting his face up. “Do you want to read more? I didn’t want these to upset you.”

He agreed, and Keith shuffled through some more and pulled forward some of the ones that had been folded into sections, rather than rolled or laid flat on the surface.

“Some of these are letters, too. For the people who couldn’t come to give physical statements. Apparently, we’ve been receiving them for days, but the Blade has to sort through all of it in case of threats so they only reached my Mom and I this afternoon when all of this was happening.”

Blue Paladin,

Not everyone is courageous enough to do what you did. I don’t know why, and I don’t know how, but you’ve given those upper-class urchins something to think about.

Lance looked at the name signed at the bottom, Blumfump, and he remembered the artisan from the Western side of town, the one who specialized in jewelry and headwares, that he sometimes called upon for his aunt. He didn’t know Blumfump extraordinarily well, only a few encounters here and there, but it made his heart squeeze to see the care the man had put into his words.

He skipped ahead, picking up another letter, and then another, and another after that, too.

Dear Lance,

I know some of what I’ve heard is just rumors, but, this whole mess really sucks. I’m sorry you’re dealing with all of this, though if anyone can keep their head up during it I’m sure it’s you.

Whatever happens, I’m glad you came to Marmora. Thursday’s are the best day at market when you’re around — you always lighten everyone’s spirits – and as a vendor I appreciate the attention
you bring with you, but as a person, I appreciate the fact that you care; you remembered Rivazi’s birthday, never try to take advantage of our prices, and it’s always meant a lot that you stop to ask how my art is going.

It’s the little things that matter, I think, and your impression on the city can be felt in waves. Your absence, especially, has hit some folk very hard.

Take good care of yourself, and feel welcome to call on me for help. I don’t know what I can do, but if there’s anything, I’m happy to pitch in.

-R. Kinkade

Bi Bo Lance,

Bi bi bo bih? Bi bi bih boh, Lance bi bi. Bo bi bih bo bih; bi bi bih boh. Bi bi bi, bi boh bih bih bo. ‘Blue Paladin’ bi bo! Bo bi bih bo bih, bi bi bih boh, bi, boh bo bih. Boh boh boh, bi boh bih bih.

Bi bi boh.

Dear Mr. Blue Paladin,

Hi Mr. Paladin! My name is Helena and I go to school with Lady Nadia and she always said she had a very nice tío. My tío lives far away with his family so I don’t see him much. I was always a little upset over Lady Nadia’s tío because she brags so much so if it’s not too much to ask maybe next time you have time we could have you for tea? My mama says you’re a hero. My dad is sort of confused? But said he still really would like to meet you!

Also if you marry Prince Keith, does that mean you become a Prince? Prince Blue? Or Lance? I’m still learning about salutations from our teacher and I’m so sorry if i got your title wrong and —

I know we’ve never met, but let me introduce myself. My name is Olia of House McKenna. Our family owns a modesty firm that specializes in international law. Do not let Daibaazal’s influence shake you. Do not let them win. We will fight your case in civil court if need be, pro bono.

Do not give up. We won’t give up on you either —

My big sister says she knows you from market on thursdays — she is the lady at the stall near the town crier. We don’t know you very well but this week was very hard for her. She cried when you didn’t show up on Thursday and then she said it was because the Galra wanted to kill you and that’s not right she told me. I’m really sorry if you’re dead, but my Mama’s dead so maybe you’ll get to meet her. She was really nice and smart and her favorite color was blue too —

I don’t really know how letters work. I can’t actually read, so my friend is scribing this for me, sorry if it’s jumbled or rambling or whatever. I’m a servant in the House of Lord Volfang, my name is Ilun, and it means a lot that you stood up for yourself, that you went in there and showed the Queen and all the other royals that we matter, too. You’re really inspiring, and I —
We are small, small people. But we can accomplish great things, thank you for reminding me of that —

Thank you. I appreciate everything you’ve done —

You made me believe that anything is possible —

I’ll never forget that night, I feel like it changed the whole world. You’re a hero —

If you need a friend, I’m always willing to listen —

Marmora stands with you, Lance — stands with you, Blue Paladin —

Don’t give up. Not to them —

Never give up.

Lance had to stop reading when his vision blurred, tears spilling down his cheeks. The words became a smear of ink and paper, his hands trembling. “Keith, I –”

“Hey, shh. It’s okay.” The Prince took the crumpling pile of letters from his shaking grip, slowly prying his fingers off and threading his own in place of the absence left there. “I sort of am breaking some rules by showing you this stuff, but I thought you deserved to know what Marmora thinks of you. I hope those are, um, happy tears.”

Lance laughed, because, duh, but didn’t bother to take the time to tease him. Instead, he fell forward and wrapped his arms around Keith, sob-laughing into his dumb chest as his dumb arms came to wrap around him, too.

“Of course they are, you idiot. This means – so much I just – I can’t believe all of these people…”

With a hint of amusement, Keith replied, “Oh, I can. Didn’t you say you were the Local Heartthrob? I’m pretty sure you’re more popular in Marmora than I am.”

Lance, sniffling as he pulled back, took a deep breath as he tried to regain his wits. “I guess I –” he hiccuped, “Heh, I guess you must be pretty lucky then, aren’t you?”

“Well, yeah, I thought that was obvious.” Keith spoke matter-of-factly, like he wasn’t keying little impressions into Lance’s heart with his stupid words. “People… people adore you, Lance, they love that the upper class could be ‘bested’ in some sort of big game. In their mind, you beat them. Or, beat me, I guess. I’m pretty sure I still came out as a winner in this somewhere, since I’m literally the one standing here with you right now, but that’s a technicality as far as they’re concerned.”

Lance felt his cheeks warm at that, and Keith moved his lips to Lance’s temple and placed a gentle kiss there. A moment’s hesitation, not unlike doubt, and he felt his heart start to rage in the cage of his ribs, Keith’s proximity suddenly apparent, the nonexistence distance between their chests, the warmth of his breath as it tickled the hairs on Lance’s forehead.

“Thank you,” Lance stuttered out, honest and breathy and more than a little shaky. His hands moved on their own, combing through the back of Keith’s ponytail unconsciously, holding the base of his neck and digging his fingers in anywhere he could. “I mean it.”

The Prince drew in a shaky breath, working up to a tentative smile. “Lance, I was… um, well,
there’s something I wanted to… ask.”

Blinking, he leaned back, surprised by the Prince’s nervousness. “Oh, um, sure. Is everything okay? I promise I won’t tattle on you for taking this stuff out, although I have a feeling your Mom would already know. She seems like she knows everything.” He quirked a grin, nodding to the tabletop spread with papers and letters.

“Heh. Yeah, she’s like that… honestly wouldn’t be surprised if she knew I was… well, nevermind, actually.”

“What? Keith, you can tell me. Even if it’s just needing to vent about all the *royal headaches* – geddit?” His eyebrows bounced, and the Prince snorted. “I’ll listen or whatever I can do. This means a lot to me, so if I can pay you back….”

“No, nevermind I – I just wanted to…” his gaze flickered from Lance’s eyes to his lips, and a sudden lurch in his stomach had him mirroring the action, studying the subtle pout of the Prince’s lips, the bow soft and leading to his sharp jaw.

It had already taken such restraint not to kiss him the moment Lance accepted the first piece of paper, but now, there was no reason no to, not a single doubt or fear or insecurity that could possibly hold him back from trying at least demonstrate an *ounce* of how grateful Lance felt, and he moved his head back, turned his chin up slightly, their lips finally meeting in a tangle of warmth and cold, soft and gentle and rough and dry. He wasn’t sure who really initiated it, but now that the desire was out in the open, it was a fantasy that demanded to be made reality.

And, oh, if Keith’s kisses weren’t just as biting as his personality, rough and unrefined as they tugged at Lance’s mouth with reckless abandon, and Lance could only hope to reciprocate some amount of the thrilling sensation by sliding his own tongue, wet and hot, over the bottom of the Prince’s lip in a silent question, hoping the gesture didn’t come off as too desperate. But, *fuck*, who was he kidding – he *was* desperate, desperate for more contact, more of the warmth, wanted to chase it down from the tips of his toes to the dizziness of his mind, drawn back as it was to the base of his abdomen where it had begun to pool in maddening desire.

A question he had asked, so an answer Lance received; he wasn’t even sure when they’d traveled from Keith’s study to his bed, but they were in it now, Keith’s head nestled in the pillows as Lance lay above him, between his legs, and the position was *awfully* suggestive and Lance was a man of weak will and dubious morals – he certainly wasn’t above trying his hand at being a little sensual if the situation called for it.

Letting out a little moan, it was thrillingly easy to coax Keith’s lips apart, enough for their mouths to fully slot together, tongues exploring and testing the languid breaths of the other, and Lance was drunk from the heat of the Prince’s air, sweet and soothing like honeyed tea.

“I’ve been thinking about – *fuck* – about this, all week,” Keith admitted, the words gentle but his voice harsh, *hungry*, even, and it sent a rush of arousal straight south. Before Lance had a chance to even think on what was becoming a very uncomfortable problem in his pants, the delicious curve of Keith’s mouth began to trail up the side of his face, stopping beside his ear, and Lance felt like his heart would give out any moment. “I’ve been worried – that you weren’t going to be okay, or that what we did – the first time, before would be –”

“The only time?” Lance finished the thought, swallowing roughly as Keith moved to press more kisses into his throat. “I didn’t want it to be the only… I want more. You, I mean. All of it, all of you, and *ah-h* –”
His breath hitched as Keith’s lips trailed up again, diverting on their path to his mouth; Lance had to bite back an involuntary moan as the Prince’s pressed his lips over his Altean marks.

Holy fucking hell, that feeling.

Even with the knowledge that it was coming this time, even having tried to steel himself as Keith’s small kisses moved from the hollow beneath his ear and up his cheek, there was no fucking possible way to prepare for the sensation of having Keith’s mouth over his eye scales. The lazy drag of teeth, a ghost of dry lips, a tease of wet tongue over the points at the corner of his eyes was the closest thing Lance could imagine to having livewires pressed right up against his fucking soul, but with the the added trails of static breaking over his skin, lightning kicking up a hurricane in his pulse.

To say they were sensitive would be… well, not wrong… but it was somehow more than sensitive, like the thin angles were a direct line of connection that went straight through him. It wasn’t stimulating a physical way any more than having Keith’s body beneath him, but there was something extrasensory about it that quelled an ache that was beyond Lance’s perception; it was pleasure, comfort, dark temptation and gentle caress all in one.

And fuck if Lance wasn’t weak to it.

So, so weak. A cracked version of Keith’s name tried to force itself out of his throat, but it was more of a wanton puff of air than anything. And, gods, was he glad Keith was kind enough not to ask him to beg, because fuck if Lance wouldn’t do it without question or hesitation – he’d do anything Keith would have asked of him at that moment. He couldn’t even imagine what he wouldn’t do, all rational thought hurled right out the fucking window, but that even somehow made it even better? Because between each touch, each break of contact, Lance could feel the presence of Keith’s smile before he even pulled his face away. Gods, to be given over to that desperate, sweet sensation without even having to ask – it turned his blood to nectar and his heart to a pressure chamber fit to burst any moment.

A dozen questions went off, rapid-fire hail smacking against the window of his consciousness. Was this okay? Was any of it okay? No, probably not, but that was fine; that’s just how they were, maybe how they always would be. Lance couldn’t help himself, and he liked to think that maybe Keith couldn’t either – maybe he was really as drawn into this maelstrom of feelings and insecurities and wonderful temptation as Lance was. Maybe he felt the same doubt, not because they were literal opposites, but because who knew how this was ever supposed to work? How did they even get this far in the first place?

Long before either of them had been born, their fates were written by the stars, authorized by nature, illustrated by the sands of time. If there was one thing he was certain of, it was this: they were never meant for each other.

There was nothing, not a single thing, that made sense about them. They were an impossibility. More ill-fated than the sun and the moon, caught in their constant dance, never glimpsing more than a shadow of the other at the edge of the horizon; fates more distant, more untoward than a storm without the rain, or a sea without the shore, or a thorn without a rose.

So why, he wondered, if this was sin, if this was wrong, if this was everything that he wasn’t supposed to have – why did it feel so right? Why did denying the inevitable feel not like he was drowning in denial, but defying it?

Maybe… maybe that was exactly it?

Maybe, like this, with his body lost to his senses, head and heart blinded to anything but simple
sensation – maybe this was defying their fucked up destinies. The skin-on-skin warmth, the flush press of lips against the base of his throat, the scrape of teeth over his bottom lip, a voice in his ear, hands on his arms, sides, fingers threading with his own, or holding him, thumb tracing burns into his cheekbones – it was all raw and inelegant, reactions and impulses that were intoxicating, overwhelming, desperate and fulfilling at the same time because – because he’d never felt more complete, and yet, this could never be enough.

Maybe they were supposed to be impossible, and they fit together anyways. Maybe it was because Lance would never accept that star-crossed fates would ever be enough for him, for them, because that would be like accepting that they were never meant to work out, and if there was one thing Lance was, it was stubborn as hell.

He would make this work if only to spite the universe – but it was honestly so much more than that anyway.

What had been a hesitant beginning had quickly divulged into, well, a hapless mess of hormones and emotions – any contrived notion of just a quick kiss had ruined along with Lance’s dignity and inhibitions. The stimulation had him on the verge of everything – he could probably be brought over the edge from that alone, strange though it was, but his eyes also felt like they’d spill over with tears, and his stomach had twisted into such a knot it was almost painful. It took Keith moving to the other side of his face – gods, please let this not be a dream – for Lance to even realize his own mouth was moving.

To say he was really speaking, however, would have been generous. It more like babbling, really.

“Ah – d-dios, aah, K-Keith… aah… no te detengas, j-joder… p-please, so good, so good.”

Quite plainly, Lance didn’t know what to do with himself. He wanted to dig his hands into Keith’s hair and just hold him there, drown in the heady bliss of it until something finally gave way, be it tears or tension or unbearable pleasure, but he was also too keenly aware of the miserable lack of friction between his thighs. As much as Lance did not want Keith to stop, he also wanted his own hands in other places, wanted Keith to feel even some fraction of what he was feeling.

“S-Stop,” he eventually said, turning his face away. “It’s – I need a tick— a lot of…’”

Keith stopped immediately, a hand guiding Lance’s face back towards his with a gentle brush of fingers.

“What did you say? Are you okay?”

God, of course he would fucking go and ask something like that, something colored by such genuine concern that Lance wanted to pull him into another kiss just to express how fucking much he loved him. Because that was just who Keith was, all the time, no matter what – he always just wanted to make sure Lance was okay. That he was happy, and safe, and it didn’t matter that he was a trembling mess, barely able to bracket his own weight above Keith so as not to crush him, because he would of course be concerned first and foremost.

Smiling with as much sincerity as possible, Lance nodded. “G-Good. Just, almost, over-sensitive… it was too good, honestly. It’s hard to explain.”

The Prince’s worry softened, his dark gaze had turned wide and warm, still tinged with concern but hooded by the promise of so much barely contained self-control, so much lust, and Lance wanted nothing more than to give him something. Biting his own lip, Lance seized his momentary courage and adjusted his hips, shoving down from Keith’s trim waist into the seat of his pants, rolling forward
in the pursuit some relief of the unbearable confines of his clothing. They both groaned, the new sensation bringing with it a surge of relief.

Lance did it again and released a breathy exhale, loud and graceless, but it didn’t matter because Keith’s head fell back, too, his eyes squeezing shut in revenant response.

It was all the encouragement Lance needed to take the plunge in spite of his hundred-million-billion fears and worries; Keith seemed to be thinking much the same thing, although he came to the opposite conclusion.

“Lance, fuck, y-you’re still healing, we shouldn’t — you could get hurt or I could hurt you by accident.”

But Lance was not turning back, he was already way too far off the fucking metaphorical rails for that. One of his hands rucked up Keith’s shirt, shaky and nervous but decidedly impatient in his desire to touch him anywhere, everywhere, and he began pressing kisses into Keith’s throat, the other shivering from the contact.

“I want… I want this, I’m okay,” Lance assured between a breath, grinding his hips down again, momentarily mystified when he felt Keith’s hands tighten over his pelvis in response, fingers itching beneath his own shirt to hold him in place, pressing Lance down into his hips. Unconsciously, Lance’s lower back began to bow, sinuous in shape as it curved into the sensation, loving the feeling of Keith’s hands on him with such avarice. “Please, Keith.”

And part of him wanted to hate it, to deny the fact that the possessiveness was absolutely thrilling, but he couldn’t help it. There was something desperately and unbearably sexy about the idea of just letting Keith have his way with him, take him, claim him. The heat in his stomach should have been colored by some amount of shame, right? Instead, his body was an unfocused outpouring of feeling – emotional and physical – as he chased the surge of desire by diving into Keith’s mouth again.

He really tried, too, to tell himself that there was shame in there somewhere, that some greater part of himself didn’t enjoy it as much as his baser self did, that he wasn’t so mindlessly needy that he was ready to give himself up so completely, but his hormones were having none of that. All he wanted was to be taken, loved – to be kissed and touched and used up and brought back down again, and then to do it again, and again, and again, until he couldn’t remember his own name, until his whole body was marked and bruised and impressed upon by Keith. He wanted to be Keith’s, wanted to be able to call upon the memory of the Prince’s jawline when his mouth was buried hungrily into Lance’s throat; he wanted to be haunted day in and out by the ghost of Keith’s touch, so he could remind himself that it was real and that they were real. Even, gods, he wanted Keith to mark him up, to suckle his skin until it turned purple or red and leave bite marks and half-moon imprints of nails on his skin, something that he could think about later, something other people could see and be forced to confront the fact that Keith was his, and he was Keith’s, and no one else’s.

*** EXPLICIT CONTENT - NSFW FROM HERE ***

With that thought spurring some confidence in him, Lance began to travel further south, tugging at the Prince’s waistband and trying to work marks into the dip of his waist with his teeth and tongue. A nervous bolt of energy surged through him when Keith’s hips rose to allow for his pants to come off, and the heat from before came back in full force as he managed to pull them from Keith’s legs, one at a time.

And Lance could only think, like, fuck me, right? Last time he’d been so overwhelmed and running on adrenaline that he’d not even really taken the time to mentally catalogue what Keith looked like naked beyond his unfairly trimmed chest, but now that his body was literally on display, his dick
inches away, it was both fucking *insane* and dangerously erotic to imagine that they had even – that he had – *fuck*.

Keith’s body was a ashen statue, smooth and sculpted in fine muscle from head to toe, complexion running red from his face down to his chest, pooling again at the base of dark hair between his thighs, presumably from a recent rush of blood. His hardened cock stood at perhaps seven inches or so, fairly similar to Lance’s in length and maybe just a bit wider, and it twitched slightly when Lance moved a hand over Keith’s thigh, running his palm all the way to the base.

“I want to… ya know?”

Keith looked like he was prepared to say something, some sort of *look* flitting across his expression, but he ended up just nodding. Lance took that as the initiative necessary.

His lips parted at the head, already a little overcome by the sensory experience of the heat, the general smell of sweat and the unmistakable tang of salt that came with arousal, and Lance figuratively choked down the nerves of what he was about to *literally choke down*.

“Mmm,” he exhaled some twinge of fear, letting the vocalization guide his tongue forward, circling the head. He managed to muffle his surprise when it jerked in response, a distinctively warm bead of pre-cum dribbling into his mouth.

Keith had chosen that exact moment to let out a wonderful shudder, the feeling crawling all the way down his thighs and legs, and Lance could actually feel him tremble around his mouth.

*Okay. Okay, fuck,* he could do this.

Lance took the not-so-metaphorical dive, letting gravity do some of the work for him, and if the *sound* Keith made was any indication, Lance certainly would’ve called it encouragement. He worked slowly with his hand at the base at first, but when his own saliva had started to leak past his best-attempt-at suction, Lance just decided to say *fuck it* and work a little bit faster.

“Ah, *fuck, feels* so good… so good Lance,” Keith’s voice became increasingly like a growl, and Lance couldn’t resist flushing from the praise, a pulse of arousal surging to his own aching erection. The satisfaction was almost as good as the feeling of Keith’s mouth on his scales, and the momentary distraction had him lose track of his momentum; he felt himself gag slightly when he took Keith in too deep.

“A-ah, sorry,” Lance panted when he came up for air, unsure if he should resume or if the decidedly unsexy sound was a mood killer.

His gaze flicked up, and given that Lance was almost completely flat on his stomach between Keith’s thighs, the position dictated that he gazed over the dips and curves of Keith’s chest all the way up to his chin, where his head was angled down, bottom lip worrying between his teeth.

“Don’t apologize — that was,” he let his head fall back with a small laugh. “That was, just – *wow.*”

*Emboldened* by Keith’s encouragement, Lance propped his own head up slightly and tried for a mischievous grin. “*Was?* I didn’t say I was done.”

With a look of surprise and, perhaps even excitement, Keith’s head snapped up. Lance’s own breathing had evened out somewhat, feeling decidedly less anxious and more exhilarated, and he lowered his head forward a second time, holding Keith’s gaze as he wet his lips, unblinking as his mouth parted over his length.
Like some sort of stupid challenge, Lance refused to stop, to pull back or blink or gag, continuing with deliberate slowness until — hah, yes! Keith threw his head back, and, oh, whoa, his hands moved to the back of Lance’s head, carding through his slight curls. The Prince’s voice shook, his grip tight but not painful— encouraging, if Lance could think of a single word.

“You’re so – ahh... fucking sexy... oh my god.”

A terribly self-satisfying part of Lance’s heart fluttered again at the words, the intrinsic knowledge that he was the one doing this to Keith satiating some deep and dangerously aroused corner of his mind. Like, yes, that’s Prince of Marmora Keith, whose breath was growing labored and sounds progressively less restrained, borderline primal, and it was because of Lance Fuckin’ McClain, and his fuckin’ mouth, thank you very much; his ego would gladly pocket the win for what it was.

And, shit, they were loud, weren’t they? Aside from Keith’s small whines of pleasure, the lewd, wet sound of sucking and the slight sliding of the sheets over the mattress had created an unquestionably dirty, yet oh-so-satisfying song, a symphony of gratuitous pleasure in the otherwise quiet room.

“G-god, Lance I’m gonna — f-fuck.” Keith groaned, and before Lance could even process the meaning behind his warning, the Prince’s grip in Lance’s hair tightened for just a moment before he heaved his own hips down into the bed, his dick slipping out of Lance’s mouth abruptly. It was such a surprise, Lance hadn’t time to even pool the saliva away from his lips, and it glistened like tiny webs, connecting his mouth and tongue to Keith’s thighs, a thin shine of spittle dripping from the head of his cock. Lance, for his part, flushed — he couldn’t decide if it was from embarrassment or hedonistic pride as he wiped away the excess at his chin.

“S-sorry,” Keith said, voice pained as he took a deep breath. His chest rose from the bed and his eyes found Lance’s, wide and dark and sending bolts of desire straight through him, coiling into a tense knot in the base of his abdomen. “I didn’t want to come, not yet, and you — I didn’t ask properly or anything the first time it all just sort of fucking happened, and I won’t do that again. I’m… I need to know what you’re comfortable with, I want to do this right – or better. Not that last time wasn’t right but – ugh, do you know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I do,” Lance pushed his hips into the bed as while too as sat up, barely suppressing a groan as he unconsciously rearranged his aching hard-on, relieving some of the glaring lack of friction as a result. It was like every little one of his nerve-endings was laced with white-hot fire, burning to continue, but he could hear the reason in Keith’s words.

“We should set boundaries and stuff – I, sorry, I guess I got carried away,” Lance coughed, feeling comically shy considering his face was basically still between Keith’s thighs, literally having to look around the length of his dick to even make eye contact. Christ, was now really the time to be embarrassed? “I mean, I’ve never done that before but you sorta seemed like you were enjoying it?”

“What? Oh — well, yeah, fucking obviously,” the Prince laughed, lightening some of the tension in the room. He pulled Lance up gently, facing-forward and into his lap. With a momentary adjustment so as not to casually crush Keith’s straining hard-on, Lance, amused, allowed himself to be guided as the Prince wanted.

(And, now astride his hips, Lance was taller than him. Hah! Another victory for his ego.)

Keith ran his fingers down the length of Lance’s arms, a drag of warmth trailing in its wake. Vaguely, Lance thought of the people he’d seen in taverns, who would cloud the air with the smoke of their hand-rolled cigarettes; was this, he wondered, how such a thing might feel? The intoxicating warmth, breathed into his body and turning his insides hotter than any fire, a willing addiction that could still his heart and lungs with one hit too many? It was devastatingly easy for Lance to imagine
the pads of Keith’s fingers as they moved to his sides, trailing tendrils of steam in their wake, melting him and shaping him into something softer beneath his touch.

A careful hand moved beneath his shirt, and Lance assisted in drawing it over his head.

Now, both bare chested, Keith seated up against the headboard and Lance settled in his lap, a thumb came to rest on Lance’s chin, angling his face down. He moved forward, into Lance’s space until there was no air, no room, no kingdom, no stars or heaven or hell — just Keith. Warm, soft lips pressed into his own, the moment both rough and unrefined, and beautifully intimate, and glaring in its imperfections of unpracticed teeth hitting each other, tongues clashing and meeting unevenly but eagerly between them; Lance could literally feel the hesitation and taste the lingering questions on Keith’s lips.

“I just want to…” the Prince sighed, dropping his head into the crook of Lance’s neck. “I want to be able to make you feel good. Without hurting you. I think I’d… prefer to top again, but, I don’t even know if we should go that far because of your injuries. But if you’re sure you’ll be okay, and you want this, I’ll bottom if that’d make it easier, I’m just— nervous, I guess, since this… arrangement worked the first time? Sorry, does that make sense?”

Taking a deep breath, Lance felt some of the tension melt from his shoulders, the weight and security of Keith’s body against him, vulnerable and honest, had him feeling all sorts of emotions. He did his best to be reassuring, gently running his hands through Keith’s hair as it tickled his chin and collarbones. Lance tried to be as honest as his own pride would allow.

“Yeah, I k-know what you mean. I’d… like to top, sometime, eventually, but this worked and it felt amazing for me so I’m not complaining. I liked it, and it really didn’t hurt that much… I want this, if you’re okay with it. Are you okay with it?”

Keith laughed, his head angling slightly so they could catch a glimpse of each other. “Are you seriously asking that? I want you so badly Lance, you’re all I’ve been able to think about. I love that so many people love you, but at the same time I’m worried that maybe something might actually be wrong with me, because I’m somehow… angry about it too?” Hands crawled up his back, settling onto his waist. “I want you to be mine, but, not… like, fuck I don’t mean in like — you know, not like, in a controlling way— I just meant, I want to be the only one who gets to have you like this. I want to be the only person who can ever hold you, ever. I hope that doesn’t sound awful.”

An instant, thoughtless rush of words tumbled from his mouth. “Make me yours.”

The Prince stilled, his throat bobbing as he swallowed thickly, eyes fluttering open to meet Lance’s gaze.

“I… want to. You’re sure?”

Keith’s grip, which had begun to gather moisture as the space between them became increasingly sticky with sweat, trailed down his sides and rested gently over the small of his back.

Lance gave a shaky laugh, his confidence soaring, and ground back slightly, enough that the curve of his ass would urge Keith’s attentions elsewhere. “Anything you want to do to me, I want it.”

“Anything?”

Keith’s voice was soft, touched by just the edge of something sinister and temptatious that reverberated with Lance’s pulse.

“Are you su—”
Lance dug his nails into the flesh of Keith’s shoulders, cutting him off. “If you ask am I sure one more time, I’m putting my shirt back on and going back to that weird windowless room downstairs.”

The threat seemed effective enough, because mercifully, finally, one Keith’s hands slid beneath the loose band at Lance’s hips and gripped the skin of his backside firmly. Another kiss followed, Lance moaning into it as Keith’s grip began to tighten, a fire igniting beneath his skin.

In a matter of ticks, his head was spinning, heart thundering so loudly he could barely think – the only thing that mattered was how good everything felt. From the sinful warmth of Keith’s fingers as they patterned his skin, Lance felt his pulse jump and shift with every touch, like his heart was reborn every time in every place anew, the heat and blood beneath his skin rushing to and from each spot. He was burning from the inside out, and all he could think to do was choke down more of the heat, nestle the flame with as much humility as he could muster.

It was just so much sensation, intoxicating as it amounted to the most heady, wonderful thing he could imagine. “Pants off,” the Prince ordered huskily, and Lance was all too eager to comply. With a quick rush of limbs, he was off of Keith’s lap and stripping the rest of the way down, a flush of pride creeping up his neck as he noticed Keith’s dark gaze trace his movements.

Smiling, he made his way back over to the bed, just as a confused expression crossed Keith’s face. “What is it?” Lance asked, self-conscious for all of two ticks before Keith frowned around his room. “The… lube, I just realized, I never put it away. Oh, god, the help has been in here… they cleaned.”

He looked mortified. “I don’t even know where…”

Half-way between sitting, standing, and keeping his eyes trained on Keith’s face and not his body, it took a moment for the words to nettle through his feverish headspace.

Lance, despite himself, quirked a grin and failed to resist the urge to laugh. “Your bedside drawer. I’d bet you twenty crown.”

A brow raised, Keith rolled over and reached into the drawer that Lance had pointed to, and the Prince released a huff of disbelief when he raised his hand – yep, there it was.

“You forget I’ve spent literal decaphoeb cleaning up after people, Keith. If I worked here, that’s where I would’ve put something like that if it was laying around.”

“Of course,” the Prince said with a scoff, tossing the bottle down as he turned his attention back to Lance. Tugging him gently forward to the center of the bed, Lance shuddered as a mouth pressed its way to Lance’s jaw line, and he gladly bared his throat, eyes closing at the sudden pressure of hot tongue and incessant suckling just inches above his fluttering pulse.

Keith paused, carefully guiding Lance down so that his head was now nestled amongst the pillows, essentially reversing their positions from earlier. “Promise that if anything becomes too much you’ll tell me?”

“Yes, yes, come on, please, I need you,” Lance insisted, taking Keith’s face and guiding it to his so that he could try to pry his tongue between his teeth, and the Prince was more than willing to give him access. An exhale, paired with a squirm of his hips in search of something to give him relief. Keith seemed to pick up on the not-so-subtle hint and finally, mercifully, touched him, placed a hand on one of Lance’s knees and pushed his legs apart, their respective bodies finally lined up in a way that was torturously satisfying.

At the heated feeling of their erections, both tortuously lacking in friction, rubbing into each other, a
crest of pleasure chased over the heat of Lance’s body, feverish and dampened though it was by sweat. The skin-on-skin contact was both too much and not nearly enough, and the Prince groaned when Lance arched his back into him. Adjusting, Keith braced himself beside Lance’s head with one hand and used his other to wrap his fingers over the unfettered line of contact where each of their aching, desperately hard dicks met, and Lance sighed and gasped almost simultaneously at the new sensation.

Attention thoroughly divided, Lance tried to paw for the bottle of lube, but he was having a hard enough time keeping his cries and pants contained without the added task of searching blind. Between the pressing heat between their stomachs, now slowly being stroked together, the tingling awareness of Keith’s thighs bracketed between his spread legs, the overwhelming smell of sweat and salt and and taste of Keith’s arousal, still embedded deep in the back of his throat, Lance felt like a wire pulled taut. Every sensation was loud and dizzying, a crashing crescendo in an reprise that made each breath, pant, touch, look, feel foreign and familiar all at once; it’s not that he couldn’t explain the feelings if he tried hard enough – but there would be certain meanings lost if he tried to put any of it into words.

Lance was content with not calling it any one thing anyways.

“Keith, please,” he whined, hips rising to meet the pace of his hand. “Just, fuck me already, please – is too much, I need you.”

A response of understanding was murmured into his neck, where Keith began to work tireless hickies into his skin, and Lance moaned. Forgetting his search of the lube for now, Lance dug his hands into Keith’s hair, (his ponytail long abandoned, he noticed,) grinding against the heat of him with his pelvis as he held Lance’s hips, thumbs dipping into the thinnest stretch of his skin in a way that promised to leave marks – Lance didn’t want it any other way.

A light click in his periphery alerted him that, oh, Keith had found the lube on his own – fucking finally – and he felt Keith lean up on the bed. Lance tried to measure his breathing, not realizing his eyes were squeezed shut until the Prince was speaking to him.

“Lance, are you okay? Just relax, breathe. I got you.”

He ground his teeth and peeked through is lashes. “I know, I’m trying to be patient, if you would get a fucking move on.”

Keith rolled his eyes, but a smirk returned to his features – the one that Lance loved, the one that said he wasn’t really annoyed, just playing along. And then, after a few hundred fucking decaphoebs, Keith’s fingers, cooled by the stickiness of the foreign substance, inched nearer to the crevice of his ass, a bit clumsy in their search until one of them pressed lightly against his rim, and Lance shivered in anticipation.

Intently, the pressure against his hole became intrusive until – ah – it was finally breaching him. There wasn’t so much of a burn or flash of pain, more of a dull ache as his body not only accepted the slick finger, but his walls fluttered and tightened as the Prince’s hand began to build up a rhythm. For perhaps thirty ticks, he worked his finger inside Lance before adding another, the lube plenty warm from their body heat now, and he let out a stuttered sound that wasn’t quite like a moan, but wasn’t quite unlike one either.

“Dios, yes, por favor, I can take it, please, Keith, a-ah. Yes.” His voice cracked, the sound broken and buried into the crook of the Prince’s collarbone as he leaned forward, a second finger, quickly followed by a third, now working him steadily open.
“You’re so eager, so willing, aren’t you?”

The heavy sound of Keith’s breathing was deliciously sinful, though Lance was confused as to why he’d moved so near to his ear. “Yes, yes, wait, what are you – oh, oh god, p-please Keith, I’m – please don’t stop, more – more, more, yes.”

A tender press of lips touched his eye scales, their color flickering and fluttering in Lance’s periphery – probably a proverbial light show for the Prince, honestly – and it was like his heart leapt into his throat, emotion spilling out of his mouth and tingling with his body, the heat rising off him like ash breathed out from a flame.

“Yes, yes, please, god, oh, K-Keith, Keith, please, you, I need you, want you, so good, so so good,” he cried, gasping with the abrupt absence of the fullness of Keith’s fingers, only to be replaced by exhilarating impatience as the lube bottle was opened again before being tossed aside.

Blinking his eyes wide, Lance wanted to watch, enjoying the image of Keith stroking himself, head falling back slightly in pleasure from the relief of pumping his cock and to do it over Lance’s pliant body on the mattress was – god, unabashedly sexy and unbearably erotic.

The Prince continued to touch himself, a hand moving to Lance’s thighs and pushing him further apart, and he whimpered at his own readiness, already skirting along the precipice of so much stimulation all at once.

With a careful, if not unpracticed, approach, Keith pressed the head of his cock against him, stopping with a final moment of hesitation that was surely going to lead Lance to losing his goddamn mind.

Their eyes met, and Lance could see the unspoken question, in the tightness of his expression, the worry etched into his frown that he might hurt Lance. Sighing, Lance dropped his shoulders back into the pillows, maintaining Keith’s gaze as he shook his head and smiled.

“I want to be yours, Keith,” he declared, but his voice came out almost shyly, and Lance had to look away in embarrassment after the words were out. It was hard to pretend to be sexy when he had in fact no idea what he was doing, all Lance knew was when something felt good or right or wrong and reacted accordingly – and this, those words, that felt right, and good, and like needn’t even really be asked to be made true.

“Okay,” Keith breathed, pushing forward and they both groaned once his cock finally breached the tight ring of muscles, the dull stretch inevitable even with the earlier assistance of Keith’s fingers. It hurt, but honestly, not as much as one might think – the pleasure was like raw starlight, piercing through his skin, while the pain was only a minor inconvenience, a weak impression of a glow.

Slowly, agonizingly, the Prince’s pulsing length pushed deeper into him, each inch another maddening test against the tightness of his body that was helpless but to accommodate, wanton, ready to be filled. A hellfire of raw desire, sin and heat and shame, coaxed the bow of his hips to rise up, to help in the initial restlessness, to try to express without the need of embarrassing words how badly he wanted this.

A base desire finally answered, a sound stirred in Keith that was more throaty growl than speech, and his grip became bruising as he held Lance’s body firmly in his hands, squeezing his hips in what Lance hoped was approval.

“Mine,” a dark version of the Prince’s voice claimed, positioning his grip to the sides of Lance’s pelvis, pulling him in, forward, deepening his reach even further.
“Yes,” Lance cried out, chest rising as if a tether tucked between his ribs to pull him out of the heady bliss enough to speak.

Keith let out a low chuckle that shook Lance all the way down to his soul, and he lowered himself, his torso closer now, and Lance opened his eyes – when had he closed them? – to find the pressing line of Keith’s body flush against his.

A gentle, soft kiss was pressed into the corner of his mouth, quickly trailing south and sprinkling tiny, affectionate kisses all down his jawline and into his throat.

“I’m the luckiest person in Marmora,” he breathed, before branding a hard suckle right over his pulse, hammering in his veins. “Maybe the luckiest person alive.”

“F-Fucking liar,” Lance muttered, laughing with the heavy exhales of Keith’s voice so close. “But I’ll for-forgive you this time.”

Keith’s smile turned from a well-natured smirk to something more lustful, a wanton and private look that made Lance’s heart swell with the knowledge that he was the only one who got to see the Prince like this. “Is that so?”

And then, gods save him, Keith pulled his hips back and they each took a moment to breath before he dived back in again, and Lance was ready to come apart at the feeling. He’d adjusted during the brief exchange while Keith was seated fully inside of him, but even so, he hadn’t been prepared for the intoxicating, seamless glide to lay into him so suddenly. A high, stuttered gasp was forced through him, and there was gratifying burst of sensation at the fullness, at the dizzying heat, and the stretch and pleasure as Keith’s cock just barely brushed against his prostate at this angle, it was addicting.

“What if I don’t want you to forgive me?”

Keith did it again, and Lance saw stars, moaning, crying out, and his hands sought purchase in the curve of Keith’s arms.

“A-ah –” Tension furled inside him, speech forgotten for the time being. It was positively unfair, this feeling, because for every winsome touch, any place their bodies met, it was both immense and still profoundly unable to satiate the demands of his body. To him, Keith was the best sort of addiction, where instead of chasing the high from the first time, trying to reach it again, each pulse, and thrust, and groan, and wet, delicious sound of skin slapping into skin – all of it felt better than the moment before it. And Keith was so surprising, too, for as dark as his fire burned with lust, his grip strong enough to mark him like Lance so shamefully wanted, his attentions were also gentle, reassuring.

If he didn’t breathe air into Lance’s lungs with the throaty growls between his kisses, Lance might have very well forgotten to breathe all together, and Keith’s pace began to pick up from a steady flow of hips, a gentle, natural brush of sea against shore, and instead switched to a storm, winds sending waves crashing into his body, helpless but to yield and draw into the ocean of pleasure, ready to drown in anything Keith would give him.

“F-fuck, you feel so good,” Keith said, heavily, his chest rising from Lance’s to something of a half push-up until he was more-or-less on his knees, a hand sliding beneath Lance’s thigh and holding his skin steadily, raking his fingers over the sensitive area. “Lance, you’re so good, look at you, so pretty, all mine. I’ve wanted you so bad, so so bad, and you’re so good, so willing to take me, god, I just...”

With a sudden squeeze, his arm moved to leverage Lance’s thigh higher, almost pressing it back into
Lance’s chest, and the new angle had his muscles tensing because – yes, there – Keith had somehow managed to find a deeper, more direct path that pushed up against the bundle of nerves in his body that had him ready to fall apart from the sensation.

“Right there,” he moaned, a lowly, needy sound, cheeks flooding with crimson embarrassment by how desperate he’d become. “Please, yes, yes.”

Already obliged, the Prince’s hips pulled back and snapped forward against with a devastating pressure, and Lance began to curve into the thrust, even if the difference was millimeters, it was all he could do to chase the sensation.

Arched over him, Keith came down as close as he could to Lance’s face again with one of his thighs acting as a barrier between them, tongue messily licking into Lance’s mouth, and he readily drank in the added heat, swallowing down flames eagerly.

“I love you, I love you so fucking much,” Keith confessed, voice some turmoil of emotion and rasping effort. Chest swelling with feeling, Lance’s hands carved into Keith’s back, hold onto him as the Prince shuddered overtop of him.

“I love you, too. I do. That’s why I want this. Please, Keith –”

And then, Keith started to move again – really move, his pace no longer steady and thorough but shallow thrusts, pulling back only enough that he could fuck himself into Lance effectively again, however little it would take to give him the momentum necessary to force the air from Lance’s lungs and his name from Lance’s mouth.

“Nnng, a-ah, y-yes,” was the best Lance could manage with the pace Keith was keeping, driving him down into the bed with a sinful, aching rhythm that made him feel like his muscles were melting, his body surely heating past a point that could be construed as healthy. In a daze of warmth, senses pushed to their limits, Lance felt Keith’s mouth wander his skin, licking and tasting, sucking spots anywhere he could latch onto, an experimental bite sinking into the flesh of his throat and Lance gasped a weak, stammering sound of pleasure. After that, Keith’s teeth were more readily involved, taking care to lick to kiss the dotted lines left in their wake, and the experience made Lance’s whole body shiver – not just from the brief flare of pain as his body was fervently worn into by the attention of his mouth, but moreso from the idea that Keith was everywhere on his skin, and would be for days. His neck would be littered with bruises, and his collar, shoulders, jaw – all stained purple and red; his hips were already starting to color, tiny red dots floating to the surface from the fierceness of Keith’s grip. His body was a whetstone, yearning for more and more rough edges to dive into him, so that anyone who dared look would see the evidence of their love-making, the hard-earned impressions of Keith all over him so blatant that people would be forced to blush and look away. That’s what he wanted, and Keith was giving it to him (and then some), the lust coursing in the air like fog as the Prince continued to piston his hips in the unbearable heat of Lance’s insides, tight and willing to take all of it in.

Before long, Lance couldn’t think anymore, couldn’t conceptualize time or social norms, a being entirely driven by hard-edged desperation. Emotion and sensation were all that remained, and he lifted his hips off the bed, not to resist being fucked so heedlessly but to succumb to it, to allow more and more of himself to be raked over the coal’s of Keith’s scorching touch. Anything he could do to be closer, anything he could give to make Keith feel good – that was all he could think about.

Lance’s head fell back, mouth open and panting as he felt himself approach the edge. He could come untouched at this rate, but added contact would certainly help him along – he considered asking Keith to touch him, or to be so bold as to stroke himself during the heated madness of it all, but he found himself still too shy to take such initiatives, which was, he admitted, just fine. There would be
other times, more times, and he could learn what felt best and how to make Keith feel good with practice, and that thought of this being a bedrock to his future had him crying out.

Shaking, Lance tried to gather himself enough to speak. “I – I’m close, Keith, but –”

“Fuck, me too,” the Prince groaned, and he shifted his own knees further apart, spreading Lance wider in the process. Gasping for air, Lance felt Keith move over him again, a hand forcing itself between his back and the bed, the other pushing back the sweaty hair from his face. The presence of his clammy fingers atop his scars left a tingling sensation in their wake, and Keith nosed into his cheek, butterfly kisses tickling his eye scale.

