Voltron: Book 1 Beginning

by KiraSakura123

Summary

My fate was tied with Voltron from the start of my escape. Abducted from earth at a young age, I was held prisoner, experimented on, then traded to Zarkon where they tried to make me a weapon. This was until I was found by the Paladins of Voltron, where they welcome me to the team and allowed me to join their quest in saving the universe from Zarkon's darkness.

Notes

This is an original story that I have written/planned before season 3 came out and is based on the story of Voltron.
Please enjoy and please acknowledge that I do not own Voltron, or its characters, this is simply my interpretations of what could have happened in a different space and time.
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This also would not have been possible without the help/collaboration/editing of my two best friends Lani and Maria <3
~I will be posting new chapters on Fridays~
“Uhn” I winced, gripping my side, wetness seeping down my ribs as the motor of my small motorcycle-like machine zoomed through space. “Come on.” I groaned, my vision blurring as the pain in my side throbbed.

“Alert alert” the inside of my helmet beeped angrily. White warning signs flashed in front of my vision.

“Come on.” I moaned, looking over my shoulder trying not to twist too much. “No,” I breathed as two other machines like mine raced towards me with guns flaring. Gripping the unfamiliar throttle-like control, I weaved the machine to the right, ducking down then up as bullets of light zipped past my head.

“Come on, come on, come on!” I urged myself, twisting the throttle farther still and slamming my foot down to shift gears as I dodged left and clumsily tried to drive the foreign machine.

“Halt!” I heard the creatures behind me demand, their deep robotic voices chilling before another round of shots were fired. This time the residual heat of one blast skimmed over the thin outermost layer of the spacesuit lining my arm. Its white hotness seared through my skin, tearing through the first layer of muscle. Crying out, my vision blacked out momentarily from pain.

Slamming my hand down on the blue translucent screen between the handles, I prayed someone would be close enough for my distress signal to be received. “Hello?!” I called out to my helmet, my voice shaky from pain and pure adrenaline as I wove my machine left and right avoiding the incoming targets that were shown on the face of my helmet screen. A weak purple pink barrier flickered in and out of focus as I tried to defend myself and began pushing any button-like shape on the screen between the handles.

“Please! Is anyone out there?! I need help!” I pleaded, my right arm going completely numb from pain now. I could feel my blood dripping down my arm under my space suit, making my hand slippery around the throttle. “Please!” I called again.

“Yes! We hear you!” a female voice came through the intercom of my helmet. Relief flooded through me. Anywhere had to be better than where I came from.

“Yes!” I nearly screamed, my voice cracking as another bullet grazed my machine causing it to rock unsteadily.

“We have coordinates locked on your location, what’s happening?” The female voice asked with purpose.

“I ran from Zarkon base. Being attacked. Please help!” I said, shifting gears again to dive downwards. “I’m injured. I don’t know how much longer I can fight.” Pushing my foot down and pulling my hands up, I used all of my energy to pull my machine upwards. I screamed as my arm burned, and I could feel the muscles tearing as my injured side protested in pain.Pressing random buttons until target lock ons appeared on the face of my helmet, I rocketed upwards towards the two machines flying over me.

“We are sending help now! I am Princess Allura and I have the Paladins of Voltron coming to save you. Please just hold out a moment more.” Allura commanded through my helmet.

“The wha-?!” my eyes shifted sideways to look at the small icon for her voice call before one of
the machines came into my peripheral vision, its engine steaming. “There,” I whispered, tightening my grip on the throttle again. I flew past them for a beat before letting go of the throttle and pulling my machine back downwards. Wincing as I twisted the machine completely over, when my right hand suddenly let go of the throttle without my command.

“No!” I cried in desperation as my machine slipped from my control, my arm hanging limply. I tried to hold myself in place as my body shifted upwards from its gravitational weightlessness. The second machine came swinging around, and my eyes widened as their bullets locked onto my position. My machine was useless with only one throttle working.

“Come on, come on.” I begged, revving the left side and trying to shift into a lower gear. But we were suspended in motionless space. Trying desperately to summon the last of my energy to push a protective barrier around me, frantically pushed buttons and revved the handles and gears next to my feet.

“We got you!” A male voice came from the headphone this time, a giant red blur stopping in front of me. “Guys, I’ve got her covered. You take care of the other dude,” he called. A flurry of ‘rogers’ briefly came through before my vision started to spot again, my head going light from loss of blood.

“Hey!” He shouted, “stay with me, we need to get to that opening can you manage?” A giant head-like structure moved in front of me with yellow tinted eye-like windows flashing.

“I can’t move. My arm is broken.” I panicked, my voice coming in fast shallow breaths. My chest tightened with a burning sensation. It felt like I was going to start hyperventilating.

“Hold on, I’ll come get you.” The male voice told me. I was briefly aware of a small explosion to the left of me, the light reflecting off my helmet before everything went completely black.

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Moaning, my eyes slowly flickered open to an unfamiliar room. Fear gripped my heart as I bolted upright, arms pulling into a defensive curl, I felt a thin bubble of energy appear in front of me before quickly disappearing. Wait, my arms were free? I glanced down at myself. I was still clothed and white bed sheets crumpled around my waist.

The sound of a small cough coming from my side caused me to gasp, my body automatically tensing. My eyes snapping upwards to the soft red energy curling around the male in the room. How had i not noticed him? Pushing myself as far away from him as I could my back hit a cool wall. I pulled my knees up to defend me with hands fisted ready to fight. “I’m not going to hurt you, I’m Keith, and you’re safe now.” He reassured me. His purple eyes glanced over me, causing me to shrink back farther.

After a beat, I lowered my fists so I could glance at his face. He looked at me with a straight face, his purple-black eyes showing a bit of concern, black hair tousled lightly as he casually lounged in a chair.

“Where am I?” I finally asked, my fists still tightly curled, muscles tensed to fight. My blue over-the-shoulder shirt with long flowing sleeves was hanging on the wall next to him. The hidden knives I kept in my sleeves were no doubt confiscated.

“In Aria castle. We picked up your distress call. You said you were fleeing a Zarkon base and were badly injured. We have these magic pod things that heal people, but you’ll probably be a bit sore.” Keith explained, moving the cuff of his red jacket up so that he could press a few buttons, “Yeah,
she’s up.” He spoke into a blue screen, his eyes flicking back to mine.

The memories seemed to flood back to my mind, my hand going to my right side instinctively, but no real pain was found. Gasping slightly, I looked down and I could see white bandages through my ripped black under shirt. “Thank you.” I breathed, my shoulders relaxing a little. A pang of sadness struck briefly as I came to the realization that this was the first time I had thanked someone in a long time.

“How did you escape?” Keith asked from his chair.

“I heard loud bangs, lots of shaking. Then a bright light and everything went black. When I opened my eyes my cell wall was broken. So many flashing lights. I ran. Found the thing I escaped on. I tried to get away but they chased me.” I recalled, my other hand ghosted over my bandaged arm. “I’ve never been healed like this before.” I murmured more to myself.

“Was the base entirely destroyed?” the familiar female voice came from in front of me. I flinched slightly out of reflex, my hand tightening around knives that weren’t there. She was accompanied by four other people. I tried to push myself further into the corner I was curled up in, unsure what their intentions were.

“I don’t know. Everything was red or black. They chased me as soon as I ran.” I answered, looking down slightly from the infirmary bed I sat in, feeling suddenly more trapped than before.

“Why would they go after just one person?” the tan, lanky looking male asked.

“I am their weapon. They wanted my power. They said it was important.” I said slowly, repeating the words they had spoken to me.

“The other aliens that kidnapped me gave me to Zarkon, trying to save their own planet. But he took me and killed them all.” I shuddered at the memory of the planet exploding, the energies on it instantly vanishing.

“Wait, kidnapped? You mean you’re not some kind of shapeshifter alien to gain our trust by looking human?!” the tan one exclaimed, completely shocked and dumbfounded.

I gave him a weird look “I am human.” I said carefully, not entirely believing my words. I didn’t know what I was anymore.

“Well…” He started before the shorter one with orange hair and round glasses shoved their elbow into his side.

“What do you mean kidnapped?” Allura inquired, sitting down at the end of the bed gently. Her eyes shone with sincere concern. I tensed slightly from her closeness, my hands twitching in reflex to defend myself.

I cast my eyes downward, squeezing my curled fingers tighter as they started to shake slightly. “Some years ago, I was exploring in the mountains on Earth, when I was in middle school I think, when I stumbled onto the aliens’ lab.” I replied, taking a deep breath, “when they saw me, they grabbed me and forced me onto their ship. After that it’s a bit of a blur since they tried to put their energies in me. I was just an experiment to them.” I closed my eyes, my chest starting to ache as I recalled the fuzzy memories.

Allura placed her hand lightly on mine which caused me to gasp, pulling it back quickly to my chest. Her face was slightly shocked but it didn’t look hurt. “Sorry, I’m not used to kindness.” I explained dejectedly.
“It is alright, no one on this ship will harm you, I promise.” She gave me a compassionate smile. I simply nodded, not really believing her. I hadn’t experienced anything other than pain, torture, fear, and sadness in a long time. This was too good to be true. Way too good. My throat felt scratchy and tight from how much I had been talking, my voice sounding foreign to me.

A few seconds of silence passed before I continued while looking sideways at the blank wall. “After a while, I don’t really know how much time passed. Zarkon ships came, because he wanted the aliens’ power. But they gave me instead. Yet, Zarkon killed them all. The one named Haggar took me, and the experiments got even worse.” I pulled my arms around my shoulders as they started shaking slightly, my breathing hitched. “They increased whatever the other aliens did to me then forced me to battle against huge monsters they created on their ship.”

“Take your time.” Allura said gently, giving my an encouraging smile.

I swallowed and nodded, taking a few deep breaths before starting again. “Haggar kept saying ultimate weapon. Taking my power, cutting me, making me fight, putting her power into me. More power, more power, more power.” I chanted quietly to myself, my nails digging into the tops of my shoulders as I tried to explain what they wanted. I breathed in deeply, trying to explain without getting too worked up. The feelings of anxiety started to creep up from within my abdomen and tighten around my chest again. “Then all the loud sounds and bright lights happened. My cell was open, so I ran, and somehow was found.” I finished quietly, I could feel my eyes welling up slightly but I bit my lip to force them back down. It had been so long since I had been around other humans, I wasn’t sure how to process everything I was feeling. I wasn’t even sure if I could trust them. I didn’t know what their intentions were, or why the rescued me.

“It seems like you have been through a lot,” Allura started softly, “please rest here as long as you need and when you feel comfortable we can talk more. You are safe here. I will have one of the people behind me stand outside the door so you feel secure. When you are ready please tell them and they’ll take you to the main rooms. For now, please rest.” She smiled at me again. “Keith, you take first watch.”

“Roger.” He said in a bored voice, pushing up from his chair and walking to the sliding door that the rest had started to exit through.

After they had all left, Keith eyed me as the door slid closed. Letting out a held breath I waited a few heartbeats before tip toeing over to the dark blue shirt that was hanging on the wall. Slipping my hand in the over-sized sleeves, I breathed out in relief. My knives were still intact. I pulled one out, the cold black metal comforting my burning skin.

Wait, why did they leave me with my weapons? Surely they noticed them when they took it off? I thought to myself as I slipped the knife back into place, pulling the shirt from its hanger and slipping it over my head, my side aching slightly. I felt more secure with the lightweight of my knives pulling down the sleeves.

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Taking a deep breath I slowly made my way to the door, my hand trembling slightly as I trailed it against the wall. I was just about at the door when it clicked open causing me to gasp, my fingers instinctively curling around a piece of cold metal and a small flicker of pink energy curling around me but I didn’t have the energy to keep its form.

“You are safe you know.” Keith’s voice floated through the door. Timidly, I poked my head out to see him leaning against the wall casually with his hands stuffed in the pockets of his black skinny jeans.

“I do not know safe.” I replied, hand relaxing slightly around the metal in my sleeve.
“You were on Earth.” He said, gazing at me in a bored manner.

“Maybe before I was taken, but I don’t remember those times at all. I can’t even remember my family’s faces.” I answered this time more quietly, looking down as my heart strings pulled painfully in my chest.

When I looked back up his face had softened slightly, “I’m sorry. Do you want to see the kitchen? Hunk will make you some weirdly delicious alien food.” He gave a small smile.

“Hunk?” I asked, more to myself than anyone else, but Keith pushed off the wall throwing a thumb over his shoulder down the corridor.

“Big teddy bear looking dude in orange.” He answered, smiling a bit.

I nodded in response, taking a small step outside of the room and feeling suddenly very exposed. Keith seemed to notice but chose not to say anything. He simply turned his back and started walking. Taking a deep breath I followed, tracing my hand along the wall as I did. My legs still felt weak, but I still kept my body slightly turned so that I could anticipate an attack from any angle. My fingertips brushed against the hidden knives in my sleeves.

After a few minutes another larger door slide open revealing the male named Hunk humming to himself and mixing together things that didn’t look like ingredients together. The orange haired one sat criss-cross on the counter, computer propped on their legs typing away as the blue light from the monitor reflected brightly on their glasses.

“Hey Hunk, think you can fix something up for-“ Keith paused, looking back at me. “Huh. What is your name?” he asked, suddenly realizing that he never even asked in the first place.

I blinked. No one had asked what my name was since I had been on Earth. When I didn’t respond Keith leaned down slightly to wave a hand in my face. I tensed, my hand reflexively grabbing a knife before I realized what was happening.

“Umi. My name is Umi.” I finally said, my name sounded strange as it rolled off my tongue.

“Umi.” Keith repeated, trying it out almost, “Hunk can you make Umi something to calm her nerves?” He turned and looked at Hunk.

“Sure thing!” He gave a warm smile causing me to look at him in confusion. “What? Never had a homemade alien prepped dinner before?” He asked in a joking manner before the orange haired one jabbed him in the side with their foot harshly.

“Dude!” The orange haired groaned, rolling her brown eyes. “Just ignore him, I’m Pidge by the way.” Pidge gave me a bright smile as she introduced herself.

I nodded, stepping into the kitchen area. Keith plopped down on a sunken rounded couch next to the counter tops. “Have a seat.” He gestured, kicking his feet up. I looked from the couch to his face again and back before finally sitting on the opposite end from him, my muscles still ready to spring at any moment and my back to a wall so I could see the whole room at once.

Pidge and Hunk were arguing lightly causing Keith to sling an arm over the back of the couch and yell at them to shut up. I tilted my head to the side. This was all so strange. Was it normal for people to interact like this? I didn’t remember. Watching their aurus wafting off of them they all had the same vibration of human. Except for Keith. His aura was slightly different, but still mostly human in nature. Squinting my eyes slightly I stared at him, his aura coming into focus as the other two faded away. As his aura came into focus, I recognized a familiar pattern of vibrations and fear.
engulfed me.

Gasping, I jolted from my perch, stumbling backwards as my heel caught on the edge of the couch, causing me to fall backwards. The commotion made them stop and look at me quizzically.

“Umi?” Keith questioned, moving to stand up.

“No!” I nearly screamed, pushing myself into the corner and curling my knees to my chest. Gripping a knife in my shaking hand, I could feel my energy trying to curl around me but I still didn’t have the strength.

“You’re- you’re like them!” I stammered, “The Galra! Not totally but-“ my voice was shaking, breath coming fast as my eyes stayed glued to Keith. Panicked adrenaline coursed through my veins. If there was a galra on the ship they must be taking me back to Zarkon.

“What are you… how did you…” he started before Pidge jumped from her spot, standing between him and my field of vision.

“Umi,” she called attention to herself, holding her small hand out unsteadily as if to take my knife. “Just because the ones who took you were evil, doesn’t mean every one of them is.” When I simply stared at her she continued. “I know you have been through a lot, and all of this is probably scary, but what Allura said was 100% true. No one on this ship will hurt you. Keith especially. I mean, he’s the one who carried you here after you blacked out.” Pidge explained carefully. Her light brown eyes were soft and caring.

“When you were in the healing pod, I took some of your blood to analyze it to see if you were human or not. It appears like your blood is mixed with a bit of those Druids. I’m guessing you can see our life forces or something… judging by your reaction to Keith here,” Pidge inferred, her hand brushing mine to take one of my knives.

“I am able to see the auras of the people around me. They are all different shapes, colors, vibrations. But every race has a very distinct vibration. That’s how I knew.” I explained, my muscles still shaking. “I can do plenty of other things, but I don’t want to hurt anyone unless I have to.” I looked sideways.

Pidge nodded as if she understood, “I’d love to see some time, but for now, how about we enjoy what Hunk made. It’s much better than the green goo they kept trying to give us when we first arrived,” She extended her hand towards me, causing my to shrink back further into the corner I was tucked in.

“You’re supposed to take it.” She smiled, holding it out to my again. I eyed it warily, trying to look past her to see Keith. His eyes were downcast, fists clenched slightly. He looked almost ashamed. Slowly I took Pidge’s hand, my eyes never leaving his. His aura was putting up a guard, something that happened when people wanted to hide their emotions. Unusual, why would he need to hide them? I cocked my head to the side studying him.

He seemed to notice my gaze because he looked back at me, our eyes locking for a brief moment. Suddenly, the room disappeared around me as I was consumed in bright red energy. It wrapped around me entirely, like a new layer of impenetrable protection. An unfamiliar feeling of warmth spread over my skin. His energy shone brightly, almost blindingly.

My breathing was the first thing I heard as my vision came back. My hands were braced on the floor and my breathing ragged and my body shaking slightly as the room slowly came back into view.
“Umi!” I heard multiple voices around me. Gasping I looked up, Keith was directly in front of me, purple eyes full of worry.

“Keith.” I breathed, my hands moving on their own they cupped his face lightly. He was only a few inches away, knelt before me. When my hands met his cheeks I could see the brilliant red aura curling away from his body. “Pretty.” I whispered, feeling completely at ease before everything went black again.

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“What happened?!?” Allura’s voice came into focus.

“I don’t know! She just stood up and then blacked out, came to, touched my face, said ‘pretty’, and fainted!” I heard Keith protest.

“Shh, I think she’s waking up.” Pidge’s voice came next.

Groaning slightly, I opened my eyes to another blank white ceiling. Gasping bolted up, my head instantly swimming and causing me to fall back onto my elbows.

“Are you alright?” Allura asked, in a concerned voice, moving into my field of vision. Her aura was a light blue that was calming and rippling softly like ocean waves.

I looked at her for a moment before slowly nodding, “His aura is so bright.” I said closing my eyes, the feeling of complete calmness washing over me as a faint red mist crawled up my body.

“Aura?” Allura repeated, giving me a confused look.

“Keith’s. It’s so pretty. And calming. And strong. I didn’t think I’d find such an aura.” I explained, my eyes still closed.

“Well that’s where the pretty came in,” I heard Keith grumble under his breath.

“She mentioned before she collapsed that she could see auras. I guess Keith’s just drained her a bit.” Pidge rationalized. I nodded in response, unsure how much information I should tell them. But I needed them to think I was valuable, so I had a better place to stay for the time being.

“It looks like you need to rest more. Please, sleep.” Allura said, patting my hand. “Pidge, I want to know more about this.” I heard Allura say, her voice fading as she walked back through the sliding door.

I heard the door slide open and close. It was silent for a few heartbeats but I could still sense his aura around me.

“Did you feel it too?” Keith asked in a soft voice.

“Feel connected?” I asked, opening my eyes so I could see him. He was leaned against the wall, arms folded over his chest with one leg cocked under the other.

“I don’t really know what that was. But yeah, I guess. It was like I saw you and then my lion.” He started, running his hand through his hair looking frustrated.

“I know it can look weird.” I said, “It was really scary when I was first able to see them. But, all of the ones around me were dark... evil” I paused, “Cold like death. When I felt yours,” I paused again, looking down, “It was one of the warmest things I have ever felt. I don’t think I’ve ever felt
He was quiet for a long time before he finally crossed the small distance and sat on the corner of the bed. “You don’t have to be afraid anymore.” He uncurled his hands, resting them on his knees. “When we connected, I felt a bit of what you’ve been through. I don’t really know how to put that into words, but I could also feel my lion telling me it was my job to protect you.” He paused before slowly reaching out and placing a hand on mine. I pulled back slightly, unaccustomed to soft touches. “So you don’t have to be afraid anymore.” He said, glancing down at me.

Biting my lip I looked away, unsure of what to say. The same red warmth from before ran lightly over my hand like a soft mist. “I don’t know how to trust people.” I confessed quietly. Why did I feel so vulnerable, yet so safe and assured?

“That’s alright. Just take your time. We are all here for you.” He reassured, patting my hand awkwardly. “Now, why don’t you try to actually rest. I’ll stay here until you fall asleep.”

“Mm.” I hummed in agreement, my head already falling back onto the pillow, a red mist-like cloud swirled behind my eyelids.

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“Is she asleep?” Pidge asked as Keith stepped out, clicking the light off as he entered the hallway.

“Yeah.” Keith replied, turning to Pidge. “I don’t know why but I feel connected to her.” he glanced down at his hand where he had touched hers. It felt oddly warm to the touch.

Pidge gave him a sly smile, “Already fallen for the new girl aye?” she raised an eyebrow.

“Shut up.” Keith retorted, pushing past Pidge to stride towards his room. Pidge’s giggles echoed behind him mischievously.

Keith laid on his bed staring blankly at the bunk above his, twirling his Galran knife aimlessly between his fingers. Sighing heavily he sat up. Sitting here was getting him nowhere. He needed to talk to his lion directly.

Walking out of his room he made his way to the red lion’s hanger. The closer he got the more it felt like he was being pulled by it.

“I hear ya.” He muttered to himself as he opened the garage door, planting his hands on his hips and looking up at it. “Now what?” He asked it before climbing up to the cockpit.

Sighing, he relaxed back in the seat, hands curling and uncurling the controls lazily, “I heard you. Now tell me what the hell I am supposed to do.” He sighed under his breath.
Beginning part 2

Slowly I opened my eyes, the room around me showing no sign of life. Sitting up I popped my stiff neck, groaning slightly. I could still feel the red aura lingering around me, light traces of red curling around my fingers where he had last touched.

“Now what?” I asked myself, slipping my feet out and placing them on the cold floor. Closing my eyes, I expanded my energy outwards, searching for the other energies. Bright flickers of blue, yellow, and green were pooled together in the room I had been shown last night.

“Weird,” I whispered, moving cautiously towards the door, expecting it to be locked shut. But again, like before, it slid open as I neared it. Slowly I poked my head out, looking in both directions before taking a step out.

“Morning.” Keith greeted.

Jumping sideways, quickly I grabbed my knife, my feet in a defensive position but no one was in front of me.

“Ok, noted, don’t sneak up behind you.” He chuckled. I blinked at him, pushing my knife back into my sleeve and trying to relax my stance slightly. I squinted my eyes wondering why had I not noticed his energy outside my door. I looked at the hand he had touched. The remaining red had disappeared. Maybe that’s why? I studied my hand intensely before he cleared his throat.

“Uh, are you hungry?” he asked, standing up. I placed my hand on my stomach, noticing how empty it was and nodded. He laughed a little before walking down the hall towards the other auras. He was easily showing his back to me, as if trusting I wouldn’t try and attack him from behind while he led the way.

“Are there others?” I asked quietly. He paused, looking back at me questioningly. “Other lions. Are they really real? I’ve only ever heard stories about it.” My eyes drifted towards the kitchen door.

“Sure are.” He gave me a coy smile, “Wanna meet them?” My eyes widened as he walked close enough to the kitchen door for it to slide open. As it did a burst of colorfully warm auras blew past me, leaving me completely frozen. Now that I had recovered more, everyone’s auras revealed themselves to me more easily. Their energies coming into focus, how I had not seen their impressive energies before? It must have been from my weakened state.

“Hey! Umi!” Pidge chirped, a bright green aura flowing around her eagerly.

“Hungry?” Hunk asked, his warm orange energy floating off of him easily.

“So this is her, huh?” The lanky tan boy called from the couch, a cool blue rolling off his shoulders.

I jumped, clutching my hand to my chest as Keith’s hand clasp my shoulder, red suddenly overflowing my own aura. “Let’s eat!” He said, gently pushing me forward into the colorful room.

I pushed against Keith’s hand as the door behind us closed, trapping me in the mass of warmth. Gulping, I stared at them, their auras overwhelmingly present.

“Sooooo,” The tan one said, springing from his seat on the couch and bounding up to me, “Name’s Lance.” He smiled at me strangely. I nodded, not taking his outstretched hand. “I know this is
probably weird for you, but usually you take the hand.” He noted, his voice light as he grabbed my hand with his other and pushed them together, moving them up and down once before letting go. “See?” He smiled again.

I withdrew my hand back to my chest, nodding at him again. This was all so over stimulating, I had never felt such warm auras before.

“Dude, chill.” Keith scolded, pushing Lance away as they started to argue playfully.

“Umi, over here,” Pidge cooed, patting the place next to her on the counter. Cautiously, I made my way away from Keith with my back to the wall and I stood next to her awkwardly. “You don’t have to be so tense, we don’t bite.” She smiled. I gave her a confused look and she laughed nervously, “It’s just an expression.” I blinked at her still bewildered before nodding, my eyes glancing down at her computer.

“Oh, this,” Pidge said, moving so I could see the computer screen, “I’m analyzing some stuff to find my father and brother.” I studied the picture in the left corner of the screen before looking back at Pidge.

“They were also taken?” I asked quietly.

Her eyes softened in a sad way, “Yeah, they were captured by Zarkon and I am going to find them. Did you see anyone like them where you were?” She inquired with a small glint of hope reflecting off her eyes.

I shook my head, “No, I’m sorry. I think I was the only human.”

“That’s alright.” She said, looking back at her computer, “I’ll definitely find them.” The green aura around her tightened from its loose flowing form with determination rolling off of it.

I looked at her for a moment more before nodding, my eyes drifting towards Hunk who was busy pulling something out of the oven. Keith was right; his aura was especially warm, almost motherly.

“Who’s hungry!” Hunk called, swinging a dish around and placing it on the table. It was a steaming mass of substances I had never seen before.

“Finally!” Lance said dramatically, grabbing a plate and piling it full, “I’m starved.”

“Hey, don’t take all of it!” Keith shoved his hand away before taking his own plate and filling it.

“Try some, Umi.” Hunk offered, putting a steaming dish in front of me. I took it gently, not sure how to receive it before looking at the people in front of me. They were all lounged on the couch, plates on their knees, and stuffing their faces.

“Umi,” Keith said, my eyes snapping to his. He patted the spot next to him, taking a bite of food with the other.

Carefully I made my way to the couch, sitting next to him trying to relax my coiled muscles. There was so much energy everywhere, and it was all bright and inviting. I had never felt anything like it before. Glancing at Keith, I picked up the same utensil he was using, copying his motions to pick up the steaming food and bring it to my mouth.

“How is it?” Hunk asked, his eyes on me.

I paused, glancing up at him before smiling and nodding. It was better than anything I had ever
tasted. It was warm and had actual shape to it, unlike the cold glob of food shoved under the door of my cell.

Hunk laughed, seeming to approve before continuing to eat.

I wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but eventually their conversations started to drop, and their energies becoming more lethargic than before.

“Time to hit the sack everyone.” A new voice announced I turned my head, my heart stopping for a brief moment as cool white enveloped the room. “Ah, you’re awake.” He gave me a gentle smile, “I’m Shiro, sorry for the late introduction. Some of us have been working rather than goofing off.” He gave a pointed stare to each of the people around me.

“Aw, come on, we have a new person here.” Lance complained lightly.

“That doesn’t mean you get to neglect your duties!” Shiro said, giving him a cool glare.

“But Shiro!” Lance protested.

“Bed. Now. We have a long day tomorrow.” Shiro said, his voice full of fatherly authority.

“Fine.” Lance grumbled in a defeated voice, “Let me know if you need anything Umi.” He turned around to give me a coy smile.

“Shut it.” Keith warned, pushing Lance’s face away and standing up. “Let’s go Umi, I’ll show you your actual room.”

I hesitated for a beat before nodding, looking at each of the people around me then followed Keith out of the door, my eyes glancing over Shiro’s as I left. The cool white aura was still inviting like the others, just more withdrawn. I studied him for a heartbeat before the door closed and Keith lead me down the opposite corridor.

“The room you were in was just in infirmary room. This is your actual room.” Keith explained, stopping in front of another sliding door before passing through, “Your suit is on the table. If you need anything, I’m in the room over to the right and Pidge is the room to the left.” He stood in the middle of the room with his hands on his hips. “Good?” he looked at me.

“Suit?” I questioned hesitantly.

Keith’s face softened a little, “If you are staying with us, you need a proper space suit. It’s an extra, but just in case it’s good to have”. He answered gently.

Keith took a step towards me as I reflexively took a step back, “I promised we would protect you. If you decide to join us, you could become one of us.”

I stared at him for a moment, my brain not processing his words, “I’ve never belonged anywhere before,” I finally confessed. Keith’s eyes hardened in response.

“Well, now you can belong here if you choose to. Again, if you need anything just ask,” With that he walked out of the room leaving me in silence.

Slowly I walked over to the desk, my fingers trembling softly as they brushed the black fabric and white armor covering my new space suit that laid there.

“I could belong somewhere?” I asked myself. The strength seemed to leave my legs as I fell down
onto the bed. This had to be some kind of trick. They barely knew me, yet were accepting me into their ship without any concern for their own safety. Confused yet exhausted, I closed my eyes and tried to rest.

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“No!!” I cried, thrashing against the burning purple restraints on my wrists.

“More power,” A cold voice commanded from in front of me.

It felt like my heart was being squeezed from the inside, electricity running through my veins and burning me from the inside out. I screamed in pain, pulling against the restraints, blood starting to drip down my arms from the tension.

“No!” the same voice instructed from the darkness before me.

My heart raced in my chest as a large needle appeared before my eyes and another restraint clamped down on my neck. “No!” I screamed louder, pure terror pulsing rapidly through my veins. I tried to evade the searing purple bands that were crawling up my neck, but there was nowhere to move. “No!” I continued to beg, tears stung my eyes as the icy tip of the needle pressed against my exposed sternum.

“Umi!” a different voice called from the dark abyss, the inky black starting to swirl with red.

“Umi, wake up!” it called again. I felt something hot grip my shoulders and shake them. “Umi!” the voice repeated my name, but this time it was right in front of me.

Gasping, my eyes flew open. I felt the familiar snap of energy burst around me. Light traces of lightening like energy crackled around me. Breathing heavily and eyes wide, Keith finally came into focus as he sat on the bed over me with his hands raised and palms forward. I noticed that his features appeared shocked for a brief second before he relaxed his position. He breathed out a sigh of relief, “Umi. I heard you screaming and ran in to help. You were thrashing around and shouting in fear? I think you were having a nightmare.” He tried to rationalize, exhaling once more in relief as the panic of his aura gradually settled and he positioned himself squarely in front of me. “Please, forgive me for touching you and shaking you.”

“A nightmare...” I echoed, my voice trailing as my racing heart started to even out. I wiped the sweat from my brow and controlled my breathing. “I thought I was back there.” I recalled softly. Sitting up, I could still feel the scorching heat of the searing purple hands ghosting over my wrists, but when I looked down there was nothing there.

“Well, you’re not there anymore and you’re safe now.” Keith whispered back, leaning forward slightly so that his forehead rested against mine as he exhaled once more, his drowsiness suddenly apparent and returning to him.

“Keith?” I asked, not sure what to do. The point where our foreheads met was hot, not only with the magnetic power of the red aura but something else. My body froze under his but not in a fearful way.

He cleared his throat and leaned back abruptly. “S-sorry, do you want to talk about it?” he stammered slightly, avoiding my eyes and throwing his hand behind his head.

I put my hand over my pounding heart, feeling that it still wasn’t back to normal yet. I could still feel the pain from the restraints and the probes that I was attached to. It made me shudder.
“It’s okay, you don’t have to.” He said after a moment, “Only if you want to.”

I shook my head, taking a shaky breath, and my hand clutched the fabric around my neck where my scars burned now. “I’m alright.” I said quietly.

He eyed me, not sure if he believed it or not before sighing and running his hand through his hair. He had changed into a loose black tank top and a pair of baggy shorts, his hair slightly messy from sleep. Keith motioned to get up, but then hesitated and appeared to be thinking about something. “Umi, I know it may not be my place, but you sounded really scared. Would you like me to stay here until you fall asleep? F-For protection, of course!” He asked, stammering awkwardly at the end, looking at me first then darting his eyes away.

I nodded slowly, leaning back and curling on my side, pulling my knees to my chest. I was so exhausted still but somehow I didn’t feel threatened by his presence at all. Instead, I felt a sense of calm security in the red aura now surrounding me. He nodded then sighed tiredly before scooting to the ground and leaning his back against the bed frame next to me. “It’s alright, you’re safe now. They can’t hurt you here.” He reassured me in a quiet voice, placing his elbow on his knee and resting his head on it, hand buried in his hair.

“Thank you.” I mumbled, my heart finally slowing, the calming presence of red curling around me like a protective shell. He hummed in response as I closed my eyes, the red shell now covering my body providing the security I had lacked for so long.

Thoughts swirled in my mind as I tried to sleep. Why did I want him to stay? I had no reason to trust him. But for some reason his energy tugged gently at mine, coaxing it to try and relax.

I wasn’t sure when I fell asleep, but when I woke up I was confused. Slowly I stretched my legs out, joints popping. I was about to flex my arms when my finger flexed around something. Freezing, my eyes focused on my hand where my index finger was curled around a soft warm figure. I blinked, puzzled before Keith’s black tousled hair came into view.

Inhaling sharply, I jerked my hand away, my legs reflexively kicking backwards to push me back against the wall away from him. I felt my heart pound in my throat. The sudden movement clearly startled him for he bolted upright dazed and confused. Standing in a fighting stance, muscles tense, his eyes finally fell on mine.

“Umi?” he asked, clearly perplexed and still half asleep.

“Keith.” I replied, hand clutched to my chest.

“What am I...” he paused, eyes drifting off as he recalled what happened. “Oh shit, I’m sorry if fell asleep in here.” He stammered, partially covering his face. I simply nodded, his aura was going all over the place in a flustered kind of way. “I didn’t mean to spend the night... I... I- I’m just gonna go. Yeah, I’ll be next door.” He finally said before nearly running out the door.

Only once the door had slid shut did I breath out. “What was that?” I whispered to myself, looking down that the hand that had been holding his.
I wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but the the longer it was, the more anxious I became. They kept telling me to rest until I was ready, but I had never been stagnant for so long.

I was finally able to convince the smaller one named Pidge to let me show them what I could do. I needed them to see that I was worth something; that they had a reason to keep me and not send me back, or leave me on some stand alone planet by myself again. I needed to prove to them that I had skills they could use to their advantage.

She agreed, but only on the condition that it was a training sequence meant to get my body moving again and make sure nothing was physically wrong.

The following morning after breakfast, I was lead to the training deck.

“Alright, these monitors will show us exactly how’re you’re doing. Just move normally.” Pidge said, sticking a final blue-lit sticker to the top of my arm. I tried not to flinch as I remembered the sharp needle-like probes the Druids would stick in me before their experiments.

I nodded, holding my arm out so that the sleeve was pulled back and inspecting the blue dots that now freckled my skin. “Are you ready?” Allura’s voice came down from a small control tower. I looked up at her and nodded, taking a few steps to the outer rim of the white training room.

“Alright, commence level one,” She announced while pushing another blue button.

“Commencing level one,” A robotic voice echoed throughout the room.

I evened my breathing as I stood in the center of the large training room as I tried to slow my suddenly racing heart, my hands closing around the cold metal of my knives. Taking a final deep breath, my feet slipped into a familiar defensive state, hands raise to attack and defend. Flashbacks of battles flickered through my head before a bell tolled and I clicked into survival mode. A white robot looking humanoid appeared in front of me carrying a long white rod.

“Her heart rate is calm, within normal limits,” Pidge noted before glancing over her glasses down towards me in the arena.

“She’s probably used to things like this,” Shiro responded in an empathetic voice.

The white robot stepped forward, raising its white rod to attack. I shifted my feet in response, tightening my grip on my knives. It was always best to see what your opponent could do before directly attacking. I had learned that the hard way.

The robot shifted its position to the balls of its feet, lunging forward with inhuman speed, rod pulled back to strike. Pushing my weight to my back leg, I lunged towards the robot as it swung, ducking below it and twisting around to roundhouse kick.

Landing a solid hit in the back of the neck, the robot stuttered for a second before whipping around swiftly, causing me to jump backwards to dodge its rod. I could feel the light pulse of electricity as it passed through the space my stomach had just been. My body tensed in anticipation as I repositioned my feet for its next move. It was fast; I had to give it that. Dodging left and right, I waited for an opening before sliding my knives back up my sleeve and grabbing the middle of the rod, using it as an anchor to swing myself at the robot. My feet colliding with my mechanical opponent’s head, I forced it downward before it caught one of my ankles throwing me off it. Clenching my teeth, I easily twisted myself around, throwing one of my knives at it which the
robot blocked with its rod.

Landing on the balls of my feet, I intercepted its punches. We boxed for a few beats more before I unclenched my hand. With the familiar feeling of electricity running through me, I charged up my hand as my energy sparked from the center of my palm.

“Ahh!” I yelled, dodging the robot’s rod again before slamming my hand into the middle of its chest. Pink-purple lightning crackled from my hand before it connected with the robot's trunk. Shards of lightning burst from its back and down through its body before it collapsed, twitching violently before disappearing.

Breathing heavily, I closed my fist, turning around so I could look at the box of shocked faces above me. The familiar feeling of being analyzed for worth washed over me. My stomach churned anxiously as I waited for their decision.

I nervously gathered my lone knife on the ground as I awaited their comments, trying to ignore the anxiety creeping under my skin. Usually the feedback was a few minutes delayed and then guards collected me. Although this time there were no guards so it seemed.

“How did you do that?!” Pidge’s animated voice nearly screamed through the intercom after a few more beats and caused me to flinch.

I shrugged, looking down at my hand again, “The aliens who took me did something to me. They called it a ‘Third Eye’. I think. It’s a spiritual power but I’m not sure. It comes out as electricity for me.” I frowned, looking at the energy rolling off my hands, “At least that’s what they had told me.”

“Almost like astral energy… is there anything else this ‘Third Eye’ can do for you??” Allura’s inquiring voice came through.

I nodded, pushing my black bangs out of my face, “I can create barriers around people. The thing they were trying to ‘perfect’ was something called astral projection. But I still can’t really do it.” I paused, “I mean, I guess I can. But it’s dangerous because if my spirit gets damaged or cut then I get hurt, or even die.”

“Hmm, barriers?” Allura repeated inquisitively, “If it’s alright with you, may we see?”

I nodded, trying to hide my confusion. Why was she asking permission? I had only been told what to do and how. Resuming my place at the far end of the white room, I stood to await my next artificial opponent. I needed them to think I was worth something, that they could use my power in order for my to stay on this ship until I figured out a way to get off. Anywhere had to be better than the place I came from.

“Commencing level 2” the same robotic voice called out into the room.

This time I didn’t go for my knives. Instead I took a defensive stance, inhaling deeply and clearing my head. Closing my eyes, I could feel my energy running through my body before taking on a circular shape around me and flaring out in a bubble-like shape.

Opening my eyes, I braced myself as the robot’s staff struck my barrier. It wavered slightly but my pink barrier held its shape. With a slightly staggered, breath I tightened my fists. Focusing my energy, I projected an energy version of myself out of my body. Gripping one of my metaphysical knives, I ducked down behind the robot before plunging the dagger into its metallic neck. Forcing my energy to conduct through the knife into the robot, I electrocuted my opponent from the inside
Taking a somewhat rugged breath, my energy self returned as the pink barrier flickered in and out before completely disappearing. The room around me was silent. I cautiously looked upward to see their startled faces. Looking away I crossed my arms over my chest.

“Umi, that was amazing. Do you know how big can you make the barrier?” Shiro asked genuinely.

I glanced back up at him. “It depends on what I’m doing. I can put it around other things like you guys, if that’s what you’d want. But if I’m fighting and shielding, it gets a little complicated. I’ve shielded his ship before, but I was locked in a testing room strapped to a table...” I mumbled the last part and shuddered slightly as those memories flashed through my head.

“That’s so cool!” Lance exclaimed, his face slipping into a grin, “you could help us defend the castle!”

I bit my lip and nodded before looking back down at the fluorescent white ground. My hands balled into fists again. This wasn’t as dark as Zarkon’s ship, but it was better than before. Everyone only wanted power. Power. More power.

Shiro reached over, pressing the mute button.

“She’s clearly been through a lot. From what I can tell she’s an experienced fighter only because she was forced to do so in order to win to survive. Her astral projection and barriers could be extremely useful but she’s not a weapon. We need to make sure she doesn’t think we are using her and that she is actually a part of this team like she just proved she could be.” Shiro explained, looking at each of the Paladins.

“Are we sure we can trust her?” Hunk asked, his voice wavering slightly. He knew that they already talked before Umi had woken up, but that was before they knew what kind of power they had tapped into. Yet, anyone running from Zarkon was generally a friend. He was conflicted.

“If she was sent here to take us out, she would have done so already,” Allura thought out loud, looking back down at the smaller girl.

“Allura’s right. She would have done her projection thing and killed us all. But they were shooting at her with the intention of doing harm. They knew they needed to bring her back and injured was most likely the only way they could accomplish that,” Pidge postulated.

“So, does this mean we have a new team member?” Lance hinted, his voice jumping with slight excitement.

“Looks like it,” Coran affirmed, glancing down at the human again, a small smile on his face.

“Well, it’s decided then. Keith, she seems to trust you the most so why don’t you go tell her the good news? If we all go down there she might think we are going to ambush her,” Shiro instructed.

“Right,” Keith obeyed before making his way down to the training room.

As the white door slid open, I eyed him warily wondering if he was the next opponent. The group’s energies had mixed together in the box for a few minutes before he had finally emerged alone. Keith walked casually up to me, hands stuffed in his back pockets. Finally, he stopped a small distance away from me, his cold eyes warming slightly as he smiled a bit and extended a gloved hand. I tensed, not sure what to expect.
“Welcome to the team, Umi,” He smiled as a cheer rang through the intercom above.

I blinked at him in total shock. My eyes going from his hand to his face and then back. Team, as in equals? They didn’t want to just use me for my power? That couldn’t be right, I was only a weapon, or part of a team.

“Go on, take it. You’re part of us now,” He encouraged, urging me to take his hand.

Carefully I slipped my hand into his. The powerful red aura from before engulfed both of our hands as he shook our interlocked hands firmly. I gave him a small smile. I wasn’t sure how to process all of this yet. “Thank you.” I said, squeezing his hand gently. He smiled a bit more in return, squeezing my hand back.
Sitting on my bed, I looked at my hand again, the one that had taken Keith’s. The one that had confirmed I was part of them. What did that even mean? I had never been part of anything before, I wasn’t even considered a living being, just a weapon to strengthen and use. But they seemed to want me for more than that. Their energies weren’t cold and analyzing like the druids’. It was warmer, more open, drawing my energy towards their own.

Sighing I sat up, closing my hand and suddenly feeling like I couldn’t breathe. My room was much bigger than the cell I had been kept in, but it still felt constricting. After seeing the large windows of the main room, I felt unnaturally drawn to them, craving their openness after being caged in a small cell for endless amounts of time.

Cautiously, I made my way to the sliding door, expecting it to be locked. But when I got within its reading distance it slid open, causing me to jump back in unease. I was still getting used to these automatic doors, let alone freedom. Taking a calming breath, I slowly poked my head out, looking down the hallway both directions. It was barren.

Silently I padded barefoot down the cold corridor towards the living area, the place I had seen with the most windows. Pausing just outside the open door frame, I listened. It didn’t sound like anyone was there. Extending my energy outwards slightly, I searched for other energies in the room but it was empty. Letting go of a held breath, I slipped into the living area making my way to the wall length windows and curling up in the corner of a pillow-cushioned window sill.

Leaning my head against the cool glass, I stared out into the vast emptiness, the flickering light of the stars the only source of light. The longer I sat there the less constricted I felt. It felt like coming up from a deep, deep dive, the pressure slowly decreasing the closer you got to the top. Closing my eyes, I listened to the quiet hum of the ship’s generator. We were stopped in some distant galaxy hovering among scattered stars.

A soft knock jolted me from my thoughts. Jerking around, I tensed ready to fight. I must have been so deep in my own mind to not even notice his presence approach me. Shiro stood at the living room entrance leaning against the door frame, knuckle held mid-air as if to knock again.

“Can I join you?” he asked, giving me a small smile. Hesitating slightly I finally nodded, my eyes tracing his movements as he made is way to the corner spot sitting down opposite from me, “Can’t sleep?”

I shook my head, looking back outside after I determined he wasn’t going to attack me. He wore a simple black fitted shirt and a pair of black sweats. After I didn’t respond further he continued, “It’s all a bit much, I know they can get a little out of hand when they are excited.” From his reflection in the glass I could see he looked at me briefly before relaxing into a sitting position and looking off into space.

“You were captured too,” I murmured, my eyes flickering back to his in the reflection. Dark energy curled off parts of his arm, a sharp contrast to his usual white. Glancing down at my own hands I could see the faint traces of evil energy wafting up from my own, “I’m sorry.”

Shiro raised his eyebrows in surprise then smiled softly, “How did you know? Was this my give away?” He raised his right arm and smirked before he continued, “I was captured along with Pidge’s father and brother a year or so ago. I was able to escape similarly to you, and joined Voltron shortly after.” He shook his head, “It wasn’t your fault, there’s nothing for you to
I nodded in understanding. “Does it hurt?” I asked quietly, still not looking at him. His aura was calming, the most calming out of all of them. There was a quiet stillness about it, yet beyond that there was a fierce protective feeling.

“My arm?” he clarified, running his left hand over it absently, “No, not really. I’m sure you of all people understand the pain behind it though.”

“Hmm” I hummed. It was quiet for a few beats. I bit my lip struggling to decide if I should tell him or not.

“So, what’s up?” he started without missing a cue.

“Your arm,” I paused, turning so that I could face him partly, “It’s connected to him. I can feel it.”

“What?” Shiro asked, clearly confused.

“Your arm, part of him is inside you, connected to you through it. He can find you if he used the Druid’s power.” I began slowly, not sure exactly how to explain it. His eyebrows still furrowed so I tried again, “From what I know, everything is connected to other things. Like... strings,” I put my hands up in front of me interlocking my fingers together. “If you know someone well your strings are tighter together and are strong. If you don’t know someone or are far away from them, the strings also stretch and are far or weak.” I then separated my fingers to demonstrate, “Zarkon has a single string tied to you. It’s small and light, almost like it’s not there, but it’s still a direct line to you.”

Shiro took a few moments to process this then finally spoke, “Alright, I think I’m understanding it. We are all connected with spiritual strings?” He looked at me for approval and I nodded once, “And depending on how close you are to someone, both physically and it seems emotionally, those strings can strengthen or weaken. They’re almost like physical bonds between people, you know, like the bonds you have between family, friends, and even enemies I suppose.” He trailed off and looked to space briefly before continuing, “Is there a way to remove this connection, to remove this bond?”

I nodded in agreement shifting slightly closer, my eyes narrowing so that the dark traces of Zarkon came more into focus. Perhaps I could sever the ties connecting them by astral projection. Zarkon had Haggar try to get me to do that before I escaped. It wasn’t perfected yet, but maybe I could do it. Now that I wasn’t surrounded by constantly encroaching darkness Slowly, I placed a hand in the middle of his chest, shivering as I felt the direct connection. “I could break it. I’ve done it before, but not much. It would just be hard and may be painful.” At least it could be painful for me if I didn’t do it right.

Shiro looked at me directly before placing a large hand on my shoulder, “It doesn’t matter if it’s painful or not. I want no part of Zarkon within me anymore. If it’s possible, I’d like to be freed again. Umi, please, can you do it?” he requested.

I paused, opening and closing my mouth before nodding. “It might be easier with the others around. You have strong ties with each of them so it will help make it so he can’t trace us.” I knew from experience that the stronger the bonds the more they were able to protect each other and could even obscure and blend together. Maybe this way Zarkon or Haggar wouldn’t find us when I worked on this bond.

“Alright then, let’s to it. Tomorrow.” He confirmed, giving my shoulder a squeeze, “Thank you,
Umi. I really appreciated it.”

“Shiro, why do you trust me so much?” I asked, looking back out at space.

“As hard as it may be for you to believe, Umi, I think you’re a good person. You worked hard to survive and escape, to not be consumed by the darkness there, and now are working hard to prove your dedication to the team. You’re a kindred soul and you’ve been through that hell just like I’ve been. I’ve been in your place and can empathize with you. I know you mean well, even if you can’t trust that from me right now.” Shiro explained softly, “we can also all feel our lions telling us that you are needed here. That you belong here.” He looked back at me through the reflection and tried to reassure me.

“I know it can be scary and overwhelming; this type of environment is something you’ve never been exposed to. I’m sorry that all you have known is hardship, but that all changed when we intercepted your distress signal. Now, you are one of us, and you have a permanent home if you’d like.” He gave me a warm smile. “I know it will take time to adjust, to learn that there are good people in the world. But I know you will learn and adapt. I hope you can be happy and heal here.”

My heart skipped painfully, an overwhelming sense of relief flooded through me. I curled my knees to my chest, hiding my face, “I’ve never belonged anywhere. Only belonged to someone as a tool to use. I don’t even remember my parents, or Earth....” My voice crackled slightly. So much had been taken from me. Each time I thought about it I felt the wounds reopen.

“The aliens who took me did terrible things to me then tried to offer me to save their race, but they all ended up dying anyways.” I continued quietly, shuddering slightly from the memory, “Even though I hated what they did to me, I would never want an entire race to die because of one evil being.”

Shiro’s eyes saddened, his hand slowly reached out before pulling me into a hug. I tensed, my energy spiking out in reflexive defense, unsure of what he was doing as he rubbed my back soothingly.

“You have a good heart even though terrible things have happened to you. We are fighting against Zarkon, and we will destroy his empire and save the universe.” He spoke in a soft voice, “and we will always protect you, we are a family now and we protect each other.”

“I’ve never had a family.” I replied quietly, sitting absolutely still until Shiro finally let go, leaning back so he could look at me.

“Well, we are your family now. If you’ll have us.” He smiled a bit.

I swallowed, not sure how to respond so I simply nodded. Shoulders still tense, I looked away unsure what I felt.

“Why don’t you go to bed now? It’s late and we have more training tomorrow.” He stood up, offering me a hand. Slowly, I took his outstretched hand, uncurling myself from the seat.

“Good night.” I said, letting go of his hand and walking quickly back to my room.

It wasn’t until the door was finally shut that I took a breath, looking down at the hand that had taken Shiro’s. I had felt his strong aura wrap around me in a protective manner, as if shielding me from all the bad in the universe. It was another kind of safe, different from Keith’s. It made me feel secure and a part of something bigger than us.

“A family...” I whispered to myself as I crawled into bed. Unfamiliar emotions bubbling inside of
me. Was it really okay to join them? Could I have a new family? One to stay with?

An alarm rang in my room, making me jump out of bed into a defensive position before I remembered it was just their way of waking up. Exhaling in relief, I walked over to the wall by the door, pushing the flashing yellow light that was telling me to wake up.

Yawning I stretched, popping my stiff joints before slipping on the black space suit Keith had pointed out before. Shiro suggested that I start wearing it to training to get accustomed to it. After a bit of struggling, I finally locked the breast plate into place, twisting from side to side to inspect myself in the mirror. Frowning, I felt naked without my knives.

“Umi?” Pidge knocked before her head poked through the door. “Rea-“ her eyes widened and she smiled, “You’re wearing it!” she exclaimed, her voice full of glee as she bounded into the room to grab my hand and drag me outside. She was wearing a matching suit only hers was tinted with green.

“Guys!” Pidge called, still pulling me behind her as she strode into the kitchen. “Look!” she pushed me in front of her, smiling widely. I tensed, trying to back up but she was right behind me keeping my in place.

“It’s Umi, we know,” Lance said, yawning dramatically before going back to his breakfast with droopy eyes.

“No you idiot, she’s wearing the suit,” Keith commented annoyed, slapping him upside the head.

“It looks good.” Hunk complimented warmly, smiling and handing us each a plate of steaming food.

I gave them a small smile, looking down not sure how to react with their staring.

“And she finally smiles.” Shiro acknowledged , giving me a tired grin and ruffling my hair as he entered the kitchen. I tensed, shaking my head away from his hand. He chuckled, taking a seat next to a very sleepy Lance.

“You guys ready for some more training?” Coran’s voice came from behind me, much too chipper for the morning. The group around me groaned, stuffing their faces with food further to avoid responding.

After breakfast we made our way to the training deck. Pidge was chattering aimlessly beside me but my eyes were wandering from the back of Keith’s suit to the anywhere else then back. She also tended to speak at a level where I had no idea what she was saying, and at a speed where her words slurred together, making it harder to understand.

“Umi?” Pidge asked, looking up at me with curious eyes. My attention snapped back to her.

“Hmm?” I hummed, my face suddenly feeling hot for some reason. Pidge eyed me then smirked at me slyly.

“Oh, nothin’,” she replied coyly, pulling her hands behind her head and walking with a small skip in her step. I watched her with confusion but didn’t press it further.
“Alright, let’s try it again. Keith, try shielding Umi this time.” Allura instructed from the control tower above us.

Keith nodded, backtracking steadily until his back was positioned in front of me, shield poised and ready.

“Begin!” she called as 4 white robots appeared and rushed the Paladins.

Closing my eyes briefly, I focused and pushed my spirit self out, touching each of the Paladins one by one as they positioned themselves to intercept the attack. A thin layer of pink covered their bodies for a moment before flickering out of view. Opening my eyes, I gently touched Keith’s arm, and the same pink layer covered his armor.

“Thanks,” Keith murmured before taking a defensive stance, blocking the robot as it swung at us.

I nodded in response, my eyes following each of the robots as they went after the Paladins individually. I began to attack the robots to defend where the Paladins’ backs were exposed. Delivering short bursts of lightning-like energy to the robots, I tried to give them an opening to finish them. With my attention split on numerous targets, my power was too thin and weak to actually take out the robots.

“Nnggg,” I winced, my astral self flickered in and out of focus for a second as a robot hit me from behind, causing me to stumble slightly.

“Keith!” Allura scolded, drawing his attention to me where he had left me exposed to attack.

He finished cutting down a robot before turning around and found me holding my side tenderly.

“I’m fine,” I grimaced, looking past him slightly to focus on my energy self. I managed to reshape it back to a full body. I moved my spirit self to touch Shiro’s and Pidge’s backs lightly, using the thin layer of energy I had put over them to expand outwards, and help them deliver their final blows to the last two robots.

“Training completed,” the same robotic voice echoed out, the white robots laying on the ground before disappearing.

“Phew,” Lance exhaled, wiping sweat from his brow, “they almost had us there.”

Bracing my hands on my knees, I tried to catch my breath. One barrier was hard enough, let alone 5 moving ones plus an extra. Coughing lightly, I noticed something wet on my hand.

“Oh no…” I breathed, trying to right myself and push the familiar churning feeling down but the world tilted sideways.

“Umi?” Keith cautioned, his voice wary before his eyes widened. My vision blacked out for a second, knees buckling and I faintly felt a light impact before my eyesight returned.

“Umi?! Keith’s voice was full of concern now. Blinking, I squinted against the harsh fluorescent lights of the ceiling.

“Umi, are you alright?” Pidge questioned, voice filled with concern. I shifted my eyes to the right, noticing that she was looking down at me. In fact they all were looking down at me. I must have landed on the ground.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized meekly, sitting up slowly as my head started to spin again. I touched my
nose expecting to find more blood but there was nothing.

“You fainted for a moment,” Shiro observed, looking at me like a worried parent. “I think 6 barriers and fighting is too much at once.”

I hummed in agreement, putting a hand on my head to try and stop the vertigo sensation. Using a lot of my power all at once usually did this to me.

“Here, Umi. Have some water, yeah?” Lance offered, handing me a clear water bottle. I took it, eyeing it for a moment before taking a long swig and coughing.

“Let’s stop for now.” Shiro suggested, standing up and looking up towards Allura in the command box.

“Agreed, let’s take a rest.” She concurred.

“How about some food? I’m starved!” Hunk announced, rubbing his stomach.

“Sounds good to me!” Lance agreed, giving him a light punch to the shoulder.

“During lunch there’s something we need to discuss,” Shiro mentioned to me before walking back towards the main deck.

“Huh?” Pidge pried, looking from me to Shiro. I glanced away, not really wanting to explain it. My energy prickled nervously at the sudden pressure of my new mission.
After we had all been seated with a bowl of green goo in front of us the atmosphere shifted from light hearted to heavy as Shiro took his usual spot in front of all of us and Allura sat in front of him at the head of the table.

“So, what is this thing that needs to be discussed?” she asked, taking a spoonful of goo.

“We have a problem,” Shiro sighed, looking at me.


“No, not with Umi. But with something she told me earlier. There’s apparently a connection between Zarkon and I, which is how he’s been able to find us. She is able to cut it, but it requires all of your presences,” He explained formally.

“A connection?” Coran repeated, looking confused.

Shiro nodded, taking a final bite of food before explaining what I had told him the previous night about bonds and his connection with Zarkon through his prosthetic arm.

“So she is able to to break the connection, and requires our own bonds to help reinforce and protect you?” Allura concluded, looking at me curiously. I nodded, not looking at her.

“If the rest of the you are in the room, it should be less difficult. It will take some time,” I answered in a small voice.

“Are we are sure this is how he’s been finding us recently?” Coran asked, a hint of doubt laced his voice.

I nodded again before Shiro interjected, “I can feel him in my head sometimes. It makes sense, so why not give it a try.” He paused for a moment, “I trust Umi.” He added and looked over at me.

I returned his gaze in slight disbelief before giving him a small nod. I’d try my best for them. I can prove my worth even more this way.

“Alright then, let’s do it after we rest a bit.” Allura finalized. Everyone nodded in agreement before finishing their food in silence. I suddenly lost my appetite, feeling very anxious.

“I’m going to go rest.” I announced quietly, pushing my chair back and heading out of the kitchen. I could feel curious eyes on my back but I didn’t dare turn around. Once in the hallway, I all but ran back to my room, the crushing feeling returning to my chest. Leaning against the door I slid down it, with my hands on my head, breathing heavily.
What is happening?” I asked myself between staggered breaths. My chest felt uncomfortably tight and my throat tried to close in on itself.

“Umi?” Keith’s voice came through the metal door, two sharp knocks shortly following. “You okay?” he asked with concern.

“Yes.” I responded promptly, trying to control my breathing and tone. My voice sounded rugged and uneven though.

“Uh huh,” I heard him mumble sarcastically before the door slid open, my back suddenly supported by air I tipped backwards slightly before his leg came up behind me to stop my fall, “Totally fine,” He joked lightly.

I regained my balance and moved away from the door frame to sit with my back pressed against the base of the bed. He waited for me to scootch back farther so he could walk in before taking a seat on the floor in front of me me.

“So, what’s up?” He prompted, casually leaning back on his hands this time, giving me an open chest as if to show he was ready to listen.

I took a minute to answer, and he waited patiently, his eyes watching me carefully. Even though he was was just observing me, it didn’t feel as though I was being studied like an experiment like I would be back on Zarkon’s ship. Instead, his expression was warm and his aura was open, as if wondering what could be bothering me and trying to understand me. Sighing a final time, I looked at him directly, and his eyes cut through mine making my heart jump.

“Why do you trust me? Shiro is your leader. What if I fail? I want to help because you saved me. But it’s always been just me and working with other people is… harder.” I admitted quietly looking down, the pressure of the situation releasing like punctured air container as I tried to explain myself. The built pressure in my chest finally releasied as I talked to Keith.

Keith was quiet for a moment. When I looked back up he gave me a soft smile. “Shiro is our leader so he is important, you’re right. But so is everyone on our team. If he trusts you to do something as dangerous as cutting a tie with Zarkon then he has faith in you and you shouldn’t have to worry because he already knows you can do it. If he thought for even a second you could jeopardize this team, or this mission, then he wouldn’t have agreed to it.”

When I was silent he continued, “So what I’m trying to say is that he knows you can do this without any hesitation. You should have some confidence in yourself. You’re already a great fighter, and can do some pretty cool stuff as far as I’m concerned.”

“Cool?” My ears picked up on the word.

“I think so. So does everyone else. You have an ability none of us have ever seen before. Your power doesn’t make you scary, or bad, or anything like that. It defines you and you should own it as your own. I’m sure you can do it. Just rest a bit since training seemed to take a lot out of you today.” He finished finally and waited for my reply. His aura radiated with warmth, reaching out towards mine, trying to console my reluctant uneasiness.

“Thank you.” I replied, not sure what else to say. “I’m not used to things like this,” I looked back up at him; his features were soft, position relaxed.

He nodded onced, “That’s understandable. It’ll take time, we all know it,” He shrugged as if it wasn’t a big deal.
I nodded, uncurling my legs slightly so that it wasn’t like a wall was between us anymore. Keith watched me carefully and seemed to accept the change in posture. We sat there in still silence for a while, neither really wanting to move. I enjoyed just sitting in his presence, his aura fluctuating around the room gently.

“Keiiiiiiittttttth!” Lance’s voice barreled down the hallway shattering our silence abruptly.

“Lance!” Shiro’s voice was heard next before a few loud thuds.

“But he’s getting to know her the most!” Lance complained loudly from outside the door.

Keith and I looked at each other then to my door before it slid open. Lance tried to charge in but Shiro grabbed him by the back of the shirt and dragged him out, kicking like a child.

“You just have to wait your turn,” Shiro scolded in a stern voice as he pulled the other boy away, the commotion fading down the hall before the door slid shut again.

Keith and I stared at each other again before we burst out laughing.

“God, Lance,” Keith snickered while running his hand through his hair.

“What was that?” I laughed, my eyes tearing up slightly. I couldn’t remember the last time I had laughed. Is this what it was like? I felt an uncontrollable bubble of emotion that felt so foreign I wasn’t sure what to even call it.

“He’s just being impatient as always,” Keith laughed, trying to control his breathing.

“Is he always like that?” I asked, wiping the tears from my eyes.

“Yeah…,” Keith dragged his response out, chuckling a few more times.

I laughed quietly, nodding, “Okay,” I finally said, catching my breath.

“At least he made you laugh,” Keith mentioned, giving me another crooked smile, his purple eyes sparkling slightly.

“I didn’t even think I could,” I admitted, leaning back against the bed frame and relaxing my tense stomach muscles.

“Well, you better get used to it. I should let you rest now.” He finished, putting a hand on his knee and standing up, “We’ve got a lot to do tonight.” He extended his hand to help me up. I took it this time with less hesitation.

Taking a deep breath, I let go of his hand. We seemed to hold it for longer than him hauling me upwards. He rubbed the back of his neck, looking down slightly, “Rest well. Come get me when you are feeling better.” He gave me a final small smile before stepping outside into the hallway.

I looked down at my hand, the same red energy curled around it softly, and a warm feeling crept up my forearm. “Weird,” I murmured to myself before turning off the light and curling into a ball in my bed.

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I wasn’t sure how long I was asleep for, but eventually my eyes opened to the groggy blackness of my room.
Sitting up, I popped my neck and back slowly waking my body up. I could feel the renewed energy within me, curling around me and energizing me. I could do this. Closing my hand into a determined fist I took a few more deep breaths before walking towards Keith’s room.

Once I was standing in front of his door, I felt a sudden sense of nervousness. Why? I had no idea, it felt like my stomach was churning in the good way. Inhaling slowly, I rapped my knuckles on the cold metal lightly.

“Keith?” I called out softly.

“Yo,” His voice came from the other side, the door sliding open to him laying on his bed, legs hanging off lazily.

“Oh, were you sleeping?” I asked, taking a step into the room hesitantly.

“Nope, you’re good.” He replied, twirling the knife in his hand a few more times before sitting up and sheathing it back into the holder that was attached to his hip. “Ready?” he checked, finally looking at me. I nodded, bringing my hand up to my chest and clenching it. He smiled, “Good.”

Together we walked back to the common area where the rest of the Paladins were hanging out. Pidge was sitting with her computer on her lap, typing away furiously, while Hunk sat opposite of her tapping away at his own holographic screen. Lance and Shiro were arguing lightly about something, and Allura and Coran were discussing matters between themselves. Once we stepped into the room, Shiro’s attention turned to us while Lance continued to talk enthusiastically.

“Good, you’re here. Are you ready?” he called across the room. Everyone stopped their activities and turned to me, making me feel small. Inhaling nervously I nodded, suddenly feeling anxious before Keith’s hand clamped down securely on my shoulder. I gasped, looking up at him. He smiled at me.

“You got this,” He assured me in a quiet voice before guiding me into the room completely.

“Alright!” Pidge readied, closing her computer and uncrossing her legs. “So, what do we have to do?”

I breathed in deeply before I sat down next to Shiro as Keith took the side opposite of me.

“I need you all to focus on Shiro and only Shiro,” I instructed cautiously, “then all of your bonds should become very bright and I’ll be able to see Zarkon’s.”

“And what should I do?” Shiro asked, putting an arm over the back of the couch.

“I need you to focus on your own energy: Your tie with the black lion, your teammates, yourself. Don’t focus on Zarkon. That will only make it hurt more.” I answered, looking back at him.

“Please sit there,” I pointed to the middle of the room, “and you all make a circle,” I tried to explain the best position for them all to effectively support their bonds and support Shiro. The circle acted like its own barrier of protection with everyone’s bonds encompassing Shiro’s while illuminating Zarkon’s.

“Close your eyes and be still,” I continued, “it shouldn’t hurt the rest of you, but Shiro, this might hurt a bit depending on how deep he tried to make the bond.” I gave him a worried look but he simply nodded.

“If it means breaking the connection with him, I’ll do whatever it takes.” He gave me an
encouraging grin, patting me on the back. I bit my lip and nodded.

“Ready?” I asked, eying the rest of the Paladins, Allura and Coran. They all nodded back, appearing confused but eager to try and help, determination on their faces.

After everyone was in their positions, I sat down in front of Shiro. He gave me one more small smile before closing his eyes, inhaling deeply before exhaling, the muscles in his shoulders and back relaxing completely. His white aura which had vibrated with minor anxiety now evened itself out and closed itself around Shiro’s silhouette, wafting off of him in relaxed movements, like fog rising off the cool ground. I glanced around the room to see the rest of the Paladin’s doing the same, each one now slumped slightly in their sitting position with their auras overlaying their bodies in the same fluctuations, each matching their owners heartbeats and emotions. Keith was the last to close his eyes. We locked gazes for a brief second before he gave me a crooked smiled and closed his eyes. The energy in the room calmed, turning almost silent.

Inhaling deeply and calmly, I closed my eyes, letting my mind go blank. The feeling of the other auras around me soothed my creeping anxiety. “I’m going to start now,” I whispered, reaching out my fingers so they lightly touched Shiro’s chest, just above his heart. He didn’t jump. His body still relaxed and I could feel his steady heart beat under his skin.

Focusing my breathing and keeping my mind calm, I pushed my energy self out towards Shiro. It wrapped around him gently before light burst before my eyes. White strings stretching from every direction filled the room. I could feel his energy pulsing calmly through everyone as it reached out and touched each of the Paladins. A bundle of white strings directly connected each of them through the chest and created an luminescent glowing web that pulsed in a synchronized rhythm. It was amazing. Slowly I started to work my way through the maze of strings, going through each fiber meticulously and searching for the one that didn’t match the others’ cool whiteness.

I was about halfway through the strings in front of me when I noticed a few thin strands protruding from my chest connecting to his. We had only known each other for a short time, but we had already started to form a bond. It was warm and secure, like nothing I had ever felt before. Smiling a bit, I pressed my fingers into his chest a bit more before continuing my search.

My astral self continued to gently pick through the strands before one suddenly shocked me. Gasping softly, my fingers twitched against his chest. Pulling on the same strand again, I felt a jolt of pain run from my fingertips to my heart. Wincing, I focused on that strand. Its color was a light purple. It pulsed irregularly against the other strings and had frayed edges.

“Found it.” I breathed, slowly pushing my fingers outward until my whole palm connected with Shiro’s chest.

Carefully, I pooled my energy into my palm. The purple strand began to quiver, as if knowing something was trying to break it. Turning my energy on the single strand, I tuned out the rest of the thousands of white strings coming from his chest until I saw just the single fringed purple one. Its light started to pulse more violently as I narrowed in on it.

Finally, the diseased strand was singled out before me. Gradually, I retracted my fingers, pulling them into a fine point on his chest I heard Shiro groan softly, causing me to stop immediately. I knew it was going to hurt, but that didn’t mean that I wanted it to.

“It’s alright, keep going.” He grimaced softly, feeling my hesitation.

Breathing deeply once more, I refocused on the purple strand. It started to shake, its frayed edges growing bigger like thorns, digging into my palm and his chest.
“Okay,” I said to myself quietly after taking another breath. Completely closing my fingers, I gently started to tug on the strand. I could feel it embedded deeply into his chest, not quite at his heart, but it was trying to wiggle its way there like a parasite. It latched onto the muscle tightly. Shiro winced but resumed his still position.

Focusing the rest of my energy into my fingertips I started to push it onto the string. I could feel my fingers begin to bleed as I wrapped my energy around it, using the lightning-like behavior of my energy to shock only the purple string until it started to loosen its hold on his muscle. In that moment, I pulled my fingers away from Shiro’s chest, drawing the purple strand with me. I could feel it tearing Shiro’s muscles, and he clenched his fists trying not to tighten his chest.

The connection started to go wild suddenly, finally realizing that it was being removed. It released a large electric shock, causing us both to cry out in pain. My grip on the string slipped slightly and it took this opportunity to try and latch onto Shiro again.

“Sorry, this will hurt,” I murmured, before sending a larger jolt of energy through my hand and around the throbbing string. Shiro let out a pained sound but remained still. The parasitic string seemed to screech in pain, its sound piercing my ears painfully as I pulled it back out again. It desperately clutched to the last layer of Shiro’s skin, jagged edges vibrating violently in an attempt to make me let go. Finally I wrapped my entire hand around it, my energy running through it like a live wire before I tugged again. A loud popping sound rang through my ears before the string curled around my hand, its edges cutting into me as it tried to bury itself into my skin. Wincing, I formed a layer of thick energy around my hand, completely electrifying it. The purple string screamed in pain again before withering then disintegrating into the air around us. It was over.

Breathing heavily I opened my eyes. Shiro was clutching his chest, a pained expression on his face, but he still gave me a small smile. “Umi, you did it.” He said in a gruff voice.

I nodded, uncurling my hand to see it was covered in long deep cuts. “I’m sorry it hurt.” I apologized, my hand shaking mildly from pain and I slumped backwards from loss of energy.

Shiro shook his head, “It wasn’t nearly as bad as I thought it would be.”

“So, it’s done.” Lance asked, peaking an eye open “I didn’t feel anything. Pretty sure I took a nap.”

“Dude.” Hunk chided, giving him a quizzical look.

“We weren’t supposed to feel anything, Lance;” Pidge replied in an annoyed tone.

“Shiro, are you alright?” Keith inquired, getting up and walking over to him.

“I’m fine, I think Umi got more damage than me though.” He noted, looking at my quivering, bleeding hand.

“I’m alright.” I responded curling my fingers in again, I could feel the blood running between them, my palm stinging slightly.

“Don’t downplay it. I saw what was happening.” Shiro denounced, “it was like a thorny parasite.”

Keith looked from Shiro to me, then down at my hand. “Show me your hand,” he demanded, stepping over to me.

I shrunk back a little before sighing and unclenched my hand. Keith’s eyebrows knitted together in worry when he saw the deep gashes running across my palm and fingers.
“We should get that treated, can you stand?” he asked, offering me a hand.

My gaze fell onto Shiro, “You also need treatment.”

“Yeah, I think I need something. It feels like the muscles are torn.” He replied, wincing a bit as he used Lance’s shoulder as support to stand up.

I nodded before taking Keith’s hand, pulling my injured hand into my chest and leaning against him. This process took more energy than I thought. My eyesight was becoming fuzzy around the edges.

“So, what happened to the connection?” Pidge questioned before we made it out the door.

I looked back at her and smiled a bit, “It’s gone. My energy stopped it.”

“Cool!” She beamed, sitting back on her hands.

“Uh huh. A parasite-like thing embedded into Shiro that got ripped out and had to be electrocuted to kill. Sure. Cool.” Hunk recapped, his face full of disgust.

“Guys, chill. It’s over now. They need to rest,” Keith reminded them with his arm wrapped around my shoulder.

“Hey!” Lance suddenly exclaimed, “Why are you getting all touchy-feely with Umi! I want to help! Let me take her to the healing room!” He went to move away from Shiro but Shiro gave him a disapproving look.

“You can help by taking me.” He insisted, his arm wrapped around Lance’s waist which he used to support himself while exiting the room.

Once they were a decent distance down the hallway, Keith turned to me, “Are you okay to walk? You look a bit pale,” He eyes looked me up and down and his brow furrowed in concern. I nodded, leaning reluctantly into him a bit more.

“I just need to sleep that’s all,” I answered, closing my eyes and letting the warmth from his aura cloak me.

“Okay,” He said, moving his arm so that it was under my arms for support as we made our way to the hospital wing.

When we got there, Shiro was already sitting on a white table, shirtless, pressing white gauze into his chest. He looked up as we approached.

“Looks like there’s only a small bit of torn muscle, nothing too serious. Umi, thank you again. I’m sorry you were hurt in the process as well. But I appreciate your help. We couldn’t have done it without you.” He smiled as he thanked me, his white aura calmly flowing around him with a comforting warmth.

I nodded back, giving him a small smile before Keith hoisted me up onto the table. Gasping from the sudden movement, my arms clenched around his neck in a vice-like grip.

Keith tensed, his hands automatically motioning to remove my grasp, “Umi… can’t breathe,” He choked, tapping my arms quickly.

“Oh, sorry!” I stammered, letting go, my face burning.
“Remind me never to wrestle you,” He chuckled, rubbing his neck gingerly.

“Wrestle?” I tilted my head to the side.

“It’s a type of fighting,” Keith replied before looking at the vast array of medical supplies. “What the hell is all of this?” he picked up a packed of clear goo with a cautious expression.

“Here, this is what you want. Disinfectant and accelerated healing,” Shiro tossed a silver package towards Keith who caught it easily and eyed it. “It’s what Coran gave me for my cut,” Shiro moved the white gauze away from his chest, “See, I’m already healed. He put another ointment on this that I need to hold to my chest to completely heal the muscle,” He shrugged. “Alien meds, man.”

Keith nodded before tearing opening the packet and peering inside. His nose wrinkled when we saw a gooey green slime-like substance inside.

Puzzled at his expression, I tilted my head to the side, “Is it bad?” I asked.

Keith laughed under his breath before setting the package down, “We should probably wash your hand out before putting anything on it.”

He moved to pick me up again but I stiffened up again, pushing away from him slightly so that I could slide off the table on my own. I was unaccustomed to people picking me up unless it was to throw me in a fight. It was still not used to to soft touches like this.

Hissing in pain, I forced my mauled hand under the warm running water. The water turned the color of blood as I washed out my wounds., Keith motioned over to the antiseptic soap on the sink. I winced once more while applying soap and cleaning my hand thoroughly. Drying my hands on the front of my shirt, I examined the wounded one closer. The skin around the cuts was an angry pink, throbbing painfully at rest.

Keith, gestured for me to sit back onto the medical table.

“Thank you.” I said, appreciating the fact that he didn’t try to pick me up this time and respected by boundaries. I could feel Lance glaring at Keith as he took my hand in his to gently prying open my shaking fingers.

“Now, this might sting a bit.” He warned in a soft tone before squeezing out a spoonful of the goo from the package, shaking it slightly so it disconnected from the rest of the container, and applying the medical cream on my hand. Flinching, I pulled against his hand but he closed his fingers around my wrist trapping it. “I’m sorry,” He murmured before spreading it further into the deeper cuts.

I closed my eyes, breathing through my nose. It stung like when you put your hand into freezing water, but then soothed out after adjusting to it. Regardless, it was much better than anything the Galra had done to me to heal my battle wounds.

Keith turned my hand over, making sure he thoroughly gooed my hand and before finally releasing me..

“There, all done.” He finished, prompting me to open my eyes. Inspecting my hand, I looked at it in amazement. I could feel the torn muscle of the deeper cuts starting to stitch back together, the angry pink lines fading slightly, and the throbbing had dulled to soft pangs.

“Wow.” I breathed, turning my hand over.
“Now we just need to wrap it until it’s fully healed,” Keith instructed, taking my hand again and grabbing some of the gauze from Shiro’s bedside table. I allowed him to hold my hand this time, relaxing it as he gently wrapped it.

“Is this how you care for your battle injuries?” I asked after he finished. It was snug but not too tight, and wove between my fingers easily. I had never had my wounds treated like this before. Zarkon’s Druids usually plunged me in a tube of quintessence leaving me submerged for hours until my injuries had fully healed.

He shrugged, “I got into a lot of fights as a kid. I just became used to wrapping myself up,”

I simply looked at him, but he didn’t elaborate so I let it go. An awkward silence hung between us before a loud, angry sounding muffled scream came from our right.

Turning my head to the sound, I saw Lance in a headlock, Shiro’s hand covering the angry-eyed blue Paladin’s mouth. When he saw that we had finally noticed them again he let go of Lance, who promptly fell to the floor before scrambling up.

“What’s with this flirty atmosphere, Keith?!” he demanded, jutting a finger in front of Keith who simply looked at him in annoyance.

“It’s called taking care of a fellow teammate,” He retorted coldly, glaring at Lance.

“Uh huh, sure!” Lance protested before wiggling in between us. “I’m going to take her back to her room before you mind-swoosh her even more!”

“Mind swoosh…?” Keith asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes.. Mind swoosh!” Lance repeated before turning to me and taking my good hand, “Come on, Umi. I can escort you from here,” He pulled me off the medical table and started towards the door.

“Yo, dude, be careful-“ Keith started before I suddenly felt the room spin around me rapidly and the corners of my vision started to black out. My knees buckled and I collapsed onto the ground. Everything went black and I fell in and out of consciousness. “She’s tired…” He finished, sighing heavily.

“Lance…” Shiro groaned under his breath, covering his face with his hand and shaking his head.

“Move, I’m taking her,” Keith grumbled, shoving Lance’s shoulder before pulling the me into his arms. “Did you not notice how pale she was?”

“She’s always pale! How was I supposed to know know?! I’m sorry…” Lance replied in a dejected voice, looking like a hurt puppy.

Keith gave him an annoyed grunt before moving past him and back down the hall.

“Aww, come on,” Lance continued to pout.

“Lance, you need to be more careful and aware of a teammate’s condition,” Shiro lightly counseled, hopping down from the table and patting the younger male on the shoulder.

“But, Shiro… Now she’s totally gonna fall for him before she even has a chance to fall for me!” Lance whined dramatically.

“I think she already did, bud.” Shiro smirked, giving him a squeeze on the shoulder, “They have
quite a different bond already.”

“Totally not fair.” Lance griped in a defeated tone. “I need to go pamper myself!” With that he stormed off down the hallway and over to his room.

Shiro sighed, shaking his head and laughing a little before walking back towards the others.

Exhaling, Keith gently laid me down onto my bed. He noticed my cheeks were still barely flushed, but her breathing was returning to normal at least.

“Sorry about Lance,” He whispered, absently running his fingers down my cheek, “He means well, but just doesn’t always use his head.” He smiled a bit, withdrawing his hand and pulling the covers over my tired body.

“Rest well, Umi, you deserve it,” I heard him whisper to me as he exited my room.
Groaning, I opened my eyes, my head throbbing.

“Keith…?” I mumbled, my voice thick with sleep. The room around me was dark with no other energy around it. Putting a hand on my head, I swung my legs over the side of the bed.

“Oh, course he’s not here.” I answered myself out loud in a quiet voice. I stood up to move towards the shower’s sliding door.

I wasn’t sure how long I had been asleep, but after Pidge had quietly told me that most humans shower once a day, I had become more self conscious about it. On the Galra ship my only form of “shower” was being thrown into a room and sprayed with icy cold water that seemed to choke the breath from me. So after I had been staying with the Paladins for some time, Pidge kindly showed me what it meant to shower.

Stumbling, I unlatched the weighted gold sash around me waist, its heavier material making a soft thudding sound on the floor as I let it fall. Pulling off the oversized dark blue shirt next, folding it carefully so that the hidden knives wouldn’t tear through the flimsy material. Unzipping my thigh high boots, I let them lean against the bed carefully, before finally peeling off the tight black spandex like suit that I wore under my outfit, stepping out of the matching black tights as well. Avoiding looking at myself in the mirror hanging next to the shower door I grabbed the towel on the wall, wrapping it around myself tightly before pulling my hair out from its usual bun twisted on the right side of my head and drawing it over my shoulder. My fingers lightly brushed over one of the many scars I had covering my back and my heart skipped painfully in my chest as a sudden rush of sadness and shame shot through me. I shuddered, memories of the experiments and torture flashed before my eyes, but I quickly pushed them down as it was too painful for my brain to process. As I entered the bathroom attached to my room, the automatic lights flashed on suddenly.

Light flooded my vision, making me wince as I covered my eyes. Letting them adjust to the white lights after a minute, I dropped my hands to my side and I sighed in frustration. There was a tile-walled room in front of me, a shower head, mirror, and a mass of alien inscribed buttons.

Running my fingers through my long black hair in frustration I walked back to the main door. Taking a deep breath, I let door slide open, peaking out both directions and found it was quiet.

“Okay,” I told myself, pulling the towel tighter around me as I tiptoed to the left. I paused in front of Pidge’s door, feeling her warm green energy pulsing through the door before I knocked gently.

“Lance, I told you that I don’t know any-“ The door flew open and she stood with her arms crossed over her chest with an annoyed expression painting her face. It dropped immediately when she saw me standing in front of her in a towel.

“Oh, hey, Umi! Are you feeling better?” she asked, her face softening.

I nodded, biting my lip and tightening my hand around the towel, “I uh…can’t” I tried to explain my situation, but I found myself suddenly feeling embarrassed.

“Figure out how to use the shower? Yeah, I know it’s super weird,” She managed to read my mind and smiled at me, “Here, let me show you!”

I sighed in relief, giving her a smile and backing up towards the door.

“No problem, I had the same issue when first tried to shower here!” Pidge explained lightly while
leading the way back to my room.

“So, you’re really okay, Shiro? No more connection?” Keith’s voice drifted down the hall. My shoulders stiffened.

“Nope, nothing! It’s amazing. I can even feel the difference.” Shiro’s voice replied back. I felt their energies creep up behind me and I didn’t dare turn around. “Umi?”

“Are you feeling better?” Keith’s voice came from right behind me. His voice sounded uneasy and his red aura began to spike around in erratic patterns. I nearly choked on my own breath, twisting so that my back was to the wall, my face feeling unnaturally hot.

“Okay, let’s go.” Pidge diverted, grabbing my wrist and pulling me away from the wall. “Nothing to see here.” She glared at Keith as she walked back through my door, it sliding shut in their faces. Taking a deep breathe I looked at Pidge, “Thank you.”

“Oh, no prob.” She gave me a mischievous grin, her green aura danced around her in a strange pattern.

“What?” I asked, looking at her warily.

“Nothin!” She smirked, putting her hands up in an innocent way before walking to the shower door. “This blue button here opens the screen. The one on the right is to start the shower, the one on the left to stop it. The arrow like button below the stop button is to make it warmer, the other arrow under it makes it cooler. It looks complicated but it’s not that bad,” She smiled at me again after her quick explanation.

I was peering over her shoulder, nodding as she pointed to the buttons.

“Got it?” she looked over her shoulder at me before pressing the on button.

I nodded again, moving so that my back wasn’t facing her. I didn’t want her to see the horrible scars lining my back, and I clung to the towel tighter in an effort to try and hide my exposed back. She seemed to notice as the green flowing around her spiked once.

“What’s up?” she inquired. I tilted my head to the side, giving her a confused look, but not moving from my place to keep my back hidden. “Never mind, you’re probably still tired. Why don’t you shower and get something from the kitchen then go back to sleep. You deserve it after all that hard energy-breaking work!” She gave me another warm smile before walking back out.

~

Pidge POV

Turning to the right Pidge marched over to Keith’s door and pounded on it.

“Umi-“ Keith started, his face slightly flushed before it dropped upon seeing her, “Pidge.”

“Keith.” She snapped back, folding her arms over her chest.

“Am I in trouble?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“You like her,” She claimed, voice filled with playful accusation. When she saw his cheeks turn a hue of pink it only confirmed her suspicions.
“Huh, like who?” he casually scoffed, trying to play it off while folding his arms across his chest.

“Don’t play dumb with me, Kogane!” Pidge chided, rolling her eyes. “Don’t worry, I won’t say anything. But try not to go peeping on her in a towel anymore.” With that, she turned on her heel and strode back to her room.

“It’s not like I meant to,” Keith mumbled before stepping back into his room, feeling like a scolded child.

~~

Keith POV

Keith and Shiro were walking down the hall slowly when he noticed her. His face flushed, flicking his eyes away from her bare back for a second. Shiro paused, catching Keith’s distraction. Looking down the hall, Keith saw Umi’s standing in a towel next to Pidge who was in her tank and shorts pajama set. Her hair was out of her usual side bun and cascaded down her back, but from what was visible, it appeared her back was covered in layers of scars. He noticed some were thick and raised, while some were thin and feathered. His heart dropped.

After the door to Umi’s room had been promptly shut in their faces, Keith looked at Shiro again with worry pulling his brows together.

“Shiro, did you see Umi’s back? What were those?” he asked in a quiet voice, his face still felt mildly warm.

“Scars?” Shiro inferred, rubbing the back of his neck.

“I could see that, but from what?” Keith clarified, leaning against the wall. His insides churned uneasily. Those scars didn’t look right at all. What hell had that poor girl been through?

“Probably the experiments. Or, if she lost a fight, it could have been a punishment. I know that all too well from personal experience,” Shiro explained, his voice concerned. “Either way, don’t bring it up unless she does.” He gave Keith a stern look.

“I know,” He affirmed, looking back at the closed door.

“I know it’s hard, but she’s been through a lot. We don’t know how long she was on that base. If she was taken in middle school it could have been years.” Shiro estimated, patting the other male on the shoulder. Keith gave him a weird look but Shiro smiled softly and walked back down the hall.

Exhaling, Keith ran his fingers through his hair, walking back into his room.

~~

Humming to myself contently, I pulled my wet hair back into a bun while slipping on the pair of sweats and a shirt Pidge had given me. Both the sweats and the shirt were too small, each riding up. Looking at myself in the mirror I sighed quietly. My belly button was showing along with half of my legs, and I could see the tip of a curved scar wrapping around the side of my hip which made me tug on the shirt, to try to cover it but to no avail. At least the material was soft and comfortable though.

The floor was cold against my feet as I padded down the vacant hallway towards the kitchen. I wondered if there was anything lying around. Peering into the kitchen I saw Keith’s back. He was
leaning against the counter, clearly munching on something. Gulping a little, I stepped into the kitchen silently, keeping my back to the wall as best I could since Pidge’s shirt exposed my lower back.

“Keith,” I called out quietly. He nearly jumped out of his skin, spinning around with some sort of cracker dangling from his mouth.

“Umi!” He tried to say, his mouth full.

I waved at him a little to greet him, eyeing the plate of food on the counter before me. He noticed, sliding it towards me as a gesture to say take some. I nodded, taking one cracker and biting off a small piece.

Keith was looking away, running his fingers through his hair in the nervous habit he seemed to do. His aura flitted around him nervously, clinging closer to him as if to avoid me. Why would he avoid me like this? Was it because he saw them? My scars? My heart pounded a little faster as uneasiness crept up my throat. We continued to avoid each other’s eyes, but the feeling kept gnawing at my insides.

It was silent for a while before I finally decided to ask. “You saw them?” I spoke in a quiet voice, not looking at him.

He was quiet for a moment before answering, “I did, but you don’t have to explain it to me.”

“I knew it would happen sometime, but I don’t really want to talk about it now,” I admitted, my voice barely audible. “Sorry,” I looked down but could feel him staring at me.

“You don’t have to apologize. You’ve been through a lot. You don’t have to say anything if you don’t want to,” He ascertained, our eyes locking when I finally met his gaze.

“Thank you.” I breathed, taking a small bite of cracker. He smiled and nodded.

“You must be tired.” He commented, taking two more crackers and holding one out for me.

I nodded again, taking the offering, “I needed some energy. It took more than I thought it would,” Keith nodded again as if to agree. We both seemed to chew in sync before grabbing another one.

“Shiro told me how different he felt. You really helped us. Thank you,” he said, breaking the silence between us.

I blinked, looking at him. “You don’t have to thank me.” I said, confused while finishing another cracker.

Keith gave me a soft smile, “I do, because Zarkon has been hurting Shiro through this connection. Now that it’s broken, he can’t hurt him anymore. Which means he’s safer and in turn we are, too. So, thank you, Umi.” His aura extended towards me in a gentle motion, its warmth comforting.

I turned my gaze towards the windows and avoided his dark eyes, my face feeling flushed. What was this feeling? “Let’s go to bed,” Keith’s voice brought me out of my thoughts. He waited for me to turn so we could walk back. I nodded, still feeling puzzled. No one had ever thanked me like that before.

We walked the short distance in silence before pausing at our doors. Another awkward silence hung between us, neither making the first move. I don’t know why, but I always wanted to spend more time with him. It was something I had never experience before, and it scared me a bit.
“Alright then, sleep well,” Keith broke the silence, not looking at me, his energy spiking awkwardly around him.

“Mmm,” I hummed back, stepping forward so that my door slid open. I glanced at him as I walked through the frame noticing his cheeks had a light pink tint as his eyes watched me as I entered my room. I could feel my face heat up slightly, making me want to hide so I averted my eyes, nodding a good night and hiding behind my door.

Touching my cheeks they were warm. I could feel my heart beating fast, but I didn’t know why. Why did he have this effect on me? And why were his cheeks pink too? Puffing my cheeks out in frustration, I walked over to my bed, flopping down on it and pulling my knees into my chest. I had no idea what was going on; all of these feeling were new and I didn’t know how to interpret them. What was this? I closed my eyes, trying to sort through the feelings that started to well up in my chest.

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“Alright, I think we should practice forming Voltron. Umi, do you think you could defend it?” Allura asked me. We were all gathered in the control room, suited up in the usual black suits with separately colored armor.

“As long as I’m not fighting, it should be alright.” I replied, looking back at her directly.

“Good, we need to test the castle’s defenses. They got a bit damaged in our last fight so I want to see how some upgrades will do.” Allura smiled and glanced around the room.

“Oh, so you’re just going to lock us out of the castle again and use us as target practice?!” Lance sarcastically presumed. In a grand gesture, he placed his hands on his hips and puffed his chest out.

“Exactly!” Coran exclaimed, giving him a thumbs up and beaming.

“Great. At least this time we know how to form Voltron,” Pidge grumbled, adjusting her glasses.

“Umi, you fly with Keith.” Shiro ordered, “You two seem to be in sync the most. Everybody, we should all work on bonding more with our lions today, too,” Keith nodded from his position next to me, his arms folded across his chest as usual.

“Alright, Paladins, to your lions!” Allura announced, smiling eagerly.

“You don’t have to look so excited to shoot at us.” Hunk pouted as he passed, walking towards his designated door.

“Alright Umi, hold onto me.” Keith instructed, walking towards another door opposite of Hunk’s.

“What?” I asked as the door closed.

“Hold onto my back.” Keith clarified, stepping in front of me. His red energy flared in anticipation.

“Why-“ I started before the floor dropped out from underneath us. Gasping, I latched my arms around him as we fell a short distance.

“Umi, little less death grip, please,” He grunted as we dropped down yet another level.

“Sorry.” I murmured, relaxing my hands as we fell down into a cart-like machine which jutted forward once we landed. It moved us forward before quickly ascending towards the same giant
red energy that I had seen before.

“Welcome to the red lion.” Keith announced when we came to a stop. Keith had maneuvered me into his lap between jumps, holding me against his chest lightly. I could feel his heart hammering, his aura fueled with excitement.

“Your energy seems happy. Do you like this?” I inquired, unsure exactly how to sit comfortably in the cart.

“I was in school to be a fighter pilot until I realized I didn’t like close minded, arrogant people telling me what to do and dropped out,” He shrugged. I nodded trying to understand, but with my limited external knowledge of what the world was like beyond Zarkon prison cell his words were confusing. He continued while pressing a few buttons on the control panel in front of us, “That was also around the time Shiro disappeared. So I left the academy and devoted myself to finding him. He was the main thing keeping me at the academy, so after he disappeared I didn’t want to stay there.” I looked at him and felt his aura flutter outwards, the bonds between him and Shiro vibrating softly.

“Where should I go?” I asked before my breath hitched as the red lion came to life, roaring loudly. My eyes widened as the red energy erupted around us, its power instantly becoming more intense as it awakened.

“You can stand just next to me, or behind the control chair, whichever is easier for you,” Keith instructed, curling and uncurling his fingers around the controllers.

I nodded, hastily stepping away from him in the small space, using the chair as a physical barrier between us.

Keith waited a beat before continuing, “Hold on,” was the only warning I got before he catapulted us forward. The red lion instantly reacted to his commands and bounded rapidly towards the exit.

We launched out of the castle into space, the force pushing us both back. My fingers gripped into the side of the metal chair to lock myself in place as best I could in the turbulent environment.

“Yeah!” Keith exclaimed, gripping the controllers by in front of him. The red lion’s aura seamlessly melding with Keith’s. I felt their intense joy for combat and freedom as Keith turned the beast around, facing the castle. I tried to even my breathing as I noticed the other lions lining up around us, their energies radiating with just as much immense power as the red lion’s.

“Scared?” Keith asked, looking up at me with a crooked smile.

“No,” I replied in a flat tone. Laughter rung around us, startling me I hadn’t realized all of our helmets were connected.

“Allura, I think Umi needs some time to adjust before you start-“ Shiro started before the castle was encompassed by blue-white hexagon shapes. “Or not. Get ready team.”

A flurry of rogers came through the headset as I braced myself for what came next.

“Ready?” Keith crooned, his eyes trained on the castle in front of him, his fingers curling and uncurling the controls in anticipation. I nodded, following his gaze and trying to focus on visualizing a shield around us. After a moment, a pink tinted barrier flicked into view before disappearing.

“Umi?” Keith called my name, glancing back at me.
“It’s there.” I affirmed, realizing just how big I had to make one barrier to cover his lion. After I had Keith’s in place, I looked around at the other Paladin’s, placing one over each of them until everyone was covered.

“Alright everyone, let’s start with individual training then move on to forming Voltron.” Shiro ordered as the assault of lasers started spewing from the castle.

“Here we go!” Lance shouted in an enthusiastic voice, rocketing his lion towards the castle, weaving in between lasers before firing at the castle.

Keith was next, following closely behind Lance. Both their energies bubbled in excitement.

“Bet you I can last longer than you,” Lance teased through the intercom, his face appearing in the upper right hand side of Keith’s yellow dashboard.

“You’re on.” Keith accepted his challenge in a determined voice.

My eyes traced the lions through the windows of the cabin. It was easier to maintain my barriers now that I didn’t have to defend my physical body as well, but five individually moving targets was still a lot to concentrate on at once. As they moved in and out of my range of vision it was harder to maintain their barriers. The farther they flew away from me, the farther I had to stretch the barriers. Each hit the lions took caused me to sense the impact and made it more difficult to hold my concentration. Grimacing, I looked to my left to see Hunk’s yellow lion taking another hit. His barrier held but flickered in and out.

Gripping the rim of Keith’s chair tighter, I tried to hold out and preserve their barriers. I needed them to think I was powerful enough to keep; that I was something they could use.

“Guys, try not to get hit. Just because we have another layer of defense doesn’t mean we can be reckless,” Shiro instructed.

“Keith, I think you’re distracted,” Lance egged on, his lion weaving through the lasers with ease.

“Shut up, you’re getting hit way more than me. If it weren’t for Umi, your lion would be out,” Keith retorted, throwing his arm forward so that a giant lava-like beam spewed from the lion’s mouth. My eyes widened at the sheer amount of power the blast contained as an explosion erupted around us after it connected with a line of lasers rocketing towards us.

“Pretty cool, huh.” Keith grinned, spinning us around in a loop to avoid another beam.

My stomach lifted up as we whipped around with my feet leaving the floor for a moment before quickly landing back down. All the sudden movements and gravity defying actions made it hard to maintain my position standing behind Keith’s chair as well as my mental concentration. My body rocked from side to side, lifting off the ground for short bursts of time as he dived down or arched in circular evasive patterns. When I had defended Zarkon’s ship, I had been strapped to a table being fed druid energy. If I were tied down, or locked in place to Keith’s chair this would be much easier.

“Aww, is this too much for you, Keith?” Lance sneered, his lion dancing between lasers before one connected head on, shattering my barrier. I winced feeling a sting of pain. The residual energy from the lasers broke through my energy which was directly connected to my physical form.

“Everybody, focus.” Shiro ordered in an authoritative voice, his lion leading both the green and yellow lions, the three of them supporting each other and calling out where their blind spots were.
Pidge’s shield was the next to go, and I heard her cry out as a second laser connect with her lion right after it shattered.

I growled lightly under my breath, flexing my hands and closing my eyes. Pushing my energy self out, I touched each of the lions directly placing a barrier around them again.

“We’re stopping,” I faintly heard Keith alert me before my body tipped forward, the momentum the lion built up was too great for me to stop. Fingers leaving the metal around his chair, I was thrown forward in the cockpit, head colliding with front console causing me to briefly lose my vision. My head throbbed painfully and I sat there to gather myself.

“Umi!” Keith shouted in alarm as he sprang out of his chair. “Keith, what happened?” Hun’s voice rang in, his face lighting up on the monitors, “I can feel the barrier now! It’s a lot stronger than before.”

“It’s Umi, she hit her head when she flew out from behind me. We need to figure out how to secure her in here,” Keith explained, leaning over to give me a hand.

“Is she conscious?” Shiro’s concerned voice sounded next.

“I’m fine,” I said, rubbing the helmet where I hit my head.

“Let’s give Umi a minute to recover and then form Voltron and see if that helps. I’m sure having one barrier to focus on will be easier than all five,” Shiro offered.

After a few minutes of dodging small barrages of lasers, I was able to stand and took my place behind Keith’s chair again.

“Umi, how’re you feeling?” Keith asked me while keeping his head forward.

“Mhmm. I’m fine now,” I readjusted my helmet and fastened my grip to the chair once more. After a second, I added, “Thanks.”

“Not a problem, “Keith replied and turned his attention to Shiro, “Shiro! We’re all ready!”

Shiro’s face lit up on the monitor as he responded, “Got it. Paladins!”

“Roger!” Everyone’s s voices came through the connection this time, each lion maneuvering together in a V-line, their energies aligning as well and pulled against the others, trying to merge them into one.

As the lions locked into place, I felt a singular pure white energy run through Keith’s lion, connecting it with the other lions seamlessly, making it feel as if they had been never been five separate lions to begin with. The pure white energy coursed through them with a power that took my breath away, its’ force making me crouch down.

“Wow.” I breathed, slowly moving back into a standing position and looking behind me in the cockpit. My eyes traced the white energy, and I marveled at how the individual pulses of energies synced into a singular unified entity.

“Lets go!” Shiro commanded, pushing Voltron forward.

Taking a step back, I braced myself in a defensive position, focusing on pushing a large barrier around Voltron. Although the Voltron was gigantic, I had shielded entire fleets of army warships when Zarkon invaded new solar systems before and managing to surround this one being was
easier than making five moving barriers. We continued swiftly dodging attack after attack from the
castle with my barrier holding strong and withstanding the hits that struck us.

“Alright, that’s enough for right now,” Shiro announced, “Disband Voltron.”

Shiro pulled Voltron to a complete stop, allowing the Paladins time to disconnect from the main
body and go back into individual lions again. The castle’s defense system also dissipated, and the
lions flew to return back to their resting places.

Once we were safely parked, the red lion’s aura seemed to relax, returning to a calm, resting state.
Releasing a held breath, I let my fingers unwind from their death grip on the rim of the chair.

“How’s the head?” Keith asked, looking my way me as he moved to disembark from his lion

“It’s fine.” I replied, unlatching my helmet. Keith nodded, eyeing me as I stood up and ducked out
of the lion with him.

“Good job team!” Allura smiled at us, clasping her hands together. “The castles defenses are reset
and upgraded.”

“Whoo.” Lance hooted sarcastically, grabbing a clear liquid pouch before lounging on the couch.

“It seems as though Umi’s barriers are effective when paired with Voltron’s defenses,” Allura
speculated, turning to me, “but she still needs some work with individual ones.”

I nodded in response, my head feeling light. “I will do better,”” I reported. Allura nodded back but
pulled her brows together in concern.

“We’ll figure something out. We’ll practice again later.” She concluded before turning back to
group. “Alright, everyone, take a small break then go to the combat deck and start practicing,” she
commanded.

There was a mixture of responses but everyone seemed to understand, plopping down on different
parts of the couch like Lance. I sighed, sitting down on the edge of the couch, tipping my head
back, and closing my eyes. I needed to recharge my energy as quickly as I could. I still needed
more power, more power, more power.

“Umi?” Shiro’s voice broke my trance. Flinching in response, I jerked into a more attentive
position. My head swam a little from the sudden movement. “How are you feeling? I heard you hit
your head pretty good back there,” he asked, eyeing me carefully. His aura flowed outwards in a
curious manner, hesitantly reaching out towards my own as if it wanted to check on me.

“It’s fine,” I said again, “I just need to rest for a minute.”

“Hmm” Shiro hummed, not completely believing me. He placed his hands on his hips and
continued, “Well, in any case, we need a different way to secure you in. We can’t let you get
injured like that again.” I gave him a confused look, the softness of his energy making me think
that he genuinely cared for my well being, unlike the Druids, who didn’t care if I got injured. As
long as I didn’t die, that’s all that mattered to them. To them, quintessence could heal anything,
even things barely hanging by the threads of life. Shivering from the memories, I glanced away,
unsure how to feel.

“What about a belt?” Pidge piped up from her spot opposite of me on the couch.

“A belt?” Keith looked at her doubtfully.
“To connect her to the back of the command chair with a belt that’s magnetic to the suit. There’s a place that would work perfectly to hook it on the chair, I’ve seen it.” Pidge continued, her voice revving up as she brainstormed rapidly. “That should help keep you in place with the command chair and prevent you from being thrown around! You also wouldn’t be in Keith’s way and could focus on what you needed to,” She rambled, leaning back on her hands. “I could design it easily in no time at all. There’s an extension on the suit that allows for connections like a rope. I assume it’s for when someone’s stranded in space so you can tie yourselves together.”

“That’s great,” Shiro praised, giving her an approving smile. “We should test it out after you’ve developed it.”

Pidge nodded eagerly, giving me an encouraging smile before hopping down from the couch, “Umi, can you come with me? I want to make sure I get the measurements right.”

I nodded, following the smaller girl out and back towards where the lions were kept.

“I’m a bit concerned about how Umi viewed her performance today,” Allura started as we went out of range, “She kept saying she would do better, as if it were her fault and that we were expecting some sort of perfection.” She didn’t want Umi to consider herself a weapon anymore, and her mechanical responses worried the princess greatly.

Shiro and Keith nodded in agreement.

“She did seem pretty closed off after practice,” Keith admitted, “Though she did bump her head pretty good.” He sighed and closed his eyes for a moment while leaning back on the couch.

“Yes,” Allura agreed, “I just didn’t like the sound of her when we asked how she was.”

“Hmm,” Keith hummed, eyes still closed.

“How did it go otherwise?” Shiro asked Keith.

“Fine, I think it’s still hard to make barriers around so many moving targets. But after we formed Voltron, it seemed fine, almost easier for her,” Keith reported, shrugging slightly.

“Yeah, I could feel it around Voltron,” Lance commented before going back to sucking on the pouch.

“If she gets more practice and learns our habits she’ll be able to understand our movements and hold barriers easier. The more we all cooperate with each other, the better it is for her too. We need to support her as well. She’s just used to needing one barrier for herself.” Shiro thought out loud, leaning against the couch.

“It definitely makes attacking easier,” Hunk observed from his spot on the couch beside Lance. He also held a clear liquid pouch and had finished it, “knowing that there’s an extra layer of defense.”

Keith nodded in agreement, “I just feel that the more you push what she can do the more it hurts her. Like, when Lance took a hit she flinched.”

“I did not take a hit!” Lance protested, sitting upright suddenly.

Keith rolled his eyes before looking at Shiro, “I think we should be careful how fast we push.”

Shiro hummed in agreement before finally sitting down and exhaling.
“So, what is this again?” I asked Pidge, holding my gloved hand in front of my face.

“A magnet. It will help keep you in place while Keith is showing off how agile his lion is.” Pidge answered nonchalantly, tinkering with another magnet that rested over my other gloved hand.

“Mhmm” I hummed back in response. Putting my hand above the metal table she was working on curiously, I could feel the magnetic pull it down.

“I’ll put some in the soles of your boots too, and then with the belt it should keep you in place!” Pidge cooed excitedly, releasing the hand she was working in on.

Opening and closing my fingers, I adjusted to the new weight of the paper thin magnets resting across my skin.

“Boots, please,” Pidge instructed, looking down at my covered feet.

“Sorry,” I apologized, stepping out of them and handing the boots to her.

“So, how was the red lion?” she carried on casually while tinkering with the bottom of the boots.

“Big.” I remarked after a moment, still playing with the magnetic field between my glove and the table. I wondered if this would have any effect on my power.

“What about my energy?” I asked her, pushing a small bubble of pink from my hand. It crackled like small volts of lightning.

Pidge paused her work, looking up at me, “From what I understand, you push the barrier out. Like, you form an image in your head and then it projects out into a physical manifestation?” she tilted to her head in an inquisitive way. I nodded, closing my hand into a fist, popping the small barrier.

“It seems like you aren’t generating an actual electrical current, though, since it doesn’t mess with the castle or lions’ interfaces. So, unless you wanted to make it an electrical current instead of a purely metaphysical one, your gloves shouldn’t conduct any electrical interference.” Pidge explained to me. I nodded, pretending to understood everything she was saying.

“So, it should be fine. Unless you want to shock Keith.” She snickered mischievously.

“Will I always be with him?” I asked, glancing away. I could feel my face burning slightly.

“I assumed so. You are the closest to him.” Pidge reasoned, giving me a playful smile before turning back to her work. Her aura swiftly moved about her and seemed to tease me.

I was quiet for a few moments, opening my mouth to ask a question but unsure if I could.

“What’s up?” Pidge chirped without looking at me. My shoulders tensed, was I that easy to read?

“Are we close?” I finally spoke, my heart fluttering uneasily.

Pidge stopped what she was doing to smile at me, “I think so. Keith isn’t really nice to people in general, so the fact that he’s talking to someone and it’s not an argument is pretty amazing.” She leaned an elbow on the table, “I think he just doesn’t know what he’s doing. A typical guy.”

“What he’s doing?” I repeated, looking at her confused.
“Ah-“ Pidge started before shyly looking away, “I might not be the best person to talk to about this. Shiro or Allura would probably know more. But, it feels different when you’re around Keith than with me, right?”

I nodded hesitantly, not sure where she was going.

“Uh, trying focusing on how he makes you feel” She tried, giving me a sheepish grin. Her energy fluttered more erratically now as if not sure what to do or say.

“How he makes me feel?” I echoed, my eyebrows pulling together now.

“Those two would totally be better at this,” She laughed a bit before handing me back my boots, perking up as she did so, “Time to try these babies out anyways!”

I took my boots, stepping back into them, not sure what Pidge was implying. Focus on how I felt around Keith? I wasn’t sure what any of this meant, but I did know that I was drawn to his energy in a way that I couldn’t control.
Crash Landing

“Umi, ready for round two?” Keith asked, looking back at me.

I was standing behind him, crouched slightly. My feet planted firmly on the ground, I gripped the top and side of the chair. A flexible metal cable hooked from the back of the chair to my waist, giving me a bit of slack, but was tight enough to hopefully hold me in place if things got rocky.

I hummed in response, re-adjusting my fingers around the chair in anticipation. A small knot began to form in my stomach as Pidge’s words still ran through my head. Focus on how I feel…

“Alright, ready for a test run.” Keith called out through the speakers. The other Paladin’s were poised and ready in their lions’ hangers, awaiting for training to start. I could feel their energies move in sync with their lions’ effortlessly.

“Okay, now remember, this is just to make sure Umi is secured, so don’t go too crazy.” Shiro’s voice cautioned as it came through our helmets in unison.

“Hey, Keith! You ready to get your butt kicked again?” Lance’s animated voice followed Shiro’s I could feel his competitive energy bursting from where he was waiting in the castle.

“Psh, like you could ever take Red and me,” Keith retorted unimpressed.

“Guys, this isn’t a competition. But, while you’re up there, Umi, try just two barriers around those two and see how it feels.” Shiro warned I could feel his energy fluctuate in unease.

“Okay.” I replied, flexing my fingers a last time before settling them into position. Closing my eyes, I concentrated on putting a barrier around the red lion and then the blue. Small flickers of pink appeared then disappeared as the barriers locking into place.

“Three, two, one. Go!” Lance counted down excitedly then shot off into space.

Keith threw the lion into gear, the sudden force pushing me back, but the magnetic restraints held me in place securely.

“Yahoooooo!” Lance screamed out, spiraling his lion around in space ahead of us.

“Hang on,” Keith grinned as he took off after Lance.

“Do you guys see the coordinates on your screen of the planet to your left? Head over to that planet and will meet you there!” Coran informed us over the intercom.

“Got it,” Keith responded, glancing at the blinking arrows on the monitor ahead of us to indicate where they were going.

“I bet I can beat you there,” Lance taunted, his lion coming up beside Keith’s.

“Like you could beat the red lion, Keith shot back. “Get ready for some speed, Umi.” He looked back at me and smiled devilishly. I nodded, tensing my muscles in preparation and focusing on creating a solid barrier around the two of them.

“Let’s go!” Keith called out in excitement.

“You’re on!” Lance came back, his blue lion zooming ahead of ours.
“Let’s go, Red.” Keith said to his lion before we jumped forward, his lion roaring.

The two of them sped towards the indicated planet at an alarming speed, my muscles starting to feel sore from the tension of trying to hold myself in place while maintaining the barriers.

“Looks like the barriers are holding up,” Pidge’s voice came through my helmet.

“Nothing is attacking us.” I commented, my voice somewhat out of breath.

“How are you holding up, Umi?” Shiro asked next.

“I’m fine.” I replied, looking ahead as a clouded dome started to come into view. Suddenly, I was thrown to the left, but my magnetic attachments helped support and keep me in place. I mentally thanked Pidge as I stabilized myself once more.

“Come on, is that all you got?” Keith sneered at Lance as the two of them started to weave in and out of each other's range of vision. Their energies mimicked each other in competitive force.

“You wish, I’m just holding back so you can keep up!” Lance responded in a cocky voice.

“Heh,” Keith chuckled before shifting his arm forward giving the us an extra boost of speed.

As we neared the planet, the swirling layer of mist only appeared to be even denser than before, its churning shapes masking whatever type of terrain laid under it efficiently.

“Come on Blue, let’s show mullet head Keith what real speed is like,” Lance purred to his lion before suddenly swan diving towards the swirling mist.

“Like you could even compete with Red.” Keith retorted, annoyance spiking off his aura before he slammed the controllers downward. We were upright one second then barreling downwards within another split second. I could feel my barrier trying to keep up with the sudden movements. My body and mind tried to balance themselves enough to maintain their barriers’ shape. We broke through the planet’s atmosphere and found ourselves surrounded in dense fog.

I braced myself against the back of the chair, trying to find Lance from the red lion’s windshield. I could feel his aura close to the us but the mist was thicker than expected. We were completely submerged in opaque whiteness obscuring all of our visual fields.

“Dude, where are you? I can’t even see you, I’m so far ahead,” Lance taunted from somewhere to the right from what I could sense. The fog was even messing with my energy, its swirling shapes making it hard to focus

“Where are you? I’m almost to the ground! I don’t even need to see to know we are almost there.” Keith taunted Lance as we ducked lower again.

“Nu-uh, because beautiful Blue and I are almost there, our-“ Lance’s voice trailed off.

“Lance?” Keith called out, his voice still had a competitive edge and his aura danced in excitement.

“Oh, quiznak!!!!” Lance yelled making Keith and I wince from the sudden voice change.

“What?” Keith started, “already crashed into something?” he taunted triumphantly before his face dropped and his aura flickered with worry.

“Umi…” Keith said in strained voice before he swung the lion to the right. The belt connecting me to his seat snapped completely straight from the sudden change in direction.
“Mountains!” Lance cried out in sheer panic.

The mist suddenly parted from around us to reveal a maze of towering, steel colored masses stretching upwards. Their jagged edges waited to swallow us whole.

“Quiznak!” Keith cursed, trying to pull his lion up as we hurtled towards them.

“Pull up, pull up, pull up!” Lance’s panicked voice rang through my helmet, his fear palpable.

The thin layer of air between mist and mountain wasn’t large enough to give us time to respond. Both Keith and Lance desperately tried to pull their lions upwards without success. I winced as Lance’s lion skimmed past a serrated edge, the barrier flickering to show where the impact was.

“Crap!” Lance screamed, his lion starting to spin out of control towards the mass of jigsaw edges. There were loud crashing sounds as his lion barreled into the mountains, my barrier starting to break apart. I felt his aura spike in panic and tried to quickly reform the barrier but we were moving too fast and the fog obscuring my vision was making it more difficult.