“Mmm, Lance.” He pressed his mouth into Lance’s eye scale, a tremble of pleasure burning at the point of contact, whispering into his skin. “You feel so good, wanna come with you. Can you do that, come for me, just like this?”

“Yes, yes,” he promised, his body reacting to the gentle plea in aching juxtaposition to the unrelenting pressure of Keith’s pelvis pounding into his, pushing him closer and closer with every stroke. “Right there, dios, please, K-Keith I’m – I’m gonna –”

And before the words were out, Keith just beat him to it, a low groan rumbling through him as his thrusts stopped, buried instead as deep as he could go inside of Lance. The hot, sticky promise of Keith finishing inside of him was the last push he needed before hurling over the edge himself, thrown into a white-spotted realm of pleasure that had his whole body tingling, toes curling, muscles unfurling in the steadfast ecstasy. His heart was loud as the languid pants above him, making it difficult to hear the murmured gentle praise that was kissed into his skin, and his own seed, warm and irrefutably messy, had splattered onto his stomach and thigh, a notable tang flavoring the air in the moments after, both of their bodies thoroughly spent. The room had slowed with them, time giving them the chance to both relish and recoup, a few shallow pumps against his walls, greedily flexing over Keith as he spilled the last of his release, deep as it could go. With a decisive throb that marked its end, a low whine escaped Lance’s at the sensation deep inside of him, his insides hot and his body coiling with satisfaction.

Keith was kissing life back into his body while he regained his senses, words sweet and voice glowing. “You were so good Lance, so good, I love you.”

When Lance finally blinked back, a mumbled reciprocation drawling from his lips, Keith kissed him softly and held his face with one hand, his hip with another. “I’m going to pull out… is that okay?”

“Ah,” he adjusted his shoulders, not that it would really help, and nodded. “Sure.” Keith gave him another kiss against the corner of his mouth and, inhaling, squeezed of Lance hip as he quickly pulled himself out, and then he was gone, a small trail of cum leaking out with him.

Lance wrinkled his nose and turned into the pillows, wrapping himself in any manner of bedding to hide his nakedness. “Ugh, that takes... getting used to.”

A laugh answered him, and Lance smiled as he listened to Keith start to move around the room, returning to his side with towel and pants and boxers before even worrying about himself. He nudged Lance so he would roll over, and he began wiping up the mess he had unintentionally smeared into the sheets.

***EXPLICIT/NSFW CONTENT ENDS***

Lance groaned, because, _ah_, his body was starting to catch up with the amount of marks he’d gained, burying the sound into the pillow as he worked the boxers and pants over his hips. After putting on
his own clothes, Keith crouched near Lance’s side of the bed, tucking a wayward strand of hair behind his ear.

“You sure you’re okay?”

Lance considered punching him, but settled on rolling his eyes.

“If you ask me that again Keith I swear to god,” he muttered, turning his head into the pillow in a lame attempt to avert his eyes. “I’m pretty sure you were there, so unless you’re deaf and blind I’m pretty sure it should be obvious that I’m really better than okay.”

The Prince was quiet for a moment, and Lance was expecting some sort of snark in reply to his own, so he was all the more surprised when all of the fire had completely drained from his voice.

“Your back…”

Lance blinked, the realization coming a moment later. “Oh. Right.”

Biting his lip, he instinctively began to turn face-up again, angling his shoulder blades away. “Yeah, it’s… probably sort of off-putting to look at. Sorry. My shirt is somewhere, um…”

“No, wait,” a hand moved to stop him, and Keith was frowning. “I want to see. Can I?”

Lance’s throat felt thick, but he pushed down the self-conscious urge to hide away the mutilation that had been done to him, nodding, all too aware of the fact that the damage was permanent. It’s not like it was something he could pretend didn’t exist; the scars were a part of him now. Awkwardly, he stayed quiet as Keith’s weight shifted the mattress, taking a seat on the edge of the bed. Delicate fingers began to trace the outline of the scar tissue, smoothing over his skin with sun-warmed tenderness, silently connecting invisible lines around the reminders of his burns.

After a few dozen traces, the Prince spoke, his tone more wistful than anything. “I’m sorry about this.”

“It’s just a scar,” Lance hummed, repeating the words that Hunk had told him. “I could be dead, so I’m not really that sorry about it.”

“Mmm.”

They returned to a comfortable silence again, but it was brief. Keith’s hand moved away and was replaced by a gentle, stupidly affectionate kiss against the crest of his shoulder blade, where some of the scarring was worst, and it made Lance’s heart skip – because, why did he have to go and do something so sweet, like, Lance was trying to recoup his blood pressure and that was not helping.

Quietly, the Prince relayed, “I’m still sorry it happened.”

“Gosh,” Lance cleared his throat, attempting to sound casual. “You already got me in bed, Mullet, no need to woo me now.”

“Woo you,” Keith snorted before placing another kiss into his back, gingerly, this time nearer to his spine. “Is that what you call this?”

“You’re a helpless romantic Keith, admit it,” Lance teased.

The Prince was quiet, which again, surprised him. A gentle few fingers returned to the marred skin of his back, following the curves and dips of his scars.
“Lance?”

The ministrations were beginning to make him sleepy, and his eyes had fallen closed before he realized. Lance lifted his head slightly to show that he was listening. “Hmm?”

“Marry me.”

[KEITH]

Keith wanted to die. Drop dead, right there. And poor Lance. He really deserved better than Keith’s absolutely disastrous impulse control.

Lance rolled over to face him, sitting up so they were eye-to-eye.

“You… hah, you wanna run that by me again? Cause I thought you just said –”

As Lance spoke, his gaze was wide, droplets of light wrought from stars and oceans, flecked by catches of navy blue in the low light, bottomless in their earnestness. It took Keith but a heartbeat to decide, yep, fuck it.

He didn’t even let Lance finish his thought. “Lance, marry me.”

His heart was raging in his chest, crying mutiny and singing hymnals overtop one another. Keith bit his lip, face burning in mortification, unable to find an ounce of regret for saying what he’d been thinking all night, instead feeling filled by a profound sense of relief, a distinct one that followed any moment of desperate, vulnerable honesty.

“You’re going to have that scar forever…” He said, willing his voice not to shake. Unconsciously, his hand inching closer to Lance’s on the bed. “Because you saved someone’s life, and you’d only met them a handful of times. If you can risk your life for someone you hardly know, then… then I can at least offer this to someone that I know I’m in love with.”

A wary sigh passed through him as he laced their fingers together, relieved that Lance’s threaded into his automatically, willingly. There was no stiffness or discomfort in his movements, not like the unrest pricking at the back of Keith’s own nerves. In fact, if the Prince dared himself to think it, he thought Lance looked, besides especially tired, genuinely happy. His cheeks marks were glowing, which Keith took to be a good sign.

No backing out now, just, just explain… He allowed himself one more steadying exhale.

“I’ll be perfectly honest, I know how fucking stupid this sounds. Trust me. I’ve tried to talk myself out of it, and I should have done this properly, and asked your Mom for permission, or courted you for like, any amount of time at all… but I realized it’s still expected of me to get engaged when the ball ended but with everything that happened – obviously that sort of became a secondary concern. That’s just the reason I would ask you so soon, but, just, I really do want this, Lance.”

Fire. Hellfire.
Keith’s face was on fire. His neck, throat, lungs and even the base of his gut – it was all *on fucking fire.*

He kept talking anyways. After all, Keith had gone through flames for Lance once before, and he’d gladly do it again.

“We don’t have to get married right away and nothing has to really change – and shit, you really deserve better than me just, like, *rambling,* but I can’t pretend to want anyone else. If you can be patient with me maybe I can do a better job proposing some other time, properly, later – when you’re ready. But, I’m one-hundred percent serious. I want this, if I’m going to –”

“*Yes.*”

Keith blinked owlishly, misunderstanding rattling his body all the way down to his bones because Lance was… *smiling?* Did he – was he not understanding? Where was the laughter at his expense, the doubtful brow raise and the subsequent humiliation?

Voice utterly failing him, Keith opened his mouth only to close it again. Then, after several more seconds of uselessly floundering, he came up with, “You – *yes*?”

“I get it, Keith. I’ve, um, thought about that too, I guess? I don’t want to get, like, *married tomorrow,* but if it came down to you having to get engaged to anyone else or get engaged to me… I would want it to be me. I *do* want it to be me. So, hell yes. Let’s fucking do it.”

His chest felt… heavy, and light at the same time. Face warm, eyes sharply tuned to track any signs of doubt, body tense and relaxed all at once. Keith was, at least for those few moments, adrift in the sea of paradox that was his mind and body.

And when understanding came, like a cooling breeze in a burning summer, Keith was overcome by gratitude, thanking the moon and the sun and all of the stars to have given him such an opportunity, for the winds to have settled just so against the sands of time so that he could have this.

Keith approached slowly, measuring Lance’s reaction in the chance that his body had decided that it *had* been too much despite Lance’s insistence otherwise, and eventually ran his thumb over the crest of his defined cheek-bone, stopping at the point of his Altean marks before sweeping the length of flawless brown skin again.

“I’m in a little bit of a state of shock right now,” he admitted, sounding about as distant as he felt.

“You’re in shock?” Lance snorted, turning into his hand and pressing a kiss into his palm – a move that effectively stopped the Prince’s heart altogether. “Pretty big words from someone who stole me away from the infirmary wing, melted my heart with a whole buncha super sweet letters and testimony statements or whatever, not to mention he was breaking the rules to share them with me, got me into his bed and then *asked me to marry him.* Yeah, you’re the one in shock. Funny, Keith.”

“Shut up,” he groused, ears burning at the edges just a bit. “You make it sound like I planned this.”

A challenging brow raised, paired by that damning smile. “*Did you?*”

“No,” the Prince defended. He maybe planned… a little… like getting Lance to stay in his room, but that was purely because Keith wanted to sleep with him beside him. He’d spent too many nights now restless, a few floors separating him from having a bed not quite so empty, a night not quite so lonely.

Seeing Lance in his bed, somehow already building himself a home in the blankets, banished the
lingering flecks of doubt that hung heavy in the back of his mind.

“I’m not asking this in a way to get you mad, but are you actually okay? Like, I understand you could feel fine in the moment and all, but I was… I shouldn’t have been so, erm, rough? Do you need anything?”

The tan-skinned boy ran his hands over his arms in a sort of self inspection, moving to his own neck before running a hand through his hair, making it stick up in an adorable kind of way. “I think I’m alright, I am sore, but I think rest is all I really need. That’s what everyone says these days,” he tagged on the last part a bit wryly, but laid back against the sheets with a comfortable smile.

“Want to go to bed?” Keith’s lips thinned as he considered the big picture. “Or, if you want, I can take you back downstairs.”

“I am pretty tired, but, no, this is fine. I’d like to stay here.” Lance said, a smirk hidden in his voice. “Won’t you come to bed, fiancé?”

Keith huffed a laugh and got up, making the bed to his own side, he noticed Lance was scowling at his pillows.

“What?”

The dip in his brown deepened. “Is there anything I’ll have to do now? Like, with all of your politics and stuff? I just want to… prepare myself for tomorrow?”

“Oh,” Keith hummed as he reclined back into his pillows, staring up at the ceiling. “Nothing has to change unless you want it to. I would like to make an announcement so that the citizens can stop trying to tear down my castle walls, but that’s all. Anything else – even staying here – is all up to you. You don’t have to be obligated to do anything, I promise.”

The distance between them lessened, Lance scooting a little closer. “Alright. Phew, ‘kay. I’m basically convinced this is a dream right now anyways, so waking up in the morning I’ll need you to remind me of everything that happened and that this was real.”

“Pff,” Keith sputtered a little laugh, turning on his side to turn off the crystal light by his bedside. “Alright. I can do that. Anything else the Local Heartthrob needs to make it through another day?”

“Nah. Just you, Knife Boy.”

Though it was probably intended as a joke, Lance’s response made Keith bite his lip, turning his face into the pillow even if there was no way his red cheeks could be spotted.

Sleep had nearly claimed him when he heard his name again, but his consciousness was too far from his body to really react.

“Keith?” There was pause, and a kiss was placed into his shoulder. “Thank you.”

A dry, empty autumn morning – missing in sun or rain, all of the sky blotted by gray overcast – was a beautifully dull thing for a day like today. It was not a day that needed the added melancholy of a thunderstorm or the optimism of a cloudless day; today was a turning point, a time for action, and it
needed no added flare of fanfare from nature to embody a magnanimity all its own.

Keith shrugged into an extra robe he plucked quickly from his closet, moving out to his balcony, watching as a crowd began to form. Their raucous gathering had woken him, though it was not quite to a pitch where Keith worried it might disturb Lance’s sleep. For now, they seemed little more than a few dozen, braving the end of October in spite of the bitter chill that crept into Keith’s bones after only mere minutes, and he listened like a twitcher soaking in a morning bird’s song, amazed by their restless energy, senseless only in its order but not in its meaning.

How many dozens, hundreds of people, were touched by the events of the ball that hadn’t been there that evening? How many servants, sons and daughters, stratified or not by the demands of time and economy, could identify with Lance in spite of many never even having met him? Keith could see it, if he took the metaphorical step back as he looked down over the capital from his perch high into the gray skies – he could see how people couldn’t help but admire the Blue Paladin. (It’s not like he had to try very hard to imagine it, anyways).

Lance had done something of myth or legend, a pseudonym even suited for such a tale, and turned an entire world order on its head with little more than a magical watch and an honest, well-meaning heart.

_It really only does take one person to change the world, doesn’t it?_

This would not solve everything, but it was a step closer, a step towards a future Keith could genuinely look forward to. Even though his hands were cold, he examined his left one spread over the stone balustrade, gaze coming to rest on his ring finger.

A smile tugged at his lips; he was starting to believe that such a future could be possible.

There was still much to do, of course. He knew the Galran they wanted Lance’s blood, at this point perhaps simply to spite him, and Keith would sooner die than let that happen.

The character statements in Lance’s favor will essentially discount anything the Valurians had to say about him, but there was still the matter of his heritage. A simple test really would verify if Lance had been born under the ownership to someone, but judging by the information the archivist had gathered – that Medram Serrano had gone so far as to use or pay someone to abjure his name from any records – Keith really didn’t doubt the story.

With that thought in mind, the Prince let out a final low exhale and retreated to the warmth of his room again. Lance was still sleeping soundly, and Keith had to resist the very domestic urge to go over and press a kiss into his temple while he slept – another time, maybe. He had to prepare for another day.

He moved about his room quietly, gathering the necessities to bathe and dress and head downstairs – he did not waste much time, only bothered with his hair enough to get his crown to sit straight, and in a grand total of perhaps twenty dobosh he was about to leave the room.

His key felt heavy in his pocket, a burden unfairly bared, and he quietly walked over to the center table and set the brass contraption down for Lance to take up later if he so chose; Keith wanted to demonstrate that he meant it when he would hold Lance to no obligations, and that included being cooped up in this room. If he wanted to spend his whole day here, he was more than welcome to do so – if he wanted to leave, he could take the key and lock it after him. He could get a spare one from the basements anyway. Sure, it would wean some of his worries if he knew exactly where Lance was, but it wasn’t Keith’s right to take that choice from him.
With a small exhale, he stepped out into the hall and closed the door behind him. The guard who had come to relief Plaxum sometime in the night was posted there, and he instructed they head off to find someone with the proper key to lock the door after him. The young man nodded and quickly went the other direction, so he stood in front of his door and waited, hesitating in front of the dark wood grain.

His palm came to rest gently on the surface.

*Have a good day, Lance.*

Keith made it all of one floor down before Shiro was chasing after him – gods, the man was like a bloodhound when it came to tailing Keith.

“Prince Keith, good morning,” he said, heaving slightly as he jogged to catch up with him. “Did you have a good night last night?”

“Fuck you, Shiro,” he shoved him by the shoulder, turning away and taking to the steps again. The older man snickered behind him.

“Oh, don’t be like that. I’m happy for you. Adam was rather upset, though, to find Lance gone.”

The Prince rolled his eyes, shooting a glance in the knight’s direction. “I’m sure he was. But he’ll be fine where he is.”

Fucking Shiro couldn’t just let it go. “You mean, in your bed, right?”

“Oh my god, would you leave me alone?” Despite his efforts, his cheeks pinked slightly. “I didn’t wake up early for this.”

“No, I’m sure you didn’t. I’m actually surprised to find you, I was just coming to wake you up.”

“Can’t even let me sleep in this one time, huh?” he groused.

The man patted his shoulder. “Don’t be such a downer, Keith. You’re needed in the Kral Beta room, if you must know, and you probably noticed Plaxum’s been dismissed so here I am – ready to guide you all the way to the second-floor!”

“I hate you,” Keith said, which Shiro acknowledged with a laugh and – gods, a *noogie*. “I’m not six, would you stop that?!”

The Prince made a point of running his fingers through his hair in a way that *should* demonstrate his frustrations, but Shiro was rather ignorant or willfully ignoring the implication – Keith strongly suspected the latter – as he prattled on with that same whimsical tone.

“You’ll be six in my heart, always.”

They’d just reached the second-floor, so Keith bit back the myriad of insults that he was oh-so-tempted to hurl at his pain-in-the-ass of a Head of the Guard, instead marching swiftly in the direction of the room that he’d visited more in the past week than he had in his entire life otherwise.

They approached the door quickly, noting Kolivan’s absence – a sign that his Mother was not yet here – and they quickly were granted entrance from the Blade posted outside.

As the room opened up, the Prince was surprised to find other familiar faces already there. Apparently, someone had decided to share where exactly the Blade and Guard were having their
joint meetings, because what was once their very private space had since become awfully crowded.

Hunk, Pidge, and, surprisingly, Sir Coran, were all seated at the table, chairs and papers strewn heedlessly about. The younger two were passed out on top of books, pens forgotten in their unconscious grips, and Sir Coran looked up with a sunken-eyed smile at Keith and the others.

At the far end the table, a large, grid-like map had been pinned to a board on the wall, in front of which stood one Matt Holt with his tongue sticking out in concentration, a hand at his hip.

Nearby, Slav was curled up in a corner, openly weeping about the color of everyone’s socks.

An observative part of Keith’s mind took time to notice that someone must have come by to clean up the massive extravagance of Slav’s mess from the preceding days, stuffing the mountains of paperwork into a corner without ceremony or flourish. Now, aside from the smaller piles crowding the sleeping duo and the Altean advisor, the room was more-or-less back to normal.

Matt turned at their arrival, and sent Keith a sympathetic look.

Quietly so as not to wake the others, he asked, “’Hey, man, you holding up okay? I mean, no one’s okay-okay, but you know what I mean.”

Yeah, Keith knew exactly what he meant.

He supplied a shrug, which Matt seemed to accept as he turned back to the grid and resumed muttering under his breath.

Moving towards the table, Keith looked over Pidge’s shoulder and he was met by a series of scribbles and dates and names that, by the looks of it, reached back through centuries. “What is all this?”

Coran folded his hands together, using them to support the weight of his chin. He looked upon the two sleeping teenagers fondly.

“Well, I believe they call themselves Team Punk, but as for the mess… They’ve volunteered their time to look into the jurisprudence of slave ownership and property rights, particularly across borders. I’ve offered my assistance where I can with my knowledge of Altean law.”

“Oh.” He supplied, rather lamely. Keith didn’t really know what to say, but that he was grateful. “Wow. Thank you, for doing this.”

“Master Lance saved my life,” Sir Coran said, more seriously than Keith had ever heard him. “It has been the least I can do.”

Shiro came up behind the advisor’s chair and put a hand against the back of it, claiming Coran’s attention. They shared a heavy, genuine smile, and Keith felt a swell of gratitude for the people around him in that moment – that they were all so clearly invested in this as he was, it was touching.

The Altean heaved a large breath before turning back to Keith. “Besides, I am not the one who’s wisdom should really be thanked – it was young Pidge here who made a, what do you say, crack in the case? Your Mother was here just a moment ago, she’s going to inform Emperor Zarkon personally of this discovery… probably to save from another unnecessary meeting. Getting the Galra to back off without the added display of doing it front of the whole Council, I think, would be less of an embarrassment and therefore a more likely plan overall!”

He twirled his moustache on the final word, just the appropriate amount of flourish for such a
Keith, however, was trying to absorb this information and analyze it just as fast.

“Wait – wait, Pidge did what?”

His eyes flickered up to Shiro, who seemed equally surprised.

It was Matt who answered, not bothering to turn around as he inspected his pin-driven grid on the board. “She figured out a legal precedent to force Daibaazal to step the fuck off.”

Blinking, Keith looked down at the drooling face of the fifteen-year old girl, glasses askew, brow knit in what was likely not a very fitful sleep.

Keith simply had to ask. “How?”

Coran grinned, his expression proud.

“It appears Master Lance has obtained legal registration of distributing materials that he sells regularly enough to categorize him as a nomadic vendor, rather than just an illegal worker, and there are certain protections that extend to, say, the Unilu that would prevent them from persecution. It’s a loophole, and admittedly a temporary fix to larger problem, because if the documents surface that cement Lady Valurian’s testimony, or his father is discovered abroad... but...” With a glowing grin, he looked up and held Keith’s gaze. “It’s nothing a little time and a thinking bonnet can’t fix! There’s a long-term solution in here somewhere, or my name isn’t Coran Hieronymus Wimbleton Smythe!”

“Not so loud, Coran,” Shiro scolded with a frown at which the advisor scratched the back of his neck and bowed his head in apology.

Shiro, apparently, was equally surprised by this. “I didn’t know Lance was considered a merchant.”

“Wait,” Keith paused. He almost burst out laughing, not that it was particularly funny, but just by sheer disbelief. “Oh my god, he – I can’t believe it.

Okay, yeah. Keith started laughing. He felt bad when he noticed Hunk start to rouse and had to clamp a hand over his mouth.

Barely keeping it together, Keith had to step back and force down himself from outright giggling. “It’s his cow. Kaltenecker,” he said with what was surely a dumb smile when the others looked on in confusion. “He won her in bar... which means he owns domestic property – live-stock – and sells her milk as a vendor. Oh my god.”

A strange mixture of relief, adrenaline, and exhaustion knocked into him, like he could fight anyone and then take the world’s greatest, longest nap.

Matt edged closer so he wouldn’t have to speak too loudly, looking down at his little sister with something akin to fondness twinged with just a bit of exasperation. “I suppose it’s fitting in some way, that was the night he and my little Pidgeon here became friends. But for now, that’s enough to hold the line, and our parents are already over at the Olkarion embassy. Assuming Zarkon accepts this as checkmate, all of the plans have shifted. Arus’s folks and some of the Alteans will be joining them at the embassy to discuss the relief effort stuff. That’s what I’m working on now. I might go over there around lunch to start coordinating.”

The map, Keith now noticed, displayed an enhanced view of the whole stretch of the northern realm, butting all the way up to Marmora’s northernmost region. There, from west to east, Olkarion, Altea,
and Arus were interwoven with different streaks of ink and a multitude of handwritten notes detailing trade routes, underground paths, bodies of water, rest areas for travelers, and the like.

It was the beginnings of a long project, Keith could tell, but it was certainly something. He felt an overwhelming rush of gratitude bloom in his chest, and were he not so in control of his own emotions, the Prince might have even cried. There was something there, a hope towards a mercifully peaceful resolution.

“Thank you, Matt,” he spoke sincerely, and the elder Holt responded with an appreciative nod. “I mean it, thank you.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. This is our home, too, you know? It means just as much to us.”

With a reassuring clap on his shoulder, the older of the Holts went back to his board, although not before casting a skeptical look in Slav’s direction when he insisted that he write with his right hand instead of his left. (“I’m not ambidextrous, I can’t just switch,” he had griped, which brought Slav to tears. Shiro had to intervene at that point, much to his own discontent.)

A gait came from down the hall, a subtle click that resounded off the crisp metal floors, one that Keith recognized well.

“Ah, good morning, Keith.” The Queen spoke softly, noting the sleeping teenagers at the end of the table. She looked surprisingly well-rested, Keith thought, and he smiled warmly as Kolivan appeared behind her a moment later. “Have you been caught up on everything?”

“I think so.” He moved closer to mind his volume. “What did the Galra have to say?”

The Queen’s typical stoicism cracked, a wide smile lightening her features. She looked younger when she smiled like that, a real grin that showed her sharpened canines and all.

“They’re, hmm, unhappy.” She began to fix the hair that was in his face, and Keith tried to move away from her doting touch with a roll of his eyes. “You really should brush your hair better. Don’t you have a boyfriend to impress now?”

Keith felt the weight of Kolivan’s gaze especially heavily – there was just something unbearably awkward talking about something like this infront of him. “Mom. Do we have to do this now?”

“I don’t know Keith, do we?”

Oh god she knows how does she fucking know everything fuck fuck fuck –

“No, we don’t,” he grumbled, trying to sound decisive and authoritative. And she laughed. God, she was the worst sometimes. “What happens now? If Daibaazal can’t make any legal claims, and the Valurian testimony is essentially moot…?”

Kolivan’s jaw shifted slightly. “They take the easy out, and accept the whole thing as a misunderstanding. Let bygones be, and things will return to as they were. There’s still the problem of domestic insurgencies within Daibaazal, but it will at least contain the conflict for awhile longer.”

Nodding, Keith rubbed his chin, studying his Mother’s own frown. “What is it?”

“Hmm? Oh, nothing,” she waved a hand. “Just thinking about how we’ll handle our own ‘domestic insurgency’ – the crowd outside. Even if the testimony we’ve gathered by now is plenty sufficient to serve to bolster Lance’s character in any sort of legal pretense, I’m not happy with the idea of turning people away who do want to share their thoughts. It seems unfair, both to them and to Lance, for
them not to have the equitable opportunity. But there’s already more than I would have anticipated, I’m assuming you saw…?"

“Yes,” he affirmed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I could hear them from my balcony. I wanted to talk to you about that…”

Chapter End Notes

OKAY I know I said it would be this chapter and then the epilogue, but it might be one MORE and then the epilogue... this one ended up being a lot longer than I intended whoops!! that's what 8k words of smut will get you! OOF
Chapter Summary


And the realm will never, ever be the same.

Chapter Notes

did i cry while writing this?

...maybe

[LANCE]

“Lance! Lance wake up!”

Gasping, Lance flew forward, chest heaving and gripping the sheets in confusion. He began coughing and choking on his breath, and shivers wracked his body harshly. Reality had struck him straight through his chest like an arrow burying into flesh, and consciousness hit him as hard-pressed as it could, a punch to his gut that left him shaken.

Just as quickly as the confused pool of feelings began to drain out of him, there was gentle, reassuring pressure of wide hands resting on his shoulder, a familiar voice trying to coax him back to the present with unheard words of comfort.

“Wh– what –?” he began to say, struggling to find his bearings. “Hunk?”

“Yeah, hey, buddy. That’s it, just take a deep breath, you’re okay. Pidge, do you have…? Thanks.”

Utterly confused, he looked around Keith’s room, finding no Keith, but Hunk and Pidge. The former was seated on the edge of the bed, and Pidge loomed awkwardly behind him with a frown on her face. In one hand, she offered Lance a handkerchief, which he hesitantly accepted.

“What’re you doing here? Where’s Keith?”

“Prince is downstairs doing Prince junk,” Pidge supplied brusquely, giving him a skeptical once over. “But forget about that for right now, are you okay? Do you need to like, get some air, or something? You’re – uh – crying. Like, a lot.”

“Huh?” He looked at them both blankly, and the concern was clearly etched into both their frowns. After a moment, his motor functions kicked in, and Lance raised the cloth to his face to wipe at his cheeks, and, shit, Pidge really wasn’t kidding; hot tears were pouring down his face with such a
steady flow they were beginning to dampen the comforter beneath him.

“Um.” Lance sniffled, his voice thick. The lingering remainder of his dream was already starting to fizzle, but he had a grip, an impression of... of something... some strange mixture of feelings thundering in his chest.

The weight of his crying was unnatural, much too large and heavy for his own heart to bare, and he had a intuitive sense that perhaps these tears were not entirely his own. It wasn’t necessarily sadness, because it was too hopeful for that. Not bittersweet, because he was not upset in the traditional sense of the word, but there was nothing sweet about this feeling.

It was the nostalgia of loving something, and to never, ever stop loving it even if time makes it distant; it was the feeling of letting go without forgetting, of looking up towards the stars, smiling in spite of the heartache because, really, what else was there to do? It was something beyond words, but necessitated tears. Like breaking a bone out of place so it could be properly set, his heart felt something that had to hurt so that it could heal. The blood of his body was chilled by the sentiment of disappointment, of a risk that did not pay off, but it lingered with a strange sort of pride for the fact that he had tried anyways, even against the better odds of fate.

His whole body felt vulnerable, his hands shaking, his heart clenched tight in his chest.

It was an emotion Lance had felt over and over and over again, without having a name for it.

He felt... blue.

“--nce? Lance, buddy, you still with me?” A hand pushed back the bangs in his face, trying to measure his temperature. “What in the name of fondant, you’re freezing. Lance, are you sick? What’s going on?”

Blinking, blind through his tears, Lance tried to focus on Hunk’s face.

“Sorry, I’m...” he gripped his head with one hand, his thoughts and subsequent words too disorganized to make sense of anything just yet.

Hunk’s gaze trailed down from his face, landing on the collar of Lance’s shirt. His voice turned decidedly suspicious.

“Did... something happen between you and Keith?”

Pidge coughed, badly covering her words in the process. “Besides fucking?”

“H-hey!” His own voice cracked, and he winced. Lance tried again to wipe at his cheeks, now burnt red from Pidge’s statement.

The girl rolled her eyes, climbing into the end of the bed and sitting crossed-legged. She propped an elbow on her knee and rested her chin in her hand.

Hunk, ever the pacifist, waved a hand at her. “That’s none of our business, let’s not go there.”

“Unless Keith has a wolf we somehow don’t know about, I’m just reaching the logical conclusion – seeing as there’s a big fucking bite mark on his neck.” She threw out a hand to demonstrate in his direction, and Lance’s face flooded an even darker shade of crimson.

“Shh.” Hunk shook his head at her, and Lance was grateful. Reflexively, he bent his chin down to hide the rather obvious marks she was talking about, but after a moment, he thought better of it. In
fact, Lance decided that Pidge or Hunk or anyone for that matter could look on as much as they want; he had not a single fucking thing to hide, thank you very much.

Hunk repeated his earlier concern, gesturing with his hands. “So, are you okay? Did anything, uh, happen with Keith that would have... upset you?”

“No, really,” Lance insisted, a little shyly as he glanced the other way. “I mean, we did – ya know – but like, I don’t know why I’m crying. I can’t even seem to stop, it’s like, not even me. I think it might have something to do with… like, fate, or something. Something bad.”

After a pause, during which Hunk and Pidge exchanged a significant look, both of his friends pulled out their pocket watches.

Hunk’s lips turned down, holding his out for Lance to see. “It’s something with these, isn’t it? I can… feel it. Like, I’m sure that there’s something… wrong?”

Noticeably uncomfortable, Pidge nodded, but she had nothing else to add. Lance watched as she brushed her thumb over the emerald glass that separated her from the face of the timepiece, a hard worry pinching her brow.

Lance’s heart weighed heavily as he watched them because he felt… nothing of the sort. That is, Lance knew how that must feel, the inexplicable tether that bound them to the device, like an open channel between his mind and the sails of the fates, where their guardians each blew gusts of wind to help them navigate the seas. Lance knew how that felt, but he didn’t feel it right now. His watch was still damaged, still gone.

After a few ticks, Hunk sighed steadily and looked up, gaze fierce. “Lance… can we help? Is there something we should do?”

After a moment’s consideration, Lance trying to steady his breathing enough so he could well and truly speak in spite of the overflow of unprecedented sadness that lined his cheeks, he nodded.

“We… we should try to talk to Allura. She’s like, the expert on this stuff. I feel like that was something… something I needed to tell her. It’s hard to explain. God, my like, chest hurts. Do you guys feel that?”

His friends, his fellow paladins, shared a similar, resolute frown and they shook their heads.

“Should we get Adam?” Pidge wondered, tucking her watch back in her pocket.

Lance bit his lip. “No, no, it’s not like that… If anything, I think I need the Princess.”

“Okay…” Hunk nodded towards the door, and Pidge got up and started to head to the hallway. “I’ll send one of the guards to find her.”

Hunk pocketed his watch, looking Lance over with wide, concerned eyes. The half-Altean had to laugh, just a little, at how anxious he appeared.

“I’m fine, Hunk, really. Your watch is probably telling you the same thing – this isn’t… it’s not, like, me crying. I think it’s… Blue, maybe.”

The larger boy didn’t look ready to deny it, and for that Lance was glad. He didn’t feel up for an argument right now, and he really was being honest. Whatever this was, it wasn’t his own body; this was something completely different.
Thankfully, the flow of tears had begun to slow, though only slightly.

After another dobosh or so, Pidge re-entered the room and closed the door behind her.

“All right, someone’s going to notify the Princess and send her our way. They said she’s helping with something downstairs and it could take up to a varga, so I figured we’ll move back down to the infirmary in a little bit. Whenever she’s done, they’re going to send her there – even if you don’t feel like you need to see Adam, it’s probably best to keep him in the loop on this stuff. We can hang out here for a bit, I figured we could still…” Pidge bit her lip, shooting an unsure glance towards Hunk. “I was thinking, I guess, I mean, I thought we could still… try to tell Lance why we came here in the first place?”

In response, Hunk looked to the ceiling, thoughtful. A hand rubbed his chin in a demonstration of deep consideration.

“How did you guys get in here, by the way?” Lance thought to ask while Hunk considered… whatever it was they were talking about. “I’m not like, complaining, but if it was anyone else besides you… Did Keith let you in or something?”

“No, Keith’s been up for hours dealing with the Galra and all the adoring fans of the Blue Paladin.” Pidge smirked. “I may have… borrowed a key.”

Hunk gasped, a pout forming on his lips. “You told me you got that with permission!”

She shrugged, whistling innocuously, and Hunk sent Lance a significant look that said something close to: she’s going to get us arrested one of these days.

Through the thick tears, Lance managed a shaky laugh, and his friend sighed and quirked a grin of his own.

“Anyway, as to why we’re here – we have some news to tell you. You’re going to owe Pidge one after this.”

Lance raised a brow in Pidge’s direction just as she looked out the window, letting out a grunt of disagreement. “He doesn’t owe me or anyone anything. But Hunk’s right about the news part, loverboy. We’ve been sleeping real weird hours and stuff, sorry for not coming to see you more. Hunk and I, oh and, Sir Coran from Altea’s court too, have all been researching laws and stuff on slavery since it’s not really a thing in Marmora.”

An uncomfortable stillness, awkward and thick like morning fog, settled between the three friends. Lance was having a difficult time understanding.

“Oh. Um. Find anything… interesting?”

At that, Hunk grinned, his hands balling into excited fists in front of him. “We looked into the claim your aunt made! There’s a loophole. As far as legal concerns go, you count as a – well, Pidge should be the one to say it. Like I said, she really was the one to figure it out.”

With an appreciative, if not sly, smile, Pidge nodded from Hunk to Lance. “Yeah, but if you hadn’t made the connection to that case from Puig and incorporated the rule of international transience of trade, I never would have been able to pick up on the applicability of it in Marmora! Hunk is definitely just as much to thank as me.”

“What are you guys…” Lance scratched his chin. “Even saying?”
Pidge’s amber eyes flickered mischievously. “You remember the night we became friends?”

Lance huffed a sound of acknowledgment, which was admittedly unconvincing through his sniffling. By this time, he’d almost stopped crying completely, thank gods.

“Of course, how could I not? That’s when I got myself my precious baby girl, Kaltenecker.”

Hunk was practically bouncing in place, and Pidge look like she’d just managed to steal a peanut butter cookie from the Garrett’s bakery.

“Exactly,” they said in unison.

The pair took turns explaining what they’d found, a lot of which admittedly went over Lance’s head in terms of technical legal stuff, but he managed to reach some sort of understanding after a solid ten dobosh.

“So you’re saying…” He swallowed thickly at the lump in his throat, feeling himself actually pushed towards tears. “That because I own Kaltenecker, and I legally registered to sell her milk at market…”

Hunk nodded furiously, “You’re a nomadic trader instead of a, well, the technical term is ‘illegal worker’ I think, but the point is, you’re safe!”

Pidge, who had gradually taken more and more to laying down and sprawling herself over Keith’s bed, comically far from Lance with the size of the thing, pumped a fist in the air.

“Yep! With or without the Prince or Queen backing you, too – which like, from what I hear, they’re sort of kicking ass and taking names in those meetings they’re in all the time but we can’t be there so I can’t confirm or deny – but, regardless, let’s just say worst case scenario every other kingdom was against you, you’re still protected by all their laws. It’s just a right that extends to nondomestic sellers, that they have… well, not diplomatic immunity, per say, but we’ve been calling it diplomatic transience. Anyway, so this means, fuckin’ Lady Bitchface can’t take you away by force, can’t lay a finger on you without it being criminal. The whole rule about not needing a trial, excluding your testimony – none of that counts anymore. Anything that anyone wants to do has to be held to the same legal standard as any other citizen, whichever country’s borders you find yourself in.”

“You guys…” Lance bit his lip, unable to hold in the shuddering sob that bubbled up his throat, completely unrelated to the anchor that had dug hooks into to his chest upon waking. These tears were definitely his own.

Hunk was immediately crouching to get a better look at him, worried. “Whoa, Lance, wait it’s okay – you’re – oh, yep, he’s smiling. Yay! Happy tears! I told you we would figure this out, bud,” the larger teen practically sang the words, tackling Lance with a bear hug that sent him sprawling back into the pillows again. His lungs were being pressed to the point where Lance expected a rib to puncture through at any moment, but he couldn’t find any fucks to give.

It felt impossible – he’d been locked in darkness, had his self-worth reduced to that of a common chair, nearly killed, groped and touched unwantedly by strangers, but – but he was actually going to be okay?

He wept a little harder.

Pidge quickly wiggled her way into their dog pile, her grabby little demon hands yanking at a fistful of Lance’s shirt.

“Now listen up, I didn’t sacrifice sleep for you to undervalue yourself. This whole castle didn’t turn
itself on its head so that you would have to answer to anyone! So if I ever hear you say, one more time, that you’re a servant to anyone, I will destroy you. Do you understand me, you stupid, wonderful idiot?!”

Lance was crying, laughing, returning Hunk’s hug and maneuvering his arm to loop Pidge in too. “Got it, Pidge.”

She sighed, allowing the embrace, and he squeezed the two of them with as much warmth as he could. Lance wished there was more he could do, something he could say to demonstrate how overcome and grateful he was to them, but for now, this would have to do.

“I love you guys,” he hiccupped. “Thank you.”

Hunk, crying almost as much as Lance, leaned back, finally giving his lungs a chance to recover. “We love you too, bud. You know we wouldn’t let something like this happen to you without putting up a fight. We’re a team.”

On the other hand, Pidge made a gagging sound and crawled away, hopping off the bed. “I find you… tolerable,” she wrinkled her nose, failing to hide the smile behind her words. “Now get up and get dressed, we’re going to meet the Princess in the infirmary, remember?”

Hunk dropped a fist into his other hand as he stood from the bed, like a detective making a clever deduction. “Oh! Yes! And I brought you breakfast, so you better eat before it goes cold.”

The tears had slowed by now, but they were not gone, not completely.

“Oh, right. Okay.” Lance allowed himself to be pulled out of bed by the larger of his two morning visitors, listing towards Keith’s closet without really thinking, in search of clothes.

With some borrowed wears that looked like they might fit him (Lance gravitated towards the more well-worn things Keith owned, not really sure what was appropriate at this point), he made his way towards the bathroom to brush his teeth and splash water on his face, groaning unconsciously when he shifted his weight… followed by a quick, vivid flashback of yesterday that had him chewing his bottom lip when he recalled why he was sore in the first place. Right.

Lance turned the tap of the faucet, using cold water to splash his face, needing the added help in making his pink cheeks go away.

“So…” Pidge leaned in the doorframe of the bathroom while Lance pulled his sleep shirt over his head. The grin she wore was decidedly impish, and by extension, made Lance very suspicious.

“Prince Keith bites, huh? Do you think it’s his Galra genes?”

He balled up the shirt and threw it at her. “Ew! Don’t touch me with your nasty sex-clothes.”

“Then mind your own business!” he said, and with an indignant huff of air, Lance closed the bathroom door in her face. It served the dual purpose of hiding his own chagrin. After a few ticks of laughter, Lance could hear the sound of Pidge and Hunk begin to discuss something else, so he sighed and began undressing the rest of the way. He’d bathed so late last night, it felt unnecessary to wash himself again even after, erm, certain activities had brought him to sweat… a lot… but he didn’t know how long the Princess would be and certainly didn’t want to keep her waiting. Lance resolved to wiping himself down with a damp towel with a bit of soap, enough to make himself at
least somewhat decent. Just as yesterday, he lingered again at the dip between his shoulder blades, craning his neck in the mirror.

“You’re going to have that scar forever… because you saved someone’s life.”

Lance supposed he should be proud of the splash of pale that now colored his back, and maybe, in a distant way, he was, but his immediate self was still struggling to accept that this was him now. That any of this was really him; the one who got to wake up in the Prince’s bed in the morning, the person who saved other people’s lives, a symbol of hope, a hero, in the eyes of the entire city, maybe the entire country.

Gods, he was nearly ready to cry again. Lance shook his head and inhaled a slow, deep breath, letting out some of the unwanted emotion. He suspected that dream had left him even more sensitive than normal, and all of his frayed edges and vulnerabilities were exposed as a result. His chest felt oddly hollow with the memory of it, now little more than muddled impressions of sensation at this point… Lance remembered falling forward, and then backwards, and then he had felt so sad, but, it was all jumbled now that he was awake.

Once he stepped out the door, Hunk sent him a big grin and gestured towards some plates piled with croissants, jams and preserves, and a big decanter of water – fucking finally, some of Hunk’s goddamn food.

“You’re awesome, Hunk. I love everything about you.” Lance sat at Keith’s couch, not wasting any time to tuck into the modest meal. “This is so good. Has Queen Krolia tried to hire you full time, yet?”

The larger boy looked sheepish, shrugging. “Not formally, but I think she’s liked having the extra help down in the kitchens. This week wasn’t accounted for in the kingdom’s usual backstock of ingredients and stuff, so Mom and I have been working to help stretch things for the coming days without it seeming sparse. So far, so good, she told us. Keith’s Mom is really nice.”

“Really intense,” Pidge murmured from the other end of the sofa, and Lance nodded in her direction. He finished chewing his current bite and added, “I think she likes me? But she’s sort of hard to… read. Like Keith, but even more impossible.”

“It’s part of being in the Blade, I guess,” Hunk mused. “Their workouts must be insane. Like, that Kolivan guy who’s always with the Queen? He’s huge.”

“Well, he’s also Galra,” Pidge reminded, fixing her glasses. “But yeah, as I understand it, Blade training is incredibly rigorous. Why do you think Prince Bad Attitude has a personal work-out room in his bed chamber? Plus, there’s like, stealth training, information extraction, poison and chemical threat detection skills – like, they are sort of crazy good at what they do.”

Letting out a satisfied sigh as he gulped down the remainder of his water, Lance’s brow furrowed. “Quiznak, I never thought about it like that. They really are, like, mercenaries, aren’t they?”

“The motto is Galran,” Pidge pointed to the symbol plastered on the opposite wall. “It means Knowledge or Death.”