“Come on, come on.” Keith mumbled to himself, trying to weave between the blades of rock. My body was being thrown side to side before being harshly stopped by the magnets holding me in place.

“Brace for impact!” Keith cried out, his lion’s controls locking up from not being able to pull up in the short amount of airspace.

I tensed my muscles, squeezing my eyes shut my energy hyper focused onto the red lion trying to make the barrier thicker and stronger in preparation for impact. I was vaguely aware of Lance screaming in the background when I was suddenly surrounded by a barrage of warning lights and alarms.

Before I knew it, the red lion slammed into the jagged mountain ahead of us, skidding harshly across its length. The barrier around us plowed through crag of the mountain, leaving a wake of gravel behind us before we tipped over the edge and dropped down sharply to the next level. I grunted as the impact threw me against the back of Keith’s seat as he struggled to stop us from falling further, the red lion tilting dangerously close to the next ledge. It wasn’t until we were completely stopped that my barrier finally shattered.

Letting go of the chair I fell to my knees, breathing hard. Keith sat in his chair completely stunned that we hadn’t just been crushed. His aura held onto him tightly in defense. Suddenly the main power cut out and we were left in darkness with only the red glow of the emergency lights.

“Lance?!” Keith cried out in worry as the blue lion blew past us overhead and ricocheted off the twisting mountains. The thick mist whipped around him quickly, giving us glimpses of Blue as he tore through them. I looked over Keith’s shoulder to watch where Lance and the blue lion were heading when my heart stopped as I realized his barrier was completely gone. They was taking direct impacts.

“His barrier…” I whispered in horror, as Lance’s terrified screams and cursing rang out in our helmets.

“Lance!” Keith shouted, trying the levers of his lion again but they were stuck, his lion unresponsive. “Umi, what happened to his barriers?” he whipped his head back at me, red energy prickling, and eyes filled with concern.

“I don’t know,” I began to ramble quietly, “When we hit I-I must have focused on just us. I’m so
sorry,” I panicked, my hands fumbling as I tried to unclip myself. “We have to find him!”

A final crash echoed around us before harsh static feedback from the intercom rang through our helmets. Keith and I sat there frozen for a few beats, listening for any change. After a few moments of painful silence, Lance’s groans finally came through.

“Lance! What’s wrong! Talk to me!” Keith exclaimed, sitting upright in his chair. I perked up slightly from my position behind him. My hands froze on the clip that I failed to unfasten.

“Ah!” He yelped in pain, “My-arm!” Lance tried, his voice hitching. Static crinkled intermittently in the channel breaking up his words.

“Lance, are you hurt?” Keith asked, getting up from the command chair and helping me unclip the belt. The red lion was tipped sideways, making it harder to move.

“My-arm! It’s… it’s, oh, god! Oh my god!” Lance’s panicked voice started repeating.

“Just hold on, Lance, we are coming your way! Don’t move.” Keith instructed as he took my hand, helping me stand up. He bent down to reach my eye level, “Are you alright, Umi?”

I shied away from him and nodded, my heart hammering, an icy anxiety coursing throughout my body. Why did I only protect the one? Why didn’t both my barriers hold? I focused on both… and why was Lance screaming so much in pain? Was he hurt? What happened to Lance? This was my fault because I had failed. They were going get rid of me since I was of no use. They were going to leave me on some abandoned planet, alone and left for Zarkon to find. My breath started to come in short, shallow bursts as my mind raced when suddenly Keith put both his hands on my shoulders, squeezing them. Flinching away from his touch, I kept my head down, waiting for some type of reprimandence, but none came.

“Umi, look at me. I need you to focus. We need to get down to Lance,” He spoke calmly, looking at me with a controlled expression. His energy began returning back to its usual patterns.

I bit my lip and nodded, “I’m so sorry,” I almost whispered before Keith shook his head.

“If you hadn’t had the barriers up, there would have been even more damage. Come on, we need to climb down,” He reached up and unlatched the emergency exit, pulling himself up before offering me a hand.

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On the side of a large brown-grey mountain splotched with small patches of pale worn greenery and scarce red and purple flowers stood a small humanoid female with long ashy grey hair, two dark grey tipped cat ears and two bushy grey tipped fox-like tails. She wore a white medical coat with a satchel slung across her chest, and appeared to be scanning the ground looking for something.

“Ah hah! There it is,” She smiled to herself, reaching down to pick some of the red tinted leaves growing from the side of a steely rock.

“This is exactly what we need to complete the antibiotic for that nasty plague,” she announced to herself, carefully pulling out a glass vial from the satchel to put bundles of leaves in before her ears twitched as she heard high pitched tone.

“Hmm?” she paused, her ears twitching again, listening intently. Something was coming, but from where? The feline girl crouched down slightly, her red orange eyes surveying the nearly barren
terrain around her. She was fairly high in the mountains and only a thin layer of fog swirled around her feet, with thicker patches covering the surrounding range.

“From above?” she looked upwards, her ears twitching a final time, hyper focusing on the sound of screaming.

“What the…?” she tilted her head to the side trying to locate the source of the screaming before a huge robotic blue lion grazed over her by just a few meters. Jumping back, she nearly dropped the vial of leaves in shock.

“Lion?!” she exclaimed before cringing at the sound of metal screeching across rock.

“What the hell!!” she jogged over to the edge of the path she was on, her red eyes widening. Lying there a few feet down was a giant blue, steaming, mechanical lion. She could faintly hear moaning before it turned to hysterical screaming.

Immediately her training kicked in. Shoving the vials of leaves into her satchel so they wouldn’t get hurt, she started down the mountain with effortless agility towards the blue lion and screams. Taking a deep breath, she jumped the last distance down to the level of the lion’s crash and tried to assess the situation in front of her. She discovered that it wasn’t the lion that was screaming, but someone inside. She could faintly smell the scent of blood as she jumped onto the gigantic front paw. The metallic beast was crushed into the side of the mountain with loose rock crumbling on it.

“Hello?” she called out, “I’m a medic, can you hear me?” her voice was steady and calm as she swiftly climbed her way to the yellow eyes. Only screams and whimpers responded. “I can hear you. You are alright now.” She tried again, placing a clawed hand on the yellow eye, determining that the screaming was definitely coming from inside.

“Entrance, entrance…” She mumbled to herself, crawling up a bit more until her eyes rested on a small indent in metal, clearly for someone’s hand to latch onto.

“There we go,” She said confidently, easily hoisting herself up and balancing on top of the tilted lion’s head.

Grabbing hold of the small handle, she pulled up as it popped open easily. A flurry of panicked yelling bubbled up from the entrance. Easing herself down, she found herself in a large control cabin with a tan male in some sort of armor laying in a pilot’s chair yelling frantically at someone.

“Um, excuse me. Hello, I my name is Dr. Miume Maolatte. I am a medic.” She introduced herself in an authoritative voice, carefully moving towards the panicking male. The robotic lion was wedged sideways, making the floor slanted and more difficult to walk on.

“Guys, someone’s here. Someone found me!” the male said in an alarmed voice, “Wait medic? Did you say medic?!” His voice perked up as he tried to turn around but stopped abruptly and cried out in pain.

“Don’t move, I am coming to you. I smell blood, are you bleeding somewhere?” she questioned cautiously, closing the distance between them. The male looked up at her with pain stricken blue eyes before they dropped to a lovey gaze.

“Why, hello there, are you an angel?” he purred, raising an eyebrow while cradling his left arm.

Miume noted the blood streaking down the inside of his helmet. The corresponding side was scraped up but appeared otherwise intact. He also appeared to be in less distress now, although he was speaking strangely.
Miume raised an eyebrow at the clearly delusional patient. Her eyes ran over his body, narrowing in on an obvious deformity in his left arm indicating a likely bone fracture. Using the device on her wrist, she scanned his body to confirm the fracture.

“Hey guys, a cat-like angel is here to save me!” he started laughing hysterically before crying out in pain again. Clearly his brain was trying to cope with a massive amount of pain.

“Hold still. I am a doctor, your arm has a fracture and needs to be treated. You also may have sustained head trauma,” She moved completely in front of him with grace. He was staring at her with glazed over eyes, a dopey smile on his face.

“Lance? Lance talk to me what’s happening?” another male voice came from the inside of his helmet.

“My name is Miume Maolatte. I am a doctor and I found a male in a giant blue lion. Do you know him?” Miume talked to thin air, assuming the people could hear her.

“My name is Keith. My comrade and I are making our way down to him now. We crashed here,” The male voice responded with a cold tone.

“I can see you crashed. I am going to splint his arm,” She informed, pulling out a pair of medical gloves and squatting down in front of the male in front of her. He watched her with a dreamy face, shock setting in and taking over the feeling of pain. She set to work after rummaging in her satchel for more supplies.

While placing the final wraps over the splint, her ears twitched at the sound of rocks bouncing against the metal surface above her, making her pause before she heard two sets of feet plant themselves down.

“Hello?” the second male voice from earlier called out hesitantly as he dropped down from the same entrance she had. Miume didn’t pause her work, she had just set the splint and was wrapping it.

“Keith?” she assumed, glanced up at him and waited for the second person to come into view. Miume tensed, noting that Keith held a defensive position with one hand holding some type of weapon.

“Yes.” He replied cautiously, barely reacting when a second person dropped down into view.

Miume eyed her. She was also in a state of shock but didn’t realize it. She was shaking badly, pupils dilated with irregular breathing. She’d need treatment next.

“Help me move your friend, I need better light to see. I splinted his arm, but I need to better assess his head. We have a base just a bit down the main path where I can treat him,” Miume instructed, standing up straight.

Keith eyed her warily before glancing down at his friend’s condition. The other male was gazing at the cat-like species in front of him with a loving expression.

“I can carry him,” He said finally, stepping over to him and carefully lifting the other male onto his back. “Just hold still, Lance and don’t say anything,” Keith muttered.

“Umi, could you go back to the roof and help me pull him up from there?” he asked and looked back at me, my body still shaking. Nodding silently, I continued to whisper apologies under my breath as I turned and hoisted myself back out of the blue lion. Miume helped Keith maneuver
Lance towards the exit, instructing us how to get him out without causing more injuries. Once we were all safely on the roof, she took his helmet off carefully to inspect his head. There was a large bruise forming, and a gash across his forehead, but nothing seemed like immediate danger.

“He probably has a concussion, but I don’t have the right tools here to verify. If you help me get him down to base I can better diagnose him,” Miume informed, pulling out a disinfectant cloth and a bandage out of her bag.

“And we should trust you because?” Keith reproached. He was crouched a few feet away, sitting just in front of me, his red aura hardened around us, almost as if he were guarding us. I tried to focus on his strong red energy to refocus myself, but I still couldn’t stop thinking about how this was all my fault. Even this comforting red did nothing to qualm my worries as my mind continued to spin with all the possible punishments that were going to happen. Maybe they would leave me on this planet, alone, for Zarkon to find again.

“Because I just treated your friend,” she quipped back but held a professional tone, “I am a traveling doctor part of an organization dedicated to save those who have been hurt by Zarkon’s greed. I am currently working in a village here that’s been subject to pathological warfare,” Miume continued in a cool tone before reaching into her jacket. Keith tensed as she pulled out a medical ID and flashed it to him.

“This is my intergalactica medical ID. It shows how qualified I am. Now, are you going to help me or not?” she gestured to the patient in front of her who was still mumbling indiscriminately.

Keith was silent for a moment. I stared at Lance wide-eyed, my face paling as I took in his state. His blue aura was spiking erratically, barely able to hold a distinct shape.

“Alright,” He agreed finally. He stood up and helped me to my feet, making sure I was steady before walking over to Lance and hoisting him up according to Miume’s instructions.

“It might be a bit tricky to get down, but we can manage if you listen to my instructions,” Miume directed as she got up and pointed over to a large cleared pathway.

“Alright.” Keith replied, his tone still cold and untrusting.

“You should talk to your other comrade, she seems to be in shock as well,” Miume commented, looking down from the edge of the blue lion trying to determine the safest, most efficient way down. They only had a few hours left of sunlight, and needed to get to base fast.

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Finally her base was in sight, Keith was practically dragging Lance now. He had passed out about a half mile ago from pain. Miume seemed to note how I was holding my arms trying to control my shaking and still apologizing while Keith tried to comfort me saying it wasn’t my fault. When we got closer one of Miume’s teammates spotted us, pausing for a moment before calling out to the other two and rushing over with a makeshift gurney. There were several tents pitched in a circular layout on the barren ground with a larger spacecraft nestled behind some rocks not too far off. Miume followed Lance as he was carried into one of the tents and Keith and I were escorted by another red alien to sit in a small clearing.

Pulling on a fresh pair of gloves, Miume gently pulled the bandages off of Lance’s face and thoroughly examined him. It was minimally swollen but had no signs of anything too serious like facial fractures. That was good. After determining he had only a minor concussion she walked outside to find the other two. She quickly found them sitting on the ground appearing completely
exhausted.

As Miume walked up to us, Keith’s attention snapped to her, red energy pooling in front of us again. Miume’s ears twitched twice as she inspected him. He was assertive, that was good.

“He has a minor concussion, a fractured arm, and some bruised ribs,” She informed us, putting her hands in the pockets of her medical jacket, “We don’t have much here but he should be fine in a moon or so.”

Keith nodded, glancing between Miume and me. He exhaled finally and looked directly at Miume, “Our ship landed somewhere on this planet and they have medical means to treat him within a few hours. I don’t know where they are though, I’ve been trying to contact them but haven’t been able to.”

“It’s probably the atmosphere. The mist you came through jams signals within a certain distance,” Miume explained then gestured to the tent where Lance was behind held, “This one should wake up in a few hours. I gave him some pain medication.”

Keith nodded, “Thank you.”

“It’s my job,” Miume gave them a reassuring smile. “While you wait for him to wake up why don’t you have some tea, it’ll calm your nerves.” She looked directly at me, “You alright, kitten? You seem a bit shaken.”

I nodded slowly, my trembling slowing but I still couldn’t stop the sickening pit in my stomach. Miume didn’t appear to believe me but didn’t press it further.

“Alright then,” her tails swished behind her and motioned to the campgrounds, “I’ll give you a once over later. Now let’s get that tea!” she purred.

Keith nodded again, standing up and pulling me with him before following Miume towards a large bonfire as the sun gradually set in the horizon.

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“Lance?” Keith called out, leaning over the other male giving him a mildly annoyed look. “Wake up Lance.” He tried again.

“Keith,” Lance stirred, his voice breaking slightly, “You wouldn’t believe what happened to me!” his eyes were still droopy from the medication he was given but his tone jumped in excitement. “I met the most beautiful cat-angel lady. And she saved me! She wrapped up my arm and saved me! It must be fate!” Lance rambled on in a dreamy voice.

“Can I punch him again to knock him out?” Keith looked over at Miume who was standing a few feet away, “I don’t think I can deal with this on the way back.” He gestured to the drugged boy below him.

Miume raised an eyebrow, “I thought you were comrades. But no. He’s sustained enough trauma for one day,” She laughed a bit at the end.

Keith rolled his eyes, “Just because we are comrades doesn’t mean I can’t hate him for being stupid.”

“Oh my god, it’s her!” Lance sat up suddenly, grabbing Keith’s sleeve and pulling on it enthusiastically. His eyes were glued to Miume who looked at him oddly. “See, see it must be fate!
She’s even here when I woke up!” Lance continued eagerly.

Keith looked back at Miume, knitting his brows together, “Now can I punch him?” he asked again, trying to pry off Lance’s hands without disturbing his injury.

Miume shook her head, stepping forward to examine the male again, “Hello, Lance, my name is Miume.” She smiled at him briefly.

“Miume” he gave her a dopey smile, “that’s a beautiful name.”

“Thank you. Your friends are going to go find their lion and come back to get you. Do you have any pain? Nausea?” Miume asked, pulling a light out from her coat and checking his pupillary reaction.

“No and no, but a yes for that date later,” He smiled at her again. Miume dropped the light giving him an amused smile. These beings were more interesting that she thought.

“How do I know you won’t kidnap him while we are gone.” Keith cautioned, folding his arms.

Miume directed her attention back to Keith, folding her arms over her chest as well. “I just saved your friend, do you really think I would try and kidnap him?” Her ears flattened against her head in mild annoyance.

“I don’t know,” Keith replied simply, his aura prickling defiantly.

Miume sighed, unfolding her arms, “You have my word as a leading medical expert that you will find him exactly where he is now after you and Umi return. He’s in no condition to hike back up those mountains and get those lions.”

Keith debated this for a moment before nodding. “Umi, are you able to come with me?” he asked, looking down at me. I was sitting frozen on the ground, barely taking in what was going on around me.

“Umi,” He tried again, his voice breaking through the fog hanging around my consciousness. My eyes drifted back to his before nodding slightly. Keith sighed, raking his hand through his hair before looking back at Miume.

“We’ll be back.” He told her, taking my hand and walking out of the tent.

“Be careful, it’s dangerous at night,” Miume called after them before looking down at her hand which Lance had reached over to take.

“You are going to be a handful aren’t you.” She smiled to herself before withdrawing her hand.
Once we were a few feet away from the camp and shielded by shadows stretching down from the mountains, Keith stopped and turned around to face me. His aura was difficult to read and I tensed, ready for a punishment when he pulled me into a tight hug.

“I don’t really like hugs, but you seemed like you needed one. You haven’t stopped shaking since we crashed.” Keith said in a low voice, holding me.

“It’s my fault.” I said quietly, not sure how to react to his hug so I stood there stiffly.

Keith sighed, pulling back and leaving his hands on the tops of my arms. “It’s not your fault we were idiots and crashed the lions. If it hadn’t been for you then we both would have been hurt. We got lucky that Miume found us, but if it had been both of us that were injured I don’t think she could have done much.”

“But-“ I tried to argue but Keith shook his head before cupping my face in his hands. His thumbs rubbed my cheeks slightly as he looked down at me.

“It is not your fault. Don’t beat yourself up about it.” He assured me.

I bit my lip. I could feel my face heating up but thankfully we were covered by shadows from the setting sun to hide it.

“Do you think you can help me find the lions? I remember most of how we got back but I could use some help.” He asked, finally releasing my face. “Do you think you could retrace the auras? Or find the red lion’s aura?” he suggested, struggling to find the right words.

“Why do you still trust me?” I murmured, looking down my shoulders still trembling.

“Because you are my teammate,” Keith replied in a gentle voice.

Opening my mouth I tried to respond but Keith shook his head, giving me a small smile.

“Come on, we need to try and get a hold of Shiro.” He said calmly, pausing for a moment before taking one of my hands and leading me away from the camp.

I let him tug me along, staring down at our interlocked hands in confusion. His red aura started to creep up from our hands, up my wrist and slowly around my arm making me feel increasingly more calm.

We hiked for a bit, and the sun was almost completely hidden behind the jagged mountains before we stopped to catch our breath. Leaning back against the cold rock I took an uneven breath. I hadn’t realized how steep we had hiked down earlier.

“Can you tell how close we are?” Keith asked, leaning against the cliff and letting go of my hand so that he could readjust the armor of his suit. A thin layer of sweat layered his brow.

I had been following the energy trails of Keith and I to find our way back as the sinking sun changed the shapes of the terrain around us.

“It’s a bit farther. Around that next part then up.” I informed him, swallowing and still panting lightly.
“How are you holding up?” Keith eyed me, “You look pale.”

“I’m fine.” I replied, running the back of my hand against my cheek, pushing off from the wall feeling lightheaded. “I can keep going.”

“Okay,” Keith said doubtfully.

“We need to get to the red lion before it’s too dark,” I continued, my voice unsteady.

“That doesn’t mean we have to push ourselves. You made two huge barriers earlier today,” Keith reasoned, taking holding of my elbow to steady me. “Besides, if we fall down that,” he looked over the edge of the thin path we were on down a gigantic cliff with jagged rocks and steely crag far below, “doesn’t end well.”

I nodded, leaning into him slightly, “Thanks.” I replied quietly.

“Of course.” Keith comforted, standing still so that I could use him for support. The closer I was to him, the more at ease I felt. After a few minutes of this I felt more energized, leaning back before looking up at him.

“Feel better?” he smiled. I nodded, stepping back. “Alright, let’s go. You said it was only a bit farther. I’d guess we only have about a half hour of sun left, and then it’ll get real cold, real fast.”

I nodded in response, stepping in front of him to lead the way. I could feel his eyes on me as we carefully treaded across the path before coming to an abrupt stop.

“What’s wrong?” Keith asked. He was so close to me that I didn’t dare turn around. My heart squeezed, making it hard to breathe for reasons I didn’t completely understand.

“We have to climb from here,” I reported, leaning back a little to look up. “There’s the red lion.” I nodded upwards. Keith followed my gaze before letting out a relieved laugh.

“There she is.” He exhaled, giving my shoulder a squeeze. “Good job.”

“I was only following the aura.” I mumbled quietly. “It looks like it could be hard to climb.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty inclined.” Keith assessed, running his hand along the wall above my head, “What if we connected ourselves together with the belt Pidge created?” he looked down at me.

I blinked at him not sure what we was implying.

“If we are tied together it makes it safer if one of us slips. We could use our jet packs to get up... but I don’t think it would be safe.” He explained, still eyeing the cliff and looking for jutted rocks for possible access points.

I nodded in agreement, turning around carefully to face him, pulling the metal clip from my waist and extending it out to him. He took it, wrapping it around himself before tugging on it to test its security.

“Seems good. I’ll go first.” He decided, taking hold of a nook above me. “If you need to stop let me know.” I nodded again, taking hold of a lower point.

Together we started to climb upwards, Keith just a bit ahead of me but not by much. We didn’t have much to work with. I had never climbed before, so I kept my eyes on Keith trying to control my breathing.
“How are you doing?” Keith paused, looking down at me.

“How’s it going?” I answered, clinging to the side of the mountain.

“Only a bit farther.” He tried to encourage me. I gave him a slight smile before bracing myself against the icy wind that blew past us.

“It’s getting colder.” Keith observed, shaking his head to move his hair out of his eyes.

I nodded, my teeth starting to chatter. The sun had dipped below the mountains completely now as the wind picked up. Keith and I needed to used the flashlights on our suits to see now. Another gust blew past us, its force pushing me. Instinctively I formed a shield around us, not realizing how tired I was. My eyes rolled back slightly, my grip loosening.

“Umi!” Keith cried out in alarm, re-adjusting his position when my weight slipped, causing me to fall a few inches.

“Sorry.” I said in a tired voice, “I can’t protect us.” I rested my head against the cold rock for a moment, trying to regain my breathing.

“Umi listen to me, it’s alright, just focus on my voice. We are almost there. Don’t put any more barriers around us, it’s fine I can support you.” He called out, his voice fading in and out slightly.

“Umi, listen to me.” Keith tried again, “I know it’s scary, but I can support you. You don’t have to do this alone.”

“I have to protect. It’s my purpose.” I replied in a monotone voice, reaching up and taking the next available hold.

“It’s not your purpose.” Keith insisted, “you weren’t created to only protect or attack on command.”

“I don’t understand.” I sighed before Keith placed his hand on mine delicately.

“Once we are in the red lion, I’ll explain more. But there’s no point in being a team if you are forced into it. That’s not what a team is,” He gave me a small smile. “Just listen to my voice.”

I gulped, feeling his energy wrap around me again, making the dizziness slip away.

“I’m not the best at talking. I don’t really get close to anyone. But for some reason, I feel more at ease with you. Why, I don’t know.” He talked in a low voice, moving carefully up a few inches before waiting for me to get to his level.

“But,” he continued, “I know that I enjoying getting closer to you.” His voice trailed off as he hoisted himself over the last overhang, reaching down to help me up.

“You do?” I asked, completely out of breath as I accepted his help and climbed up to join him at the top of the cliff.

“Yeah.” He confirmed, his eyes glancing away nervously. His aura wavered around in nervous patterns again.

We were silent a few more minutes, shivering from the cold, wind blowing past us before I leaned forward resting my helmet against his and closing my eyes. I felt completely exhausted.

“I don’t really understand. But I enjoy it too, I think.” I almost whispered, leaning into his warm
energy, enjoying the feeling of it curling over my own.

I heard Keith make a small choking noise, making me open my eyes to find him smiling at me.

“What?” I asked, sitting back.

He just laughed a bit and shook his head, “Come on, let’s get inside before we freeze.” He stood up, jerking me with him from our connection. “Sorry.” He apologized, reaching out quickly to steady me before untying himself.

Finally we were in the red lion. The wind was howling outside loudly and we were completely submerged in darkness. Taking a deep breath, I collapsed to the floor feeling exhausted. Keith joined me on the floor and sighed.

“How are you feeling?” he eyed me again, his red aura stretching towards me, mixing with mine and soothing me.

“Fine.” I tried before my vision started to blur and I felt a tickle in my nose. Running my hand under my nose, I caught the blood before Keith could notice it. I used too much energy today.

“You’re exhausted. It’s okay to say so.” Keith assured, taking off his helmet and shaking out his hair a bit.

“I’m not used to that.” I replied, taking off my helmet as well.

“I know, and it’s alright.” He smiled softly, leaning back on his hands before pushing off to stand up and move to the main control panel.

“You rest, I’ll try contacting Shiro.” He sat down, his lion’s energy spiking and clearly rejuvenated.

I nodded, resting my head against the chair feeling completely drained.

“Shiro, come in.” Keith called out, “It’s Keith and Umi, Lance and I crashed.” He paused, listening for a response but hearing none. There was just radio silence. “Shiro, come in.” Keith tried again but was again met with silence.

“I don’t think we are in range.” He sighed in frustration, turning around to find me passing out against the chair. “And she’s asleep.” He laughed to himself, standing up and walking over to the me.

Pulling open a small compartment on the floor, he retrieved the emergency blanket. Unfolding it he carefully readjusted his sleeping companion into a more comfortable position before laying the blanket over me.

Placing a gloved hand on my head briefly, a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “You did good today.” he murmured quietly.

Keith moved over to the command chair, collapsing into it, his eyes feeling heavy. The sound of the shrieking wind faded as he drifted into sleep.

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“Sooo,” Lance said in a smooth voice, his sleeve rolled up as Miume took a blood sample, “I don’t think we have officially been introduced.”
Miume looked up at the heavily medicated male, giving him a coy smile. “I’m Miume, your doctor.” She replied simply, not pausing from her work.

“Miume,” he purred her name, “So you’ve come from heaven to save me and become Mrs. Future Blue Lion?”

“Maybe I have.” Miume chirped back, retracting the needle from his arm and capping the vial of blood.

“Well, I think that’s what the heavens are clearly trying to tell us.” He smiled widely, thinking he was the smoothest man on this planet apparently.

“Paw-ssibly, or they are telling me that I am a doctor who’s meant to save people, and you happen to be one of those fur-tunate souls,” She smiled at him.

“Or, you’re an angel. I think that.” He replied, patting her hand tenderly and nodding in agreement with himself.

“Can’t I be both?” Miume questioned innocently, placing her other hand on top of his. He turned bright red, the smile on his face stretching even wider. She laughed at his reaction.

“So, what are you doing after taking my blood?” He asked, his eyes never leaving hers.

“I’m going to take it and do some simple diagnostic testing,” Miume explained lightly, retracting her hands to his dismay.

“I don’t know what you just said but it sounded like you and me are getting drinks.” His words slurred a bit as he spoke. Lance tried to sit up more but tilted off to the right from the sudden loss of blood.


“Well gee, I didn’t know you were plagued by love already. Looks like you’ve already fallen for my charms.” Lance cooed in a flirtatious voice, wiggling his eyebrows slightly.

Miume tried not to laugh as he leaned forward, almost missing the edge of the bed and falling again.

“Un-fur-tunatly for you, I have the cure for this plague already being developed.” She patted his head tenderly as his face dropped, eyes starting to water.

“So you don’t love me?!” he cried in a dismayed voice.

“Paw-lease, I have much bigger fish to fry.” Miume teased, withdrawing her hand from his head which only made his eyes water more.

“What could be a bigger fish to fry than me?!” he asked in utter shock

“Oh, you’re a big fish? How big of one are you? I like mine nice and big.” Miume purred, sitting down on the edge of the bed which made his face light up again.

“The biggest you’ll ever find! Me and blue are the strongest and fastest in the whole universe!” he proclaimed, drawing out the word ‘whole’ like a child telling someone how much they loved them.

“Are you now? Sounds like a very important fish to me.” She humored him, giving him another
smile. He smiled ever wider now.

“Like the most important defenders of the universe!” he threw his arms out into an arc to display just how important they were.

“Defenders of the universe? Now that’s a big boy job isn’t it.” Miume said in a teasing voice.

“Well, they don’t just call me the sharp-shooter for nothing!” he puffed out his chest pointing his thumb towards himself. “Everyone else has to go pew pew pew,” he made a mock gun out of his fingers to demonstrate, “but I just go pew and hit the target in one shot. Keith tries to keep up because he’s my rival but can’t, I’m just too cool for him. No one can keep up with the sharp-shooter and Blue. Blue is my lion by the way, and she’s a beaut. Strong, fast, and cool just like her pilot.” He tried to flash her a cool smile but his face was too relaxed from the pain medication to be successful.

“Oh, and what are the other lions like?” she inquired, tilting her head to the side and twitching her ears cutely, while only made him smile more.

“Well, they aren’t as important, but without them we couldn’t form Voltron. Who’s the legendary defender of the universe and who is going to take down Zarkon. We are fighting against him and going to take back the universe!” he explained excitedly.

“Meow, that is a big fish to fry.” Miume eyes gleamed as she pressed for more information, “and these other pilots?”

“Well, I am the sharp-shooter so obviously I am an essential part. Keith, the one who goes ‘pew pew pew’ pilots the red one who isn’t nearly as cool as Blue. But he flies into black holes and stuff so I guess he’s okay. Hunk is yellow and like a tank. He used to hurl in elevators but now he goes zoom zoom in his lion. Pidge is the techy one, all smart and stuff. Half the time I don’t even know what she’s saying so I just nod and pretend to understand. Shiro is in black and the leader. He’s pretty cool, he’s got this robot arm that turns purple to kick ass in. But, I kick the most ass.” Lance started to ramble in an enthusiastic voice.

“And, we got this new member. Her name is Umi, she’s pretty cool. She escaped from Zarkon all by herself like Shiro! And she has this cool purple power that shocks people and makes shields and it’s sooooo cool but she won’t talk to me! She only talks to Keith and I know something is going on between them! I can feel it!” he continued becoming distressed, tapping his temple with his index finger at the end before his eyes started to water again, “She’s only been talking to him and hasn’t even had a chance to fall for me and it’s not fair!” he pouted, lip quivering as he tried not to cry.

“Aw, but you are their handsome sharp-shooter so it’s alright.” Miume comforted him, patting his head again to which he closed his eyes and purred happily.

“I mean they wouldn’t have a team without this handsome stud so.” he boasted, completely forgetting about his previous pout, the medications clearly affecting him. Although, here and there he still seemed to wince in pain.

“So, obviously you need to get better to get back to this blue lion of yours.” Miume played along with him, her tails swishing behind her in amusement.

“Yeah, I bet she misses me. But she’ll understand that you came to get me and become Mrs. Future Blue Lion.” Lance tried to reason.

“She won’t be jealous?” Miume prodded, smirking a little. Lance’s eyes widened suddenly, horror
written all over her face he gasped dramatically.

“Oh no! Maybe she is jealous!” he cried out in despair. “What if she gets up and flies away and leaves me here?” He had taken Miume’s hand again and was shaking it up and down in worry. “Not that I would mind being stranded on a love plagued planet with you... But she needs her sharp-shooter pilot! No one else could replace that!” he was almost in tears again as his poor drugged brain ran in circles about his mechanical lion being jealous.

“Well, we’ll just have to introduce ourselves and I’m sure she will understand.” Miume comforted him, patting his hands lightly.

“Oh that’s a good idea! You are so smart! I guess if you’re a doctor you have to be super smart. I’m sure Blue will understand!” Lance reasoned, his face lighting up again. “We should go find her now. I bet she’s lonely and cold. We crashed into a mountain did you know?” Lance continued rambling, trying to swing his legs over the bed, but visibly winced as the soreness from the crash began to hit him again.

“I think she’s having a girls’ night and enjoying her time out in the mountains. She’s got to brag to the other lions about surviving such a crash and protecting her sharp-shooter.” Miume started, placing a hand on his chest and pushing him back down into the bed. Lance’s eyes immediately focused on her hand, his body going limp to her touch.

“Yeah?” he asked innocently but grimaced in pain.

“Mhm.” Miume agreed, reaching over to administer another pain medication in his IV.

“Hey, what are you doing? Are you breaking up with me?! Is that the break up medication?” Lance exclaimed in a panicked voice.

“No, no, I could never do that to you. This is just a medication to help strengthen that love plague of yours.” She explained in a soft voice, giving him a small dose. His eyes were already half lidded.

“Oh I see, you need more of this charm, don’t cha.” He gave her a droopy smile, immediately feeling relaxed and at ease from the medication.

“Oh yes, I need it very much.” Miumi purred back, watching the male’s eyes fight to stay awake.

“Well then, my angel.” Lance breathed as he drifted off.

“Well then, you are a very interesting human indeed.” She said after he started to snore lightly. She turned to leave the room and her eyes gleamed as she smirked to herself, “and fighting against Zarkon... Looks like we found ourselves a powerful ally.”
“Keith?” Shiro’s voice suddenly came through the main screen in the lion’s control panel. The sudden noise jerked us awake. Gasping I tried to orient myself as the inside of the red lion came into focus. “Glad to see you two are alright.” Shiro sighed in relief, his face appearing on the monitor clearly now.

“Shiro!” Keith replied, his voice thick with sleep.

“Morning. Where are you? The castle can’t really fly around in these mountains, and the mountains here are so twisted it forces us to fly slow. Paired with this thick atmosphere above it’s impossible to see down from.” Shiro briefed, glancing behind Keith at me causing me to shrink back further. A sudden fearful anxiety gnawed at my stomach now. What would my punishment be for not protecting them?

“I don’t know… we crashed. Lance is at a medical clinic here on the planet. Umi and I came to get the red lion but ended up falling asleep because it was too dark to fly. Miume said that the fog interrupts communication signals so we were hoping that the red lion would be close enough to be in range, but it looks like you are closer now.” Keith reported, his voice seeming more awake now as his aura came slowly to life.

“Miume?” Shiro asked, “Medical clinic? Is Lance alright?” his eyes were full of worry now.

“Yeah, he needs to be put in a healing pod. But he’s not in immediate danger. Just a fractured arm and a mild concussion. If it weren’t for Umi, we both would have been in bad shape,” Keith explained, looking back at me briefly, “Miume is the doctor who got to him before we did. She was already treating him by time we got down to the blue lion.”

“I told you not to make it a competition.” Shiro sighed shaking his head, “Well stay where you are. I have your position locked. It’ll take us a while to get to you though. We had to land the castle on the other side of the planet practically because of these thorn like mountains. Pidge, Hunk, and I are flying carefully through the mist.”

“Okay, we will hold position.” Keith replied giving Shiro a nod.

“Are you two alright?” Shiro asked, his eyes glancing to the back where I was crouched.

“Yeah, we just needed to rest. I haven’t heard from Lance, but I assume he’s sleeping,” Keith reported.

“Alright, well we’ll get to you as fast as we can. We are still a ways away.” Shiro said before nodding, his image disappearing after.

“Well at least they are coming to us. Now we just get to wait.” Keith verified, moving his hands behind his head.

I nodded, sinking down to the floor and feeling miserable again. It was silent for a few minutes before I finally spoke. ”Keith.” I almost whispered.

“Hmm?” he hummed, looking back at me.

“Will you send me away? Punish me?” I asked, my hands started shaking again.
Keith’s face softened as he got up so that he could sit in front of me on the floor.

“Umi, we would never do that.” He tried to reassure me.

“Lance got hurt because I couldn’t protect him.” I continued, not looking at him. I couldn’t escape the dreaded heaviness within me. I knew I’d be sent away for this. My punishment.

“If anything he will scold us for being competitive.” Keith said, laughing at himself a bit, clearly not looking forward to it.

“But-” I tried again before Keith shook his head and patted my shoulder tenderly.

“I promise, nothing bad will happen.” He smiled at me a bit, his aura flowing around him and approaching me in a soft manner.

I sighed, leaning back against the command chair not sure what I was feeling. Closing my hands into fists I tried to stop them from shaking. Keith noticed this and his hand twitched before he finally moved it to place one of them on my hand.

“We are a team. That means we forgive people when they make mistakes. Which you didn’t do of course. It was Lance’s and my fault for going all out and making some dumb competition like we always do.” Keith continued in a quiet voice, giving my hand a gentle squeeze.

I looked down at our hands and I could feel myself calming as his red aura slowly drifted around me. I didn’t understand how this could be happening. How did he make me feel so calm?

“You make me feel calm.” I confessed quietly, still not looking at him.

“Well, that’s good at least.” Keith chuckled a bit leaning back on his hands for a beat, noting that I was still trembling slightly. Pausing briefly, his energy pulled around him hesitantly before he finally crossed the distance to sit next to me. Closing his eyes, he tilted his head back and relaxed his muscles. “You make me feel calm too.” He almost whispered after a moment.

My eyes snapped back towards him, my heart squeezing from his words before looking back down at my hands. Sighing, I closed my eyes too, enjoying the feeling of his aura wrapping around me. It always felt like a thick layer of armor surrounding me, making me feel at complete ease.

“Keith!” Pidge’s relieved voice flooded through the cabin making Keith and I jerk awake again.

“Pidge.” Keith sighed, rolling over a little so that he could see the monitor.

“Well hello there, sleeping beauties.” She smiled at him evilly.

“Shut up. Where are you guys?” He asked, standing completely now.

“Just above you. There’s nowhere for us to land around here. Can you show us where the camp is and we’ll try to get closer?” Pidge inquired as her lion hovered above us.

“Uh, one sec let me find it.” Keith said, moving his fingers over the yellow screen until a map was pulled up. “It was in this general location. Looks like there’s an open area a little to the east of it.” He swiped his fingers across the screen to share it.

“Got it, let’s meet there, can you move now?” she asked, trying to peer behind the chair where I was still half hiding.

“Yeah, the red lion is fine now.” Keith answered curtly.
“Alright, we’ll meet you there then.” Pidge acknowledged, nodding and vanishing from the screen.

I breathed a sigh of relief, readjusting my hands so that the magnets were intact.

“Ready to fly again?” Keith asked, looking back at me. I nodded, crouching down as Keith put the lion in gear. Carefully this time he ascended a bit before moving towards the designated meeting place. The closer we got the more anxious I felt as my heart began to race and my chest tightened uncomfortably.

“Keith.” I whispered. He glanced back at me momentarily but I shook my head, biting my lip instead.

“I promise it will be alright.” He reassured, guessing my thoughts as we landed next to a small circle of colored lions.

“Keith!” Hunk called out in a relieved voice before patting him on the back and giving me a warm smile. His aura was still bright and welcoming, which I wasn’t expecting.

“You two are alright?” Shiro asked, eyeing us more carefully now that we were out in the open. I was surprised to see his aura flowed around smoothly and curious with genuine concern.

“Yeah, if it hadn’t been for Umi, I don’t know what would have happened.” Keith praised, peering back at me. I was standing behind him slightly, hunched over waiting for something bad to happen.

“You should have seen their impact point!” Pidge exclaimed, her voice full of excitement, “it looked like a comet hit the mountain. Umi, your shield made craters in the mountain!”

“Your shield pushed through solid rock?” Shiro repeated with interest, raising an eyebrow, “Impressive.”

I blinked at him, not expecting that either.

“The first place they hit looked like a bomb went off from the amount of impact.” Pidge continued happily, and Hunk’s face began to drain of color.

“So, I’m really glad you guys are alright but… what happened to Lance then if it looked like Keith’s lion exploded on impact?” Hunk inquired in a worried voice, visibly shrinking.

“He wasn’t going as fast as we were, and got slowed down by Umi’s barrier. So I think there wasn’t as much impact.” Keith guessed, crossing his arms over his chest. “We should go find Lance.”

“Alright, lead the way.” Shiro instructed, stepping back to let Keith pass. I didn’t follow. I stood there confused before Shiro walked up to me.

Tensing my whole body, I flinched when he reached his hand out. I saw him pause briefly before he gently placed a hand on my head. “Thank you for saving them Umi.” He thanked me in a soft voice, ruffling my hair a bit. “They are idiots who go too far sometimes. I’m glad no one was really injured.”

My heart nearly stopped. His aura was so calm and full of compassion that I didn’t understand it. I looked up at him with wide eyes.

“You’re not mad at me?” I asked in disbelief.
Shiro gave me a sad look before shaking his head and rubbing my head again. “No, you were the one who helped them. If it hadn’t been for you, Keith might be seriously hurt. And it sounds like you still helped Lance too, since you kept him from getting even more hurt.”

“But I didn’t protect them.” I replied, my voice shaking slightly.

“Yes, you did.” Shiro reassured in a soft but firm voice.

“But” I tried again but he shook his head and smiled at me.

“Come on, let’s go see Lance.” He moved his hand to my shoulder, giving it a light squeeze before turning to face the others who had paused to wait for us.

My eyes found Keith’s and he smiled at me when they meet. “Told you.” he mouthed.

“Come on, Umi!” Pidge waved an arm over her head, waiting for me to follow Shiro as Hunk grinned encouragingly.

Pausing for a beat longer, I felt their energies slowly tugging at mine, trying to get it to move forwards. They were all still warm and inviting, wrapping around me and pulling me towards them. What was this? I let their auras bring me towards them, feeling lighter and more at ease the closer I got to them.

“How much you want to bet Lance is flirting with the doctor?” Pidge grinned in mischief. Her aura pranced around her playfully.

“Oh you have no idea.” Keith laughed, “He thinks she's an angel from heaven sent to save him.” He shook his head in disbelief.

“Sounds like he's doing just fine.” Hunk laughed in relief, his aura settling even more now.

“Totally fine.” Pidge agreed.

They continued making fun of Lance until we reached the edge of the open area where tan tents were scattered around. The tents were oblong shapes with sturdy fabric walls that appeared to be metallic with military grade plastic windows. There was a medium sized ship tucked into the corner of the base of a mountain, some makeshift tables and another bright white tent that was securely rooted in place.

“Oh, you must be the other paladins.” A familiar female voice cooed from the left of the group. A tan girl with cat ears and a white lab coat strode confidently over to us out for the nearest white tent. As she completely emerged from the tent, they saw she had white-grey hair and two fox like tails with blackened tips that matched her ears. She wore black elbow length gloves under her white lab coat. A white and pink dress with a black bust and matching leggings with accents of pink tied everything together and around her neck hung a beautiful cerulean crystal from a golden chain.

“Yes, thank you for taking care of one of ours. I’m sorry for any inconvenience.” Shiro replied, shifting to face her head on.

“It is no purr-blem at all,” Miume responded, visibly blushing as she eyed Shiro, “My name is Dr. Miume Maolatte. I’m one of the lead physicians of this base,” She extended a clawed hand to Shiro, red eyes sparkling at him.

“Shiro. You’re the one who found Lance?” He asked, taking her hand firmly.
She blinked at him coyly, clearly smitten with him. “Correct. I was picking some important ingredients for an antidote I’m working on when his lion fell from the sky.” She recalled, folding her arms under her chest. “It was very surprising, but he wasn’t injured nearly as badly as he could have been given the force of impact.”

“I appreciate you treating him so quickly. Thank you again. Those two,” he turned to glare at Keith sternly, “can be real thick headed sometimes.”

Miume laughed a purring sound, nodding in agreement. “He’s awake now if you’d like to see him. He has been quite the handful.” Her voice was light as she turned to walk back into the tent she had come from.

As soon as we had filed into the tent, Lance’s face lit up from his position in his bed as we circled around him. “Guys!” he cried out in excitement. He sat up making the IV pole he was attached to rock slightly.

“Lance!” Hunk exclaimed, smiling at him and embracing him warmly. Their auras nearly engulfed each other in brotherly love and joy.

“Glad you’re alive.” Pidge teased, giving him a sarcastic smile from behind Hunk’s broad shoulders.

“Psh, there’s no way I could die like that.” Lance boasted before his eye met Shiro’s and his smile dropped instantly.

“Lance.” Shiro said in a stern voice, crossing his arms, “What did I say before you left?”

“Not to get competitive.” Lance mumbled, “but Keith did it too!” he tried to defend himself, pointing at Keith who glared at him in response.

“And who initiated it!?” Keith shot back, angered at being called out, his aura prickling.

“You went along with it!” Lance bickered, his voice raised. His aura matched Keith’s vibration now.

“Enough! You are both at fault. If it weren’t for Umi you could both be dead right now.” Shiro scolded in a stern fatherly tone.

Keith looked over his shoulder, ignoring Lance who huffed and crossed his good arm over his chest.

“I expect better from you two.” Shiro continued his lecture. “Do you have anything to say for putting your teammate in danger?”

“Sorry Umi.” Keith said in a soft voice, giving me an apologetic smile. I stared at him, not understanding why he was apologizing.

“Sorry.” Lance followed, looking like a genuinely upset.

“But it was my fault.” I said in a quiet voice, looking at the ground.

“No, it was their fault for being idiots.” Pidge reassured, nudging my arm. Her aura tried to calm mine as it extended outwards.

“But I couldn’t protect both of them.” I continued, trying not to avoid her gaze.
“You are still learning how to use your powers. It’s their fault for being idiots and racing when they couldn’t even see what was below them.” Pidge tried to comfort me before giving the other two boys a disappointed look. “Especially Keith. I expected you to care more.” She added in a snide comment. Keith’s face flared with anger and embarrassment and his aura exploded briefly around him as well before quickly pulling inwards on itself in an attempt to hide his embarrassment.

“Of course I care.” He retorted in an annoyed voice, crossing his arms tightly over his chest.

“Uh huh.” Pidge said, giving him a sly grin.

“Enough.” Shiro said to Pidge, giving her a warning look.

Miume leaned against one of the cabinets in the examination room, trying not to giggle at the people in front of her. When it looked like the leader was done scolding his children she pushed herself up and walked over to join the group around Lance’s bed.

“I heard you were fighting against Zarkon.” She started in a low voice, putting her hands in her pockets and eyeing Shiro.

Shiro turned to look at her, “We are.” He replied simply, his energy stiffening as he tried to read Miume’s intentions.

When he didn’t continue Miume began to explain in detail, “This planet used to be lush with vegetation. A doctor’s dream of treasure for medicinal herbs. However, Zarkon and his army completely ravished the planet and destroyed it, taking all of the Quintacs with them and killing off nearly everything in their path. Following such a greed, the weakened planet and its people suffered as Zarkon’s men released a plague that spread through the small population… That is, the remaining population that wasn’t brutally murdered by his army. They were barely able to survive in such barren conditions, as the plague was wiping them out faster than they could recover. I am here with my team treating them. We recently developed an antidote for the plague and have been treating the population with great success. My team and I, known as the ‘Red Eyes’, are traveling doctors and rebel spies against Zarkon’s forces. We travel to the planets Zarkon has destroyed and help the population that has somehow survived,” Miume sighed as the group looked to her in silent awe. “I’ve talked it over with my leader, Oli, and we agree that the Voltron team would be a powerful ally. Do you think you and your team would be willing to become an ally?” she concluded. Miume could see the gears turning in Shiro’s head as he went over the information she had just given him.

“I think anyone fighting against Zarkon is an ally of ours.” He said finally, giving her a smile and extending a hand.

Miume eyed if before returning his smile with a fanged grin and gripping his hand tightly. “Pleasure to do business with you.” She purred and winked at him.

“Having an ally who knows medicine is really helpful, so thank you. If you ever find yourself in trouble we will protect you.” He gestured to the rest of his team in the room, failing to recognize her advances.

“I appreciate it.” Miume thanked him, taking her hand back and scanning the faces around her. “I would like to see how these lions work though, just to see if you are as worthy an ally as Lance here mentioned.” She nodded to the male who was gazing at her in a dreamy state.

“Naturally.” Shiro answered matter-of-factly, “Pidge, would you mind showing Miume what your
lion can do?”

“Sure, Captain, sir,” Pidge smirked, giving him a mock salute.

“Keith and Hunk, you should go with Lance to find his lion,” Shiro continued to delegate.

“Umi, do you mind staying with Pidge and me?” Shiro looked back at me. I nodded in agreement, watching as Hunk helped Lance off of the bed he was propped up in.

“Miume, if you would follow us, we’ll show you what just one of our lions can do.” Shiro requested, walking back out of the tent and holding it open for the rest of us to file out.

“He just wants you to rest.” Keith whispered to me as he passed, gently squeezing my hand as he walked towards the opposite side of camp to go retrieve the blue lion. I watched him leave, feeling more uneasy the farther he got from me.

“He’ll be back soon.” Pidge reassured, appearing beside me and giving me a mischievous smile. I jumped, not noticing her before glancing back at Keith as his red suit disappeared around the end of a mountain.

“Alright Pidge, fire her up.” Shiro called up as Pidge adjusted herself in her lion.

“Roger that.” She confirmed, her lion roaring to life.

Miume stared up at the green lion curiously, ears pointed forward attentively. The green lion was the smallest from what she could tell, but it floated into the air so easily.

“Each lion has their own personality, one that matches their Paladin.” Shiro explained to Miume, looking up at the green lion like a proud parent. “Pidge’s lion is tech savvy like her. She’s been modified to have an invisible cloaking device, and of course it has self defense mechanisms.”

“Invisibility?” Miume repeated, her tails swishing in curiosity.

“I took the program from the castles invisible maze exercise and reprogrammed it.” Pidge informed her casually, pressing a few buttons then her lion vanished into the air.

“Oh, very im-purr-essive.” Miume purred. She looked over to Shiro pleased and smiled at him.

“She can also make electrical signals and other tech shut down by jamming their systems with roots.” Pidge called out, her lion reappearing as she swung it around. “Let’s go girl!” She said lovingly.

Miume’s eyes widened as she fired a green beam at the base of a mountain opposite them and wooden roots sprung from its impact point, twisting around trying to find purchase.

“Amazing.” Miume commented to herself, her ears twitching in excitement. “And the black lion?” she looked back at Shiro eagerly and smiled coyly.

“The black lion enables us to form Voltron. It’s the core of it, you could say. However, we need all five lions together and can’t form it until Lance gets back with his lion.” Shiro explained looking over at her and giving her a warm smile, “How’s just one lion doing for you?”

“Oh, it is doing very well. And this one in particular could help this planet a lot.” Miume replied, taking her hands out of her pockets and scratching her ear.

“Is there anything else you want to see?” Shiro asked, motioning for Pidge to land.
“What was this castle you mentioned.” Miume recalled, watching the green lion land gracefully.

“The castle of Altea. It’s a highly fortified castle and spacecraft that our other teammate Princess Allura pilots it with her assistant Coran. It was the first place the blue lion took us.” Shiro explained, “it’s our base you could say. Allura and Coran are the last of the Alteans, and Allura’s father King Alfor had built the lions of Voltron some 10,000 years ago.”

“That’s quite a long time ago, isn’t it?” Miume commented, “And may I ask what you mean when you say these two are the last of their kind?”

Shiro paused for a second before replying, “Zarkon had destroyed their planet before he set out to conquer the universe. They were frozen in the castle of lions until we found them when the blue lion took us there. Without Allura or Coran, we couldn’t power the castle.”

“What a terrible tragedy, I see.” Miume mulled before looking inquisitively at the yellow and red lions as they sat on the ground and gleamed in the sun.

“The yellow one is the muscle of the group. It belongs to Hunk. The red one is the fastest and most agile and belongs to Keith.” Shiro answered her unspoken question, not missing a beat. “Lance’s is the blue lion from what you could tell. His is one of the greatest supports for our team.”

“Interesting.” She purred, walking up to the green lion and placing a hand on it. She could feel a warm energy emitting from its structure. “And Umi, you create barriers?” Miume asked, turning to me as I stood silently behind Shiro. I nodded at her. Miume eyed me and thought to herself, was this girl selectively mute? Her ears twitched.

“May I see?” Miume requested, walking back over to Shiro.

Shiro looked back at me, “Do you have enough energy?” he asked in a caring manner. His aura felt comforting as it reached out to me and gave me some strength.

I nodded before looking back at the green lion. Closing my eyes for a moment, I focused on pushing energy towards it. A pink translucent barrier flickered to life around the green lion before disappearing. Reaching down, I pulled a knife from my boot and threw it at the green lion. It bounced off, the point of impact rippling a pinkish purple.

“Very interesting.” Miume observed, her tails swished back and forth happily.

“We are still training to see just what Umi can do. But she’s the one who protected the lions when the crashed.” Shiro praised, giving me an encouraging smile.

“I remember seeing a flicker of color as the blue lion passed. I bet it was your barrier that I saw.” Miume inferred, looking back at me. I shrunk away from her view while looking down.

“When everyone returns to camp, I would love to meet this Princess Allura you speak of,” Miume announced, moving her gaze back to Shiro.

“I’m sure she would be happy to meet with you.” Shiro answered, looking over his shoulder again as Pidge walked back up to us.

“Would you purr-haps like some tea? You’ve all had quite the long journey.” Miume offered warmly as she made her way to another tent.

“That sounds great, thank you.” Shiro replied, smiling a bit, welcoming the hospitality.
We were all sitting on the dusty ground around a campfire sipping tea when the blue lion flew over us.

“Finally.” Pidge whined, leaning back on her hands, “Took them long enough.”

“At least it’s not dark yet.” Shiro commented, standing up and brushing his suit off.

“Miume!” Lance called as he jogged towards us, smiling broadly. “See, I told you blue was the most beautiful.”

Miume laughed under her breath. She didn’t think he would remember most of their conversation, but it seemed like he remembered vague parts. “Yes, she is paw-sitively beautiful.”

“Only second to your beauty,” Lance wiggled his eyebrows as he approached Miume and she rolled her eyes as her tails swished.

“Shut up, Lance.” Keith barked, mock punching Lance’s shoulder as he came to a stop in front of the fire pit.

“Guys come on, let’s not fight on empty stomachs.” Hunk settled, catching up and rubbing his stomach. “Is it dinner time yet?”

“Why don’t you stay here for dinner? We don’t have much because we have to ration, but we’d be happy to offer something for Voltron’s paladins.” Miume chimed, standing up to join the rest of them.

“That sounds great!” Hunk exclaimed, his face lighting up, aura radiating with warm happiness.

“We would appreciate it. We still haven’t been able to contact Princess Allura, or the castle, and I get the feeling trying to fly at night here is almost impossible.” Shiro said, looking up at the twisting mountain cliffs towering over us.

“You’re correct. It is most definitely not safe to fly at night.” Miume nodded in agreement. “We have a few extra sleeping bags and cots. You may sleep in the medical examination tents.”

“Thank you.” Shiro replied, his voice full of gratitude. It wasn’t often that they found hospitable allies.

Miume smiled before calling out to one of her teammates. She had lime green hair pulled back in a long braid and a scaly green tale with red gems lining the top. Her long black ears twitched when she heard Miume’s voice, making her turn around to reveal iris-less red eyes. She had red whisker like markings down her cheeks and similar red raised dots on her forehead.

She spoke back to Miume in a foreign tongue, before walking towards another tent.

“That’s Kara. She doesn’t speak much of your language. She is our ICU specialist and defense commander.” Miume explained as the group watched Kara in puzzled caution.

Kara returned to the fire pit carrying a bag of something. Her pale white skin was a stark contrast to her lime green hair. As she got closer you could see the faint reflections of scales on her pale skin as the firelight danced in the right spot, its pattern nearly invisible otherwise. She wore a white jumpsuit with black sleeves at the shoulders and weathered leather elbow length arm guards. She had matching leather pants with three black stripes down her thighs and knee-high black boots. Her
long, thin rabbit like ears pointed downwards and had gauges punched of of them with two red earrings hanging just below them.

She smiled a sharp-toothed smile at us as she set down the bag, saying something to Miume before heading back to the securely nailed down tent.

“She seems nice.” Pidge mentioned, eyeing her curiously, aura waving around her, “is her skin scaly too?”

“Not exactly. It’s thick and armored like her tail, although it does not show scales purr-se. That suit of hers is akin to an armor. Essentially she’s our ‘tank’ of the group. A skilled fighter and a brilliant medic.” Miume explained warmly, pulling a pot from the bag and hanging it over the open fire carefully.

“We have two more members, Tug and our captain, Oli, but they are currently distributing the plague antidote to another village a few miles out. They won’t be back until morning, maybe even later.” Miume continued, checking the wristlet device on her right arm.

“Interesting.” Pidge replied. She was still watching the white tent like an excited puppy.

“You seem to have a sound team.” Shiro assumed, watching Miume as she poured a powdered substance into the pot as the water started to boil.

“Most are refugees from planets Zarkon has either destroyed or conquered. Each member was a part of the POU, Physicians of the Universe, which is a traveling medical foundation. We each have medical focuses and despise what Zarkon is doing to the universe. We banded together, broke off from the POU and we formed a secret team.” She explained, pulling spoons and bowls out from a bag for each of us then handing them out and taking her place around the fire.

“Nice.” Lance sighed, plopping down next to her, still nursing his injured arm, and gazed at her lovingly. Miume rolled her eyes and smiled to herself. He was still this much of a handful even off of pain medication.

The group chatted aimlessly as the powder cooked into a thicker mass. Everyone’s aura was warm and relaxed. I sat a few feet away at the edge of the fire’s ring of light, knees curled into myself watching them. They were all so carefree, their love towards each other was overwhelming. I didn’t understand how their energies could be so close, tangling with one another effortlessly. Keith looked back at me from his spot next to Hunk, motioning for me to come closer. I sighed, getting up from my position reluctantly and moved next to him. He bumped my arm lightly.

“You okay?” he asked in a low voice, trying not to draw attention to himself as Hunk got distracted by the food Miume was now pouring out into our bowls.

I nodded, watching the flames dance in front of us. The sun had set, casting long shadows over us.

“Umi?” Miume mewed, drawing my attention away from the dancing flames to her as she extended a bowl towards me, giving me a warm smile. Her aura was a light pink, and bubbled out from her easily, wrapping around the other members in a protective way.

“Thank you.” I replied quietly, taking the bowl. She smiled at me a bit more as I accepted it, energy relaxing slightly.

“Finally food! I’m starved!” Hunk exclaimed, bringing the bowl to his nose so he could take a whiff. “Mmm, anything beats green goo.” He smiled happily before blowing on the steaming substance and taking a bite. “And it tastes better than green goo, too!” His eyes closed and his aura
sparkling in pure happiness.

“No way.” Pidge said in disbelief, taking a small bite of hers. “On second thought, maybe you’re right,” she corrected herself and began to shovel the stew into her mouth.

“Honestly, anything beats that green stuff.” Lance confirmed, using his good hand to take a large bite. “and I’m sure anything Miume cooks is bound to be amazing.” She rolled her eyes at him and continued to dispense the meal.

“Shut up.” Keith groaned, sitting in a relaxed position he held his bowl in one hand, the other hooked around an upturned knee.

“Just eat, we have a long day tomorrow.” Shiro scolded, taking a bite of food.

They continued to eat and laugh until the fire had died down to only dull burning embers.

“Alright, I think it’s time for bed.” Shiro announced, sitting up, “Thank you for the food again, Miume.”

“It was no purr-blem. Let me show you guys your tent.” Miume replied, standing up as well, putting her bowl in empty the pot.
“Alright, girls on one side, boys on the other.” Shiro announced, rolling out one of the sleeping bags.

“Aw come on, that’s not a sleep over.” Lance complained, rolling his out awkwardly with one arm.

“This isn’t a sleep over.” Shiro replied sternly, looking at Lance who pouted.

“Well, now I get some quality time with Umi.” Pidge chirped, taking my arm and pulling me to the opposite side of the small tent and pushing our sleeping bags together. She turned around and stuck her tongue out at Keith who glared at her.

“Come on now, settle down.” Shiro tried to reason with Lance who had thrown his pillow at Keith who in return smacked him in the face with it hard enough to knock Lance over.

Pidge lounged on her stomach next to me laughing at them as Hunk pulled the two boys apart. They were growling at each other, glaring intently but not in a serious manner.

Finally things settled down, Lance falling asleep almost instantly and Hunk soon after. Pidge nestled herself closed to me. Laying on her side she gave me a smile. She took my hand in hers, squeezing it slightly. I tried to pull away from her but she tightened her hands around mine.

“I know we don’t really talk. But I’m glad you are okay and saved those two idiots.” She whispered. “If you ever need anything you can always talk to me.” She smiled at me coyly before closing her eyes, still holding onto my hands. I looked at her. She was so close I could feel her aura wrapping around me, pulling me closer to her. It wasn’t the same as Keith’s but it felt gentle and inviting, curling around me like it wanted to get closer.

Closing my eyes, I let myself go completely still allowing her aura to wrap around me entirely. Her breath evened out into deep sleeping patterns, a small smile still played on her lips. Taking a deep breath, I tried to relax my body. With all of them so close, their auras should have been overwhelming but each simply curled up from their sleeping body like smoke. They were calm and slow, moving up and down with each sleeping breath. Keith’s was the only one that was slightly different as it moved around almost anxious, stretching towards Pidge and me then retracting.

Biting my lip, I pushed my energy out around us, starting with Pidge before encircling the entire tent. Keith’s aura seemed to respond, growing more calm before it finally settled to wafting around him. I smiled to myself as his aura relaxed. A single thread from it drifted over towards Pidge and me before meeting mine. They connected and locked together, gently floating there like drifting seaweed.

Sighing contently, I could feel myself relax completely now that our auras were directly touching. I found myself drifting off to sleep with my energy still tied to his.
The first thing I was aware of was just how silent it was. Other than the sound of the other Paladins sleeping around me the air outside was completely still, not even a breeze compared to the howling of last night. Slowly I opened my eyes. Pidge was still snuggled against me, only her head was pressed into my chest now, arms curled up like a cat’s.

Sighing I patted her head softly, trying not to wake her. Her aura was still wrapped around me, almost feeling like a hug.

When I was sure she wouldn’t wake up, I slowly scooted away silently. She mumbled something in her sleep, turning over in her sleeping bag before her breathing evened out again. Moving out of my own sleeping bag, I tip toed over the sleeping paladins towards the tent’s entrance. A pale yellow leaked through the tent flap indicating it was still early morning.

Carefully I slid open the entrance, soundlessly stepping out into the cool air. A thin layer of mist was curling over the ground, barely moving from lack of air movement. Breathing out, I enjoyed the feeling of absolute stillness. On Zarkon’s ship there was the constant buzz of the ship’s core along with the usual screams of torture or anguish. On the Paladin’s ship there was a similar soft hum of some other type of core, one that wasn’t corrupt like the one on Zarkon’s.

“You’re a morning person, too?” Shiro’s soft voice came from behind me, making me jump. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.” He gave me a tired smile, rubbing his eyes as he stepped out into the open air with me.

“It’s so still.” I replied quietly, looking back out towards the canyon of mountains. I had never experienced something so still. There was barely any energy moving here.

“It’s nice.” Shiro commented, coming to stand next to me. I nodded, closing my eyes and tilting my face upwards slightly towards the rising sun. I couldn’t remember the last time I had felt natural warmth.

“Umi.” Shiro said after a moment. I looked up at him. He was scratching the back of his neck. “Want to take a walk?” he asked.

I tilted my head to the side giving him a confused look before nodding. He breathed out, smiling at me before gesturing for me to follow. We walked away from the sleeping camp, stopping just outside of the it at the base of an old decaying tree line. Sitting down, he leaned against it motioning for me to join him. Slowly I sat down, leaning my back against the opposing tree trunk.

Shiro was silent for a few moments, watching the shadows slip down the mountain as the sun slowly rose higher.

“I wanted to thank you again for saving those two idiots.” He finally spoke, laughing a bit under his breath as he looked out at the wafting fog.

“But I couldn’t completely protect them.” I countered, curling my knees into my chest and resting my cheek on them as I gazed out at the mountains before us as well. I was waiting for him to deliver my punishment.

“But you did protect them. You still don’t know the bounds of your powers and are still learning. It’s perfectly fine that you weren’t able to keep them one hundred percent from injury. I wouldn’t expect that.” Shiro said in a reassuring voice. “It will just take some practice, but I’m sure you can develop it the way you want to.”

I was silent for a moment as I chewed on what he said, “What if I can never one hundred percent
protect you.” I asked in a quiet voice.

“That’s why we are a team. One person can’t protect everyone one hundred percent of the time. We all need each other to accomplish that.” He explained, picking up a broken rock fragment and tossing it in his hand, parts of it already starting to deteriorate from the movements.

“But I have to protect everyone ... I am the ultimate weapon.” I replied in a sad voice, not looking at him, painful memories flashing briefly before my eyes. I blinked, pushing them back and focusing on the horizon once more, letting the growing sunlight wash away the darkness around me.

“Umi.” Shiro said, I could feel his gaze on me, “You aren’t an ultimate weapon. You are a person and we all care about you. Some more than others.” He gave me a light smile when I glanced at him. His energy was becoming more awake now.

“I don’t understand.” I confessed. That went against everything I’ve ever been told, everything that was beaten into me.

Shiro laughed to himself again, skipping the rock along the barren ground, making it completely break apart. “I think Keith cares for you in a different way than the rest of the team. That’s not to say we don’t care about you. We are a team, a family. But he cares in a different way.” Shiro continued, returning to looking out across the wasteland. His aura was usually steady and calm but it fluttered nervously now.

“I still don’t really understand all of this.” I admitted quietly, looking down.

“And that’s alright.” He turned and reached to pat my head, causing me to flinch before I understood he wasn’t trying to punish me, “It takes time, we all know that. I just wanted you to know that if you needed anything, Keith would be more than willing to try and help. He’s pretty thick headed so I don’t think he understands what’s developing either, but he is trying.”

I could feel my face start to blush as Shiro continued, “Honestly, I’ve never seen him so openly care about anyone before. He usually sticks to himself, but with you he’s different and I think he’s confused.”

“Is it bad?” I asked, not looking at Shiro.

“That he cares about you?” Shiro clarified, when I nodded he continued, “No, I think it’s a good thing. He’s finally opening up a bit.”

“Shiro,” I said quietly. He turned his attention back to me, “Is it alright to form bonds with you and everyone else?” I bit my lip suddenly afraid of his answer.

“Of course it’s alright. I know it was terrible what Zarkon did to you, and it’s been so long since you’ve been in the outside world. But you can form bonds with the people you want. If you feel like you care about someone, at any depth, then it’s alright to get closer to them. We won’t hurt you.” He added gently. “We are a family, and families care and support each other. It’s safe now.”

He assured me, his arm reaching over and pulling me into a slight hug. “It’s okay to heal, at your own pace. We will all wait for you.”

I bit my lip suddenly feeling a wetness on my cheeks. Swallowing, I ran my hand under my eyes. It was still wet. I was crying? I couldn’t remember the last time I had cried. After so much torture I had become numb to emotions. I could feel myself slowly being broken into, each of their auras gently pulling away the thick protective shell that I had made. Their different colors carefully
chipping it away, revealing emotions I had long forgotten.

“It’s scary.” I whispered, Shiro squeezed my shoulder gently,

“It’s alright. Take your time.” He replied, holding me against him for a moment more before releasing me. I could feel his aura wrapped around me, like a protective shield. It was different than Keith’s. Shiro’s was full and carried a gentle, paternal feeling, while Keith’s was denser, richer, and drew my energy towards his.

“Did you make a barrier around the tent last night?” he pried coyly, trying to lighten the mood.

I nodded, “I don’t really know why, it just happened.”

Shiro smiled at me, “That’s what caring is. Doing something to protect the people around you without reason. Thank you, I couldn’t imagine that tent being very warm against that wind.” He laughed a bit before standing up and offering me his hand. I took it after a moment.

“I think you should try talking to Keith more. He doesn’t know how to talk to people well but I know he would like it.” He said, giving me a warm smile.

I nodded, glancing away as I felt my face heat up which made Shiro chuckle softly to himself.

“Let’s get back before the rest of them wake up. If Keith wakes up and finds you gone he might turn the camp upside down.” Shiro laughed now, moving to walk back to the camp.

When we got there Keith had just ducked out of the tent, his eyes worried before they landed on us and visibly relaxed.

“Told you.” Shiro said, bumping my arm with his and smiling warmly.

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“So, are you ready to fly?” Lance looked back at Miume from his position in the pilot chair of Blue, giving her a crooked smile. She was standing behind his chair and hanging onto the armrests for support in the cabin.

“I travel all around the universe experiencing innumerable planets and astrological phenomena. A mere trip to the other side of this planet isn’t going to be that special.” Miume smiled back teasing him.

“True, but have you ever done it in a giant blue lion that’s part of the legendary weapon of the universe?” Lance clarified, raising an eyebrow and smirking.

“Purr-haps not.” Miume replied, leaning in closer to him and purring softly. He visibly blushed and she laughed at his embarrassment.

“Okay Lance, stop flirting and let’s get going.” Shiro’s voice came through. “Keith, Lance, follow me. You’ll have to stick close and fly slow. This environment isn’t really suitable for flying.”

“Got it.” Keith said, firing up his lion. “Ready?” he glanced back at me. I nodded, flexing my fingers around the edge of the chair anxiously.

“Alright guys, head out.” Shiro ordered, rising his lion up so that he hovered just between the thin layer of mountain and fog. The visibility remained low as we flew over to the castle. It seemed to take much longer than it should have, but Shiro was making sure everyone was taking strict
precautions to prevent more accidents.

“Flying slow is such a drag, Blue can’t show her real beauty like this.” Lance complained as he touched down in front of the white-blue castle.

“Better than crashing again.” Pidge snided before exiting her lion.

“We wouldn’t crash.” Lance tried to defend himself, offering his hand to Miume to help her as they descended. He smiled widely when she accepted his hand without any hesitation.

“Oh?” the device on Miume’s right wrist beeped twice and flashed briefly, “One tick, I must take this.” Miume held up her wrist and a small holographic screen projected from the device. A humanoid face illuminated blue on the screen with what appeared to be thorn-like horns protruding from curly locks on the side of their head.

“Miume,” the head spoke quickly and precisely with a cool tone to their voice, “Tug and I’ve become wrapped up in something in the southern hemisphere and won’t be returning to camp today. Perhaps tomorrow. I don’t know.”

“Oli, that’s fine with me, but I’m meeting with the rest of Voltron right meow as we’ve discussed,” Miume quickly glanced around at our faces.

“Are you? Good! Make sure to tell them about our decision and what we bring to the table in their fight against you-know-who. Also I want a picture of those sick lions.”

“Yes, yes, of course. Meow I must go, the meeting is happening as we speak,” she blushed a bit, her pink aura fluctuating nervously.

“Alright, Mew Mew. Please report back as soon as you can. Over and out,” The face and screen collapsed inwards as the holograph closed. Miume looked back up at us and smiled.

“I a-paw-logize about that! That was our leader, Oli.”

“Not a problem,” Shiro gestured to the castle as he led our group towards the entrance.

“So, this is your base?” Miume asked, swishing her tails.

“Yup, pretty sweet, huh?” Lance coaxed, wiggling an eyebrow again. Miume tried not to laugh at his blatant attempts of flirting.

“Lance.” Shiro scolded, folding his arms, “We are here to finalize an alliance.”

“I know, I know.” Lance said, rolling his eyes and giving Shiro a look like an annoyed teenager. “That doesn’t mean we can’t form our own purr-sonal alliance…” he added to Miume who laughed at his pun and advancements.

Allura met us at the entrance, hands folded in front of her, smiling. So they weren’t all human, Miume thought as they approached the front door.

“Welcome Miume, and thank you again for healing one of our own.” Allura greeted her, bowing slightly.

“My pleasure. I’m a doctor, it’s merely what I do.” Miume replied giving her a smile back, bowing, then extending a hand. Allura took it and shook it once firmly.

“Regardless, we thank you for your kindness and quick actions. We’ll get Lance in a healing pod
soon.” Allura said before glaring at Lance, “Not that you deserve it right now but we need all Paladins in tip-top shape at any moment.”

Lance shrunk away from her glare, rubbing the back of his neck like a scolded child.

“Come, let’s talk inside.” Allura offered, turning her attention back to Miume.

“Yes, thank you.” She replied, following Shiro and the others inside with inquisitive ears rotating happily.

We made our way to the conference room where Coran was waiting for us, bouncing on the balls of his feet energetically.

“Ah, my favorite Earth Paladins, welcome back!” he greeted the group cheerfully. The Paladins made their greetings with Coran as we took out places around the table. I followed Keith around the corner of the table and sat next to him feeling nervous suddenly. Coran walked over to Lance before he could sit down, “Nuh-uh, young lad! I have explicit orders to take you to the healing pods. Now, come along and let’s get you situated,” He dragged Lance off before he could even start complaining, Lance’s whining protests echoed down the hallway until Allura shut the door. She gracefully strode over to the head of the conference table and took a seat.

“Shiro tells me you’re an anti-Zarkon group. Traveling from planet to planet saving people.” Allura started, folding her hands on the table. “Thank you for fighting against him. Any ally we can find weakens Zarkon.”

“That’s correct. We are a rebel medical group, going to the planets Zarkon has destroyed and helping the population that has survived his attacks and greed.” Miume explained, folding her hands on the table as well. “I didn’t think we would find another group such as ourselves that was so strong, not to mention the old legendary defender Voltron.”

“Ah, so you have heard of Voltron!” Allura smiled warmly.

“That’s correct. We are a rebel medical group, going to the planets Zarkon has destroyed and helping the population that has survived his attacks and greed.” Miume explained, folding her hands on the table as well. “I didn’t think we would find another group such as ourselves that was so strong, not to mention the old legendary defender Voltron.”

“Ah, so you have heard of Voltron!” Allura smiled warmly.

“It was an old story, passed down from my elders.” Miume chimed, “Voltron hasn’t been seen in ten thousand years, so not ever physically seeing it makes it a little hard to believe in. I practice medicine, so I like to actually experience, quantify and assess things to know that they are real, not just hear old stories.” Miume explained, smiling apologetically.

“Understandable. But I can assure you that Voltron is real and has returned. We will defeat Zarkon and stop his horrendous tyrannical pursuits.” Allura reassured her with confidence.

“I can see that now, and I am looking forward to it and to working with you all. Zarkon and that Galra empire have reigned with terror for long enough. I don’t want to keep seeing destroyed planets and civilizations.” Miume replied with conviction.

“Then may we join forces? The more people we can unite directly against Zarkon, the less power he has.” Shiro asked, folding his arms across his chest.

“My team and I can not truly ‘fight’ along with you purr-se. However, we can provide the medical support, and help spread the word that Voltron has come back and is fighting to free us all.” Miume negotiated, “We could also help in finding planets affected by Zarkon and travel together so that you can directly show surviving populations that there is physical hope once again.”

Allura and Shiro nodded, “I think that sounds reasonable. Leave the actual fighting to the Paladins. Having medical support on the ground and someone to help spread the world of Voltron is more than enough.” Allura smiled, stretching out her hands again, “It would be an honor working with
“The feeling’s mew-tual” Miume took her outstretched hand, “If you like, Oli, had an idea. Since we are a team of medical researchers, why not put the Paladins through a bit of a physical training? That way we can know exactly what their conditions are and be more prepared to help them.”

“Hmm, training?” Allura pondered, “like a boot camp?”

“Precisely. We can run a few diagnostic experiments, find out what each of their strengths and weaknesses are, and then create specified improvement regimes to make them stronger.” Miume explained eagerly, her ears attentive.

“I think it sounds like a good idea.” Shiro agreed, shrugging his shoulders and looking at Allura,

“If it means making the Paladins stronger, then I am all for it.” Allura said confidently.

“Wonderful!” Miume smiled, already thinking of research exercises.

“We can start in the morning, let’s take the day to rest.” Shiro suggested, “The Paladins have been through a lot the past few days.”

Miume nodded, “I’d like to observe them in their relaxed state as well in order to get a sense of the psychological state before their physical one.”

“Alright.” Allura complied, standing up, “Please let me show you around then.”

“Thank you.” Miume smiled, standing up as well. From what she gathered, this was a fairly advanced castle. She had only really been around Lance, but already could assumed he was very entertaining and overly confident in himself. Yet there were still skills present to back them up. Keith seemed to be calm and collected most of the time. And Umi seemed very skittish and afraid of things but had powers that didn’t belong to the normal human race. Shiro she found extremely attractive, not only in his physical appearance but his authoritative presence as well with the Paladins. She hadn’t seen much of Hunk or Pidge’s interactions yet and was eager to observe them.

“First off, we’ll show you our healing pods, which is where Lance is now. If you ever are in need, you are welcome to use these. They cool down the body temperature to heal them at a more rapid pace than normal healing process.” Allura tried to explain they walked through another sliding door.

Lance had already changed into a white suit, protesting that he was okay before a Coran pushed him into a pod. Once the pod had sealed closed, Miume could hear air rush in as the temperature cooled inside. Lance’s eyes dropped closed, and on the monitor his vitals evened out as if he were sleeping.

“It should only take a day from what these readings are implying.” Coran announced. The rest of the Paladins were gathered around the pod, glancing between it and him.

“Well, that’s good at least.” Hunk sounded relieved, “If anyone needs me I’ll be in the kitchen cookin’ up something good!”

“I’ll be in the green lion’s bay going over some stuff to find my family.” Pidge stated, hitching a thumb over her shoulder and backing out of the room.

“I guess I’ll hit the training deck. Umi wanna join?” Keith asked, looking over at the me where I was leaning against the wall quietly, afraid to get any closer to Lance. Nodding, I followed Keith
“I think I’m going to join Keith and Umi.” Shiro said, looking back at Miume, “Would you like to see the training deck next?”

“Sure.” Miume agreed, following him down the hallway as her tails swished curiously taking in the impressive castle.

“Are Keith and Umi usually together?” Miume inquired, looking at the two in front of her.

“Usually. Umi is still new to our team and seems to be the most comfortable around him.” Shiro explained.

“Interesting.” Miume commented lightly, her ears twitching intuitively as they walked into another white fluorescent room. As the doors slid open, she saw us on the deck preparing for training.

“Alright Umi, you said you needed to watch our movements to learn how to defend us right?” Keith called over to me, tugging on his gloves to make them tighter, “Want to work on that?”

I nodded, backing away a few paces to give him room to fight, my eyes never leaving his form. I tried to take in the way he held himself, trying to memorize his patterns. If I could interpret his movements I could more accurately assist him during battle.

Miume observed that they clearly were close but in a somewhat awkward way that she wasn’t entirely sure of.

“Mind if I join you?” Shiro asked, rotating his arm to roll his shoulder.

“Not at all” Keith grinned, glancing over at him before taking a defensive stance.

“Alright, commence training sequence.” Shiro called out.

Miume casually walked over to the wall I was standing at, my eyes catching her movements from my peripheral vision before refocusing on Keith and Shiro in front of me. My body automatically tensing as the white robot from before sprung to life. Miume’s hands were in her pockets, ears pointed forward attentively. She saw me glance at her before returning her gaze to the two males in front of her, her body tensing as a white robot dropped from the ceiling and started engaging in fighting.

As Miume watched Keith and Shiro fight against the robot, her eyes started to pick up on faint flickers of pink-purple bubbles appearing around Shiro and Keith as the robot swung its staff at them. So she was protecting them, Miume noted mentally, and now the question was whether this was a conscious effort or not. She slid her red eyes over to Umi whose eyes were trained on the males in front of her, her muscles tensing as she reacted to the robot’s moves. It seemed to be a blend of conscious and subconscious effort. Interesting.

Miume returned her gaze to the males. They were both clearly experienced fighters from what she could tell, and there was a deep bond of trust between them as they defended each other’s backs, moving nearly in sync with the other, predicting the others moves and picking up where the other lacked. Placing a hand under her chin, she hummed to herself, watching their movements. They were both in good physical condition and had decent reaction time. They also appeared to be mentally trained for fighting.

After a while it seemed like Miume gathered all the information she could about them. Umi was harder to read. She simply stood there silently watching them fight.
“I’m going to go observe the rest of the Paladins.” Miume announced once their sequence had ended.

“Alright, I’ll go with you.” Shiro panted, wiping some sweat from his brow he fist bumped Keith before jogging towards a smiling Miume and silent Umi. Keith withdrew his sword, wiping his cheek with the back of his hand and watched Miume and Shiro leave. So Keith was only trusting of people who had gained it, Miume thought. He might take awhile to get used to.

Miume followed Shiro out of the room, glancing over her shoulder to see Keith take another defensive position to continue training. He was dedicated, too.

After a while the two finally arrived to a room that had a sweet smell wafting through it. Hunk had his back turned to them, mixing something, a mess of alien ingredients around him.

“Hunk.” Shiro addressed casually as he and Miume walked into the kitchen together.

“Oh, hey Shiro! I just whipped up a batch of cookies from some... stuff. Want to try?” Hunk offered happily, smiling and swinging a tray topped with even rows of round transparent blue cookies around for them.

“Uh, I’ll pass, but thanks though.” Shiro politely refused, eyeing them carefully.

“I know I made reflector cement-like cookies before, but I’m telling you, I have the recipe down now!” Hunk tried to convince him but Shiro held up his hand to decline. “Alright, your loss.” Hunk shrugged, taking a cookie and biting into it.

Hunk had a light happy vibe that vibrated naturally off of him. Warm hearted and kind, almost like a mother and Miume couldn’t help but feel relaxed and secure in his presence.

When he saw her looking at him, he swallowed loudly before offering her a cookie. Miume smiled a bit and accepted the cookie, biting into it and found that it wasn’t half bad. Her ears perked up happily. So he had a knack for cooking, that must come in handy for the rest of the earthlings. He seemed nervous about fighting, as if he preferred to be on the ground than in the air, yet he still chose to fight. Interesting.

Still munching on a cookie, Miume and Shiro walked down another blue-lit corridor. They seemed to be going downwards this time. The next room they walked into had Pidge hunched over a computer, her lion behind her as she typed away furiously. She didn’t even seem to notice the pair until Shiro cleared his throat.

“Oh, Shiro.” She mumbled, looking at them briefly before returning her eyes to the screen.

“Anything new?” Shiro asked, walking over to place a hand on the back of her chair, looking at the blinking screen.

“Not really, I’m still analyzing the coordinates and info we downloaded.” Pidge replied, still typing and keeping her eyes glued to the screen.

Miume looked at the monitor curiously. There was a picture of another male earthling on it, he had the same hair and eyes as Pidge and a similar face. A family member? Was she cross referencing faces? Were those refugee lists? Her family must be missing somewhere in space and she was obviously determined to find them.

At least the Paladins were all relaxed around each other, a very family-like orientation about them. That would be very helpful in battle environments as it meant they trusted each other easily and
would work together well. Their physical training would prove to be very interesting in the coming
days. So far, she only knew of Keith and Shiro’s physical capabilities and Miume was eager to
assess the rest of the Paladins’ capabilities.

“We’ll find them. I promise.” Shiro assured, placing a hand on Pidge’s shoulder and squeezing it.
Shiro was a clear, compassionate leader. A strong base for the team and an appropriate pilot of the
Black Lion if it truly allowed for the formation of Voltron. Judging by the data she had collected
from mere observation, Miume could tell this was going to be interesting.
“Alright guys, we are going to be doing some physical training today so Miume and her team can get some data on us to help if we need it.” Shiro explained as the Paladins lined up in front of him. We were outside of the medical camp Miume had set up near one of the barren mountain ranges.

“Uh, physical training?” Hunk clarified nervously.

“Yes, just some simple tests, don’t worry. Kara here is going to direct them.” Miume instructed, gesturing to the alien next to her. Kara stood with her arms folded over her chest, head slightly raised as if to look down on us. Her energy barely moved around her, wrapping around her like a hard outer layer of protection.

I could feel myself shrinking away. I knew that I was in shape, but I was pretty sure Kara wanted to push us far beyond normal means of physical training. I curled my hands into fists, trying to calm my racing heart. It felt like I was back on a Zarkon base before they classified us into groups to determine where we would go. The druids had put me through a series of physically grueling tests to establish what my limits were and then push me to my breaking point. They would throw me into a tube of quintessence to heal the physical damage I sustained before continuing again and again, my power never being great enough.

“First,” Kara said in a hard thick accent. English clearly wasn’t her strongest language, “You will run from here to the top of there.” She pointed to a lower level mountain about a mile out from us.

“What!” Pidge and Hunk protested together, their auras spiking with disbelief.

“That’s right. We will begin with a speed assessment and monitor your progress directly in the field with this nice little station we have set up here,” Miume held a small tablet and walked over to a portable control station set up with multiple switches, beeping machines and holographic screens. She began to input data on a transparent vertical screen as Kara turned her attention to us and revealed a small box filled with small white circles.

“We will monitor heart rate, blood pressure, respiratory rate, oxygen saturation and mental status. For endurance.” Kara explained, walking up to Shiro and placing a few white stickers on his temples and wrists then moving down the line. When she got to me I tensed, closing my eyes trying not to flinch, as she placed them on me. They weren’t the same as Zarkon’s. Before, there were needles on the inside of the sticker that stuck into me and shocked me when I wasn’t performing enough. I let out a relieved breath when it was just a simple sticker like Pidge had placed on me before.

“You may start. Whenever.” Kara instructed as she placed the final stickers on Pidge who was at the end of the line.

“I bet I can beat you.” Lance gave Keith a cocky smile before bending down to stretch.

“This isn’t a competition.” Keith said back in an annoyed voice.

“What? Too scared I’ll beat you?” Lance wiggled his eyebrows, his aura jumping with competitive energy.

“No.” Keith retorted, giving him a deadpan look.

“Good, ‘cuz I’ll race you to the top!” Lance called out excitedly before running towards the
mountain in front of us.

“Lance-“ Shiro tried before shaking his head, “Come on guys, let’s go.” He started jogging at an even pace after Lance.

Biting my lip, I moved with them. Their pace was slower than I usually would have gone. Anxiety started creeping up me the closer we got to the mountain as I felt the need to get there first or else a punishment would come. My breath hitching slightly, my heart started to beat unevenly as the feeling of the Druid eyes boring into me made my skin burn.

Keith noticed my change in breathing, and I saw him open his mouth to say something but I pushed off the ground harder this time. Taking a long stride, I could feel my energy curling around my legs, boosting my speed a bit and I soon caught up with Lance who was trying not to show how fatigued he was becoming.

“Have to get there first.” I said under my breath as we hit the incline. My heart started hammering in my chest. The feeling of the Druid’s cold hands seemed to clamp around my throat before Keith’s hand came down on my shoulder, pulling me to a stop. Gasping, I jerked away from him, a thin layer of energy snapping in front me before my eyes focused on his face.

“Umi.” He panted, his breathing staggered as he tried to catch his breath.

I flinched away from his grip slightly before realizing it was him. “Keith.” I said, my breath still coming in short bursts as if I were almost hyperventilating.

“It’s not a race, you don’t have to push yourself so hard.” He breathed, letting go of my shoulder and giving me a worried look.

“I’m not pushing myself.” I replied, turning away from him slightly as I started to jog again. This time he kept my pace, watching me.

I tried to match his even breathing as he took stride with me, his presence calming. I started to realize that I wasn’t on a Zarkon base, but on some other alien planet with him and the rest of the people who had rescued me. I was still safe.

When we reached the peak of the small mountain, Keith and I were both breathing hard. It had been more tiresome that we’d expected. About half way up the landscape turned into a field of sharp-edged boulders that we had to strategically climb in order to get to the top. Kara was already lounging on a rock lazily waiting for us. When Keith and I crossed over the crescent she stood up, watching us for a moment before walking over with a thin holographic monitor and took our readings.

“Good job.” Keith said out of breath, he was hunched over slightly but extended a fist towards me. I stared at him for a moment before bumping it like I had seen the others do before. When I did he smiled before sitting on the ground and groaning. “This is gonna be a long day.” His red energy wafted cautiously around him.

I joined him, squatting down and placing my cheek on my hand while we waited for the others to get to the finish line. Lance and Shiro were next. I noticed Lance wasn’t as out of breath as he had been before. Maybe he had gotten his pacing down. Shiro next to him and wiped sweat from his face, giving Lance an encouraging bump on the shoulder.

Finally, Pidge and Hunk got to the top, breathing hard and supporting each other, both clearly exhausted.
“What the heck, this isn’t simple PT.” Pidge gasped, taking the water Shiro offered.

“You’re telling me.” Hunk panted, taking a big swing of water.

“Get ready for test two.” Kara said, her voice low and grumbly, eyes looking slightly disappointed.

“Give us a minute.” Pidge protested, looking up at Kara as she bent over to catch her breath.

“There is no rest in war.” Kara replied, struggling to enunciate.

“But this isn’t war, this is practice.” Lance objected, standing up and dusting his butt off. “But I am ready for whatever you throw at us.” He smiled confidently. Kara simply looked at him before turning around.

“Come.” She commanded, walking down the opposite side of the mountain.

“Not more climbing.” Hunk groaned, taking Lance’s hand as he stood up.

Kara lead us down a few feet before we were faced with a large cavity carved out of the side of the mountain, only this one was filled with water, its contents cascading over the side. My heart stopped. Not water...

“Now, we swim.” Kara ordered, pointing to the mass of rocks in the middle of the oasis.

“Swim?” Lance repeated, his aura perking up in slight excitement.

“Wait,” Hunk cautioned Lance, “Let me get this straight. You want us to swim. To that island. Across this murky, potentially dangerous animal infested pond?” Hunk speculated warily.

“Uh, we don’t know what’s in t here.” Keith replied, eyeing the purple tinted water.

“It is safe.” Kara reassured us haphazardly, but no one seemed to buy it.

“Ummm, what if we can’t swim?” Hunk asked, gulping nervously.

“Then find another way.” Kara shrugged before leaning against the mountainside and waiting for us to start.

“I’ll go first and test it out.” Shiro offered, closing his helmet completely around his face. He carefully stepped into the water as it rose up to his calf easily.

My hands started shaking slightly as I gazed over the water, trying to find another way before my eyes landed on a light shadow. Tilting my head to the side I focused on it. Was it was a rock? Blinking I traced more shadows towards the shore, the first being a few feet out.

“I see platforms.” I said under my breath, repositioning myself to jump.

“What?” Keith asked, his foot already in the water his eyes widened as I jumped from the beach towards open water.

Squeezing my eyes shut I pushed a thin layer of energy over my feet, and braced for pain as my feet collided with the solid mass a few millimeters under the water. I was expecting acidic burning upon hitting the water, but nothing hurt. I just felt wetness. Letting go of a held breath, I opened my eyes. The water wasn’t acid. I should have known that from Shiro and Keith placing their feet in it, but I couldn’t shake the images of acidic bubbling water seering the bottom of my feet. Looking down at the water, I faintly started to feel a burning heat creep up my legs. Gasping, I looked for
the next platform and launched myself towards it quickly. The feeling of searing pain melting the skin of my legs made my heart start to race.

“This isn’t really acid.” I tried to tell myself but my muscles reacted as if there were starting to get burned. I could faintly hear Keith and Shiro calling after me as I hopped quickly from one base to the other, my feet sliding across the slippery surfaces.

“Umi!” Pidge called after me, “Slow down, it’s too dangerous!”

The closer I got to the island base the more relief I felt. I was almost safe, almost done with this challenge. Almost to the quintessence that would take the pain away. My breath started to hitch again as I slid across a large rock, my footing slipping causing me to catch myself on one hand. I cried out in pain as the feeling of my flesh burning caused me to pause. Quickly cradling my fist to my chest I looked for the last platform to get to the island in the middle of the lake.

“Umi!” Shiro called, seeing me holding my hand to my chest. He searched for the next rock to jump to, trying to follow the path I had taken.

“Did she just hurt herself?” Keith asked, landing on the same rock as Shiro.

“I don’t know, but it looks like it.” Shiro replied, “Careful guys, it’s slippery.” He slowed the pace of the team, using his jetpack to help control his landings.

“Good thing Umi spotted these rocks!” Lance exclaimed, jumping so that he was on the same rock as Keith now.

“Really, I did not want to get in this water not knowing what kind of creepy alien monsters are under the surface.” Hunk said, shivering slightly.

“Agreed.” Pidge remarked, catching up to Hunk.

“I think something wrong.” Keith said as he landed next to Shiro again. I was breathing hard now, still clutching my hand to my chest as I skidded across another rock.

“How so?” Shiro asked, jumping alongside Keith.

“I don’t know, she just seems freaked out.” Keith observed, not taking his eyes off the girl in front of him as she made it to the base island.

Gasping, my feet touched the dense sand of the island. Finally no more acid water. I looked down at my hand expecting to see blistered skin but, blinked in confusion when there weren’t any burns on it.

“What?” I whispered to myself, looking down at my legs to find my suit completely intact other than the new dampness. “But, the acid...” I looked back out across the water. Shiro and Keith were closest to the island I was waiting on, but they didn’t seem bothered by the water. I looked down at the water and noticed it wasn’t bubbling or boiling like it usually was on Zarkon’s base.

“It’s just water.” I told myself, stepping forward. I closed my eyes, and dipped my toe back in it and found that nothing happened.

“Umi,” Shiro called my attention, jumping the final distance, “Are you alright? What happened to your hand?” he reached for my hand, his brows pulling together in confusion when there was nothing wrong.
“Did you cut yourself?” Keith asked, looking over Shiro’s shoulder.

“I thought I did, but I am fine.” I replied quietly, pulling my hand back to my chest. They both gave me a concerned look before their attention was brought back to the water. Hunk had overshot his jetpack and was completely submerged in water now.

“Aw, come on!” he cried out, reaching out to the closest rock and pulling himself back out.

Lance just stood on a different platform, laughing, while Pidge shook her head trying not to laugh.

“Well, at least we know it’s okay to swim in.” Shiro shrugged.

Once we were all on the island we turned to find Kara missing.

“Uh, where did our supervisor go?” Lance questioned, putting a hand over his brow and squinting.

“Maybe she’s in the water?” Pidge suggested, squatting down to try and look through the murky purple water.

“Or she’s down this creepy hole.” Hunk guessed, making us turn around to find him peering in between the roots of an upturned dead tree.

“She’s not on the other side of the lake.” Keith reported, coming around the tree.

“So, you’re saying our only option is to go into the creepy black tunnel?” Hunk feared, the color in his face draining.

“Looks like it.” Shiro confirmed, stepping forward and placing a hand on the rotted wood.

“Everyone take the hand of the person in front of you. We don’t want to get separated.” He held his left hand out to Hunk who took it gladly.

Once we had formed a chain, Shiro turned the flashlight on his glove and carefully tested the ground just inside of the tunnel.

“I just want everyone to know if we die in here, I love you.” Hunk blurted out nervously.

“We aren’t going to die.” Lance said lightly, but his laugh sounded forced.

“Everyone hold on.” Shiro called back, his body disappearing into the blackness.

“Ready?” Keith asked, looking back at me and squeezing my hand. I nodded, feeling uneasy that no one was behind me as we entered the darkness. Each of us had turned on our flashlight function, but it was hard to get much light as the tunnel was barely big enough for Hunk to walk through easily.

We walked slowly for a bit, the only noise coming from the shuffling of our boots. The farther we descended, the colder it got the smell of muskiness intensifying. I squeezed Keith’s hand trying to calm myself from the feeling of being watched. The confined space reminded me of the cold, inescapable cell I had been caged in.

“Does anybody else get the feeling we are being watched?” Lance asked in a nervous voice somewhere in front of me.

“Totally.” Pidge replied. She was just in front of Keith in our chain but I could barely see her physical form, only able to see the outline of their bodies by the bright colors of their energies.
“Keep your guard up.” Shiro cautioned from the front, his voice echoing off the narrow walls.

“I dunno guys do you think we should turn around or something-“ Hunk started before his terrified screams bounced off the walls.

“Hunk!” Lance and Shiro cried as his hands vanished from theirs.

“What just happened?” Pidge called out anxiously before her voice become more distant.

“Pidge!” Keith called out, he gripped my hand tighter now.

“Umi, shield!” Shiro commanded.

My chest tightened as I focused on forming a barrier around Keith before pushing it outwards towards Shiro and Lance. I couldn’t tell where Pidge and Hunk were, their energies suddenly vanishing from in front of me.

“I can’t find Pidge or Hunk.” I stated, my voice shaking.

“It’s alright, just focus on us for now.” Shiro instructed Lance cried out in shock before Shiro shushed him.

“Ow, dammit Lance.” Keith cursed, backing up into me as Lance’s energy connected with Keith’s. Shiro had backtracked so that the rest of us were connected now.

“Do you think Kara is doing this?” Lance speculated in a nervous voice.

“I don’t know, but stop clinging to me.” Keith growled in annoyance.

“Getting worked up won’t help us. Umi are we covered?” Shiro’s aura was closer now. I closed my eyes to see white, blue, and red auras swirling next to me. Focusing on those, I pushed my energy outwards until it was mirroring the walls of the small tunnel.

“Yes.” I replied after a moment.

“Great-“ Lance began to praise when his voice cut off abruptly and was replaced with a panicked scream.

“Lance!” Keith cried out at the feeling of Lance’s hand leaving his arm.

“Where did he go?” Shiro exclaimed, his voice worried now.

“Below, I’m sorry... I didn’t think he would get pulled from underneath me.” I replied, my voice holding hints of fear now, my own energy starting to prickle anxiously.

“Below? But it was solid ground” Keith wondered. I could hear his foot moving around the ground in front of us, “Is solid” he corrected himself.

“Maybe Kara has this area set up like the training deck.” Shiro tried to rationalize. “Umi can you make the barrier so it’s under us as well?”

“Yes.” I acknowledged, knowing he couldn’t see me nod now. I focused on closing the barrier completely so that we were fully encased in a bubble.

The ground under Shiro suddenly reflected pink-purple ripples, indicating that there had been a point of impact from underneath us.
“I guess that answers that question.” Shiro murmured to himself.

“Alright, we need to find the other Paladins and then a way out. Umi can you feel them?” Shiro proposed.

“I can, but they are faint. Everyone is moving around so it’s hard.” I answered, my head started to feel light as I focused on three moving targets. Their auras were spiking with panicked anxiety.

“Shiro?!” Pidge’s voice came through our helmets.

“Pidge! Are you ok? Where are you?” Shiro responded immediately.

“I don’t know, it’s totally dark like before. I have a reading on where you guys are. This place looks like a huge maze. Check it out.” Pidge reported. Shiro’s helmet flashed to signal an incoming message and he flicked his glove upwards to reveal a small map.

“A maze?” Hunk came through next, sounding scared.

“Great.” Lance grumbled in a sarcastic tone.

“Everyone calm down. Pidge can you get us a common meeting place?” Shiro questioned, looking at the small screen hovering above his glove.

“Yeah, but it’ll take me a tick.” Pidge notified, “Everyone is in different locations.”

“That’s fine, everyone just stay put for now. Umi can you create shields over them?” Shiro asked. I could see him now, his flashlight uplighting his face. I nodded, closing my eyes I focused on each of the Paladin’s energies, then making a barrier around each of them. It was much easier now that they weren’t running around in different directions.

“Alright, I’ve sent directions to the middle of the maze it looks like. We can meet there then find a way out.” Pidge determined.

“Great, thanks Pidge. Everyone move carefully.” Shiro ordered before turning around and pointing his light town the dark tunnel. “Let’s move.” He uttered to Keith and me.

Still gripping Keith’s hand, I let him pull me along as I focused on keeping the barriers around everyone. The longer they held the more lightheaded I started to feel, my energy reserve slowly draining.

“You doing okay?” Keith checked on me, breaking my concentration and causing the barrier flickered slightly.

“I’m fine,” I answered, closing my eyes again to focus on everyone’s auras.

“We are almost there, keep holding on. You’re doing great, Umi.” Shiro reassured from in front of us. I nodded, running my gloved hand over my forehead.

“Guys!” Lance cried out, running over to Hunk to hug him as we entered a larger cavern.

“I thought I was going to die!” Hunk nearly cried as we all came from different entrances into a common room that was wider than any tunnel we had been through so far.

“No one’s going to die. Now we just need to figure out how to get out of here.” Shiro explained in a calm voice. “Pidge, any ideas?” he asked, looking down at the maze’s map.
“I think if we follow this path,” she inferred, highlighting a route on the map, “it’ll take us outside.”

“Alright, lead the way.” Shiro instructed, moving over so Pidge could take the lead. I breathed out in relief now that everyone was closer and could fit in a single barrier was still easiest to maintain.

“Still good?” Keith asked in a low voice, looking back at me as we filed through another narrow opening. I nodded, taking a deep breath to try and calm my pounding heart.

“We’re almost out.” He squeezed my hand reassuringly.

After shuffling carefully through a twisted maze of darkness, we finally emerged into the sunlight again. Wincing I covered my eyes. We had walked out into another barren canyon, only this one was filled with grey-blue sand with the steely mountains making a bowl around us as they stretched upwards. The sun glinted off their razor sharp faces.

“The sun!” Hunk cried in happiness, “Oh, I never thought I’d see you again!” He continued, kneeling on the ground and raising his hands up to praise the sunlight.

“There’s no way Miume would let us die in there.” Pidge figured, folding her arms under her chest she sat down. “Right…?”

“Of course she wouldn’t! My kitten angel wouldn’t hurt us on purpose. But, how many more tests do you guys think we have to do?” Lance asked, looking around squinting in the bright light, “I don’t even see Kara.”

“Where are we even?” Keith thought out loud, holding a hand over his eyes to shield the harsh sunlight that cut through the misty layer of the planet’s atmosphere.

“According to the GPS, we are a few miles from camp.” Shiro informed us, turning so that he was facing towards base.

“And of course there’s a mountain in the way.” Lance sighed dramatically.

“Come on, we better head there before it gets dark.” Shiro decided, glancing at the map again before walking towards the base of the mountain.

“And more climbing.” Hunk groaned, getting up and looking miserable.

“This doesn’t really seem as if these are normal physical training tests...” Pidge grumbled, following Shiro reluctantly. “We aren’t even properly prepared with food or water, totally unrealistic.”

We had started to trudge through the blue-grey sand, towards the base of the mountain that was in front of camp when I paused, turning around as I sensed a large negative energy forming behind us.

“Umi?” Keith noticed my hesitance and turned to look back at me.

“Something’s coming.” I murmured, my eyes scanning the wide-open area. The air was still, but I could feel something pulsing far behind us. Something giant and malevolent crept closer and closer.

“What’s the hold up?” Lance called back in a sarcastic tone.

I didn’t respond as my body automatically crouched into a defensive position.
“Umi.” Keith said under his breath, coming to stand behind me with his bayard in hand.

My eyes scanned the area before us again, trying to pinpoint the encroaching negative energy before the sand in the middle of the area shifted. My heart froze as I realized there was a giant monster emerging from underneath the sand. A huge wave of dust blew our way as an ear piercing shriek ripped through the open air. Throwing a hand up, I tried to block the sudden loss of vision, sharp particles slicing across my exposed skin.

Opening an eye, my mouth dropped as we were faced with an enormous creature, its blood thirsty energy curling around it hungrily as the sand started to settle around it.

“Run!” I cried grabbing Keith’s hand and running towards the other confused Paladins. They were still unable to see its shape as the sun ducked behind the mist layer above us, casting dark shadows into the swirling dust storm. But I could see the rough outline of its shape as its energy curled upwards off of it.

“Umi what’s wrong?” Keith shouted from behind me as the sound of rushing sand filled the canyon.

“What the-” Shiro’s eyes widened as he looked over our heads.

“What is that?!” Lance cried, his voice hitching in fear.

I dared to look behind me. The sand had started to settle revealing a large arachnoid creature screeching loudly as it scuttled towards us with remarkable speed. Its sharp pinchers snapped dangerously, red eyes fueled with hunger as it locked onto its new prey.

“S-spider!” Hunk nearly screamed in absolute horror.

“Run!” Shiro commanded, moving aside he ushered Pidge, Hunk, and Lance farther up the mountain we had started to climb, “We can find cover in the boulders!”

My mind started to race as my honed fighting instincts kicked in. This was a test, and if I ran there would be punishment. Letting go of Keith’s hand, I turned quickly around to face the monster, one foot braced at the base of the mountain, the other sinking into the sand as I shifted my weight. This was just like the testing on Zarkon’s base, where the Druid’s would create horrific monsters for me to fight and win against… or else. Life or death. My power. More power. More power. More power. My muscles tensed in anticipation. If there was a monster I had to beat it.

“Umi, what the hell are you doing!?” Shiro called after me, sliding down the smooth surface of the rock and gripping my arm, trying to pull me up towards the shelter of the boulders where the other Paladins were trying to take cover.

“I have to win!” I practically yelled back, ripping my arm from Shiro’s grasp. My energy started to crackle around me. The heavy pounding sound of the monster’s legs thundered through the open space, echoing off the barren walls.

“What? No, we need to get out of here.” Shiro shouted over the roar of the monster’s screeching. His hand came back down on my arm, wincing slightly from the sting of my electrical energy.

“If I don’t win, there’s punishment!” I looked back at him, my heart racing, eyes wide with fear.

“Umi, there’s no punishment.” Keith tried to coax my attention towards him, appearing next to Shiro, furrowing his brow.
“No. There’s always punishment. I have to win.” I repeated, wrenching my arm from Shiro’s grip. I bolted towards the spider-like creature with large strides.

“Umi!” Keith called before I felt Shiro’s mechanical arm grapple around my waist, the breath knocked from my lungs, my feet leaving the dense sand.

“This isn’t Zarkon’s ship, Umi, you are with us now.” Shiro persisted. Hoisting me over his shoulder as he started up towards the boulders where Lance was waving wildly and Hunk was helping Pidge climb up the ledge.

“Let me go! I don’t want punishment! I don’t want to get hurt!” I screamed frantically as I struggled against his mechanical grip. Nails tearing at the metal structure, my energy bubbled around me in a desperate attempt to defend myself.

“Umi, listen to me. You are only going to get hurt if you face that head on.” Shiro tried to calm me down as we reached the others.

“No I am not! I am powerful enough. I can win!” I argued, my breathing becoming rugged as he set me down, pushing me into the crevasse of two boulders where the rest of the team was taking cover.

“Umi, you need to listen to me.” Keith was in front of me now, placing hands on my shoulders, “You are not going to get punished. Trust me.” His hands were hot on my shoulders and his aura wrapped around me. Nervously, my breathing started to calm after a few heartbeats. Outside the crevasse, the sunlight broke through the mist again, shining through the space between the boulders and flickering as the monster searched for us. Each pounding step caused small rocks and dust to rain from above us.

“There we go, now we all need to figure out how to deal with that.” Keith said in a quieter voice, pushing me deeper into the crack as one of the spider’s enormous black legs came down in front of the entrance.

“We need our lions!! That’s what we need!” Lance whisper yelled from another opening in the rocks.

“Well, we don’t have those now.” Pidge called back in a sarcastic tone. She winced as the leg came down again and more debris fell from the top of the cavern.

“Guys, we need to focus.” Shiro moved between the boulders towards us now.

“I can beat it.” I told Keith, my breathing still uneven. I tried to move forward but he placed his hands on either side of the small space, effectively blocking my path.

“No, you can’t.” He retorted in a hard voice.

“I can shock it.” I tried to reason, the intense feeling of needing to win still gripping me.

“She has a point.” Hunk’s hushed voice called from somewhere around me.

“Yeah and what if she passes out again?” Pidge countered from another angle.

“Then we carry her.” Keith responded quickly. “I don’t agree with this though.” Realizing that if he didn’t let me pass I would probably force my way past him.

“Anyone else have any other ideas? I don’t see a way through the boulders.” Shiro attempted to
form a plan as the sound of rocks being crushed started to vibrating through the boulders we were hiding between. The field becoming more unstable by the second.

“I don’t think we have much of a choice. It’s smashing the boulders!” Lance cried out quietly in panic, turning towards us with a terrified expression. Another loud crash came down and a huge chunk of the boulder separating us from the monster fell away, exposing us to bright sunlight. “It’s gigantic, guys, holy shit!” Lance screeched as he saw the monster come into full view from his position. He quickly dove into a new shadowed spot, hoping he wouldn’t get crushed.

“I don’t like this. There should be another way.” Keith mumbled, activating his shield over his head as more pieces of rock tumbled down towards us.

“I can do it.” I said in a more confident voice, the feeling of needing to win dulling with a new desire to protect. Keith locked gazes with me for a moment before sighing in a defeat.

“Fine.” He squeezed himself close to the wall so that I could see out, “How do you plan on shocking it?”

“By grabbing one of it’s legs.” I replied in a lowered voice, moving past him and crouching into an offensive position, my eyes stalking my new prey.

“Are you crazy?” Hunk stammered in panic. “Its way too big for that!”

“How else are we going to get out of this?” Shiro posed. I could see him moving carefully between the boulders to look at me. The monster outside started berating the boulders with its legs, making them shake violently now. It was trying to force its meal from its hiding spot.

“We don’t have a lot of time here.” Pidge called out as more rocks crumbled from above us. Her shield was also activated now.

“I can do this.” I breathed, repositioning myself at the entrance where the spider’s leg kept stomping in front of.

“Umi-“ I heard Keith’s worried voice behind me as I unclenched my hands and focused my energy into them. The air around us crackled slightly from how much energy I was pooling into them.

“I can do this.” I repeated to myself while mentally pacing the monster’s stomping.

Three. Two. One. I launched myself out of the cavern we were hiding in, grabbing hold of as much cold mass as I could before being lifted upwards. The monster screamed in pain as I forced my energy into it, electrical shards running it from the leg all the way around its body.

The enormous spider began thrashing violently, trying to get the electricity off of it. Wincing, I closed my eyes, wrapping my legs around the giant leg I was gripping on to and focusing on sending as much energy through it as I could muster. It was bigger than I expected and I could feel my energy draining rapidly as I poured it into the monster.

“Now guys!” I heard Shiro call from above me. The sound of guns firing came next. The monster screamed again, trying to defend itself from the new attack while my electricity continued to course through it.

“Okay, Keith!” Shiro commanded. I heard Keith’s battle cry before the monster became completely limp as its legs collapsed under itself. The sudden movement threw me from its mass and I rolled away as it fell to the ground.
Breathing hard, I looked behind me to see Lance and Hunk holding their bayards smiling triumphantly. Keith stood up from the head of the spider, pulling his sword out and flicking a black liquid off of it.

“Good job team!” Pidge praised, thrusting her smaller bayard into the air.

“Umi.” Keith jumped down towards me, “Are you ok?” He kneeled in front of me. His red aura wavered in concern.

“That was crazy!” Lance ran over to join us with Hunk following close him.

“I’m fine.” I replied, still breathing hard. The world around me started to spin and I began to feel nauseous.

“Sure you are.” Keith said, clearly not believing me. He pulled one of my arms over his shoulders and hoisted me up. “We need to get back to camp fast.” He looked up at Shiro who returned his serious gaze.

“Umi, are you ok?” Shiro asked, sliding down the rocks towards us. I nodded, leaning heavily against Keith. Running my hand under my mouth, I caught the first drops of blood that had escaped from my nose.

“She used too much energy.” Keith clarified in an hard tone, readjusting me to carry more of my weight. He was clearly upset that I put too much energy into fighting the monster. But I didn’t care, I won and that was all that mattered. There would be no punishment and I had shown my power.

“Well yeah, what did you expect after all that lightning energy stuff.” Pidge sat down on a boulder and waited for us to reach her.

“Hey now, we helped kill it!” Lance protested, returning his bayard to its dormant position.

“Yeah, but who distracted it.” Keith continued in an annoyed voice, shifting slightly so Shiro could come help support me.

“It was a team effort. Now let’s just get back.” Shiro concluded, taking my other arm over his shoulder. His aura was now wafting off towards me as well.

“It looks like we just have to get over this field of boulders and not the whole mountain, thankfully.” Pidge called down to us, tapping her screen a few more times.

“Thankfully.” Hunk sighed in relief as he began to climb up a ledge.

“The faster we get over this, the faster we can get home.” Shiro finalized, helping me up the next set of boulders. I could feel myself going in and out of consciousness. I had used too much energy, internally scolding myself for not being powerful enough to finish the entire training mission.

“Umi, get on my back.” Keith commanded, releasing his hold on me and squatting down in front of me.

“What?” I asked, trying to back up before Shiro pushed me down into Keith’s back to which Keith stood up promptly. Hooking his arms under my legs, he trapped me in place.

“I can walk.” I protested, trying to push myself away from his back but he held onto me tightly.
“Just shut up and accept it. You defeated the monster. Now you need to rest.” Keith struggled not to sound angry. His aura flared for a brief second, then returned to a steady flow as it began to encompass me. The feeling of gentle security surrounded me and calmed my adrenaline fueled body.

“Just rest.” Shiro repeated, patting my back before helping to pull Keith up the next boulder.

“No punishment.” I mumbled to myself, the edges of my vision starting to blur before I felt myself lose consciousness against my will.

“No. No punishments.” Keith echoed quietly before everything faded to black.

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“Is she going to be alright?” I heard Pidge ask, her green aura fluttered around me nervously.

“Yes, she just needs to rest for some time.” Miume’s purring voice came next. Her aura was lightly floating around her warming the area.

“Those tests were not meant for normal humans.” Shiro started with contempt. His aura was stiff and guarded now.

“On Kara’s home planet these are standard physical aptitude examinations.” Miume replied lightly, her aura flickering slightly in conflict. She knew Kara’s test would be hard, but she hadn’t realized just how hard they would be for the Paladins.

“Well, we aren’t from there.” Keith’s voice came next, his aura spiking in annoyance.

“No, you’re not. However, you all did splendid, and we have a great amount of data on how you perform in different situations as one unit now though.” Miume remarked cheerfully. Her aura bounced around once more in satisfaction.

“Listen, we aren’t just research subjects.” Keith snapped back, his aura growing larger in anger.