At that, Hunk shuddered. “I always figured it was, like, hyperbolic. It sounds scary when you say it.” Pidge smirked. “You know, that’s not the first time I’ve been told that.”

“What do you think that announcement is going to be about?” Hunk said after a moment, rubbing his
hands nervously on his chef’s pants. “I hope it’s not like, war is imminent. This talk about the Blade is making me nervous…”

Brow arched, Lance looked up, mouth half-full of bread and fruit. “A’ou’cemen’?”

“Oh, pff, duh.” The teen adjusted his bandana distractedly. “You’ve been sleeping – it’s almost ten in the morning already. Towncriers and riders were sent out like, super early this morning. There’s going to be an announcement from the castle at midday, probably some sort of update focused on crowd control or something but I’m… what?” Hunk paused, expression twisting with confusion. “What’s with that look on your face?”

“O-oh,” Laughing a little too loudly, Lance swallowed. “W-well… an announcement, huh, right. Hmm. Yeah. I don’t know anything about… about that.”

He coughed, and both Pidge and Hunk leaned purposefully in his direction, squinting doubtfully.

“What do you know?” questioned Pidge. “You can’t just… get all cozied up with the Prince and then start keeping secrets from us, we were your best friends first.”

Lance held up his hands, definitely not nervously sweating, nope, hah. Not at all. If Lance was an artisan at anything, it was deflecting, so he crossed his arms and turned his chin away.

“If I recall, someone said I’m only tolerable.” He said, trying to construe some air of importance. “Even if I knew, I wouldn’t tell you because of that.”

Without skipping a beat, Pidge threw out a biting threat, leaning forward far in the chair she occupied.

“I’ll tell Keith about the soup incident.”

“W-WAIT!” Lance spun in place, arms flailing, almost knocking the dishes clear onto the floor. Hunk covered his mouth, a sound somewhere between a laugh and genuine pity only partially blocked by his hand.

“Oh, okay! Don’t be hasty, geez. I thought we agreed never to even speak of that again.”

Unamused, Pidge’s lips thinned. “Then spill.”

“Welllllll….” Lance twisted his fingers together, averting his eyes. Suddenly, the pattern of pectin swirling with preserved fruit seemed very interesting to him, much more so than the eyes of his friends boring into him.

“Keith maybe… sort of…”

Oh, fuck, why was admitting this so embarrassing?

“Asked me to… marry him?”

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[SHIRO]
The Head of Guard stretched his arms out, only enjoying the satisfaction of the one that was still his arm, but the movement helped both his shoulders to relax as he walked inside from the barracks. He was leaving a meeting with the other Commanders when he heard it, birds crying in protest as they soared away from the bordering treeline, people around him also stopping to look up to the sky.

It was a… a scream? A shriek, perhaps? It didn’t even sound human.

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[LANCE]

He uncupped his ears, barely enough time to brace himself before Hunk was upon him, arms thrown around his middle and spinning him in place like a ragdoll, breakfast utterly forgotten.

“MY BEST FRIEND IS GETTING MARRIED!”

“H-Hunk, can’t…” Lance tapped him on the shoulder kindly, unable to wheeze out the remaining word. Thankfully, his friend picked up on Lance’s insinuation and let him go, plopping down onto the spot beside where Lance had been previously sitting. His hands were folded together in a pose of prayer, looking more thrilled than a child seeing their first snowfall.

“Sorry, sorry – I know when I said figure out your own fate and stuff I just – I figured you’d come up with something. Are you excited? Do you feel like it’s too soon – I mean of course you would, but are you okay with it anyway? What about Keith, did he propose? Or oh my god Lance did YOU –”

“Breathe, Hunk.” Pidge and Lance instructed simultaneously, and the gremlin shot Lance a questioning look. “Let me guess – you guys had some dumb romantic bonding moment type thing, and then you guys had sex, and then Keith blurted out a proposal like the impulsive dumbass that he is?”

Opening his mouth, Lance closed it again with a furrow in his brow. Shit, Pidge was always right, wasn’t she?

She snorted. “Figured. The only other option was that he proposed first and you were both so excited that you boned after. It’s like solving for \( x \) in an equation, where the variables bi-idiot and gay-disaster are both constants.”

“Oooohh, good nerd joke,” Lance stuck his tongue out while beginning to gather up his now empty plate and used utensils, and Pidge cackled gleefully. “Really got me with that one.”

Chuckling, Hunk began to help him with the dishes and they put them carefully back into the modest basket he had used to transport the food upstairs. “It’s actually pretty clever, because no matter what the theoretical arrangement, if you subtract or divide until you get \( x \) by itself, you’ll always end up with –”
“Please, no more math,” Lance asked with a sigh, yawning. “It’s still too early for math.”

Pidge batted a hand. “Fine, fine. Fifth-floor, then?”

“Sure.” Hunk pushed himself to standing, and Lance noticed the key on the table, Keith’s key, which he’d let Lance borrow once before. With a small smile, he snatched it before poking his head out into the hallway.

There was one guard posted at the door as the three filed out into the hallway, and as Lance went to lock the door behind them, the person let out a little… well… yelp?

“O-oh!”

Lance blinked at him, and then back again between his two friends who looked just as confused as he did.

“Um, you good, bud?” he spoke gently. Their features and voice were fairly androgynous, so Lance just chose not assume any one thing about them.

Their hair, cropped short and falling in little curls, bobbed up and down frantically.


“Ohhhh,” Pidge snapped her fingers and laughed. “You’re like, famous now. Right.”

That caused his lips to thin, doubtful, but another clear look at the guard told him that Pidge might not be far off. Their cheeks were burnt red, and they were avoiding eye contact at all costs. Lance felt a little flustered himself, if he were honest.

“Oh, um. It’s alright. Just, you know, I’m not anyone special. You don’t have to be formal around me, alright?”

Their eyes widened momentarily before they jerkily nodded. “R-Right! Okay. Of course. You’re just – sorry – it’s just that you’re – the Blue Paladin. I’m sort of… just… wow.”

 Unsure how to handle this development, Lance offered the individual a wistful smile and turned away after locking the door, hurrying to get a move on.

In less than three ticks, there was a Blade beside him. He nearly leapt out of his skin when they skirted so close, so silently.

“J-Jesus! What the – Ulaz?”

Ulaz did not show any emotion whatsoever.

“Good morning, Master Lance. I’ve been assigned as your personal escort for the day, though I have also been ordered to tell you that, should you so desire, I will relieve you of my presence posthaste. My attendance with you in the castle is precautionary, but not necessary.”

Gritting his jaw, Lance ended up just rolling his eyes and setting off towards the stairs.

“It’s whatever, just, like, don’t scare me like that next time? And maybe a little space would be nice. I know you’re just doing your job, but you’re going to give a guy a heart attack, you know?”

Hunk and Pidge caught up to him a moment later, and, true to his word, the Blade hung back enough that Lance could almost forget that they were being followed. Not quite, but almost.
A scullery maid sent a warm smile their way as she heaved a load of laundry towards a servant’s passage, and at almost the same time an older, large man passed through and into the hallway. He was broad and heavy-set, presumably at least some part Galran from his features, and he wore the same sort of “kitchen fatigues” that Hunk had on.

“Oh, Hunk, there’s you are. Been lookin’ for’s ya’, we needa second set of taste buds on this course for tonight. Minds if we borrows ya from your fri – oh my god. Oh, wow, holy – it’s you’s! The Blue Paladin. Damn, what an honor. Name’s Sal, it’s a pleasure, no – an honor to meets ya. How are you feeling? Anything the kitchens can do to help out?”

“Um… hi,” Lance awkwardly took the man’s proffered hand and shook it, his vigorous grip practically dragging Lance up and down with the movement. “Sal, is it?”

“Ah, yeah, Lance, this is Vrepit Sal. He’s one of the mainstays in the castle kitchen’s. Sal, this is my buddy Lance, we were actually just –”

“Oh, no, no, of course! Don’t let me gets in ya way. Hunk, come down later when you’ve got time, don’t worry about this, it’s nots going anywhere. Oh, and, hey, Pidge.”

She gave a two-fingered wave. “‘Sup, Sal.”

“Take good care, fellas. It was a pleasure meeting ya’s, Blue Paladin. Just know we are all behind ya. If you need anything at all – anything at all – we’ll backs you up. It’s amazing what you did, and hooking the Prince, too? Gods, what a crazy week. Shit, sorry, I’m ramblin’, ain’t I? Go on, go on. I’ll sees ya later Hunk.”

“See you, Sal!” Hunk sent a friendly wave over his shoulder as Lance and Pidge continued on towards the staircase.

Coughing, Lance crossed his arms over his chest. “Um, sorry. That was… weird.”

“Hardly. That was pretty tame for Sal,” the shorter of his friends said, unimpressed. “Everyone is pretty hyped to meet you at this point. Speaking of which, we should ask Sir Adam if he can get you a primo spot for Keith’s announcement. You know, so you can listen off-stage or whatever. Maybe wherever Shiro is standing, unless he’s like, up there with him…”

Lance sucked his teeth and nodded, only half-listening. The interaction with the guard and then Sal after him was… well, it was certainly going to take some getting used to. Maybe the announcement would help to dial down all the excitement? Or… quiznak, would that make people even more star struck? It made him feel weird and his insides squishy to think about it – he didn’t do anything to elicit respect from people in any intentional way, so it felt just… bizarre, for lack of a better term, for the sudden display of deference around him. Last night, he’d assumed the guards had been snapped to attention because of Keith when they passed.

Now?

He wasn’t so sure.

[KEITH]
Breakfast had been even more awkward than usual.

Not that Keith minded. It was a marked improved from the days previous; there were no dismissive sneers, no contemptuous comments made against his infatuated, errant behavior. In fact, there was almost no one from Daibaazal at all. Again, there no Lotor, which was a damn shame, but there were only two people from their court who had bothered to come down to break their fast at all. One was a young woman that Keith vaguely recognized and an older gentleman beside her. Even with an entire courts absence, there was still a conspicuous amount of noise that filled the hall, especially unusual when you considered the fact that not a single person in the Dining Hall was actually speaking.

See, breakfast was an affair usually set against the clittering of silverware and glass goblets, or the twinkling, utterly fake laughter of the realm’s gathered nobility. That morning, however, any such fragile background noise was deafened by shouting and screaming and chanting that weeded its way through the cracks in the stone walls, a literal mob of people ready to go for another day of gathering character witness testimony. From the general din, it sounded like they were calling to an end to the bureaucracy (a particular point of order that Keith couldn’t help but agree with), and a banishment of Daibaazal from their borders – and who would Keith be to deny his people that?

Keith met eyes with Princess Allura and Lady Romelle several times, both looking somewhat disturbed, if not a tiny bit pleased, by these new developments, and he caught himself smiling more times than was probably appropriate during the meal.

Oh well. It was a bit nice to watch the room squirm, the degree of his citizen’s disappointment fracturing the room’s carefully crafted, pristine life of lies.

Once the meal concluded, the Queen stood.

“Thank you all for your patience. As you can surely tell,” she raised a hand, gesturing outside, “our people are not taking well to Daibaazal’s presence here. I can’t strictly say I blame their court for not joining us for the meal – they are deliberating at this time how they wish to proceed with affairs of the realm. In the meantime, we will be continue our suspension of the Council until later this afternoon, perhaps after midday, to accommodate an announcement that my court will be sharing on the subject of our domestic affairs. We believe all of our citizen’s voices deserve to be heard, but we were spectacularly underprepared to handle such an outpouring of support for young Lance. As such, we invite you all to gather on front gatehouse, or along the bailey should you feel so inclined, while we make our announcements to the public. Graciously, the Olkari have postponed their relief campaign launch until our domestic affairs have been sorted – they are planning tentatively for immediately after our affairs are settled this afternoon. If you are uninterested in attending our domestic meeting, Ambassador Ryder has informed me that they will begin set-up at the embassy around or shortly after our own ceremony begins, so feel free to excuse yourself from our affairs if you feel so inclined to join the Olkari to help prepare for this commemorative day.”

There were a few additional comments and questions, but none that formally required Keith’s attention, and he allowed his Mother to handle the remaining proceedings.

Once dismissed, Keith made a beeline for the stairs – he had shit to prepare and he was decidedly not going to be ready in time, but, he might as well fucking try, right?

Shiro caught up with him, an all-too-smug look on his face, but the knight remained mercifully quiet as the Prince took to the stairs.
He made it all of one step up before someone stopped him, and Keith had to bite back the urge to groan.

“Um, Prince Keith, may I have a word?”

“Right, sure.” Turning on the spot, he was surprised to find the young Galran woman from Daibaazal’s court who had been at breakfast. She was taller than him (though, standing one step up, they were about eye-to-eye), had short hair, styled to frame one side of her face.

“Uh, can I help you?”

“No, well – I didn’t need anything. I just wanted to… this isn’t… there’s nothing like this in Daibaazal.” She nodded towards the front doors, where the guards had begun to gather to begin organizing people once they opened the gatehouse. After a measured, deep breath, she continued. “A… friend of mine was once involved in the underground slave marketplace, and it’s a… dark business. I suppose. Anyway, sorry I didn’t think this through properly, just… as one half-Galra to another, thank you. I appreciate what you and your mother are doing. I… appreciate what Marmora is doing.”

Genuinely surprised, Keith blinked a few times as her words processed. He tilted his head to the side.

“What was your name again?”

“Ah.” Her expression remained impassive. “Lady Axca, your Highness. If there’s anything my father or I can do to help with the investigation, helping to gather witness testimony or anything, please call on us. We’ll be with the rest of our people in the meantime – I understand if you don’t trust us to take such an active role, but the offer is there if you change your mind.”

And with that, she bowed her head politely and took to the steps with the other Galra – her father, presumably – walking beside her. Keith watched them go with mild confusion, but he hadn’t long to think on it before Shiro nudged him.

“You don’t have much longer to prepare. Might want to get on that, your Highness.”

“R-right.” Lips thinned, Keith began to climb the steps again. “You would try to talk me out of this if it was a bad idea, right?”

Cheekily, the knight feigned innocence. “Oh, is that what I was supposed to do? Well, it’s a bit late for that.”

“You’re a terrible friend.”

“Perhaps,” Shiro threw an arm over his shoulder, in a very familiar way – familiar in that it was annoying as hell, and he did it on purpose. “But you see, I’m better than a friend. I’m a loyal knight.”

Deadpan, Keith continued up the steps and did his best to shove Shiro down them all the while.

“You’re terrible at that, too.”

The Head of the Guard merely laughed at him, which only served to annoy Keith more, and it was with no small amount of relief he marched down the hallway towards his the drawing room where the speechwriters were hard at work.

Knocking gently, the men and one woman in the room all began to rise upon his entrance, but Keith stilled them with a hand. “Please, as you were.”
As the seats clambered over the floor, wooden legs creaky and groaning with the weight of the hardworking writers, the Prince bit his lip before turning to the older man.

“Listen, Shiro. Only my Mother and these four people know exactly what this is about… well, and one more person, I guess, but please, please, keep your damn mouth shut about this.”

Evidently surprised by Keith’s choice of tone, the knight nodded. “Sure. What are they working on? Please tell me it’s not a war declaration.”

“Quite the opposite!” A bright-faced Seok Jin said, practically leaping from his seat. “The Prince is getting married!”

The three other scribes around him looked considerably less enthused, and Keith covered his face with a hand.

“Thank you, Seok Jin. Maybe not so loud next time.”

Shiro had gone very still, brows raised high. It took him several seconds to collect himself.

“You’re – and – wait. Not… to Allura?”

Keith tried to sound less embarrassed than he felt, without much success. “No. Not Allura.”

Nodding slowly, as if he were calculating a very complex mathematical equation, Shiro eventually stumbled out a syllable. “Lance?”

“Gods, obviously, would you not – whoa.” He was prepared to deal with the chagrin and an inevitable amount embarrassment over the whole thing, but he was not prepared for Shiro to pull him into a tight hug.

“Um, Shiro?”

Sincerity colored his tone, and a pang went off in the Prince’s chest when he heard a slight waver in the man’s voice. “Keith, I’m so proud of you. I told you, your feelings matter in this. If being unhappy was going to be the cost of conceding to the Empire’s demands then I told you it wasn’t worth it – gods, just, you deserve to be happy. I’m glad you finally see that, too.”

“I –” His voice got caught in his throat, and Keith’s cheeks burned as the scholars pretended to suddenly be very busy with the parchment on the table in front of each of them. “I-I told you before, don’t get sentimental on me. You’re no good at it.”

The knight huffed a laugh. “Like that would stop me from being proud of you, kid. I mean, just look at you.” He pulled away, holding Keith by each shoulder, eyes shining – oh gods, was he going to start crying? “You’re – I can’t believe you’re… It’s not going to be easy, you know, with Lance’s family and his sudden, hmmm… polarizing reputation, but if you care about him, it’ll be worth it. You’ll see. You do care about him, right?”

He rolled his eyes. “…Obviously, I love him, Shiro. Why the hell else would I –”

The man removed his hands, crossing his arms instead over his chest in a self-satisfied sort of way. “You used to make fun of me for being a sap. Oh how the tables have turned.”

Eyes narrowed, Keith growled out a small, “I may love him, but I swear sometimes, I hate you.”

With that, he pushed past the head of the guard and approached Vakala, the head speechcrafter, who
was pouring over a long scroll.

“Apologies. Now, how can I help?”

“Here, sir,” the man’s fu manchu facial hair twitched as he thrust three separate pieces of parchment into Keith’s hands without any manner of regard. He’d always been on the brusque side when it came to his work, which the Prince honestly appreciated.

“You need to pen this part here, here, and here yourself. The people will be able to tell if you’re unauthentic. You’ll have to speak from the heart, your Highness.”

*Ugh.* Just the notion made Keith feel awkward, let alone writing it out and then preparing to *read it.*

Scanning the page over his shoulder, Shiro barely suppressed a giggle.

“This is the sweetest thing I’ve ever seen, you know that, right?”

Keith didn’t bother looking up, instead holding up two pinched together fingers. “I’m *this* close to stabbing you, Sir Shiro.”

Vakala, along with the others, looked uncomfortable. The Prince let out a frustrated sound and shook his head before approaching the scribes seated around the table, and the Head of the Guard stepped up beside him.

“Alright.” Keith said, jaw set. “Show me where, again.”

It was just one speech, right? He’d given dozens before. It was just a part of the bearing the weight of the crown, metal and rubies inlaid in the dark, carefully crafted onyx that sat over his brow.

Just a speech. No big deal.

---

“Oh fuck, what the fuck was I thinking?”

Keith’s hands were shaking, his head pounding with the rousing cry of a thousand voices, angry and curious, enlivened and energized, all ready to hear his dumbass talk about his dumbass feelings.

Shiro, who had volunteered to join him for moral support, was spectacularly failing to do the one task he had signed up for. “I honestly don’t know *what* you were thinking. Guess your heart is bigger than your brain?”

“Please stop talking,” the Prince griped, the parchment trembling in his hands and his heart lodged in his throat.


It genuinely did not matter how long he’d grown under the scrutiny of nobility and his people – doing something like *this* would always be nerve-wracking, of that Keith was certain. He was not made for such tasks as these; he may have been born to lead but he was *not* a public speaker. He was hardly a fucking *private* speaker, and yet, he’d volunteered himself for this. Willingly. *Knowingly.*

Leaning against the wall beside him, Shiro let out an exhale of exasperation. “If you think about it,
you could blame Lance in a roundabout way for being so likeable. Does that help?”

Keith wasn’t even going to dignify that with a response, instead shooting the man a glare.

“Presenting, his Royal Highness, Heir Apparent to the Marmoran Throne, Prince Keith Kogane.”

Kill me kill me fuck fuck abort what was I thinking this is a terrible idea I’m going to pass out shit–

His legs were moving. Oh, gods, he was really going to do this, wasn’t he? The jeering roars of people from the realm over echoed up from the crowded bailey, and while it was too far off for Keith to make out distinct faces, the “refined” senses gifted him by his timepiece did help him to discern some details. There were many a face bundled in hat and scarf and coat, with small children riding on the shoulders of parents or big siblings. An innumerable amount of people raised bright blue tokens, waving them madly over their heads as Keith approached the edge of the gatehouse wall.

The sight made him smile, softening his nerves ever-so slightly.

It was chilly, as should be expected for the end of October, and the brush of biting wind over his neck and cheeks reminded him of why he was out here, subjecting himself to his personal least favorite part about being a ruler; the wild brandishing of a hundred shades of blue—anything that people had managed to find, jostling in the sea of bodies below, only served to further cement his resolve.

Lance.

He was here for Lance, just as these people were here – sure, to hear him speak, but of what subject?

The same one that seemed to be stuck in everyone’s mouth these days.

The Prince took a deep, deep breath, and let it out just as some of the raucous cheering began to die down.

“People of Marmora,” he said, leaning forward, silently thanking the castle scholars for enchanting the crystal to magnify his voice. No fucking way he’d be able to shout all of this over the castle wall; he was barely managing to keep his voice from shaking like this.

Those three words rang out over the silence, echoing until they reached the castle gates.

As patiently as he could, Keith glanced down at the scroll in his hands and began to read.

“I hear your frustrations. I hear and understand them better than you realize. I, as your Prince, and as your leader, want to lead by example – and keeping you all in the dark about the recent events in the castle has only leant itself to more confusion and distrust amongst us. That has not been my wish, so forgive me for my coarse speech and blunt language on this October afternoon. I wish to give you all the transparency – the truth – that you deserve.

“One week ago, I celebrated my eighteenth year on this earth. Eighteen years of being able to call myself your prince. And yet, in all of that time, it took only but one week for my life to have changed more than I thought possible. I know there was a popular belief that I was betrothed to the Princess of Altea, Allura, but the Princess and I both share in the understanding that this arrangement had been one of political convenience rather than any emotion beyond that of friendship. Make no mistakes, Altea has been a great ally to our kingdom, and the dissolution of this intended union does not have any bearing on the depth and degree of our alliance. The matter was in fact simple: she did not want my hand in marriage, nor did I want her’s. Admittedly, I did not think I would ever want to take anyone’s hand in marriage, convinced as I was the entire affair was not one I was meant to
enjoy.

“This was my belief not as soon as two weeks ago, but, in that time, I met and have come to know who many of you know by the name of Blue Paladin, or by his given name, Lance McClain. Call him whatever you would like, it changes not the fact that it took someone as stubborn as myself to pry me away from what I had resigned to be my future – a loveless marriage that would keep you all safe. But then, when I grew to know Lance, I...”

Pausing, Keith looked up from the parchment splayed out before him, eyes casting over the crowded courtyard. These people had come to demand justice in Lance’s name, to find answers, to cast judgement. It was not yet time for him to formally ascend the throne, but in an odd way, this moment felt just as important – perhaps even more important. Because such an affair as when he would truly claim the throne, that would be all about him; today was about these people, his people, and Keith was prepared bare his heart, make himself as vulnerable as he could allow, to request their patience and, gods willing, their acceptance, too.

More than anything, the Prince wanted to be worthy of them. Once he spoke the next words inked on the page, there would be no turning back, no alternatives.

“When I grew to know Lance,” he repeated, his eyes finding six words.

There was no fear. No nervousness.

Only honesty remained.

“I fell in love with him.”

There was an impression of a smile lingering in his voice, and Keith could have mistaken his heart for a hummingbird, fluttering madly in the cage of his ribs. He ignored it.

“It wasn’t some grand romance, there was not nearly the courting efforts that he deserved on my behalf – the whole thing was entirely by accident. As for what has been happening behind these ancient walls, Lance, along with a valued Altean ally and Daibaazal’s Prince, were all injured on Sunday evening during a terror attack that was made against Prince Lotor’s life. All three are expected to make full recoveries, and we are still investigating the cause and origin of the attack. At this time, we do not have any definitive suspects, but there are several leads we are pursuing.

“He is… Lance is… he is not like anyone I’ve met before and… ah, this is so foreign to me, I ask you to forgive me if my voice is shaking. I know many of you see it in him, too, how he makes himself so impossible not to love, and I want to make it clear to you that my motives are sincere and not driven by political or social expectations. I know of his status as a servant. I believe it goes without saying that I know we are both men, and therefore neither of us can bear children to inherit the throne. I understand and have accepted the consequences that such a relationship may serve in the eyes of you, my people, and of the realm as a whole, but... but, even with this knowledge, I cannot help but to love him.

“If I could, I would give him everything I have, give him the whole world, but that right is instead reserved for you all. I rise from my bed and look out from the castle every morning to remind myself why I have the privilege and the burden of the crown – it is for all of you, to make this kingdom and this realm a better place for the generations that will take our place. So instead of giving him the world, I have asked him to become a part of mine, to stand beside me while I rule. To leave no room for doubt or questions on the matter, I will say it again, in the most plain language available to me: I have asked Lance, who you may know by the name Blue Paladin, to marry me. He has, by a miracle even my own heart cannot quite unpuzzle, accepted my offer.”
What had turned into a steady buzz of voices in the background, a nettling of curiosity and questions that poked at his words while he continued to speak, had broken out into such a demanding sound that it required he pause from his speech.

*Gods,* they’d become so loud, cheering, waving their little banners. On a dais lower down the wall, a terrace beneath the gatehouse, the royal families who had decided to attend stood and several of them beamed, cheering and clapping along with them. Allura looked like she was crying, and Lady Romelle waved at him with both hands in such a silly gesture that he couldn’t suppress a small huff of laughter.

“Please, I’ve almost finished,” the Prince called after another thirty seconds of maddening din. “I just ask for a few more minutes of your time.”

Gradually, the crowd’s voices quieted, but never to the same degree as when he’d first begun. The air itself had taken on an indefatigable, even *frantic* quality, in the people’s excitement, and it was everything in Keith’s power not to just smile and laugh in relief and take the positive reaction for what it was and be done, but, no.

He would see this through.

“I am genuinely thrilled to hear your excitement over this, as I share in the same feeling, but this is a new era for our realm and for our people. There will be just as many surprises and fears that will crop up for myself, and for you all. I burn with the questions of the unknown, what this means for our nation, for our future, but please, know this. You are my people, and I am your servant. I live to serve and make your lives better, and so long as you will let me, I will never stop doing everything in my power to protect you, to make your lives more comfortable, to do my part to wade off scarcity, illness, and the other hindrances that plague our kingdom.

“I swear it on the crown, and I rest it on my name. I will do whatever I can, every day, to be a worthy husband to the person who has captured your hearts, just as he has mine, so that one day, perhaps, I too will be worthy to call myself your King.”

Keith allowed himself a final, steady inhale and exhale, the audience all at once holding its breath.

“Thank you.”

[**LANCE**]

“Thank you.”

Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

*Ahem.*

Give him a moment, please.
All of this storytelling has been nice, but, give him just a few ticks to gather himself before we continue.

...

A few more ticks than that, c’mon. This was sort of a life-changing, world-altering moment for him. Lance wasn’t exactly known for having a well-function heart and mind, so some slack would be appreciated.

Aannnnnnnd –

No, wait, he’s not ready yet. Almost.

Honestly, Lance wasn’t even sure what he just heard, or how long he’d been listening, or what his name was – he was pretty sure the person all those people were screaming for him, and he was almost certain the Prince had said his name several times during – whatever that was, but, no.

Couldn’t be. This was too much. He literally would not be able to handle such a thing.

Okay… Okay.

He’s ready now.

...”Oh my fucking god.” Lance’s voice was drowned out by the thudding of his heart, trying its damndest to tattoo its outline into his sternum. “What the fuck. Quiznak. Holy shit.”

If anything more sensical managed to spew from his mouth, Lance didn’t hear it, all of his mumbles little more than whispers that were totally lost to the chattering around him. He was utterly oblivious to Hunk and Pidge exchanging smirks and words nearby; it took Shiro clapping him on the back, hard, for Lance to even realize where he was, and even that was pretty loosely established as far as his grip of reality went.

Lance didn’t know what this – what he – what even?

Really, it was like being emotionally overwhelmed to the point where he couldn’t even remember what he was supposed to be doing. A walking catastrophe of human-Altean hybrid, Lance was ready to start sobbing or laughing hysterically (honestly, your guess as to which was as good as his at that point) with the drop of a hat. It felt like he’d been made of a long line of thread, and someone had rested their foot on the string at some point along the way, and now he’d finally run out of slack, his legs stuck even as his mind and body urged him forward.

Go out there.

Go. Move!

But, oh gods, was he nervous. Terrified, even. Lance didn’t have his Blue Paladin mask, he didn’t even have Blue with him as moral support, but there was still nothing he wanted more than to stomp down on the nerve-wracking fear and strut out there, all the confidence of the world supporting him. What if he wasn’t everything all of those people thought him to be? What if he was better left as a legend in their imaginations? Would he spoil it by showing his face?

Then, dark purple eyes turned towards him for the first time since the thing had started, fixing to his face, surprise and something else passing over his expression.
Lance couldn’t hear him, but he didn’t need to. The Prince’s mouth formed a question in the shape of his name.

*Lance?* Keith asked, called, questioned, hummed.

And, gods, if Lance wasn’t right on the precipice of something in that moment. He just had to reach out and take it. To answer, to respond, to let his knees give out or for his heart to stop or for something to happen but he couldn’t move, couldn’t function, so overwhelmed and –

“Go!” Hunk whispered behind him, and even Pidge was starting to shove him.

“You guys are so gay, would you just go to him already?”

Lance’s catatonic state was ruptured only when one of his feet finally dragged off the ground, weighed down by no less than seventeen year’s worth of self-doubt and the sin of existing, and Lance snapped free of that string that had been holding him in place. Driven forward by an unspeakable amount of pent up – energy? Emotion? Everything – Lance didn’t stumble, didn’t falter, didn’t wait or hesitate or even hear the guards and acknowledge the Blades that moved to stop him.

No, he was fucking running, and he threw his arms around Keith’s neck and thanked the stars his – his fiancé, oh my god, his fucking fiancé – had such sharp reflexes because Keith managed not to fall over when Lance practically smacked into him.

Their lips came together without a second thought, without expectation, without the backdrop of people shouting praise to them – Lance just needed to kiss Keith in that moment. He needed it like the planets needed the sun to keep them aligned, or how a breeze needed a dandelion to wisp through, to affirm that it was in fact real, that they were real. And it felt of a song, the way Keith’s lips moved to fit with his, the shape of them so right when flush against Lance’s own. Warm, safe arms wrapped around his lower back and held him in place, held him close like saccharine harmony. When Keith squeezed his waist, the touch forced out an unapologetic gasp that was meant only for them, the inhale of air felt rather than heard over the din of it all.

Lance didn’t really realize when, but someone had been brave enough to pull them apart, if only long enough that they could wave lazily down at the crowd who watched on in delight, amazement, yelling and shouting unintelligible impressions of his name, of the words Blue Paladin.

The idea of the future was terrifying, truly, but even so… even so, Lance thought to himself that maybe he could do this, be what these people thought of him, whether that was hope or hero, vigilante trickster or bourgeois intruder. He could really, just maybe, imagine that he could do this – he could do anything when Keith looked at him like that, smiling unrestrained beside him, looking like an impossible ray of light in a midnight thunderstorm, a flash so brilliant it lit up the whole world.

It was with that thought that Lance accepted whatever the future might hold, happily ever after, or not, he could face it, as long as they faced it together.

*The end.*
...Just kidding.

You didn’t really think it was over, did you?

Good. I’m glad you’ve taken off the rose-colored lenses, because, in life, there is no such thing as a sugary-sweet ending. Everything comes at a price, I’m afraid.

Oh, and I assure you, it’s nothing personal. Just as the flow of quintessence depends upon a balance, equal input to equal output to preserve the alchemical properties of the universe, it is but a simple inevitability that, in challenging fate when their destinies had already been designated by the stars, a few constellations would break apart to accommodate this new pattern.

Indeed, their actions would break Libra’s chains and irrigate Eridanus’s flow, creating an entirely
new interconnected web of lights that would hang brilliantly in ebony skies over the realm come nightfall.

An utter mess of emotions and adrenaline, Lance felt a spectacular wreck by the time someone was leading him off the balcony-dais-thing. He was a little bit sheepish to have run out like that, seeing as he wasn’t even supposed to be anywhere near the high security gatehouse at the inner castle wall, but, true to Pidge’s prediction, Sir Adam had managed to escort them there (and talk his husband into allowing he, Pidge and Hunk to watch from the sides) after a good varga-long lecture on sneaking away from medical care in the middle of the night.

He’d gladly sit through the lecture just to experience that all over again.

People were abuzz around him, Shiro and Pidge and Hunk’s voices passing over him, and then they were being led somewhere by two masked Blades, and then the Queen was there and he was being crushed into her sturdy frame in a hug that was somehow affectionate and intimidating.

The unfortunate part of all of this was, truly, how fast time passed. Lance could not in good faith tell you much of what was being said to him, where he was going, and who was there most of the time – the only solid, predictable presence through the whole thing was Keith, who had not let go of his hand once.

At one point in the cacophonous whirlwind, Keith leaned close in Lance’s space and whispered into his ear.

“I love you,” he said, just loud enough to discern. “Thank you for agreeing to this.”

“Don’t t-thank me you dork,” Lance gave a shaky laugh and knocked his shoulder into Keith’s, heart swelling with feeling.

It took all of perhaps twenty dobosh for them to be moved from the gatehouse to some other nondescript part of the castle that Lance could not really identify – seriously, the place was like a proverbial labyrinth of passages, more than a few of them totally undetectable if you weren’t looking out for a specific line in the wall or a mark above a nondescript line of brick facade. He supposed this was what he should get for agreeing to marry the leader of a nation of freakin’ spies.

Eventually they were led to a modest room that resembled Keith’s personal study, only larger – maybe it was some kind of library? With some surprise, considering the mayhem from which they’d come, it took the door clicking quietly behind him to realize that they were left alone.

Quiet, the padded seats and walls lined by shelves of books seemed to absorb some of the backdrop of voices, the crowd already starting to disperse with the guard’s encouragement. Lance figured that was where they’d lost Sir Shiro somewhere along the way, off to help navigate his men and women to do their duties. As for Pidge and Hunk, Lance hadn’t a clue where they might have ended up, but he was actually glad for their absence at the moment.

“Hey,” he mumbled lowly, his voice dropping to suit the muted room. In truth, Lance felt a little breathless, like he’d run a marathon instead of just walking a few dobosh down hallways and up and down stairs; perhaps an emotional marathon was an apt description.

Keith sent him a small smile, but he appeared distracted. “Hi.”

Lips pursed, Lance asked, “Something on your mind?”

“Hm? Oh.” Keith blinked, eyes fixing to his face. “No, uh, just – here, let me show you. This window looks over the gardens.”
Tugging him along by the hand, the Prince walked the length of the bookcases, passing over a sizable desk on the opposite end of the room, stopping when they reached the far-wall windows, towering glass structures with intricate metalwork bracketing designs into the panels. Looking down, he recognized the third-floor terrace, some of the debris from the explosion still littered carelessly about the otherwise beautiful architecture. The high vantage point did indeed grant them a lovely view over the castle gardens, topiaries manicured to perfection as they snaked all the way to the surrounding gatehouse wall. Despite the change in season, he was even able to make out a few stubborn petals, tiny pops of color beneath the overcast midday sky.

“I still can’t believe all of this is real,” the Prince hummed. “I hope the speech wasn’t too much, I know it was…”

“Are you kidding?” Lance interrupted, unable to help himself. “It was like, the nicest thing I’ve ever heard, ever. I – and you –” and because whatever gods there might be had their hearts committed to Lance making a fool of himself, his face turned darker and his words less coherent as he flustered. “Good. It was really good.”

He noticed Keith’s gaze trail from his eyes to just slightly off the side of his face, and Lance scowled and crossed his arms, staring determinedly out the window.

“And don’t even point out that my marks are glowing, jerk. I know they’re glowing.”

Keith laughed, and Lance’s heart leapt right into his mouth.

Desperate for something to say that might give him back some amount of brain functionality, he scoured for the first topic he could latch onto.

Lamely, he asked, “What now?”

The Prince’s laughter began to taper out, an impression of a smile still lingering in its wake. “Right now? We’re waiting for the other kingdoms to join us here. Well, meet me here. You don’t have to stay if you’d rather go find Hunk and Pidge or... do anything else. As for the big picture? It depends, really, on how the people respond. I suspect there will still be some citizens who insist they give their statements, but if we keep the Blade on top of that it shouldn’t be unmanageable. Otherwise, it’s really up to you. Like I said, no obligations, okay? You can join us for dinner, go back to my room, or leave the castle if you want. Just... maybe take Ulaz or another guard with you if you do that.”

Keith squeezed Lance’s fingers, and he was pretty sure he just lost at least two decaphoebs from his life with the fucking look he gave him, like, who looks at someone like that? Fond and soft and smiling and sincere as fuck?

“Whatever you want,” he repeated. “Just let me know.”

Have fucking mercy, goddamnit, my heart is not equipped to handle this.

Before he could patch together some pathetic response, Keith checked his watch and sighed. “Think about it for a second, I’m going to go see what kind of time we’ve got before people start showing up. Let me see if I can track down Shiro or something. I’ll be right back.”

Smiling, Lance nodded as he moved towards the door, standing there in silence for a moment as he watched the dust dance beneath the crystal beams of lights. It was mesmerizing, beautiful, even – it reminded him of the flickers of light in the night sky, if one could take a tree branch and swirl it through the inky sea of stars.
After stepping out of the fourth-floor study, the Prince frowned down at his watch again and set a quick pace for the stairs. Did the surface always look… that dark? Did it always shift in hue like this? What he would have sworn was burnish scarlet was definitively thicker, the ruddy hue of blood.

He began descending the steps without much thought, assuming Shiro would be floating around somewhere near the front doors. By the time he was halfway down the final set of stairs, a smooth, familiar soprano timbre pulled him from his thoughts. “Oh, hello Prince Keith.”

“Hi, Princess. Sorry, did you say something?” He barely made it to the bottom when the light click of hard-bottomed shoes descended the steps at the other end of the foyer, and Keith looked up to spot the glowing smile of the Princess’s own fiancé.

“Hello, Princess! Hello, Keith.”

“Oh, my gosh, congratulations on yours and Master Lance’s engagement! Such lovely news,” Romelle bubbled with excitement, pausing to sweep a stray strand of hair from Allura’s forehead.

The Princess raised a brow, a sly smile tagged on to accent her words. “I was surprised to see Lance, I received note that Lance wasn’t feeling well this morning. I wanted to catch him before the announcement but time got away from me, I’m afraid. He seemed okay up on the parapet with you, though.”

“Hi,” Keith said, though he’s not sure why he bothered. Lady Romelle clearly was not there for him, seeing as the way her hands threaded together with the Princess’s, her easy and apparent utter disregard for propriety almost as impressive as Lance’s – almost.

“Oh my gosh, congratulations on yours and Master Lance’s engagement! Such lovely news,” Romelle bubbled with excitement, pausing to sweep a stray strand of hair from Allura’s forehead.

The Princess raised a brow, a sly smile tagged on to accent her words. “I was surprised to see Lance, I received note that Lance wasn’t feeling well this morning. I wanted to catch him before the announcement but time got away from me, I’m afraid. He seemed okay up on the parapet with you, though.”

“Heh, thank you. I was actually just trying to find out when we should expect everyone to make it upstairs?”

“Ah, well – good question.” Allura tapped her chin, looking around the atrium as guards and other nobles began to refill the halls, still basking in the post-announcement energy. “If there’s anyone we could ask, I suspect – Keith? Keith, what’s wrong?”

It was a fair question, considering he’d gone rigid mid-breath. A sudden ripple at his wrist drew his attention, and some sort of… sensation followed, thrumming behind his lids when he blinked. It was like a flicker of intense focus, gut-wrenching emotion, heart-pounding rage, hopeless abandon and raw heat had shifted between his bones, his joints, chasing the blood all the way to his chest.

“Uh…”

In a distant sense, the Prince was aware that the Princess and Lady Romelle were speaking in a low tone, trying to get his attention, but Keith wasn’t really that removed from what was going on around him, just… preoccupied. What was going on?

Everything felt… red? That was… new.

Blinking, Keith inspected the whole of his wrist for signs of anything unusual besides what he swore was darkening colors, but there was nothing else that seemed amiss. The hands moved steadily, but
his eyes trained to their silent ticking anyways.

Just a regular passage of another second.

And another.

And ano–

The main atrium doors were thrown apart, and the three of them all jolted in surprise when the echoing groan was followed by a brisk chill of outside air.

And this, this was one of those moments that Keith was certain he would remember forever, like when he first met Lance’s eye in the western sprawl of the capital, or the first time he won a sparring match with another Blade.

The moment was a painted canvas of what would become unrelenting chaos, an image of Arus’s tiny king, framed in the doorway as he waddle-ran up to them, heaving for air, several guards bristling in concern. Nearby, Keith sensed rather than saw two Blades seemingly materialize around him.

“Y-Your Highnesses! T-the,” he coughed, wheezing several breaths as he rested his hands on his knees. “The Olkari! The embassy is being attacked!”

Princess Allura’s demeanor shifted like the snap of a whip. “What? How?”

The King shook his head, pale and trembling. “I don’t know – one minute, we were fine and the next – oh, god, there was so many screams, and t-the blood... we have no military force here, please, do something!”

Keith’s blade was already in his hand, surveying the men and women he had around him. Shiro was notably absent, but he had recognized the two Blades to be Regris and Antok, and, conveniently, Plaxum had seeming apparated beside him as well, along with three other of Shiro’s men who were posted in the atrium.

The Princess and Lady Romelle had six guards between them, three men and three women.

He didn’t have time to really think, orders spilling from his mouth before he could really consider his options; every second he wasted, his consciousness was screaming at him how people could be dying, right now, people who were in his care, who had entrusted to his country to keep safe.

“Antok, Regris, Plaxum, with me. You three,” he pointed at the other guards wearing Marmora’s insignia. “Secure the main entrance of the castle – no one is to enter or leave unless specifically accompanied by me or the Queen. Allura, have your men take you and Romelle somewhere – ”

She cut him off with a steely look. “I am coming with you. The Olkari are relying on Altea’s support – whatever is happening, it is my duty to be there.”

Now was not the time for arguments, so Keith was already hurrying through his assent. “Okay, yes, fine. Some of your people, go with Romelle, alert whoever you can of what is happening. Keep her safe. Whatever is happening, do not let her get hurt. Do you understand?”

The Altean guards warily gave their consent, closing ranks around Romelle, but the Princess turned sharply to one of her men.

She thrust a hand forward, wrenching the spear from his grasp.
“I’ll be borrowing this,” she said before she shoved the man after the others, narrowly avoiding running into Lady Romelle, who by looked, well, stricken.

“W-Wait, you’re just going to…?”

“I must do this, love. I will be fine. Be safe.” Allura shouted over her shoulder, pulling Keith along after the panicked Arusian King who was already leading the way down the castle steps. “I love you!”

A hesitant voice cried back a response, and Keith barely surprised the urge to wince.

“I-I love you too! Please, be careful!”

The Princess and King made a beeline for the front gates, but Keith knew better than that – not only was it going to be a pain in the ass for them to run that far into the Northern District, it would be wasting energy that would be better spent in a fight if push came to shove came to stab. Instead, he veered left towards the stables.

“Keith, where are you – ?!”