“Of course I understand that, Keith. This was purely to observe how you all respond and perform to a variety of situations so that my team can know how to best react when an event occurs.” Miume responded, her aura mildly fluctuating.

“Hey guys, I think she’s waking up.” Hunk noticed, his warm aura hovered over me in a nervous manner.

“Umi, can you hear me?” Shiro asked, his aura floating towards me in a protective way.

Slowly I opened my eyes to see a group of faces around me as I laid in a foreign bed. I was in the same medical tent Lance was taken to that first night here. The beeping of multiple machines filled the background as I tried to take in my surroundings and adjust to the bright lights of the tent and the auras around me.

“What happened?” I blinked a few times to try and focus my vision.

“You used too much energy and lost consciousness.” Miume told me, walking over to take my vitals, “You seem to be stable now though, since you’ve had an appropriate amount of good rest. It appears to me that you can only produce a finite amount of extra expendable energy before you exhaust your resources and overstress the system, resulting in a period of negative energy resources requiring dormancy to replenish your reserves. In other words, you can only use so much before
you’ve used it all and end up crashing.”

Everyone looked warily at Miume after her rambling except for Pidge who simply nodded in agreement. I nodded too, only understanding the last part of what she had said, sitting up a little although my head still felt light. “You could also use some food. Your energy requires nourishment by rest and nutrition to replenish itself!” She glanced over her tablet’s monitor at me and twitched her ears.

“Alright, let’s eat!” Hunk exclaimed excitedly, his aura changing from nervous to relieved.

“Can you stand?” Keith gave me a concerned look, his aura wavering cautiously around me. I nodded, swinging my legs over the bed.

“Yahoo! I can’t wait to stuff my face and then pass out!” Lance cried happily, walking out of the tent with Hunk, an arm slung over his friend’s shoulder.

“Good job today.” Shiro praised, patting my head gently before following the other members out.

“Ready?” Keith asked, stepping back but holding his hands out to catch me just in case.

I nodded again, slowly standing up before walking out to the roaring fire. The world spun just a bit, but I forced myself to continue. I couldn’t let them think that I was weak. The sun was almost completely set now and the smell of warm food filled my nose as I approached the others. Pidge was playfully teasing Lance who was blushing furiously and trying to clamp a hand down over her mouth. Hunk watched in amusement while passing a dish to Shiro who sat next to Allura and Coran as they discussed things with Miume and Kara. There was still a little activity around the campgrounds surrounding our bonfire as they team closed up for the night.

“We won?” I asked Keith as we sat down next to the fire, welcoming its warmth over my chilled skin.

“Yeah, we won.” His voice sounded worried as his aura fluttered. I sighed in relief, leaning back on my hands and closing my eyes. That confirmed there was definitely no punishment.

“Hey, Umi.” Keith began to question me before thinking better and shaking his head, “Nevermind.” He dismissed it, looking into the flames. I could almost see the gears turning in his head but decided not to push it.
I stared at the ceiling of my room and sighed deeply. We were able to move the castle closer to the camp thankfully so we weren’t all sleeping in one tent. My mind frantically went over the events of today’s examination. We had won, but barely. If the tests became harder, would that mean more chances to be punished? Was part of the test to protect the Paladins? If I didn’t would I be punished? Or was I supposed to show my own power and leave them to fend for themselves?

Rolling over, I tucked my knees into my chest as it started to tighten, my scars starting to burn under my shirt. I knew that I wasn’t on a Zarkon base anymore, but these tests felt like they were attempting to categorize us based on worth just like those Druids would before. Resting my head against my knees I tried to calm my racing mind, willing myself to sleep.

The next morning was chillier than the previous day. Mist curled around our ankles as the sun rose over the sky. We were lined up in front of Miume and Kara, my stomach churning in nervous anticipation as I awaited their results. The lightly forming bruises I had sustained on my back throbbed dully, but it was a familiar feeling that I was used to. I had chosen to not wear the space suit today, it still felt uncomfortably constricting and I was still learning how to move under the added weight of the jetpacks.

“Alright, based on the data we collected yesterday we have created specialized training for each of you.” Miume announced, looking at us individually as we stood outside the castle.

“Specialized training?” Shiro repeated, raising an eyebrow warily.

“Yes. Each one is designed to strengthen the aspect that the individual struggled with as well as improve their greatest skills.” Miume explained as she looked at him while placing the same white stickers on his temples. “We will collect more data each day and adapt the training accordingly to produce the most fruitful results. This way, we will be assisting you all in becoming the best versions of yourselves to tackle Zarkon head on. It’ll be paws-itably effective!”

“As long as it’s not like yesterday anything is better.” Pidge mumbled as Miume placed the monitor stickers on her temples.

“Each of you need to train long and hard seeing as your final test at the end is Kara.” Miume looked back at the other alien from yesterday. Kara stood with her arms crossed, an unimpressed expression painting her face.

“What?!” Hunk exclaimed, “There’s no way we could take her in just a week! You said it yourself, she’s a tank!”

“That’s why we are training you.” Miume grinned a sharp toothed smirk at him.

“That doesn’t make me feel any better.” Hunk grumbled as Miume kept smiling, placing the stickers on him.

“So, what special training for you have planned for me?” Lance purred as Miume placed the stickers on him. “Preferably something involving you and me… alone?” She raised an eyebrow and smirked at him as her tails swished.

“High pressure defensive and offensive response target shooting.” She said simply before walking over to Keith to address him. “You will also have high pressure strength training with and without your sword.” She placed the final stickers on his head and shot him a brief glare before moving on.
“Umi, you will be with me for projected barrier manifestation training.” She smiled at me a bit as I tried not to wince from the pressure of the stickers on my temples.

“Pidge will have high pressure situation analysis training with physical agility and strength training. Hunk, you will have physical strength training as well as focus on high pressure decision making. Meow, Shiro, you will focus on defense against multiple enemies simultaneously on an individual basis.” Miume declared, glancing at each of us as she read off our training then winking at Shiro as she read his.

“All of them are this ‘high pressure?’” Keith raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms.

“Correct, Keith. Yesterday, there wasn’t much pressure placed on the situation and you had more than enough time to deliberate and develop a strategy to overcome each challenge as a team. Meow, we need to prepare you for the times where you won’t have adequate time to thoroughly assess and respond to your situation. You will just have to trust each of your body’s instincts from your training to ensure your success.” Miume replied matter-of-factly. “You’ll need to rely on yourself and trust that your training has prepared you for the worst case scenarios in a split second decision-making moment. Thus is the nature of wartimes, battle, and survival.”

“Understood, but if anyone looks like they might get seriously hurt, we stop immediately.” Shiro asserted, folding his arms over his chest sternly.

“The purpose of training is no injury.” Kara spoke up as she squared herself and took a few strides forward, “It is to get stronger. Ready for Zarkon.”

“Yes, and the more we know about your physical and mental capabilities the more we are able to help you improve and work together!” Miume added cheerfully, nodding at Kara. “Alright! Pidge, Hunk, Lance, Keith, if you could all please follow Kara to your designated training areas. Shiro and Umi, please follow me.” Miume instructed, turning on her heel and walking the opposite direction of Kara’s group.

I could feel my hands begin to shake again as Keith nodded at me before turning around to follow Kara and the others towards the opposite side of camp.

“It’ll be alright.” Shiro placed a hand on my shoulder and squeezed it slightly before following Miume.

We walked around the edge of camp and up a small twisted trail towards a cluster of mountains. The mist clung to our ankles at every step as we came up to a mountainside with many cave openings.

“Okay, Shiro, your training will be here.” Miume paused in front of a cavern, pressing a few buttons on the small monitor she carried. “I’ve sent instructions to you, and when you are ready, hit the start icon and your training will begin.” She smiled at him with a slight blush, tails swishing behind her.

“Alright.” Shiro acknowledged, looking at the small monitor that came up from his glove before glancing at me again and nodding.

“Umi, you and I have a bit further to go.” Miume purred, waving me towards her as we started up the mountain again.

After a few minutes of silent hiking, we finally emerged over the peak of a small hill-sized mountain. There was a large flattened open area that was sunken into the ground a few feet,
creating a jagged rock fence around us. It’s shape reminded me of a cratered arena. Miume had a small table set up with three monitors at the edge of the convex space.

“Allright Umi, if you would walk into the center please.” Miume requested, walking behind the table and firing up the monitors. They were a translucent blue so she could see both me and whatever else was being displayed on the screens.

Slowly I made my way into the center, my chest tightening the closer I got. My fists tightened around the hidden knives in my sleeves to try and stop my hands from shaking. This was just like Zarkon’s bases. I was in an isolated arena with an observer commanding me to bend to their will.

When I was in position, Miume called over to me, “We are going to focus on manifesting your barriers right meow. I took the liberty of borrowing a robot from your castle’s training deck. Courtesy of Coran. I would like you to defend yourself with your barriers so that I can collect some more data on them.”

I nodded back at her while slipping into a defensive position. My breathing started to pick up as light traces of electrical energy rippled off my skin in nervous anticipation.

“Okay! The setting is on level fifty and we’ll go up from there. Get ready, I want you to beat it!” Miume instructed, placing her hands on the table in front of her, red eyes trained on me eagerly.

“Ready, set, go!”

The robot stood a few feet from me, slumped over in a dormant state waiting for commands. Its unresponsive shell reminding me of myself as I waited for my own orders. The lights placed on its head blinked twice before it sprung to life. Jumping back, I narrowly avoided its staff. It was faster than I thought it would be.

“Barriers, Umi, your barriers!” Miume shouted from the observation table, tails swishing. Her pink energy quivered in hungry curiosity.

I swallowed hard as I glanced at her briefly before my attention was rapidly drawn back to the robot. I think I had gotten to maybe level twenty while training with Keith and Shiro and even then it was challenging, so to jump to level fifty even was more difficult than I imagined. The robot’s movements were so swift I could barely keep up with them let alone focus on making a barrier!

Bringing my knife up, I blocked one of its attacks but its force knocked me backwards towards the edge of the crater near the wall of sharp rocks.

Grimacing, my foot caught on an unsteady part of the ground causing me to lose my balance. The robot took advantage of my unbalance, swinging around its staff to catch me in the stomach. My gold plated waist sash resounded with the staff’s echoes and I was thrown against the opposing wall.

I gasped as the crushing force knocked the air from my lungs. Falling harshly to the ground, I tried to gather myself but the robot was already almost on top of me again, staff raised to strike me down. Coughing, I tried to regain my breath as I rolled into a defensive crouch, bringing my arm up and squeezing my eyes shut. A barrier flickered to life around my raised arms. It was just barely big enough to intercept the robot’s blow and crackled at the impact point.

“Umi, you need to beat it, not just dodge it.” Miume insisted as she leaned to the side with her hand on her hip. She tapped a few things on her tablet and huffed as she thought to herself, Based on the way she defeated the giant arachnid, you’d think Umi could handle an intermediate level fifty setting...

Gritting my teeth, I threw another knife at the robot’s head, distracting it enough to give me an
opening to run. I glanced briefly at the monitors as I tried to gain some distance between us, trying to see if I could understand anything Miume was looking for.

My energy pricked behind me, alerting me to my mechanical opponent’s close presence. Taking a final powerful stride I reached down and pushed off from the ground with my hands. I swung my legs upwards powerfully and my feet collided with the robot’s metal face. Breathing hard, I bounced back into a defensive position expecting to have a second to form a barrier around myself, but the robot was already reacting. My eyebrows pulled together in concentration as I pulled my arms up, barrier flickering to life again.

The robot twisted its head back and forth twice before coming at me again, it’s mechanical fists pounding against my barrier in rapid fire punches as my barrier responded with large crackles of energy on each impact. Wincing, I could feel the barrier weakening with every hit, the residual impact force pounding across my skin. The robot’s power was too strong for my makeshift shield.

“Umi, you’re going to need generate more power if you want to defeat this. I need you to create a greater barrier so I can get a more accurate reading.” Miume persisted, looking at me through the monitor. I saw her click a few buttons. “I just need you to channel more power, please. More power, Umi.”

“More power.” I whispered to myself. The Druids’ booming voices demanding for more power echoed through my head as I balled my hands into fists. I forced more energy around myself to make a thicker, more powerful barrier. The robot’s punches felt lighter as my barrier absorbed the shockwaves now. It no longer cracked through the barrier and my heart raced as I tried to come up with the power to completely take over my opponent.

“More power, more power...” Their hissing voices started to chant in my head as the robot continued to barrage my shield. The crater around me came in and out of focus as glimpses of the blood stained arena I had fought in streaked across my vision.

“There we go! That’s what I needed, thank you. Meow that your barriers able to handle fifty, how about we go just a little higher? We’re very close to completing the data collection! I am increasing it to level fifty five.” Miume called, dialing a few notches on her screen while taking some notes on another. Her attention was completely consumed by the monitors as her red eyes scanned over them eagerly.

I could barely hear her excited mewl over the thundering voices clawing inside my head. Unclenching one of my hands, I hyper focused my energy into my open palm. I broke the barrier holding the robot at bay and rushed forward, slamming my charged palm into the robot’s chest. Large shards of purple pink energy ripped through its metal frame, freezing the mechanical fighter in place as electricity coursed through it before it collapsed heavily onto the ground.

Panting, my hands started to shake until I clenched them into tight fists. Residual energy crackled around me as I shut my eyes trying to push the demented voices from my head.

“Well done, Umi! We’ve collected quite a bit of nice data. However, with that final blast being so decisive in battle it seems as though you’re holding back on me. That was so quick! I need to see your real potential, Umi. Get ready for round two.” Miume praised before her voice slipped back into its analytical curiosity. Pressing the reset button, she kept her eyes trained on the monitors in front of her, reading over them quickly while still interpreting the real time data.

The robot next to my feet twitched violently, its limbs rotating unnaturally as it reset itself, slowly curling upwards until it was standing again. Taking a hesitant step back, I slipped into a natural defensive stance as it rapidly snapped its staff towards me again. Gasping, I ducked, my hair
whipping across my face from the speed as it narrowly missed my head. Sliding knives back into my hands, I brought them up to try and defend myself as the robot quickly ascended on me somehow even faster than before.

“No knives!” Miume ordered from behind her table.

I briefly looked at her with shock written over my face, “What?!” I exclaimed, ducking again to avoid another powerful blow.

“No knives. Just your power from your barriers.” Miume clarified sternly. She still wasn’t even looking at me, just the data.

My heart dropped and my chest tightened painfully. Memories of being physically restrained with huge monsters in front of me flashed before my eyes. It was the Druids’ way of forcing me to use my power to defeat their twisted creations.

“I know you’re more powerful than this. Come on!” Miume called out from across the arena. I could barely focus on her aura as it continued to prowl with curiosity.

My breathing started to hitch, the robot going in and out of focus as we danced around the area. My vision began splitting between the dark dome of the fighting arena and the open lit area of the crater. The bloodthirsty roar of the Galra audience and the soft sounds of wind brushing past me on the planet became indistinguishable.

“Umi, I need to see your power not just your fighting skills.” Miume urged. “How am I supposed to get accurate data from inaccurate conditions?”

“Power.” I whispered to myself, my throat closing on itself making it hard to breathe. Miume’s voice mixed with the Druids’ growls. The sky around me disappeared as harsh fluorescent lights flooded my vision.

“Yes, your power. Show me your power!” Miume repeated as the sound of a small alarm chirped causing her ears to twitch. Her red eyes flicked to the second monitor where Umi’s heart rate and blood pressure had spiked dramatically and her neurotransmitters fired more rapidly than would be expected. Tilting her head to the side, Miume made note of the changes. Was this what happened when she opened up her true power? If so, how long could she sustain such an extreme condition before expending her resources? What were Umi’s limits, if she had any, and could they find a method to surpass those limitations and help her?

She looked back out at the girl, and her mouth dropped in shock. Umi held the robot by the neck as large shards of electricity jutted through it and long streaks of lightning crackled around her. The fur on Miume’s tails stood on end as the energy around them started to snap dangerously through the air with electrical currents. Umi’s breathing was erratic, her body shaking as she dropped the completely overcharged robot and stood over it without response.

“Umi-” Miume started before the girl in front of her screamed, clutching her head as lightning-like energy exploded around her, rocketing skyward as the mist above them parted. Miume covered her eyes from the sudden blast of brightness, ears flattening across her head as the hair on her tail stood on end while energy waves pulsed past her. Squinting, she looked back out at Umi, who was hunched over on her knees, clutching her head as a sphere of energy throbbed around her. Its power was so immense that it was visibly swirling and crackling with pink-purple lightning that curled inwards on itself trying to protect the girl inside its chaotic shell.

“Miume!” Shiro shouted from behind Miume, his eyes widening as he took in the scene in front of
him. “Take cover!” he cried, grabbing Miume’s arm and roughly pulling her over a small wall of rocks. Purple-pink energy erupted over the two of them, the ground around them shaking violently as energy coursed through it. Umi’s blood curdling scream pierced through the air over the sound of rocks being torn apart. Wind tearing past them in erratic patterns as the atmosphere started to change by the massive burst of electrical energy coursing through the air now.

Fighting against the strong force trying to rip them from their cover, Shiro activated his shield and placed it over the them. Bracing their feet in front of them against the jagged rocks, they tried to hold their position as the tremoring stopped.

After a few beats of silence, Shiro removed his hold around Miume lowering his shield. “What’s happening?” He asked quietly as they cautiously peaked over the rim of their cover. Umi remained on the ground, hands clutching her head and eyes squeezed shut. The area beneath her had been carved out aggressively, her body almost hidden by the new landscape. The space in front of her now had huge ripple shaped gashes slashed through the solid rock, as if powerful wind whipped past them at horrendous speeds.

“I-I don’t know!” Miume’s voice stammered as she pulled the tablet from her lab coat and went over Umi’s vitals. Her eyes widened as she reported the results, “It appears as though she’s experiencing some great distress, as if her body is under attack? Although nothing is physically attacking her, her body is behaving as it would if she was being assaulted. It appears to resemble a night terror or a flashback? Her vitals are off the charts! And the sheer output of energy… it’s concerning, but we have to admit that it’s fascinating!”

They both looked back at Umi. Even from their position several yards away, they could see her shaking as more energy slowly curled around her, flickering in and out of focus before forming a solid barrier around her body. The barrier stopped for a beat before snapping outwards, cutting into the rock easily and pushing it forwards, creating an even bigger crater around the small girl. Her energy ran across its domed shape, charging the air between them with thick electrical energy.

“No punishment!” Umi’s shrieking voice cut through the sound of crumbling rock, “I showed you my power! No punishment! I showed you my power!” She chanted her words while digging her nails into her scalp. Rocking back and forth, Umi pressed her forehead deeper into the crumbling rubble beneath her.

“She’s been triggered,” Shiro realized, bringing a hand up to shield his face from the sparking energy around them.

“Triggered? How? Why is she screaming ‘no punishment?’ I made no mention nor held the intention of a punishment!” Miume’s ears twitched at the word ‘trigger’ and she looked back and forth from the screen to Shiro.

“Miume, she was a prisoner of Zarkon for who knows how long. They were developing her into the ‘ultimate weapon’, as she’s told us, and put her through horrible tests and forced her to fight against huge monsters. She must have been set off to think that she’s back on Zarkon’s ship, in the fighting arena or testing room,” Shiro explained while climbing over the rocks and began to carefully make his way to Umi. The electricity around the barrier swiftly responded to the advancement and jumped forwards zapping his cheek in warning.

“We need Keith!” he yelled back to Miume as gently as possible. She was trying to pick up the pieces to her destroyed setup when she suddenly whipped her head at him and gave him an incredulous look.

“What?!” Miume squeaked, keeping her tone low as well. Her heart started to race as a sinking
feeling pitted her stomach as she realized Umi must have had some form of undiagnosed PTSD and was having a severe episode all because of she pushed her too far. How could she have done this to Umi? She was a trained medical professional, dealing with warridden civilizations. PTSD was a common diagnosis for survivors of Zarkon’s attacks. Yet how had she missed the signs Umi had been showing? Miume's mind start to race as she ran over all the information she had seen and collected, of all the other possible training methods she could have used.

“Just trust me.” Shiro swiftly took cover behind the uneven ground and reached up to tap his helmet’s receiver, “Keith, I need you at my location stat,” He commanded into his helmet. The air began to crackle as static built up around the dome Umi had created. Wind continued to howl around the center of the crater and small rocks tumbled in circular formations.

“I’m already on my way. What happened?” Keith’s voice came back, his staggered breathing indicating that he was running.

“I think Umi’s been triggered in some way. I can’t get near her to try and calm her down. I think you’re the only one who can get close enough.” Shiro grimaced holding up his hands trying to signal that he meant no harm while taking another step forward only to get shocked harshly again.

“On my way,” Keith replied in a determined voice.
LANCE

“So, why are we headed back into the creepy canyon where we were attacked by a giant spider again?” Lance asked, trying to peer up at Kara who was striding forward silently.

“Maybe you have to kill another spider by yourself.” Keith grumbled, not really enjoying being so far away from the camp.

“Or maybe you do! Hunk and Pidge got dropped off in that ominous underground labyrinth.” Lance shot back, internally sulking at the fact that he was alone with Keith instead of with Miume.

Kara stopped abruptly at the edge of the canyon looking down at the boulders Lance and Keith had used to escape the other day with bright red eyes.

“Lance, stay. Keith come.” Kara commanded, glancing at Lance before hopping down the boulders with ease.

“Uh, ok.” Lance stood towards the the edge of the smoothest part of a steady boulder looking down at the field filled with black sand and massive, irregular shaped fragments of rock. Miume’s camp was just behind them, and the lions were less than a mile to the East. He looked towards Keith with concern. Keith shrugged and followed the large reptilian female down the field. Lance watched them pace farther down the crag filled enclosure until they disappeared around a blind corner. Another part of the canyon’s rim jutted out, obscuring Keith from his vision in their ringed arena.

“Lance, can you hear?” Kara’s voice came through his helmet, startling the blue paladin as he jumped up suddenly.

“Yeah, where are you guys?” Lance craned his neck to try and see beyond the rocks blocking his view of Keith and Kara. The sinking feeling that something bad was about to happen crawled under his skin.

“Your training starts now Defend.” Kara announced curtly, “Keith, same for you.”

“Whoah, wait just like that? No instructions?!” Lance protested, activating his bayard that formed into his rifle. He took a defensive stance spreading his legs and readying his gun.

“She said defend yourself.” Keith’s apathetic voice came back over Lance’s helmet.

Lance’s eyes scanned the terrain, trying to pick up on Keith’s position on the visor of his helmet. Keith’s red signature dot was a good distance away under some boulders.

“I can defend myself just fine, thank you.” Lance sneered, continuing to peer through the target scope for any changes in sand beneath him.

“I can take care of myself.” Keith retorted, his voice sounding annoyed.

“Oh yeah? Wanna make a little competition out of it?” Lance sneered, continuing to peer through the target scope for any changes in sand beneath him.

“There’s not gonna be a competition because I’ll kick your ass either way.” Keith’s voice carried a
“Oh yeah? Prove it. First one to get hit by whatever is coming at us loses!” Lance grinned while stalking the grounds cautiously and keeping his eyes tracked on his helmet’s monitor.

“Fine by me.” Keith’s smirk was palpable through the helmet this time. Lance felt his heart race as he knew this would definitely be a very fun competition. He knew his instigating brought the best out of broth of them, for the most part, helping them perform to their best ability.

“Get ready to eat your words.” Lance scoffed confidently, sinking further into a defensive position he slipped behind some raised boulders to give him cover while training his gun on any possible movements.

It was silent for a few minutes, the dry air brushing past them and Lance peaked around the nearest rock fragment curiously. “Kara, are you sure you started it?” he called out, his eyes moving around the boulders. His helmet wasn’t detecting any other heat signatures other than Keith’s, steady red dot who was slinking cautiously through the boulders.

“Kara?” Lance tried again.

“Dude, shut up.” Keith grumbled.

“Well nothing is happen-“ Lance started before his helmet started flashing indicating multiple targets coming at once.

“Do you hear that?” Keith asked, pausing his movements on Lance’s visor.

“Yes! Yes I do and I don’t like it!” Lance frantically whipped his head around to pinpoint the sound when his eyes landed on a growing mass and his stomach dropped as he realized that the mass was actually hundreds of individuals rushing towards him, “Bugs! Bugs, oh god, you have got to be kidding me!” Lance started screaming, his gun firing as he tried to take out the massive swarm of freely flying larva rampaging his way.

“Stop screaming,” Keith barked in an annoyed voice before curses. His red dot was moving at a fast pace steadily on Lance’s visor.

“Try not to get too bloody. They attracted to it.” Kara’s bored voice came through suddenly.

“What?!” Lance cried out, still firing rapidly at the incoming horde. Their swirling mass approached like a dark cloud. He dodged quickly to avoid incoming splatters of insect blood.

“Lance, shut up and just focus.” Keith snapped, his voice distracted. Lance could hear his sword slashing through solid objects.

“Oh god, they are getting closer.” Lance’s adrenaline coursed through his veins as he ran along the edge of the boulders trying to gain some distance before his foot came down on something squishy.

“What the?” he looked down and his face dropped. Spiked purple segmented legs poked through the steely rocks and glints of armored teal skin crawling through the cracks were visible beneath Lance’s feet. These were giant insects about the size of a small dog, but much thicker and plated in dense gleaming teal blue pleated exoskeletons. Each one had what appeared to be hundreds of sharp legs that propagated in waves and propelled them through each crevasse of the rocks and seamlessly through the sand. Screaming, he jumped back while firing into the rocks. Blue goo splattered in every direction and thick steaming guts coated the face of his helmet.
“Oh god, it go in my mouth! It’s in my mouth!” Lance cried dramatically, spitting and wiping the goo from his helmet frantically trying to see again. He could hear the high pitched chirping of the wings start up around him.

“Why did it have to be more bugs?” He groaned in a defeated tone, wiping the last of the blue viscous liquid from his vision and shooting towards the invading insects again. With his attention focused on the whirling mass trying to surround him from above, he was vaguely aware of his leg pricking in pain. He looked down and his eyes widened in horror to find more of the same species attaching to his legs, creeping up from the boulders. Their rapidly moving masses gave the illusion that the rocks were shifting under his feet. Flailing his leg vigorously, he hopped from one foot to the other trying to shake the creatures off before shooting them as they flung to the side. Thorned needle thin spines covered their sleek spindle like legs and scratched the armor of his boots easily.

“Gotten bit yet?” Keith teased in a competitive tone over Lance’s helmet. The red dot indicating his positions had stopped moving and was holding steady over an elevated space.

“Psh, not even close.” Lance shot back, blasting a few more times before dropping down to the boulder below and firing into any open crevasse he could find.

“Uh huh.” Keith came back, sounding slightly out of breath.

“Sounds like you’re having a hard time there, bud. I’m not even breaking a sweat!” Lance taunted, turning in a slow circle as the bugs started to corral him. He continued to shoot them with precision as they tried to creep closer.

“Not even close.” Keith snorted as more slashing sounds came through Lance’s helmet.

“Just shut up and let me concentrate,” Lance retorted with a hint of amusement, then grimacing as he scrambled down a few more sharp rocks. The insects responded to his movements and honed in on his position. In eerie unison, their pleated armor segments split open and thin silver wings fluttered rapidly from under the plates. The mass of insects rushed towards Lance and he swatted at them in disgust as they angrily buzzed around him. The masses from below merged with the swirling hoard above him. A few insects flew to him and hovered over his shoulders, nipping at his armor and helmet.

“Ow, ow, ow! God dammit, why do they have teeth!?” Lance shriek in horror and anger, shaking his left arm before firing more.

“Oh, what was that? Already bitten?” Keith sneered.

“No!” Lance defended himself harshly while taking out more bugs. Blue remains coated the rocks around him making them slicker than before. It seemed like no matter how many he took out he couldn’t make a dent in the invading enemies. “Are you noticing that no matter how many you kill there are always more?” he asked Keith in a nervous voice while ducking and skipping over some rocks.

“No, it must mean you aren’t taking out enough.” Keith replied, his voice arrogant.

“Psh, you should see the bodies around me!” Lance boasted as he propped a leg up on a rock and blasted an incoming swarm to his right. He exhaled heavily then used his jet pack to ascend a few rocks up.

“You should see my part of the arena!” Keith shot back, his dot moving around smoothly on Lance’s visor once more.
“Oh yeah?!” Lance was getting distracted and was almost hit by a mass of large flying bugs. He shrieked and refocused on shooting defensively.

“Yeah!” Keith responded just as aggressively when suddenly a giant purple pink bolt exploded into the sky grabbing both Lance’s and Keith’s attention. The clouds above them parted into a giant ring with residual static electricity rippling across the mist covered atmosphere. The horde of insects seemed to hang in the air, their bodies twitching in response to the charged air.

“What is that!?” Lance cried, his voice shocked as his eyes followed the beam of light upwards before the same color bubbled over the mountain behind them. The air around him crackled in response, making the bugs screech.

“What the heck?” Lance’s ears rang painfully and pressed his hands over his helmet, trying to block his ears from their high pitched screeches erupting around him. The intensity of the blast caused the boulders to vibrate under his feet, and looser rocks began to tumble down from above. The sky darkened and wind violently whipped around the area, causing some of the bugs to descend into the crevasses of the arena.

“Umi,” Keith breathed.

“Umi?” Lance repeated, his blue eyes flicking to Keith’s voice icon in the upper right corner of his screen. He lowered his gun a fraction of an inch as the swarm continued to retreat quickly.

“There’s no way she could make something like that,” the chaotic swirling mass of bugs twisted and turned in on itself as if trying to get away from the suddenly charged atmosphere.

“It was her, I can feel it.” Keith responded in a hard voice.

“End of training for now.” Kara’s voice came through, sounding surprisingly concerned.

“What? I was just starting to enjoying trying not to get eaten by blood thirsty bugs?” Lance answered sarcastically, watching the insects as they turned into blinking dots in the distance.

“End of training.” she stated curtly before appearing below Lance, making him squeak in surprise and raise his gun in her direction.

“Kara, you can’t just sneak up on armed people!” Lance protested, lowering his gun as his bayard returning to its normal form.

“Come,” Kara growled and effortlessly descended the rocks as she led the way out of the area towards camp.

“‘Come,’ she says,” Lance huffed as he used his jet pack to swiftly maneuver through the rocks and follow Kara. “‘Do this,’ she says.” The air continued to spark intermittently and felt heavier than before. He looked upwards at the dark clouds for a brief second. Whether it was Umi or not, Lance knew something felt wrong.

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KEITH

Keith slipped into his familiar defensive position, widening his feet to ground his stance, bending his knees and holding his arms open in front of him with his sword in hand as he waited for whatever was about to come. Kara had lead him into a small opening in the boulders. It was a fairly large cavern but he wasn’t exactly thrilled about fighting under large rocks that could shift and kill him. Bickering with Lance over the intercom of their helmets wasn’t helping his focus
either.

After barking at Lance to shut up, the ground underneath him started to tremble. Glancing down, his heart rate began to race as he prepared himself to bolt if needed. He couldn’t see what Lance was doing behind the large crag that separated them, so he couldn’t be sure if the rumbling was residual from his actions and going to cause the cave to collapse, or if it was part of Kara’s test.

Lance’s frantic screaming faded into the background as Keith positioned himself focusing on the task at hand. His eyes scanned the cramped cave before the ground in front of him started to shift, curling upward like a tidal wave.

“What the-” he started before Lance’s distressed voice came through about insects. Outside of the cave, the ground continued to rumble as the sound of rapidly beating wings grew louder. He felt the wind pick up and knew the bugs would be upon him soon.

“Great.” Keith grumbled, taking a step back and looking for another exit as the sound of metal scraping over itself filled the space. The jarring sound made him wince as a horde of flying beasts poured through the caves opening. Why did it have to be giant bugs? Glancing upwards, he noticed a small hole a few feet up on the roof of the cavern. A small amount of grey light trickled through giving away its position. Deactivating his bayard, he gripped the side of the boulder as he hoisted himself up quickly, cursing as the swarm swallowed the area he had just been standing in. The ground shifted like dark waves around him as he steadied himself on higher ground.

“Come on, come on,” He urged himself as he frantically climbed towards the small hole using his jet pack here and there to help him propel upwards in haste. He could feel the bugs scaling the walls around him, their sharp pinchers nipping at his boots. The boulders around him shook as their hard bodies rumbled clumsily over each other in the small space. He did not want to get crushed or trapped.

Finally, he pulled himself up through the small hole looking around for something to cover him, but found nothing. Cursing, his dark eyes rapidly scanned the area again, trying to find anything that could give him an advantage. The bugs accelerated up through the hole and spilled out into the airs, their swarming masses almost blending in with the degraded landscape around him. Their shiny exodermic shells reflected off the sun, making the terrain a gleaming morphing mirror that almost blinded Keith. Why did they have to be so damn shiny?

He was faintly aware of Lance calling out to him as he ran across the boulders trying to gain some distance when the swarm nearly exploded out of the small hole he had climbed out of like a tidal wave. Bringing up his shield, he braced himself against the blue slime that burst from their bodies as he started slashing through the flood of insects. There was just no end! He continued to swing his sword around, trying to fend them off but they just kept coming, like relentless surging waves of the ocean.

Looking around quickly, he tried to find another exit when his eyes landed on a small trail between a segment of boulders a few feet up. That would give him a height advantage at least. Swinging his blade once more in a large arch, Keith bolted for the edge just below the trail. Using a small burst from his jetpack, he threw himself at it, his fingers barely catching the sharp edge. Cursing, he struggled to pull himself up, kicking his legs to try and get the bugs off of him as they tried to pull him down into their blood-crazed churning depths. Their spined legs dug into his calves painfully. He had just steadied himself on the small ledge after slicing through more bugs that continued to surge forwards when he felt it.

A powerful force exploded through the open air before a giant bolt of purple pink lightning shot into the sky. The ground quaked as dark clouds swirled around a central point where the beam of
light emitted.

“Umi,” He breathed, his eyes widening as he watched the bolt disappear and morph into an impossibly large bubble that encased a huge spans of land like a force field.

The bugs around him screeched, falling from their hold on the wall they curled inwards on themselves and started twitching violently.

“What the?” Keith whispered to himself before his attention snapped back to the large barrier bursting over the jagged edges of the crag around him. Keith’s body tensed, his muscles rapidly contracting as if a live wire was running through him. Energy coursed through him as the translucent purple pink shock waves of residual static electricity pulsed through the open air around them. Keith wasn’t even sure when he had started running but suddenly the sound of his boots stomping the ground and the crunching of shells echoed in his ears as his feet crushed the twitching bugs under him. Wind whipped past him as he sprinted towards the epicenter of swirling clouds and streaks of lightning like energy. He knew instinctively this was Umi. No one else could produce energy capable of such power. Keith had to make sure she was alright. She had never produced so much energy before and he had a gut wrenching feeling that something was very wrong.

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HUNK

“What, wait, wait. You want me. To go back in there. Alone?” Hunk recounted nervously as he hiked a thumb over his shoulder and partially folded in on himself in self defense. He stood in front of the upturned tree from the other day with Kara peering down at him and Pidge with sharp iris-less red eyes.

“Yes.” Kara repeated firmly. Her half lidded eyes and flat voice gave away her obvious disinterest as she placed a hand on her hip that was cocked to the side.

“You aren’t going in alone,” Pidge piped up from his left, “I’m going in there too.”

“Yeah, but last time we all got separated because the floor dropped out from under us!” Hunk threw his arms open wide in protest.

“Go.” Kara commanded, her eyes narrowing and arms folding over her chest. Her large reptilian tail slid across the ground in impatience.

“Yeesh,” Pidge whined, shivering from her cold stare as she took out her bayard.

Kara nodded as she turned around and started to walk back towards the purple water that surrounded the small island.

“Wait, this is unsupervised?!” Hunk cried, turning around and looking panicked, “What if something happens? What if I can’t get out and starve to death!?”

Kara sighed, turning towards him to give him a final apathetic glance before hopping easily through the maze of rock platforms under a thin layer of water.

“Kara!” Hunk called after her but she didn’t acknowledge him. “Are you really going in?” He turned back to Pidge with a fearful expression.

“We got out last time. I already sent you the route, and it should change based on where you are if
we get separated.” Pidge shrugged, turning on the light on her glove and stepping through the entrance carefully. “Let’s just get this over with.” She mumbled to herself as she reluctantly moved into the darkness.

“Oh, I do not like this. I do not like this at all.” Hunk grumbled to himself, activating his light as well and unwillingly following Pidge descend into the shadowed opening in the tree.

“Pidge?” His voice echoed off of the narrow walls. As the sound faded he was met with silence. “Pidge, this isn’t funny. Where did you go?” Hunk took a few more timid steps into the underground cave before the entrance shifted and closed itself, surrounding him in pitch black darkness. Screaming in surprise he whipped around to where the opening was just seconds ago.

“What?” he exclaimed in panicked voice, moving his hands up and down the now closed entrance. “Aw, come on! Pidge, where are you?” he called again, pushing on the entrance but it didn’t budge.

“Hunk... can you... hear me?” Pidge’s voice suddenly came through in broken static chunks over his helmet’s intercom.

“Pidge? The creepy opening closed! It’s completely solid now and I can’t open it. I don’t know what to do!” Hunk replied hurriedly, his anxiety audible. His heart pounded out of his chest and into his throat as he felt around the cave walls that barely allowed him to move comfortably.

“Hunk, I can barely hear you. Follow the path.” Pidge tried to instruct him, her calm voice cutting in and out before he was met with silence once more.

“Oh, I don’t like this.” He repeated in a quiet voice, holding his hand in front of him to reveal total blackness as his flashlight catching small particles of dust floating through the air. A small hologram screen appeared just above the light, blinking to indicate his location before a yellow route highlighted itself throughout the network of tunnels surrounding him. Gulping, he carefully shifted a foot forward before finding the courage to move through the inky blackness engulfing him.

Hunk walked for a while in the cramped tunnels, humming softly to himself to try and fill the emptiness around him before he emerged into a more open area with tunnels leading in multiple directions. This was more spacious at least, giving him more room to think and breath. He evened his breathing as he walked towards the center and felt a cool draft pass by him. At least there was some circulating air.

“Pidge? Can you hear me?” he tried again, standing in the middle of the cavern and turning in a slow circle so he could see every new direction. For a while now there had been the consistent dripping of water cascading somewhere in the darkness, giving Hunk some comfort that he wasn’t swallowed by silent aphotic labyrinth. Sighing, he brought his light down to look at the map again when a rustled movement echoed around him.

Squeaking in fright, Hunk whipped around, flashing his light frantically around him but saw nothing. Just more blackness and dust with the occasional drip of water from somewhere around him.

“Maybe it’s just my imagination.” He laughed nervously to himself before the same sound came from his right. Gasping softly, he jumped back, bayard in hand but saw nothing again.

“Okay, now I’m just imagining things.” He straightened his himself and tried to relax his pose and closed his eyes, “This is just like space madness, only with tunnels. The mind plays tricks on you. I
just need to breath.” Hunk attempted to coach himself while recalling his training from the Garrison and experience with Voltron.

Taking a few steadying breaths, he tried to calm himself and regulate his heart rate. The sound of unsteady drips of water became more frantic as a single drop of bioluminescent liquid dripped from the darkness. Hunk’s brown eyes immediately flew to the new light source and widened as a few more glowing drops slowly seeped through the shadowed cavern and highlighted the ceiling.

“Am I near a water source?” Hunk questioned out loud. His voice was louder than intended as it bounced off the walls loudly, scattering in different directions as the drops above him started to pour in more frequently. They became almost like small streams breaking through the darkness, trying to illuminate it for him.

Hunk had been so preoccupied by the hypnotic flow of fluorescent liquid he had almost forgotten about the noise that had startled him earlier. That is until the sound of fluttering air moved above him. The dark shadows gradually awakened as they started to come to life. The sound of rustling intensified as the water started to pour more prominently from the ceiling and create puddles on the ground now. The low light form the puddles illuminated the shifting shapes that consumed the ceiling.

Hesitantly, Hunk brought his flashlighted-glove upwards, making a large sweeping motion of the domed overhead space. His heart skipped before starting to beat fast and sweat collected on his brows as he realized he wasn’t alone.

“Oh, quiznak.” He gulped quietly as he took small steps backwards to try and give himself some distance. Hundreds of glowing red eyes greeted him as the flapping stopped and was quickly replaced by low agitated hissing. Elongated fangs reflected against the light and beady eyes narrowed in response to the harsh light that disturbed their slumber.

“Hey there fellas. I’m sorry for disturbing you. I’m just gonna go quietly now, okay?” Hunk nearly whispered, blindly retreating as slowly as possible to make as little sound from the splashes each step created. Lowing his flashlight he debated turning it off completely, but he couldn’t bring himself to purposely submerge himself in darkness. Even if there was faint flowing liquid streaming from above him that provided a soft glow, it wasn’t enough for visibility and didn’t disrupt their nest entirely.

The fanged creatures hissed dangerously at him, fluttering their wings in vexed annoyance. Their dark masses moved with the shadows, giving the illusion that the darkness above him was churning like raging ocean waves.

“Oh, please don’t attack.” Hunk begged with his hand twitching on his bayard and the other raised to activate his shield if needed. He didn’t want to use his cannon unless he had to, as it also glowed and it seemed like the creatures didn’t approve of light in their space. Having the ceiling fall on him from the blast was also an unfavorable outcome.

Swallowing hard, he dared to glance down at the monitor over his wrist, eyes running quickly over the network of tunnels and trying to find the fastest way to connect back with Pidge’s route without encroaching on the bat’s space any further.

The low rumble of hissing increased steadily, the intensity of their wings flapping thundering around him before becoming eerily silent.

Freezing Hunk looked upwards, his stomach dropping as he was faced with thousands of red eyes all staring down directly at him.
“Um, nice batties.” He nervously laughed to himself before a terrified yelp escaped his lips. A massive hoard of swirling red eyes dive bombed towards him. Their angered hissing filling the cavern entirely as they dove towards him.

“Oh, no, no, no!” Hunk cried to himself, activating his shield as he brought his bayard up out of reflex, sending blind shots in any direction.

Squeezing his eyes closed, he braced himself as razor sharp wings slashed past him, cutting through the air with deafening motions.

“This is not how I want to die!” Hunk yelled to himself. Forcing his eyes open, he faced the twisting tornado of shadowed attackers. Deactivating his shield, he fired around himself in a large arch which caused the bats to spread out for a moment, giving himself enough of a cleared space to think for a moment. If he could somehow keep his distance or cause some sore of distraction to create an opening for him to run to Pidge.

The sudden sound of cracking rock shattered his train of thought. Large chunks of stone broke loose from their hold above him and crashed downwards. Bright patches of illuminated liquid burst through its previously contained space as it started to flood the uneven ground around him.

“Oh, that was a bad idea.” Hunk said to himself, noticing the water was starting to submerge his feet. The bats’ enraged screeching filled the air as they scattered away from the glowing water’s light. Their previously controlled swarm broke apart into chaos as they started to fly in random directions. Desperately trying to avoid the light while also trying to rid of their intruder, the bats’ patterns became erratic as they scattered throughout the cave’s expanse.

Hunk took advantage in the interruption of their attack to look down at his map. Reconfiguring Pidge’s original design to show him the quickest escape route, he continued to dodge incoming bats as they frantically flew around him. His eyes swiftly found the best possible path and he looked back up towards the nearest entrance then bolted towards it as fast as he could. The bioluminescent light splashed loudly around him as he waded through nearly calf deep water.

The sound of chaotic fluttering ceased momentarily before a unified growling hiss rumbled around him. Glancing back, Hunk yelped as he saw the unorganized bats reconfiguring into one cohesive mass and barreled towards the tunnel he was running through.

“No, no, no! Don’t follow me!” he cried, making the split second decision to stop. His wet boots slid across the smooth floor as he activated his weapon again. His brown eyes quickly scanned the area above when he spotted an unsteady rock jutting out. “Please don’t crush me.” Hunk prayed to himself before firing at the ceiling. The loose rock immediately burst into pieces, letting loose the rest of the structure it was barely holding up. The tunnel quickly collapsed inwards on itself as the sound of splashing rocks and painful screeching echoed around him.

Hunk braced himself for the impending flood of bioluminescent water to engulf him, but was surprised when he found none. Pulling a hand over his face, Hunk blocked the dust storm that blew through the hallway, waiting for the rumbling to stop entirely before opening his eyes.

Taking a few deep breaths, he shined his light in front of him to asses the damage. The tunnel entrance had completely given out and a few remains of monstrously sized bats crushed between its sharp boulders were visible. Grimacing at the sight, he couldn’t help but feel some relief now that he wasn’t being chased by carnivorous beasts and had survived the cave collapse. Only a few streams of water trickled through the cracks in the dam of rocks, effectively keeping Hunk from being washed away by the sudden waterfall of water that had cascaded down from the previous rooms ceiling.
“Phew.” Hunk sighed, wiping his forehead before the ground below him started to tremor violently. The quaking lasted only a few seconds then stopped abruptly which confused Hunk but he was still relieved.

“Okay, note to self, firing large bullets in an underground cave was not my brightest idea.” He talked to himself as he started jogging down the tunnel. Residual aftershocks rocked through the underground space, causing loose rock to crumble from the ceiling. Holding up his arm his shield materialized again, keeping the smaller shards of broken rock away from him. The newly programmed map automatically generated different highlighted paths connecting the tunnels, showing all possible routes to where Pidge had marked the exit.

Hunk mentally noted the fastest route and continued jogging in that direction. The tremoring should have stopped by now if he caused it with his cannon’s blast. Hunk wondered what could have been triggering it as he made his way to Pidge’s location.

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**PIDGE**

Pidge had made not even two steps into the cave when the floor suddenly dropped out from under her. Screaming, her butt collided with something smooth before gravity took effect and dragged her down an even narrower tunnel at an alarming speed. Pushing her heels into the ground she tried to stop herself but the ground was too smooth to gain friction.

“Quiznack!” She cried as she was spit out of the tunnel, struck the ground roughly and rolled a few times.

“Oww.” Pidge groaned, sitting up and rubbing her back.

“How’s that?” she questioned while walking towards it. There was an artificially smooth, reflective and flat circular object protruding from the cavern wall. It’s uniform appearance stuck out from the rough textured surface it laid on.

“Wait a minute.” She leaned in closer and adjusted her glasses. She had seen these symbols before.
It was a code! A quantum space code in the Altean language, one that Coran had been teaching her curious mind as she worked on helping to update the castle. What luck! Smiling confidently to herself, her fingers tapped the first part of the code easily. The rock just above it groaned to life, giving just enough space for her to hoist herself up.

“Now where’s the next part.” She smirked to herself, scanning her light carefully over the rock around her until something shiny caught her eye again.

Pidge repeated the process a few times, gaining a good thirty feet into the air before the cavern seemed to howl making her freeze.

“That didn’t sound good,” Pidge said under her breath, moving closer to the wall before directing her light below her to see if anything had appeared, but it was the same steely rock as before. “Maybe it was just Hunk screaming or something.” She shrugged, easily brushing it off and going back to the coded wall before something cold dripped on her arm.

“Ew, what?” Pidge recoiled, shaking her arm as bioluminescent liquid dripped from her suit. She froze. it looked like the same liquid as the lake above them, only it was illuminated now. Slowly, her eyes moved upward. Another streak of glowing rain glided past her.

“Oh no.” she breathed, frantically typing in the next part of the code and scurrying up to the next ledge that appeared. The flashes of glowing rain started to increase rapidly as the floor under her pooled into an illuminated mass.

“Come on, come on! Where’s the next part?!” Pidge squeaked in a frantic voice. She rushed to find the next reflective surface but with the addition of pouring glowing rain on the walls everything started to shine with the same eerie bioluminescent light. The once easily spottable reflective surfaces were now obscured a muddled mess of color.

“Ah hah!!” Pidge cried, swiping her fingers over a shiny area, but its color just smeared revealing plain rock underneath.

“Quiznak!” she yelped, glancing down in panic at the area under her. It was rapidly filling with glowing water, and the rain nearly poured down like a waterfall now. Its force threatened to push her small frame from the ledge she hugged tightly.

“No, no, no.” She ran her hands over the wall in a rush trying to activate something as the cavern started to shake again.

“What now?” she cried, clenching to the wall as rain streaked down her armor.

The ground below her suddenly erupted and a large wave of glowing water crashed up towards her. Screaming, she slid her hands wildly over the wall now, desperately searching for another code. But the river of water pouring down coated the rock and made it nearly impossible to find anything. Finally she brushed blindly past a button, her fingers dipping downwards as another part of the code appeared. Trying to shield the code from the cascading water, she frantically typed it in before pulling herself up the next foot as a new ledge appeared. The water splashed violently against the edge she had just been on before entirely engulfing it.

“What the heck?!!” she cried out in shock as blue bullets suddenly burst through the water beneath her towards the ceiling. Hunk’s terrified screams sounded over the churning waves as the bullets rang through the cavern.

“Hunk, stop shooting!” Pidge screamed down at him as she groped the wall for the next section of
She was so close to the exit but random flying bullets weren’t helping her concentrate. The shooting stopped abruptly and the floor began sagging downwards deeply in sections causing the water to drain through, which kept it from rising any higher as it continued to pour from above. Pidge. Breathing out in relief, Pidge typed in the next code and swiftly scaled the last distance before pulling herself into the small opening she had been aiming for. The stream suddenly stopped with a loud clicking sound, as if the final code had activated some kind of wall to prevent more water from filling the cavern. The small opening turned out to be a small entrance to a tunnel that was illuminated by the trickle of water on its floor. The majority of the water had appeared to be coming from the small entrance, but slow drips still cascaded from the ceiling cracks as well.

“I seriously don’t think Kara cares if she kills us.” She panted, wiping her helmet off so she could see properly again before crawling on all fours down the cramped tunnel. There was a shallow river of luminescent water on the ground flowing downwards before trailing off and stopping completely. Pidge followed the trail of water until it stopped and came upon an intersection. She paused at the three way break in the tunnel, looking down at her hologram screen and smirking a bit to herself. She only needed to go straight through the center path until she reached the exit and could meet up with Hunk.

“I swear if any more water comes.” She grumbled to herself before quickly crawling towards the exit before more water could wash her away.

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**SHIRO**

Shiro stood at the entrance of the cavern Miume had instructed him to wait by. Glancing down at the small screen he assumed the large green button in the center was the start button. Looking back up, he watched as Miume and Umi disappeared around the corner and noticed Umi glancing back at him nervously. He sighed, understanding her nervousness but not knowing what to do about it. Her lack of social skills of cues made it harder to comfort her.

Breathing out once more, he turned around walking into the carved out area of the mountain. There was enough natural light coming through the large opening that he didn’t need to use his light.

Stepping into the middle, he carefully looked around. Nothing seemed out of place. The walls surrounding him were an uneven steely grey and the occasional rustling from the wind whispered across the stones’ faces. Shiro curled his right hand into a fist and it started to glow pink as he took a defensive stance. He glanced around the cave a final time before pressing the green holographic button. A high pitched bell sound echoed off the walls but nothing happened immediately.

“Uh.” Shiro said to himself as he went to press the button again, but it was gone from the screen. “Miume, I think its broken~” he started before something white flashed in front of him, the sound of air cutting filling his ears.

“What the?” he stumbled backwards a few paces, his eyes searching around the space but seeing nothing. Keeping his defensive stance, another flash of white whipped past him, the side of his helmet cracking loudly in response.

Cursing, Shiro twisted around, his eyes noticing the blur of white fast enough to let him dodge left. Bringing up his shield, he braced against the object as it collided with his shield, the sound of the impact snapping against the walls of the cave. Even though it was barely the size of a golf ball, its force rocked Shiro backwards a few paces. He had just focused on the white spherical object before it disappeared again, its speed whipping it around the cave so quickly he could only barely
dodge or block it.

“What is this?” he grumbled, trying to track the white ball when another skidded past the visor of his helmet narrowly missing him. Flinching away from it instinctively he took a calming breath and turned in a slow circle as he braced himself against the spinning nearly invisible objects. He swung his shielded arm to try to catch one but it zipped past his shield, grazed his arm, and stung him painfully instead. Wincing in pain, he glanced at his left arm, the skin underneath burning, and noticed a small rip in his space suit.

“What are these things?” he whispered to himself, flinching again as another one burned across his leg.

“How can I fight them if I can’t even see them?” he tried to talk himself through it but he kept being distracted by the sound of high pitched whistling as the swift white orbs cut through the air. He danced with the orbs for some time, dodging or shielding them as fast as he could as they whipped past him at nearly blinding speeds. The orbs’ seemed relentless on try to damage his armor and his shield crackled with each impact.

Pausing, Shiro grinned to himself as an idea clicked in his head. Closing his eyes he focused on the whistling sound zipping around him. Flexing his fingers he waited as the sound of one of the balls got closer. His eyes flew open as his hand flashed out to grab one of the balls just as it skimmed past his arm. Flinching in pain he laughed in triumph as he turned the ball upright in his hand. He caught one!

He groaned, bringing his shield up as the second one nailed itself against it, shattering his momentary victory, “Ow. Okay, there are two.” The one in his hand twitched anxiously trying to get away. A high pitched humming sound started to come from his hand and he looked down to inspect it further. The white ball had a pearly appearance to its hard outer shell that shimmered in the low light. Thin, nearly translucent wings fluttering rapidly between his fingers so quickly Shiro could barely see them. It appeared organic. So they were alive? Great. Shiro tried to tighten his grip around the first creature as the second attempted to assault him and crashed into his shield at an even higher speed, as if trying to free its friend in Shiro’s hand.

“Just come here!” Shiro grumbled under his breath, trying to keep his focus as the one in his hand started to spin violently, burning into his palm. He had just reached for the second one as the rocks around him started shaking violently around him, making him lose his balance. The white ball instantly flew from his loosened grip causing Shiro to curse in annoyance. As soon as it was reunited with its partner, both pearly orbs abruptly dropped to the floor unmoving.

“What the-” Shiro started, regaining his balance before a blood curdling scream pierced his ears.

“Umi?” He breathed, stumbling out of the cave his eye widened as a large pillar of lightning like energy rocketing into the sky.
“Umi!” Keith shouted as he vaulted himself over the last of the boulders nearly colliding with Miume as he did so.

“Keith.” Shiro sighed, looking back at the younger male. Shiro was standing a ways away from Umi, unable to get any closer due to the angry streaks of lightning dancing around him. A barrier bubbled around Umi protectively, creating harsh winds and generating static in the air.

“What happened? What’s wrong?” he demanded, crouching down to avoid the streaks of lightning and running up next to Shiro.

“It’s Umi. Her training with Miume seemed to have triggered something for her. She keeps saying ‘no punishment’. Shiro informed him in a sad voice, “I can’t get any closer to her without her energy attacking me.” As if reacting to Shiro’s words, a flash of lightning lashed outwards and the two covered their heads with their hands before looking back towards Umi. The residual energy barely licked across their skin, not wanting to directly attack the incoming presences but rather warn and deter them from getting any closer.

Umi was curled on the ground with her forehead pressed against the upturned dirt, hands clutching her head, chanting quietly to herself as she rocked back and forth.

“She thinks she back with Zarkon.” Keith replied quietly.

Shiro briefly hummed in acknowledgment. “Has this happened before?” He looked down at Keith as light from the crackled energy reflected off his helmet.

Keith nodded, “She has nightmares about being back there sometimes. She thinks she’s actually there being experimented on again. I bet she’s seeing them right now.” He explained solemnly, taking a step closer. Energy crackled around him in warning before delivering a shock.

“And how do we help her?” Shiro asked, not moving forward and remaining partially sheltered behind the raised crag Umi’s barrier had created.

“I might have an idea.” Keith posed, taking another small step forward, away from the shelter he had taken beside Shiro. Harsh winds and prickling static whipped past him.

“Careful Keith.” Shiro warned as Keith continued to inch closer in a crouched position.

“Umi, can you hear me? It’s Keith.” He coaxed softly, moving towards her slowly.

“Umi, can you please take down the barrier?” he continued cautiously. Keith was almost up to the purple-pink wall and he could feel the heat and static of the energy increasing the closer he crept.

“Please, Umi. Listen to my voice. You aren’t with Zarkon anymore.” He took the final step up to her barrier before placing his hands on it directly and wincing. It felt as if thousands of needles were piercing his palms at once.

“I need you to take down the barrier please.” He tried again, pushing against the barrier lightly. Energy crackled around him threateningly but didn’t electrocute him like he feared it would. Keith breathed out in relief before trying again.
“Umi, listen to my voice. It’s Keith.” The girl in front of him jumped slightly at his name, her shaking stopping momentarily. Could she hear him?

“It’s Keith. Paladin of the red lion. I rescued you with my team when you put out a distress signal.” He continued. The barrier in front of him started to flicker the more he spoke. So she could hear him. A smile tugged at Keith’s lips before he took a deep breath and continued pushing on the barrier with more pressure, trying to give her a sense of physical being, to draw her back to present.

“You escaped from a Zarkon base on your own. We intercepted your distress signal. Took you in. Remember me? Keith, the one who flies the Red Lion and has the red jacket. Umi.” He kept bringing up the recent memories to help guide Umi to the present before the barrier shattered suddenly. Flinching away and covering his face, he waited for impact but the pieces dissolved into the air instead of piercing through him.

“Umi!” he cried in relief, taking the last few strides to the girl curled on the ground. “Umi, listen to me. It’s Keith.” He gently placed his hands on her shaking shoulders and pulled her into a sitting position. Her eyes were wide, pupils completely dilated as small traces of blood dripped from them. Her breathing came and went rapidly as she stared blankly somewhere in the distance. “Umi.” He almost whispered, pulling the shaking girl into his chest instinctively. He placed a hand on her head, holding her securely against his chest, the other around her waist. He wasn’t sure what came over him, but in the moment it felt like the right actions. His body reacted almost naturally as he held her against him.

“You aren’t with them. You are right here with me.” He spoke quietly, squeezing his eyes shut as he tried to calm her racing heart. He could practically feel it pounding against her rib cage.

“Remember, Lance and I took you out to test the belt Pidge developed for you so that you wouldn’t slip around during flight. But being the idiots we are we turned it into a race.” He started to lightly stroke her hair, trying to soothe her shivering frame. He hoped the repetitive motion would help bring sense back to her body so that she could return to the present instead of the horrid nightmares of the Druids and Zarkon.

“We crash landed on some crazy barren mountain planet. Lance got bruised up but some medical cat lady treated him. He calls her his angel and pretty much wants to marry her.” A dry laugh escaped his lips as he opened his eyes, feeling her shaking turn into small tremors.

“But you saved us. You made a super strong barrier around us and kept us from getting really injured. We are a team and we need you. You are right here with me. Right here.” He murmured. Her breathing had slowed to unsteady shallow gasps. It was still uneven, but at least she wasn’t hyperventilating anymore.

“Come back to me, Umi.” He whispered, squeezing her softly.

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The first thing I was aware of was strong rhythmic thumping. Like a heartbeat. It felt so warm and familiar, comforting me. Focusing all of my senses on its steady rhythm, I tried to find the calming source in the chaotic darkness around me. Red ribbons broke through the blackness next, stretching towards me and started to curl around the emptiness I was consumed in. It pushed away the crushing feeling of the Druids’ claws that sank deep within my body and suffocated me.

“Umi.” I heard my name faintly cracking through the darkness. I knew that voice.

“Keith?” I breathed, light suddenly flooding my vision.
“Umi!” he sighed, breathing out in relief. My head was pressed against his chest securely and I could hear his heartbeat flutter excitedly. His arms pulled me closer to him with his other hand in my hair and his aura was wrapped around me snugly.

“What happened?” My breathing was scattered and it felt like a heavy weight was pressing down on my chest.

“I think you were triggered,” Keith replied in a soothing voice, stroking my hair.

“Triggered?” I repeated, pulling back slightly to look at him. He automatically released me from his hold as if afraid I’d feel restrained. Blinking, my eyes drifted from Keith’s jawline over his shoulder, and focused on the area around me. I froze. The ground around us was sharply caved inwards before large uneven slashes rippled out around us. Miume’s research table was strewn about the ground with monitors and papers scattered and cracked. There was a heavy and prickling static in the air that clung to my clothes and deep, jagged gashes bore into the surrounding earth. The terrain was completely destroyed. “What…” I gasped, my eyes widening as I took in the horrific scenery.

“It’s okay. Focus on me, Umi.” Keith reassured. His hands touched my face, snapping my attention back to him. “It’s okay now.” He repeated, looking me directly in the eyes before I quickly flicked my gaze away. “Do you remember anything?”

I blinked, feeling my face flush as I became increasingly aware of his hands cupping my cheeks, my senses hyperfocusing on him rather than the surrounding area. His red energy curled off of him in anxious patterns, reaching out and wrapping around me and tugging my energy towards his.

“I remember coming here to train, and a robot, but that’s it.” I recalled, looking back at him. My memory fogged around the edges making it hard to think clearly.

“Nothing else?” he clarified, glancing over my head at something. I could feel Shiro’s energy approaching. It was filled with caution.

“Umi?” he called my name, coming to sit down next to Keith with worry painting his face.

“Shiro?” I looked at him in confusion. My head felt light and my chest tight as the burning sensations of my scars started to fade.

“She doesn’t remember anything.” Keith replied, his hands slid from my cheeks to the tops of my arms like he was afraid I would fall back into the darkness again if he left go.

“That’s alright. It’s probably best for right now.” Shiro sighed, looking down at me then back to Keith.

“What happened?” I asked again, my eyes traveling between the two of them before a wave of exhaustion washed over me. My body slumped forward, eyes fluttering open and closed.

“You should rest. Come on.” Keith suggested, standing up while carefully pulling me with him. I reluctantly leaned against him, trying to stand on my own but my legs failed to support my weight entirely.

“No more training for today.” Shiro declared, patting my back gently as we began our hike back to camp.

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“I’m so sorry, I had no idea she had a such a terrible condition like that.” Miume started, shaking slightly from horror of what she had done as well as from the residual energy that filtered through the air.

“It’s alright, we should have told you.” Shiro reassured, leaning against the rock wall of the crater next to the feline-like species.

“I feel so terrible. If I had known, I would have chosen a different approach to training. I wouldn’t have pushed her so far...” Miume stared at the ground ears flat.

“You didn’t know, and there’s no way you could have.” Shiro tried to comfort her as he looked at Umi and Keith who were against the opposing wall. He helped her sit down before running over to the small medical supply bag next to the destroyed research table to grab water while giving Miume an aggressive glare then jogging back over to the exhausted girl leaning against the wall.

Miume watched the two as she held the crystal of her necklace and rubbed it in thought. If Keith hadn’t arrived to help Umi, what would have happened? She’d never felt such raw power on that scale before. If Umi had wanted to hurt any of them, she could have killed them easily. However, this did help explain why Umi was so skittish and cautious around people. Perhaps she was terrified of her own power and its unknown boundaries. Perhaps she was afraid of hurting people? Miume’s mind started to wheel as she reviewed the data she had collected, feeling more and more upset that she had created an environment akin the one Umi had been tormented in for gods’ know how long...

“Miume, it’s not your fault, you know.” Shiro’s voice broke her trance.

“I just feel so mortified over hurting her. I won’t let it happen again. I can’t believe there is still such dark methods of research happening.” Her voice was full of disgust, ears remained flat against her head and her tails wavered low.

“There’s no way you could have known. Yesterday during the physical training Umi had seemed off, but I had no idea she could do this.” He gestured to the new cratered area around them.

“I mean, I do understand why Zarkon’s researchers were so interested in her. I’m... I’m just so ashamed that their research methods were so horrific.” Miume nearly whispered, swishing her tails in disappointment and annoyance.

“Well, after Voltron defeats them we won’t have to worry about that anymore.” Shiro reassured, giving her a small smile. Miume nodded before looking back at the two other members across from them. Umi had her head on Keith’s shoulder, fast asleep from what the monitor on Miume’s wristlet indicated.

“I’m glad she has someone to ground her.” She confessed, smiling a bit.

“I think it goes both ways.” Shiro inferred. Miume gave him a confused look which made him laugh softly. “Keith is usually hot headed and temperamental. But when he’s around Umi, he’s cool and collected. He tries to protect her like I’ve never seen him do before. And he helps Umi feel more comfortable. Apparently he can also calm her when she gets triggered or has nightmares.” He went on to explain.

“Nightmares?” Miume’s ears picked up the word. Shiro nodded, looking back at her.

“Keith mentioned that she has frequent nightmares where she’s back on Zarkon’s base and is being experimented on.”
“Sounds more like a night terror.” Miume noted, ears flattening again and she continued to stroke the crystal on her necklace in a soothing manner.

“Probably.” Shiro replied quietly. “Let’s give them some space, I doubt Keith will let her even try to train anymore today.” He pulled his hands behind his head and started out of the crater. Miume glanced at them one more time, her heart squeezing painfully with sorrow and shame at the fast asleep girl before following Shiro down the mountain.

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As night fell, everyone regrouped around the campfire crackling with lively energy. Each of the Paladins were talking over each other in loud voices, eagerly trying to outdo the other on the intensity of their individualized training. Sitting at the edge of light radiating from the fire, I tucked my knees into my chest, trying to create a physical barrier between myself and the exciting twisting energies in front of me. Keith sat next to me quietly, hands spread behind him while gazing blankly into the fire.

I had woken up with my head resting on his shoulder. He sat silently next to me, letting me regain myself without trying to press more about what happened or what I remembered. His gentle red aura wafted around me more strongly, as if trying to protect me. We sat quietly for a long time before he suggested we get some food. I nodded numbly, my head still foggy from the earlier events.

Sighing, I forced myself to take a small bite of the food, not feeling very hungry but knowing I needed the fuel for whatever tests came the next day. If I couldn’t get myself back to full strength soon, I wouldn’t be able to perform at my best and I would be useless. I willed myself to take a few more bites before setting the bowl down. My stomach churned uneasily as I thought about my performance today. If it had been as bad as I felt then they would think I was of no use and dispose of me. Keith eyed me as I stood up, my legs unsteadily shaking for a few beats before I made my way to the castle. Being around all of their energies right now was too overwhelming. Whatever happened today had completely drained me. When I tried to think about it my head started to pound and the edges of my vision went fuzzy.

The door to my room slid open and I all but collapsed into my bed breathing in heavily. I didn’t know what was wrong but I felt completely empty and numb, just like I had to be on Zarkon’s base where it felt as if I were an empty puppet being controlled by strings. Rolling over I closed my eyes, willing my body to fall asleep, to escape at least for a little while from the horrors of my mind. I hadn’t realized how much had changed since I had joined Voltron, but after expending so much energy today it reminded me too much of what had happened to me before.

After what felt like hours of failing to fall asleep, I sighed in frustration and opened my eyes. I couldn’t sleep no matter how hard I tried. My whole body felt disconnected and overwhelmingly anxious at the same time while my mind tried to race over all the possible ways I could make myself seem more useful to them. Sitting up, I huffed in frustration.

The only thing I knew I felt was my craving Keith’s warm, secure energy, but I quickly shook my head at the strange thought.

Closing my eyes I rubbed them in exhausted confusion. How could I be numb, anxious, and wanting to be near Keith all at the same time? Dragging my hands down my face I stared at the opposing wall knowing Keith was just a few feet away. The feeling made my heart skip a beat painfully. Sighing again, I stood up and started pacing my room before eventually stopping and placing a hand on the opposite wall. Was he still awake? I closed my eyes, focusing on his energy. I could feel it pulsing on the other side of the room but was too drained to tell if it was resting or
Biting my lip, I grabbed my pillow from the bed and hugged it against my chest, sitting down and staring at the wall again. Shiro did say that if I needed to talk to him he would be more than willing to listen. But what if I couldn’t talk? What if I just wanted to be around him? Did that count? Why did I want to be around someone? After living my life in isolation I had become used to only being with myself, comforting myself, surviving by myself. So why did I suddenly crave a different energy?

Exhaling, I buried my face in my pillow in defeat, waiting for a few beats before standing up and walking over to his room. My heart fluttered nervously in my chest as I paused, knuckles poised to knock. This was okay wasn’t it? Closing my eyes I struck the door, bracing myself.

“Pidge, I told you I don’t know what’s wrong with-” Keith started in an annoyed voice, rubbing his eyes before they landed on me.

“Uh, hey, Umi. What’s up?” he asked awkwardly, clearly not expecting me. His red aura flashed outward then retreated to cover himself. The warmth of his brilliant energy already began soothing my body as I felt my nerves coming down from their heightened state.

I was quiet for a moment, pulling the pillow closer to my chest. “Could I-“ I paused feeling my face heat up, “I was wondering if... I could stay here.” I confessed in a quiet voice glancing down. Why did asking him make my heart race in ways I’d never experienced? Why did I want to stay close to him? Why did I feel so calm and secure next to his bright crimson energy?

When Keith didn’t respond I glanced up at him. His face was frozen, eyes wide and mouth slightly parted. When he realized I was looking at him he snapped back to reality, his cheeks flushing and his aura wavering.

“Uh, yeah, sure come on in.” he said hastily, stepping aside so I could enter.

“Have a seat.” He said, sitting down at the edge of the bed near the top facing the door and gesturing to invite me to sit as well. His hair was slightly ruffled and he looked more comfortable in his loose black tank and a pair of sweats, his bare feet dancing up and down on the cool floor with some nervousness as his energy fluttered around him at the same tempo. But he kept his chest open to me, as if inviting me to relax next to him.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” I asked, sitting towards the foot of the bed, keeping my back to the wall and the door in my line of sight while still tightly clinging the pillow, and tucked my knees to myself to create a physical barrier between us.

“Nope.” He replied sleepily, running his hand through his hair before partially turning his head to me and eyed me, “Can’t sleep?” he guessed. I nodded, holding my pillow to my chest.

“I don’t know what I feel right now.” I confessed. “But I knew that I just wanted to be closer to you.” I let my voice trail off.

I heard Keith make a choking sound, when I looked at him he had his head turned to the side smiling a little before flopping back on the bed with legs hanging off the side. His aura spiked around him in uneven patterns, but remained close to his body. Small tendrils trailed down the bed towards me, but hesitated just a few inches from my feet.

“You can come to me anytime you need.” He commented, folding his arms under his head as a mock pillow and closing his eyes. The red warmth finally closed the gap and wafted over me.
peacefully, comforting the rawness of my emotions.

“Thank you.” I murmured, copying his motions and, leaning back, still clutching the pillow to my chest instead of folding my arms behind my head. The cool floor made me shiver as the balls of my feet rested on it.

Closing my eyes too, we laid in comfortable silence. My body was already relaxing at the soft touch of his energy, my racing mind calming its vicious thoughts.

“Umi.” Keith spoke in a soft voice his voice breaking the silence, causing me to glance over at him. He was looking at me from the side but flicked his eyes away once more when our eyes met. “I was just wondering if you were okay. You had a rough day.”

I blinked, not expecting his question. Why wasn’t he scolding me for not being able to withstand Miume’s test and was instead asking if I was alright? Looking at him in confusion, I turned my gaze back to the ceiling. “I don’t really know. I don’t remember much of what happened today. That scares me. This happened with Zarkon sometimes. When it got really hard I wouldn’t remember the test until later. My body would feel numb. Like how it feels now. I don’t understand why there’s no punishment. Why are you not punishing me? I am confused. Anxious. Numb. I don’t understand what’s happening.” I tried to explain struggling for the right words, yet they poured out of me with surprising ease. It was as if an unknown door had unlocked itself and I felt relief from the release of blocked emotion. Where did all of this come from? How was I able to just say my thoughts, my feelings, so freely with him?

“You don’t have to think about it and take it all in at once. It’s okay.” Keith said, “Thanks for trusting me enough to talk to though.”

I rolled over on my side so I could look at him. I saw his body tense for a fraction of a second before he mimicked my movement, turning on his side as well. We faced each other now as newfound comfort hung in the air.

“I don’t know why but you make me feel calmer.” I admitted. He waited a beat before nodding in agreement, using a nonverbal response so that I could continue. “I never thought I could form bonds with anyone before, but for some reason we already have some between us.” I uncurled one of my hands and gently drew the bonds across the space where our energies connected, their colors mixing into a harmonious one. Keith watched my fingers trace invisible patterns on the comforter, unsure what I was doing.

“You can’t see them, but they are there.” I closed my eyes feeling completely relaxed as his red energy draped over me like a secure blanket.

“I saw Shiro’s when you cut his tie with Zarkon so I have an idea.” He said, sitting up on his elbows, “Watching that bond break was incredible, but you looked tired from the amount of energy you used during it. I’m surprised you’re up actually since you used a tremendous amount today. You must be exhausted. You need to rest, and I shouldn’t be keeping you up...” I felt his energy flex nervously around him for a few beats, as if struggling to decide on something. Opening my eyes, I noticed his cheeks subtly flushed with pink, eyebrows knitted together, while his mouth set into a hard thin line. Blinking I waited, watching his chest rise in fall in slow unsteady increments. His eyes quickly flashed to mine before looking away, aura spiking now.

“Do you, uh, wanna stay here tonight?” he finally mumbled hesitantly, his voice barely audible.

“What?” I looked up at him in confusion, feeling my brows pull together. He laughed awkwardly to himself.
“I mean, you did have a very hard day, and maybe those nightmares - or even the threat of them - could be keeping you up? You seem to rest easier when someone’s near you. So, I just thought maybe you’d want to stay here or something.” He rambled quickly, his eyes pointedly looking away while his aura fluttered in bashfulness.

My eyes widened at his words, heart skipping in my chest as I processed what he was saying.

“And your room is right next door! But you are already here, and tired. So, I just thought why not? You know, just teammates helping teammates or something.” he grumbled the last part, the redness of his face deeping with each word.

Glancing away, I felt my own face start to heat up. Squeezing the pillow tighter to my chest my heart started to beat unevenly. Was it really okay to stay here? To be close to his energy?

At my hesitance, Keith sat up swiftly with his hands held in front of his chest in embarrassment, “You don’t have to. It was just a thought. I don’t know why I said it.” he cursed softly under his breath, red aura spiking in nervous patterns now.

“No.” I blurted suddenly, the words leaving my mouth before I had time to think, “I’ll stay.”

Keith’s eyes widened as he looked back at me, taking a sharp inhale at my response. His aura was frozen in a spike pattern and awaited my reply.

“You make me feel safe.” I admitted quietly, glancing away from him. I squeezed the pillow again and the burning of my cheeks intensified. My heart skipped as well as I continued to avoid his gaze. It was uncomfortable yet exciting. There was no punishment and he felt genuine in his concern. What was going on?

His shoulders relaxed, his energy melting and returning to its normal steady beats as he gave me a soft smile. “You can come to me any time.”

I nodded, still unsure of his words and confused how there could be no punishment, or why I hadn’t been left stranded somewhere by myself. The warmth of my face and fluttering heart were also new and difficult in a way that was completely foreign to me.

“Well, uh, let’s hit the sack then.” He said, scratching his neck awkwardly. I tilted my head to the side and furrowed my brow in response as he moved off the bed, waiting for me to stand as well.

“It means go to bed.” He explained warmly. I nodded, still not understanding.

“It means go to bed.” He explained warmly. I nodded, still not understanding. “After you.” He held his hand open to the bed. I nodded again, pausing briefly before scooting under the covers and curling my knees into my chest as he walked over to turn the light off.

I bit my lip, watching his red aura drift off of him nervously as I waited for my eyes to adjust. He slid into bed slowly, as if unsure what he was doing was alright. He was so close I could feel his warmth radiating off of him. My heart started to pound in my chest as we laid next to each other stiffly.

“Even I can feel how anxious you are.” Keith laughed softly. “I won’t do anything so you can close your eyes and rest.”

I hummed in response, waiting a few tense moments before closing my eyes and letting his warm aura float over me. Breathing out a shallow breath I felt my muscles relaxing as Keith’s breathing
evened out. He must be exhausted from training today, too. I hadn’t paid much attention at dinner since I my thoughts were still foggy then, but from what I did make out it sounded intense. His aura seemed to wrap around us and comforted me with its weight against my frame. Curling on my side, my breathing matched his before I drifted to sleep as well. For the first time I felt unnaturally safe and secure.

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“More power!” the Druid’s icy voice commanded from somewhere around me as I pulled against the restraints on my arms and legs, my heart pounding rapidly against my chest as my breathing hitched.

“More!” they crooned before I screamed. Electricity coursed through me painfully as they tried to jump start my powers with their own dark magic.

“Stop!” I shouted, my tortured screams falling on deaf ears. Breathing heavily, I looked around the black room wildly, the only light coming from the blinding operating lamp above me.

“You didn’t win.” Another cold voice hissed before searing pain cut through my back. I screamed out in agony, pulling against the restraints again as scorching blades sliced into the exposed flesh of my back.

“Umi!” Keith’s voice shattered through the darkness that engulfed me. The chains that restrained me suddenly vanished, my body dropping like a dead weight to the cold, blood stained, floor. Reflexively I hugged my chest, curling inwards on my exposed body as the light blinked off, engulfing me in heavy darkness. My back still burned from my punishment, but at least I was no longer chained.

“Keith!” I cried out desperately, now searching for him in the black abyss I was trapped in. I reached out blindly with my free hands in a frantic search for his aura but the darkness was thick and made it difficult to breathe. Shakely getting to my feet I took a sightless step forward.

“Umi, open your eyes.” He called out, crimson streaks starting to waft towards me from the edges of the darkness. His warm energy reached out towards me, trying to rescue me.

“I can’t see you!” I responded, trying to find him in the neverending darkness. I could feel hot blood running down my back as the fresh incision burned with every breath. My throat felt tighter as I pushed my way towards Keith’s faint secure energy.

“Umi, open your eyes. You’re right here with me.” Keith’s voice was closer now. I could feel his body against mine, his warm hands on my aching shoulders.

Gasping, air rushed back into my lungs, my eyes flying open to find Keith’s inches from mine. He was propped directly above my body, unintentionally pinning me between his frame and the bed with his arms resting on the sides of my shoulders.

“Keith.” I breathed, my heart still racing as the scars on my back burned painfully. Swallowing, I tried to collect myself as I gradually left the oppressing darkness. My breathing felt lighter and I could finally take a deep breath. Keith’s powerful aura radiated protectively over me and I basked in its warmth, letting it push the chilling darkness that clung to my body away with strong pulses of confidence.

“You had another nightmare.” He told me quietly, shifting his hands from my shoulders so that his thumb could stroke my damp, flushed cheek gently. I noticed him pull his eyebrows in worry
briefly as he wiped a tear.

“I was there again.” I nearly whispered in a shaky voice, my breathing still uneven but becoming more stable as time passed.

“It’s alright. You aren’t there anymore.” He assured me, running his calloused thumb across my cheek again. His voice was a soft coo and his energy wrapped tightly around me, securely and serene.

Gradually my heart rate slowed and I became more aware of my surroundings. The room was softly illuminated by interwoven blue lights lining the ceiling above us, barely providing enough light to discern ourselves in the darkness. Keith’s shadowed figure hovered over me, supporting himself on his opposite arm. His body rested just over mine, his chest brushing against me as he breathed. My heart skipped a beat, my face blushing as I realized just how close we were.

“Umi?” he asked, turning his head a few degrees to the side and eyed me with concern.

“I’m alright now, thank you.” My voice was barely above a whisper and cracked momentarily. The air around us was so still and silent I thought he could hear my hammering heart. Its rapid pace was set by a new unknown feeling instead of the panicked adrenaline it knew too well.

He breathed out in relief, slumping forward in exhaustion, and his forehead rested against mine gently. I stopped breathing altogether. He was so close now but I wasn’t afraid. A nervous excited feeling fluttered through me.

“I won’t let them hurt you again.” Keith vowed in a quiet voice, his forehead still pressed against mine, his eyes closed. “I promise.” He opened his eyes, leaning back slightly to look at me.

I took a nervous breath, reaching up and touching his cheek without thinking. I heard his breath catch as my fingers brushed his hot cheek but he didn’t move. He leaned his face into my fingers, closing his eyes briefly in blissful peace before looking back at me. He paused for a moment before leaning back down. I closed my eyes expecting his forehead to touch mine again but instead I felt his lips gently press into mine. I froze, my heart stuttering in my chest in shock.

It was over as soon as it happened. His lips pressed against mine for a brief second before he pulled back, I could see the blush on his cheeks even in the dim light. My heart started hammering in my chest as I clutched my hand over it.

“Sorry.” He blurted out in a flustered voice, quickly rolling off of me. I laid there frozen, my cheeks burning with a fluttering sensation coursing through my body, trying to process what just happened. I felt his hand flex against mine before he pulled me into his chest, burying his face in my hair as he held the back of my head to his chest. I could feel his heart racing against his chest through the soft material of his shirt.

“Keith?” I breathed, my hands against his chest as I clutched my hand over it.

“I will let go if this is too much.” He whispered into my hair, relaxing his arms around me slightly. His aura was burning brightly, surrounding us and filling me with a sense of warmth and relief.

I stayed there, not sure what to do but not wanting him to let go either. Slowly I felt my body relax against his my fingers slowly curling around the fabric of his shirt and tugging him closer as his other arm was wrapped around me while one of his hands ran through my undone hair slowly. Closing my eyes I sighed contently, my whole body relaxing against him I nuzzled my forehead
into his chest. He paused for a second before resuming combing his fingers through my hair.

“Sleep well.” He whispered, kissing the top of my hair gently. I hummed against his chest, drawing myself closer to his vibrant energy and drifting off to sleep.
Acid Rain

Miume sat on the cool outer steps of the castle entrance overlooking the dry campus surrounding the ship. The sky was a mix of dark grey blues with streaks of fiery oranges occasionally breaking through the dense fog atmosphere as the sun set and storm clouds settled in. She huffed as her ears twitched in response to the faint rumble of thunder. Great, it was going to rain. Just what she needed. Closing her eyes she propped her chin on her hand, replaying today’s events over and over in her head. Even though Shiro had told her it wasn’t her fault she still felt awful. A twisted knot gnawed in the pit of her stomach that she couldn’t shake off. She had created an environment similar to that of Zarkon’s tortuous researchers! That wasn’t the type of medical research she wanted to do. And poor Umi! She looked so scared during it! Miume couldn’t get her shaking frame out of her head. Nor Keith’s glare. If she thought he was cold and standoffish before she couldn’t imagine what it would be like now. Sighing again she swished her tails, feeling miserably depressed and unsure of what to do.

“Miume?” she heard Lance’s voice call from behind her before he sat down next to her on the first step. “Are you okay? You look so down,” He gave her a worried expression as his features softened and his brows knitted together..

“I’m fine.” She stated curtly, not looking at him. Her ears twitched again as the thunder rumbled louder this time..

“Uh-huh. And I’m most handsome ruler of the Universe.” Lance replied sarcastically, leaning back against his hands. Miume couldn’t help the small chuckle that escaped her mouth. Even in the short time she had come know him, his boisterous personality proved amusing to her and he seemed to always have a way of making her laugh. “So, do you wanna talk about it?” he asked casually, looking over to her.

Miume swished her tails anxiously before looking back to the dark clouds that were rolling over the mountains more fluidly now. She placed her fists onto her thighs and squeezed tightly, exhaling a long breath before answering. “I pushed Umi too far during training today and I believe I might have hurt her.” She started quietly, looking down at her hands, “Shiro kept telling me it wasn’t my fault but Umi was so shaken she left for bed early, and Keith clearly dislikes me now. How are we supposed to be a strong alliance when I’ve gone and hurt a team member?” She folded over herself and held her face in her hands clearly distressed. She deflated as her ears flattening across her head, tails dropping down to the cool castle floor.

“Keith? Not like you? Well, he doesn’t like anybody so you shouldn’t feel too bad about that. Well, everyone but Umi but that’s not the point. He’s an antisocial jerk.” Lance playfully reassured her, staring out at the mountains. Miume tilted her head up a bit and returned her gaze to the sky as well, watching the dark clouds descend down the jagged mountains swiftly. “And if Shiro said it wasn’t your fault then it really couldn’t be. He’s too honest with that stuff.” He continued, smiling towards her. “Besides, you’re way too good of a doctor to hurt someone on purpose.”

Miume couldn’t help but smile a little to herself. Was he really trying to give her a pep talk right now?

“Ah hah! See, I got you to smile! Brownie points for me.” He grinned even more before his attention was drawn to the fluorescent strands that began streaking through the black night. “Whoaah, what is that?!” His blue eyes widened in wonder as he flew up to stand and held his hand out eagerly as blue-green bioluminescent rain drops started to pour from the sky.
“Acid rain,” Miume answered nonchalantly, languidly standing up herself and placing her held hands in front of her. Her tails swished as she watched his endearing excitement din amusement.

“Acid!??” he nearly screamed, clutching his hand back to his chest before inspecting it for damage. Miume couldn’t help but chuckle at his reaction, her ears and tails perking up.

“It only erodes certain materials. That’s why the rocks here are the steely color they are. It’s from the chemical reactions of the elements in the atmosphere before the rain precipitates downward causing another subsequent reaction as it meets the mountains’ surfaces. It won’t do anything to your hand.” She informed, backing under the archway more as the temperature began to drop and rain splashed under the roof of the castle entrance.

Lance’s eyes sparkled with a dreamy admiration, “I like it when you talk smart. Did I tell you how smart you are?” he cooed, leaning closer to her.

Miume smiled at him a bit. Just being around him made her feel better for some reason. She watched him as he held his hands outside the castle’s overhang again, smiling widely as his eyes shone. He was enjoying the fluorescent acid rain far too much in her opinion, but it was alright because he was cute. Miume’s heart skipped a beat. Wait a minute... Were her feelings for him going beyond entertainment? She looked back at him, ears rotating forwards. He had turned around, cupping a puddle of glowing light in his hands for her to see.

“Look Miume! My hands are glowing!” he showed her excitedly. Miume smiled in return and shrunk back from the water slightly. He didn’t seem to notice her resistance towards the water since he was too elated by the neon color streaking through the dim light that was rapidly turning into the deep purples of the night. “Hey, if it doesn’t burn us we should go walk around in it!” Lance suggested, eyes still marveling the sparkling water, “You know, get all nice and wet before kissing in the rain romantically.” He wiggled an eyebrow at her trying to be seductive.

Miume tried to hide her giggle, which only made him smile more. He threw the water back out into the night before coming back to her and taking her hand.

“Uh.” Miume started, planting her feet down and pulling back gently.

“What’s wrong?” Lance asked, “still not feeling well?” he looked more concerned now, his body completely open and facing her to give her his full attention.

“No, well, yes, to a degree, but it’s mostly the fact that I don’t like water all too much.” She gave him an apologetic look, not taking her hand from his, but pulling him far enough under the castle’s shelter to avoid being sprayed by the droplets of luminescent rain that continued to pour.

“What?! You don’t like water!” Lance exclaimed, his voice echoing off the curved ceiling. His entire being jolted upwards in disbelief and his cyan eyes widened in shock.

“I just dislike being wet which leads to being soaked which then makes you cold and lingers, with the fur and all.” Miume pointed her free hand at her ears, flicking them twice and smiled sweetly. Lance visibly melted as his tanned cheeks flushed with a pink hue and his eyes glazed over in admiration.

“I love when you do that.” He mused lovingly “Okay, well, what if we cozy up together under an umbrella? Then we won’t get wet and we can have a nice romantic stroll through the barren wastelands.” He sang, raising an eyebrow once more.

Miume laughed loudly this time, “The acid could paw-ssibly eat through the umbrella, creating a
corrosive product which would then drip down and burn your hand.” She smirked at him.

“Well, you’re a doctor. I’m sure I’ll be fine. Also we have those weird healing pods.” Lance continued lightly, smiling at her again. Miume pretended to weigh her options by looking to the side and tilting her head before looking back at him. He was watching her with hopeful eyes, his hand still holding hers but keeping her under the shelter.

“Maybe when completely acid-repellant umbrellas are invented.” She countered smoothly, giving him another small smile. He sighed dramatically, swinging their hands slightly before plopping back down on the castle steps, hands still connected.

“Well I guess I’ll have to accept your rain check.” He joked, pulling her down to sit with him again on the dry top steps. She couldn’t help but smile at his corny pun and her cheeks started feeling warmer.

It was silent other than the soft pitter patter of rain which left glowing rings after it hit the ground. They huddled near each other under the safety of the castles overhang, but he was polite enough not to push her limits too quickly or without her permission. She appreciated his closeness while still respecting her boundaries.

After a few more peaceful moments, Lance finally spoke in a soft voice, “But seriously, Miume, you don’t have to feel bad. I know you didn’t intended to hurt anyone. You’re just trying to help us. Hell, you even treated me before you even got to know me. Then again, maybe it was these devilish charms of mine that compelled you soooo.” He paused to flash her a flirtatious grin.

Miume purred quizzically. She wasn’t used to having someone make her feel better so easily. Usually no one could really make lift her spirits, but his sincere smile and genuine words seemed to be picking apart her hard exterior with ease to her. How strange.

“You’re a great person, I can tell.” He bumped his shoulder against hers lightly and squeezed her held hand, “I have a knack for these things. And I can tell you are doing the best you can to help people.” He smiled a bit to himself, still watching the glowing rain.

Slowly and without warning or thought, Miume leaned in impulsively, feeling the need to be closer to him as her lips connected with his cheek. Lance froze, his entire face heating up and heart pounding so intensely in his chest it felt like it might explode. Miume pulled back, feeling her face flush as well.

“Uh, Miume.” Lance stuttered, his hand flying to his cheek and turning to look at her

“I- uh - I have to go meow.” Miume panicked, standing suddenly and bolting down the hallway of the castle.

“Wait! Miume!” Lance called after her, his hand outstretched, trying to reach her shrinking frame as she ran into the castle and around the corner. He blinked. “Uhhhh,” his mouth dropped, eyes frozen wide in complete shock. “What just happened??” He rubbed his cheek where she had just been and it still felt warm.

“Oh gods, what did I just do?” Miume whisper-yelled to herself, hiding in the spare room she had been given. Putting her hands on her cheeks she could feel how warm they were. Did she seriously just kiss him? What was she thinking? Her mind spun around in circles as she paced her room before coming to an abrupt stop Her heart fluttered nervously. Her eyes widened as her stomach dropped as a dreaded realization dawned on her. “I like him.” She admitted to herself in horror. She had never really liked anyone, not more than teasing them to see their reaction! No, this time, she
really liked him, more than just teasing him. How could this happen in such a short amount of time? How was he able to break through to her with such blatant charms? What was so special about this boy that fascinated her and drew her towards him?

“Meow what?” she asked herself, closing her eyes and sitting down on her bed, her heart still beating quickly.

Outside, Lance remained on the steps of the castle, staring into the hallway, stunned, for what seemed like an eternity before Pidge walked past giving him a weird look, shrugging and walking back off.
“Keith!” Pidge shouted while banging on Keith’s door, “Keith! Umi is missing.” She called again, banging more rapidly. Pidge had woken up to Miume shaking her awake, asking her quietly to check on Umi and make sure she was okay before they met for breakfast.

Keith jerked awake, rolling over sleepily before freezing. Umi was curled into his chest sleeping soundly. Her fingers coiled around his shirt lightly. Blinking away the sleep, he could feel his face heating up as he realized their bodies were pushed together.

“Keith!” Pidge called again with greater urgency.

“Crap.” Keith grumbled drowsily, carefully untangling himself from the sleeping girl. He had just made it to the door when Pidge suddenly opened it. Her face was full of worry before she caught Keith’s flustered appearance, and looked behind him to see Umi’s sleeping frame in his bed. Her open mouth pulled into a sly grin as her eyes returned to Keith.

“Well, she’s not missing anymore.” She whispered, still smiling at Keith. “Don’t let me keep you, but you better hurry up for breakfast.” She turned on her heel and whistled innocently as she strolled out of the room.

Keith blinked, still trying to come out of thick sleep that clung to him before his face drained as an embarrassing realization dawned on him.

“Pidge!” he whisper-yelled after her, stumbling out of the room quickly.

“Yes?” she asked sweetly, raising her eyebrows and smirking.

“Pidge, what you saw you, you, can’t tell anyone. She couldn’t sleep.” Keith stammered his face completely flushed, hair still a mess and hands half raised.

“Uh huh.” Pidge replied lightly, rocking back and forth on her heels, “Sure, Mr. Lovey-Dovey Keith.”

“What? I’m not lovey-dovey! She just couldn’t sleep!” he threw his hands at his now closed door, his face still hot.

“Sure.” Pidge toyed, half lidding her eyes and grinning wickedly.

“Pidge.” Keith ran his right hand down his face, “Please, just keep this to yourself.”
“Okay.” Pidge complied, waiting for Keith’s eyes to light up before continuing, “on one condition.”

Keith’s face dropped and his body slacked. He sighed running his hand through his hair again, “Fine, what do you want.” He wasn’t awake enough for this and it was too embarrassing to sort out.

“You admit you like her.” Pidge said, leaning forward slightly and crossing her arms over her chest. Her warm brown eyes glinting mischievously under her glasses.

“What?” Keith choked, standing on alert and flushing once more.

“Oh, come on.” Pidge exaggerated, “It’s soooo obvious.”

Keith sighed heavily, covering his face with a hand again, “Okay, I admit it.” He grumbled in a low voice.

“What was that? I couldn’t hear you.” Pidge smiled even wider now, placing a cupped hand around her ear and leaning forward.

“I said I admit it. I might like her okay.” Keith mumbled again, not looking at Pidge.

“That’s what I thought.” Pidge sneered, leaning back now. “It’s fine, your secret is safe with me.” With that she turned around and skipped happily down the hallway.

“This isn’t going to end well.” Keith groaned, rubbing his face again before turning back to his room. Sitting down heavily on the bed he leaned back and closed his eyes. He knew just how bad that must have looked to Pidge; to walk in and find Umi sleeping in Keith’s single bed. He also knew how much Pidge loved to tease people for these kinds of things, and that he would be at her mercy. He couldn’t even imagine what would happen if Shiro got wind of it in the wrong context, let alone Lance. Today was going to be a long day.

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Sighing softly, I opened my eyes stretching my arms in front of me and noticed they rested on something warm. Blinking, I waited for my eyes to adjust as Keith’s chest gradually came into focus. My face flushed.

“Morning.” Keith said in a gruff voice.

“Morning.” I almost whispered back. My fingers were curled on top of his chest and I was laying right beside him on the small twin bed under the blanket. His aura clung to us and wavered here and there.

“Sleep well?” he asked as casually as possible, his hand coming up and resting on mine. His chest rose and fell evenly but his heart was thumping irregularly.

“Mhm.” I hummed, relaxing my arm against him and resting my head against his shoulder. He felt so warm and strong, providing support physically but comforting my thoughts and concerns as well.

We laid there in silence for a few more minutes before Keith sighed, “We should probably go eat before training today.” He looked over at me, “Do you want to train still? I’m sure Allura would let you stay in the castle and use the training deck instead if you wanted.”
“I don’t know.” I admitted after a moment, “I want to train with you and the others. I want to be useful. But,” my voice caught in my throat for a second and I tried to find the right words, “But, I don’t want to lose control in the blackness. I don’t even know what happened because I can’t remember.” My thoughts drifted back to the destructive crater I had created, “What if it happens again? What if I hurt someone? It’s not just me fighting now, I have people I need to protect. I’m your shield. I don’t want to hurt you and not remember.”

Glancing at Keith’s hand resting over mine, I focused on the thin bonds stringing us together. The other Paladins’ strands ghosted outwards as well causing my heart to skip bittersweetly in my chest. I had never had bonds with anyone before, and now that I was making them, these warm, strong, comforting bonds, I wanted to keep them safe at all times. The fear of losing myself to the Druids’ voices clawing at my head crept over my skin like a second cold layer of frost that Keith and the others were trying to melt away. But Haggar’s grasp had frozen deep into my skin, making it excruciatingly painful as the Paladins’ invigorating energy tried to break through its deadly cage encasing me.

“Umi, even if something like that were to happen again, I know you wouldn’t mean to hurt anyone.” Keith said quietly, running his thumb over the back of my hand, “The team is here for you. I’m here for you, and I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

I nodded against his shoulder, closing my eyes and internally debated with myself for a few beats before sitting up reluctantly. After yesterday’s events, whatever bonds we had made as a team were probably weakened. I lost control and needed to prove to them once again that I was in full control and could be valuable on the team; that I wouldn’t lose consciousness from being weak and could perform the way they needed, and not a threat to their safety. I needed them to think I was powerful, and that they could still use me. That I had a reason to stay with them.

“Let’s go eat something. You can decide after you wake up a bit more.” He offered, sitting up with me and rubbing his eyes.

I nodded, moving my hair out of my eyes, the uneasy numb feeling from yesterday creeping over me again the more I woke up.

“Ready?” he asked, standing up and offering me a hand. I glanced at his hand, a small smile tugging on my lips as I took it.

“Thank you for letting me stay.” I said quietly, my heart skipping nervously.

“Anytime.” Keith smiled a bit, “I’ll meet you in the kitchen.” He leaned against the door frame as we walked out. I nodded, letting go of his hand and returning to my room.

Once the door was closed I breathed out a held breath, my heart still pounding. “Will it really be okay today?” I whispered to myself, pulling my fingers through my hair nervously.

After getting dressed, I hesitantly made my way to the kitchen, biting my lip as I peeked my head into the dining area. It was already full of life. The Paladins’ auras were bouncing off the walls, mixing with each other playfully.

“Hey.” Keith tapped my shoulder which made me jump, my hand automatically gripping a hidden knife.

“Hey.” I echoed, my heart started to race again. His aura was moving nervously around him as we walked into the kitchen. Pidge was sitting on the edge of the counter swinging her legs when her eyes lit up as we entered. She hopped down from the counter jogging over to me and hugged my
arm against her before pulling me to sit next to her at the table. I paused, briefly resisting her physical closeness before trying to relax into it. This seemed to be a normal interaction for Pidge. Once we were sitting she stuck her tongue out at Keith before smiling at him evilly. Keith groaned internally, rolling his eyes before grabbing a plate of food and sitting down on the other side of me.

Miume walked in next, stretching her arms over her head, “Morning everyone,” she greeted while yawning a bit.

“Morning! Here,” Hunk smiled, handing here a plate of warm food.

“Thanks.” She smiled taking the food and breathing out a sigh of relief when she realized Lance wasn’t there yet. She had been hoping to see him, but also wanted to avoid him too. Her brain was too confused in self conflict over her recent admission of her feelings to herself. She still wanted to deny it.

Sighing, she sat down in front of me and was about to take a bite when she noticed Keith’s death glare. Great, she thought to herself, he is obviously still pissed. Maybe he won’t even let Umi train with me anymore even though I came up with a new training strategy... She took a sad bite into her food mulling her thoughts over and avoiding his glares. Miume looked across at me, and I nervously glanced up from my food briefly before instinctively shrinking back in my seat. Ah, apparently she’s still uncomfortable, too! That’s also just great. Taking a bite of food in frustration, Miume looked everywhere but at the two people in front of her. Why were the only chairs available right in front of them? Even when she wasn’t looking at Keith she could feel his eyes shooting icy daggers at her. He really did care for Umi, enough to blatantly show how he wasn’t happy about yesterday.

She was about to take another bite when Lance strode into the room, yawning dramatically before his eyes landed on hers. Miume nearly dropped her spoon as Lance waltz over to her and plopped down in the chair at her side. Pausing I felt Miume’s energy jump in excited surprise before quickly trying to collect itself. Lance’s usually cool ocean blue energy washed over Miume’s with more confidence now, even it its half asleep state. I briefly glanced up quizzically to get a better look between them, noticing faint lines of bonds forming between them before flicking my eyes back down, not wanting to hold Miume’s gaze. Resting his chin on his hand Lance turned towards her completely, Miume’s tails going rigid behind her.

“Soooo, about last night.” He trailed off, raising an eyebrow, trying to look seductive and leaning closer to her. His crystal blue aura wafted over to hers eagerly.

“What about it?” Miume asked coolly, not looking at him, but her tails swished and her rosy aura wavered nervously but did not retreat from his.

“Oh, I see! Playing hard to get, ayyy?” Lance smiled a bit, “Oh you know... Just the two of us, in the dark, with the romantic bioluminescent rain on the castle steps...” He waited for her to play.

“Clearly you were hallucinating from exposure to the acid rain,” Miume flashed him a coy smile. One of her ears twitched once.

Lance’s face pulled downwards in mockful despair, “It totally wasn’t the acid rain! If anything I was hallucinating from your gorgeous face,” He smiled a bit which made Miume laugh a little before she coughed into her hand, trying to play it off.

“Clearly you were hallucinating from exposure to the acid rain,” Miume flashed him a coy smile. One of her ears twitched once.

Well, since I am a medical professional with years of experience, I think I can clearly diagnose a hallucination secondary to acid rain exposure.” She paused to look at him and her heart fluttered. “But... acid rain-contaminated or not, purr-haps you can help me file the reports I have
on your research later.” She added quickly as she turned her head away from him with her ears turning outward in embarrassment.

Lance’s face lit up again, a grin cracking across his face. “So it’s a date!” he determined ecstatically. His aura burst outwards in excitement as it bubbled over to Miume’s whose own aura spiked but slowly allowed itself to mingle with his.

“Paw-lease,” Miume chided, swishing her tails as she got up and hastily exited the dining room.

“She’s totally into me.” Lance gloated, facing Keith, “Right?” he paused looking confused.

Keith and I looked at each other briefly before I looked back at Lance not sure how to react.
Focus on the Happy part 1

We were lined up outside on the training grounds again once the sun had risen higher in the faded violet blue sky, churning mist obscuring its pallet. Miume placed monitor stickers on us to prep for the training evaluation. I shrunk behind Keith a fraction of an inch as she stuck them on my forehead carefully, her energy twisting around her nervously while Keith’s spiked outwards in warning. Keith all but growled at her when she placed them on his head before turning to Shiro.

“I don’t think this is a good idea.” He addressed in a low voice, turning to face Shiro.

“Keith, I know you’re concerned but there’s no way Miume could have known. And besides, she said she came up with a new method. One that won’t trigger Umi.” Shiro tried to reason with the red paladin who still emitted frustration. Shiro’s dark eyes found mine next to Keith’s, trying to gauge my response.

“How do you know it won’t trigger her?” Keith countered defensively. His fists balled up and tightened as his aura hovered over him in a dense blaze.

“And how do you know it will?” Shiro rebutted, sighing and folding his arms over his chest, “I know you don’t like it, but give it a chance. Umi is a strong person. Have faith that she can do it.” He glanced over Keith’s shoulder at me again.

“Umi, do you want to try?” Shiro asked me gently, looking optimistic. I hesitated before nodding slowly. I needed to redeem myself from yesterday’s performance.

“I have developed new method of training for you, and I think it will really help.” Miume tried to offer, holding her small monitor to her chest and giving me a hopeful smile. Her ears were still pointing outward slightly, expressing her nervousness while her aura fluttered over her.

I glanced between Keith and Shiro before nodding at Miume whose ears twitched happily. “It will be okay, I purr-omise.” She smiled at me eagerly. Her accented words took me a longer time to process and my heart skipped in uneasy anticipation.

“If anything happens, I’m stopping it right away.” Keith threatened, shooting Miume a warning look.

“She will be fine, I can assure you of that.” Miume challenged, looking Keith in directly in the eyes. Their auras rose to meet each other, each a solid wall as they stood up to the other, clashing as a mix of rosy crimson waves pushed out between them.

“She better be.” He grumbled before reluctantly walking back to his designated training area.

“Ready?” Miume asked me, smiling encouragingly. I bit my lip and nodded, already feeling anxious, my stomach twisting nervously, my fingers flexing over my hidden knives.

We walked to a different section of the camp this time, just behind the mountain instead of over it. It was a smaller circular open area peppered with some deformed vegetation and flowers, but still mostly barren like the rest of the planet.

“Okay,” Miume announced as she spun to face me., Her ears and tails slacked downwards just enough to notice when she saw me visibly wince. “Firstly, I want to apologize formally for
yesterday’s events. I really am sorry, Umi. I had no idea that would or could even happen, and I’m sincerely sorry for hurting you.” Miume apologized earnestly then bowed to almost ninety degrees. I blinked in total confusion.

“Why do you apologize?” I asked in a quiet voice, looking away not sure what to do as I hesitantly crossed my arm over my other one to cover myself, “It’s my fault for not being powerful enough to control my power.”

“Umi, no, that’s not it at all.” Miume disagreed, standing back up and looking me dead in the eyes, “It’s not about being powerful enough, or winning. This is about developing your power at your own rate the way you want to.”

Flicking my gaze away awkwardly she continued, “I want you to be comfortable using your own power in a way that you’re using your power for you. Before, you were using it just to survive, under constant fear of punishment and pain.” Her eyes glistened with a melancholic shine as her aura poured out and hesitantly reached towards me, “But meow, I want you to use it for yourself. Let’s try to think, why do you want to use your powers?”

“Why do I want to use it?” I repeated, looking back at her in confusion.

“Yes, it’s yours afterall. What do you want to use it for? For example, protecting yourself, your friends, your loved ones. Maybe to use it in battle to assist your team. You can easily perform offensive and defensive positions.” Miume explained, giving me a soft smile.

I stood there for a moment thinking. No one had ever asked me what I wanted to do. “I don’t know really... but I want to protect these people. I don’t want to hurt anyone.” I said finally, turning my head to gaze in the direction of their energies.

Miume nodded, “I had a feeling you would say that. I have an idea of how you could use those desires, the emotions, of wanting to protect others to help you. From what I gathered yesterday, your power manifests out of fear or self defense. But,” She held up a clawed finger and flicked her ears twice, her voice light, “what if you used your power to protect the things most important to you? To focus on those protective, loving emotions rather than fear?”

I tilted my head to the side pensively. The things most important to me? Did I even have those kinds of things? It had only been me for so long, I wasn’t used to having something else to protect. Miume smiled a bit more, rolling her eyes to the sky, “For example, think of how Keith makes you feel,” she let her voice trail off suggestively.

My eyes snapped back to her, my face suddenly feeling hot. “How Keith makes me feel?” I echoed in a small voice.

“Mhm! He makes you feel happy right? Safe, protected, maybe even a little nervous.” Miume prodded carefully still smiling, her tails swishing behind her mischievously.

I looked down, brushing my fingertips over the top of my knives nervously. “Those are all good emotions?” I questioned. This was so confusing. In the short time I had been with Voltron, they had pried open emotions I didn’t even know were possible.

“Yes, good emotions.” Miume answered happily, her ears and tails rising. “How does he make you feel?”

I glanced back at her feeling anxious. “He makes me feel calm.” I said after a moment, “I’ve never formed bonds with anyone. But I want to form them with him. And the others.” I shifted my weight
uncomfortably, unsure of where Miume was going with this.

Miume nodded again, giving me a sad smile, “So, focus on those emotions. Let them be the inspiration for your shields. Try to make them to protect those bonds.” She leaned forward towards me, her ears attentive pointed directly at me and her tails curled upward. “Would you like to try?”

I gazed back at her, my mind still trying to process everything before nodding slowly and taking a few steps away from her. I inhaled deeply and slipped into a defensive stance.

“Actually, there are no crazy robots today.” Miume informed as she placed her tablet on the ground next to her, “Why don’t we have a seat and try from there?” She carefully sat down cross-legged with her hands on her knees and waited for me to do the same. I looked at her for a moment before mimicking her and sitting down across from her cross-legged with my hands on my knees, palms facing upwards too.

Once we were in position, Miume smiled at me again, her tails moving back and forth slightly. She closed her eyes and drew in a long breath then exhaled. “Meow, please try closing your eyes and focusing on those happy emotions. Those bonds. Let them manifest into the barrier.” She instructed, her voice smooth and calm.

I watched briefly, still puzzled by this new method. I’d never done training like this before. Slowly I closed my eyes, trying to relax my tense shoulders but finding it difficult. With my eyes closed my body automatically hyper focused on any energy around me, watching it intently for any chance of sneak attack.

“Whenever you are ready.” Miume said softly from in front of me. I could feel her eyes open a crack to observe me. Her energy dipped downwards as she took in my tense state.

Taking a deep breath, I gradually let my mind wander back to last night. Keith’s face appeared behind my eyelids, making me blush softly. Focusing on the few strings that tied Keith and me together, an overwhelming sense of security washed over me. One that I hadn’t felt before. A thin layer of energy flowed over my skin like armor before it steadily started to bubble outwards.

“Good, keep focusing on that sensation, that emotion.” Miume’s voice floated towards me, a low rumbling of purring filling the silence.

“I don’t even know what this emotion is.” I admitted, the barrier around me shattering silently. I sighed and opened my eyes. “How can I focus on it when I don’t even know what I’m feeling?” I had never felt this way before. How could I focus on something so foreign to me? This was becoming impossible now.

Miume tilted her head to the side, thinking to herself. “You don’t know what emotion it is?” she clarified, her tails flowing behind her briefly.

I nodded, huffing a bit in confusion. “I don’t know what most of these emotions are. How can I form barriers if I don’t know the emotion themselves?” I frowned in frustration. My heart rate started to creep upwards in anxiety as I waited for some kind of punishment to be dealt for asking questions and not showcasing what she asked of me. I had never talked back to the Galra, only preformed what they asked.

“I think you will understand the emotions in time. You don’t have to know the name or definition to feel it.” Miume tried to explain, “Just focus on how it makes you feel.”

“How I feel...” I repeated slowly. That wasn’t something I was used to either. “I don’t know how I
Miume chewed her lip, her tails swishing back and forth again. “But you formed a barrier just then when you were focusing on something. What were you thinking about?”

A fluttering sensation bubbled in my abdomen and I felt my cheeks grow warm again as I looked away from her. “I was thinking about Keith.” I confessed quietly.

Miume smirked to herself in satisfaction. Knew it, she thought confidently. Those two were so easy to read.

“Alright! Why not try concentrating on him again? And then you could start thinking about how the others make you feel as well?” Miume prompted, closing her eyes and breathing in deeply, the purring sound resuming. I looked at her once more before nodding and closing my eyes too. Taking a deep breath, I focused on my own new bonds. There weren’t many, but they were there, stretching out in different directions in small bundles. Carefully I examined the scarlet threads that reached out to Keith. They were warm and protective. I could feel his fire red aura extend from the bonds wrapping around me languidly. I felt a small smile tug on my lips and my cheeks heat up as I wrapped my energy over his until it covered them completely. Then I projected my own energy away from myself, sending it down the line towards where his strings would be connected to him. Even though he was far away, I could still feel the warmth radiating from his energy and I was relieved to feel his presence.

Miume’s eyes widened in surprise. It was working! Umi’s pink barrier visibly bubbled to life around her before being pushed outward. It had a completely different feeling than yesterday. Yesterday’s felt forced and scared. Today, there was an overwhelming feeling of light and warmth. Even though she didn’t know how to describe these emotions Umi was able to feel and focus on them, empowering her natural abilities. She wasn’t blocking them out, which was an improvement.

“Good, good! You’re doing it, Umi!” Miume praised encouragingly. Umi was smiling a little to herself. This was the first time Miume had seen her smile, she mentally noted.

“Meow, do you think you could form barriers around the other Paladins?” she coaxed.

I opened my eyes to look at her. The other Paladins were miles away by now and busy training. “Won’t that interfere with their training?” I asked, not wanting them to get punished or hurt either as I realized I could have interrupted Keith’s concentration. Miume paused and pondered this for a moment.

“Hmm, you’re right. Maybe let’s focus on making this barrier bigger.” She offered instead.

I nodded, closing my eyes again. My barrier felt lighter this time, maybe even a bit stronger. These emotions that I didn’t understand were helping somehow. Refocusing on Keith, I started to make my way around the bundles of bonds I shared with the other Paladins. Pidge’s electric green aura was next as it danced around me carefully. Slowly, I concentrated on pushing my energy down the stings towards her, feeling my barrier expand further. Next was Shiro, and I pressed my barrier even farther trying to grasp on and focus on his specter white energy in addition to the other two. Taking a staggered breath, I started to feel resistance. When I tried to find Lance’s energy, my attention started to break, the barrier flickering in and out slightly. I was only able to focus on three bonds at once.

“You don’t have to push it. It will take time.” I heard Miume say with assurance.

“I can go farther.” I replied in a monotone voice, placing my hands on my head. It started to throb
as I tried to push myself farther still.

“Umi, stop. You’re bleeding.” Miume ordered, her voice carrying a trace of alarm as she put her hands on mine. I flinched away from her, my eyes snapping open before they widened as my barrier came into focus. It was immense as it canvassed around the field around us, almost touching the edge of camp. A tremendous translucent purple-pink bubble glimmered against the sun rays as they slipped through, causing the area to have a faint rosy tint as it formed around the mountainscape with ease.

“It’s bigger than I thought.” I gasped, my lungs suddenly needing more air as I gathered myself.

“You did very well, here.” Miume praised, offering me a tissue. I looked up at her, taking it hesitantly before, dabbing it under my nose. “If you try and force the barrier, I believe that’s when it starts to backfire and cause physical harm.” Miume tapped a few notes into her tablet’s monitor. “It wasn’t until you were trying to force the distance that walls of your barrier flickered in and out and your nose started to bleed.” Her ears twitched towards me as she mumbled some indiscriminate words to herself, “Has this happened before?”

I looked at her puzzled, wondering why she would ask me that kind of thing. “A few times.”

Miume’s brows furrowed and she looked up from her tablet to look at me directly, “‘A few times?’ Have you noticed bleeding from anywhere else when you overexert yourself like this? Purrshaps you feel sick when you overwork yourself, like nauseous or lightheaded?”

I blinked. I’d never been asked questions like this before. “Sometimes. If I use a lot of my power it makes me feel lightheaded and my vision goes fuzzy. Sometimes it’s hard to breathe. Sometimes I cough up blood or get a bloody nose, or my vision gets kinda red.” I shrugged awkwardly while speaking nonchalantly. None of this was that big of a deal to me since it happened a lot and I’d been through far worse. I could take this. Was she wondering if I wasn’t strong enough to take this? My heart skipped at that thought.