“Trust me!” He called back, sweeping into the doors with such force he kicked up dirt and mud. Thankfully, not enough had really gathered to be a concern, and he practically skidded around stablehands and staff in his haste to release Red from her stall.

She was almost frighteningly calm when he entered, dead-still and silent while Keith threw her saddle into place, secured her reins, and opened the door leading back out into the main stables. With a quick hike-up of one leg, Keith was in the saddle, and the two dashed back out into the front lawn in record time.

The Princess and the Arusian King had wandered a few paces his direction, looking slightly stunned to see him mounted so quickly. He leaned down to offer the Princess a hand, and she did not hesitate to hoist herself up behind him.

“No time.

And like that, they were off, taking off down the road without bothering to work up to a trot – Red was ready, and so was he.

Muscle memory played more a role than active thought in guiding Keith to the embassy – he’d been there only a dozen times his whole life, as they typically hosted visiting ambassadors in the castle. Most occasions he’d been here were for ceremonial or public appearances, but this was clearly an exception to that rule.

Gray billows of smoke climbed high above the district’s tall buildings, blending in with the dark schematics favored by many Marmoran nobles. Unlike those polished stone buildings, however, this dark force was very much alive; coiling, roaring and ripping with flames in the direction of the diplomatic centre – an embassy for each court – but there was little question as to what the source was.
People had already begun to spill into the streets, making their path unnecessarily difficult, onlookers and curious passersby rearing to get a better look at the disturbance.

“The embassy is on fire!”

“How did they get in the city?”

“Are we safe?”

“Should we hide?”

A stray sentence wisped by, but Keith paid them little heed – his focus was entirely unilateral, tuned to Red’s same urgency to push them faster, to cut through crowds and down alleys whenever possible. He almost forgot that Allura was behind him, riding side-saddle, until she squeezed his midsection.

“Look!”

Just as they broke through the front of the crowds, a hand reached over his shoulder and pointed due north, and he followed Princess Allura’s line of sight to the embassy.

The entire western half the building was completely engulfed in flames.

Well, fuck.

The Prince cursed under his breath as he swung his legs out of the saddle, and Allura was already touching down on the cobblestone by the time he reoriented. Thankfully, Keith needn’t bother tethering Red, leaving her to her own devices as he readied his blade and approached the building.

He ran to the first people he could find, guards who had begun breaking windows and helping some of the Olkari out, some civilians gathered a ways down the building that were trying to haul mattress beneath the second and third story windows – in case people needed to jump.

Minding the broken glass, Keith yelled over the din of burning metal and wood, the pops and cracks of splintering materials disintegrating before melting.

“What’s happening?!”

“A-Attackers, sir!” The guard said, a young man who couldn’t be much older than Keith. His skin was sheet-white, nervous and sweating with the heat. “Daibazaal’s Prince, sir – I’m not sure – he just turned on the spot and killed the girl – one of his own guards. He’s mad! He went inside next, and then – then the building was on fire!”

Not bothering with manners – indeed, the kid seemed like he was barely keeping it together, so he certainly didn’t need Keith breathing down his neck – the Prince turned away and made for the front doors.

The Princess was in stride beside him, but he held a hand out to stop her. “I can’t be burned, Princess. Red Paladin, remember?”

Surprise flittered over her expression momentarily, mouthing the words “…Guardian of Fire.”

“Stay out here,” Keith gestured towards the windows and the eastern, relatively stable part of the building. Not a moment too soon did four other horses rear into the scene, the Blades leaping down
and rushing up to his side immediately. “Antok, Regris, go with the Princess. Stay around the southside of the building, make sure no Galra are trying to escape. I’ll try to find them inside, or ferret them out your direction. You two, help with the rescues, make sure none of the civilians move in close enough to incur additional casualties, and you,” he pointed towards the last of Allura’s guard, “get back on your mount and go to the clinic. “Don’t come back until you’ve got medical personnel with you.”

Sharing a brief nod, the two spun in opposite directions, no need for spoken reassurances or half-meant promises – if there was any one person who could understand Keith’s position in this moment, it was Princess Allura, whos own country had just as much at stake in this… in this war.

Because that’s certainly what this was – this was an act of terror, an act of warfare, an execution of brute strength against a peaceful house of diplomacy.

With that thought in mind, Keith took in a steady deep breath of fresh air and pushed into the building, trying to keep his senses at the apex of attention, listening for cries or grunts or moans, voices or orders or anything that might point him in the direction of people to save or people to kill.

Imagine, then, Keith’s surprise when he sprinted his way down every hall, ducked beneath burning beams and tried to catch every breath of air he could by any of the windows, and found not one single living person.

There were more than a handful of dead, and while each body he stepped over made his stomach roil and throat close up, he couldn’t let it get to him. The blood loss, the wounds, the degree of devastation that ran through the facilities – it was clear that every body he came across was a corpse.

He didn’t have time to help the dead; he had to keep going, keep looking, to find some sign of the insurgents or those who hadn’t managed to make it out, weren’t dead and roasting on the floors –

Don’t think about it, don’t think about it, don’t think about it, don’t think about it.

After barely avoiding a particularly large chunk of ceiling that crashed down behind him, Keith’s senses buzzed, like a current of electricity ran up his veins and shorted out his brain momentarily.

He needed to get out of the building. It was a warning, a plea, and he didn’t hesitate to think it over, trusted Red, his instincts, and ran for the nearest window, crashing through the glass with a loud crash and his armor rang loudly against the ground when he landed, managing to roll his weight to minimize the force of the impact.

The Princess was running up to his side, breathing heavily and glare fierce. “Nothing?”

“No,” Keith replied, panting as he looked around the scene outside. It appeared everyone had been evacuated and the guards put up a perimeter, thank gods, because the building seemed about a minute away from collapse. “There was a lot of – a lot of dead. But, no attackers.”

“What’s going on?” The Princess clenched her fist, and before the Prince had the opportunity to agree - because, what the fuck was going on? - a familiar voice called out to them both.

“Your Highness! Princess Allura!”

Keith whipped around, sighing in – well, not exactly relief, more like resignation. When disaster struck, as it inevitably did, Shiro was never far behind the scene – whether it was a product of his position or his own poor luck, who was to say? In any event, Shiro’s arrival marked a shift in the event, no longer “act now think later,” but, rather, “delegate and lead.” Together, they could order the gathered forces effectively and decisively.
The man practically jumped from his steed, breaking into a run the moment his feet hit solid ground. He looked sharp, jaw firm, teeth grit together, brow a severe line running across his forehead. “Thank gods you’re alright. We need to get you back to the castle immediately.”

“W-What? But the embassy – ” The Princess sounded gobsmacked, but the moment Keith heard the words leave Shiro’s mouth, the teen would have swore he could feel his heart still in his chest, time stopping for all of one second to accommodate his realization.

Oh no.

“This was – fuck, this was…?”

“A distraction, to scatter our forces.” Shiro grit his teeth, and the Prince unleashed a string of curses under his breath.

“Zarkon is at the castle – Alfor met him at the entrance with some of his own men, but he told me –” The man paused for half a breath, the next words spoken with bitterness. “It was more important to make sure you two were safe. But he’s outnumbered and – we have to go. We have to go now.”

In all honesty, Keith doesn’t even remember climbing onto Red, or setting back off through the streets, or riding with such speed that people gasped without enough time to jump out of his way – not that they needed to, Red was much too precise and he much too focused for that to be necessary – but he does remember getting there.

He supposed it was one of those moments. Where the world tilts, the ground shifts beneath you, the universe takes an ounce of pity and politely asks Father Time to slow down – like shock absorption, the impact stung with blunt force trauma, rippling over his skin in waves.

For that moment, the world was chaos.

Fucking chaos.

There were droves of Galra, many more than had been occupying the castle, meeting steel for steel with clangs and cries and loud thuds as men and women fell to the dirt, the grass almost completely mashed to mud, and much of that muck was painted with crimson splatter. Keith wished and hoped it was his imagination taking liberty with the madness of the situation, some misunderstanding of droplets of rain, but he knew better; he could taste death in the air.

Across the front of the grounds, at the cusp of the castle, King Alfor stood blade-to-blade with Emperor Zarkon, Altean and Marmoran forces fighting back in spite of the confusion and lack of coordination – they were holding ground – it appeared no one had made it to the castle.

Allura, now riding with Shiro, urged them through the fighters and straight up to the castle. Keith didn’t remember what exactly she said, didn’t really have to, because his pulse was screaming in his ears to stop it stop it stop it, to put the Emperor down into the dirt, to stop these people from nurturing the soil with their own sweat and blood.

Marmora was built on backs of those who wanted better than this. Somehow, Keith felt as if he’d failed them. But he would not give up; he would at least stop what little he could.

The pull between dismounting to help his soldiers as they fought, having to ignore the sound of sword splintering flesh as he rode past (because it wasn’t all armor and steel and iron – Keith was certain he could never forget the distinct wet tearing sound, like a luxite blade slicing cleanly through wet parchment), and pushing on to get to the castle was such an impossible task it was actually painful. His legs seized up in Red’s harnesses, instincts telling him to jump out of the saddle and
blow through anyone who dared raise a weapon against his own… but it was for that same reason he had to keep going.

If Zarkon was the heart of the Galran military, Keith would have to make them bleed from the source.

Red was infinitely faster than Shiro’s standard steed, but she was not designed for fighting like a warhorse. She was all speed and precision, a perfect mare for hunting or riding distances but not in the heart of a fight. The undercurrent of fear that pricked at the center of his chest, like an ice pick chiseling between his ribs, made him wince at every arrow or spear that flitted by, and the only thing he could think to do was go faster – it was the one thing he and Red could do that no one else could.

Yet, the fates had not been in their favor that day. Red could never be fast enough to stop what had already been predestined on her own.

After all, it only takes a single second for a man’s heart to stop beating.

Shock waves slowed the burden of passing seconds, time stilling to the point of a nearly infinite frozen frame – he was close, but not close enough. Keith could even count the notches in Zarkon’s helmet, but still, it wasn’t enough, they weren’t near enough to stop it – the mud and dirt splattered scarlet as a sickening squelch sounded, the Emperor’s sword barreling through the chest of Altea’s King.

Keith released Red’s reins as she veered a sharp left, the mare needing no instruction as he wretched his body up and out of her saddle in a two-point turn, sweeping down and retrieving his blade, holding it overhead in an arc of movement, Emperor Zarkon framed at the end of his vision.

But the man’s reflexes were otherworldly (surely, he had not become the ruthless leader of such a vicious military state without learning a few tricks), and Zarkon managed to pull out his sword from the King Alfor’s torso, a waterfall of red painting the ground beneath them, and meet Keith’s own blade in midair.

Somewhere behind him, Keith heard Princess Allura release a heart-wrenching sound, the sort of sob that would crush better men’s souls right from their body; if he were not so fueled by adrenaline and his own stirring emotions, Keith wasn’t sure how he would have maintained any amount of focus.

An errant thought gripped him, some sort of fleeting emotional tether yanking at his consciousness: his own father went missing eight years ago. For Marmora, for his Mother and for himself, there had been no body to recover, no closure to be had. But now, at his feet, the crumpled remains of Allura’s father lay bleeding and broken, and the Prince had to wonder if this was worse fate.

But now was not the time for that. Emperor Zarkon was less than a foot away, blade-to-blade, and, gods, he was laughing.

A rumble of dread, loathsome and dark, crackled from the slits in the Emperor’s mask.

“Today is my day, isn’t it? First Altea falls, and now Marmora’s Prince is here to meet the same fate. A great day indeed.”

In a demonstration of his incredible brute strength, the Galra managed to dislodge the parry they’d held, and Keith had to slide down and backwards, pivoting his weight with a hand to avoid the blade running straight through his chest.

Keith had to act defensively – he couldn’t stand up to the Emperor in strength alone, but he could at least out maneuver him…maybe. Hopefully.
“Bold words, child. You are your Mother’s son, certainly.”

“And you are your son’s Father, running your mouth,” he bit right back, smiling in spite of himself, because at that exact moment Shiro had come up from behind the Emperor and swung down with his sword heavily, taking the Zarkon off-guard. It ran through his cape, but failed to strike through his armor. It was enough to knock him forward, off his feet, and with his guard down Keith reaffirmed his grip on his blade’s pommel and lunged forward.

Where he expected a satisfying resistance of knife carving through flesh as he aimed for the joints – the points where an armor was weakest – he instead felt a horrible pain wrack his own body, the taste of blood pool in his mouth like he would choke on his own body. White-hot flares tensed his muscles, flared over his nerve endings in a sudden, intense brand of agony the likes of which he had never known. It was more than enough to knock him into the dirt, the pain of whatever had happened sudden and entirely incapacitating.

Somewhere nearby, he heard Princess Allura release an utterly inhuman sound, and from her position a brilliant flare of white, opalescent light coalesced into a physical presence, enough to cast aside his sudden paralysis of agony that had set fire to his flesh and blood and bones.

“It’s his witch,” the Princess seethed, the luminosity dimming but not fading completely. She’s struck you with her quintessence, Keith, are you alright? Can you understand me?”

“I – I think I’m okay,” he groaned, gripping his head and trying to right himself. How had he been rendered defenseless and not fucking died? Where was Zarkon?

Where was...?

“Shiro!?” Keith sprang up, battling down the nausea of his own body recoiling from – from whatever it was the witch had done to him – and turned on the spot, not needing to look far to find him matching the Emperor’s furious onslaught of swings and jabs, hit for hit. There was the sharp song of swords that rang between them, again – and again – and again. They were just about an even match, but if Keith bolstered Shiro’s offense, they might be able to take him down together.

Voice a dark rumble, the Princess turned away, her hands raised. The tips of her fingers began to glow, a pallor light cast in his periphery. “Go. I’ll deal with the witch.”

Tightening his grip to the point of paint, the Prince surged forward, trying to stay out of the line of sight as he approached the Emperor from behind. Satisfyingly, Keith felt his blade dip between the joint of his shoulder, a terribly telling resistance of muscle and flesh pushing back against the serrated edge as he drove it as far in as he could.

Unfortunately, Zarkon was built like his entire body had been wrought from luxite, and the damage was little more than an angered grunt of pain as he swung around, so quickly the handle of Keith’s blade was wrenched straight from his grip. With the turn, Shiro ended up getting smacked in the face with the blunt end of his weapon.

Fuck.

A heaving exhale passed through the Emperor’s helmet as he readied his sword, feet turned in a way that suggested a lunge, and Keith prepared to dodge, ready to side roll out of the way when there was a flash of purple in his vision.

Muscles tensing, he expected the witch to have sent some sort of that horrible, seizing energy at him, but instead, he did a double-take as the Emperor was rolled into the dirt, a lithe figure landing on his
shoulders, grabbing Keith’s knife and pushing Zarkon’s weight away as they jumped back, blade now in hand.

“Keith.”

Queen Krolia landed beside him, tossing him the weapon without a second thought. He snatched it in midair, a little taken aback by her sudden appearance and the execution of such a smooth retrieval, but did not comment beyond a muttered “thanks.” Emperor Zarkon recovered as quickly as the Queen had appeared, a snarl tearing through his facade of superiority.

“A foolish move; you would have been safer in your castle, woman.”

Arching a single brow, his Mother barely spared him more than a glance. “I could say the same to you, Zarkon. I will leave him to you two. Don’t lose your weapon again.”

Lowering to a position that Keith knew well, one that would give her a quick burst of momentum in the opposite direction, the Queen muttered quick explanation. “Some citizens from the bailey got caught in the middle. I’m going to try to get them out.”

Keith gave a single swift nod of acknowledgement, and she was already vaulting away. Behind him, the Prince was acutely aware of the sound of Commander Iverson’s and Sanda’s voices, coordinating the soldiers over the bailey and archers from the gatehouse, bright flashes of cosmic colors, bright whites and venomous purple flashing like a cloudless thunderstorm. The shouting of men and women fell out over the symphony of swords, the dance of steel and iron, an exchange of blood and death freely changing hands.

God fucking damnit – this was Marmora. Like fucking hell Zarkon was going to take them down on their own ground.

A few paces behind the Galran Emperor, Shiro too had collected himself, nose bleeding freely but his focus was otherwise razor-sharp. Accordingly, the Prince lowered his posture, ready to attack or parry, ready to fight for his country, for his crown.

Emperor Zarkon let out a dark chuckle before storming forward, the Prince in his sights, and Keith volleyed his weight to the side so he could counter with his own blade, hopefully long enough to give Shiro an opening. Shiro followed after, charging, sword held behind him to give him the most amount of leverage possible and striking at any discernible weak point beneath all that armor.

Neither sword connected with metal, however, even as Keith lifted his arms, ready to parry. As soon as the Emperor was near enough to strike, a pulse of violent purple energy surged outward from his armor, and there was a sudden surge of responded pain that flushed through the Prince’s veins, staggering him in response. It was enough to shock his system, but not as awful as when it had come from the witch directly. A cheap, disarming tactic, he figured.

Gritting his teeth, Keith dropped his weight all the way to his back as Zarkon’s sword was drawn over his head; he was not going to let Galra underestimate him so easily. He hooked his foot through Zarkon’s ankles, and pulled his entire lower body beneath Zarkon’s legs, far enough tucked inward that the force of the Emperor’s gravity would cause him to fall forward should he continue the swing.

Successful, Keith allowed himself a tiny smirk when he heard the squish of mud and blade pierce through the ground not even a foot from where his head had been seconds ago. Without skipping a beat, the Prince twisted to get back onto his feet, and, digging a knife from the holster at his right shoulder, Keith buried it neatly into the Emperor’s calf as he pivoted his own weight against the ground, using the momentum to push his body forward into a roll.
The Emperor seemed… less than pleased. With no small amount of discomfort, Keith could practically taste the bloodlust radiating off him in waves, fissuring the air itself with a suffocating urge to kill, kill, kill. It was a poison that ran from the living, and soaked deep into the reality of the bodies of the dead.

“Enough!” Roared Zarkon, taking a chunk of the earth out as he ripped his sword from the grass. Barely suppressing an angry groan, Keith caught two new figures charging to give aid to their Emperor, both probably twice his size. Shiro, however, launched himself in their direction, dropping to a slide and bowling the first one over, impaling the offending soldier on his sword as he went down. Almost at the exact same time, he used his prosthetic arm to block an incoming attack from the other, and the shock of meeting metal instead of flesh had a visceral effect, confusion playing over the Galra’s expression, and Shiro used the moment to his advantage to abandon his own now soiled blade, wrenching the broadsword that tried to take off his left arm from the combatant’s grip and claiming it as his own.

There wasn’t sufficient time to admire Shiro’s quick work of the incoming attackers, however, as Zarkon was a much more immediate issue. The Emperor had vaulted himself forward, hurling himself bodily towards the Prince. The move had taken him by such surprise that Keith hadn’t even the chance to parry because there had been no weapon to counter, just an abrupt, vicious weight that smashed into him, the brunt force sending them both tumbling into the dirt in the direction of the eastern barracks. He was uncomfortably far away from the front of the castle by now.

Keith cursed as they landed, him on his back and Zarkon pinning him down, one-handed, crushing his throat into the dirt.

“I’m going to enjoy conquering your kingdom, child.” The Emperor practically crooned the words, taking up a sword in his free hand and rearing his arm over his head.

And Keith – his heart was a piston, angry and thrumming with adrenaline as he glimpsed someone fall out of the corner of his eye – he couldn’t spare the time to see if it was friend or foe, but the thought of these people – these people dying around him, when it was his duty to keep his kingdom safe… The momentary rage coiled inside of him, sparking into a conflagration that thrummed in time with his wild pulse, the feeling so driven by unbridled fury that, in his left hand, from the watch he felt a tangible weight begin to coalesce, a solid forming between his fingers in the shape of…

A sword?

Aiming blind, his vision beginning to fill with white spots, Keith swung the borrowed weapon as hard as he could into Zarkon’s own downward arc, barely managing to hold the weight of it, but in his movement, Keith had gotten a solid gash through the arm that had been pinning him down.

Even with the momentary freedom, breath filling his lungs, sweat sticking his hair to his face, the Galran Emperor was still on top of him, regained his ire for a second swing, two handed, driving all his weight behind it.

Abrupt and vicious, the force of the blow came down over his entire body, crushing, agonizing as it wrecked the muscles of his arms, his shoulders shaking with the strain in their reflex to resist. Zarkon’s sword had taken on an ephemeral purple glow, and he was pressing it into Keith’s throat with all of his weight bolstered behind him. It was too much, his bones felt like they were going to break.

Voice low with the smooth quality of victory, a rumble fell from the Emperor’s helmet, the words like acid dripping down onto Keith’s face.
“You and your disgraceful Mother’s heads will look fitting on the castle walls – a nice reminder to your people that you failed them, all the way until the end.”

Fuck, fuck, *fuck* – Keith couldn’t give a shit less about his talk, all of his focus was reserved for his *arms*, but god, they couldn’t bare the weight, Zarkon’s sword was *way too close* – Keith tried to turn his head away, to give himself a chance to catch his breath, only to cry out as a terrible, blistering heat began to scorch his skin, running down his cheek and into the crevice of his neck and *fuck no I won’t die like this I won’t* –

An arrow buried at the joint of the Emperor’s shoulder, shot with enough precision to have made purchase in the thin slit where the pauldron of the upper arm met the shoulder. The Emperor grunted, more in surprise than in pain, but it was enough of a distraction for Keith to leverage his weight and shove Zarkon away from him.

“*Hey!*”

The Prince’s throat seized up, head snapping up in the direction of that voice – that *voice*.

“Just because the ball is over doesn’t mean I won’t kick your ass if you die, Mullet.”

Swinging out of… *Red’s saddle?*… and ducking down in a smooth motion, Lance grinned that heartbreakingly beautiful smile at him, offering him a hand to stand up. And, *seriously*, he was just… walking around in *day clothes* like he was on a motherfucking *walk in the park*, not the middle of a battlefield. But of course it was Lance – who else would have a smartass mouth like that, *now* of all times.

“L-Lance, what are you…?”

Accepting the hand, Keith swiftly got to his feet and faced Zarkon again, the Emperor pulling himself to standing at almost the same time.

Fingers squeezed his hand briefly before pulling away, and there was a dark glean to Lance’s gaze that Keith was certain he’d never seen before.

“Wow. *Quiznak*, your cheek – that’s going to be a hell of a scar… I guess we both earned one, huh?”

Not in a position, nor with the time necessary, to really respond, Keith swallowed his million-and-one concerns (like, why the *fuck* are you out here *if you die I swear to fucking god* –) and turned in his attention back to the immediate threat, just as the Emperor reared his blade back, ready to charge again.

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[LANCE]

“*Pff. Swords.*”

Without hesitation, Lance notched another arrow and launched it squarely at Big and Ugly (he was *pretty* sure it was Daibaazal’s Emperor, but he never encountered him up close at the ball and it’s not
like this guy had on a nametag). For his second arrow, he hadn’t really intended to make any sort of impact, but to measure Maybe-the-Emperor’s reaction, and, ah. He raised an armored hand to block it. Hmm. Well, that meant he had good reflexes, which also meant he wouldn’t be able to make much of an offensive move if he was constantly defending.

Which meant…

“Lance, can you get me an opening?” Keith asked, voice a bit raspy. He’d be lying if it wasn’t a little bit sexy, but, like, not the time, McClain.

Already readying his next arrow, Lance started to sidestep closer to the trees that decorated the outside of the barracks, because he was not looking to get shot or stabbed in the back today, no sir.

“Sure can.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Sir Shiro forcing his way through another monstrosity of a Galra, pulling out his weapon from their stomach and – blood, wow, that’s – that’s a lot of blood – but Lance tried to ignore the knot forming in his stomach at that knowledge and waited for Keith to get closer to their own hulking problem, a weird sort of stand-off going on between the two. It wasn’t clear to him what they were waiting for, but he figured it probably wasn’t exactly appropriate to just ask, so he waited while both of them tightened their grips on their respective weapons when finally…

It was Big Boy who moved first, and Lance felt his chest seize up slightly when he realized that he was the target, but, an opening was an opening, right?

He let go of the feathered end, watching with satisfaction as it made purchase at the line of his jaw and throat. A wound like that would be fatal if the guy wasn’t, like, fucking huge. He barely flinched, but Lance just held his breath, not needing to even check, sure that Keith would – Yep. There he goes.

With no small amount of smug satisfaction, he watched the Prince move quicker than a match striking from spark to flame, putting himself between them, his handiwork precise as he curved his blade to deepen a wound the Emperor had already sustained in his arm. Twisting the knife, quite literally, seemed to be enough to derail him, and Lance took the opportunity to back the fuck up a bit more, arrow at the ready.

Something moved around him – he heard it. Was that a person? An animal?

From behind the coverage of the same trees, he was surprised when Sir Shiro popped out – how did he even get over here? – and came at the Emperor’s flank, and – wow, fucking jacked him in the face with his metal hand. That was arguably the most badass thing Lance has ever seen.

“Drive him back to the castle!” Shiro ordered, and Keith was quick to comply, taking the knight’s side with weapons raised.

Presumably-Zarkon was starting to lose enough blood that it was concerning, and Lance wondered, errantly, if getting him back to the castle was an attempt at, like… an arrest? He didn’t know enough about any of this to really know what to do, and seeing as he didn’t have any armor, he wasn’t exactly keen to follow them out through the middle of a goddamn warzone. Riding there had been different, it’s not like when he hopped in the saddle of the frantic horse he knew that this is where she was going to take him, but he didn’t exactly have a good plan on how to get back there now.

And then, he saw Keith narrowly avoid getting skewered by Zarkon’s sword, and that was all it
really took for Lance to decidedly say *fuck that*.

His bow was drawn, feathered tips brushing over the pads of his fingers, legs moving steadily closer. He stopped after catching up a few dozen paces behind and waited for Shiro or Keith to duck to one side… and...

*There.*

He released, the satisfying sight of arrow making its mark in the center of the target – except, this wasn’t a shooting range, and he aimed for the throat, not the bullseye.

Without skipping a beat, Lance followed after them, sprinting and ducking as he moved closer to the castle, because, shit there were *a lot* more people around here, all manner of weapons flying overhead or sinking into armor or bodies around him. Once, he had to roll under a Galra’s outstretched arm to avoid getting clotheslined, and it was an encounter much too close for comfort.

The south-facing outer wall of the castle, between the stables and to the right of the large double doors that opened to the main atrium, was in sight. Whatever the purpose, Shiro’s directions had at least been fruitful, and Lance took to beneath the awning of the stable to give himself some cover.

He took a deep, steadying breath, even if his hands were shaking. His sharpshooting wasn’t going to be of much use if he missed and accidentally shot Shiro or Keith in the process.

Bow drawn, Lance brought the bow to level, envisioning the trajectory like a stream extending from the tips of his fingers. He needed simply move with the river’s flow and…

“*Fuuuuuuuuuck YOU!*”

Um.

The arrow could wait.

His jaw dropped, and Lance had to slacken his grip and lower his bow.

Across the castle wall, he and – and seemingly everyone in the near vicinity stopped what they were doing and watched *Pidge fucking Holt* grip the Marmoran standard in her little demon hands, the top of the banner hung up all the way to the top of the guard tower at the castle wall, and Lance watched in awestruck silence as she proceeded to *propel down the side of the castle like a fucking maniac*, pushing outwards from the castle and using the momentum to fucking swing back and *kick Zarkon* square in the chest.

The Emperor smacked into the castle wall so hard, some of the surrounding stones crumbled and cracked; poor Shiro barely got out of the way in time.

Pidge jumped down with the lost momentum, landing between Keith and Shiro on her feet. With a satisfied sigh that Lance swore he could have heard all the way back at home in the mountains, she grinned at her own handiwork – or, more appropriately, her *footwork*.

“Wow, can’t believe that worked.”

Keith’s shock came out as a strangled shout. “*Pidge, what the fuck are you doing?! Get out of here!*”

In her usual display of deference, she took two large steps back and stuck her tongue out. “You can’t tell me what to do!”
Lance shook his head, forcing his focus back to the castle wall as Zarkon stirred, rising yet again, only to catch the movement of two hulking figures start to rush the three of them – some of the Emperor’s damned reinforcements.

“*Behind you!*” Lance shouted, adjusting his aim to at least get the knees of the incoming Galra, but Pidge was, apparently, already on it. And oh, was she fast.

She pulled out something from her pocket – what was that, a slingshot?! *The fuck?* – and aimed it at the attackers.

Closing one eye and sticking her tongue out in focus, Pidge shot at them, but her accuracy must have been tragically off; her ammunition landed at their feet.

One of them laughed, hurling some sort of mocking insult at her, and Lance was but a tick from releasing his arrow when Pidge pulled out… her *pocketwatch*.

She shook it slightly, like one might rattle a wrapped gift in question of what might be inside, and an abrupt quake beneath the ground resulted in a set of twisting roots springing at their heels, dragging them and their weapons down into the dirt. They were face down in the mud and grass, but not so much that they wouldn’t be able to breathe, completely incapacitated in a twisted, coiling mass of tendrils that, honestly, look like they could have come straight up from the depths of hell.

It was decidedly really fucking cool.

Lance grinned proudly as she spun around, readying another shot at someone who was approaching in Lance’s blind spot, around the side of the stables, so he returned his sights on the main target.

The Emperor had been managing to hold Keith and Shiro at an even match of swords and strength, but neither side had made any significant impact to the other in the meantime. It looked like Keith might have taken a hit to right shoulder, but nothing too serious – thank the stars.

Lance readied arrow was aimed on Zarkon’s left arm, where his bracer had come undone in the sword fight, and with his shot held steady, he yelled a brusque command.

“*Keith, duck!*”

The Prince didn’t need telling twice, dropping back as Lance released the string, and his arrow landed just as Shiro managed to get a solid swing into his side, the simultaneously hits jarring him enough that it knocked off the Emperor’s helmet.

He heard Pidge cheer, jumping up with a fist. “*Yes!*”

Hand cupped towards the heavens, she squinted straight up. “*Hunk, now!*”

Lance and Keith’s heads snapped up, though Shiro seemed prepared judging by the way he immediately dragged himself and the Prince back from the wall. Up the length of the castle wall, over top the parapet, Lance couldn’t help but laugh at the sight of his very best friend, giving a thumbs up and shouting something unintelligible.

At his command, about an additional twenty people appeared over the side of the wall, all bearing massive chunks of crystals. They then proceeded to heave them over the side.

Gravity did the rest of the work from there.

A horrible *crunch* sounded from the boulders of refined stones as they buried the Emperor beneath
their mass, and Lance watched with amazement as the people at the top of the tower, Shiro, and Pidge all led a cheer of victory.

At least Keith looked dumbfounded – Lance had no fucking idea that they had a plan. He was suddenly very grateful someone had the forethought to figure out how to get the man to stay down, because, fuck could he fight.

Lance wobbled on his legs, leaning into a nearby support beam for the stable, disbelief and pleasant surprise falling from his lungs in the form of a weak chuckle.

Did they… did they win?

A two or three dozen meters ahead, the Prince turned around, his own legs looking a little shaky, and locked eyes with Lance. They exchanged a smile, and Lance mustered up enough will to shoot him a finger gun and began to stumble in their direction. He made it about fifteen meters when a terrifying voice made his blood run cold.

“WITCH.”

For half a breath, all combat seemed to still across the castle, and there was a ripple in the air itself. A hooded figure apparated in front of the pile of rubble, and for a few ticks, the world was unmoving, the winds themselves seemingly stopped along with her. And then, the witch thrust both of her hands out in front of her, and from her fingertips sparked terrifying bolts of crackling, violet energy, aimed towards Keith and Shiro.

However, by the will of a brilliant white light, the energy skipped over them and continued to barrel down into the nearest target – Lance would later learn that it was Allura who intervened, but from such a distance, she could do little else but disrupt its original path. The bolts of corrupted essence arced around the knight and Prince, making purchase in the two struggling soldiers that Pidge had pinned down beneath her weird-magic-vines things.

The moment the magic hit their mark, the Galra’s bodies began to fucking fry, and like being gripped by a seizure, horrifying screams began to rip from their writhing bodies. It was a sound that would surely haunt Lance for some time – a sound of pure agony, a cry of misery, blood-curling, desperate – it required no words to speak volumes: please kill me please kill me please kill me. Lance moved to cover his ears, doubling over with a wave of nausea, barely able to keep from emptying his stomach on the ground in front of him. Gods, the shrieks were terrifying, and his eyes pricked with unheeded tears.

And for the life of him, Lance could not have tell you how it happened – mostly because his eyes were squeezed shut – but when he eventually got his breathing under control and looked up again, the two soldiers on the ground were gone, replaced by what he could only think to call a giant motherfucker. He supposed it must be what was once the Galra who’d been trapped, but, in reality, it was just a goddamn monster, twisted together in some sort of grotesque fusion of limbs and body.

Their flesh had been pulled taut in some places, tearing completely in others, crackling with purple energy. Its body, consisting of two already-large Galra continued to grow, swell almost, to three, four, maybe five times the size of one of them had been but moments ago. One eye socket was completely empty, another eye inflamed, bulbous and almost popping out of its socket in a sickening sort of way, while the remaining two were too gnarled to even be functional. A steady stream of bloody tears leaked down one side of its face. Arms, legs and torso were all patched by fur mottled with blood or just long stretches of exposed muscle in those places where the skin had ripped apart.

While it was certainly warped and disfigured, the more pressing issue came from the fact that it was
clearly angry. Not that Lance could blame it, cause like, holy shit, he’d be pretty mad too if that happened to him – but this seemed like a blind rage, and he wouldn’t be surprised if the thing had lost all cognitive function as a result. Having your fucking soul smothered by corrupted quintessence and then fused with someone else’s probably wasn’t great on the brain, Lance assumed.

“What the fuck,” he heard Pidge stutter, everyone else too horrified to construe much of a response. “Is that?”

The Princess had appeared from somewhere, her throat bobbing. “It’s a… a Beast. We must destroy it.”

In a sound of distress, the thing let out two small whimpers and then reared its head back, roaring. Immediately after, it hunched over on all fours like a true and proper predator, an aptly named beast.

But, even so…

“W-Whoa, destroy it?” Lance lowered his bow (probably against his better judgement), backing away as the thing cast its mismatched gaze over them, turning in a circle. Perhaps he was being naive, but his heart twisted with the idea of fucking murdering the thing. “It was a person – two people – just a few ticks ago.”

“It’s… it’s not anyone anymore. It’s an abomination,” Keith ground out, though he sounded decidedly disturbed with the idea of cold-blooded murder as well, and Shiro nodded solemnly.

“It could hurt people, or worse. We need to stop it. Now.”

While his chest ached with the thought of it, Lance could see the truth in their words – it would be much worse if this… Beast tried to hurt someone else, and did it really even have a conscious? Should he even care, as it had been trying to hurt his friends not dobos ago? But then, injuring someone who was attacking you, and massacring a feral, scared, wild animal were two different matters entirely.

It just felt… it felt wrong, though he was genuinely kidding himself he he tried to find anything remotely right about the situation anymore.

He pulled the string of his bow taut in his fingers, steadying the feathered ends with his other hand and took aim, teeth pressing into his bottom lip. It truly was more animal than Galra at this point, and his familiarity with hunting told him to aim where its main artery would be.

Uttering a silent apology, Lance loosened the arrow before immediately notching another.

The others joined him the moment the first arrow whizzed through the air. Together, their ragtag group was able to strike with such fortified strength that the creature was not allowed a chance to so much as orient itself properly after the first arrow buried itself into its neck. Strategically, they drove all manner of wound into the monstrosity, arrow and spear and blade and knife and jagged crystal shards piercing and battering the thing, and Lance was unable to help but wince as it hollered and cried with each impact that met its mark. Unlike in hunting, this particular creature refused to stay down, and each gash or puncture mark left behind on its body seemed to incense it further; the Beast hardly put up more resistance than any other feral animal might, oversized and uncoordinated with the mass of its body, and it lashed out at Shiro and Keith when they moved too near, but it seemed resigned to its fate in a heartbreaking sort of way.

Like it would rather die quickly than live painfully.

The Princess was the one to finally put the thing out of its misery. It collapsed onto its side after a
particularly deep slash from Shiro’s blade, and Allura had used the opportunity of its exposed underbelly to plunge her spear into the Beast’s struggling heart. A guttural growl sputtered out in its ruined voice, an exhale of its last breath wheezing into the breeze. With a grisly sizzle of energy, purple tendrils bled out from things body and soaked into the ground like spilt blood. Immediately, the grass and mud turned black with rot, a corruption spreading like flames over a dry brush.

The black saturation thinned around the edges of a small circle around the Beast, leading out perhaps three-feet on all sides, and they all backed up immediately once it had start to spread. There was nothing about it that was explicitly or intuitively dangerous or harmful, but there was just something… untoward about it, like to step on the ground would be like desecrating a grave.

Lance supposed, in a way, that was true.

Something about the sight made his chest ache, like the sinking promise of sin itself whispered on the wind, and the ringing sound of deja vu thrummed in his ears with haunting brand familiarity – like he’d felt this same thing, witnessed this same thing, before – why?

And, gods, why was he crying?

Already far enough away that the thing would not reach him, Lance’s legs still backpedaled in instinctual retreat, his nerves screaming to get away from whatever that was, and his heel caught a stray branch, sending him back into the grass.

Burying his head in his knees for a moment, Lance tried in vain to find some sort of steadying presence in the maddening sea of emotion that raged over his heart. He squeezed his eyes even tighter. People were saying his name, but it was too much, too much – everything was too much – his face was burning, his cheek marks – fuck that hurts – and the smell of blood and decay was overwhelming, and he was going to be sick, oh gods his stomach was threatening to turn any moment – he could hear the whine and screams of the two Galra, fusing together, the fear so disgustingly thick on his tongue he thought he would choke on it.

And then, it stopped.

It all stopped.
Eyes closed.

A distant call reached out to him at that tiny precipice where sky and sea meet on the horizon. It was beautiful, like a song, a resonate variety of a pitch that felt comfortably tuned to the pace of his soul.

Eyes open.

What the… where is this place?

He was in… the middle of nothingness. The place was endless and vacant, carrying the almost reverent quality of a sepulcher or a place of worship, empty of anyone, of anything. There was no sound, no smells, and he couldn’t even feel the air smooth over his skin.

Blinking, Lance looked down. His feet were evenly stationed on solid ground, the plane of white extending endlessly in all directions. Weakly cast in the light of the ground, his reflection looked back at him. Lance raised his hands, turned his palms over and then back again, experimentally flexing his fingers. The clothes on his body were not his own, a loose fitting, soft-threaded jumper and pants — he felt like he should know who they belonged to — but the rest of his body that he could see appeared normal. That was about the extent of things Lance could qualify as normal about the situation, though. A subtle ringing began to echo in his ears, bizarre in its innate promise that relief could come if he were just able to reach it. But there was no sun, no sky, no ocean, no reflections, no horizons here – how could he reach something when there was nothing to reach?

It was peaceful, if not a little uncomfortable in its barren reach. Lance was certain he’d never seen anything like it before in his life.

And yet…

Why did this place feel so… familiar?

No sooner had the thought occurred to him did Lance feel the hairs on the back of his neck rise, some intuitive call of his human response citing danger. He spun in place, only to spot the first imperfection in the vast emptiness a few dozen paces behind him.

It was not subtle.

Across the ground, like a tectonic plate splintered as the ground itself ripped apart, there was a
fucking gaping hole that punctured the expanse of whiteness, of everything. His body ran cold, struck in frozen horror as he studied the pool of obsidian icher, a swirling void of midnight, right in the middle of the colorless, soundless nothingness, throbbed like a wound, pulsed like a creature, and festered like a disease. It was molten tar, grotesquely alive as it tore through the world itself, and it promised danger, and quiznak – it was growing and it was swallowing everything, everything, and shit it was getting closer.

Lance began to back up as the chasm spread, promising wreck and ruin with its boundless, violent mass, but even as his legs began to move, even as he broke into a dead sprint in the opposite direction, away from the monstrous energy, he knew he could never move fast enough. A quick glance over his shoulder told him that he hadn’t a chance in hell of escaping, but Lance was no quitter, no sir, and he pushed his legs faster, harder, away from black and into white, no end in sight, no chance of surviving but he was damn stubborn. Just as the ground gave out behind his heel, a final warning that this was it, it had gotten him, he was going to – to be sucked into whatever it was – his weight sent him sprawling forward.

The smack of his chest against the ground did not come, the rot did not spread to his body, but instead Lance burst through the ground like he’d been walking on water.

And then he was floating… no, sinking.

Weightless, the buoyancy and general confusion sent him tumbling head-over-feet and twisting in an invisible current, but he had managed not to get dragged into the poisonous icher so he could feel little else but relief. When he managed to stop twisting and turning, he looked ahead of him, where his arms floated listlessly up against the drag of his body into an infinite sea, and beyond that, the blinding, beautiful world of white fading into a distance, an echo, an impression of the eye.

Bubbles did not float from his mouth as he sank into the oceans depths; Lance could not breathe here. Instead, he felt himself continue fall back through a cold, comfortable place, a depth that dragged him deeper into what became a blackened sea. There was no surface to ultimately land upon for a long time, and his skin tingled in ripples of response to the sensation of falling.

It, too, was familiar.

When his body connected with a plane of space where he could orient himself again, the ground dipped to his weight but decidedly supported him – it was like the surface nestled over his shoulders and arms, his hips and legs, like a blanket that had been warmed under sunshine.

It was dim here, but the air was not thick and saturated with the ever-darkening waters, of an ebony sea to drag him on and on forever. No, this place had a sky, a horizon laid out before him of infinite reach, but the stars had been hung so close Lance thought he need only lean up to brush a hand through the inky canvas. He studied the constellations that he could see, swearing this particular stretch of sky should have held Libra, but there was no clear connecting lines that he could see.

Turning his head to gaze around, it was like the world had been rendered in the image of amaranthine starlight, a sky painted by brushstrokes of heather and orchids, a spill of mulberry wine soaking into a dark watercolor painting. Thin aurora clouds patterned the outer edges that his eye could see, soft, almost-forgotten shades of blue joining together with a gradient of gentle maroon, twisting and warped the edges, extending past a point he could perceive. Stars speckled long into the universe, and it was lovely besides.

To the left end of the horizon, there was a duel of light, a battle of cosmic proportions between two combusting stars, their lights so bright that it was impossible to tell which outshone the other. One red, the other blue, the impression of their rivalry echoed with familiarity.
After watching them awhile, Lance realized they were slowly, ever so gently, creeping closer to one another, a gravity warped between them that threaded their orbits into a converging path.

Lance let out a low exhale, only to grimace when he realized he still could not breathe here, the catalyst to inhale and exhale needless and forgotten. His heart, however, continued.

It was heavier than he remembered. Was that his body making up for the lack of oxygen? Would he die here? Why didn’t that scare him? The pressure that sunk into his solar plexus was one of haunting familiarity.

[Hello, my Paladin.]

His eyes flew open, chin dipping down in surprise.

Blue?

She was seated on his chest — ah, so that was the added weight.

Blue! Oh my god, I’ve missed you – where am I? What is this place? Why can’t I talk?

Tiny, wide eyes studied him quietly before settling into a ball of fur.

[This is the Astral Plane. My place of origin; the source from which my existence comes. It is my home, you could say.]

Grinning, Lance laid back and put his arms behind his head, the ground sculpting to accommodate his weight like the most decadent mattress imaginable.

Not bad digs, I gotta admit, Blue. This view is something else. Lance smiled wistfully, eyes tracing the pattern of space before his gaze flickered back to her.

Why am I here, anyway? Did’ya miss me?

A dozen droplets of euphoric, spirited rain patterned against the windowpane his consciousness; in a distant way, he could tell she was amused.

[I have, cub. But that is not why you’re here.] The rumble of her thoughts felt… heavy, more tiresome than they had once been. [There is… danger that threatens you, my paladin.]

Lance sat up sharply. Blue jumped off the spot into which she’d begun to settle across his chest and took a seat to his right, turned to look up at him with wide, dark eyes.

Was it… that – that blackness? What was that?

She scratched behind her ear before answering. [What was set into motion is not yet finished; the cause for which I was sent to guide you was interrupted, and a much greater threat what you faced this day looms over the realm. Only five paladins, acting together as one, have any chance to stopping this unthinkable evil.]

His mind flickered with something not unlike anxiety, but Blue quelled it before it could really manifest. A chalice placed upside down over a fire, the oxygen burned out, though an echo of the worry remained, curling into smoke, trapped beneath the surface.

But…

A ghost of a memory rose to his mind, a similar question fielded to the kitten when he had been seated opposite to Allura on Keith’s couch – gods, it felt like lifetimes ago – when all of this began to
unfold. “What do you need?” he had asked her then.

[This is the answer I could not give you before.]

At the core of his being, and unfiltered outpouring of emotion began to rise within the shared space of their mind; like a switch turned on, the flood was as sudden as it was overwhelming, and tears welled in his eyes on reflex of the sensation. Blue was, after all, the Guardian of Water, and in that moment, the presence of their bond had never felt more tenable. Her quintessence resonated with his spirit, the blood in his veins frozen to ice that then splintered into crystals; his skin was snow, his heart a frost-touched paragon that he was only just beginning to understand. Lance found he couldn’t resist the pull of winter that pricked over his skin, and he missed it more than he knew. Things had been warm, and they were tender and loving, but there was something exhilarating about the biting, glacial wind that glided over his skin when Blue coaxed his spirit to the surface. With her, he wanted to shiver until his teeth chattered, a reminder that he was alive, and then seize that assurance and paint the landscape white, brushstrokes of snow to cap the trees and houses and lakes and mountains, to lay waste to autumn and welcome the quiet murmur of winter over the realm.

And then, in a second wave of emotion, their bond, which had always embodied an ebb and flow of comfort and encouragement, was being pulled in an untoward direction. Lance felt like his body seized up, neither hot nor cold tempering his pulse – oh, gods, what was this feeling? It didn’t feel like – it didn’t feel like anything, just, nonexistence. Hopelessness.

Danger, it whispered, a weight of inevitability fastening him to the overwhelming sensation. Anxiety roiled in his stomach, but he could do nothing to right the sickness, could find no purchase in the depth of his heart upon which to secure a foothold. A hole ripped through his heart, and it was black, destructive – that void, he realized – it was the chasm from earlier – oh, gods. Did it get him after all? Was he not safe, did he just imagine that? What was happening? Oh, gods, gods, no no –

Just as suddenly as it began, it was over. Lance’s eyes snapped open, and he was on his feet in a flash. Overhead, the picturesque landscape of stars of the Astral Plane were forgotten. Blue was seated low to the ground, her head dipped in what his intuition told him was apology. Pacing, combing shaking fingers through his hair, Lance threw his hands up.

Blue, what was that?! What is happening? What am I supposed to do? How can I –?

[My paladin...] Her voice was more tired than ever, the seraphic weight of her presence smaller than Lance had ever heard her. It stopped his rambling immediately, and Lance practically threw himself onto the ground, kneeling in front of her.

Blue – what can I do? Can I help you? You sound so... weak. Take my, um, quintessence, or whatever you need – c’mon, we can do this together, right?

She rose to wobbly legs, and Lance reached out, ready to brace her if she collapsed. There was no need, it seemed, and instead she turned into his hand and nuzzled it, licking his palm a few times before releasing a little brrt.

[Warn your fellow Paladins. Warn the Altean Princess. You are all the hope that can save this world, but you must believe in yourself, and you must believe in each other... I chose you, remember that. I chose you, because only you can do what it is you do. No one else can offer what you have to give.]

The comfortable tug of her bond weakened, and Lance felt the pressure of her nose pressed against his hand start to fade. Before he realized it, tears began to line his eyes, stain his cheeks.
Jolting forward, Lance’s chest heaved with painful exhales.

This time, he noticed the tears rushing down his cheeks.

This time, he remembered why he was crying in the first place.

“G-Guys?” He coughed, throat terribly dry. Sitting upright on the ground, Lance realized his chest was being pulled into a tight embrace. It look a tick or two for him to recognize the familiar scent of smoke and something warm, his head buried into neck of dark hair.

“Oh my god, thank god, you’re okay – you just, stopped responding, I thought – stop scaring me like that!” Keith pulled him back and took his shoulders shaking him. “Please… please stop doing that.”

Blinking, Lance opened his mouth and closed it again. He thought for a few seconds, finally coming up with a few words.

“Did we win?”

“Did we…” Keith laughed, and instead of answering, yanked him forward and captured his lips in a bruising kiss, effectively lifting Lance’s heart up, up and up and up, settling it back into his chest, where it belonged. He hadn’t even realized he’d been missing it.

Lance sighed into the embrace, his tension unwinding, his frantic pulse beginning to steady. Even with the world around them so wrong, twisted, echoing with the apotheosis of chaos, the aftermath of blood spilt and hearts rendered motionless, there was nothing more right then the familiar roughness, eager and warm, of Keith’s lips pressed into his own.

Dizzy with another sort of aftermath, Lance’s whole face felt flushed by the time the Prince moved his head back, just far enough to rest their foreheads together.

“Zarkon and his witch fled, along with any of their remaining officers. Lotor basically vanished… so yes, the fighting is over. But this isn’t winning, not at this price.”

Glancing over his shoulder, the Prince leaned slightly aside so Lance could get a clear view of what was happening closer to castle. In front of the massive double-doors, Allura knelt beside the body of her father, and Lance’s stomach clenched in a knot of terrible, backwards relief – that could have been Keith, or Shiro, or the Queen. It could have been the Princess herself, or even him. He was
grateful, sincerely, to be alive, and burdened by such guilt it was like a cancer that had spread through his bone marrow. The Princess faced away from them, but her shoulders were shaking, her gown soaked through by the color of wine.

If only it was just wine.

Lance looked around, a shiver dancing up his spine as his gaze cast over the quiet stretch of open grounds, bodies scattered like leaves on an autumn forest floor. He swallowed roughly on the lump in his throat, eyes finally coming to land on the ground that had been kissed by death, all traces of life drained away into the shade of ebony – the sea at evening, the sky at midnight. But this, this was starless, lifeless, pitch like tar, and it pricked at his chest all over again.

Lance had to bury his face into Keith’s neck to try to get ahold of himself, unable to help his own unrelenting tears.

Blue.

The whole world, dragged down beneath the weight of loss felt slow. Heavy, coming out the other side of a dark tunnel… relieved to see the sunlight again, but unable to ever forget the prick of shadows on the back of its neck.

The whole world, in that moment, felt blue.

It was hard to tell how long they sat like that, but when Lance finally raised his head, it was another set of hands joining Keith’s in holding him that had him looking up, trying to breathe evenly.

“Thank the stars you’re both okay.” The Queen gave them both a threadbare smile, and Lance saw a flicker of something – something familiar pang in his chest when Keith and his Mother met eyes.

Lance extracted himself from the sort-of-hug, leaning back and scooting away as subtly as possible, and without hesitation, the Prince flung himself at the Queen with a different sort of affection, less fierce, less supportive, but just as genuine as that he’d been demonstrating only ticks ago. This was a darker, quieter Keith, a heartbreakingly fragile sounding Keith, his voice thick when the Queen hugged him back, smoothing down his hair and shushing him quietly.

“Shh. It’s going to be okay. You did so good today. I’m so proud of you. So proud.”

A small smile twitched at the corner of his mouth, even through his own ridiculous crying, and Lance felt a wave of numbing relief, watching the two embrace, mother and son. It wasn’t his moment, and while it was a little awkward to sit back and watch, it was still a touching thing to witness.

Vaguely, Lance tried to remember how it felt to hug his own mother. She was shorter than him, and would usually rest her head over his heart.

“Oh, cariño,” she might say. Or something like, “Cariño… me alegro tanto de que estés bien. Te quiero. Te quiero tanto, gracias a dios que estás bien, qué suerte que no te ha pasado nada. Te quiero, estoy orgulloso de tí. Menos mal que estás bien!”

Maybe. There was no way to know for certain.

Another shuddering sob wracked his body, and Lance wrapped arms around himself.

He wanted to celebrate, and he wanted to fall apart.
He wanted to feel guilty, and he wanted to be relieved.

He didn’t know what he wanted.

It was over… but it wasn’t.

It wasn’t over, not judging by what Blue had told him. Not even close. His muscles thrummed with the urge to move, to do something, to help people who were hurt and not just sit by himself and cry, but where to even start?

The quiet presence of footsteps at his side perked his attention, but seeing that his eyes were still red and swollen, Lance opted to keep his head low.

“Lance.”

“Oh, hey, Shiro.” He hiccuped, face darkening. It was so obvious he was crying, and in front of put-together, Head-of-the-Guard, nice-and-sincere Sir Shiro, of all people? “We did it, huh?”

In the corner of his eye, Lance saw the knight kneel beside him. “I’m glad you’re okay. You were pretty brave, coming out like that without any armor. I know a lot of fledgling knights who wouldn’t do that if their lives depended on it.”

His throat felt tight, and Lance raised his eyes warily. He tried for a weak smile. “T-Thanks. That… that means a lot, coming from you.”

With a sad but sure grin of his own, Shiro nodded and held up his fist – for an errant few ticks, Lance thought he was offering him a fistbump – uncurling his fingers to reveal his small-boulder of a timepiece.

The Black Paladin timepiece.

“I wasn’t sure about these things when you first brought Keith out to the woods, but after today… it’s hard to explain, but I felt like I could see every vulnerability, every weak spot in friend and foe. It was incredible. But, terrifying, too… I was stuck beneath someone when I saw what was about to happen to Keith, with Zarkon. He was going to die. It was telling me, the watch, that I was running out of time. That I wouldn’t be able to save him, and, gods, Lance, I was so scared. More than I had been when I lost my own arm – I thought I was going to lose him, and you saved him.”

His voice wavered, and Lance felt like he’d had the breath knocked out of him when he saw the corner of the man’s eyes shine with moisture.

“You shouldn’t be thanking me – I should be thanking you.”

He wanted to say thank you again anyways – to insist he was just doing what anyone would have done in his position – but the opportunity was never made available. The moment he opened his mouth, someone else was yelling his name.

“Lance!”

“IM GOING TO MURDER YOU! YOU’RE ALIVE!”

Almost at the same time, Hunk and Pidge launched themselves at him, sending him back into the ground so hard he could feel the mush of the mud shift around him to accommodate their weight. Somehow, they’d tackled Shiro into it, too, and he was effectively on the bottom of a pile of paladins, his lungs protesting but his heart decidedly full of affection.
Hunk was crying, rattling him around like a doll. “I HAVE THE COOLEST BEST FRIEND IN THE WHOLE FREAKIN’ REALM!”

“You were pretty slick out there, I gotta admit.”

“Are you kidding?!” He couldn’t help but laugh a little, his voice mostly coming out as a wheeze. “What about you guys? What the fuck, Pidge, you literally jumped from the top of the castle wall?! And Hunk, oh my god, whatever that was with all of those people – how did you even get those rocks up there? That was SO COOL!”

The two laughed, accepting the compliments, and Shiro, wedged awkwardly against Lance’s ribs and beneath Hunk’s calves, cleared his throat.

“It was pretty, uh, lit.”

“Stop,” Pidge groaned. “Stop talking to my brother. He’s giving you outdated slang.”

The older man – a terrifying presence with a sword – pouted. “Aw.”

“Do you idiots mind, you’re crushing my fiancé,” an exasperated voice interrupted, and Lance smiled, tucking his chin into the crook of his own shoulder to try to hide it.

“It’s a team huddle,” Hunk explained, but he begrudgingly began to roll over into the grass. “Bonding is a good thing.”

Lance looked up, chuckling quietly, his heart still unbearably heavy, his tears slowed but not gone completely. The skies were cloudy; you wouldn’t know that the world had just become frayed beneath them, calm and grey as it was for miles and miles. The world was oddly bright for there to be no sun, but awash in a strange desaturation beneath the mute color of the sky, like someone had painted the landscapes with a pastel brush to make the colors softer, but dimmer at the same time.

“I don’t know if the team huddle was good for my lungs,” Lance said with a sigh, remembering himself, and he glanced around until he found the Prince’s eye. “But I’ll admit, I’ve felt worse.”

There was some tired laughter, and Keith hesitantly joined them on the ground, sitting across from Lance and next to Shiro as they all laid out in the dirt and grass.

“We’ve got to get you to see Sir Adam,” Lance sighed, glancing around for the cleanest-looking piece of fabric, and, spotting Hunk’s banada, swiftly tugged it from his forehead and used the least dirtied corner to gently wipe the dirt away from Keith’s face, down the pointed scar that extended into his neck. “This could get infected.”

“I’ll see him when I see him,” the Prince winced when the makeshift rag moved flushed against the outline of the flesh wound. “Right now there are about a million things I need to do first.”

Lance scoffed. “No, you need to go see Sir Adam, because you’re not going to be a very great Prince to anyone if you’re dead.”

Beside him, Shiro nodded in agreement, and Pidge rattled off a few words of the most common kinds of infection. It seemed to do to the trick, in any case, because some of the fight drained from Keith’s gaze, softening into something a little more patient, a little more vulnerable. Lance did a bit more thorough inspection of his burn-cut and was glad to see there weren’t any signs of debris or dirt having gotten caught up in it, and he idly began wiping pockmarks of mud from the remainder of his face, pushing his hair out of his eyes or picking off stray blades of grass or splatters of blood. Lance hoped he might find some sort of comfort in the gentle touches; he didn’t really know what else to
do, didn’t have anything witty to say.

But he did have a warning.

“I’m sorry I passed out like that,” he spoke lowly, focusing on his hands. “I had a… something weird. A vision, sort of. I saw Blue.”

After a brief silence among the five of them, he continued, his voice soft. “She said there’s something dangerous, really, really dangerous that’s coming our way. She said it was up to us to stop it. It was… terrifying.”

Lance paused, taking in a shaky breath. Keith was watching him carefully, attention fixed deeply to his face. Lance began picking off dirt from his own arms, now that Keith’s more immediate issues seemed resolved.

“I felt like, like that purple energy we saw come from that Beast, it was like it got inside of… everything. How it sank into the ground, I mean, it was like the blackness just – just destroyed it from the inside out. I don’t know what it means, I wanted to ask but she wasn’t… isn’t… Blue was already really weak.”

He felt what little motivation he had start to fizzle out, a child’s sparkler using up the last of its light, and Lance just dropped his head into his knees. Fatigue washed over him, but he didn’t feel like eating, didn’t know if he’d be able to sleep until his body shut down without it.

The terrified sounds of the two Galra being twisted, mangled together, rang in his ears. It sent shivers from his spine all the way down to the tips of his toes.

Pidge, sounding nervous, directed a question towards the Prince.

“So do you think this really means war? Like, war-war, not, trade embargos, no economic sanctions. Is that what happens now?”

Raising his head a few millimeters, Lance saw that Keith had been watching him, a pinch in his brow.

“Yes. This was a violent, unprecedented attack on sovereign soil. The proportional response would be to do the same, and that means a declaration of war.”

Eventually, Hunk added a few simple words. “I’m not sure I’m ready for a war.”

“There’s no way to be ready for war.” Shiro said, still gazing up at the sky. “We’ll just… try our best, protect as many people as we can with what we have.”

The concept was straightforward enough. It wasn’t new, novel, or sensational, but even so, hearing the words spoken aloud, it gave Lance something to hold onto, a compass around which to orient himself.

Try our best, huh?

It felt like it was asking a lot right now.

Nothing was very clear, everything was tinged by the lingering sense of loss even in the resounding quiet of a battlefield no longer in use, like an vacant assembly hall with empty seats. He could glance up at the castle, could hear the murmur of voices and the creak of greaves and the squish of mud beneath them. The taste of copper and salt swirled in his mouth, unable to decide if he should spit it
up or choke it down.

Fulling raising his head, Lance realized there was a blade of grass stuck to his nose from where he’d been resting it on his legs. He blinked at the tip in vain, his eyes going slightly crossed in the process. Keith burst out laughing, the sound sudden and sharp, unapologetically loud and sincere, and Lance would have been lying if he said it wasn’t the most beautiful thing he’d ever heard.

All wrong for the occasion, but all right for the heart.

Hunk started giggling, pointing at Lance’s red face, and the sound was so pure and happy that soon, Shiro was chuckling along, too.

He made a sound of mild offense to be the subject of everyone’s amusement, and that was the last straw before Pidge was clutching her ribs, cackling and falling down beside Hunk in the grass, her glasses askew, her hair a mess. She hadn’t smiled like that in so long, Lance almost forgot what it looked like.

Unable to hold any ill-will, Lance sighed and hid his face in his hands. Of course he started laughing too, the sound infectious, bubbling up his throat before he could stop himself.

He still felt blue. But, in that moment, he felt a little green, too. A bit of black. A ray of yellow.

A flash of red.

*Five paladins,* Blue had told him.

*Five paladins, acting together as one.*
Epilogue: Aftermath (Part 1)

Chapter Summary

Lance has come a long way, but he still has some unfinished business he needs to take care of.

[LANCE]

On the first night, it rained.

It was an oppressive, heavy rain, the sort of rain that wasn’t fun for kids to jump around in, that was too aggressive to bring out biting fish. It was a tired, exhaustive downpour, where back home, Lance would have imagined his Mamá tightening the sashes on the windowsills.

The time was late, or very early, depending on who you asked. It was perhaps three or four in the morning, almost twelve varga exactly since the chaos had officially ended.

Predictably stubborn, Keith had to be talked into allowing for medical evaluation and treatment (after plenty of “I’m fine”’s and “It’s not as bad as it look”’s bullshit that Lance was not buying for two ticks) — it took Lance refusing to get examined for Keith to begrudgingly agree. (“If you don’t need it, then I don’t either,” “That’s stupid,” “You’re stupid,” et cetera.)

As it happened, they both did end up needing the examination; their results added to the count of those who were injured.

When Lance had retreated from the blackened corruption that bled out of the Beast, and subsequently fallen onto his back, he’d landed on a broken piece of someone’s armor that had nicked his still-healing burn. At the time, his body had been so overwhelmed with emotion and the rush of, and subsequent drain of, adrenaline, he hadn’t even noticed the pain. It really wasn’t that bad, but it had broken through the healing skin graft on the left side of his upper-back, and that was enough to warrant Sir Adam fussing over him, concerned about an infection. There had been a lot of blood around, and Lance’s immune system was, apparently, weakened after all of the treatments he’d received days prior, so Sir Adam was not willing to take any chances and instructed he take some sort of apothecarian elixir that would help to do... something or other. Honestly, Lance had missed the end of the physician’s explanation, distracted by the sound of Keith groaning in his periphery as a nurse cleaned his arm with some variety of alcohol-antiseptic that burns the hell out of you.

Keith was much worse off comparatively. He’d left the battle with a sprained wrist, a nasty puncture wound that tore into the strip of muscle just north of his left clavicle, a shallow slash down his right arm — deep enough to warrant bandaging — and, of course, the fresh, angular scar that ran down his cheek and into the crevice of his neck. Lance was surprised, and maybe just a teensy bit annoyed, when he overheard someone mention that the Prince’s susceptibility to infection was lower because of his Galra genetics (how unfair is that, by the way?), but he needed to have his wrist set in a splint and his shoulder was going to take several movements to heal properly.

Adam had him on a light cocktail of narcotics and something designed to help him sleep for the first
night. After that, he would go down to a temporary medication to help with the pain, not enough to keep him off his feet — Keith had insisted on that. He’d prefer conscious pain to unconscious rest, because, of course he did. This was Prince Keith “I walk into burning buildings” Kogane, who should be grateful Lance doesn’t kick his ass for doing that again. What if something happened to his watch? When Lance got caught in the explosion, it showed that the things could be damaged, and if it had gotten damaged — he could have — nevermind.

That’s besides the point.

The panacea was simple — two doses — and designed to do enough, so it might take the edge off while his body healed, but Adam made him agree that if he were to neglect pain medication and being treated like a patient, that he had to commit to following the doctor’s mess of instructions in terms of taking care of himself so as to prevent infection. His Galra genetics didn’t make him immune, and he was half-human.

What with the perks of being a royal and all, the Prince was permitted to actually sleep in his room rather than stay under Sir Adam’s watchful eye, if he wanted. He had access to a personal medical attendant at any time of day, apparently, and all Keith needed to do was call on them. (The decision for him to go back to his room was made as much for the Prince’s convenience as it was for Sir Adam’s, preoccupied as he was with the dozens of others occupying the entirety of his fifth-floor wing, and spearheading the effort to coordinate with the local clinic to treat and transfer patients depending on their needs.)

Lance hadn’t really known if it was right to ask Keith if he should come with him to his room, or if he was expected stay in the private medical room in which he had been staying days previous. He could still see the scuff marks of the floor from Lotor’s armor.

It wasn’t until Keith hovered in his doorway, after Sir Adam finally permitted him to be discharged, and glanced over his shoulder as two guards walked past, that the offer was made.

Almost shyly, the Prince looked back to Lance with dark circles lining his tired eyes. “Do you… want to come upstairs with me? To bed, I mean.”

He didn’t know what to expect in the way of a slightly drugged, wounded, exhausted Keith, but Lance certainly hadn’t been expecting to see the face of this Keith again, so soon. This was the Keith that had started to come undone outside, after the fighting was over, clutching to his mother like it could be the last time; it was this same, quieter Keith whose dark eyes were black, but unspeakably soft, who sounded vulnerable and tired and like he’d just turned eighteen last week, not ready to deal with dozens of lost lives on his conscious. He wasn’t Prince Keith in that very quiet, very private moment on the fifth-floor, and the display of vulnerability made Lance’s heart feel a little too small for his body all of the sudden. This was… just, Keith. The Keith that almost no one else ever saw.

It could have been the medication, or it could have simply been the fatigue, but whatever the case — in the face of this Keith — Lance was helpless but to agree.

He leaned in and kissed the pale skin of the Prince’s unmarked cheek and threaded their fingers together.

“Of course, idiot,” Lance said, and, feeling a little giddy with the embarrassing amount of somersaults happening in his stomach, he carefully held Keith in place by gripping his collar — not so much to disturb any of his bandaging — but enough to keep him in place. Then, he assaulted his whole face (mindful of the new scar) with kisses, peppering anywhere he could with tiny little brushes of his lips, refusing to stop until Keith pried Lance’s hands away with a breathless, playfully annoyed laugh.
“You’re ridiculous, I swear.”

“I know. Isn’t it great?” Lance grinned. “Let’s go to bed.”

Keith sighed, and then, in warning as Lance began to lead him by the hand, he added, “I don’t plan on sleeping.”

The half-Altean sputtered a laugh before dropping his voice. “I’m sure the kind and dashing Prince isn’t trying to imply what I think he’s implying, now is he?”

“What? Oh. I — no — I didn’t mean — didn’t mean that, I, er,” the Prince rambled, cheeks flushing crimson as he struggled through an explanation. It was the most expressive Lance had seen him since he’d woken up in the grass, and he couldn’t help but to squeeze the Prince’s hand and snicker louder.

“I know, just relax. I was kidding — I know what you meant.” Lance looked behind him and smiled gently, amused by the Prince’s clear chagrin. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to sleep, either.”

“Yeah…” Keith agreed, clearly still a little embarrassed, and Lance decided to let him off the hook without further teasing. The guy did get slashed up and fought off a bunch of bloodthirsty enemies today, so Lance supposed he earned himself some slack.

With the awkward angle of Keith’s shoulder injury, he had been instructed not to lie down, which was how the Prince had ended up sitting with his back against the headboard once they returned to Keith’s room. Lance helped himself to the Prince’s lavish bathroom and poked around until he found one of the creams Adam had mentioned, something with plenty of silicone, vitamin E, and allantoin, along with some antiseptic cleaner and a fresh washcloth.

Keith looked at the assortment of supplies with a furrow in his brow as Lance put them down on the bedside table.

“For your scar, dummy. It’ll help it heal. Weren’t you listening to what Adam was saying?”

Frowning, or perhaps pouting would be a more apt description, the Prince averted his gaze. “I… not really. Usually my own attendant comes and takes care of this sort of thing. I should listen to him, but my mind is sort of…”

“All over the place?” Lance suggested, taking a seat on the edge of the bed. “Yeah, alright. I’ll let it slide this time, I guess you have a good excuse. But you need to take care of yourself.”

“Speak for yourself,” Keith grunted “I can’t believe you rode out in the middle of a battle without any armor or anything... on my horse, by the way.”

“Hey, Red happened to find me, okay? I was waiting in that like, library room or whatever, and there was a bow and some arrows I managed to snatch from, well, a guy who I passed that was, er, ya know, dead.” Lance paused as he unstoppered the jar of emollient. “She came up around the edge of the garden later, whinnying like crazy and bucking. I swear she was trying to get my attention, and there was already yelling and shouting and shit was obviously happening and, well, I was worried about you. When I saw Red and you weren’t with her, I thought something might’ve…”

Lance smiled weakly as he applied some of the cream to the end of the washcloth, glad to have something to do with his hands. “A-Anyway, I’m just glad it’s over, that you’re okay. That’s probably shitty to say because of everything that happened, but I’m still happy, you know…? You’re alive. That’s… that’s, you know. I feel like we got really lucky, in a fucked up kind of way.”
Just as he glanced up to apply the topical to Keith’s cheek, Lance barely managed not to flinch when he realized how near the Prince had moved. Damn him and his sneaky Blade training; Keith’s movements weren’t just quiet, but *precise.* Lance wondered if he even made a conscious effort to do things in such a covert manner all of the time, or if Keith was just *like* that.

The Prince closed the distance almost the moment Lance looked up, and a soft, achingly sweet kiss was pushed into the corner of his mouth. Keith tasted of metal and salt, the line of his mouth had a certain curvature that Lance never knew he missed until it was gone again.

“I’m sorry,” confessed the Prince, lips so near to Lance’s own he could feel each words form against his skin. “I don’t know what else to say. I know that’s not enough and there’s a lot I want to say but, at least right now... I just know that I feel sorry that I made you worry. I just know that I’m happy you’re here, too.”

As Keith leaned away, Lance stared down at his lap, looking at the cloth in his hand until he could will away the stupid little smile that snuck onto his face. Once tempered into something more neutral, he looked up at again and began to apply the cream with the corner of the towel, gently.

Hissing, the Prince shut his eyes but didn’t lean away. “Not as bad as the cleaning stuff, but still…”

Yeah. Adam said best not to cover this one, just to let it breathe and to keep it clean. He said to put something like this on it every six varga or so. It’ll help it from being so red in the beginning and speed up the healing, but… it’s definitely permanent. You’re lucky I’m like, the cool ninja sharpshooter, or else you could have gotten a lot worse than this scar.”

Keith barely contained the obvious snort that tried to force itself out of his throat. “Oh yeah, so what, I should start calling you Sharpshooter?”

“Are you really in the position to be making fun of me, Kogane?” Lance asked, rag gingerly hovering over the raw skin that ran down his cheek.

That effectively shut him up, Lance grinned winningly as they slipped into a comfortable silence. The Prince snuck a glance at Lance while he worked on applying an even layer of the balm, and Lance felt more than he saw the dark-haired boy’s lips turn down into a grimace near where his hand was working.

“What?”

Keith lowered his gaze, and after a few ticks, managed to respond, “Does it look... bad?”

“What?” Lance had to stop and pull the cloth away before moving on to the dip of his neck. “No, I can’t even — I can’t believe you just asked me that. No, Keith. It doesn’t look bad. If anything, it’s kinda hot.”

That earned him a quiet chuckle, and the skin surrounding where Lance had been applying the cream tinted pink.

The combination of the sound and sight had Lance beaming. “I’m not joking! Now you’ve got like, this sort of badass look going on.”

“I don’t know about that,” Keith said, laughing in earnest now. Lance had to stop applying the cream so as not to bump the raw skin by accident, which was fine — he was basically done anyways. “But I guess I don’t mind it as much if you like it.”

It was unfathomable that Keith could honestly be any *more* stupidly attractive, and yet, he still
managed it when he laughed like that. And oh poor, poor, Lance. Poor Lance and his poor, weak heart, pounding with an urgency that he found alarming, as if to verify for him internally that, yes, you absolute fuck, of course he likes it.

Ugh. Practically disgusted with himself, Lance shook his head and returned the lid to the jar of vitamin-rich emollient and set it on Keith’s nightstand before plopping back into the same spot. Evidently laughed out, the Prince fixed Lance with a look, and Lance could see his jaw working, like he was going to say something.

“Something on your mind? Well, besides the obvious.”

For a moment the Prince’s eyes darkened, and Lance could only imagine where his thoughts might have gone. Lance’s own went to the few Blades that he knew by name, that he’d never see again. For Keith, their deaths and all the others must have been like losing a part of a family.

Tentatively, he reached forward and took Keith’s hand, squeezing to get his attention.

“Hey,” Lance said, voice soft. “You don’t have to, but if you want to talk about any of it, I can listen. It’s going to be okay, Keith.”

In truth, Lance had no way of knowing that for sure, but he willed conviction into his tone for the dark-haired boy’s sake. Lance needed to sound like he believed it if it were to do any good for the Prince, and it must have been at least somewhat convincing because his expression softened, eyes wide and dark in the low-light of his room.

“I — okay. Yeah.”

It wasn’t intentional, not really, but they ended up talking through the night, voices rattling along atop the steady pitter-patter of the rain against the windows. As was Lance’s habit to become cozy during a storm, he ended up shifting on the mattress several times, first resting edge of the bed, to sitting across from Keith, to finally leaning back in the space between the Prince’s legs, his back reclining into Keith’s chest.

They both really could have used to sleep, but there was no point that Lance actually felt ready to say good night. He wanted to talk to Keith, to sit there and maybe enjoy the fact that he felt a little bit small against his chest, a little bit warm and a little bit safer there than he had all day. They talked as the sky quickened from black to gray, talked even as they heard the guard shift happen outside Keith’s door at some godforsaken hour, talked through yawns and laughs and sighs.

Though he wasn’t certain, Lance suspected the medicine may have loosened Keith’s usually sharp tongue, speaking more than listening. He spoke in languages of blood and steel, and each person or place or possibility he named both felt of a terrible weight and of some kind of unspeakable relief. Lance dared not let himself think too much on it, but he silently wondered — maybe hoped — that, in Keith’s ability to to trust him with some of his crushing sense of responsibility, that maybe Lance was helping. That if he was at least able to make things a little easier to bare, just by listening and talking, humming quietly to the sound of the rain, playing with Keith’s fingers while he explained border security, or listening to his heart pound when he explained the terrible sight within the burning Olkarion embassy — if Lance could help just by being there, then he would gladly stay awake, as long as Keith might need him.

They talked about Princess Allura and Lady Romelle, about what might become of Altea now. The Prince speculated and Lance listened, stomach dropping upon learning that not only had King Alfor died, but Queen Melenor had been slain within the castle, too. That meant Allura was not only the acting queen, but that she was subsequently an orphan.
And while the conversations were guided by Keith, he did, on occasion, grow quiet. Maybe he’d been gripped in a particularly distracting train of thought, or just simply without anything more to say, and Lance filled those silences with his own lore and legends, sharing stories his Mamá had once told him, things that skirted the line between myth and reality.

He wasn’t sure why that’s where his mind kept returning to that evening, maybe because the rain reminded him of Varadero, but the stories were trailing from his tongue with practiced ease, and Keith seemed genuinely interested in Lance’s recounting of the tales he could remember from his mother’s masterful cartography of the night sky.

Rainy days in the McClain home used to be the image of loving chaos, he and his siblings stacking on top of each other around the living room, fighting over who could sit in Mamá’s lap while she told them stories. The rivers were too dangerous during a storm, and it was a waste to try to tend to the rural landscape while it was all drowned beneath a pouring rain. She told at least a dozen different stories of how it would rain because a spring goddess was crying for her lost love, or that the spirit of the mountains would argue with the sun on occasion, their rumbles of fury coiling into storm clouds, and the epitome of a fight was the thunderclaps that would light up the sky at midnight. The sky was falling, or weeping, or shedding itself of some unspeakable weight; there had always been something inherently cathartic about the idea of that sort of relief, at least for Lance.

He didn’t know for certain if it had the same effect anymore, but he figured it would probably be a nice change of subject for Keith to think about for a little while. Gods know it was nice for Lance not to think about everything happening around them for once.

Somewhere near the end of his recounting of *Aquarius*, the Prince interrupted, evidently surprised to learn that they weren’t really his Mamá’s stories, but that was just how Lance referred to them.

“No, she just really loved the legends, but I don’t think she ever believed them. She’s always been a follower of God, not, you know, gods. I think that was how she was raised. My old man was the one who worshipped all these gods. I think talking about them made her feel... closer to him. I guess in the same way that talking about them makes me feel closer to her, and my family.”

“Yes...” Keith began to say, but he hesitated. The way they were seated, Lance couldn’t judge what kind of face he might have been making, so he tried to glance over his shoulder. “What?”

“I was going to ask if the stories make you feel closer to him, too — uh, Medram, I guess — but then I guess, I never really... we never talked about your dad, after everything. I was so angry about Lotor and then all of this happened, I just feel... bad. And everything with Lady Valurian, too... I know that you know that nothing she said matters,” Keith paused, and Lance felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise when the Prince’s lips were close enough to feel against his shoulder. “But I can still imagine that was a lot to process.”

Lance chewed the inside of his gums, nodding along while he considered how to respond. He was genuinely unsure how he felt about it, which he supposed would be the honest answer.

Slowly, he said, “I... guess I’m still surprised, of course. I don’t know if I’ve really wrapped my head around it. I mean, I think of myself and my family in the same way — like, I don’t think of myself as a Serrano even if that’s maybe what my last name really is? It’s not who I’ve felt like my whole life. But, it’s... well,” Lance chuckled, but it wasn’t a sound borne from humor. “It’s all pretty scary, too. Pidge and Hunk and Sir Coran did me a huge favor in looking into all of that legal stuff for me, but it’s all temporary, right? I mean, what if someone comes and kicks down the door and has a piece of paper that’s got my name on it, and my sister’s and brother’s names on it, and my Dad’s name on it? I don’t like the idea of anyone owning me, which like, I guess is probably not that surprising.”
A wilted flower of a sigh sat on his lips, the sound bright but still worn down. “There’s just something… I can’t explain it, surreal, maybe? Something like that — something surreal about the thought that he might alive out there. Or dead out there, maybe. And it doesn’t really matter? Cause either way, it changes nothing.”

“You know,” Keith murmured softly, breath tickling Lance’s shoulder enough to make a faint rosy blush rise up his chest, staining the tips of his ears. “It goes without saying, but if someone managed to get this far into the castle and actually knocked my door down throwing out claims like that, I’d kill them. Just saying.”

Okay, it was probably weirdly morbid to think, but Lance would have been lying if the whole statement didn’t strike him as somehow… romantic? Offering to murder someone for him? Coming from Keith, that seemed like it was somehow romantic, but Lance was well aware that it definitely was not supposed to be romantic — oh, god, maybe he does actually have a death kink?

Lance tipped his head back into Keith’s uninjured shoulder. “I want to laugh, but I don’t think you’re joking.”

Ambiguously, the Prince chuckled. He didn’t actually confirm or deny it.

“Sorry if I got you off track,” he said with that same unusually gentle tone, too close to the hollow of Lance’s ear for it not to give him chills. “I’ll say, anyway, that if you do want to talk about anything like that, you can. If you want, though, you can continue with the story.”

Breathing in an attempt to steady his elevated pulse, Lance cozied back into him and nodded. “Okay. Where was I? Oh, right, so, after Ganymede got snatched away by Aquilia, which is this little pattern sort of north-east-ish that looks like this,” he made a triangle with his fingers, holding them out and above. “Aquila took him to the Eos, goddess of the dawn. You’d think, being dawn and light and all that she would have been a good god, and I guess it’s not fair to say she wasn’t good in general, but her treatment of Ganymede was definitely not…”

As was customary for a McClain story, Lance may have been a bit heavy-handed on the amount of embellishment he provided via lavish dialogue and a compelling, illustrious landscape, even if it was all a bit untrue. A lot of the details of the old tales were left to interpretation anyways, including the goddess of the dawn’s involvement at all, but the version with the mountains, the Temple of the Gods, and a shouting match between Zeus and Eros was the version that Lance liked best.

It was just as he was explaining how Ganymede became Aquarius that he realized Keith’s breathing had slowed, evening out with sleep. He considered the Prince’s hand, now completely lax as it lay over Lance’s midsection in a sort of backwards hug, and sighed with a small smile pulling at his lips.

He could feel the sleep ready to come and claim him for the final hour or so of night before the sun rose proper over the horizon, but Lance stayed awake for a little longer, struck by a moment of quiet reflection.

It skirted the line between fantastical and overwhelming — how his life had come to be this, sitting in the Prince of Marmora’s lap who had just nodded off to the sound of Lance’s voice —

In what felt like no time at all, Lance felt some sort of warmth moving around him. It wouldn’t be until he woke up a few varga later that he realized the Prince had gently maneuvered out from behind him, laying Lance down across the pillows properly.

It was like trying to see into his stream of consciousness through the barely-there tendrils of a smoke-screen dream, holding him in the plane between sleeping and waking, and as a result Lance couldn’t
quite tell if he was awake or dreaming. He heard footsteps and creaky floors, water running, the slight ring of metal sliding against metal.

The clearest moment came in the form of a sudden warmth, the gentle press of lips to his temple, words barely spoken in his ear. Hands held his hips, the tell-tale pressure of thumbs sliding beneath his sleep-rumpled shirt.

“Mmm… ‘eith?” Lance squeezed his eyes together against the offending brightness of the room.

“Yeah, it’s me.” A quiet chuckle lingered above him. “There’s a lot I’ve got to do, but try to get some sleep. You need it.”

“El que lo... dice lo es,” he murmured back.

Lance swore he heard a smile in the Prince’s voice when he said, whisper-quick, “I don’t speak Spanish, Lance.”

“Shh. Duerme ahora. Inglés después.”

“Whatever you say, Sharpshooter.”

Had Lance’s sleep-foggy brain been a bit clearer, he might have tried to peek through his lashes, to see if Keith was teasing him with the use of the nickname, but, alone in the Prince’s bed as warm hands, plush with premium leather gloves, trailed off his hips, Lance instead buried his face into the pillow. He could see, even with his eyes squeezed firmly shut, that the light blue glow of his eye scales was bright enough to be discernible through his closed lids.

A quiet click of the door was the last thing Lance heard before drifting off once again.

For the few following quintant, life felt like it was circling the drain of the disaster, the runoff of blood slowly washing away, the cataclysmic dust taking the time it needed to settle. Strangely dizzying, time passed too quickly and too slowly, all at once. Lance felt himself moving from one room to another with the heaviness of trying to wade through water, but lavender morning light bled into obsidian skies before he could even catch his breath.

Fittingly, he supposed, the entire castle was beleaguered with a certain frantic energy that he didn’t find particularly inviting. People were always jogging to get somewhere faster, parchment or papers rustling in their arms, shouting down a hallway towards another to avoid having to walk the length just to walk back — it was as if the walls themselves felt more narrow, the passages constricted, a claustrophobic sense of “fuck there’s not enough time there’s never enough time,” pulsing arrhythmically with Marmora’s collective heartbeat.

And, all the while, Keith was there.

But, at the same time, he wasn’t. Not really.

Always at a distance, Lance saw him on occasion, moving from one place to another or talking to someone — could even hear him at times, his voice sharp and full of its usual intensity — but he was as tied to the chaos as anyone.
After that first morning, a conversation of mumbled half-conscious words, Lance hardly got to see him alone. Shiro passed along messages, that he was sorry, or that he got held up doing something. And, honestly, Lance doesn’t blame him, doesn’t hold any ill-will over it. He’d spent many nights before he’d even met Keith, up late into the hours attending to his own responsibilities; his aunt had always been sure to remind him that those floors weren’t going to scrub themselves. So, Keith was busy. After all, this was his nightmare made reality, unfolding around them in the subsequent days; the realm was at the cusp of war, Altea and Marmora making formal declarations that afternoon, Daibaazal answering with a promise of bloodshed unlike any the realm had ever witnessed. Lance didn’t expect Keith to drop everything to cater to his Lance’s own loss of gravity, barely able to tell up from down in the bustle of castle-life.

That was fine. What was not okay, however, was Keith not taking care of himself because of what was happening around them — if that required Lance being a thorn in the Prince’s side, then so be it.

“I don’t care if you have a meeting, just wait for one tick!”

That particular confrontation happened at the end of the first day as Keith started to storm away, but with a bit of a crowd looking at them from the other end of the hallway, the Prince ground his jaw and dragged his feet back to where Lance was standing.

People seemed to like him around here, and while it was unusual to him for the door to be held if someone saw him coming, he was willing to accept their help when he asked someone to take him to wherever the Prince was in the castle, and he would plant himself right in fucking front of Keith, whether or not the Prince wanted him there or not.

Keith spoke little during the days. His eyes were hard and blank, impossibly cavernous in their dark purple depths.

“Lance, I don’t have time right —”

“Bullshit.” Lance was already reaching for Keith’s wrist before dragging him back to the now vacant council chamber, and the guards at the door — Lance was trying to learn their names, and he knew these ones as Alphonse and Quincy — hastily allowed him entrance. He practically shoved Keith into the chair nearest to the door.

“Quit being so fucking stubborn. If you keep this up, I’ll have Adam forcefully admit you as a patient.”

From his pants pocket, Lance was already drawing out the jar of balm and unfolded the cloth he’d been using for this task every six hours.

“I can’t not fucking push myself, Lance!” The Prince snapped back. “Everyone is looking to me for answers and — and expects me to lead them — and I’m not even sure what day it is or how many people are fucking dead and — just, would you stop following me and let me do what I need to do, okay?!?”

Lance clenched his fist. Keith was stressed. He knew that.

So, for all he wanted to punch him and tell him to calm the quiznak down, he simply sighed and pulled up another chair, the sound loud and grating in the silence that followed.

As gently as possible, he began to apply the balm and forced the vial of medication Adam instructed him to drink into the Prince’s open hands. Keith blinked down at the bottle like it was going to bite him at any moment.
“I get that the realm is counting on you, and that you have to take care of so many people.” Lance hummed for a moment, hoping the sound might soothe some of the tension. “I’m not trying to stop you, and I know I can’t help you with any of the high-order council garbage, so if I can’t help you, at least let me take care of you.”

“I’m —” the Prince began to say, but stopped to bite his lip. “I’m sorry. I feel like a dick. I’m just — gods, every second I’m trying to think days, weeks ahead and —”

Lance smiled and shook his head as he finished the cleaning job quickly, because he knew — he certainly knew — that Keith had somewhere else to be right now, doing something for someone else who needed him more than Lance needed his apology.