The rosy pink aura dipped as Miume took in my words. “Well, that’s not good.” Miume stated plainly, her tails moving back and forth in thought. She smiled sadly at me and gave a sympathetic purr.

“It’s not?” I asked. These things seemed so minor to me because I was just so used to it. The pain, the blood, the punishment.

“To start, you’re not supposed to cough up blood in general. Additionally, I don’t think using your own power is supposed to have such negative side effects. The energy draining and fatigue, those I can understand because it’s your own energy expended and we all have certain energy limits. But I don’t quite understand the negative physical aspects of it, yet.” Miume explained, tapping a few more notes into her monitor. “You shouldn’t risk your own well being every time you employ your power. Therefore, I’m determined to ensure your wellbeing with the data I’ve collected so that you don’t have to get hurt. I’m paw-sitive we’ll be able to tap into this though and you’ll be able to make as many barriers of any caliber as you please without any harm to yourself as a byproduct!”

I tilted my head to the side not really understanding. She talked at a level next to Pidge’s, where I rarely understood when she explained things. But through the flurry of strange words and abstract concepts, I could tell there was a genuine desire to help me. Was this the caring that Shiro had talked about? Her aura was moving around her nervously. It reached out towards me then pulled back like it didn’t know what to do. I looked at her curiously. Keith’s aura had done something similar so maybe this was caring.
Miume’s ear twitched in my direction again, making her look up at me. “Is something wrong?” She had paused her note taking now. I shook my head, looking down at my hands instead.

“Do you want to try that a few more times?” she offered after a moment.

“Making barriers?” I clarified and she nodded. I looked at her for a moment more before closing my eyes and concentrating, this time feeling more relaxed than before, my shoulders decompressing. We practiced this for a few more hours until I felt completely drained but not as spent as I usually would be. Now I could sense that my energy reserve had been used up but I felt lighter, and less mentally exhausted than before.

“Umi, you don’t have to push yourself so much. It’s good to know your maximum energy output, but you shouldn’t be straining yourself beyond your limits with such negative consequences.” Miume said, offering me a hand as she stood up.

“I can keep going.” I replied, taking her hand after a moment and she shook her head in response.

“It’s getting harder for you to make them. You need some food and rest and then we can try again after you’ve replenished yourself adequately. Plus, if we don’t get to camp before lunch, I’m purr-etty sure Keith will come find us himself and drag you there.” Miume chuckled, pulling me into a standing position.

“I don’t understand what you’re doing.” I said quietly, making her pause to look at me with a puzzled expression.

“What do you mean?” She tilted her head to the side and twitched her ears.

“I’ve never had an experimenter treat me like this.” I confessed, looking down and avoiding her gaze. Why was she asking me about how I felt and if I was okay? Why wasn’t she demanding more power or asking where my power even came from? Why was there no punishment from yesterday's performance, or further experimentation?

Miume smiled sadly before carefully placing a hand on my head. “It’s because I care about you, Umi.” She replied warmly.

I looked up at her in confusion, “Care about me?”

“Yes. Not only as a doctor, but hopefully as a friend as well.” Her pink aura softened around her and crept over to me yearning for a connection.

“Friend...” My voice trailed off slightly as I looked to the side.

“You don’t have to decide now, but I would like to eventually become friends with you.” Miume patted my head tenderly before ushering us towards the camp.

I stood there and stared after her for a moment before following. Maybe this was what it meant to be cared for by others.

When we rounded the corner, Keith and Lance were standing in the center of the clearing just outside of camp. Lance was tall with his frame open and proudly chatting away. Keith was leaning against a dead tree, tapping his foot anxiously. His tense shoulders visibly dropped and his body slacked in relief as we came closer, his energy relaxing around him when our eyes met.

“See, she’s just fine.” Miume teased as she passed Keith and headed towards Lance who was hard to ignore as he waved his arms over his head calling for her. Residual blue insect blood scattered
around him and Miume scolded him for making a mess.

“You’re okay?” Keith asked, closing the distance between us. I nodded, feeling myself blush as I became more aware of his closeness. He sighed in relief, running his hand through his hair.

“Are you okay?” I echoed his question, eyeing the blue slime that was stuck to his suit. The viscous liquid was splattered over both his armor and Lance’s armor and shone like dark ink in the sunlight.

“Uh, yeah, the bugs just exploded with this nasty stuff.” He wrinkled his nose and tried to wipe more of goopy substance off of him.

“Bugs?” I repeated as we walked back towards camp, Miume and Lance further ahead of us now.

“Yeah. Kara had Lance and me fight off different types of bugs. It was real great.” He rolled his eyes looking annoyed.

“Sounds hard.” I commented, adjusting my bangs self consciously.

“Not really, more like annoying.” Keith shrugged before looking down at me, “This is gonna sound strange, but... did you try to put a barrier over me earlier?” He looked at me curiously.

I stopped walking and looked at him incredulously, “You could feel that?”

He nodded, “It was brief, but it felt like you were trying to connect us together or something,” he tried to explain his aura flustering.

“Miume told me focus on how you make me feel.” I admitted shyly, avoiding his gaze as I stared at my scuffed boots, “So, that’s probably why.”

When I looked back at him he was smiling to himself a bit, energy jumping upwards with a light and warm expression. I tilted my head to the side looking at him quizzically. When he caught me staring, a soft red dusted his cheeks before he glanced away for a brief second then flicked his eyes back to me.

“Come on, we better go get some food.” He promptly changing the subject. I nodded, still not sure why his aura seemed so happy.

As we joined the chattering group around the designated fire pit, I felt myself relax. The Paladin’s were sitting around the campfire and eating the same soup that Kara apathetically served. Coran and Allura had joined as well and were chatting with the Paladin’s about their training. It was much easier to be around everyone’s energy now. They were still hyperactive like yesterday, bouncing off each other as they talked over one another about their training. Lance was sitting by Miume, showing off his gun and telling her about how he kicked bug ass today. I smiled a bit at them. Their auras were flowing together over one another with less hesitancy now, her pink teasing his blue.

“How?” Keith asked, mouth half full as he offered me a plate. I nodded, taking it from him as my vision came back into the present and the colorful energies faded into the background.

I chewed my food and let my mind wander over the events that had happened today when out of nowhere I felt flicker of negative energy. Blinking, I looked upwards in confusion. Was it coming from the sky? I saw that Miume had noticed the same thing, her ears twitched and focused on the new sound as well. We glanced at each other briefly before looking around the others. No one else had seemed to notice its presence. The frequency must be too high for the other Paladins to hear.
“Umi?” Keith questioned, placing a hand over mine as I tensed. Focusing on the approaching negative energy the hair on my arms stood on end as my body went rigid. I knew that energy. It was the same cold, unforgiving dark energy that felt like death.

“Something’s coming.” I almost whispered, my full attention above the space of the mountain just south of camp. My energy started to spark around me in nervous anticipation and I gripped the hidden knives in my sleeves.

“What do you mean?” Keith’s eyes tried following mine as I continued to focus on the rapidly approaching energy. My mind started to race. How had he found me? Was this all just a trick, a means of showing me that I was only a weapon to be used and returned to Zarkon once strengthened?

“Umi, you sense it too?” Miume called over to me. She stood in a half crouched position, looking at the same space my eyes were trained on. Lance looked slightly put off by her sudden divergence in attention from him to the sky and tried to track what she was so engaged in.

“It feels like Zarkon.” I warned quietly, slipping into a defensive stance and pulling a knife into each of my hands.

“I hear something like a ship approaching.” Miume added. Everyone had stopped talking and was staring at us now. The light hearted nature immediately dropped into a tense anticipation as their auras collectively stiffened.

“Ship?” Lance repeated, standing next to Miume with his gun poised at the ready.

“Why would a ship be approaching? This planet is isolated and clearly uninhabitable. And as you explained, the mist disrupts signals.” Allura asked, her eyes looking upwards as well, trying to see something.

“Wait, what? Did you just say Zarkon?” Hunk gulped nervously, the yellow aura around him trembling close to him. He put down his bowl and reached for his bayard instinctively.

“How could he find us though? I thought we had severed the connection with Shiro?” Pidge questioned, looking from me to Shiro with worried auburn eyes.

“I don’t know.” I admitted, my eyes never leaving the encroaching energy source. Keith was standing next to me now with his body tensed, crimson aura stiff and bayard in hand.

“We need to get to the lions.” Shiro declared as he stood up before a large black coffin shaped ship burst through the mist. The force scattered the fogged atmosphere above us, filling the air with the sound of jet boosters as it rocketed towards the barren wasteland of a planet.

“Run!” Shiro commanded, grabbing Lance by the arm and pulling the boy away from Miume’s side to his annoyance. The other Paladins started sprinting towards their lions as Shiro continued barking orders. Their auras flared in a hectic mess of colors fueled by adrenaline and urgency. “Keith, take Umi. We’ll need the extra barriers! Miume, you and your team take cover in the castle with Allura and Coran! We will protect you. Everyone, to your lions, now!”

A flurry of ‘rogers’ followed his command as Keith grabbed my hand and pulled me towards the lion with him. The other Paladins took off in our direction as Miume and Kara splintered off and began to corral the other medical team members towards the Castle of Lions where Allura and Coran were now sprinting towards. The coffin collided with the side of a mountain abruptly and Keith cursed, squeezing my hand. Its force made the ground under our feet tremor with
shockwaves as steely rock shrapnel erupted away from the impact zone.
“What is that?” I asked, my heart starting to race and my blood ran cold as Zarkon’s malicious presence increased in magnitude nearly swallowing me. Its sinister aura crept off the coffin ship in large waves, overtaking everything in its path with an icy dread.

“It must be one of Haggar’s robeast’s that Zarkon sent to try and defeat us.” Keith tried to explain between staggered breaths as we continued to sprint. His aura flared as it surrounded us.

The coffin’s lid exploded open and hot white steam escaped from its depths with a high pitched whistling sound that announced its presence.

“Hurry!” Shiro shouted as a large rock-like monster stepped out of its casing. My eyes widened as I took in its massive form. It stood nearly the height of the castle. Its body appeared to be made entirely of dark, charred rock. Large vein -like cracks split between them with a fiery red glowing substance underneath that steamed upwards. A large crack split open across where the mouth should be and rows of black jagged teeth lined inside the opening as vibrant scarlet glowed from behind them as the creature let out a monstrous bellow. The sound thundered towards us, shaking the loose pebbles under our feet.

“What the hell is that?!” Lance nearly screamed as he ran faster to keep up with Shiro.

“It looks like a giant rock monster.” Pidge assessed while struggling to keep up.

“I can see that!” Lance responded in a sarcastic tone and jumped over a large rock.

“Try lava monster!” Hunk cried in terror as the giant rock monster drew its hands back, roaring before the cracks along its body lit up a fiery crimson red. Its boulder sized fist heated up to an impossible temperature, the black charred rock turning into a vivid orange yellow liquid of molten rock.

“Umi, shield!” Shiro commanded, glancing back at me. We were still too far away from the lions and there was no way I could make a shield that big while running. I saw Keith look back between Shiro and me from the corner of my eye as we continued running towards the lions. They were still a good hundred feet or so away.

“Now!” He cried as the monster rocked backwards before slingshotting its arm forward, a lava-like substance rocketing from the core of its fisted hand.

Lance screamed in terror as I shut my eyes, forcing a barrier around us. Reflexive and emergent defensive energy expanded around us before the lava substance collided with it, making me grimace in pain. I could feel it burning through the shield trying to melt it away and my skin grew warm in response.

A blanket of steaming magma slid over the rounded edge of my barrier as hot steam hissed above us.

“It shoots lava?!” Pidge cried in panicked alarm, running faster now.

“Oh, that is not the kinda thing I wanted to see,” Hunk relented as his eyes took in the steaming
lava that oozed around the barrier.

“Just keep running! We have to get it away from the camp.” Shiro ordered, keeping his pace.

“Are you good?” Keith shot a glance back at me. I nodded without looking at him, my eyes trained on the monster. My heart rate began to slow and my body calmed into its well practiced fighting response as I realized this was a test. Just like the arena, I had to beat the monster and win.

The creature started to emerge from the coffin further with labored steps. The sides of the vessel it had been sent in melted away instantly as its heated hands gripped them for support to push itself outwards.

“It can’t move very fast.” I thought out loud, mostly to myself, letting my barrier disappear once we had moved out from under the magma coated shield. The molten rock collapsed to the ground heavily behind us. Splashes of burning substance scattered across the sullen ground, illuminating it bright red and a scorched smell filled the air.

“Thank god.” Keith started before his eyes widened and his aura flared. “Incoming!” he called out to the group as the monster brought its arm up again, hurling another round of burning lava towards us with more force than the last attack.

“It’s not slow anymore!” Hunk screamed as a mass of molten rocks rocketed towards us.

“Shield!” Shiro commanded again, the cool white aura remaining steady around him.

Squeezing Keith’s hand tighter, I felt my muscles tense around me as I pushed another barrier around us, making it thicker than the last one while bracing myself for impact as the lava collided roughly with my shield. The impact of the force threw me off my feet and I felt Keith’s hand tighten around mine as we were tossed to the side harshly. “Umi!” Keith cried, his body automatically responding to the directional change and he pulled me into him instinctively. His body covered mine from the impact as we rolled a few feet on the cemented ground.

“Umi! Keith!!” Lance shouted in our direction. He stopped running and used his rifle to shoot towards the monster who was bringing its other hand around for another shot. His bright crystal blue aura sparked protectively in his attempt to give us some cover as we collected ourselves.

“Lance don’t piss it off!” Hunk pleaded looking over to Lance in disbelief. His hand twitched to his side, as if he wanted to activate his bayard as well.

Keith used the momentum we had to roll us into a crouched position. Easily sliding into an offensive stance, he hovered over me for a beat before grabbing my arm and hauling me up as the next impact hit. This time the collision of molten rock shattered my barrier completely. Crying out in pain I winced as my feet staggered beneath me. Why was this hurting so much? Usually I only felt residual effects from things hitting my barrier, but this time it was as if my skin was being burned by the searing heat that consumed my barrier.

“We need to get to the lions.” Shiro said again as he resumed running after he made sure everyone was accounted for.

Keith released my arm, giving us more freedom to run at a full pace. We quickly caught up to the other Paladins as they resumed their dash to the lions. The uneven ground made it difficult to run, forcing us to clamor over smaller boulders and rocks desperately. The monster took another lumbering step towards us, its roar thundering through the space, bouncing off the sharp edges of the mountains that surrounded us.
“Lava fire!” Pidge screamed as we just barely reached the lions. The fiery cracks lining the monster intensified in color, lava leaking from them and quickly consuming its long arms as lava pooled onto the ground. The glowing pulsations of magma unexpectedly flowed down the mountainscape rapidly, burning everything away in its path of destruction. The creature thrust its heavy lava coated arms upwards, sending two whips of boiling lava towards us as the sparse greenery of the landscape smoked and burned in the molten waves pouring down towards camp.

“Umi!” Keith cried in a concerned voice, his red aura spiking around him violently.

My feet skidded across the jagged surface as I stopped and sunk down into a defensive position. I brought my arms upwards above my head and focused on creating a stronger barrier than before. Pushing my energy outwards, I braced for impact as the lava lashed across the barrier’s surface. Flinching, I gritted my teeth at its sheer power, my barrier already threatening to break as it flickered in and out.

Glancing around me, I noticed the Paladins had ceased their sprinting and were taking defensive positions. Seeing them poised to attack as well, I felt a surge of foreign desire to protect them. “Run!” I screamed, trying to reinforce the barrier with this new passion fueling my power.

“I’m not leaving you,” Keith gripped my hand as he tried to pull me with him, but I planted my feet into the ground, needing to be in one place to maintain the shield.

“Keith.” I breathed as I looked over to him before a line of bright liquid drew my attention. The rock creature had thrown another attack, its reach of power draped easily over the large space between us and the mountain it was slowly laboring down. A fiery rain of molten rock cascaded over the barren land, setting it ablaze as surges of broiling magma slithered downwards. Its extended fist came from the right, slamming into the barrier with such immense force that the barrier shattered. Red hot lava spewed in every direction and my eyes widened as the Paladins scattered to evade the boiling substance.

“Umi!” Keith screamed as the force threw us sideways, our hands ripping apart from each other. The world suddenly slowed. My eyes finding Keith’s, I managed to push another barrier around him and the others just as the second fist came down on top of them. Lava exploded over the barriers as the Paladins crouched under them, their individual energies running around them in adrenaline fueled fear.

Crying out in pain, time snapped back to normal, surging around us quickly as I was hurled away from the others. Covering my face, I braced for impact as my side struck the hard ground. The inertia from the blast was so strong that I bounced off the solid ground before slamming against it again and continuing to roll a few times out of control. Unable to gather my feet under myself, I waited for the speed of my impact to slow, my body skidding across the uneven terrain. I felt the sharp rocks ripping through the fabric of my clothes, their sharp edges breaking through my skin easily as they sliced across me.

“Umi!” I heard Keith scream. I could hear him running towards me with his aura outstretched.

Gripping a knife from my sleeve, I tried to slam it into the ground to stop my momentum but the ground was too thick for me to penetrate it. The tip of my knife barely scratched the surface and I continued my chaotic path of tumbling and sliding before my body was met with nothing. Hanging in the air for a split second gravity took hold of me again as I free fell. Crying out in fear, I desperately grasped for the edge of the fissure but my fingertips barely brushed over it as I plummeted into darkness.

My back collided with the ground first, roughly knocking the air from my lungs. I gasped painfully.
trying to intake some air before coughing harshly. Groaning in pain, I rolled on my side trying to regain my breath. I hadn’t fallen nearly as far as I thought I would. Blinking, I tried to adjust my eyes to the inky darkness I had plunged into when bright lights suddenly flooded my vision.

Wincing, I held a hand up to shield them before my energy prickled around me in nervous anticipation. My body froze as I sensed a terrifyingly familiar presence. I knew this aura; it curled off of its owner like a dark mist, trying to choke the life from whatever it came in contact with, cinching around it with a vice-like grip before drowning you in its cruel nature. Looking around wildly, I pulled myself into a defensive position, protectively lowering my center of gravity while holding my throbbing side and still trying to catch my breath. My body was accustomed to being thrown and winded from constant fighting to survive, but it still took a few moments to regain my full lung capacity.

“Your barriers were more impressive than I thought they would be.” Haggar’s raspy taunting voice echoed through the space. My heart stopped painfully in my chest as I realized where I was; the harsh operating lights, the icy tiled floor, the oppressively freezing sterile air. I was back in an exam room.

“H-how did I get here?” I stammered, gripping my throbbing side and slipping a knife into my opposite hand as my breathing starting to get under control from practiced tolerance of battle.

“Hah!” her dry voice barked out mockingly. “Did you actually believe you could escape? That I would let my precious weapon out of my sight? All of this has just been a test to see how much power you could gain.” Her voice trailed through the shadows surrounding the spotlight I was under before her robed form came into focus. My body automatically tensed as anxiety coursed through my veins like ice. Squeezing the knife in my hand, I tried to control my body from shaking.

“And you failed! You couldn’t defeat my robeast. Failure means one thing: You need to be punished.” Her voice sneered as she held up a purple clawed hand with dark magenta energy forming in her palm before it exploded towards me.

Gasping, I lunged to the side rolling into a defensive crouch before she appeared right in front of me with another ball of energy curling just inches from my face. My eyes widened as she fired point blank. A barrier barely flickered to life as her sharp energy collided with it. The brute force broke my barrier immediately as I tried to back away from her, almost slipping on the smooth tiled ground. I could feel the blood dripping off my skin from the cuts I had sustained while rolling.

“You still aren’t powerful enough, my ultimate weapon.” Her voice was full of disgust as she grabbed me by the collar roughly and tossed my easily into the opposite wall.

My back struck the wall with less force than the initial blow when I fell, but its force still stung painfully as fresh bruises formed over my skin. Coughing, I hit the ground hard, my vision going in and out of focus as she swiftly glided towards me and held another energy sphere in her upturned hand.

“Did you think those people really cared about you?” her voice taunted digging into my ears painfully, “They were just using you the same way I am.” She threw the dark energy in her hand at me with vicious speed. Scrambling, I dodged it before she flashed in front of me again, and a clawed hand raked against my chest as she sneered at me. Her yellow eyes were full of tormented pleasure.

Screaming out in pain, I gripped the knives my hands and swung at her. Her haunting laugh echoed around me as she vanished into smoke before appearing at the other side of the room.
“No one cares about you. You are just a weapon. The ultimate weapon I personally designed. You belong to me.” Her voice was full of hate as tendrils of her malicious dark purple aura began to fill the area around us, creating a cage of oppressive energy.

“You’re wrong!” I yelled back defiantly, forming a barrier around me. I threw a string of knives directly at her but she dissipated into mist avoiding them easily. My breath came in short bursts now. This was the first time I had fought back against her. My mind screamed at me to stop, to close off my pain receptors and get the punishment over with before it became too unbearable. But a new spark of desire drove me to continue fighting, pushing the terrified thoughts away.

“No, you are wrong, weapon.” Haggar persisted. Appearing in front of me again, her blood stained talons slashed across my face. “You are nothing more than a weapon. And just barely one at that. You still don’t have nearly enough power. You need more work. More punishment.”

“I am not a weapon!” I cringed away from her, the weak barrier flickering in front of me as I regained my footing before lunging at her again. Swinging around my foot cut through the air she had just occupied. Hot blood streaked across my face, but I wiped it away unfazed. My focus was honed on defending myself against Haggar for once as the new spark inside me fueled my energy into something other than fear.

“You are the ultimate weapon! That Keith who you got so close to, he’s only using you for your power.” She leered as another blast of energy came from the void of darkness around me, breaking through my barrier this time. Lunging to the side, I narrowly avoided the attack. Her words bore deep into my energy, trying to choke the life from me as she continued to barrade me with abusive language.

“Keith.” I whispered, my eyes widening as his face flashed through my mind. The feeling of his warm aura wrapping around me faintly pushed away the dark energy trying to encase me.

“Come, you need to be punished.” Haggar demanded in a harsh voice as she appeared in front of me again, her cold hand gripping my throat. Choking, I grabbed at her hands trying to focus my energy into them as static electric crackled around us. “They don’t care about you. No one does! Who could care about a weapon that is only meant to be used.” She continued, cackling evilly.

“Y-you’re wrong.” I gagged, dropping one of my hands to my side. I slipped another knife into my hand and slashed it her across the face swiftly. The witch cried out in pain, her hands leaving my neck to cradle her bleeding face before turning her icy glare back to me. The temperature in the room dropped drastically as her malicious energy swirled around her dangerously.

“They all care about me,” I told myself, ignoring the hot pain that wrapped around my neck where her hands had been. “Keith cares about me.” The feeling of his crimson aura grew stronger around me giving me renewed strength, “Pidge cares about me.” A surge of confidence came over me as her warm pale green aura curled around my chest as if she was hugging me. Standing up straighter, I raised my head to stare Haggar her head on. “Hunk cares about me.” The soft yellow of his aura wrapped me into a secure reassuring hug as well. “Lance cares about me!” My voice grew louder with each name, and his cool blue aura danced around me protectively. “Shiro cares about me!” Shiro’s strong and commanding aura completely enveloped me and I felt even more empowered. “Even, Miume! She told me that she cares and I believe her!” I nearly shouted as Miume’s aura wafted in gracefully and wisped around my chest. Purple pink energy starting to dance across my skin charging the air around me.

“They all care about me!” I screamed at her, curling my hands into fists. I focused on the faint feeling of their auras presence intensifying around me. Their energies reached towards mine, like they were calling out to me. Taking a deep breath, I pushed my energy towards their bright
energies until they connected and power pulsed throughout me. “And I am not a weapon!” I cried as a brighter barrier erupted around me, the tiled floor shattering as I pushed it outwards.

“What?” Haggar paused in shock, her hands curled upwards for another attack. The dark energy around her rose in surprise.

“I am going home.” I declared, uncurling my hands as I felt the overwhelming energy surge through me and rush to my palms.

“You aren’t going anywhere, my weapon. You have no home.” Haggar argued, pulling her hands in front of her as a large energy ball of snapping energy formed before she hurled it towards me. The crackling sphere of energy nearly enveloped the entire room as her wicked laughter bounced off the walls.

“They are my home.” I murmured to myself, slipping into a defensive stance as my breathing evened out. I could feel their auras fusing with my energy into a reinforced, sturdy and powerful barrier. “I can feel you now.” I whispered. I could almost hear the others calling out my name as Haggar and my energies collided. An eruption of lightning energy exploded around us, its force pushing me backwards as my feet skidded across the smooth floor.

Throwing a hand over my face, I covered my eyes from the impact’s shocking light. I felt Haggar’s venomous energy strike the barrier before slithering around it, desperately trying to find a weak point to seep in. Swirling gusts of air whipped through my bangs in every direction, almost creating a vortex of pulsing energy. Squinting against the harsh light, my eyes locked onto Haggar’s shocked face as I took an aggressive step forward and our energies repelled against each other, both trying to overpower the other. Sinking down into an offensive stance, my energy curled defiantly around me.

“They do care about me!” I screamed at her. Throwing my hands apart, I forced my energy to slice through Haggar’s. Purple pink lightning streaks scattered across the space, snapping hungrily at the dark energy before overpowering it. Bursting forward, I lunged at Haggar as my energy pooled rapidly into my palms and spiked dangerously outwards. Sharp shards of lightning-like energy erupted around me from as I took a final grounding step before slamming my empowered sparking palm into Haggar’s chest. Screaming out a battle cry, my pink purple energy rampaged throughout Haggar’s body forcing the energy from her body to burst outwards from her back, which violently ruptured the strings that connected her physical form to her spiritual one. Haggar’s deep purple strings tried desperately to reconnect to their physical form as my other hand grabbed her neck and sent volts of violent energy coursing through her.

Haggar shrieked in agony as her spirit self was ripped from her body, the strings snapping with a deafening twang, forcing the soul from her body as it desperately tried to cling to itself. Haggar’s eyes widened with a new sense of fear that I had never seen from her. Her cracked lips pulled back into a rageful hiss before her body evaporated into thick smoke.

Breathing heavily, the barrier around me disintegrated as Haggar’s aura withered away. The residual static electricity faded to small snaps of energy before disappearing completely. Once I was sure her energy was entirely gone, my knees gave out and my vision blurred again. Looking down at my hands, I noticed they were streaked with purple pink veins that pulsed in tune with my rapid heart beat. The faint wafts of residual dark energy that had curled up from my own was now gone. It was as if I had pushed away all of the witch’s corrupt energy and there was only mine left.

“I won.” I whispered breathlessly to myself before my vision faded into black.
“Umi!” I heard Keith’s voice cry out. I felt him lightly hold the tops of my shoulders and shake them gently.

“Please refrain from shaking her. We don’t know what kind of damage this fall caused and I wouldn’t want you to hurt her any further,” Miume lighty but sternly cautioned Keith. I could feel his frown as he released his hold on my shoulders with care. Miume’s careful touch came next as I felt her prop my head up at a slight angle as she slipped a small collar-like device around my neck. The furious tapping of her fingers on her tablet filled the brief moment of silence as I heard her wristlet whirr as the scanning function hummed.

“Wake up.” Pidge said quietly, her melancholy energy wavered next to Shiro’s supportive white aura.

“What’s wrong with her?” Shiro asked Miume. Her rosy pink energy flowed in a more rigid pattern than usual, as if she was analyzing something.

“I’m not sure. Her brain patterns appear as if she’s asleep, but she isn’t completely showing a total sleep response. Her brain waves show an underlying marked activity. She seems to be in a trance, almost in another state of consciousness?” She guessed, trying to make sense of the conflicting readings she was getting. Umi was alive for sure, but what was happening? Her physical body showed damage other than those one would expect from a fall. She had sustained claw-like abrasions over her face and gashes over her body, but nothing around them could have possibly attacked her.

“Why won’t she wake up!?” Keith demanded in a strained voice. My cheeks warmed as his hands rested lightly over them. His physical touch and the way his aura poured over me were cautious enough to not move me, but at least me know he was present. “Umi!” he called again.

“Keith, please, do not move her. As to why she isn’t waking, I’m not sure. Her vitals read as if she is in physical distress, but these other readings indicate otherwise and point to a trance-like state.” Miume tried to explain, her red eyes running over the conflicting and rapidly changing charts.

“Wake up!” Hunk tried this time, as he crouched beside me and carefully squeezed my hand. His comforting yellow energy pushed away the chill from the cool substance pressed against my back.

“Come on, buddy,” Lance coaxed, placing a hand on Hunk’s shoulder from where he knelt on the ground next to his friend.

“Please.” Keith pleaded, his breath catching as my chest rose sharply.

Gasping, air rushed back into my lungs painfully as my eyes flew open.

“Umi!” Keith breathed, his aura relaxing around us in relief.

“She’s awake!” Lance declared happily from behind Hunk as Pidge loudly blew out a held breath and sunk to the ground next to Shiro in relief.

I was laying on my back at the foot of a narrow valley of dark grey rocks as light trickled blindingly through the cracks several yards above. I blinked a few times trying to adjust to the bright light above me before my eyes focused on a circle of worried faces around me. “What happened?” I asked, my voice hoarse.

“You flew off a cliff and somehow didn’t die.” Hunk explained, pointing upwards. I followed his gaze to see that we were a ways down from a sharp drop.
I blinked a few more times trying to make sense of what they were saying. How could I be here when I was back on a Zarkon base?

“But Haggar was here.” I replied, trying to to sit up when Miume swiftly drew a hand over me to stop my motion. She shot me a glance and her aura flared once. I took this as a warning to not move, which was fine since the world was still coming back into focus. “I was back on Zarkon’s base with Haggar.” I tried to explain, my eyebrows pulling together in confusion. As my body regained normal sensation, I became increasingly aware of the raw feeling of wounds across my chest and face. My back and sides ached unpleasantly as well. But this was something I was used to, and not nearly as bad as I had had been injured before.

“Alright,” Miume suddenly announced after her wristlet chimed twice, “No breaks so far in your neck. Let’s sit you up carefully. We still can’t be sure, so please keep this neck brace on.” Slowly with care, Keith and Shiro helped pull me into a sitting position. The change in position caused a cascade of throbbing pain down my back, arms and legs, and I drew in a sharp breath. Miume eyed me warily.

“Umi, you were right here. You were knocked unconscious from the fall.” Shiro explained gently while placing a hand on my leg reassuringly.

“No, I fought her.” I argued, placing a hand on my throbbing head. I felt the familiar drying of blood against my skin matting into my hair and each breath felt labored. Everyone was silent for a moment.

“Are you sure?” Shiro finally asked. I tried to nod before looking down at my hands. The purple pink streaks had disappeared from under my skin now.

“I did something I’ve never done before.” I almost whispered, closing my hands into fists.

“What do you mean?” Keith asked with a concerned face.

“I forced her spirit out of her body. I cut the ties and she disappeared.” I murmured while not looking at them.

“What?” Lance’s bewildered voice drew my attention. His face was scrunched and the crystal blue aura around him twisted in confusion.

“I’m not really sure.” I admitted, leaning back against Keith for support and feeling more exhausted the longer we talked.

“We need to get you to a healing pod immediately. You might have sustained severe head trauma and are having hallucinations from a bleed in the brain.” Miume interrupted, standing up and looking upwards, “I’m still surprised, shocked even, that you survived from a fall of such a distance nearly unscathed.”

Despite this, Miume couldn’t shake the feeling that there was some truth to Umi’s words. There was nothing in this crevasse that could have created the laceration type injuries on her body, and the readings from her pawport on Umi’s brainwaves indicated that she had most likely been in another state of consciousness, like a dream. If Umi had been locked in some kind of mental metaphysical battle, that would explain these different injuries to some degree. And perhaps her victory in this match allowed her spiritual consciousness to return to her physical body and the waking world. But could something this abstract and mystical even be possible? Was it all psychosomatic? Miume shook her head in confusion. This energy business Umi described was all still hard to wrap her medically wired brain around.
“Well, let’s just be glad she’s awake.” Keith said, moving to scoop me into his arms.

“No, stop, we need to keep her in a stable position. We need a gurnee!” Miume commanded, waving her hands frantically trying to keep me from moving further, “She shouldn’t be moved too much.”

Keith sighed before gently laying me back down.

“Kara is on her way.” Miume said, leaning over me and checking my pupillary reflexes once more. “I still can’t believe you are even awake and talking. Does it hurt anywhere?”

“No.” I responded tiredly, my eyes fluttering shut and the feeling in my body fading. Sleep felt so good right now. I just wanted to sleep.

“Umi, stay with me. You can’t fall asleep yet.” Miume warned, gently touching the uninjured parts of my cheeks. I heard Keith make a disapproving sound under his breath as he squeezed my hand. “Stay with us.” Miume pressed, taking my vitals again on her wristwatch.

“I won.” I breathed in a winded voice. Miume paused, her tails twitching slightly.

“Won?” she echoed, confusion fluttering her aura to waver unsteadily above us.

“I made a barrier like we did in training. Pushed all the bad energy away. Safe now.” I smiled faintly, only able to speak in short bursts. It felt like my whole body was underwater, pressing down on my chest with crushing force and making it so I couldn’t focus on the people above me. Their faces blurred together, as if distorted by the water.

“Umi,” Keith coaxed quietly, stroking my hand, “Just a bit more.”

From what I could remember on the way back to the castle, Keith explained to me that after they formed Voltron to defeat the lava beast the land around them had been completely destroyed from battle. The Paladins had split up to try and find me since I wasn’t wearing a helmet to give them a tracking signal. Keith scanned the area from above carefully before finally catching a small glimmer of gold down a large break in the barren landscape. He recognized the gold plating from the armor I wore around my abdomen and immediately flew to the crack in the terrain. Quickly jumping from his lion and jetpacking down to me, he found me lying unconscious at the bottom of a deep crevasse after I was thrown by the monster’s blows and was amazed that the small armor I wore kept me alive. He also explained how I had been laying in a small circular depression, similar to the one my barrier had created to stop the Red lion from crashing before, and thought that I may have created a barrier around myself to break the fall, which would explain why I hadn’t been severely injured from falling such a large height. The rest of the Paladins had met up with him after he sent a distress call and Miume accompanied them to assess me for damage.

I wasn’t sure when I got to the healing pod, but I opened my eyes to find myself behind its frosted glass door.

“She’s awake!” Lance nearly yelled, jumping up from his position at my bedside and rushing out of the pod room.

“Open it up, Coran!” Pidge beamed, looking between Coran and me as her green aura danced around us in relief.

The door finally slid open, my body falling limply forward as I breathed in the non-freezing air deeply.
“How are you feeling?” Shiro asked, catching my disoriented frame and helping me take a seat as Hunk wrapped a blanket around me.

“Better.” I replied, pulling the blanket around me tighter and shivering. I could still feel some faint pulses of soreness, but my face and chest no longer stung with fresh wounds. Lightly touching my face, my fingers came back clean. They must have wiped the blood before putting me in the pod.

“Umi!” I heard Keith’s voice. He stood in the doorway breathing hard before Lance all but shoved him into the room. Keith turned around to glower at him before walking up to me, his aura nervously reaching for me.

“How are you feeling?” he asked kneeling in front of me, dark eyes wandering over my healed face.

I gave him a small smile, “Fine, Shiro already asked.”

“Of course he did.” Keith sighed, glancing up at Shiro who was blatantly ignoring us.

“Come on, she’s only been in the pod for a day. Not a whole year.” Pidge remarked in a playful tone before moving between Keith and I to give me a hug.

“Glad you’re okay.” She whispered, leaning back and smiling at me. I blinked not sure what to do before my shoulders relaxed a bit and I smiled back.

“Thanks.” I still felt exhausted but with everyone’s light energies hovering around me I was happy.

“Umi,” Shiro started, his white aura wavering in uncertainty, “I know you just woke up, but something you said before has had me thinking.”

I glanced up at him. I hardly remembered what happened after waking up in the crevasse. The voices and faces had blurred together.

“You said you pushed all the negative energy away. That we were safe now.” He paused, “What exactly did you mean?”

I pulled my brows together, processing his words before looking down at one of my hands. It was blank. The malignant feeling really was gone. I hadn’t hallucinated it. The faint pulses of residual energy that had clung to my own from my time with Zarkon were completely separated.

“Umi?” Keith’s voice coaxed me back to reality.

“I’m sorry.” I whispered, curling in on myself, “I think the past energy that held to mine is how Haggar found us.” I closed my hand into a fist, giving it a disgusted look, “I’m so sorry I put you all in danger.”

The room around me stiffened; each of the Paladins looked at one other to see if someone understood exactly what I was implying.

“You mean residual energy?” Pidge held a finger to her chin pensively.

I nodded, “The energies around you stay. The longer you are near them, the longer it stays. Their dark energy still held onto mine. But there were no bonds. I didn’t know she could find me that way.” I shivered before bowing my head. “It is my fault you were in danger.” I nearly whispered the last part as my heart started to thump unevenly in my chest with a new sense of fear icing over me.
“Umi.” Shiro’s soft voice came from beside me, his large, warm hand coming down gently on my shoulder. I flinched away from his touch reflexively, but he kept it there as I relaxed.

“You didn’t know it was possible. It’s not your fault. We are fighting against the most evil being in the universe. There will always be some kind of danger.” He gave me a crooked smile, “but with your help we were able to detect it before it was too late. And your barriers gave us enough cover to get to our lions. From what I understand, you battled Haggar as well and defeated her, which means there is one less evil to fight.”

I stared at him with wide eyes, my body completely frozen under his genuine energy. There were no hints of hostility, anger, or desire to punish. Only notes of fatherly care and ease radiated from the soft white glow around him.

“Why?” I asked, flicking my gaze away and holding onto myself tighter.

Keith smiled, leaning over to meet my gaze, “You are part of us Umi. I promised we would protect you, and I meant it.”

“We are a family!” Pidge piped up, throwing her arms out so that she could pull Hunk and Lance closer. Coran grinned from behind them proudly like a father.

My dark eyes drifted from each of their faces. Their warm auras engulfed me in an unfamiliar peaceful embrace. Confusion still painted my face when Shiro squeezed my shoulder again.

“Okay, time for some normal bed rest. You had a long, hard battle. Let’s give your mind a chance to rest.” Shiro declared, shooing the other Paladins and Coran out of the room before helping me up. “I’m sure you can handle it, Keith.” He smirked before walking out a well and leaving the two of us alone.

Keith sighed, dragging a hand down his face in embarrassment before taking my other hand and leading me towards our rooms silently. His scarlet aura was fluttering around him nervously.

“Keith?” I asked when we stopping in front of my room, watching his wavering energy.

“I’m glad you’re okay. I was worried.” He said quietly before pulling me into a tight hug. I froze for a second before relaxing into him, letting his warm aura push the remaining chills from my skin.

“I’m glad you are safe.” I whispered, hesitantly wrapping my arms around him and hugging him back. He stiffened, not expecting me to hug back but slowly relaxed and accepted the returned embrace. His protective energy draped over me like a thick blanket, coaxing my energy closer. The vibrant aura was calm, beating steadily with the strong pulse of his heart and no notes of anger or resentment. Just simply concern as it wove cautiously through mine.

Squeezing my eyes shut I released a shaky breath. They really weren’t going to abandon me on some stranded planet by myself. There was no punishment. They healed me. They were gentle with me. This place was safe, and safe was a concept I was still trying to understand.

“You should go rest. Miume will come check on you soon.” Keith’s voice broke through my thoughts as he cleared his throat and stepped back. I nodded, pulling the blanket around me tighter.

“I’ll be here when you wake up.” Keith smiled, awkwardly petting my head before gently pushing me into my room.

“Thank you,” I replied quietly, smiling at him a bit as the door slid shut. I inhaled deeply, a smile
still pulling on my lips as I walked over to the bed. Warm traces of the red aura wafted around me.

I had just laid down when Miume walked in still carrying her small monitor.

“Feeling better kitten?” she asked, her tails swishing behind her. I nodded in response while pushing myself into a sitting position and relaxed my back against the wall of the bed. “Admittingly, I still don’t know how you’re even alive. That cliff was at least a good fifty foot drop. Purr-haps you created a barrier reflexively?” she inferred, sitting on the bed next to me and taking my wrist to check my vitals.

“I don’t know. The last thing I remember is rolling off the cliff... then blackness. Then I was back on a Zarkon ship in the test room.” I recalled quietly, my body starting to tremble as images of what happened to me flashed through my mind.

“But you were on the ground in the canyon.” Miume said softly, looking at me sadly. Her pink aura flowed outwards towards me, trying to get me to stop shaking.

“I think it was a spiritual battle.” I replied, looking down at my open hands, “I thought I was back there and then I did something I’ve never done before.”

Miume’s ears twitched as she waited for me to continue. “I pushed Haggar’s spirit out of her body and cut the ties connecting to her physical body. I didn’t think it was possible. But i’m not sure if all the ties broke. It was hard to tell.” I continued even more quietly, closing my hands into fists again. “Maybe I am the ultimate weapon she created.” Had this been Haggar’s end goal? To make me powerful enough to rip the energy out of other people so that there was nothing left?

Miume was quiet for a moment. All this spiritual matter was still new to her, but if Umi could force other beings energy selves out of them to kill them that was indeed a dangerous power. Nevertheless, she was determined to help her out in any way she could. And if that meant understanding something so foreign to her then so be it.

“Well, regardless. How do you feel now?” Miume nonchalantly changed the subject while typing in a few notes.

“Fine. Tired. A little nervous.” I replied automatically before pausing. Why was I telling her these things so easily?

“Because of the new power you unlocked?” Miume clarified, swishing her tails a little. I nodded, looking down at my hands again.

“What if I can’t control it?” I confessed, still not looking at Miume. My heart started to race in my chest as I replayed the events in my head. I knew that I could push my own spirit out, but I didn’t think it was possible to force another being’s energy out of their body.

“Well, that will only be known when you use it again.” Miume gently placed a hand on mine. I tried to pull it back but she curled her fingers over mine, “I don’t think you will hurt anyone on purpose, Umi. It sounds like it was in the heat of battle. It was essentially self defense.”

“I don’t want to hurt you, or anyone here.” I admitted as my hands started to shake.

“And you won’t.” Miume reassured, giving me an encouraging smile. “From what I can infer, Haggar and you were fighting, and you didn’t realize you were capable of this power until you were attacked and injured. It just appears to be a new spiritual ability for you.”

I sighed, unsure how I felt as I closed my eyes and feeling more tired. I had been created into a
weapon, soaked in others’ blood in an attempt to survive, but never had I thought of ripping the energy from someone. It just seemed unnaturally cruel and terrifying. As if I was taking away their very soul from existence. Shivering at the thought, I tried to bury the uneasy feeling down.

Miume gave me a warm, sharp tooth smile but her eyes shone with sympathy. Her aura traced soothing patterns around me and helped ease the frightful worries. “You should rest a bit more, kitten. You’ve had a long mental battle that I’m sure was exhausting. Despite healing in the medical pods, you still need good old fashioned sleep. From the research I’ve gathered, you can only expel so much energy before needing to sleep to regenerate it. You made a few huge barriers against that crazy lava monster then were locked in some kind of spiritual fight. You should let your mind, body, and spirit rest meow.” Miume patted my head gingerly.

“Thank you.” I nearly whispered, my body instantly slouching down in my bed. “I used what you trained me on. Only it felt bigger.”

“You mean using the ‘good’ emotions you are feeling?” Miume clarified, her ears perking attentively. I nodded, closing my eyes again.

“When I tried to force the barriers out of fear it was harder. It felt like my body was rejecting it. Then it felt like everyone was calling out to me and I reached for them.” I opened my eyes, holding my arm over my head as if reaching out. “My power felt stronger than I’ve ever felt before.”

Miume nodded, noting this, “Everyone was calling your name when we got down to you. Could you have been hearing them calling out to you then?”

“They were calling my name?” I echoed, looking over at her. Miume nodded eagerly.

“Keith especially, he was very worried.” Miume smiled coyly as I felt myself blush.

“He was the first energy I felt.” I finally responded.

“You two seem to have a strong bond.” Miume said, patting my hand again, “You rest up. I’ll send him in.”

I looked away, trying not to blush as she chuckled under her breath and stood up.

“Let me know if you need anything. I’ll be ready to help! Just after I attempt to salvage my research.” Miume sighed heavily, her ears drooping sadly. I gave her a confused look but she waved it off as she walked out the door.

“You can come in meow, Purr-ince Charming.” Miume said in a teasing tone once the door was closed. “She’d probably feel a lot better with you there.” She swished her tails at Keith who glared at her before she skulked down the hall dreading what she was about to see.

Chapter End Notes

~Kudos and comments are always appreciated. I would love to know if you are enjoying it or your thoughts about the story so far!~
Miume made her way out of the castle looking deflated as her tails dragged behind her. Of course lava would destroy things, but did it have to destroy the three small tents holding all of her research? No! It didn’t! Sighing again she planted her field research boots in the now charred ground and hunched her shoulders. Small flakes of dark grey ash lightly snowed down around her as the vegetation that had survived the quintessence harvesting burned away to nothing but a useless pile of soot.

“All of my research, moons of work completely wasted… it’s all gone.” She sniffed meekly as she painfully made her way over to the remaining ashes of tents and medical supply tanks.

Pulling on a medical mask and a pair of latex gloves from her coat pocket, Miume carefully stepped over the decaying supports that once held up her examination tent. Scanning the ground, there was nothing but black molten rock crumbling over itself. No more neatly piled stacks of medical records that she had mistakenly procrastinated in digitizing. No remains of the grueling research she had spent so much of her time on this planet collecting and perfecting. Not even a single test tube had survived from being blasted by lava.

“Oh, why did it have to aim here?!” she cursed, carefully picking through some of the black ash, trying to find something, anything, that could have any semblance of legibility, of use, of hope... But, no, everything was completely torched and crumbled to fine soot in her hands.

“Oh, come on!” Miume nearly growled in frustration and threw a charred rock in exasperation. She heard the tang of solid rock on metal as the rock bounced off a large surface to her left, which made her ears perk in that direction. Turning, her heart dropped again as she took in the sight in front of her.

“My ship!?” she cried out in horror, running over to it through the blanket of black ash that covered the ground and placing a gloved hand on its melted side. Its surface was still faintly heated from the lava’s intense temperature. The entire structure was almost completely melted with even the most sturdy supporting frames not even salvageable. The once shiny metallic structure was now charred into black ugly drips of metal that created a solidified mass on the torched ground beneath her feet leaving a barely standing, empty bone structure cemented to the ground and neighboring mountain.

“Damn you, Zarkon!” she screamed this time, kicking the molten metal before her and cursing under her breath. Must he wreak destruction everywhere his monstrous clutches grasped? She felt her eyes begin to water in her frustration and despair, despite her best efforts to keep composed.

“Miume?” Lance’s voice came from behind her, making her shoulders stiffen. Discreetly pulling a clean tissue from her pocket and running it under her eyes, she tried to dry her cheeks quickly before he could take notice and removed her medical mask. “Are you okay?” he inquired. She could hear him carefully stepping over the charred land towards her.
“Does it look like I’m okay meow?” she snapped, her voice harsher than she intended as her ears pulled back against her head. She took a breath and continued with more control, letting her ears and tails relax. “All of my research. It’s gone.” Her tone dropped again. “The antidote I slaved so tirelessly to develop, distribute and mass produce for the planet… the medical records of those we treated here, the data collected on the land’s flora and fauna… everything has been utterly destroyed. I have nothing…” She darted her eyes to the side and bit her lip trying to fight off the hot tears again.

Not only was her research destroyed, but the surrounding land as well. Who knew how far the lava had reached before finally cooling. How much destruction had it carved out of the land? Miume didn’t even know if there were any plants salvageable to remake an antidote. Not to mention that all of her backup copies of the research she had digitized had been stored in one of the tents that had been burned to the ground, leaving her with nothing.

“I know, but just because the physical thing is gone doesn’t mean the mental stuff is gone.” Lance reassured, gently placing a hand on her ash peppered shoulder. “You are super smart and I’m sure everything is stored in that big brain of yours!” He tapped her temple lightly with his index finger, trying to cheer her up.

“Lance,” she tried, finally facing him and her heart skipped a beat when she saw his apologetic face. He was smiling a little, and clearly trying to make her feel better, but his eyes weren’t their usual happy-go-lucky blue. They were a darker, deeper more serious hue; one that she had yet to see from him before.

Her eyes darted away as her heart continued to flutter. How was she this easily affected by him? It was all just a game, nothing more than flirtatious fun. But with Lance it continued to feel different, and she hated admitting it to herself.

He stepped closer, pausing and gauging her response to make sure he wasn’t pushing too far. “I know it seems like you’ve lost everything, but I know that you’ve got some of it deep inside you. Sure, yeah, it’ll be kinda hard to remember it all, but with your skills and your team I’m sure you guys can whip up a new batch of medicine and continue helping others!” Lance’s voice was smooth and sincere as he continued, “Besides, I can help you scrounge up whatever you need! I’ll make it my duty to you to help by any means necessary. You’ve got everything you need around you and within you. You’ll be okay, Miume. I’ll make sure of it.” Miume glanced back at him, eyes widening as he gave her a genuine smile of encouragement that made her heart skip.

Biting her lip, she closed the small distance between them and leaned into his chest letting him support her weight. Instinctively, she placed her hands on his chest, feeling herself well up more as the tears began trickling down. “Moons of research... gone in an instant. And my ship! Even my ship is destroyed! I don’t even have the antidote anymore.” She mumbled sadly, her fingers curling over the material of his shirt. Why was she crying in front of him? She rarely showed this side of herself, not even to her team who were like her second family. And now, some Earthling who she was just barely getting to know had comforted her so easily just by his presence and seemed to be cracking into the shell she had built up so long ago. It was embarrassing to be this vulnerable, to appear weak. Yet, there was this compelling force about Lance that made her feel secure enough to let this side of her show. As if she her sadness wasn’t a weakness at all but rather just an expression of emotion.

Lance froze for a second before smiling to himself softly and placing his arms around her. “But you just have to retype it. It’s not really gone. You still have it stored in your head. And we can just take a nice stroll back up the overcooked mountain to get those leaves needed for the antidote.” He soothed, rubbing small circles into her back. “Plus, we have Hunk. He can fix your ship in a jiffy!”
He tried to encourage before his eyes landed on the remains of the incinerated starcraft, “On second thought, you might be stuck with these devilish charms on our ship for a while.” Miume could almost see him wiggling his eyebrows, making her cough out a small chuckle under her breath.

“Besides, Pidge has that fancy green lion of hers that can make plant roots. I’m sure that could help the land--“ Lance tried to continue before Miume all but shoved him away as she shot up. Her nails dug into his shoulders as she looked at him with shining eyes from arm’s distance.

“That’s it!” she cried in excitement, “The green lion can regrow the vegetation!” Her ears were perked up now and her tails moved back and forth in excitement. “Lance, you’re a genius!” she smiled, kissing his cheek swiftly before dashing off to the castle calling for Pidge.

“Hey-“ Lance called after her, one arm slightly outstretched. “That’s twice you’ve kissed and ran. I’m gonna need to collect on these dashes.” He smirked to himself, rubbing his cheek fondly.

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“Pidge!” Miume burst through the sliding door into her room making the smaller girl jump in shock.

“Uh, hey Miume.” She replied hesitantly while looking up from her laptop, clearly not expecting her. How did Miume even remember where her room was in this maze of a castle?

“I need your lion!” Miume exclaimed while swiftly navigating the cluttered floor around her to reach Pidge who was hunched over her computer on the bed.

“What?!” she protested, confused and struggling to keep up with the older female as she was yanked out of the room in a rush.

“Your lion, kitten! The Green Lion! Its natural elemental abilities. It could restore this entire lava affected area!” Miume rambled on excitedly, turning around and giving Pidge a wide sharp toothed grin.

Pidge stopped jogging, pulling them to a stop as she pondered this before her brown eyes lit up, “You’re right!” she realized, her voice full of hope. “We could incorporate whatever formula you’ve developed for the plague into the Lion’s canon and spread the antidote and vegetation simultaneously, effectively restoring the land to its pre-charred state! You’re a genius!” Pidge smiled, taking hold of Miume’s hand now and running with her.

“Purr-cisely!” Miume chimed as they quickly made there way to the Green Lion’s hanger.

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“Thanks girl, you did great.” Pidge praised, getting out of her lion and patting its large paw lovingly.

“That was paw-sitively amazing.” Miume exclaimed, her eyes moving over the monitor on her pawport rapidly as she observed the life energies of the planet spiking all over the charred surface. The Green Lion had shot countless bundles of roots infused with what remaining product Miume could scrounge up into the decaying ground before new vines and roots burst up, life clinging to them and restoring the land.

“At this rate, this area should become healthy in half an Ear or so - err - two years or so,” Miume smiled, looking up from her monitor at the forest of newly twisting roots. They had a thin layer of
fresh ash on them, but they were moving slowly around each other, trying to find purchase to grow.

“I can’t believe I didn’t think of this.” Pidge admitted, coming over to stand by Miume and assess her work proudly with her hands on her hips.

“To be honest, it was actually Lance who thought of the idea.” Miume confessed, sheepishly smiling to herself a bit. The male didn’t even realize the amazing idea he had come up with which made him even more endearing to her. It was simple, yet well thought out. He was something else...

“Oh, so you were with Lance again?” Pidge teased. Miume’s ears flicked down towards Pidge’s playful tone.

“So?” Miume shot back in a defensive tone as her tails curled up in agitation and embarrassment.

“So, nothin’,” Pidge smiled, bringing her hands behind her head and turning on her heel. “We should go get dinner, I’m starved. Maybe you can sit next to Lance again.” She turned around to flash Miume a foxy smile. Miume felt her cheeks heat up as her mouth dropped indignantly and her ears flattened completely.

“I’ll have you know there is nothing going on between us, little kitten.” She hissed, striding up to Pidge and planting her hands on her hips, “Nothing more than innocent flirting at best. His reactions are very amusing is all.” Her tails swished back and forth behind her.

“Uh huh.” Pidge cooed plainly, rolling her eyes and walking towards the castle, the setting sun casting long shadows around them.

Huffing lightly in responses Miume followed. Pidge was much more observant than she’d given her credit for.

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“We have something important to discuss.” Shiro announced, as everyone took their seats around the table.

“What could be more important than food?” Hunk asked, looking at his plate longingly.

“We can eat and talk Hunk.” Pidge said in a teasing tone, taking a mouthful of food, “See?” She demonstrated with her mouth full.

“Guys.” Shiro, sighed while rubbing his face with his hand.

“What’s up?” Keith asked, giving his attention to Shiro.

“We need to ask if Miume and her team, the Red Eye’s, would like to travel with us.” Allura replied, smiling warmly at Miume.

“Travel with you?” Miume repeated, her ears twitching upwards as she sat up straighter.

“Yes, Lance informed us that your ship was destroyed from the lava monster. We don’t have a spare ship to give you, so Shiro, Coran, and I thought you and your team might need to stay here until we find you a new one.” Allura continued, keeping her eyes on Miume.

Miume gave a sideways glance at Lance who was grinning at her widely.

“It is true that we don’t have a means of transportation currently.” Miume started, placing her
spoon in the green goo in front of her, “We would be very grateful to travel with you. I know of a planet a few galaxies away from this one where we could find another ship easily and in good time to lessen our burden on you.”

“Aw, that’s no fun.” Lance pouted, stuffing his face with goo. “You should just stay with us here and work together as one big team!”

“Lance, this isn’t about fun.” Shiro scolded lightly. “Although, we also thought it would be best to stick close. Since we are allies now.” Shiro continued, looking at Miume. “It would also be nice to have some medical experts around, too.”

Miume stirred her goo as she took their offer to consideration. Her team didn’t have any means of transportation right now, so it would be helpful if the Voltron team dropped her group off at the planet she was thinking of. However, it would also prove to be beneficial to have such a well equipped ship around for defense if the times called for it. And there was Lance…. Wait no, this wasn’t about Lance! Why was she thinking about Lance?

“I agree, traveling together for the time being would be most efficient for both of us as well.” Miume finally spoke. “If we can get a new ship soon, it would make it easier for my group to travel separately if times called for it. But I do agree, if we traveled to planets destroyed by Zarkon together, then people witness Voltron with their own eyes they would gain hope once more.” She continued, smiling.

Shiro nodded, “We could also intercept planets Zarkon wants to destroy and prevent it from happening in the first place. With your team’s medical knowledge, it would come in handy if things got hairy.”

“So we have another deal then, ally?” Miume purred, leaning forward on her elbows. Her team had declined the offer to dine with the Paladins, opting to start on the massive recall of research they had stored in their brain instead. Plus their leader, Oli, was still uncomfortable using English, while Kara and Tug barely spoke any, if at all, they preferred to do things on their own and keep communication limited to just their small team.

“I think we do. Welcome to the team.” Shiro smiled back, extending his hand over the table to her.