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me, but I am serious about this. Stop trying to fight me every time I come and find you. All I’m asking is for five doboesh a day. One doboesh to put this junk on you and make sure you haven’t killed anyone, five times a day. That’s it.”

“This is so unfair to you.” Keith’s knuckles were turning white, the leather of his gloves pulled taut. He stayed seated, glaring at his lap. “I’ll make it up to you, okay?”

Smirking, Lance offered a hand to help him stand. “Fine, I’ll hold you to it, Mullet. Once this is all over, you can sweep me off my feet. I’ll allow it.”

When Keith accepted, Lance flustered slightly in surprise when the Prince let their fingers twine together. He knew that they were already taking up too much of the Prince’s time, but there was a sadness in his expression that made his own heart ache.

Lance squeezed his hand. “Keith?”

“I just —” the Prince paused, swallowing roughly. “I don’t know when over will be. I don’t know if this is just how life is going to be… all of the time. Some wars last decades, Lance. What if there is no over for this? I don’t know if — gods, fuck, I don’t know if I can do this. I feel like if I stop moving for a second, everything is going to blow up in my face. If I make a single mistake, people could die, more people will die, and I don’t know what to do.”

“Listen, man.” Inhaling steadily, Lance lifted their joined hands, shifting his grip to tightly hold the Prince’s palm. “You can’t plan for everything. You are going to mess up sometimes. But let me tell you, as someone who’s made a million mistakes, the only thing you can do is to get up and try to make it right. So stop being worried about fixing problems that haven’t even happened yet and go do what you need to — you’re their leader, right? So lead.”

Keith’s brow had unknit for the first time in two quintant, his lips pressed tightly together. Lance was a little proud to see his skin had turned an incriminating shade of pink. Tossing on a smile, Lance tilted his head to the side.

“Seriously, go before Kolivan has my head for making you late. He’s scary.”

“I’d kill anyone who tried to do that,” Keith eventually said, biting down a smile before he yanked Lance forward suddenly. A surprised oof fell out of him, but was immediately absorbed by Keith pressing a hard, uneven kiss to his lips, warm and sincere, and Lance sighed when he pulled away too soon.

Leaning in the doorway to the council chambers, Lance watched that red cape billow as the Prince retreated down the hallway again, uninterrupted this time.

Like he said, Keith was busy. So much so that he didn’t return to his room when Lance would
eventually fall asleep, near midnight. He left the medication on Keith’s bedside table and woke up in
the middle of the night a few times, the quiet sound of disappointment falling from his mouth in the
shape of a sigh when he saw the sheets just as empty as when he’d crawled into them.

That was the extent to which he saw Keith for three quintant. Quick conversations, sometimes while
Keith seemed dead on his feet and others while he was simmering beneath the surface all over again
— it all depended on how things were going, and days were a rollercoaster around the castle.

Except… well. They did have the mornings. But Lance wasn’t sure if he could talk himself into
believing that, because, every morning, before the room was filled by the sun’s slowly rising light,
Lance would have sworn that Keith was in his bed chamber again. Moving around the bed, the
bathroom, the closet. Lance tried in vain to struggle through the veil of unconsciousness, wondering
why the hell his eyelids were always so heavy; he wished he could fully wake up to see if the visits
were imagined or not. Part of him felt phantom touches on his hips when he woke up, a memory of
hands holding him, caressing him with such gentle attention that it brought a blush to Lance’s cheek
just to think about it; a kiss on his temple, forehead, the corner of his mouth. They were something,
quiet promises of patience, but Lance wondered if it was his own imagination making up for the
unexpected loneliness, if those passing visits in grey morning light were real or imagined.

Outside of those five dobosh he had every quintant, it was all Lance could do to at least try to be
helpful while he gave Keith the space he needed to do whatever he had to. That was how he ended
up on the fifth-floor for large spans of his days, between stalking the Prince down every few hours.
As far as help, Lance didn’t have much to offer, but he was at least an extra set of hands and could
follow instructions. For the most part, without any sort of training, Lance could do little to help Sir
Adam directly, but he helped fill in gaps in the whole process whenever he could. Sometimes that
was transporting linens downstairs or fixing one with fresh sheets after a discharge, or helping the
cooks bring meals up to the patients, or helping some of the larger people who were injured try to get
up and move around. Most of the time, though, his days simply amounted to Lance sitting with
various soldiers or Blades post-op, talking to them or their families, exchanging stories and
answering all manner of questions. It would take some getting used to for Lance, for strangers to take
such an interest in his personal life, but he didn’t mind the attention. He was glad, in fact, to offer
something in the way of distraction to those who had not yet been transferred to the city clinic. If he
was able to provide comfort to these people just by talking? That was one of the things he did best.

Pidge and Hunk were often with him in the infirmary, along with Lady Romelle. The two betrothed
— it was weird to think about himself in those terms — ended up providing support to the patients,
and the wiz-kids took over coordinating discharges to the city clinic for those who were injured enough to transfer. Their combined help freed up enough of Adam’s time so that he could eat, sleep,
and do surgeries uninterrupted.

And that, for all intents and purposes, was that.

For three days, that was how his days were structured. Wake up in a haze, eat with the patients in the
infirmary, find Keith, go back to the infirmary. Rinse and repeat. Lance hung around the castle,
helping where he could and trying to stay out of people’s way when he couldn’t.

There were two distinct exceptions to this routine, both in the form of “formal” meetings.

One was on the subject of his family, and the other on his engagement. Two Blades, both masked
and way bigger than him, were being dispatched to Varadero to make contact with his Mamá and
sisters and brothers, to explain what happened, and offer them to return with them. Lance felt his
nerves wind and unwind so many times during the course of that conversation, he actually felt dizzy
by the time he stood up.
The other was with two complete strangers, positively ancient Galran men, both decked out with fancy robes. Oddly enough, Sir Coran volunteered to join Lance for that meeting, and he ended up being very grateful he’d accepted the advisor’s offer. The older Altean spent most of the time stone-faced, seated beside Lance at a table way-too-big for the four of them, diligently listening to the two muttering men, and then not-so-subtly re-explaining to Lance what the hell they were even talking about. It was like Coran was his lawyer or translator or something, helping Lance make sense of the technical jargon and babble that he barely understood.

What it all came down to, evidently, was that his engagement to the Prince came with more than just a nice bed and exclusive rights to run his hands through Keith’s mullet.

It came with a quiznaking title.

“We’re having a stagecoach prepared for you, Lord Lance.”

Lance would have never, not in a million decaphoebs, guessed he’d be hearing those words.

Well, unless they were being said sarcastically, at his expense — which is exactly why his reflexive reaction was to laugh in the woman’s face when she spoke them. (To even call it a laugh at all might have been a bit generous — it was an awful blurt of a sound, something between a loud snicker and a scoff.)

The woman, a stable hand around the Queen’s age, raised a brow at him with a confusion that could only be described as decidedly uncomfortable, as if he’d just started eating grass or imitating a horse. Lance opened his mouth to apologize, because, what the fuck? But, not trusting his voice and without really anything to say, he snapped his jaw shut so hard his teeth let out an audible click. He spun on his heel, grabbed Hunk’s arm and began marching the other direction, now retreating quickly towards the castle steps. His cheeks felt fiery as they burned with embarrassment.

In fairness to Lance, he really hadn’t meant to laugh at her; he’d just pretended she was joking. It was rather that, or stand there and fluster uncomfortably at the suggestion of someone bringing him a luxury carriage just because... what, he had somewhere to go?

That just felt ridiculous.

It shouldn’t, Lance supposed, but he supposed a lot of things these days were thrown right out the window. Hell, he’d been prepared to walk before Pidge had written off the idea that morning when he mentioned it. (“You may be okay with wearing your soles and heels down to nothing, but I’m not walking two fuckin’ hours for a ride that could take fifteen minutes.”) Said Gremlin was supposed to join him and Hunk any dobosh now — she was helping her family prepare for some diplomatic thing.

Hunk was saying something to him, and Lance was well-and-truly doing his best to listen, but his thoughts were fuzzy with exhaustion and nerves and suspended disbelief as he looked out over the castle grounds.

In three quick quintant, across the grounds of Marmora’s castle, the bodies had been cleared. The blood had been washed from beneath their fingernails and from the hilts of their blades. Things were still a bit hectic, but noticeably less so today. Were it not for the chasm of black, rotten earth marking
the place where the creature of the witch’s creation had been slain, one could hardly tell that there had been a battle at all.

Three quintant, and it felt like reality itself had shifted. Was it even fair to say the world had moved on from three quintant ago, when this felt like waking up in entirely new world altogether? A world where the faces were familiar, the scenery recognizable, but there was something subtly wrong with it? Something that was off-putting, and not quite right about the way all the pieces fit together. Something that pricked at the back of your neck in warning or fear because you know this place, but you also know that you know absolutely nothing about it at all. A location without a context, or, at least, not one that served a purpose anymore; solving a puzzle upside down, with just flimsy cardboard, brown and blaise and utterly unhelpful in the way of making sense of the bigger picture.

“—nce? Lance? You alright?” Hunk shook his shoulder, bringing his attention back to the present.

“Hmm?” Blinking, his gaze focused on his friend’s face, wearing a grimace and knit brow. “Oh, sorry, what?”

“You’re quiet and zoning out… more than normal. What’s up?”

“I…” Bottom lip worrying between his teeth, Lance considered brushing it off, but he also really had no desire to lie to Hunk. It was, just, his current situation wasn’t exactly the easiest thing to organize in his head, let alone to verbalize it to someone else. “I guess I’m fine, I dunno. Nothing’s really wrong…”

Hunk raised a brow. “I sense a ‘but’ coming.”

Lance shrugged, letting his gaze wander over the courtyard in the light din of mid-morning affairs. Nothing really was wrong, he supposed, and even the day reflected that: he observed stablehands and horses nickering in familiar restlessness about two dozen paces to his left, patterned by the steady staccato of boots and the creak of greaves as people moved around him, up stairs, into the castle, or out into the day that had been kissed by winter’s embrace. Brisk with November’s arrival, the air sat chilled against the roof of his mouth, tasting of pine and of something he felt was vaguely comforting, like the warm decay of autumn leaves and the earthiness of dew-sodden soil. It was the scene of modernity that existed around the cradle of nature; it was a kingdom in the bustle of the everyday, operating within a world that was not as peaceful as it seemed.

The scene was a jarring contrast to the loud, intrusive thoughts that rang hollow in the space of Lance’s head, loudly clanging into one another like metal armor crashing to a marble floor.

He’d slept especially poorly last night. There had been voices haunting his sleep, the words spoken in his ear as readily as if they’d been said out loud.

*All of these paths lead to you at their center, and with war as your shadow. So long as you live, that inevitability will follow you to the far reaches of the earth.*

A voice derived from satin.

*Unfortunately, as things are, the most selfless option would be death.*

And words derived from sin.

*You have such power over these people, and you don’t even realize it. The realm will know peace. Marmora and Altea will remain unharmed, their royal families unthreatened. Is that not what you want?*
An offer he couldn’t refuse.

*All I’m asking for in exchange is you.*

A knot tightened in his stomach. He told himself he wasn’t going to go through this again. He’d made his choice and intended to stick to it… *but.*

But. However. On the other hand. Actually.

It was easier said than done. Lance wanted to be able to forget about it, and maybe it was just because the dream had stirred something, but there was a tiny part of him that couldn’t help but wonder — *what if?*

Had he really been given the opportunity to stop this? To have undone the deaths of Keith’s men and women, of Allura’s parents, of strangers and enemies alike? His eyes fell to that blackened pit, the Beast’s grave. How much would have been different?

What if Lotor had made good on his word, defamed Zarkon and had him tried for treason?

Lance might be on his way to Daibaazal, right now. Or maybe he’d already be there. The Olkarion embassy might be more than the desecrated ghost of its former self. Allura’s parents might be alive. What if Lance had just gone ahead and confessed willingly, let himself be one to save the many? Swinging for crimes he didn’t commit? What if he hadn’t gone to the ball at all, or met Keith, or bonded with Blue, or put on the watch?

What if he stayed the hell away, and minded his chores, and did what his aunt had told him to do?

*What if? What if? What if?*

Was he the selfish one? Was it worth it? Should he have —

*No.* Lance took a deep breath, trying to exhale of the waterlogged sensation that was tearing at his lungs. He couldn’t drown in his own thoughts, not if he kept his head about water.

“It’s just hard to think about the fact that people died here,” Lance said eventually, his voice faint. “You can hardly even tell. I wonder if it could have happened… differently.”

“Buddy…” Hunk pulled Lance into a hug, unrestrained, and the gesture helped to ground him, shaking him out of the haze of his thoughts. “I know that tone. Don’t blame yourself for a second. You saved people’s lives, and this fight would have happened no matter how involved you were. Marmora is just lucky to have you, and you’re going to be great. I know it.”

“T-Thanks, Hunk.” Lance sniffed, throat a little tight.

He sighed, leaning into his best friend’s warmth. Hunk had one of those auras that helped people unwind, similar to that of a toasty kitchen filled by the scents of rising yeast and sweetly satisfying sugar and earthy flour. It probably wasn’t a coincidence that Hunk almost always smelled like some combination of those three exact things.

Moving to examine him at arm’s length, Lance watched his best friend’s face scrunch up. “And you’re *sure* you want to do this today? You don’t even *need* to go, you could just send someone. Heck, you know even Pidge and I would do it for you if you feel weird like, asking a guard or something.”

“No.” Lance took a deep, *deep* breath, felt it fill all the way between his ribs, felt it stretch the
muscles of his back enough for it make the scarring itch. “I need to do this.”

Hunk still looked unsure, eyes flicking back and forth from each of Lance’s own, but the half-Altean steeled his resolve, forced himself to push away the nebulous, terrifying what if’s surrounding the future that he helped set into motion.

His existential crisis could wait for another day; today’s agenda was already reserved for his identity crisis. One crisis at a time.

“Okay,” Hunk decided, and with a final squeeze of Lance’s shoulders, let his arms fall to his side. “I get it.”

A few ticks later, the ever-chipper voice that belonged to none other than Pidge Holt groaned, zombie-like, from behind them. Lance and Hunk turned to as she dragged herself down the stairs, glasses askew, hair sticking up in odd places. Lance was pretty sure her shirt was on backwards.

“Yo’,” she barked. “Been up all night. Don’t even ask.”

“Fair enough,” Hunk said with a shrug. “I slept like a baby, for the record.”

Both Lance and Pidge shot him a look that was mostly contempt, and maybe just a tiny bit jealous. Lance might look more put together than Pidge, but he’s not exactly been getting what he would ever construe as an appropriate amount of beauty sleep.

Their stagecoach pulled up a few ticks later (gods above, it was really fancy), and, without waiting for the attendant to get up and open the door, Pidge strode forward and threw it open, climbing in.

“Let’s roll out, fuckers.”

The attendant, a young man probably no older than Allura, looked offended at Pidge’s brash language, but Lance would be lying if he said her entire presence wasn’t a breath of fresh air.

He and Hunk clambered in after her, and before Hunk could shut the door, a hand stopped him. The hinges creaked back open to reveal, ah, right, the face of another Blade. Ilun. Lance had actually offered to take a Blade into the city with him, and he had witnessed Shiro visibly relax at the suggestion. Honestly, he didn’t mind them that much — the Blades did do a good job at acting like they were hardly there — but their constant presence also served as a bitter reminder of the ones who had died. Lance had started to sort of even like Ulaz and Thace.

As the Blade quietly occupied the corner of the carriage, Pidge grabbed the door and shut it. The coachman called back into the cabin. “All set to go, your Grace?”

Lance covered his eyes with a hand. He heard Pidge and Hunk both fail to silence their snickering.

“Yes, ready. Please. Please, just go already.”

One leg pulled up in her seat, Pidge hugged it to her chest with a wicked glint in her amber eyes. “Whatever is the matter, your Lordship?”

“Ugh.” Lance sunk lower into the plush cabin seating. He kept his hand firmly shielding over his eyes. “I don’t see why being engaged to Keith suddenly ‘elevates’ me to being a Lord. I mean, I know Sir Coran was trying to explain it to me, respectability or status or whatever, but like... it just sounds weird. I’d rather be the Castellan of Lions or whatever that herald kept making up for the ball. Or Sir Lance! Like Sir Adam and Sir Shiro. That’s not as bad.”
Hunk patted his knee sympathetically. “Couldn’t you just ask Keith to change your title? He could, like, knight you if you just asked or something.”

“I don’t wanna do that,” groused the newly-dubbed Lord, carding a hand through his hair. “I hardly deserve any of this special treatment as it is, the last thing I want is for Keith to just give me an extra title because I asked for it. That’s even worse.”

Shrugging, Pidge interjected, “Honestly, you’ll stop noticing. People have called me weird titles all my life ’cause of my Dad, I hardly even notice anymore.”

“Mmm. I guess. It’s just hard to imagine I’ll ever feel like I can get used to this high society stuff. I mean, just look at this carriage!”

As if to prove his point, there was no tumble of uneven cobblestones, no tremors of wheels that bumped and shook through the plush seating of the stagecoach. Were it not for the little window that showed the city rolling by, Lance would hardly even be able to tell they were moving at all. It could not have been more different than when they not-so-legally dropped in on the castle not a phob ago.

Lance settled further back in his seat, sighing as he leaned into Hunk’s shoulder.

“And it’s not just the title, you know? It’s everything that goes with that. I guess, I just don’t know what I’m doing. Like, you missed me make a total idiot of myself earlier Pidge — I know, I know, big surprise — but this lady at the stable was just like, ‘why would you need a horse?’ Like I was supposed to know I would get a carriage? Am I just… supposed to know these things? And then I just like, laughed in her face, cause I got nervous! Dios. Am I supposed I say thank you, or like, am I even supposed to ask for stuff? Or do I just, like, say, and people are supposed to do whatever I say? It’s weird. I don’t know. Sorry, I don’t even know if I’m making sense. My aunt would always just say things and I don’t know if that’s because she was really rude or if that’s just the way things are supposed to be and —”

Stopping abruptly, Lance realized he’d started to raise his voice, and was talking so fast that even Pidge’s usual nonchalance had fallen into a concerned frown. He coughed and glared at his lap, ignoring the flush that rushed to his color cheeks with reddened embarrassment.

Despite the messy tumble of his words, the underlying set of fears and uncertainties were still very real. Everything he did was plagued by second-guesses.

Quietly, he finished, “All of this… It just doesn’t feel like me, you know?”

They were silent for a few ticks, and Lance felt Hunk’s cheek squish into the top of his head as his friend leaned back into him.

“It’s alright to be nervous and worried about this kind of stuff, man. I would say you’re overthinking it, buuuuuut,” Hunk continued, drawing out the last syllable, “I would probably be doing the exact same thing if Sha— if someone entered my life like Keith entered yours.”

Unable to resist, Lance chuckled a little. “You can just say ‘Shay’, you know. She was totally into you, man. You don’t have to be coy about it.”

“I — well — you know I’m just, ah, bad at that sort of thing.”

Pidge nodded from the other side of the coach. “He has a point, though. No one expects you to just get it all right away. And even if you did, you’re a person who’s allowed to make mistakes, just like everyone else.”
“Yeah, exactly,” Hunk agreed. “Like, you should know better than anyone how not to treat people. Just because something was normal for the Valurians — heck, even things that are normal to people like Sir Shiro or even Keith — doesn’t mean it has to be your brand of normal, you know? After everything you went through with your aunt, and then the way people at the castle treated you… Just think about, like, why all these people liked the Blue Paladin in the first place. They liked that you didn’t blend in with all the nobles. They know that you’re not like them, so I imagine that if people have started to treat you differently, it’s because they want to, not because they have to.”

Lance managed to smile at his friend’s reassurance.

Pidge, in a lighthearted change of conversation, let out one of her signature cackles. “Oh, man, I just realized you both bagged a royal. Shit, I’m glad I’m not interested in any of that garbage or else I’d be falling behind.”

Flustered, Hunk began to defend his status as not having bagged anyone, and that his “platonic interest” in Lady Shay — well, no, now she was Princess Shay — was being blown out of proportion. Lance literally could not defend against Pidge’s accusation, seeing as he was quiznaking engaged, so he just sat back and listened to their argument, a grin of mild amusement tugging at the corner of his mouth.

And he did appreciate their attempt to cheer him up, truly. It was just a hard thing to really process, and maybe Pidge was right — maybe he would figure it out and get used to how the whole socialite lifestyle worked, but it wasn’t going to happen overnight, and certainly not in the ten dobosh they had left in the carriage. At the end of the day, at least for now, their support only managed to soften what was an otherwise a stabbing source of nervousness in his gut.

His eye was drawn to window on the door while his friends chatted back and forth, and Lance found himself almost mesmerized by the sight of the city as it rolled past. It had been so long since he’d left the castle grounds, he’d almost forgotten how sprawling the capital actually felt when he wasn’t looking over the Prince’s balcony or from one of the many windows that lined the castle walls.

From up high, it was easy for perspective to change.

Gazing out the frosted pane of glass, Lance felt his cheeks start to hurt with the size of his spreading smile. So many faces, familiar and not, stopped to wave at them as they made a sightly procession down the uneven streets, heading towards the eastern city walls. Young, old, brown, white or anywhere in between, people stopped what they were doing and cheered, whistled, and sent huge smiles towards the stagecoach — did they know he was inside? Or were they merely demonstrating their solidarity for the Marmoran kingdom, celebrating their expulsion of the Galra from the capital after their failed attempt to take the castle?

Lance didn’t know, but he supposed, in a way, it didn’t really matter. The intricate symbol carved in the side of the carriage was the same, and Marmora was as much a part of him now as his home in the mountains had ever been. It was where he met Pidge and Hunk, where he’d found role models in Shiro and Adam; it was where he’d been attacked by a stranger, saved by a Princess, caught in an explosion, felt the petrifying fear of his slipping sanity in a dusty cellar surrounded by untouched wine. But, it was also where he’d learned how to sew with Moonie’s help, where he’d picked up the fine art of bargaining on market days, where he helped Nyma and Rolo skirt the authorities one too many times, and where he’d won Kaltenecker.

It was where he felt, for the first time, like maybe there was truth to the stories his Mamá used to tell him. He learned, somewhere along the way, that most children were told fairytales growing up, but Lance and his siblings almost exclusive heard the old legends of the sky. All of the blessings of the gods passed on to them by his father’s old, old faith. There was one story in particular, of a place that
translated into something close to the *everdark* — a place that was, always, constantly, cloaked in ebony darkness. Mamá told them that it wasn’t a place to fear, but it was the most beautiful place in the universe, because it was where light was born.

Despite his Mamá’s reassurances, the idea used to terrify him. Who would ever want to find such a place? Why would such a place even exist?

Well, Lance had found it, just not in the way he’d ever thought. It wasn’t sensory emptiness, but a total overwhelming opposite, too much and not enough for him at the same time. That place, the *everdark*, was one he found in a person — someone who didn’t only bring night with their mind and head and heart, but someone who painted his skies with stars.

Marmora was where he met Keith.

Stupid, impulsive, angry, *annoying*, Keith.

Keith, whose dark eyes and messy hair reminded him of the sky at midnight, and whose smile was more brilliant than every constellation he’d ever memorized. Who made an embarrassing, heartfelt speech to, like, a *thousand* people, saying that he loved Lance and wanted to fucking *marry* him. Christ, who *does* that?

“*Buddy, we’re here.*” Hunk nudged him lightly in the ribs, and Lance snapped to attention. Shit. That went by faster than he realized.

Stepping out of the carriage, he touched down on a familiar path that led up to a familiar house, because that’s all this place had ever been.

*Familiar.* Not intimate, not welcoming, not *his*.

It was, at best, a home by proxy, because he had lived with people who had called this place a home, but it had never felt of home to him.

He didn’t gaze upon the sloping architecture of the classic Altean design with any lingering sense of warmth and comfort, like flipping through the dogearred pages of a well-loved book, the exterior coated with a film of dust. There was no nostalgic relief, no gut punch of guilt for not having continued to read it, front to back, cover to cover, to have lived and breathed the narrative of escape.

He didn’t feel some magnanimous sense of *completeness* for having come here. If anything, Lance simply felt exhausted. That was how he always felt when he lived here, and remembering those times only served to draw him thinner and thinner, set his nerves off in long-instilled warnings and lessons and expectations.

Unconsciously, he straightened his posture, just like he always would.

“Okay, bud, let’s go.” Hunk urged him along. “Sooner we can get you back to the castle, right?”

“Yeah, right.” Inhaling, he tried to will his heart to slow, lightning-quick in the rolling storm that had manifested in his chest. “I just — I’m nervous, you know? This is… a lot.”

“You’ll be okay. Honestly, do you think I would have been able to stand letting you come down here if I *didn’t* have every confidence that you’d be okay? You got this, Lance. I know you do.”

Hunk clapped him swiftly on the shoulder, and Pidge prodded between his shoulder blades.

“Let’s goooooo.”
Walking up to the front door was ingrained in his movements, and he cast his gaze over the garden he’d been tending in the time since he’d left the house. With the onset of winter’s chill, along with that solitary snowcap they’d had, his vegetables and flower had wilted and curled in on themselves, sagging towards the soil with a weight that told of death.

He didn’t actually mind, though. In fact, a smile quirked at the corner of his lips, remembering his conversation with Princess Allura before things had gotten so out of hand; it was just part of the cycle, right? Living and dying, and giving and taking, and then giving back one last time before you’re returned to the flow of the world. The flowers he’d grown weren’t wasteful, as they’d go on to become nutrients that would bloom flowers anew in phoebs to come.

With that thought urging him forward, Lance set his jaw resolutely and approached the front door. He was a guest now; he would knock like a guest.

Vaguely, he wondered who would answer the door since he wasn’t around to do it. His answer came after such a long pause, he almost knocked again.

“Who’s — Tío Lance!!” Nadia launched herself from the ground and straight into his legs — if Hunk hadn’t been there to catch him, Lance very well might have toppled over with the force of her embrace. “Lance! Estás bien? Te e-extrañé?”

Laughing warmly, Lance dropped down to give her a proper hug, turquoise hair moped around in an utter mess. “Sí, niña, yo también te extrañé. Donde esta tu mamá y hermanas?”

“Uhhh…” She bit her lip as they drew apart, a look of deep focus on her face.

“Heh, that’s alright.” Lance smoothed back some of the flyaway hairs that had stuck up in her enthusiasm. “I’m proud of you for how much you’ve managed to remember. I asked where your mom and sisters are? I need to talk to them.”

She bounced on her heels, looking over her shoulder quickly with a pout. “Mom’s been in the study almost allllll day, but it’s getting sort of boring though cause she just sits there and looks at the fire. Uhh, Addie and Emmie I think are in their rooms.” In the same breath, Nadia jumped along with her stream of consciousness. “Oh, oh, are you here cause of all the stuff Prince Keith said? At his big speech thing? Mom didn’t let me go but people were all saying it’s because you and him are getting married. Is that really true, Tío? Did you and the Prince fall in love? Is he gonna come here and stay with us? You and him can take my room if you want.”

“Mmm. That’s a nice offer.” Lance booped her on the nose, earning a pleased little giggle. He heard Hunk chuckle from behind them. “Actually, it’s sort of the opposite… Prince Keith did ask me to marry him, and I said yes. So I’m actually going to be moving into the castle.”

She placed a hand on her hip, a skeptical brow hooked high into her hairline. “But if you move to the castle, won’t it be a long trip back and forth all the time to come home to clean and make dinner?”

“Ah, well, that’s the thing.” Pursing his lips, Lance chose his words carefully. “I’m not really going to be coming back here anymore. Your Mom will have to find someone else to clean and help around the house now. Come on, let’s go inside and we can talk more, maybe with your Mom to help answer questions.”

Her aquamarine eyes had turned wide with confusion, and Lance used the opportunity to poke at her ribs. Tickles might have been a cheap tactic to get her moving, but Lance didn’t have all day; within ticks, she was squealing with delight and playful terror at his prodding and poking, confusion forgotten with a wave of euphoric giggles.
And then, whip-sharp, an angry voice snapped through the momentary peace.

“Nadia! What is going on, why is the door — oh.”

Kneeling on the doorstep, Lance looked up a staircase that he’d spent weeks of his life cleaning, locking eyes with the chilled-tip daggers of his Aunt Hira’s glare. She stood at her towering height at the top stair, a gown of unquestionable refinement glittering beneath the overhead crystals, her magenta hair pushed out of her face, which had been fixed with a frown. As ever, the woman was a poised picture of intimidation and elegance — it was like a facsimile of the nights he’d spent in the ballroom, that tactile, unapologetic sense of *ownership* seeping into the air itself.

In a way, it was more appropriate for her than it had been for any of the others.

“Hi, Aunt Hira.”

Consciously, he was aware that to call her *Aunt* was no longer accurate nor necessary, but it was a habit ingrained in him by decaphoebics of conditioning.

“Hi’s you,” she said, not lacking in her usual disappointment.

“Momma, Cousin says it’s true! He’s marrying the Prince and they’re in love and — ” Nadia began to skip up the stairs towards her mother, but stopped speaking about halfway up when her mother sent the girl a chilling look. “Momma?”

The ice in her expression thawed, and she met Nadia halfway down the steps. Aunt Hira tucked a strand of hair behind her daughter’s ear, and much more softly, instructed, “Honey, go to Emely’s room. I need to talk to your cousin in private.”

“Oh. Um, okay.” She nodded, glancing over her shoulder with a wide grin. “Don’t leave without saying bye!”

Smiling, Lance waved as she started to climb the stairs, walking into the foyer proper. Behind him, Hunk and Pidge hovered, and he turned to glance over his shoulder.

“Can you guys wait outside with Ilun? If I need you I’ll —”

“No worries, man.” Hunk nodded, already closing the door. He sent Lance a warm, supportive smile; Pidge hadn’t taken her eyes off his aunt on the staircase, a dangerous flickering taken to her bright eyes.

Staring at his hands for a moment, Lance tried to think of what to say, how to begin. Or, perhaps more aptly, how to end — surely she would be as relieved as he was, to be rid of him? His heart was beating a little too quickly for words to form, instead all of his half-nervous habits rearing their unwelcome heads. Grinding his jaw, standing statue-still, averting his eyes as he numbered the tiles around his feet — all things that had been normal to him such a short time ago.

Lance was startled from his frustrated silence when a shadow fell over him, and he realized Aunt Hira had come the rest of the way down the stairs and was standing in front of him. His head was bowed, and the gesture now felt much more submissive than he had intended it to be.

He inhaled deeply through his nose, and on the exhale, looked up.

“And what exactly are you doing here?” she asked, quietly, when it appeared that Lance had nothing to say.
“I — I came for my stuff.” Lance cleared his throat, willing himself not to shut down. “And to say goodbye to the girls.”

Her lip twitched, the reaction one he recognized. The beauty mark on her upper lip always curled up with her lip when she was going to say something cruel.

Lance’s muscles tightened reflexively, bracing himself.

“Is that all?” It was spoken like a question, but it didn’t really feel like one.

Aunt Hira did not ever really look at him, in all the decaphoebs he’d lived here. She saw through him, like his transparent self was an apparition that merely stood to obscure her from better things.

And, gods, if Lance didn’t want to hate her in that moment.

He wanted to hate this house and all that had happened here. He wanted to break the lock on the cellar door and smash all the glasses in the basement until his hands were bloody and the wine would stain every crevice in that pitch-colored nightmare. His fingers itched and his legs shook with the force of his inertia, fighting to keep from running and giving in to every impulse of violence that surged through him.

Lance wanted to hate her, but hating her wouldn’t give him this part of his life back. It wouldn’t stop him from getting sick at the thought of drinking wine or of feeling the ache in his bones of the hours spent cleaning the place, floor-to-ceiling.

Hating her wouldn’t give him anything, besides maybe some small, dark sense of satisfaction, but that’s never been who Lance wanted to be. He didn’t want to be the monster that she was, wouldn’t let her turn him into that.

There may be strength in holding on, in fighting for your last word and final breath.

“No.”

But there is love in letting go.

“That’s it.” Lance forced his voice not to waver. “I don’t want to take up anymore of your time.”

His aunt’s gaze turned needle-sharp, and Lance could feel the hairs on the back of his neck raise in response. Instead of engaging, however, he swiftly stepped around her and marched towards the staircase that would lead him to the kitchen, where he’d been sleeping for four decaphoebs. The house seemed to ache for his presence, floors groaning and creaky in ways that he was unused to; it took him getting to the last step to realize it was because he was wearing a solid, reasonable pair of shoes. They were and old pair of Sir Adam’s which he’d just replaced a movement or so ago, and he insisted that Lance at least wear them until he could get some shoes of his own.

Rather than stepping over eggshells or out of the way of landmines, Lance felt as if he’d spent his whole time in Marmora walking over these very same marble, flawless floors in slippers fashioned from glass, where one wrong jolt would not only set off danger, but would shatter the world beneath him. The era of soft spoken words, well balanced duties, subtle and conscientious actions — not all things Lance was exactly known for — finally coming to an end.

It had been a long four decaphoebs, but he was here.

The thought had him smile gratefully down at the floor, wiggling his toes in the leather just enough that he could see them flex. He walked to his spot that he’d slept on for cold and hot nights alike,
looking in the exact same state he’d left it in the night he ran with Blue through the forest. It was disheveled, without a mattress, and so entirely his that it almost brought tears to his eyes.

His stained, stretched out shirts, patched and worn pairs of pants, folded thoughtlessly by his pillow. He bent down, chuckling as he pulled out the night cream he’d stolen from his aunt many moons ago. It was his solitary instance of cutpurse behavior, and he picked the product up and tucked it into his pocket without and ounce of regret. One-by-one, he gathered his things, so few they were able to fit in his arms in one trip. In one hand, he made sure to keep his grip tight on the letter from his family.

A laugh caught his attention from out the backdoor, and Lance’s headed out that way as he gathered the remainder of his things. Just as he had envisioned, around the corner where the stalls were set up, was his prized, precious girl. Kaltenecker. Lance shoved his stuff into Pidge and Hunk’s hands the tick that he spotted them, and dashed the rest of the way forward and wrapped his arms around the corded muscles of her neck.

“Mi vida, corazón,” he cooed, stroking her affectionately on the back of her head. The stable had its usual musty smell, particularly strong since he’d not been around to clean properly, but it didn’t stop him from nuzzling her with all the warmth he could muster. “Did you know you saved my ass, bebita? All you did was exist and be your beautiful self. And now we’re moving!”

Hunk laughed, the sound sunshine-bright in the muted morning air. “We’ll put this in the coach for you, if you want to try to get her into the delivery wain?”

“Thanks, guys.” Lance grinned, giving Kaltenecker one more squeeze before standing up properly. Pidge levied her load of Lance’s belongings towards Illun instead, who accepted them silently. She waved a hand when Lance looked prepared to ask what she was up to.

“Just going to do a once over the kitchen area to make sure you didn’t miss anything. Always smart to have a second set of eyes on this sort of thing, cause like hell am I coming back here.”

“Oh, good idea.” He began to move around the stable and gather the few things of Kaltenecker’s that would make sense to bring, lingering on the brush for the horses. He picked it up and gave her back a few quick dusts, and she made a noise of appreciation in response, but he decided to leave it for the girls (or, whoever it was that ended up being responsible for their messes).

After a bit of coaxing and some creative bargaining on Lance’s part involving a patch of stubbornly green grass, he managed to get Kaltenecker into the back just as Hunk, Illun, and Pidge reconvened on the main path leading down to the gate.

Pidge smirked as she balled up a dark, thick piece of fabric, almost as tall as she was, and tossing it to him. Lance had to smack his forehead for almost leaving it behind.

“Oh, shit. I forgot about this.” He took the cloak into his hands, marveling just as he had the first time at the positively unctuous quality of the fabric. It was like molten metal, soft and warm as it flowed around his fingers. Embarrassingly, Lance had to resist the urge to pull it closer to his face, to see if it smelled just as he remembered — that same smoky, sinful warmth mixed with the curling scent of pine in the back of his throat, the scent that he’d come to appreciate as so uniquely Keith that it almost had him blushing just to think about. It’s how the Prince’s… how their bed smelled, even if Keith hadn’t been in it in days.

On impulse, Lance threw it over his shoulders and secured the front around his neck, content instead to wrap himself up in the feeling and memory. Both his friends were grinning knowingly at him, but
“They didn’t poke fun — small miracle, coming from those two, Lance thought with a wry smile.

“Alright, I’m just going to say bye to the girls and we’ll go,” he said with a large breath, and Pidge nodded.

“Looks like they’ve actually come down,” she pointed towards the front door, and Lance turned to see she’d been speaking the truth. Emely and Adéla stood beside each other, Nadia sniffling and rubbing at her eyes in front of her big sisters.

Though he’d not loved his cousin’s company, they were never as bad as his aunt. He felt decidedly bittersweet, tagging on a smile for Nadia’s benefit as he approached.

Once he was about six or so paces away, he dropped to his knees and his littlest “cousin” ran to hug him, and he held her close.

“L-Lance, y-you really m-me-mean it? You’re l-leaving?” she blubbered, voice thick. It was almost painfully reminiscent of when he’d said goodbye to his family the first time. “B-But w-who is gonna b-brush my hair a-a… ‘nd play with me?”

A small hymn plucked on his heartstrings in response, a lament for the unfair heartbreak of this little girl. He wanted to shush her and reassure her like he had his nieces and nephews, but that would be as much of a lie now as it had been back then.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be back soon,” he had said back in Varadero four decaphoebs ago, not knowing how wrong he’d be.

Lance was older now. He knew better. Hira Valurian would make it a mission to make sure the two of them never crossed paths again.

He at least tried to be honest this time, quiet as he gave her a firm squeeze. “You’re a strong little fighter, you don’t need me to stand on your own two feet. You’ll always have your big sisters, too. They and your Mom love you and will take care of you, so don’t you worry.”

Just as he spoke, Lance felt another hand come to rest on his shoulder. He glanced up from where he’d been leaning into Nadia, surprised to see a soft smile on Emely’s face, her own cheek markings glowing faintly.

“You’ve been a wonderful help, Cousin. I’m… sorry.” She took back her hand, gazing at her palm with a sad smile. “For everything.”

Before he had the chance to respond, Adéla bowed her head, curtains of blonde, silk strands falling around her face. “I-I give my apologies too, cousin. I didn’t… there were times we should have treated you better. This doesn’t undo that, but, do know that I feel… remorse. I am sorry.”

“You’ve been a wonderful help, Cousin. I’m… sorry.” She took back her hand, gazing at her palm with a sad smile. “For everything.”

“Y-You guys,” Lance’s chest tightened with an urgency he found alarming, the unexpected and sincerity of their apologies knocking the wind from him. “I don’t know… I don’t know what to say.”

“W-Which is unusual, for you,” Emely joke, weakly. “You’re usually the one with no shortage of words.”

“Tío,” Nadia sniffled while the three older “cousins” shared a brief chuckle. “P-Promise you’ll come visit? Promise you won’t forget about us?”

“I could never forget you, niña,” Lance said, giving her a quick kiss on the forehead and gently unwinding her arms from his chest. “I don’t know about visiting, but never doubt for a second that
I’d never forget that beautiful smile. Okay?"

She seemed dissatisfied, and Lance sighed fondly.

“Come on, don’t send me off with that look on your face. One more smile, for me?”

With a frustrated furrow to her brow, Nadia pursed her lips and wrinkled her nose with the effort to fix her face, eventually landing on a toothy grin that was almost convincing. It hurt Lance’s heart a little bit, but for the most part, it was a nice way to say goodbye. Nicer than he had expected, considering what this place meant to him.

The girls filed back inside, and his aunt remained standing in the doorway. Head tilting slightly to one side, she examined him like one might a rodent caught in the corner of a pantry. Pidge made a noise that was concerningly similar to a growl.

“Forget it,” Lance waved his friend off, turning his back on the house and the hell he’d come to know there. “We’re done here.”

The ride back to the castle seemed to pass by significantly faster than the trek out.

The city seemed busier, somehow, but then perhaps that made sense; it was now midday, and the streets were crowded with people. The heavy preoccupation of his thoughts with his strange goodbye to the Valurian women, and his lack of a goodbye with his aunt, coupled with the bustling outside the carriage had him listless, and before he could so much as get comfortable he was already being called out of the carriage and stepping down into the courtyard. A chilly wind whipped around the ankles of the cloak, and Lance was once again thankful that Pidge had gone back and checked the house one more time.

He’d scarcely put his foot on solid ground before a guard was at his elbow. “Lord Lance, her Royal Majesty of Altea has requested your audience.”

“Oh,” he blinked, pulling back slightly to get a better look at the man. He was Altean, likely one of Allura’s personal guards, broad with thick cords of muscles. Not for the first time, Lance groused silently over how he’d gotten nearly nothing useful from his Altean heritage besides his markings and perhaps the blessings of an overall nice complexion; otherwise, he received none of the grace, inordinate strength, or magical properties inherent to some Alteans. Why’d he get stuck with the twiggy, lanky, awkward part of his human genetics?

The guard was looking at him expectantly, and Lance flinched when he realized he’d just been staring at the guy in silence. “Uh, sure. Of course. Right now?”

“No, she asks that you call upon her this evening, your Grace. Perhaps eight or nine.”

Somewhere behind him, Lance heard Pidge and Hunk cackle with delight at the use of his new title. He rolled his eyes and did his best to ignore them.

“Fine, I can do that. Should I meet her somewhere?”

The man gave Lance a patient smile. “No, Lord Lance. Someone will be sent to fetch you when it is time, but it is kind of you to offer.”

“Oh.” Lance thought for a moment and decided not to fight him on it, if only because the timing was so inexact. If it was going to closer to nine, he’d rather spend that time doing something more useful than just waiting around for Allura. “Okay.”
Epilogue: Form Voltron (Part 2)

Chapter Summary

The team formed Voltron, and they didn't even realize.

I may have arbitrarily split the epilogue into two chapters, because ending on 20 sounded nicer than 19. :) 

Chapter Notes

a final thanks to my dear friend e350tb in the Steven Universe fandom, who has been a huge pillar of emotional support through this entire process. I appreciate your friendship, your work as a writer, and your spirit as a human being. thanks for being the Hunk to my Lance. :) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes 

[KEITH]

Keith was very tired of burying people.

Today, he would bury Thace, Ulaz, Antok, and Regis.

As was tradition, the service was kept private to only active Blade members and the immediate families of those who died. They had already held the services for the military officers and soldiers.

Three days had passed, and the final body count was reported that morning.

Nineteen Marmorans had died. Thirteen of them were soldiers, and four of them were Blades. Two of his citizens were trampled.

Twenty-seven Galra were killed. Six Alteans, two Arusians, and thirty-five Olkari were all murdered in cold blood.

Almost a hundred people were injured in total, not including any of the wounded Galra that had fled.

But that was all three days ago, and the world moved stubbornly on, eighty-nine people fewer for it.

It was overcast, uncomfortably calm as they stood in the brisk morning. A small group had gathered around four fresh graves in the burial grounds for members of the Blade, for those who died during their service, spanning back generations. Ulaz and Regis both had families of their own, and Antok’s sister came to honor him. Thace was the only one left of his immediate line, so there hadn’t been anyone who had come for his sake; he died for his nation, and only a select few people would ever even know his name.
No one really likes watching someone be put in the ground, Keith supposed, but there was something especially dark that coiled in stomach that morning as he stared blankly at the four immaculate, newly fashioned headstones, wrought from polished obsidian. The castle mason was too good at his work, Keith decided, because these were much too clean, too perfectly carved, too nicely embellished with dates and letters. For all their sculptural beauty, they did nothing to even remotely capture the men that he had known, and the men that he had lost.

Keith couldn’t have cried if he wanted to, seeing as the twisting in his stomach was so uncomfortable it made him feel sick. If he had to think about death for one more day, he might throw up; this was already too much. It wasn’t like there was some sort of weight, guilt or responsibility or blame, that was pulling him down — quite the opposite, really. Instead, Keith felt empty. A cavern folding in on himself, like his body was starved but any sort of food would be come right back up if he tried to eat.

Keith did not know how to say goodbye to people, living or dead. Well, he knew physically how to, but not in any real sense of the word. After the death of the King, he’d resisted letting anyone get close enough so that these moments would happen less often. He hadn’t had to say goodbye to someone, not like this, in several years.

It bothered him that he couldn’t remember the last conversation he’d had with each of the four Blades. Keith knew it was silly, but he couldn’t help but wish that he’d taken the chance to catalogue the small things like that.

Kolivan and his Mother both spoke. Keith didn’t hear them.

*Honeycutt.*

*MacDonald.*

*Young.*

*Dugorium.*

*Thompson.*

*Guthrie-Stokes.*

*Conway.*

*Higgins*

*Brahm.*

*Neil.*

*Emerick.*

*Sufila*

*Wilkes.*

He took a deep breath.
Focus distant, his eyes traced the small details of the Marmoran crest on each of the headstones, perfectly jagged, pristinely unrefined. Knowledge or Death. At the top of each headstone, there was an outline of the basic shape of a knife, sans the hilt, hollowed out.

The ceremony concluded with a family member placing each Blade’s namesake, their luxite weapon, into the headstone. All four were identical, having reverted to the shape of simple knives with the connecting life-force severed between the body and the blade. The obsidian practically molded to the luxite, stone and metal sitting flush against the other, and each pommel turned brittle, easy enough to snap off — it was customary to pull them apart, and give the hilt to the family if they wanted to keep it as a momento.

The Prince had volunteered to place Thace’s blade in his tombstone, and he took the handle. After tucking it into his cloak, he thought he must be losing his mind — because, somehow, without the metal weighing it down, he swore the hilt of Thace’s severed blade felt much heavier than his own weapon, resting at his hip.

After the ceremony, the Prince and Queen went to visit Keith’s father. The catacombs were predictably cold and too bright, adorned by the familiar lavender lights that were ubiquitous of Marmoran design stretching far into the mountain tunnel. A hall of dead, the room was quiet except for their muted footfalls over the smooth stone passage.

Neither of them said anything, not even when they stopped in front of the raised stone bed that displayed his father’s name. The Queen stepped forward and rested her hand over the script engraved on the front display, and the Prince watched the action with quiet pause.

He could have been burying his mother today, could be visiting both she and the King in this subterranean, unwelcoming home of his ancestors.

His Mother could be visiting both father and son right now — that mental image sent off a pang in him that was somehow even more evocative, more emotionally gut-wrenching, than the alternative. Maybe it was the look on her face, just now, that he could see as she kept her gaze trained to Dad’s grave. Her yellow eyes were narrowed and lips flat, inscrutable to most, her brow furrowed. To someone who did not know her well, it could have been mistaken for thoughtfulness, but Keith knew better. She executed the appearance of extreme focus when emotional, and while it was not an expression worn by the woman often, it was unmistakably one of grief.

Keith felt like he could handle dying, but if there was any sort of afterlife waiting for him, he’d surely suffer with the knowledge of leaving his mother alone.

He could be like Allura, struggling through a political nightmare outside of the comfort of his own country, trying to handle the ascension to the throne while grieving the loss of family. His castle could have fallen; he could have lost Marmora, could have lost all of his people and his soldiers and his Blades.
He could have lost *Lance*.

And he knew — gods, he *knew* — that it could have been a dozen times — fuck it, a *hundred* times worse. He knew the realm *needed* him, that he didn’t have time to *shut down*... but, even so, all Keith really wanted was to just be *angry*.

Gods.

Fists clenched, he glared at his own boots. Spotless. He’d never cleaned his boots once in his damn life.

And there was just still so much to do. No end to this in sight. So many apologies, hands to shake, letters to write, and comfort to lend while people asked him questions and relied on him to lead. It was of the utmost importance that now, of all times, Keith remain level-headed and focused, to be considerate and strategic on how to handle national security and the renewed push for Olkarion relief efforts.

There wasn’t enough time and there was never enough resources — he couldn’t be eighteen and fiancé and friend, and at the same time be Prince and Blade and Commander and Paladin. Maybe he was being immature or selfish, but for fucking once, he didn’t really care. Keith felt *robbed* of the opportunity to even grieve, to let himself be a *person* for longer than five minutes, to even pretend to have something to celebrate in terms of his own survival. How was he supposed to celebrate living when it was draining the life out of him to go on like this?

Stupid. Stupid fucking responsibilities. Stupid fucking Zarkon, and Lotor, and that witch.

For Keith, he could only look forward, but that wasn’t where he wanted to go. His fingers twitched towards the base of Thace’s blade in his cloak.

While Keith couldn’t say for certain what he really wanted, he was certain that he didn’t want this. Keith didn’t want to visit the place where he would be buried someday, to think about death anymore, to remember how fucking much it hurt when they had to go through mourning the first time, when they lost his Dad. It never even really felt like it ended, just softened by degrees, a broken bone that was never set properly. Even after the “closure” of putting the lid on his empty tomb, the whole display was a farce, he knew. It’s not like there was even a body to be found inside.

The entire fucking thing was a *show* and Keith just wanted something to feel *real* for once.

Even mourning didn’t actually feel like grieving. There was a schedule, appearances, order, *regiment* to the whole thing. He had to wear certain things to display certain emotions, all while being instructed *not* to show his emotions. Prince Keith was permitted to feel sadness for those who had died, so long as it was convenient to the schedule laid out for him.

*Fuck* that.

Fuck everything, honestly.

Gods, he just didn’t want this right now. He didn’t want to be here, even with his Mother, for all he loved her. She was insufferable in grief, because she had to be just as cold and reserved as ever. Even here. Even when it was just the two of them.

If Keith was being selfish, honest, and *real*, just for a moment, what he *really* wanted was longer than five minutes. Maybe a cozy night in his bed, or laughing in the forest, or counting stars, so bright it was as if he could pull each one out of the sky from his balcony. Was that wrong? Maybe. That’s part of the reason he was fucking angry in the first place. Why was it fucking *wrong* for him
to want something else?

Because, contrary to what everyone wants to believe, people don’t just die, and then you just move on. People die, and they stay dead, and that stays with you. Even if you act like a composed adult and you put the past in the past where it rightly belongs, the fact that they’re gone remains constant — in the empty spaces, vacant chairs, the people who move into your life and take their titles and their duties.

No one is ever truly gone; all absence becomes a part of you.

These crypts were evidence enough of that, and the compounded weight of the crown atop his brow felt so heavy Keith was genuinely surprised he was still standing. The rulers before him might all be dead and gone, but they wore the crown with him, through him. It felt creepy and uncomfortable, not at all reassuring like he guessed it was meant to.

There was a lot Keith had been preparing for, when he turned eighteen. He’d expected they’d start working on plans for his coronation sometime for the coming spring or summertime, depending on how the dates fell with their allies and the obligations the crown had to other factions in Marmora. He expected to take more of an active role in the political discussions at the council table, the long-standing, silent terror of having to take on more of his mother’s daily responsibilities finally coming to claim him. It was a fear, truly, because as twined together the crown was to his mother’s mortality, Keith had to accept the weight not only of her responsibilities, but of her eventual, inevitable death.

He wasn’t ready, not even with all his mental or physical preparedness accounted for. These past few days had taught him that much.

And that’s to say nothing of the things Keith could never have prepared for, the things that weren’t supposed to happen to him — actually wanting to live out his future, thinking about marriage in any capacity beyond obligation? Never saw it coming.

Falling in love?

Gods, no. Talk about a backhand from reality.

But Prince Keith wasn’t in a position to think twice about anything. Decisions were decisions and he was the one making so many of them — if he had to think twice, he might come apart. And it was better for everyone if he didn’t come apart, so he didn’t. Simple as that.

Stop being worried about fixing problems that haven’t even happened yet.

It was one of the few threads of sense that kept him on his feet these days. Everything felt like it was blurring around him, falling into place or apart too fast, and the only thing he had to catch his breath on was the tiny platform of the five minutes he had a day.

It wasn’t for another few more minutes that the Queen decided they should head back. She pulled her hand back from the stone, a smile in her tone when she said, “See you, Texas.”

She hovered towards the opposite side of the aisle, stopping in front of the burial site of her parents — two grandparents Keith never met — and he decided to wait for a moment to give her the time she needed.

Eventually, the woman tossed a tired grin his way. “Alright. Ready?”

With that, she led him back towards the outside world, to face the harsh chill of winter once again. Red stood, still as a statue, measuring him with a look; if she was trying to tell him something, Keith
figured she could probably be less cryptic than to look at him, so he shrugged it off and just hopped in the saddle.

He kicked her up into a trot that didn’t last very long, soon gaining speed into a full-on gallop, wind whipping in the electric-surged air, tingling his cheeks and causing his fingers to cramp from the chill, not minding the ache for a second. Riding was the most freeing experience Keith had ever known, and it was something he dearly missed in the crowded rooms full of old political strategists or councillors. It was the one thing that drove his heart rate up with exhilaration and confidence and carelessness; the one thing Keith knew he could get right every time, no fear of failure. They weren’t far away from the main gatehouse, so it wasn’t a long ride. Still, it was enough to feed into his adrenaline, just a bit, like taking the edge off a permanent migraine.

Speaking of headaches, Shiro was waiting for him at the stables, a small smile on his face at Keith’s breathless expression as he slowed their pace. The knight glanced at his watch before looking up at Keith.

“You’re due for a visit with —”

“Adam, I know,” Keith finished, sighing as he lifted himself out of Red’s saddle. A stable hand approached and took the reins from him, moving back towards the stalls automatically. Keith caught one more glimpse of his mare before moving inside, and she was behaving with… an unusual amount of calm, considering she was ornery on a good day.

It was expected of him to check in with Adam every few hours, and any structure to his day had to surround that fact. (Well, he didn’t have to check in with Adam, any doctor would have worked, but he preferred Adam.)

“I’m starting to think you’re only guarding me again so you can sneak in time to see your husband,” Keith noted as they entered the castle.

Shiro laughed. “No, I happened to want to actually spend time with you, since I’ll be leaving early in the morning.”

Oh, right. Keith had forgotten about that.

He also wasn’t about to let Shiro off that easily. “And that just happens to align with the fact that I have to see Adam?”

“Maybe.”

“So you admit it?” Keith asked with a snort.

Shiro kept his expression neutral, which was how Keith knew he was full of shit. “I didn’t admit to anything.”

They were climbing the stairs now, the halls and stairwell noisy with activity. Nothing like a hundred injured and nearly as many dead to stir things up, the Prince thought wryly.

“You’re a bad liar, Shiro,” he said, shaking his head. “You couldn’t keep a secret if it killed you.”

“Hey, I take offense to that,” the older man said, though the playful lilt to his tone suggested he really didn’t mind. “I have managed to keep lots of secrets from you, your Highness.”

Keith grinned. “Oh yeah? Name one.”
“Nice try, but no.” The knight sighed good-naturedly and led the way to Adam’s office. The moment they stepped into the infirmary, all those who had the ability rushed to stand, and Keith was swift to react.

“Please, as you were. No need to exert yourselves while recovering,” he directed, and the faces around the room all smiled and nodded gratefully, some of them greeting and thanking him verbally.

The momentary kindness was nice, if not a little awkward, so Keith just nodded and headed towards the back of the room, and Adam was opening the door to his office before the Prince even had the chance to knock.

“Good morning, your Highness,” he said, stepping aside to allow Keith entrance. His arm stopped Shiro in the doorway. “Oh, and hello, Sir Shirogane. Did you need something?”

Shiro pouted. “Adam, I thought we talked about this —”

In a clipped tone, the doctor replied, “Yes. We did, only just this morning, in fact. I have to look over the Prince now, so, if you’ll excuse me.”

The door snapped into place with a quick click, and Shiro’s frustrated grimace could be seen through the little window. Adam made a shoo gesture, and Keith watched the Head of the Guard disappear from view.

The Prince rubbed his hands together, unsure if he should say something. “Uhh…”

Adam saved him the trouble, taking off his glasses and pinching the corners of his eyes in a look of exasperation. “Sorry about that, kid. Please, sit down. Armor and shirt off, too, I need to check your shoulder.”

“R-Right, sure,” Keith cleared his throat, doing as he was told as Adam pulled on a pair of gloves and gathered some familiar tools and that damned antiseptic cleanser.

Only once the knight turned his focus back to the Prince did he crack a small, familiar grin, and he began to remove the existing bandages.

“So, I’m sure you’re wondering what that was about…” Adam hummed to himself, deciding on the right words. “Kashi’s just a bit of a dumbass sometimes.”

Keith considered that piece of insight for a moment.

“Well… yeah.”

Laughing, Adam pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose with the crook of his arm, preparing the antiseptic. Keith grit his teeth, bracing himself for the now-familiar burn of the raw skin surrounding his shoulder.

“I actually don’t have a good reason to be mad at him, he’s just doing his job,” Adam admitted. “But he volunteered to be the Altean’s and Olkari’s escort since the night of the battle, apparently, but he only just thought it was important to tell me this morning. You know, being his husband and all, I figured I would be a little higher on his priority list to notify.”

“Oh. Shit, I’m sorry, I could try to see if —” Keith hadn’t even thought about the strain this might put on their relationship, but Adam took that exact moment to press the burning antiseptic into his shoulder, effectively cutting him off with a hiss of pain.
The man clicked his tongue. “Your Highness, do not apologize. You have enough on your plate without worrying about my marriage. Like I said, Takashi is just doing his job. I knew what I signed up for when I married him, I was just… frustrated. With him, not that he volunteered to go, but that he decided it wasn’t important enough to clue me in on until the day before. I don’t like being mad at him, but I’m also not ready to talk to him without getting angry.”

“I… okay… that’s fair.” Keith exhaled once the cleaning portion was over, trying to force his muscles to relax to better accommodate the bandaging. “Actually, it’s a bit of a relief, I appreciate how… blunt you are. It’s refreshing. Shiro’s honest with me too, but he’s sort of…” Keith made a face, and Adam snorted. “I know.”

The doctor made quick work of wrapping his shoulder and collected the remaining supplies. He instructed Keith put his shirt back on before moving on to check the shallow wound running down his cheek and into his neck.

After perhaps a minute, Adam spoke again. His tone had shifted, suggesting a change in subject.

“Shiro’s mentioned to you that we’re thinking about adopting?”

Keith blinked, fixing his gaze on the physician, but the man was preoccupied with his examination and didn’t look up.

“Yeah,” Keith answered, trying not to move too much while Adam did his thing. “He’s mentioned it. Awhile back, anyway.”

A pause.

“I got a letter yesterday from a family we inquired with a little while ago.” The ghost of a smile began to shadow the man’s expression. “I think we might have found a little girl.”


“Shiro doesn’t know yet, because gods know he can’t keep a secret.”

Keith had to resist the urge to laugh, not wanting to interrupt or accidentally bump his face into Adam’s probing fingers, so he simply bit back a grin.

“I try not to clue him in on these sorts of things until we arrange to actually meet the child — too many of these have fallen through in the early stages, and even those break his heart. The one where we actually met the kid and still didn’t… I don’t want to put him through that again.” Adam let out a small laugh, barely more than a puff of air, but Keith could hear the genuine, saccharine sweet happiness in his voice. It sounded of relief, an effortless, wholesome sound; a breeze through a tunic on a clothesline in the summertime, it was a sound of simpler times than they found themselves in.

“But based off the letter I got, I think this one might work out. I have a good feeling, you know? They’ll be in the Capital in about a fortnight, so…” Adam leaned back, grinning in earnest. “You may just be an uncle in a few weeks.”

Keith opened his mouth, but closed it again. An uncle. The word was very… domestic. He wasn’t sure why, exactly, but it made the space between his ribs swell with feeling. It’s not like he was even very good with children, but he didn’t dislike them. The news just struck him in an odd way, like a well-played song on and out of tune instrument. The notion was… so strange. It was good.

It felt like there was nothing anymore that didn’t come with strings attached, which was why, ever the eloquent speaker, he responded, “Huh.”
Shaking his head back into focus, Keith cleared his throat and tried again. “I-I mean, that’s amazing news. Really, congratulations. I feel there hasn’t been enough good news lately.”

“You and me both, your Highness. We’ll see how it works out. Also, you’re all set,” he added the last part with a gesture towards the door, so Keith stood up and put back on the breastplate to his Marmora uniform. “Needless to say, let’s not clue in Takashi just yet, if you don’t mind?”

Rolling his eyes, because — duh — Keith began to head towards the door, but stopped when Adam called out to him again.

“Oh, I almost forgot, the next time you see Lance, can you tell him to come see me?”

Keith barely managed not to wince. “What? I mean, yes, but… is he… okay?”

Now Adam was the one to roll his eyes. “Of course he’s okay, wouldn’t you be the one to know that? I just didn’t get to thank him for his help yesterday before he and Hunk disappeared.”

When Keith proceeded to stare blankly back, Adam hooked a brow. “Wait, didn’t he tell you? Well, no, don’t answer that — I can tell by your face that’s a hard ‘no.’”

Sighing, he walked around the Prince and held the door to his office open, gesturing for him to go first. Once they stepped back into the infirmary, Adam nodded at the many still-occupied beds. “As much as I love my job, we were definitely not staffed to handle the amount of patients we’ve seen in the past few days, and since I’ve been doing surgeries nonstop, things have been hectic. I have all my staff working 12-hour shifts, basically. But, it’s been made a little easier with some people who have volunteered. Pidge and Hunk who have been helping to streamline the outpatient transfer process to the city clinic, and Lady Romelle and Lance have both been sticking around the fifth-floor, talking to patients and families who haven’t been discharged or aren’t in a state to be transferred. Sometimes they’re both here for hours. I figured you knew.”

“I — I didn’t.” Keith’s throat closed up. “I had no idea.”

“Keith,” Adam sighed, needing no further words. The disappointment was obvious from his tone.

Keith scrunched his nose and shot a glare in Adam’s direction. “I know, okay?”

“When was the last time you slept?”

The fact that Keith had to think about the answer to that question was alarming to both of them.

“I mean, I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, but I still am.” Adam mused, mostly to himself. “Don’t be like Takashi, listen to him when you actually have the chance to talk him. I imagine you’ve got a lot on your mind. He deserves that much, at least.”

“I — y-yeah,” he tried to choke down the lump in his throat. “Okay. Right.”

The man sighed, turning away before his husband had the chance to strike up another conversation, but he did offer the Prince one more fleeting smile before turning into his office once again.

A smile felt like more than Keith deserved right now, because, Lance deserved so much fucking better, it actually physically hurt for Keith to think about how unfair this was to him.

Fuck.

“Ready?” Shiro asked, frowning after his husband’s closed office door.
“No,” Keith shot back, bitterly, but he started walking anyways. He had nowhere else to go but forward.

It did not escape him that Lance did not hunt him down yet today. Maybe he was tired of Keith’s shit; gods know Keith would be if it were him.

The remainder of the Prince’s day whipped by, a steady stream of near-numbness, listening and responding with practiced, mechanical ease. He had with a marathon of minor council sessions and two separate war caucuses, along with independent appointments: the Master of Foreign Affairs, which resulted in for an added battalion each at the primary entry points along the western borders, followed by the Blade’s Domestic Intelligence faction, a lengthy conversation with Arus’s royal family on how to manage the affairs of displaced Olkarion peoples, which were surely going to be many in the coming months, and a quick rundown of the current economic stability of coin, both domestic and abroad.

Keith had some combination of a lunch and dinner while he saw off the Commanders for their various assignments. In the morning, Commander Holt and Matt were being dispatched to Olkarion, due to the intimate involvement their family had with Ryder, along with a transfer of Sanda out to the western holdings. She, along with her soldiers, were to act as a first line of defense in the event of movement across the border. Iverson would remain in the capital to coordinate domestic affairs, and Shiro, Head of the Guard, was seeing off the Alteans and act as a partial escort to the Olkari until the two camps split up north.

The stars were coming out by the time Keith had a chance to breathe again, but even that was short-lived. Shiro was in step with him, glancing up as the moon arrived to banish the sun for another evening.

He did his best to sound casual when he asked, “Have you seen Lance today?”

“Oh, right, he asked me to tell you. Ah sorry, my brain these days.” The knight smacked himself on the forehead. “Too much going on all at once. Anyway, he, Hunk and Pidge went to the Valurians early today to get his cow and any of his things. They were trying to figure out where the best place to keep, er, Kaltenecker is, since the castle doesn’t have its own livestock.”

“Oh.” Keith wanted the ground to open up and swallow him whole. He didn’t know — he didn’t know anything about what Lance was doing during the day. Why was he so selfishly single-minded to think that Lance would wait to find him all day, and that he couldn’t have been busy doing his own thing? Gods, he should at least be briefed on this sort of thing, right? It’s not like he doesn’t get enough fucking briefings in the day.

Shiro was still talking, Keith realized after a moment.

“—chaplain for services… would you like to do it before or after the briefing from the scouting party along the western rivers?”

It took several seconds for Keith’s very tired brain to catch up with the fact that Shiro had asked him a question. “Uhh, after, I guess.”

As they entered the castle, Shiro cleared his throat. “By the way, I meant to ask you, did Adam…?”

“I’m not touching that, Shiro.” Keith cut him off, a hand raised to signify he stop while he was ahead. “Your marriage is your problem.”

Just as Shiro let out a huff, halfway through a retort, a voice interrupted their conversation. Both of
them turned to glance behind them, spotting an Altean guard, dark-skinned and tall, jogging to catch up with them.

“Sir Shirogane, your Royal Highness, my sincerest apologies to disturb your evening.”

Keith had to stop himself from yawning. “What is it?”

“Her Royal Majesty of Altea has requested to see the both of you. She apologizes for such short notice, but was hoping the both of you might spare a few dobosh of your busy schedules.”

Keith blinked, surprised. For as busy as he’d been, the Prince knew that Allura must have been under comparably taxing constraints with her own political and social affairs to sort out — so for her to ask to meet outside of a scheduled appointment? The hour was growing later and their morning departure growing nearer. Who knows when they might see each other again, after today? Who knows if they might see each other, ever again, if the violence of recent days were indicative of the sort of future they both had in store?

“Oh, yes, of course.”

Keith gestured for the Altean — he would later learn his name was Rassar — to lead the way. His footfalls were heavy yet precise as he led them down the dark passageways of the basement levels. As fate would have it, neither he nor Shiro were stopped by anyone for just a “quick second of his time,” which in itself felt like a godsend.

Keith recognized the path they were taking after they started into the underground levels; they were heading towards the same room he had met Allura in before, when they cleared the air about their betrothal, each admitting their feelings for… well, for each of their own now-fiancés, in fact.

Odd, how some things work out, and others don’t. Keith was very grateful for this one thing that did.

Following the path to him was natural as breathing, but Keith could easily see someone getting turned around down here. Servants passages that led nowhere, doors that were hardly visible against the walls, short hallways followed by curving ones followed by more doors and more passageways. It wasn’t entirely functional from a utilitarian perspective, but three generations or so ago this had been the area of the castle reserved for the Blades. The architecture surely reflected some amount of the inherent difficulty that came with a paranoid network of spies.

As they neared the door in question, Keith noticed that it was open, a thin slit of orange light pouring into the dark hallway. The triangle of inviting warmth brought with it voices, the sounds of laughter and people talking amongst one another. Shiro met his eye, and the pair shared a doubtful glance, but Rassar seemed unphased.

Keith was prepared to grab his blade, just in case, but a distinct, soothing voice caught his attention, head snapping up like a wolf who’d gotten the scent of blood on the wind.

“...just took his time with the nets, and I almost got dragged in!” The syllables were broken by the force of laughter. “I swear, I saw my life flash before my eyes at least six times that day.”

Keith was near enough to see through the crack in the entryway, and — as if he hadn’t known from the voice alone — his heart did a leap when he spotted Lance sitting at a table in the center of the room. He was seated at a perpendicular angle to the door, giving Keith a perfect view of his profile, the gentle slope of his nose and bright shine of one of his eye scales.

Seated across from him, Allura laughed. There was a sunken, almost papery quality to her usually glittering skin, like a woman who’d failed to sleep, but the sound of her amusement was not lacking
in any of its usual brightness.

“Oh Oriande, what a disaster! Did you all end up catching anything?”

“Yeah, thankfully, my brother Luis saw the net and jumped on it at the last second.” Lance let out a
breathy sigh, elbow propped on the table and head resting on his open palm. “I feel like my life is
one continuous close call after another.”

In hindsight, Keith can acknowledge that it would have been a really good opportunity to compose
himself, or think of something nice to say, or to figure out how to properly apologize for vanishing
for several days. All of that would have been great, but he was so fucking tired and he’d missed that
laugh so much; the moment he caught sight of that smile, split ear to ear, eyes turned up at the
corners, Keith all but knocked Rassar out of the way and ripped the door off the hinges with how
suddenly he threw it open.

Fuck five minutes. His instincts were practically shouting at him to kiss his fucking fiancé, and fuck
it. Keith was intent on doing just that.

If he were being honest, his entrance was not very graceful. His stride was rushed without the weight
of death that was enough to try the patience of a saint tethering him to the goddamn ground for the
first time in literal days. There were other people around, and Shiro was still somewhere behind him,
but Keith didn’t even notice. Lance leapt in his chair, eyes blown wide in surprise, just as Keith sank
into the open seat beside him. He did not waste another second, tiling Lance’s chin and pulling him
into a kiss.

Soft, cool lips met his own, first surprised, but then melting into the sweetest thing Keith could
imagine, a gentle smile tugging at the corners of the mouth pressed against his, the tiniest of sighs
exhaling into the space where their lips met.

It wasn’t grand or poetic, wasn’t heated or filled with romance or sweeping anyone off anyone else’s
feet. It was just a message, a I just really fucking missed you sort of kiss, a I skipped breakfast
everyday so I could sneak by to check on you, because I don’t know what I would do if something
happened to you sort of kiss, I’ve wanted to do this every morning but you’re so pretty when you’re
sleeping and I couldn’t wake you up sort of kiss.

It was quick, barely longer than a breath, but it was exactly what he needed, everything he could
have asked for — more than he could have hoped for, considering he’d seen Lance more than a
dozen times and lived for the minutes Lance would find him.

When he pulled back, Lance was just as wide-eyed as he’d been when Keith essentially barged in,
but his shock had quirked into something so adorable that Keith honestly had to resist kissing him
again.

Cheek marks faintly glowing aquamarine, Lance said, “Hi, your Highness.”

“Hi.” Keith sat back in his chair properly, turning to face the room and to attend to whoever was
actually around them.

Across the table, Allura roughly cleared her throat. “Ah, well, hello Prince Keith. I would normally
thank you for joining us, but you seem rather eager to be here.”

Hunk and Pidge, who he noticed for the first time seated around the side of the table, both laughed at
the Princess’s teasing. Keith couldn’t find it in himself to even mind.

The seat beside of him scraped dully against plush carpeting as Shiro plunked down beside him. He
proceeded to greet everyone like a decent human being. “Hello, your Majesty, Sir Coran. And hi, Hunk, Pidge, Lance.”

They all murmured some form of greeting, and the Princess smiled at their gathering. Sir Coran was standing behind her, his mustache twitching in a familiar, anticipatory sort of way — one Keith hadn’t seen for several days, when they would cross in the hallways or set down at delegation tables. The Princess’s own blue-lilac eyes seemed brighter, flecks of purple catching in the light from the fireplace as she swept her gaze over all of them.

“Alright, now that we’re all here and settled,” she began, lifting her palms from her lap and revealing —

“What the hell are those mice?!” Hunk practically screeched, flailing back in his seat and knocking into Pidge.

Beside him, Lance inhaled, a sort of hum beneath the sound, almost a mix of shock and excitement.

“Hey! It’s you guys!” he leaned far over the table until his chin touch the table top, hands reaching out. Four mice, unnaturally colored, all ran over and began sniffing his hands, jumping or running circles over his fingers.

“Um… friends of yours?” Shiro asked, looking uncomfortably between the Alteans. Keith simply watched Lance play with the mice, a small smile on his face. If it was almost anyone else, he would have wondered, what in the entire fuck, but that was basically the status quo with all-things-Lance anyways.

Smiling, the Princess leaned forward over the table and held her hands open as one of the mice scurried back to her, and she began to idly scratch behind their ears.

“You could call them friends, I suppose. They were caught up in the magic of the Blue Paladin when Lance first underwent one of the watch’s transformations. Somehow, their quintessence stayed sort of… modified, you could say. Enhanced might be a better word. In any event, I can understand them, and they seem to like Lance quite a bit by now. They’re friendly, so don’t worry.”

Pidge, who had taken to shoving Hunk back into his own seat, exhaled a breath of relief as the larger teen sat up, eyeing the mice warily.

“Anyway, they’ve been around since the start of all this, so it only seemed fitting that they be here for the end.”

At that, the room stilled, quieted. The mice chittered happily, one of them running up Lance’s arm while another chased after it, but no one spoke for the Princess’s words had struck them silent. There was a heavy finality to the moment that sat uncomfortably in Keith’s stomach.

After a beat of silence, the Princess continued, her voice steady. “First, I apologize for not planning this properly. Things have been… hectic. I’m sure you all know by now, but to let us all begin with a clear slate, I wanted to let you know myself that Altea has declared war on Daibaazal. I will be taking the crown when I return to Altea tomorrow. My parents shall be put to rest by the next day, and on the following day, my troops will mobilize.”

Shiro folded his hands over the table. “Yes. By then, I should be on my way back to Marmora, arrival planned for sometime that day or the next depending on how well travel goes.”

Out of his periphery, Keith watched Pidge pull her legs into seat, hugging them to her chest. “Matt and my Dad will be in Olkarion. I’d have gone to help, but ya know how they are about me being
Involuntarily, Keith scoffed. “You are too young, Pidge. The fact that you grappled down the goddamn castle doesn’t change that.”

“**TheFacttHatyOuGraPplEddOwn—**” Pidge began to mock him in a garish impersonation, at which Lance and Hunk laughed. The mice, still pillaging the length of Lance’s arms, jostled slightly with the force of Lance’s amusement.

“Yes, well, anyway,” the Princess interrupted before Keith had the chance to snap back at them. “I wanted to have this time to talk with all of you, together, before I leave. Communicating while apart is not going to be as easy as I’d like it to be, and the choices you all make in the coming phoebs may very well change the course of fate. Indeed, some of the choices you’ve made already have. The Defenders of the Universe, those who wear the watches, are part of an ancient legend dating back to the creation of Oriande, at least for my people. The fact that all the timepieces have manifested, together, at the same time… there is something deeply troubling about it, to me. I fear for the sanctity of the cycle, especially after what we saw with that… Beast.”

A shiver ran up Keith’s spine at the mention of that… thing… they faced on the lawn of his castle. Even with the remains put to a pyre, the thought of the tar-like ring of death in the castle courtyard made his stomach roil. It wasn’t from fear, not really, nor was it even simple disgust — it was more perverse than that. Horror, maybe. The memory was that of a subversion of the natural order of things, the distortion of body and mind and being of those two unsuspecting Galra, sickeningly twisted and malformed into a single, frantic, desperate abomination. Sure, they’d been trying to kill the lot of them only moments before, and had Allura not intercepted that crackling wave of surging, sickening black electric energy, it could have been him and Shiro. They had clearly been the targets the witch intended.

Still, Keith did not know what to call it besides a Beast; to call it a monster felt unfair to the Galra that gave it life, but to call it a person was absurdly inaccurate.

Hunk, eventually, brought him back to the present conversation by breaking the stony silence. “Um, what cycle is in danger, exactly?” asked the chef.

The Princess leaned back in her chair, a look of sad deliberation furrowing her brow. Coran took a step forward.

“To spare you a long lecture, I found a tome in the castle library I put on reserve for only the five of you that recounts a fairly simplified, but straightforward, version of the lore. If you want to read the actual myth, I would encourage you to do so, but the long-and-short of it is that, essentially, the world is in a constant flow of matter, and all existence thereof is connected, even things we usually don’t think of as living. Oriande is a parallel place to our own world, a ‘negative’ copy you could say. If we give life to it, it takes life from us; if we burn a forest, the realm of Oriande grows new trees. It is the other half of our cycle of living and dying, energy transferring from one source to another. And, it is through Oriande that people like the Princess, Lance, and myself get our markings. Altean alchemy is a microcosm of this same principle at work.”

Keith snuck a glance to his right, and Lance had sat back in his chair, somewhere between sad and thoughtful. A part of him was tempted to reach beneath the table and grab his hand, but at the same time, he didn’t want to distract from Coran’s story.

Biting the inside of his cheek, the Prince forced himself to listen.

“Not all Alteans are as inclined towards sensing and interpreting quintessence as the others, but we
all have the capabilities. It is likely for this reason that Blue was able to reach out to Lance before anyone of you managed to find the watches.”

“Speaking of which,” the Princess interrupted, reaching into her robes before pulling out a simply black box. “I have something for you.”

Opening the lid, the shining silver band of the Blue Paladin’s timepiece looked pristine under the flickering light of the fireplace, and Lance nearly jumped out of his seat.

She chuckled, closing the lid and sliding it across the table. Without stopping to breathe, Lance snatched up the box, a heavy sigh leaving him the moment he plucked it up from the table. The Princess started speaking before he had the chance to take it out of the box, her tone solemn.

“Now, before you put that on, I must warn you. Both your quintessence and the Blue Guardian’s quintessence have been weakened due to the injuries you sustained, as such, it is of the utmost importance that you do not put the watch back on before she has manifested her physical form for you again. If she was able to do it without the watch before, that is the level of strength she must return to before you can try to connect with her again — if you force it, both of your life forces will become codependent on the other.”

Beside him, Keith could practically feel some of the excitement wilt out of Lance, and on impulse he moved his hand to Lance’s thigh and gave it a light, supportive squeeze.

The Princess continued. “You could think of your own energy as… a pitcher, only half-filled by water. To fill the rest of the way, you could leave it in the rain to refill naturally, or you could mix it with wine. Wine would certainly fill it faster, but the two substances will become mixed with the other in a way that cannot be undone. It would be very dangerous for you, Lance, so you must be patient. Do you understand?”

“I… yeah,” he took a deep breath in through his nose, nodding. Keith couldn’t resist the small grin that quirked the corner of his mouth when Lance glanced his way and took his hand under the table. “I can wait.”

“Excellent,” she smiled, small but sincere, and looked around at the others. “As for your own Guardians, I’m not sure how or through what means they will manifest, but if they don’t, that may even be a good thing. The heightened presence of danger is what brought Keith to summon a sword through his watch, and for Pidge to create that bizarre weapon. The forms of the Guardians take the form best suited to serve their Chosen; the timepieces are a part of each of you, making up for or accommodating the needs that each of you have.”

Brow furrowed, Hunk mulled over the Princess’s word before snapping his fingers. “Oh! Wait, that makes so much sense now — I feel like, since I’ve had this, I’ve been so much better at expressing my thoughts and, like, knowing how to put what I want to say into words. I used to get super anxious and stuff. I thought I was just, like, imagining it. So the watch helps make up the difference?”

She nodded, and Keith couldn’t say he was surprised. He’d suspected something to that effect since he first put the watch on, his instincts repeatedly pushed to their limits — it was like he was constantly running on adrenaline, able to hear, see, even smell anything and everything with perfect accuracy. The principle that the Red Paladin’s timepiece would sharpen his senses stood to reason, seeing as his ability to focus had always been one of his shortcomings.

Unseen by Keith, lost as he was in absorbing the Princess’s explanation, Shiro tilted his head and sent Allura a questioning look. “So, what does it mean, exactly, that we have these watches? I mean,
I understand there’s this connection to the realm’s quintessence, and I certainly felt the… impression of the watch when I was fighting, but is it just… a boost, to each of us?”

“Well, yes and no.” Allura placed the mouse she’d been absentmindedly petting on the table, and it ran straight towards Shiro, sniffing his arm. The knight shifted a little awkwardly, but didn’t move his arm away. “There is… another part of the legend. In the beginning, when Oriande was created, it was the result of a struggle between all radiant light and a great darkness. It’s unclear if the two entities coexisted, or if one was borne from the other, but the myth states that Oriande is the result of the two competing sources that gave birth to our universe, and for all that Oriande embodies, a great cycle of life, a cosmic scale of balance, it is not a place that casts moral judgments. We view death as something inherently evil, but the reality of the flow of matter is that death is natural. Destruction is essential so that the flow may continue; it is why fire is one of the primary guardians.

“There was always a warning to those who studied alchemy to not abuse the power. It is, after all, only those who can interpret the flow of quintessence who might be able to throw off this balance. And as much as Oriande embodies a cycle, my father’s recent research suggested, perhaps, it in itself is a part of a larger cycle. So that great struggle between the realm of energy and — Father called it the realm of the null — is also constantly at odds with one another. It is this balance that ensures that there is never more death that there is life, never more than could possibly exist than could possibly be destroyed, and vice versa.”

Pausing, Allura leaned back against the high-backed chair, her head tilting towards the ceiling in quiet meditation. No one spoke, giving her the opportunity to gather her thoughts.

“So how does this relate to all of you?” she smiled wryly. “I’m still not entirely sure, myself. I would have loved to ask my father more on the subject, but this is the hand that fate has dealt us. What I do know is that the legends state five guardians were created by a division of the original spiritual entity, the White, to protect and maintain a balance for all energy and matter in the mortal world so as to protect this balance. The fact that the timepieces have manifested, all at once, all together, leads me to believe that this balance is in danger. I believe a threat much more dangerous than Zarkon looms on the horizon, something that may jeopardize all of reality as we know it.”

The weight of the Princess’s warning suffused the air like a poisonous mist, settling over all of them in distinct but no less unsettling ways.

Pidge, eventually, was the one to cough out a response. “So, we’re supposed to… fight this… thing? Restore balance or… something? What is it? Do we know where to find it?”

“Ah, clever girl!” Coran snapped his fingers, and Allura’s expression twisted into a frown. “No, I’m afraid, that’s one of the hardest parts about this whole shimbazzle, isn’t it? There’s no telling what the entity is, how the balance has been thrown off, why, by whom, or through what means it should be fought!”

After the unnecessarily chipper words settled, Keith had to shake his head to make sure he understood correctly.

“So you’re telling me, we have to fight against some kind of… great evil, while our countries are at war, without actually knowing what we’re fighting or how to fight it? Real helpful.”

“Hey, don’t be a dick,” Pidge shot back, and Keith threw a glare down the table at her.

The Princess was looking into the fireplace, her brow drawn, like she was trying to come up with some sort of explanation that might be more satisfying, but it was clear that this was the extent of what she knew. The disappointment on her face, the guilt and yet undeniable degree of acceptance,
spoke just as much as her silence did.

Her eventual answer came slowly, deliberately, like she was testing each word on her tongue before speaking them.

“Well… this is where I have to speculate based off the warning Lance was able to bring back to us, but, I doubt that it is coincidental that all of this happening aligns with the sudden violence that has struck our realm. I suspect that the corruption we saw with the Beast is only just the beginning. I can’t quite fathom how one could use alchemy to do something like that…” She scowled down at her own hands, palms face-up. “It’s like, unthreading the matter of something, but instead of threading it back into something else and expending the excess energy, so that it would return to Oriande to be repurposed, it rots the energy so it can no longer revert. It’s like harnessing that extra energy and forcing it to stay in our realm. Whatever it is, it’s not natural.”

A visible shiver ran up the Princess, the hairs on her arm standing on end. She shook her head and dropped her hands to the table, allowing her mice to use them as their personal jungle gym.

“Well. That is just my theory, but I don’t know why or how this is happening. I don’t know who is responsible and what it means. I know that I’m not giving you much to go on, but I suppose my best advice moving forward is to trust your instincts, and trust in what your Guardians tell you. If the Blue Guardian’s final directive to Lance was to work together as one, then I have no doubt that the word of that entity speaks for all of them. You are the Defenders of the Universe. I will lend my services however I can, but I have the immediate affairs of my kingdom to return to.”

The Princess sighed, standing up. Though the expression seemed strained, she smiled genuinely around as the rest of them stood. Keith didn’t have to, their titles still equal until she ascended the throne formally, but he wanted to. She deserved the deference; how she managed to stay composed at such a time, he would never understand, but would silently admire until his last breath.

“I leave first thing in the morning with Sir Shiro here,” the young woman nodded in his direction, and he smiled warmly in response. “But after that, please, write me. Call upon me if you must. Altea stands with you not only as military allies…” she lifted her hands and plucked off her crown, offering it to Coran, who looked ready to burst into tears at any moment. “But as friends. I have every faith in you. The realm is counting on you.”

And while he felt almost sick with nerves at the scope of what she was suggesting, Keith was surprised with himself. He was — not excited, that wasn’t quite right — but sort of… prepared? Ready? A strange sort of unity he hadn’t felt before entering the room washed over him, filled him up and poured him back out of his skin.

He felt like Keith. Prince Keith Akira Yorak Kogane. He could never escape that.

...but, at the same time, he felt like a part of something much bigger than his already problematically large title — and this, for the first time in his entire life, wasn’t his title. It was theirs.

Beside him, Lance snatched his hand again, even more fiercely than before. Pidge shot him a smirk. Hunk fanned his hands in front of his own eyes, like he was trying to stop onrushing tears.

“Defenders of the Universe, huh?” Shiro repeated, and he was wearing one of the strangest, goofiest grins Keith had ever seen. “It’s kind of got a nice ring to it.”

The seven of them exchanged a few more encouraging words and did their best to face the fears of whatever future lie ahead, together, before going their separate ways again. Though Hunk and Lance both agreed to be there to see Shiro and Allura off in the morning, Keith could feel some of the
weight of their goodbyes and thank you’s as he quietly stood off to the side. This level of informality
was rare, and it felt more real than any departing ceremony ever would.

Everyone began to drift towards the hallway, lingering between the room and the doorway, except
for Lance. He stayed at the table, and hooked a finger in a come hither direction towards Keith that,
in different circumstances, might have been devastatingly sexy.

From seemingly out of nowhere, the Altean-human hybrid pulled out a familiar cloth and bottle of
antiseptic along with the cream that Keith dutifully forgot about. At this point, he was used to the
process enough that he surely could have done it all himself — if he had the forethought to remember
— but he wasn’t going to deny the chance to sit with a beautiful boy who wanted to take care of
him.

Are you kidding? At that point, Keith would take a matching scar on his other cheek just to spend
more time with Lance.

“Hey, Pretty Boy, take a seat. I’ll try to do this quickly.”

Please don’t, Keith wanted to say.

“Thanks.”

Shiro caught Keith’s eye from the doorway and rolled his eyes in a well-meaning, I’m-your-big-
brother-so-naturally-I’m-a-knowing-piece-of-shit sort of way. The Prince just narrowed his gaze and
tried to see if he could make Shiro die from the force of his stare alone.

Instead, the man closed the door most of the way, muffling the voices on the other side as the others
dispersed. Eh. Good enough.

Lance hummed while he applied the burning stuff, a soft little song that Keith was almost starting to
recognize. As the initial sting disappeared, he asked, “How are you? It’s been a long day.”

“I’m —” Keith was going to say that he was, quite honestly, shitty and exhausted and feeling like he
deserved lashings more than Lance’s gentle attentions, but that was all just as self-centered as
anything else.

Instead, the Prince answered, “...doing okay. I saw Adam today; he wanted to see you and thank you
for your help again.”

“Oh yeah?” Lance crooked a grin. “He doesn’t need to thank me, I’m just doing what any decent
person with time to kill would do.”

“Mmm. I don’t know about that. Most people aren’t actually decent.”

A scoff echoed the sound of the emollient jar opening. “Aren’t you speaking of your own subjects,
your Royal Mullethead?”

“That just sounds dumb,” he rolled his eyes, forcing himself not to laugh anyway. “I thought
McClain Nicknames were supposed to be a speciality or whatever.”

“Oh, they are. You’re just uncultured.” Lance laughed to himself as he put the lid back on the jar and
folded up the cloth, a practice Keith had seen him perfect by now.

“Now you’re just insulting me. I could put you in shackles for that.”
Lance’s already dopey smile turned impossibly sillier, bouncing eyebrows added to the mix. “Ooh, kinky.”

It took actual will power for Keith not to blush, instead doing his best to be royal and dignified or something. “Lance.”

“I’m kidding! Geez, lighten up.”

“You know, one of these days, I’m actually going to punch you,” Keith said, tauntingly. If Lance was going to try to get a rise out of him, then it was only fair that he did it back. “But if you’re into being locked up, then you might just like that.”

Lance’s jaw dropped, his voice turning squeaky. His marks started to glow, and the tips of his ears were burned scarlet. “K-Keith! What the fuck!”

Keith couldn’t help but laugh in his face.

“W-Well, how about instead of punching me… uhh,” Lance floundered for a moment, arms crossed and face turning impossibly redder as he came up with nothing. “Uhh you, uh… you suck and I hate you. Gods, just go away.”

Still laughing, harder than he had in a long time, Keith leaned into the table to support himself. Holy shit, he was so cute when he was embarrassed. It was definitely worth a little of his own chagrin if it turned Lance into such a flustered mess.

“Fuck you, Kogane,” Lance grumbled, and Keith thought he sounded just the tiniest bit sincere beneath the insult, so he willed himself to stop laughing and scooted closer to the brunette, cheek marks still shimmery and baby blue.

“Shh, I’m just kidding.” He tucked his hands into Lance’s sides, and the other boy tensed like Keith was going to tickle him. Another valuable piece of information that Keith carefully stored away for another time. “I probably do have to go though.”

Lance furrowed his brow, raising his pointer finger to Keith’s chin and tilting it up. Facing the fireplace, with the light to Lance’s back, the teen moved his head back and for like he was trying to examine Keith’s nose.

“What?”

“These bags under your eyes aren’t cute, Keith.” He clicked his tongue. “I mean, they’re kinda cute because you’re cute, but like, you really gotta get some sleep, dude. Even if you… you know, can’t come back to the room tonight. Sleep in this chair or something. Your eyes are bloodshot, too.”

Rolling his eyes, Keith squeezed Lance’s waist and he practically jumped in response. “I’ll try. I really mean that. You shouldn’t wait up, though.”

“I-I… yeah. Okay. Well, I guess, see you… when I see you?” Lance sounded more than a little disappointed, and it chipped away at Keith’s already slipping resolve. How he’d like nothing more than to go upstairs with Lance and do all of the things he’d just joked about; Lance’s neck was unmarked, unforgivable in Keith’s opinion, and that tantalizing column of smooth skin was almost too close for him to resist. It would be easy, so quick, he could do it right now. Just kiss down his throat and mark him up with his teeth, sucking spots into —

Shit. Stop that.
Ah. Keith really needed to go, now, or he really was going to fail to rein in his last bit of self-control.

Clearing his throat, Keith’s hands slid to the light curve of Lance’s narrow hips — gods help me — and he squeezed one more time before pulling away. “I’ll see you soon.”

Shiro was standing in the doorway, whistling, poorly trying to hide the fact that he was eavesdropping. Gritting his teeth, Keith ignored the faint stain of heat in his cheeks, thinking about someone overhearing all of that, and he firmly began to walk away. Shiro laughed, but made a point to catch up with him.

Hunk and Pidge were walking a ways ahead of them, too far to bother catching up, but near enough that they caught glances of them around corners. Keith watched them turn towards the kitchens instead of the stairs.

Keith frowned. “Hey, Shiro... Any idea where my Mom is right now?”

The knight glanced at his watch, brow raised. “I’d guess she’s probably still with the Arusians, they’re supposed to be finalizing the plans for their departure tomorrow. Altea and Olkari are all ready to go.”

Lips pursed, Keith tried to consider what he still had to do tonight. They were already going to be late for the final war council meeting before the other kingdoms left — would it really matter to be a little later?

The Prince bit his lip. “Can we go see her? I want to ask her something.”

[LANCE]

Keith had told Lance not to wait up for him, so naturally, Lance had decided to wait up for him.

Gazing at the clear evening sky, his chest chilled from the inside out, a one-of-a-kind ice spreading over his skin, like someone had poured out the liquid moon, a frigid, molten ocean of platinum, directly into the waiting chamber of his lungs. Into the window it rushed, a silver stream that managed not to ensnare the stars in its wire net, and Lance sighed and cozied deeper into windowsill, bundling the cloak he’d retrieved that morning more tightly over his shoulders.

In fairness, he had tried for thirty dobosh to get comfortable, washed his face a second time, even switched his and Keith’s pillows, but it didn’t feel right. If he could have chalked up the past few nights of mostly-peaceful rest to the latent exhaustion, or the small hope that Keith might be coming back, it was much harder to sleep when he knew that the Prince was already planning not to show up.

The balcony looked inviting, but it was bitterly windy at the moment and too cold for Lance to be comfortable. This, huddled at the seat of one of the largest windows in Keith’s room, was a nice compromise. A beautiful view, even the glow of moon and stars paled in comparison to the way he remembered the sky from the Astral Plane.
Part of him was sad that the Princess would be leaving tomorrow. It felt like out of everyone, she got the worst end of the deal, but at least she had Romelle. Lance never expected to empathize with royalty, but such was fate, he supposed. There was something about her, some sort of… connection might be too strong a word, but there was just something about her that made him feel strangely better about the whole thing. Was it because they were both Alteans? Because she understood the whole bizarre legend, the mythos of the watches? Because he literally mistook her for an angel when they first met?

Perhaps it was simply the grace with which she wore in the face of the ruins around them. She reminded him of starlight, a force that was especially bright at the darkest hour.

Out of the corner of his eye, he glanced at the box the Princess had left him, a silhouette resting on his bedside table. Of course, he wondered when Blue would be able to return to him, but the anxiety he’d felt after waking up in the infirmary, upon realizing that their link had been severed, was nowhere near as present. It hadn’t disappeared, but it had faded to a background sort of ache; Lance had gotten used to it.

He felt about the same with the scar between his shoulder blades. Aside from the small puncture wound from the battle, it had basically fully healed, the skin light and fresh compared to the rest of his body. The respect and gratitude he’d received for jumping in front of Coran felt… strange. Like, he got that it was probably a pretty cool and respectable thing from other people’s perspective, but he didn’t plan for it. It was just instinct and dumb luck that had kept him and Coran alive.

_Dumb luck._ Lance snorted quietly.

He shook his head and returned to seeking out some arrangement of stars along the treeline that he might recognize. He’d been only mildly successful so far: Virgo, no problem, and little Corvus beneath it. A few smaller stars he didn’t remember the names of nearby — but they were big, bright ones, and they were at least still pretty enough to admire.

The whole idea of dumb luck applied to Lance in essentially every capacity, didn’t it? Kind of stupid, but things kind of worked out, but they didn’t really work out — just sort of. Things didn’t slot into place like a puzzle, but sort of folded over different parts of his life and ended up working out.

Wrapped up in an impossible soft, warm cloak, in a room much too big for one person — it’s not like he was complaining.

Just, marveling at the disaster.

Narrowing his gaze, Lance spotted what he thought was the bottom two chainlinks of Libra in the sky, but the lines didn’t match up. But he would have sworn that’s where it was, and that meant Scorpio was to the East…?

Yes. Okay. What gives?

Frustrated, Lance flattened his brow, glowering at his reflection in the glass separating him from the outside world. He refocused his gaze back to where Libra should be… seriously, what the hell? Did he still have Pidge’s star chart? Did he return it to her? He couldn’t even remember, honestly.

Whatever. Maybe he was just remembering wrong, or this was just a bad angle or something.

The longer he sat, the further Lance curled in on himself until he ended up as a ball of limbs and cloak, leaning into the wall beside the window. It wasn’t the most comfortable of positions, but he
was growing tired. Lance watched the homes across Marmora’s moonlit streets go from warm orange, crystal-lit for all of the Northern and Artisan districts, likely torch lit the further South and East one ventured. The capital grew increasingly monochromatic, peaceful beneath the pale rays of the moon. The city was slowly shifting to sleep, and Lance supposed he probably should, too. It would be sort of hypocritical of him to force himself to stay awake while Keith was also plodding around, trying to organize and mobile and function no matter how outrageous the hour. Still. It just felt, like, stupid that Keith couldn’t just sleep like a normal person.

Lance knew that it was probably important that he and the Queen and Shiro all be up and about even late into the night, but he’d also be lying if he thought it wasn’t a little annoying. It wasn’t like he blamed anyone for it, he was just frustrated by the whole situation.

Though he didn’t know it at the moment, it was around two-thirty when he dragged himself from the window and back to Keith’s bed.

Well, it was sort of their bed now. Lance did little to hide the giddy little smile that appeared on his face at the thought. The whole thing was such a quizzaking mess, and he couldn’t find himself to regret a single choice he made.

Crawling under the sheets, cool from the absence of any living warmth, Lance closed his eyes and breathed steadily. The mattress was just a lush as it was the first time he’d sunk into it, just as decadent, and Lance vowed to never take a single moment of all of this for granted.

He fell asleep, perhaps a bit lonely, but satisfied.

When he woke upon the gray dawn of a new quintant, Lance wouldn’t have believed it was going to be any different than the last three.

His brain was foggy, a falling dew of dreams keeping him waterlogged beneath the pull of unconsciousness’ current. The visions were fragmented and disjunct — he remembered climbing a giant tree like he used to as a child, and then he was talking with Hunk, hiking up the mountain path in Varadero, and then he was walking over dark glass, so cold his toes curled, his reflection looking back at him through a black mirror. There was a rainbow that had been tied up into knots, glittering crystal-bright, and there was the feeling of a hand over his mouth and a voice in his ear he didn’t understand. The stars shifted. The winds changed course.

Anything else was interrupted by a gentle pressure at the place along his midsection where his shirt was rucked up from sleep, the touch so light it was possible to have imagined it. Though shrouded by that same haze he’d had for days, Lance forced himself to chase after his own consciousness this time.

It felt like… hands.

Warm.

Blearily, Lance blinked. “Keith?”

“Hi.” The Prince’s voice sounded raspy, like he’d been yelling or smoking or something. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you up yet. You can sleep a little longer.”

“’m ‘wake.” He tried to sit forward, and Keith, sitting on the edge of the bed, reluctantly helped him up. The room was barely light dark, a pewter light filling the room light water in a glass. He guessed it was too cloudy for a proper sunrise.

Yawning, Lance rubbed at his eyes and wondered if something had happened. “What’cha doing?
“Thought you were busy.”

The Prince took a moment to respond. “I was. I mean, I am. I’m sorry I woke you.”

Fixing his still sleepy-gaze onto the Prince’s face, Lance observed a small smile on his lips. It reminded him of the weaning moon for whatever reason, and surely, better and more erudite men than Lance could have waxed poetry on the subject, but he was content with drawing the simple parallel for what it was worth. To him, both sights were beaming and beautiful, but subtle and soft, too. His dream had felt too bright; Keith had a darkness that he missed, the perfect amount of reality that brought him back to himself, allowing the subtler lights of stars to shine through.

“Is everything okay?” he asked, glancing around the room. “What time is it?”

“Almost five.” Keith sounded exhausted. “The Alteans, Arusians, Olkari, Shiro and the Holts will be leaving at six, and I know you wanted to see them off. I had a little break and just… thought I would make sure you were okay.”

Lance scratched his head, and he could tell his hair was slightly amess from sleep. After some quick math, he rolled over to Keith’s side of the bed and clawed for the things he’d left on the nightstand, groping slightly before dragging them back into his lap.

“What are you — oh, no, I’m fine. You don’t have to do that right now.” Keith took the cleanser and the emollient from his hands before Lance had the opportunity to start the ritual of tending to his face, and, too tired to really argue, Lance just pouted.

“Okay.” He reached out and tried to at least clear some of the Prince’s mop of black hair from his face. “I can barely see you with all this mullet.”

“Thank you?”

“Bleh.” He made the sound while tucking some of the larger strands behind the other boy’s ear. “Messy.”

Keith was looking at him with a small, fond look. “You’re not going back to sleep, are you?”

“Maybe. What do I get if I do?” Lance grinned back, unable to resist the opportunity for a challenge.

“I guess I could give you a kiss——” Keith began, and then, with all the theatrics he could manage, Lance flopped back into the covers and tucked them up all the way to his ears.

The Prince burst out laughing, and the bed dipped slightly when Keith moved. “Well, I was going to say, if you stayed awake, on the other hand, I could think of something else I could give you.”

Glancing over his shoulder, Lance distrustfully eyed the Prince, who was staring at his own lap intently. “What?”

Keith shifted off the bed, standing beside it instead. He knelt to be at Lance’s level, who rolled sideways to meet the Prince gaze-to-gaze.

“I’ve been thinking about how much I’ve really fucked up,” he spoke quietly, more seriously than Lance anticipated. “Like, I basically did this wrong from the start. I literally almost stabbed you.”

“Yeah,” he snorted. “I remember.”

Keith didn’t laugh, instead, swallowing roughly on his throat. “I basically lied to you about who I
was, you got hurt in my castle — what, three times now? And then we, er, sort of... slept together… and I didn’t mean for that to happen, even if I wanted it. I’ve been jealous and shitty and mean and haven’t been able to spend nearly enough time with you to justify how nice you are to me. Just, like, nothing has gone the way it’s supposed to. I wanted to do at least one thing right.”

A subtle gray shimmer caught Lance’s eye, and his gaze darted down when —

“Holy shit.”

The Prince looked a hilarious mix of embarrassed and proud to have elicited that reaction, biting down a smile.

“Yeah. I at least wanted to do this right… the second time.”

A thin silver band, accented by a stripe of lavender stone through the middle and a simple but sizable amethyst gemstone in the center, was presented less than a foot from his nose. Lance felt like he could have died.

“So, um, I guess I just wanted to — Lance, will you marry me? And... not just that, but rule with me, help me when I’m being a stubborn dickhead, calm me down when I’m going to do something stupid? I know I’m asking a lot of you already, but I don’t think I could ever want anything more than I want to be with you for the rest of my life.”

Lance could count on one hand the amount of times he’d been truly speechless. Brain fizzled out, the flow of his thoughts literal nonsense. Words were totally lost to him.

And, like a dumb idiot, he almost started crying. Dios, he’d already told Keith yes once, so why the heck was he getting emotional? The first time had felt so natural and fitting for their entire mess of a relationship, it had been perfectly fitting for them.

But this... it didn’t feel wrong or bad. Just, different.

Special.

Keith was obviously going outside of his comfort zone just to do this and... to what? Apologize? Ask Lance to marry him, again?

It felt greater than that. This wasn’t just an expression of raw emotion — this was an action, a choice, a symbol.

The ring was ridiculously pretty, too. The metal looked almost fluid in how smooth the surface was, polished and amerthine through the vein running down the center. He’d never seen anything like it before.

As if reading his thoughts, Keith smiled down at the ring.

“It’s actually not an engagement ring, but it’s been in my family for a very long time. The ring that would have been used for this was lost when my Dad disappeared, but I think this one is better in a way. I asked my Mom about it... she said it was a gift from my mother’s grandfather’s to his wife... so, my great-great-great grandmother, I guess? It’s Arusian metal, and the stone is from Balmera. This part, the purple line around it, is made from refined sands from the Puigian coast, super heated into a sort of special glass. It used to have an Altean enchantment, but it’s long worn out by now, and my grandmother was born in Daibaazal. But it was made by a human. A commoner, not even an artisan.”
“I… Keith I… that’s…” Lance stopped to compose himself, sitting up fully. It hadn’t occurred to him before, but Keith was actually down on one knee, not kneeling next to the bed like he’d thought.

After a deep breath in, he tried to keep his wits when he answered, “Yes... I — just, yes. But are you sure, this ring is — I’m sort of a klutz, I could lose it or something, if it’s that important I s-shouldn’t… I don’t need a ring at all, ya know, I could just...” his voice trailed off, because it hardly seemed like the Prince heard him at all. Instead, he took Lance’s hand the moment the first “yes” was spoken and slid the ring onto his fourth finger.

“I hope that wasn’t too cheesy,” Keith cleared his throat, not meeting Lance’s eye. “But I felt like I needed to do something to at least... well, I guess, like I said — there might not be a point where this is over, we could be at war for the rest of our lives. One of us could die. I don’t want to try to wait for the world to catch up to this, or waste any of the time we do have. Does that make sense?”

Lance wanted to laugh, but a huff of disbelief came out instead. Morning breath be damned, he shot forward and grabbed the front of Keith’s hood — he was wearing his Marmoran armor again — yanking him in to kiss him.

It was rough and expressive and a bit of a mess, just like them. He wanted to pour out some of the words he was failing to say into the kiss, hope that maybe with his lips that he could show Keith how much the gesture meant, how it wasn’t cheesy at all and how he very much felt the same. Hot met cold, and instead of coaxing down the flames, Lance began to melt, one of Keith’s hands returning to its place at the dip between his waist and hip, fingertips burning his skin with the unexpected intimacy, the traveling grip attentive, almost possessive, and the other began to pull up the Prince’s weight as they sort of rolled onto the bed.

And then — jesus, Keith wasn’t even giving Lance a chance to catch his breath — his mouth sought out Lance’s neck like a wolf, ready to tear out his throat. Instead of fangs, however, he felt the quick, wet pressure of tongue-heavy kisses pressed into his skin, and Lance gasped into the sudden sensation. He let out an embarrassing keen on accident when the pressure turned to suckling, and then suckling to bites that were then peppered with tiny kisses to soothe the sting.

Barely two dobosh had passed, and Lance was arching his back into Keith’s body, halfway between asking him to shift his attention elsewhere and halfway tempted to just let Keith have his way with him, tiny sighes rising and falling from his lips with the rate of his lungs, working overtime to compensate for the abruptly wanton air.

Unable to decide what he even wanted, instead Lance breathed out, “M-Missed you. Missed you so much.”

A groan at the base of his neck sent anticipatory shivers up his spine, and Keith gave him one more, harder bite — fuck, it hurt, but in a way that was so satisfying and grounding, that said I’m here and I’m not letting you go, and Lance didn’t mind the sting in the slightest — before Keith finally kissed his way up Lance’s jaw and pressed their lips together.

And Lance thought, gods, he could never get tired of this. Tired of breathless conversations spoken only through open-mouthed kisses, of exchanging the same, languid air. It was sweeter than honeysuckle, how sinfully they spoke in silent tongues; it was a language contrived without words, a dialogue that traipeezed the line of monologue as silence became gasps, and gasps became moans, and then moans shy admittance of desire, and then, slowly, touches to match the pace of the wordless conversation.

“N-no, wait, wait,” Keith groaned, pulling his weight up once again, and Lance was so surprised he had to resist latching onto him and dragging him down again. “This wasn’t why I came up here. I...
fuck you look so good like this, fuck.”

The praise made his heart flutter, cheeks growing redder.

Keith leaned back in again and started to press his lips, petal-soft compared to their earlier roughness, into Lance’s eye scales. It was confusing and thrilling, leaving Lance unable to really understand what was going on but not at all disappointed.

Evidently, Keith was struggling with something, because he drew back again.

“I should go,” he whispered, but the way he continued to press his body down into Lance’s made it seem less and less like he really intended to follow through with that proposal. “If I don’t now, I won’t be able to stop. There’s… ugh… let me just…”

And then, just as it had started, Keith began to kiss back his neck, showering the other side this time with attention. The pressure was somehow affectionate and gentle and absolutely sinful, all at the same time. Lance was having a difficult time keeping his own composure, trying not to loosely moan. Quiznak, why did Keith always leave him feeling so needy?

“Wanted to do this so badly earlier,” Keith murmured, pulling back from where he’d been suckling Lance’s fluttering pulse with a lewd *popping* sound. “Couldn’t stand seeing you, looking so put together.”

“Keith,” he breathed, tangling his hands in the Prince’s hair and baring his neck further, unable to keep his hips planted as the ruddy warmth of Keith’s mouth traveled to his collarbone, licking between the dip of his clavicle and kissing all of the freckles on his shoulder. “Please, I need you, your Highness.”

Keith’s hand that had been holding his hip had since traveled down to his thigh, but it flinched away from Lance so abruptly the tanned-skinned boy wondered if something happened. Instead, the Prince closed his eyes, took a deep breath, flexing his hands as he sat up.

“W-What happened?” Lance’s voice cracked.

With two more solid, deep breaths, Keith opened his eyes to blink at Lance and, much to the other boy’s surprise, they weren’t the same familiar black or dark purple he’d grown used to. Well, that’s not true — his irises were black and so opaque it was like looking into a pit of tar, but they were thinner, elongated, and his sclera had taken on a yellow hue.

“I… sorry. That happens when I’m… well, emotional, I guess. Usually just angry. But, uh, calling me — *that* — I didn’t expect it.”

Lance blinked. “Your Highness? I mean, it’s just your title. I can not do it again if it’s —”

“No!” The Prince interrupted quickly, then ran a hand down his face. “Sorry, this is not probably a very sexy conversation. I just, I meant… it wasn’t *bad*. I sort of… liked it.”

Oh.

*OOOOOOOOOOOOOOh.*

Now Lance got it.

He grinned, fully intent on taking advantage of this new information, but they both sighed when there was a knock at the door.
A woman’s voice — Plaxum, Lance had learned — was calling them.

She sounded a bit more strained than normal. “Your Highness, your Lordship, if you’re, um, ready, the departure ceremony will be starting soon.”

Face flushed, Keith ran a hand through his hair and called back, “Be right there!” and reluctantly rolled off of him.

Lance whined, and the Prince laughed while finding Lance’s hand. He kissed the back of the brown skin before holding it up above them, both their backs flat on the mattress.

The sight of the ring on his finger made his stomach tighten, some of his the lust-heavy pulse starting to calm. Instead, it was replaced by the supreme sense of simple, almost disgusting happiness, a flower leaning towards the sun. The accessory reminded him of the way ice looked on the mountains when it froze over a lake, warm silver and glittering. The soft purples was Marmora’s court color, the accent of the castle standards and the flags that fluttered on the winds of the parapets.

After a quiet few ticks to compose themselves, Keith got up first and helped Lance to stand. So to not keep anyone waiting, he elected to just change now and deal with a wash later, but the entire time it felt like his left hand weighed six thousand times heavier with the metal, something beautiful and decadent and that actually felt like his. Not borrowed or given something because he needed it — it was a genuine gift, something Keith had wanted him to have.

Gods. He was so fucking in love with him.

They exited the castle to a scene of mild chaos, but Keith hardly seemed to notice. His eyes were studying the faces around them, like he was looking for someone. Lance didn’t see Allura or Shiro anywhere yet, neither Hunk nor Pidge, but that was likely on account of the simple amount of activity at the base of the castle steps.

It was noisy and brighter by the time they walked outside, horses and wainwrights and people shouting over each other. Knights and squires and pages, scullery maids and serving hands, stable workers and cooks, all of them were bustling around, loading carts with belongings, hooking wains to carriages, preparing horses, packing food for the expedition. Someone had mentioned that Altea was about a two-days ride, comfortably, but could be done if one drove their coach through the night. Lance had some sense of what such a trip might be like; when he’d come to Marmora, his trip from Varadero had taken three days and was a pain in the ass, literally and metaphorically.

Travelling with this many people — some of them the bodies of those who would be put to rest and had to be treated with tender care — seemed like a nightmare to coordinate.

They probably would have found the others sooner if they hadn’t been traversing the crowded space together, because as a unit, they were the subject of much interruption, stopped and hugged and thanked and chatted to by random people, many of whom, in Lance’s case, were Alteans. It was definitely strange for him, each time the Princess’s guards and small team of advisors and diplomats stopped to bow their head. Every encounter left him with a weird vibe, like they were… how could he put it? Demonstrations of solidarity? Almost familial? As if they were saying goodbye to one of their own, and that was, at least to Lance, a very bizarre thought indeed.

He’d really not thought of himself as Altean, not for his entire life (he’d always felt much more like a human with an Altean good-for-nothing father), never practicing their customs learning about their culture. For a very long time, his single cheek mark had been a burden, a sour reminder of the man who had left his family behind. In the past few decaphoebs, the Alteans he lived with on a daily basis were uncaring and cruel; even in the past few movements, thoughts about his aunt left a bitter taste in his mouth, or the way Lotor had commented on how pretty he found them.
It was tempting to want to hate them — the marks, not the people. But it was because of the people that Lance found he couldn’t resent his heritage, even if he wanted to. The Princess, Sir Coran, all of the Alteans were respectful and honest and wore smiles when they talked to him, like they wanted to respect him, wanted to understand him. With the friendships he’d made, they felt more like a badge of honor. It was still strange, but it wasn’t unpleasant. If anything, he felt oddly… proud.

By the time they actually found the Princess, she was standing with Lady Romelle and Sir Coran, going down a list of parchment that was likely some sort of checklist. Sir Shiro was seated at the driver’s side of the coach, chatting with an Altean woman with long blood-orange hair who held the reins. A few carriages over, Hunk was laughing at something Pidge had just said, presumably at her brother’s expense judging by the angry look on his face. The Queen was engaged in a private a conversation with Commander Holt off to the side of the bustle of morning activity.

“Ah! If it isn’t his Majesty and Lord Lance.” Sir Coran chirped, plenty loud enough to turn heads and eyes in their direction. “How do you fare this morning?”

“Very well,” Keith said automatically. “Where’s Adam?”

Coran twirled his mustache inquisitively. “Oh, yes, Sir Adam was up all night in another surgery. Someone’s developed pneumonia I believe, had to drain their lungs. Emergency operation, you know.”

Romelle’s head popped up nearby, and she and Lance locked eyes immediately. They both turned on the advisor before the Princess had the opportunity to come over and greet them properly.

“Who? Do you know their name?” the Lady demanded, and Lance was nodding immediately. Two quintant ago, he’d spent over a varga with Yanna and her Mom, Isabelle. Isabelle had moved to the capital to work after having Yanna and they’d talked about the best places to eat in the eastern parts of the city. Yanna had taken up a job as a guard to help with money, but...

“Was it a woman?” Lance asked, biting his lip. “Dark-skinned, human probably? Yanna was sort of sick the other quintant.”

Sir Coran blinked a few times. “Sorry, my boy, I’m afraid I didn’t ask when I heard.”

“Oh, gods,” Romelle looked stricken, whipping around and grabbing Lance’s shoulder. “Please, will you write and tell me how everyone recovers? I’ve already lost so much sleep over this. I don’t know if I can handle not knowing if they’ll all be alright.”

Jerkily, Lance nodded. They had to put faith in Adam’s skills as a physician, but he felt exactly as Romelle did — all of the patients they’d interacted with had practically become friends, and hearing someone’s health had turned for the worse was disconcerting.

To the side, Allura whispered in Keith’s ear, and before Lance had the chance to remind them that secrets were rude thank-you-very-much, a loud call at his side caught his attention.

It was Matt, grinning more wicked than his sister for once. “Hey! Nice ring, McClain!”

Everyone — everyone — in at least in a 15x15 square in all directions turned at that moment and their eyes locked on Lance’s left hand, fourth-finger.

“Oh.”

“Oh!”
“Shit. Wow.”

“Oh.”

“Ummm.” Lance looked to Keith, unsure if he should say something, or if it was the Prince’s place to do so or what, but he was quickly lifted up right off his feet into a hug. Not nearly as bone-crushing as Hunks, but solid and firm in a strange kind of way that made Lance feel very small.

“U-uh,” he blanked, looking up at a surprisingly soft-eyed Queen, looking more like Keith than Lance had ever seen her.

“I’m glad he picked you. No one else would be good enough for my son.”

“M-Mom put him down,” Keith grumbled, appearing at their side with an expression of supreme annoyance.

Her eyes flashed to her son, a wicked glint in the corner as she grinned. “If you insist.”

Practically whipping him around, Lance was dropped squarely into Keith’s arms, who had not been ready at all and barely managed to catch him. There were at least a dozen people around laughing, and Lance couldn’t help but join them.

“Nice catch, Mullet.”

“‘You’re heavy.’ He sighed, helping Lance down and grinding his jaw.

Lance stuck his tongue out. “You’re a bully”

“Only to people who deserve it.”

He rolled his eyes, exasperated and annoyed-but-not-really, and had to bite down his retort when a belltower at the cusp of the Northern District loudly rang over Marmora. Three knells, and the world fell silent in respect for the Altean King and Queen.

Lance glanced at Allura, but she was looking at Romelle, her fiance’s hands folded in front of her in a position of prayer. The unexpected slip in her usual composure, vulnerable and sad and loving all at once, was one Lance felt all the way in his own stomach, a twist of nerves, a twinge of relief.

It was over. It was really, really over.

Allura was leaving, and her parents were dead, and she was going to get married. She was still happy to have what she had, in spite of what she had lost; Lance thought she was one of the most remarkable people he’d ever met.

The silence was broken by the Queen, who approached the Princess and placed a hand on each shoulder.

“Though you’re not joining our family like we had expected two movements ago, you will always be welcomed in this castle like my own daughter. King Alfor and Queen Melenor will live on through you, and you will lead Altea with more strength and grace than any one before you. Take good care.”

After a quick hug between them, Allura turned to Lance and Keith, the Princess grabbing Romelle’s hand in the process.

“Well, we’ve certainly come a long way, haven’t we?” the Princess remarked, and Lance barely
managed not to jolt when he felt Keith reach for his own hand, fingers intertwining naturally.

“It’s been an honor getting to know you, Lance — well, Lord Lance.” She smirked, knowing how his weariness on the title. “And it’s been a pleasure, once again, your Highness. Altea is blessed to have such strong Allies. I’m… thankful, to have seen you together. Had it not been for your own affections, I’m not sure if I’d ever have found the heart to chase my own.”

Eyes wide, Lady Romelle smiled with such warmth at the Princess it looked like she might start crying.

Keith spoke, readily, which took Lance by surprise. There was a certain rigidity to the moment that Lance took to mean it was probably expected that the Prince and Princess formally speak, especially with people watching, so Lance remained quiet and listened, watching Keith as he spoke.

“It’s been Marmora’s privilege to host Altea, your Highness.” He sighed, bittersweet. “I’m sorry to see you go, as it’s been the first time in the years since we were children that I feel like I’m saying goodbye to you as a friend and not just an ally. The fate of your parents is… tragic, but, they could not have left behind a more suited heir to their legacy. I’ll be looking forward to be yelling at the Altean Queen the next time we meet for a council session.”

She snorted, leaning in Romelle’s direction. “Is there anything you want to add, love?”

“Ah.” The Lady grinned, sheepish. “I’m afraid I’m not the most eloquent speaker like the two of you, but I do want to express my thanks for all that you’ve done. I do not wish we were leaving the country with the promise of future violence, but it would be a dishonor to the memory of those who we lost not to fight for their sake. I’ll keep Marmora, the both of you, and the realm in my prayers.”

Lastly, the three of them — well, and literally everyone who’d been out in the courtyard — all looked to Lance.

His cheeks turned pink, but Keith chuckled quietly. “You don’t have to say anything, I didn’t give you a chance to properly prepare for this so…”

“N-No.” Lance shook his head, holding his head as high as he could. “I owe both of you, I owe everyone here, at least something. It wouldn’t feel right without saying goodbye. And that’s just… that’s just the thing. Goodbyes are so hard when they’re sad, but I don’t want this one to be like that. I just… I know this is probably strange, because you’ve only ever known me from the time I’ve been in the palace, but I never was anyone before all of this. I spent so much of my life… convincing myself that I was happy or okay with being nobody. And maybe I’d convinced myself that I was. But meeting you,” he glanced quickly to Keith, and then looked forward again. “And Sir Coran, Lady Romelle, Princess, and everyone — ” Lance paused, swallowing as he stood on his tiptoes to looked around the crowd, because pretending like this wasn’t intended to be heard by everyone wasn’t Lance’s style. “I honestly never believed I could be this happy. So I won’t let this goodbye be sad, because it doesn’t have to be. When I left Varadero, my Mamá said sometimes we have to leave the people we love to do what is right. That goodbyes are necessary so that new things can start something new. New beginnings, new reigns, new families and new friendships, and I’ve never felt more ready to move on, because I know that I’ll always have this connection to all of you, even if you’re in Altea, or Olkarion, or Marmora, or even Daibaazal. Wherever you’re from and wherever you go doesn’t matter, doesn’t change how much of an impact you’ve made on my life. I’m Altean and human and I may be from Varadero but… but I feel ready to be Marmoran. To be a part of this life. And I have to thank all of you for that.”

Barely enough time to smile, Lance was pulled into a swift hug by the Princess. Her voice was thick with emotion.
“Thank you, Lance. You don’t know it yet, but if you hadn’t come into our lives, the realm would already be lost. Whatever happens, at least know that I’ll always be grateful for what you’ve done.”

“T-Thanks, Allura.” He sniffed and rubbed his eyes when they pulled apart, and he forced himself not to tear up. “But I said no sadness! So hugs. Give me hugs and get on your way already.”

“Fine fine,” she said with a wet chuckle of her own, so quietly Lance almost missed it. “One last thing — check that star chart of Pidge’s when you get the chance on a clear night. I made some adjustments.”

Lady Romelle laughed and obliged, and Keith rolled his eyes while saying farewell to the Princess and the surviving Olkarion. After a brief, but touching, thank you and farewell from the Arusians, the carts were all filled by their passengers and they began to ride away.

Sir Shiro had leaned down from the coach at the last second before pulling away and told Keith not to get into trouble while he was gone, which Lance found hilarious.

It was strange, quiet and final and empty as the carts one-by-one rolled down the drive and beyond the castle gates, then into the city, then out of the walls and into the world beyond. Marmora was finally at rest, a calm settling as the day continued to brighten, and Lance didn’t feel the slightest bit of the wintry chill. Keith’s warmth was plenty, and then Hunk was there, and Pidge too.

They may not live to see the end of the war, they might not live happily even if they do, and they certainly won’t live forever after. That’s not how life works. Life is a cycle of endings, beginnings, living, and dying, but to that same point, there’s never a real end or a real beginning, because it’s all a flow. A circle, not an arrow. A ring. A tomorrow. A future that exists because of the past laid out behind it.

They won’t live happily ever after, but they’ll live a real life, with heartbreak and laughter and mistakes and joy, they’ll live for one part of a much greater story, and they’ll live a life that will be worth remembering.

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**BONUS:**

**[KEITH]**

Late that night, the night was clear, and Keith was eager to fall into bed… except, Lance wasn’t quite ready to sleep.

“Holy shit, Keith, come look at this.”

He plodded out from the bathroom, yawning and scrubbing at the bags beneath his eyes. He’d be surprised if the dark circles beneath his eyes weren’t permanent by now, but he figured a few more minutes wouldn’t hurt. A smaller part of him knew that he was utterly weak to deny Lance anything
if he asked, seeing as he asked for so little.

Lance was standing on the balcony, wrapped up in Keith’s red cloak. The King’s cloak, in fact, but it looked much better on Lance anyway. He considered telling Lance that it had been his father’s, but decided against it, instead coming up behind him and wrapping his arms around his thin waist.

“What am I looking at exactly?” He sighed over Lance’s shoulder, who appeared to be in full-on investigative mode. It was the star chart that Pidge had made. After Keith had agreed to give the little Gremlin access to some restricted records, he had managed to convince her to let Lance keep it, and to be discrete about it. (“Just pretend you forgot to ever ask for it back.”) The guy’s smile lit up like no other when he was talking about the stars, or looking out at space, or recalling legends and myths about it all; it felt criminal to Keith for Lance not to have a map like this of his own.

“This, look. Allura told me to look for this.”

Things were finally starting to feel calm. Not normal, Keith doubted it would ever be normal to be so stupidly in love with someone, but he was going to have the chance to sleep tonight, and Lance was smiling. Things were good.

They were happy, in spite of everything.

“See, here?” Lance held the parchment taut out in front of him, rotating it until the night sky matched Allura’s adjustments.

“Are you sure that wasn’t there before?” Keith scrunched his nose, looking over Lance’s shoulder and then up at the stars. “Maybe she just connected dots that weren’t connected before.”

“No, no, look. This makes sense because — look, here,” he pointed to Virgo, which shone just as bright as it had every night before since it first winked into existence eons ago. “Libra is gone. This part, here, the bottom of Libra — it doesn’t match up with anything anymore. See?”

Scowling, the Prince glanced up and down a few times, following the marks in the skyscape Lance had provided.

“Whoa.”

There was a new shape in the sky. A brand fucking new set of constellations. How was that even possible?

“I know. I know! Look, what she wrote here…”

Lance turned the map of the universe over, and in the corner, written in a neat but hurried script said:

_I do not know if this has come from the Guardians, Oriande, or something else, something greater than us all, but I found it late into the evening and it felt important to share with you. My mother said our fates are written in the stars, but that we still control our own destinies. Who knew that some destinies were so great, they could rewrite the stars themselves?

The stars formed a pattern of an anatomical figure, not entirely unlike Virgo, but this was larger and had a different colored star at each joint, with two especially bright lights — that which used to be the bottom chains of Libra — shining at the top like a pair of eyes.

“Wow. Shit. That’s amazing”

Lance laughed. “You’re always so good with words.”
“Shut up.” Keith squeezed his arms tighter. “Did Allura write anything else?”

“I… yeah, back on this side. One word off the ledger, here.” Lance flipped the parchment back over, lips pursed as he south it out amongst the dozens of labels running down the lefthand side of the page. “Ah. There. I guess she named it, or maybe it already had a name and she was just telling us?”

Keith followed where Lance pointed, raising a brow. “Voltron?”

“I kind of like it.” Lance admitted, glancing back and forth at the figure. “I mean, that blue shoulder-star is hella bright.”

“You’re just saying that because you’re the Blue one.”

In mock-offense, Lance pointed his head in the other direction. Keith laughed into his shoulder. “What, and let me guess, you like the Red one? Mr. Paladin of Fire?”

Watching a flicker of light catch in Lance’s eyes as he examined the stars, Keith murmured, “Actually, I think I like the Blue one too.”

Meanwhile...

[SHIRO]

His eyes were heavy, and the steady roll of the cart was starting to give him a headache. They’d been following the river path for the most part, though the name was misleading seeing as there was no river in sight. It had vanished about an hour ago when it was swallowed up by a crowded part of the trees, but if it was quiet, the man would have had no issue hearing the gentle listing of water moving over rocks and around time-worn earth.

There was no complaint from the Head of the Guard when their procession agreed to take a fifteen minute break to let the passengers stretch their legs. The Princess and Lady Romelle took a short walk around the caravan, Matt and Commander Holt chattered with their own driver, and soldiers and drivers and other nobility all milled about on the side of the empty path.

Night had only just fallen, but they weren’t going to stop to rest properly for a few more varga. This would likely be the last opportunity before they would camp, so Shiro used the change to unwind his own muscles, checking the horses and the condition of the carts, making sure no luggage had fallen, none of the wheels seemed too worn, et cetera. It was just in his nature to stay busy when he could.

One side of the path opened to a long stretch of field, empty for miles until it hit a treeline, but the other side butted up to the forest, the life within largely silent. Not unusual with winter’s approach, as it was colder to the north. Thile they had yet to hit any snow, it would be likely to cross their path tomorrow, probably near when the Olkarion troop would break off to the west and the Alteans would remain north-northeast. For now, however, the group moved together. Security was easier that way, and I think everyone preferred the added protection the other side brought.

Nearing the end of their break, Shiro caught sight of the Holts lingering near the edge of the forest, Matt crouched down and Sam bent over. The pair appeared to be examining something, but it was too dark and Shiro too far away to make out. He approached after helping Lady Romelle and
“Hey, we’re just about to take the last leg of the day. What’s going on?” Brow furrowed, he tried to better see what the two were looking at.

“Oh, Shiro,” Commander Holt glanced up, a sheepish expression on his face. “Sorry, sorry, I didn’t realize how long it’d been. C’mom son, hurry it up.”

“Yeesh, give me a few ticks,” grumbled the younger Holt. “I’m trying to get some samples of this river runoff, it’s frosted over to ice. It looks weird, and I wanna examine it when we get back.”

“Won’t it melt?” Shiro frowned, and Matt sent him a disparaging scowl.

“Of course it’ll melt, I’m a researcher not a magician. I can refreeze it when we get back.”

The knight huffed a laugh. “Okay fair enough. I feel like you would make a good magician if your science career doesn’t take off.”

Commander Holt shook his head. “Don’t encourage him, for my sake.”

Grinning, Shiro and the Commander stood quietly while Matt scraped up thin crystals of the frozen water he’d taken such an interest in and stick them in a little vial. Shiro absently wondered if the Holts all kept strange trinkets in their pockets. Honestly, he’s be more surprised if they didn’t than if they did.

Just as Matt wrapped up, one of the guards came jogging towards Shiro, and he caught them before they made it all the way over — he already knew what they intended on asking him.

“Yep, we’re good to go. You can start the front carts, I’ll catch up with tweedle-dee here!”

Matt leveled him with a look of outstanding disappointment. “Tweedle-dee? Really, man? You used to be cool, you know that, right?”

“Oh, shut up —”

“What is that?” interrupted the Commander, pointing into the forest straight ahead. “It looks like… no, but it couldn’t…?”

Shiro had to blink, the offending light so bright and abrupt he thought it was a crystal shining in his face. Purple, bright — it was loud and it crackled, too, almost like…

Oh no.

“Run.”

“What?” Matt started to turn around, but the knight grabbed him by the collar and practically shoved him towards their carriage.

“Run!”

Instincts screaming danger, they ran, chests seizing and night air bitterly cold, but then — well.
I’m sure I don’t need to tell you what happens next.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading. this has been an emotional journey for me from the first word to last. i love you for reading, giving kudos, commenting, bookmarking -- any combination of the above -- it's been a project that I've poured a lot of my heart and soul into, so thank you.

I try not to self-promote too often, but if you enjoyed this and want to see any bonus content (deleted scenes/artwork/random shit idk), send asks, or anything else based off this story, please follow me on tumblr. take care, readers. :)

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