“Thank you once more.” Miume smiled and gripped his hand as her tails curled upwards in satisfaction

“Wahooo!!” Lance cheered, his mouth half full again making everyone burst out laughing. Keith just shook his head looking like he wanted to shove more goo down his throat.

“Things are about to get very interesting.” Pidge chuckled evilly to herself, her eyes going from Miume to Lance then from to Keith me. Her emerald energy dancing around her mischievously.
“Aaaaaaaachoo!” Lance’s sneeze was dramatically drawn out while he laid on the couch in one of
the common areas of the castle covered in several blankets. “I feel like I am dying!” he complained
loudly.

Miume stood next to the couch and looked down onto the sniveling male with a slightly annoyed
look, but she still couldn’t help smiling. “Lance, you’re going to be fine. You have a simple URI
from staying out in the rain all night again when I specifically advised you not to…” She recalled
last evening’s events where Lance happily skipped and jumped around in the bioluminescent rain
as Miume stood with her arms crossed under the castle’s awning watching him with amusement.
She rolled her eyes, smirking as she turned around to pick up a bottle of medicine from the table
behind her. “How much do you weigh again?” she asked lightly as she grabbed a syringe from the
table.

“I dunno, and I am dying. I can’t smell anything, I can’t breathe out of my nose! I can’t even
breathe!” Lance drew out the last word and whimpered while looking absolutely miserable. His
sparkling aqua blue eyes contrasted the sunken appearance to his sick eyes and his hair was tousled
in a mess of brown curls.

“I’m just going to round you out to about 65 kilos. We can always increase the dose if needed,” she
reasoned while drawing out the red liquid medicine using the syringe and subsequently pushing it
out into a cup. She turned around to face Lance and hand him the cup of medicine. Miume almost
snorted when she found him to be staring up at her with large “puppy-dog” eyes and holding the
blankets up to his chin.

“What’re you doing, Lance!” Miume giggled, her free hand partially covering her mouth, ears
turning in amusement.

“I don’t feel good!” he pouted, looking up at her.

“Well, here. Take this medicine and drink it all. It’ll make you feel better in just a moment’s time,”
she chimed, handing him the plastic cup. Lance took it slowly and began sipping when he suddenly
reeled away from it, nose crinkled in disgust as he spat out a little back into the cup.

“Ew! Why does it taste like that? It’s so metallicly!” he exclaimed, sitting up abruptly.

Miume shot him a look of exasperation while placing her hand on her hip, “It’s not supposed to
taste good. It’s medicine. Did you want me to give you the kitten’s dose of ‘sweet mewberry cold
and flu’ instead?” She barked back, then continued in a teasing voice with half lidded eyes, ”I
thought you were a big boy…”

Lance’s face grew more hot and flushed than it was as he swiftly tossed back the remaining
medicine. With a triumphant face he replied, “Ha, you’ll find that I am quite the… ’ahem’ big boy,
heh heh.” He winked at the end of his laugh and Miume just rolled her eyes again playfully as her tails swished back and forth.

“Wow, I can’t get over this.” She laughed to herself. *He was still this ridiculous even when feeling ill*, she thought to herself. *How entertaining… and endearing*.

“Can’t get over these smooth charms, am I right?” Lance wiggled his eyebrows then coughed abruptly.

“Hah!” Miume scoffed, “Sure, that’s it, you got me again,” Leaning down she met him at eye level and smiled, “You’re just too *a-mew-sing*, you know that?” She went to pat his head, but Lance moved back and grabbed her hand quickly to pull her close.

“Well, I can be ‘*a-mew-sing* ’ in a quite a few ways if ‘mew’ll ’ let me show you,” Lance purred as seductively as he could with a congested nose as he attempted to pull Miume down on top of him.

She snapped back upright, breaking his hold on her and her face turning a slight pink as her ears twitched nervously, “Nuh-uh. Cannot do that. Nope.” She blurted. “Number one, you’re ill. I don’t need to get sick myself. And two, we are not going down that road, mister.” She nearly scolded him towards the end of her remark with a clawed finger wagging pointedly at him.

Lance looked shot down and continued to pout, “But I don’t feel good and you’re my beautiful angel doctor and I know that you can make me feel better! Come on…” He returned to the “puppy-dog” eyes and Miume became a little more flushed in the face.

*Furballs*, she thought reluctantly, *he’s being really cute. Dammit, we’re not doing this. Be strong. Purr-severe …*

Lance began to whimper a little. “Come on, can’t you at least stay with me, watch some shows, chat… maybe cuddle a little?? Purr-lease” he batted his eyelashes in an exaggerated manner, then coughed again into his plush blue blanket.

“Alright, listen hear you. I’m going to put away this medicine as it needs to be kept in a refrigerated space once opened. Then I’ll come back and keep you company fur a little but I still have loads of work to do so it’ll be brief. Meow, if you’ll excuse me.” Miume turned around again and began to pack up the medicine and supplies. Lance’s face lit up once again and he smirked triumphantly, “And I’ll be waiting my ‘purr-incess’

“You’re sounding too much like me, you know” Miume called over shoulder as she exited the room.

“You know you love it, baby!” She heard Lance shout from behind her and could feel the smile in his voice. Once she was safely concealed by the hallway, she let out a large sigh. Why did she think he was being so cute today? Maybe it’s because he was sick and that just strikes a caring cord within her… or maybe it’s that crush she had been trying to stifle.

“Ugh, this is so complicated…” she muttered to herself as she strided down the short hallway to the makeshift medical room they had set up and put away the medicine while tossing the used syringe. “Alright, pull yourself together girl. We can play, but we’re not doing anything serious. We like to play, we wanna have fun, but we are not feeling anything real, nope, not at all, this is nothing. I’m just having fun,” she quietly continued trying to convince herself.

“What’cha talkin’ about?” she heard Pidge’s teasing voice from right behind her.

Miume’s ears and tails perked right up in surprise as she squealed and whipped around to see Pidge
standing behind her rocking on her heels and giving her a coy smile. “How long have you been standing there?” Miume demanded, face flushed with embarrassment.

“Oh, you know. A while “ Pidge replied, “I followed you from the living room since you started talking to yourself. It’s fun and I’m bored.” She innocently twirled a stray lock of hair. “So, what were you talking about? Having a little fun there?”

“Don’t you have other matters to attend to?” Miume retorted, looking mildly annoyed but still blushing.

“Everyone else is busy doing something!” Pidge sprang up defensively and threw her arms out to the side, “I’m downloading the latest files you let me have on Zarkon’s prison ships and that’s gonna take a good day to complete. Shiro is busy with Allura and Coran in trying to make some sort of battle plan against Zarkon and come up with new battle formations. Hunk is absorbed in his cooking and is experimenting with too many new ingredients and I can not be a test subject any more!” She grabbed her stomach and looked sheepishly to the side then continued, “Keith is all ‘goo-goo-gaga’ with Umi and won’t let me have a minute with her to just hang out… and then you put Lance on quarantine so I can’t even pester him!”

“All I’m hearing here are excuses, Pidge. You still can’t just sneak up and start stalking me like this,” Miume said sternly, looking more irritated. She was very embarrassed and little Pidge here was acting too much like Miume’s younger sisters back home. Too meddling. “Why don’t you go and play with the settings on the new medical tablet and scanner I gave you? You said you were going to upgrade it so that I could see imaging studies immediately from my hologram port.”

Pidge responded matter-of-factly, “I already finished that project three hours ago and now I’m bored. Can’t we just hang out?” She blinked several times up at Miume and tried her best at making a cute little kitten face. She even raised a fisted hand like a paw next to her face.

Miume smiled and sighed softly, “Pidge, I have to go back and take care of Lance. He has quite a serious upper respiratory infection and I have to make sure he won’t stop breathing on me.” She patted Pidge’s head twice and swished her tails. Miume hoped this would keep Pidge from following her so she could have some private time with Lance.

“That’s not what you told Lance,” Pidge smirked behind glinted glasses. “You said it was a little URI and that he shouldn’t be crying about this and that you weren’t gonna stay with him for long.”

“I did not- I was just- Oh, how do you know what I said! Were you eavesdropping?!” Miume stuttered, completely flustered and embarrassed now.

Pidge laughed a small, high pitched maniacal laugh, “Ohhhhh Quiznak! This is hilarious! You’ve totally got a thing for Lance, like a real thing!” She continued to triumphantly laugh with her hands on her hips in a victory stance as she rambled on.” This is so great! I kinda had feeling that maybe there was a little more to your guys’ flirting and then I thought to myself, nah, there’s no way Lance actually has a party that is interested in him too. He just flirts with all the girls and ends up all alone. But then you started returning his exaggerated passes and I was like, this girl’s funny, she’s the ‘cat’s meow’, if you will, and then the more you guys talked and I saw how you look at each other I figured, oh! There might be something real here! Just like I did with Keith and Umi. Holy quiznaks, I’m good! Maybe I should be like a matchmaker or something? Hah! I’d match Hunk to food,” Pidge spewed incredibly fast as Miume just stared at her in flushed distress. Pidge really was just like her sisters.

“Oh, that’s enough sugar for you,” Miume cooed and grabbed Pidge by the shoulders, turning the small one around and started pushing her out of the medical cabinet room with her.
“But I didn’t have any sugar! Just like twelve of those weird glass cookies,” Pidge protested, unable to stop herself from being forcefully slid into the hallway.

“I think you need to stop fantasizing about things that aren’t true and just relax with your computer or something,” Miume tried to distract the younger girl and kept pushing her down the hallway. She passed a room to her left and paused to see Keith and Umi sitting peacefully together on a loveseat. Keith was throwing his Galran knife in the air and catching it and Umi was doing the same with her own knives. Keith suddenly threw his up a few feet higher and almost knicked the ceiling, catching it skillfully and raising an eyebrow playfully to Umi. Umi followed suit and threw two of her knives into the air, a few inches higher than Keith’s blade had gone and caught them with her eyes closed. She opened her eyes and looked back at him with a small smile. Keith let out a genuine laugh, almost a giggle, then nuzzled Umi’s head with his own. The two laughed together and Miume and Pidge both sighed lovingly at the adorable scene in front of them. Then Miume had a brilliant idea.

“Pidge, why don’t you stay with these two and hold a small competition to see who can throw their knives the highest and fastest? Maybe compile a small report on it so we can use it for training?” Miume said eagerly, lowering herself so their heads were at the same level and trying to sound as appealing as possible.

“Hmm, I dunno, I mean clearly Umi has the advantage since she’s super powered and has multiple knives. Did you even see the height she had on Keith?” Pidge replied, bringing her hand to her chin in thought. Miume could see the gears were turning within her head.

“I’m honestly not sure since Keith is such a skilled fighter. Wouldn’t there be some kind of advantage he has too?” Miume purred, still trying to convince the younger girl.

“Well, I mean his Galra heritage may play a factor,” Pidge started then yelped as Miume abruptly threw her into the room and chimed, “Great! I want a ten page report with figures and references and I expect it in the morning!”

“What!” Pidge shouted back as Miume closed the door on her.

When Miume returned to the room she had left Lance in she was surprised to see him passed out on the couch. She breathed out sharply, annoyed and squinted her eyes. After all this effort he just fell asleep on her? “Are you kitten me?” she muttered. “I guess I should have given him a smaller dose… Fish.”

Miume walked over to the sleeping male who was laying in the middle of the extended couch covered in only some of the blankets as he seemed to have kicked some off. She placed her hand on his forehead. It was hotter than she thought. “Does he still have a fever?” She pondered to herself out loud. Using her Pawport she took his temperature with the scanning function. “101.2 degrees Fahrenheit…” she continued, “He must’ve really not been feeling well. I shouldn’t have been so harsh.” She looked down sadly at the sleeping boy. He looked so peaceful. And cute… Sitting down on the space next to Lance’s head she noticed the softer blanket had fallen to the floor. Miume carefully picked it up and placed over Lance’s gently rising chest. She smiled happily to herself, satisfied in her work. Before she knew it, she had managed to scooch herself
under him so his head was resting on her lap instead of the pillow and she was stroking his hair softly. *Well, this is nice*, she thought to herself while looking down on him with a loving gaze. Miume let herself be in the moment, not resisting the happiness she had just being around Lance and caring for him as his doctor, his colleague, his… mate? She caught herself on that last remark. “Oh no, not going there.” She scolded herself out loud again.

The sudden noise from her voice made Lance stir a little in his sleep, and Miume gasped quietly hoping he didn’t wake up, praying for him not to wake up. He sighed softly in slumber and she breathed out in relief. Too close.

Miume continued to watch Lance sleep while stroking his hair and then retook his temperature after some time. She grinned softly as she saw the numbers climb down to 100.0F. With a sudden rush of affection, she leaned down and planted a soft kiss on his forehead and stayed there with her eyes closed for a few heartbeats. When she opened them she saw Lance looking right up at her with a smirk.

“Hey there, beautiful. Trying to wake up Prince Charming with True Love’s first kiss?” he purred, grinning playfully.

Miume sat up and returned his gaze, embarrassed but holding her ground this time with an almost determined demeanor. “No, I wasn’t doing anything like that. And that was not True Love’s first kiss, you fool.”

He continued to look up at her and replied coyly, “Oh, you’re right! Our first kiss was in the romantic glowing rain on the fateful day…” Lance trailed off as he reminisced about that night with stars in his eyes.

Miume let out a teasing, exasperated sigh, “Oh paw-lease, that was nothing. You made that one up remember? And besides, that wasn’t a real kiss anyway.” She gazed down at him with a flirty smile. “Don’t you know? This is a real kiss.” she purred softly, bending down and placing a gentle kiss directly on Lance’s lips.

His eyes widened in surprise before he closed them and gave into her kiss. Taking the opportunity, he reach up with his free hand to run his fingers through Miume’s hair, going over her right ear which made her produce a purring sound.

She shot up, embarrassed and covered her face while looking to the left. Lance laughed in a cocky manner, “Damn, girl, that was too cute. Almost hot. Shall we continue?” He started going back to her and Miume placed her hand over his face pushing him down.

“Nope, you ruined it you clawbrain,” She avoided looking at him and kept her hand over his face. Her own face was hot but she felt so light inside. She had been waiting to do that for ages and now it finally happened! Butterflies danced within her and she couldn’t help the near silent purring that escaped her.

“Come on, Miume, we were having a moment! Baby! Angel! Kittencakes!” Lance pleaded, trying to remove her hand and squirming under her hold. He managed to kick off a few more blankets as the playful struggle continued.

Miume laughed at him, “And you ruined that moment, you doof. And what is a kittencake, are you kitten me?” She bickered playfully at him. Clearly he was feeling better.

The two continued to flirt and argue while sitting on the couch there together until it was time for dinner. Hunk called out to the team loudly and was assembling the forces for a group meal. Miume
and Lance got up together and Lance moved to hold Miume’s hand when she pulled back and gave him an incredulous look. “Excuse me sir, what’re you trying to do. I am your physician!” she mocked.

“Yeah, let’s play doctor some more,” Lance replied seductively leaning into her.

“Okay, no, let’s just keep this little event a secret fur meow. Can you do that for me?” she winked at him. She didn’t need her team know about this advancing relationship, and with a member of their new ally nonetheless! Just thinking about what Oli would say, or rather harass her over, was making Miume feel ill.

“Well, why?” Lance asked honestly. He looked a little hurt.

“There’s just gonna be a lot going on. Let’s just… keep it a little secret. Like secret lovers,” Miume pressed. She didn’t want to admit these feelings to anyone yet, especially herself.

“Ah hah, like Romeo and Juliet?” Lance perked up just a little, trying to keep the romance in the air.

“I have no idea what that is.” Miume stated flatly.

“Cat Romeo and Cat Juliet?” Lance joked as they continued walking.

“Putting ‘cat’ in front of it doesn’t help,” Miume laughed as the two walked to the dining room together in unison, almost holding hands.
It had been about two weeks since the Red Eyes moved into the Castle of Lions. We were still stationed on the plagued planet Miume called Trex since they wanted to finish administering the antidote on this planet before moving on. The Red Eye’s had taken Lance and Pidge on a small expedition up the charred mountain in search for any salvageable vegetation to complete the antidote they had been working on. Using Pidge’s lion like before, they were able to restore large amounts of vegetation to vast expanses of the land. As the days passed you could see the changes of texture and color start to blossom up from the grey cracked surfaces. Slowly but surely, restoring the planet to its former unbarren self.

Miume was still the most active of the group in terms of communication. Oli had made contact with another subsection of their research team that offered new information on Zarkon’s whereabouts. I only met Oli briefly before he and Kara took one of the castle’s pods to meet with the team on the other side of the planet to report back their knowledge. His green energy bristled around him and he kept his communication brief and barely acknowledged the rest of the group. His speech patterns were short and choppy, much like Kara and hard to understand. While Tug stayed in the castle with Miume, he mainly kept to himself. His maroon energy wafted around him quietly despite his huge stature. He even ate alone in his room despite Miume’s countless protests to interact with their new ally.

I had barely caught glimpses of Oli and Tug since I was busy trying to memorize Keith’s fighting patterns and prepared for battle at the training deck. We had been going over different battle formations and duo work together. Our combat styles seemed to flow seamlessly now. With every stroke of his blade, I was able to cover him entirely with a barrier that acted like a translucent pink purple second skin. Our bodies moved together insync, reacting as one. He was able to defend all projectiles coming my way as I threw knives and darted in and out of enemy lines. We were becoming closer in so many different ways.

After a particularly rough training session, Keith and I all but collapsed onto the round oval shaped couch of the common room. Keith slung his arms around the back of the couch, tipping his head back and breathing out heavily. We sat towards the end of the long lounge since we hadn’t showered yet, and I was still self conscious about that after Pidge had explained that people usually showered after workouts, especially intense ones. The rest of the Paladins were scattered about the room, with Lance, Hunk and Pidge dominating the center of the couch as Miume stood behind them. Hunk and Pidge were engrossed in a new piece of equipment Miume was showing them, and Lance was trying his hardest to ask questions and get Miume’s attention. Allura was sitting near Shiro opposite of us on our end of the oval couch and were discussing something about the castle with Coran leaning against the back of the couch giving his two cents now and then. Breathing out an exhausted sigh, I leaned back into Keith’s arm naturally and took in the kaleidoscope of vibrant auras around me. What I once found overpowering was now reassuring and filled me with warmth.

“You know what I could go for right now.” Lance’s voice broke through my focus on the swirling energies as he turned and stretched dramatically. His arms nearly plowed over Pidge and hit Hunk
in the forehead.

“A sock in the mouth?” Keith grumbled, looking out the windows as his aura flared once.

“No,” Lance replied in a flat tone, “A super nice, warm bath!”

“A bath?” Hunk looked at him weirdly over Pidge’s auburn waves.

“Yes, like those bath spas in Japan! You know, with the hot springs and big rocks and lanterns! Sounds super relaxing right now.” Lance continued to drag us into his daydream as he painted the scene elaborately. “All this training is making me sore. I want to relax and pamper myself!”

“I think you’re referring to the Onsen in Japan,” Shiro spoke up from his end of the couch and leaned forward. “However, I doubt this barren planet as anything like it. And we aren’t here to relax, Lance.”

“Well, no, I know that! But it’s still good to get your pampering in.” Lance crossed his arms over his chest now defensively to hide his sulking.

“I don’t know if it’s exactly like the onsen you speak of, but we did convert a small pond into a heated bath.” Miume chimed, her ears twitching forward with excitement. “I could go for a good soak.”

“Exactly! Only my angel savior would understand. Whaddya say, Miume, wanna go take a long soak under the stars?” Lance asked in a seductive voice, wiggling an eyebrow.

Miume coughed out a laugh, trying not to imagine him shirtless. “I was thinking more of a girls’ bonding night.” She purred instead, placing her hands on Pidge’ shoulders and looking up towards me.

“Girls’ bonding?” I echoed, looking in her direction as my energy jumped uneasily.

“Yes, some good quality girl time! On my home planet, the bathing pools are spas where you can completely relax, rejuvenate and bond with your fellow clan. Allura, you should come with us.” Miume smiled, glancing at Allura who had leaned forward as well, her eyes sparkling with wonder.

“A warm bath sounds most relaxing.” Allura perked up, her mouth pulled with into a wide smile.

“Is it safe? I thought everything was totally plagued here,” Pidge asked, glancing up at Miume as well. Her aura was wavering uneasily, a stark contrast to the cotton candy pinks and blues of Miume’s and Allura’s dancing auras.

“Of course it is! Did you assume I wouldn’t sterilize and treat the land first before converting it?” Miume swished her tails in mild annoyance.

“I think it’s a lovely idea. Team bonding through something so relaxing! I agree, ladies first.” Allura announced, hopping up and walking over to Miume who was beaming with excitement.

Lance tried to pipe up and move between the two but was shut down by Miume who took her hand to his shoulder and pushed him back down on the couch.

“It’s a date then!” Miume’s eyes sparkled as she clasped her hands and held them to her cheek. Her rosy aura was even brighter and radiated warmly from her. “Here! Let’s go prepare and I’ll show you to the spa.” Miume led the way as Allura followed her out the room.
“Oh, well in that case and it’s a girls only bonding night, then I’m in! I can’t wait!” Pidge grinned, jumping up and quickly striding to the other side of the couch to grab both of my hands.

“Uh-“ I tried before she pulled me out of the room after the other girls. I glanced over at Keith panicked but he just gave me a crooked smile and nodded in encouragement.

“What! I wanted a nice bath too!” Lance protested as he whipped around the couch after us.

“I guess we’ll just have to wait our turn,” Hunk surmised as he stood up and tapped Lance on the shoulder. “Come on buddy, let’s go play with Pidge’s game while she’s busy!” He tried to distract the distraught male with something he would enjoy.

“Great idea, Hunk!” Lance immediately perked up, his eyes shining with a new competitive edge as the two ran out the door.

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“Where is this thing?” Pidge asked, swinging our interlocked hands back and forth with her towel slung over her shoulder casually.

“A little bit up the mountain. It has a beautiful view of the stars when it’s not too misty.” Miume replied, twirling around in a small circle with excitement. She was leading the way on a small mountain trail that was on the far side of the castle. Its slope faced away from the cooled lava destroyed ground that surrounded the basin the castle rested in. The trail appeared to be well maintained. Small clusters of trees clung to the barren land, trying to find nutrition to grown as speckles of fresh green vegetation lined the trail. Even though there wasn’t much blooming vegetation, it was still a stark contrast to the dried out land we had seen earlier.

“I haven’t soaked in water like this in many decafeb’s.” Allura smiled to herself, looking dreamy eyed while following a few steps behind Miume.

“What is this?” I asked quietly, gripping the soft fabric of the towel hung my my shoulder to mirror Pidge and still not understanding what they were talking about. Pidge had dragged me to my room to grab my towel before we all headed out of the castle. Miume’s pawport lit the way as she led us up the even trail.

“The hot spring?” Pidge guessed, looking up at me. “It’s like a pond only it has warm, sanitary water. Sometimes they have minerals in them that are good for your skin. The traditional way of using them is you wash yourself outside of it, then use it soak. It’s kinda like a hot tub.” She started to ramble excitedly and skipped next to me.

“Hot tub?” I echoed, even more confused as we walked through the darkness. I followed Allura’s energy as she walked behind Miume’s brighter one. The glowing outline of their auras helping me see where to step as Miume’s light shined ahead of her.

“It’s a warm body of water.” Pidge clarified, giving me a wide grin. “Think shower water warm but you can sit in it and relax.” I nodded, still not sure what was so exciting about sitting in warm water. The thought of being anywhere near a body of water made my energy prickle in unease. The only form of water I had been near was either the icy spray hosing the blood from my body after a fight or the lukewarm quintecess cage.

“Here we are.” Miume mewed gleefully, her tails moving back and forth quickly.

“Whoah.” Pidge came to a stop and squeezed my hand. Her aura was going around in circles of eager curiosity, trying to touch everything new.
I looked up from her excited aura and froze. We were in another open area that was covered by softly glowing jagged rocks. There was a purple tinted body of water in front of us about the size of a small pond with steam rising from it gently. Various shaped, smooth oval stones surrounded the spring. Their formations were unique to any that we had seen on the planet so far. Their refined texture made it much easier to walk on. Pockets of glassy stone glimmered against the faint light coming from the surrounding jagged edges in the hollowed out space giving us a private nook in the twisting mountains. A few sanded down branches balanced on a pairs of stacked rocks. Small metal pails rested just beneath them as two hoses were jammed into the nearest stone face. Purple tinted water seeped out of their nozzles as another shelf of polished wood rested above them with a cluster of neatly stacked clothes. The aura around the place was incredibly relaxing. The slow moving energy wafted around us, curling over the space like a light fog and wrapping around our ankles, coaxing us towards the still body of water before us. The illuminated rocks gave the small space a mellow ambiance.

“After the rocks absorbed up a large amount of rain, a chemical reaction took place and made them glow like you see here. It’s purrfect for nights like tonight when the mist is too thick for stars.” Miume explained, glancing up at the sky with some disappointment.

“Interesting.” Allura commented softly to herself, her tanned hand tracing over one of the illuminated surfaces.

“I wanna do a cannonball!” Pidge nearly screamed, completely ignoring Miume’s comment about the rocks as she dragged me along with her. I slipped against the damp rocks a little as she pulled us over to the makeshift towel rack Miume had set up earlier.

“Come on Umi, get undressed!” She beamed at me, her aura fluttering around her in anticipation.

“What?” I asked, my body tensing nervously.

“Umi, we are all women here. There’s nothing to be worried about.” Allura reassured, placing a hand on my shoulder lightly, the motion causing me to stiffen even further out of reflex.

I stared at her not understanding. Was this really okay? Was this something that regularly occurred? My heart started to race as I realized they would be able to see my scars easily. I didn’t know how they would react to them, nor did I want to think about seeing the raised discolored, patches of skin that curved around from my mutilated back, or to feel entirely exposed like I had been in the testing room with the Druids and Haggar made my energy bristle nervously around me.

“Slow down Pidge, this is still new to Umi. Right?” Miume came over as she slipped off her medical coat. I nodded, still looking anxious.

“You’re not completely naked. You have a towel.” Miume continued, gesturing to the towel I had brought. I glanced from it to her not sure what to do.

“You wrap yourself in it after you take your clothes off.” Pidge chimed in, already wrapping a towel around her small frame.

I nodded, not wanting to get undressed. I could feel my hands starting to shake as my heart skipped in my chest.

“You can take your time,” Miume said gently, giving me a soft smile. I glanced around their encouraging faces nervously. Their auras were all inviting and warm, with Pidge’s being the exception and bubbling out in every direction excitedly. She was hopping from one foot to the other impatiently.
“Go on Pidge.” Allura shooed, wrapping her own towel around herself as well.

“Cannonball!” Pidge yelled, running towards the water.

“Careful! Its slippery!” Miume called after her as Pidge’s feet skidded across the smooth surface before launching herself into the water, knees tucking into her chest and hollering happily.

“Her aura is so happy.” I commented to myself, then flinched away from the sudden uptake of water.

“Onsens are supposed to make you happy.” Miume informed me. She folded her dress carefully as she turned and I caught a glimpse of pale stripe like markings dusting her body that matched the ones on her face. “I know it’s probably strange, but we are all women and this is purrfectly acceptable to do with each other. It’s ultimately up to your comfort level, but I assure you, this is very natural and normal.” She smiled at me a bit.

I bit my lip before nodding and turning my back to the rocks. Slowly I began undressing. Miume looked away, preoccupying herself with tying a towel securely around her. She had graciously stitched my torn garments up while I was asleep in the healing pod. She even fixed the tattered ends that had worn thin from countless battles. Once I had shimmied out of my clothes I quickly pulled the towel around me, undoing my hair so that it covered my upper shoulders. Miume eye’d me from her position a few steps away.

“You might not want to get your hair that wet.” She commented, waiting for me to step away from the wall. “Traditionally, the hair is tied up and away from the water.”

I looked at her for a moment before reluctantly tying my hair back into place on the top of my head. She continued to watch me cautiously and her aura prickled around her.

“Are you afraid of something?” Miume asked lightly, her ears twitching forward attentively while noticing my more than normal nervousness.

“I don’t want you to see my scars.” I admitted in a quiet voice, looking down and clenching my fists. It wasn’t that I was ashamed of them, but rather they were too painful and too fresh to think about.

“Scars?” Miume repeated. She tilted her head to the side, “Are you worried they will make us uncomfortable? Because I can assure you that everyone here has some kind of scar. They are nothing to be ashamed of, kitten.” She took a step closer to place a hand on my exposed shoulder, ”I view them as warrior markings.” Her bright pink aura reached towards mine, trying to comfort my prickling one.

“Warrior markings?” I felt my brow furrow, still not understanding.

“It means that like a warrior you has been through and survived some very difficult and challenging times. Those scars only prove that you were strong enough to make it through.” She explained, smiling at me a bit before taking my hand. “I promise they won’t scare anyone, and we won’t push you to talk about it if you’re not ready. Let’s just enjoy the water and have some bonding time.”

“Bonding...” My voice trailed off as I let her pull me towards the water. Pidge was floating on her back still smiling while Allura laughed gently under her breath, relaxing against one of the cool stones.

“When forming any relationship you start with bonding. That happens through talking and
interacting with other people. Trusting them. You don’t have to completely put your trust in them all at once, but just opening up little by little at your own pace helps.” Miume cooed as she dipped a toe into the water then purred happily.

“Miume,” Pidge called from the center of the pool, “if you are a cat-like species, why do you like water?” She tilted her head to the side inquisitively. “On Earth, our cats don’t really like water all that much, save for the big cats, and since you’re pretty close to being a cat, don’t you find it weird that you enjoy it? Is it different for you?”

“I don’t like water,” Miume clarified before easing herself into the steaming water, “Baths are the only exception. I generally avoid large bodies of water at all costs, but this is nice and warm and relaxing. The only time I will stay in water for more than the necessary is when it’s time to clean and rejuvenate myself.”

“That doesn’t really make sense, but okay,” Pidge stated oddly, swimming over to us now. “Come on Umi, get in.” She splashed water up towards me a little. My feet automatically took a step back as flashes of yellow glowing quintessence blinked in front of my vision.

I flinched away from the water instinctively before hesitantly lowering my body into the heated water. I kept my back to the walls like Miume and Allura, while trying to calm my uneven breath, silently telling myself that this wasn’t a punishment. It wasn’t quintessence, nor the freezing hose of water. I was not on a Zarkon ship.

“Why’re you clinging to the wall like that, Umi? It’s kinda weird. Is something wrong?” Pidge asked, her head tilted to the side, staring at me now as her energy fluttering curiously. This had been the second time I had acted strangely around her when my back was exposed and I could tell she was catching on.

“No?” I responded, my voice sounding like a question.

“You seem way more nervous than usual. Like the last time when I helped you with the shower. Are you uncomfortable with all of us not wearing clothes? Do you not like water either?” Pidge continued grilling me while floating casually in front of me now, her aura still moved around her naturally despite her intense questioning. I sunk lower into the water, knowing that one of the larger scars on my back creeped up onto the top of my shoulder.

“It’s not the water… I have never experienced something like this. Warm water that you sit in without clothes. I mumbled, glancing away uncomfortably. I wasn’t sure if I was read to tell them about my time on Zarkon’s ship yet.

“No need to be so coy about it. Something’s bothering you. You can trust us you know.” Pidge’s voice sounded slightly hurt. “I thought we were gonna bond, share secrets and gossip.” She leaned back in water to look at the sky.

“We just got in Pidge, it doesn’t have to be immediate.” Allura lectured softly. The warmth of the springs caused her skin to glow a faint red and she laid back against the cool rocks with ease.

“Yeah but still.” Pidge whined. Her voice became distorted as she made bubbles in the water and sunk her head in and out of the water.

Miume glanced at me and nudged me arm encouragingly. Her aura gently pushed against mine as if to try and encourage me to open up and trust the people around me.

Opening my mouth I tried to find the words to speak but my throat felt tight. Closing it I swallowed
painfully, clutching the front of my towel nervously and staring down into the pigmented water. “I...” I paused, willing myself to accept the kindness in their auras, “I just didn’t want to be asked about the scars. Or scare you.” I finished quietly. My heart thumped rapidly against my chest, my body resisting my efforts at being vulnerable.

“Scare us?” Pidge sat up, puzzled at the word. She bobbed a bit and giving me her full attention. I looked at Miume who smiled warmly at me again, “I have warrior scars. They hurt to see or think about. I thought you wouldn’t like them.” I tried again, using Miume’s words to hopefully explain it better. I knew my speaking skills were lacking. It had been ages since I had last spoken to people. So long that I barely remembered how to.

“You mean from your time with Zarkon?” Allura proceeded cautiously, picking up on what I was implying, her blue eyes softening immediately. I nodded, shrinking down into the water even further until my chin was barely skimming the hot surface. The scars on my back starting to throb.

“Why would they be scary?” Pidge’s confusion was obvious as she cocked her head to the side and subconsciously motioned to adjust glasses that weren’t there.

“They are dark. Painful. Most humans don’t have them?” I continued, now confused as well. Wouldn’t this be something obvious? I was deformed, defective, a broken tool covered in ugly scars...

Pidge’s eyes flashed with a sadness I hadn’t seen before from her as she looked at me, “I agree, they are like warrior markings. They show how strong you are. They don’t make you a bad or dark person. Besides, we all have our own thing that characterizes us. Makes us who we are. Your scars just show your strength, I think.”

“I only have two tails when most of my species has a larger number, and my stripes are uneven compared to most!” Miume piped up, showing off the markings on her tanned arm. “Allura has pointed ears which is different from humans based on my observations. Her pink facial markings that I thought were initially makeup actually aren’t make up at all! And Pidge, despite being a small girl, presents as a male which is most comfortable for her. She doesn’t seem to care for the thoughts of others and owns who she is. We are more than our appearances. We are all unique.”

I looked at each of them, feeling more at ease as their auras wrapped around them contently, showing no signs of anxiety or fear. They were simply pure bliss with some notes of sympathy. Is this the bonding Miume had explained to me? By opening up did she mean sharing parts about yourself to other people? Even the parts you were most sensitive and vulnerable of? I still wasn’t used to this, but at least they didn’t press on how I received my scars. The burning sensation on my scars began fading into the warm water as I slowly relaxed into it.

“See, now we are opening up.” Pidge smiled, grabbing my hands and looking me right in the eyes. “You can be open with us Umi, it’s alright.”

I didn’t flinch away from her touch this time. Blinking I tried to push away the tears that had started to form in my eyes away. What was this? Pidge’s aura wrapped around me again as if it were hugging me. “Open up about anything.” Her voice changed to a teasing tone.

Miume’s ears perked up as she noticed where Pidge was going. “Yes, anything,” she smiled, resting an arm lazily on the cool rock behind her. “Purrhaps about boys?” She purred suggestively. Suddenly the atmosphere of the relaxing pool shifted into a mischievous one as their aurs began lighting up with curiosity.
“Oh boys! Now this is some girl bonding time.” Allura chimed, clasping her hands together playfully. “One time when I was a little girl, this small Arrusian proclaimed his love to me by marching up the castle and demanding my hand in marriage!” She laughed fondly to herself as she recalled the memory, “Father just laughed and sent him home, but everyday he would march back up to the castle and demand a marriage.”

“He was determined.” Pidge snickered, imaging the Arrusian warrior striding confidently up to the enormous castle doors, not even up to Allura’s knees and demanding a marriage proposal.

She held her hand up to cover her mouth, “Yes, very.” Allura sighed happily, calming her giggling.

“What about you Umi? Any guys proclaiming their love to you?” Pidge smoothly directed the conversation to me and gave me her full attention as she smiled coyly.

I blinked, feeling my face flush even more than the heat from the bath caused. I didn’t even know what the word love meant, but from the way she said it my mind flashed to Keith’s face.

“Allura pried, leaning forward in honest curiosity. Miume glanced at her through slanted eyes; had she really not noticed?

“Maybe someone who wears red?” Pidge continued, grinning even wider now. I sunk farther into the water, my face burning. She was talking about Keith, but I still didn’t know what this love was, or what marriage proposals or proclaiming love meant.

“Ah hah.” Miume played along, poking my side playfully. The three of their auras circled me in pursuit of something. It wasn’t threatening but still felt uncomfortable.

“I don’t know what this love is you keep saying.” I finally mumbled, my mouth just above the water.

All three of them paused, looking at each other in shock. I looked at them clearly missing something.

“Well, maybe love is a bit extreme,” Miume suggested, glancing at Pidge and Allura for help, “Purrhaps ‘like’ is a better term.”

“Like?” I repeated, “but I like all of you.” Now I was even more confused.

“Just take Miume for example.” Pidge interjected, giving Miume a foxy smile. I felt Miume’s aura snap back in place as if trying to shield herself.

“Pidge.” She said in a warning tone.

“Think about the way she acts around Lance! He treats her differently than how he treats me, or Hunk or Keith. That’s an indicator of someone liking the other person,” Pidge continued, raising an eyebrow at Miume confidently.

“He does not treat me differently.” Miume protested, her face flushing as her ears flatted across her head.

“Uh huh. You are his cat angel savior.” Pidge purred, putting her hands together and flapping her eyelashes lovingly, “and you totally flirt back but act like it’s not really flirting.”

“I do not flirt back. My engagements with him are purely for my own amusement!” Miume defended herself, turning her head to the side away from Pidge now and closing her eyes.
“Flirt?” I repeated the foreign word, looking from Pidge to Allura to Miume for clarification.

“Oh, you know, like,” Pidge closed the distance between us, “like placing a hand lovingly on your shoulder or your face, and maybe even taking your hand from time to time.” She smiled at me, demonstrating each of the actions, “Even the occasional peck on the cheek or kiss.” She continued dramatically, her eyes gleaming as she watched my face become redder and redder.

“Kiss?” I squeaked, shrinking away from her.

“Like their lips touching your cheek or lips.” Pidge grinned even more before sliding her eyes back at Miume who was staring at the other girl in mock horror. “Bingo!” She called.

“Pidge?” Allura asked between laughter, clearly not understanding why she had said bingo. She had been sitting in the corner giggling quietly at our reactions.

Miume looked down at me and gasped, her ears pointing forward happily. “He kissed you!” She proclaimed and smiled widely. I felt myself blush even more. Looking away quickly I tried to find something else that wasn’t their shocked faces. I tried to shrink away from their curiously twisting auras as they eagerly prodded at my own.

“No way!” Pidge chirped in glee, shaking our hands up and down. “Really?!” She pressed for details, her aura clinging to me now.

“Wait, so Keith showed physical, romantic affection for another person?” Allura clarified, clearly not believing it. Her aura was radiating with a surprised warmth.

“Oh, come on Allura, it’s sooooo obvious.” Pidge dragged out, still trying to get me to make eye contact with her. Reluctantly, I returned her gaze and instantly regretted it. I could feel my face burning and her eyes only widened as she determined the reason why.

“They totally kissed!” Pidge concluded, smiling like she was scheming something before looking over at Miume, “and you’ve totally done something with Lance. I’m just not sure what yet,” she hummed.

“Lance and I haven’t done anything.” Miume protested, flicking her tails nervously. Pidge was more intuitive than she had given her credit for in these matters.

“You all said it yourselves, that Lance flirts with any female-esque living thing he can. Just because I toy with him doesn’t mean anything is happening,” Miume stated, crossing her arms over her chest and looking away pointedly.

“Uh-huh.” Pidge teased making Miume roll her eyes. Their auras seemed to bicker playfully around them now.

“I still cannot believe Keith showed romantic affection to someone else,” Allura said to herself, her hand under her chin she tried to put the pieces together.

“I have a question,” I said finally, staring at the water and refusing to look up.

“Oh?” Miume hummed, giving me her undivided attention in an effort to ignore Pidge’s teasing.

“Is a kiss important?” I resisted the urge to reach up and touch my lips as the memories of a few nights ago flashed before me. The pleasant warmth of his soft lips against mine, his firm chest pressed against me securely, the blending of our auras into a harmonious flow; it was all so much yet not enough at the same time. An unfamiliar knot grew in my lower abdomen as I flushed all
over now.

“In short, yes! Of course it’s important.” Miume mewed, patting my head lovingly. “It shows that that someone really likes you, that they truly care for you and that you’re important to them in a very special way.”

“Again with the liking.” I mumbled, still not understanding. I liked all of them, but that didn’t mean I wanted to kiss them. Well, I wanted Keith to kiss me again, but that was different wasn’t it? Biting my lip I sunk further into the water, blowing bubbles out completely confused. My mind started to go in circles as Pidge and Miume’s arguing voices faded out until I was promptly hit in the face with water.

Jolting back to reality, I stared at Pidge and Miume who were frozen in front of me, mid-splash before they burst out laughing. Shaking my face, I couldn’t help but laugh too, their auras were all bubbling and warm, bouncing off the walls around us.

Allura sat up and smacked the water just enough to have the splash reach me. I mimicked her motions, but used more force than intended and sent a large wave crashing over the three of them. As the water rippled around us, they began laughing harder now and sent splashes over water towards me again, creating larger waves and louder laughs.

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“Come on! I can hear them giggling!” Lance protested, trying to sneak up the other side of the mountain’s rocky ledge just outside of the spring. After about an hour of anxiously waiting Lance had finally reached his limit. Attempting to drag Hunk behind him but he promptly refused. So he turned his sights on Keith. Pulling him outside and up the side of the mountain in the direction of giggles drifting across its jagged edges.

“Dude, I am not spying on them with you.” Keith said in an annoyed tone. He wasn’t happy about being physically dragged outside in a coup to spy on the girls.

“Don’t you wanna see Umi?” Lance taunted, looking down at him. Keith felt his face flush before quickly hardening into a death glare.

“Don’t even think about it.” He growled in a low voice.

“Oh, come on, where’s your sense of adventure.” Lance complained, trying to take another step but slipping and falling down on his butt. Yelping in pain he moved to rub his tender tush.

“My sense of adventure is piloting the Red Lion as a part of Voltron and being a well respected Paladin. Not being a peeping tom.” Keith retorted, keeping his eyes off of Lance.

“What are you two doing?” Shiro’s authoritative voice came from behind them.

“Lance is trying to spy on the girls.” Keith snitched immediately, chucking a thumb over his shoulder at Lance who was still on the ground.

“Dude! Don’t rat me out!” Lance protested, standing up and jabbing a finger in Keith’s face, “You’re just as guilty as me! You’re out here too!”

“Yeah, because you physically dragged me since Hunk refused to be a part of this creep fest!” Keith shot back in irritation, pushing Lance’s hand away.

“You were trying to peep on them?” Shiro clarified, his voice dropping in disappointment as he
rubbed the bridge of his nose and kept his head down.

“Just as a joke. Ha ha.” Lance laughed nervously and tried to backpedal as Shiro gave him a disapproving look.

“I expected more from you two. They are our fellow teammates.” Shiro started to lecture, taking a final step and grabbing Lance and Keith by the ear. “How could you even consider peeking in on them?” He started dragging them off, both boys protesting in pain.

“You guys are just lucky you weren’t caught. Any of them could kick your asses.” Shiro warned as he corralled them back into the castle.

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Sighing happily, I changed into the old shirt and sweats that Pidge had given me. I had forgotten what fun actually was. I didn’t even think it was possible, but that was the most fun I could remember. We turned the last half hour of our time in the onsen into a giant splashing match to which Pidge promptly won. Miume had screeched in disinterest after the first few splashes when she realized this was turning into a war, quickly leaving the chaotic scene while Allura joined in on the splashing. Laughing quietly to myself I pulled my hair from its bun, dragging the comb Allura had given me through it. She had shown me the proper way to run it through my long hair so that the knots would come out and it would tie easier back into a bun. Before I had just used my fingers to rip through the knots as best I could before tying a string of hair around the base of my bun to hold it in place and out of the way for fighting.

lightly touching the tip of the exposed scar curling around my hip I smiled a bit to myself. They weren’t even afraid of my scars, nor did they press me about them the way I feared they would. Is this what bonding is? I know I had formed bonds with some of them, but I didn’t realize it could have so much interaction needed to form them. Since Voltron found me, this was the most peaceful interaction had had experienced. Draping my damp hair over my shoulder, I stared at myself in the mirror for longer than usual. These new relationships were confusing and I didn’t understand half of what they were saying most of the time, but they didn’t seem to mind. I smiled to myself a bit, running my fingers through my hair subconsciously. But I was still puzzled-confused on the word ‘like’. I liked all of them, but Keith still felt different in ways I wasn’t sure. I had discovered the word behind the action of his kiss, which only made me blush more. And he did take my hand often, or place a hand on my shoulder. Was there a deeper meaning to ‘like’ that I was missing? Was it supposed to feel this way with everyone?

Sighing again I closed my eyes as my mind started to race. There were still so many things I didn’t understand. But everyone's auras were so warm and inviting that it felt alright for now. I wonder what Pidge was getting at with Miume though? When she mentioned Lance’s name her aura spiked nervously before becoming ridged, like she was trying to hide something. Tilting my head to the side I continued to run my fingers through my hair, not understanding her reaction. Maybe she would open up later. Maybe that would strengthen our bond.
“So, where is this planet again?” Shiro asked Miume. We were all huddled around the main control system of the castle. Allura stood in the center, her palms hovering over the two command pillars while Coran stood just to her left.

“Pull up the space map paw-lease,” Miume said as she looked up to Allura who nodded. Closing her eyes for a brief moment the pads under her hands flashed brightly before she quickly moved her fingers over the glowing hologram screen so that we were suddenly engulfed by solar systems.

“We are here,” Miume explained, pointing at a small galaxy cluster, “and the planet we want is in the Drakorn galaxy,” she moved her clawed finger over a few clusters.

“Are you sure?” Allura questioned in a hesitant voice as she pulled up the images of the planet.

“That doesn’t look safe.” Hunk gulped as the pictures scattered across the air in front of us. Portrayed were towering stacks of buildings that seemed to rise up above the thick smoggy mist that laid just under the atmosphere. Others showed crammed streets filled with fluorescent colors and hidden creatures lurking about.

“It’s an underground market filled with repair parts, medical supplies, and the like. It’s also rumored to have several anti-Zarkon groups working within the shadows. My team and I were going to hit it for medical supplies soon anyways,” Miume shrugged, not seeing a problem as she had grown comfortable in their constant stops to the abysmal appearing planet.

“So… then it’s a black market,” Lance clarified, looking at the images again with his brows furrowed in uncertainty.

Glancing at the holographic image closest to me I could see that the world had a thick layer of smog like substance over it and towering rotted metal structures that seemed to cover every inch of it before extending upwards into nothingness.

“Is it safe?” Shiro looked at the images in concern. He turned to Allura and Coran who were also staring at the images with unease. They had heard stories of this underground market. About how the laws were based on word rather than structured conforms. This made it a hotspot for anyone looking to disappear from the world as well as get their hands on tech that wasn’t regulated or legal.

“Not with how we are dressed right meow,” Miume replied, eyeing each of us carefully. I could already see the gears in her head turning as her aura twisted around her in thought.

“What’s wrong with what we are wearing now?” Pidge asked, looking down at herself and tugging at the ends of her sweater.

“Well, it’s an underground market so we have to blend in. We must look the part to not raise
suspicion,” Miume informed before smiling to herself, “I have some ideas but we’ll need to make a small pit stop first.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Keith grumbled under his breath. His arms were crossed over his chest as he looked at the overcrowded city before him.

Allura glanced back at Coran who had his hand under his chin, stroking his orange mustache. “Are we sure we want to stop at Trax?”

“Wait, but we are already on Trex.” Hunk turned to Coran with confusion, his aura pulled back on itself pensively.

“Ah, no number two! Trax, with an ‘A’, is the black market planet. We are on Trex with an ‘E’. I’m honestly surprised it still carries the same reputation it did in my day. While it does have a surplus of scultrite, I am unfamiliar with how it operates now after ten thousand years or so.” Coran spoke, running his eyes over the images again.

“Oh, that’s confusing.” Hunk mumbled to himself as he looked down and scratched his head.

“You’re telling me, buddy,” Lance jabbed Hunk’s side in solidarity.

“Once the war started,” Miume spoke more softly this time, “Trax became a hub of supplies. A market for mismatched parts so that others could escape or acquire the means necessary to survive. While it does have parts I wouldn’t dare go to, my team and I have created reliable contacts that have solid intel on where the rumored groups should be. If there was a real possibility of danger, of course, I wouldn’t send the Paladins of Voltron there.”

Shiro gazed at Miume, his white aura pulsing around him as it tried to determine the right course of action. “And you are sure you can make us blend in?”

Miume nodded, a wicked smile appearing on her face again, “Purrfectly! I have all the supplies we need at our small base.”

“Well.” Shiro placed his hands on his hips before looking around the group for consent.

“It’s the only lead we have on other potential anti-Zarkon groups.” Keith spoke first, his energy hardening around him in protest.

“And if Miume’s team can find another ship so easily it would greatly increase our mobility.” Allura added, her focus trained on the planet before her.

“So, it’s settled,” Shiro confirmed, his eyes resting on each of our faces before nodding back at Allura. The collective energy of the room was of hesitant caution, except for Miume’s which bubbled against them with excitement.

“Where to first?” Allura turned her attention to Miume, letting the pixelation of images disappear as she rested her hands back on the commands of the castle firing up its engines.

“A home base for our team, it’s in the Palra quadrant.” Miume smiled before listing off various numbers.

“Alright,” Allura confirmed, closing her eyes and opening up a worm hole.

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Exiting from the wormhole we were faced with a small asteroid belt and an even smaller grey planet resting in the middle of the gently tumbling rocks.

“It’s good to be back.” Miume smiled to herself as the castle descended onto the base at the center of the asteroid field.

“It’s so tiny,” Hunk observed, he walked outside the castle towards the metallic form. It was a windowless, nearly seamless structure that only rose a story over the dusty surface of the barren planet. The castle appeared to take up nearly a quarter of the planet itself.

“It’s a small base, not a home,” Miume retorted before grabbing Pidge’s and my hands, “and I am going to have so much fun.” She mewed playfully and her aura glimmered around her.

Pidge and I looked at each other before being dragged into the structure. Miume briefly stopped to tap her wristlet to an unmarked space on the steel surface. A low ping echoed through the building’s insides before an airtight seal popped open becoming the only crease in the metal structure and opening enough for us to enter. Dim lights flickered to life above us as we moved down a narrow, low bearing corridor. It was lined from base to ceiling with clean silver shelves which were completely packed with various items in an organized yet chaotic fashion. From medical supplies, to food, to other knick knacks, the space was filled with an eclectic assortment of goods.

“What is all this?” Keith asked, looking around cautiously.

“My collection. Don’t touch anything, Lance.” She called over her shoulder, staring Lance dead in the eyes as he was about to touch a very fragile appearing ornate vase.

“I’m not doing anything, look at Keith!” He protested, shooting an arm out to point at Keith and nearly knocking another small vase off the shelf in the process.

“I haven’t even touched anything!” Keith glared at him, his aura flaring.

“Enough,” Shiro’s scolding tone hushed the bickering boys. He then turned to Miume and used a softer voice, “What do we need here?”

“A change of costume!” Miume spun around and smiled at us sweetly. She had lead us down a short length in the shadowy hallway so that we were standing in front of the only apparent doorway.

“I don’t like the sound of that.” Hunk gulped, stepping behind Lance.

“Oh I’m paw-sitive you’ll like it,” Miume purred, looking at Keith who gave her a cautious gaze, his face set in a definite frown. She stepped through the opening while never breaking gaze, “Meow, you wait out here and don’t touch anything.” She warned before slamming a set of large wooden doors shut in their face after yanking Pidge and me behind her into the unlit space.

“Uh, does anyone have any idea what’s going on?” Keith asked, looking at the guys around him.

“It feels like I’m shopping with my sisters again,” Lance sighed while plopping down on the floor. “Get comfy, boys. This could take a while.”

“Meow!” Miume cooed, leading Pidge and me farther into the dimly lit room. Faint pink ambient bulbs of light blinked to life, floating lazily around the space and only illuminating the room enough to see ourselves before slowly increasing in brightness to a comfortable low-lit level.
“Should we be afraid?” Pidge sounded skeptical as she was forced down into a rosy cushioned chair with to me.

“Paw-lease,” Miume grinned, delicately sweeping her closed hand down Pidge’s cheek as if she were grooming a small kitten Pidge leaned back in the chair uncomfortably and gave Miume a suspicious look.

“So, we are going shopping?” Pidge guessed in a careful voice, looking around the pink tinted room that was neatly ordered into zig-zagged shelves with carefully placed oddly shaped mirrors and accessories. Even though it was organized, there was scarcely any other space to sit, let alone walk freely, other than the multi-blanked bed that had thick curtains drawn around half of it it. Two small metal boxes with glowing pink underlights rested on either side of the bed, their tops holding stacks of books which supported delicate looking lamps on top of them. A cluttered desk filled with curling parchment and instruments sat just to the side, its hovering chair covered in colored pillows as a low slightly off-set ticking noise drifted in the background; its source completely hidden by the masses of artifacts. Alternating soft chimes filled the absence of noise from the ticks while a faint mixed floral fragrance wafted through the thick air.

“In a sense, yes,” Miume shrugged nonchalantly, walking over to another set of large wooden doors and opening them to reveal a brightly lit a closest packed with clothes of every shape, color, and material.

“Whoah.” Pidge gasped, adjusting her glasses to get a better view of the immense treasure trove before us.

“Shopping?” I repeated, glancing around the room and feeling anxious as Pidge’s energy pulled back in an attempt to escape Miume’s eagerly encroaching one. There were so many lingering energies drifting through the room, each object having their own faint trails wafting from it. Brief glimpses of the previous owner’s auras peeked through before Miume’s pink one enveloped it. Her energy trails were old showing just how infrequently she visited the space.

“Yes my dear, it’ll be fun I purr-omise,” Miume beamed before turning back to the closet and planting her hands on her hips while staring at the mass of apparel. “We need to blend in, so we may get in and get out efficiently. I have some clothes that I think are going to help in our disguises,” She hit a switch on the wall causing the clothes rotate slowly on the racks, “The question is where did I put them...” Her aura was swirling with a playful excitement.

“What is all of this stuff?” Pidge asked, looking around the room from her place on the chair, “some of this stuff looks ancient.”

“That’s because it is. Don’t touch anything. Most of it is su-purr fragile,” Miume responded while still scanning the clothes in the immense closet. “I’m a traveling doctor remember, I visit plenty of fascinating places and collect the things that pique my interests. Typically I choose one thing from each planet, but you know.” She shrugged then gestured to the crammed shelves that seemed to close in on us.

“Like a souvenir!” Pidge stood up to inspect an older looking artifact dangling above her, “Interesting,” she commented lightly.

“Ah-ha!” Miume exclaimed, slamming her hand down on the button to stop the cycling fabrics. She pulled out a few outfits and walking over to us smirking devilishly.

“I don’t like the looks of this.” Pidge gulped, glancing at me. I just looked at Miume not sure what she was carrying. Was it even considered clothing?
“Stand please.” Miume commanded. I paused before standing. Pidge crossed her arms and shook her head as she scrutinized the fabric Miume held up.

“Nope, I’m not wearing that,” She eyed the short fishnet dress.

“This isn’t for you,” Miume purred, her eyes landing on me.

My eyes widened as she held out a closely netted dress. Even though the design had tightnit strings it still gave the illusion of being nearly transparent.

“Um,” I paused before reluctantly taking it from her as she shook the hanger, “I don’t think I can wear this.”

“Of course you can, with these.” Miume smiled innocently before holding up a neon blue cropped top with a few accent of pink corset ties in the middle and a short black skirt.

I bit my lip as I examined the pieces of fabric again and didn’t feel any more confident. There was no way I could have any type of protection from such flimsy clothing. It looked restrictive for fighting, and where was the armor? Where would I sheath my knives?

“Just try it on, kitten!” Miume pleaded, looking at me with dilated pupils and her ears bent slightly down. Sighing I nodded slowly complying with her persistent aura.

“How do I try this on?” I asked while holding the garments up and eyeing them again.

“You put on the dress like you would your regular tunic then apply the other pieces on top of it,” Miume instructed before laying her red eyes on Pidge who shrunk back away from her intense gaze. Miume easily pounced on the younger girl as I left the commotion to walk behind a wooden pleated partition that had carved faded flowers climbing up the side. Even though I had changed in front of them once before, it didn’t make me any more comfortable showing them my exposed body.

Carefully I pulled on the netted dress. It was tighter than I thought it would be. A thicker black band stopped just above my collar bone extending outwards to the shoulder cut outs before turning into a short three quarter sleeve. Glancing down at myself I grimaced at the foreign feeling of the tight transparent material and fumbled on the blue crop top awkwardly. It had metal hooks to accentuate the chest before coming down to the middle of my ribs leaving me feeling uncomfortably exposed. Biting my lip uneasily I shimmied into the form fitting black skirt. The sleek fabric stopping mid thigh and the fishnet undergarment slipped out to rest just above my knees. Widening my stance, I gauged the width I could extend my legs for an attack, but the fabric clung close to my skin making my range of motion limited. Frowning I blinked not recognizing myself in such revealing clothing. The netting gave the illusion of clothes, but my skin was so pale that it showed through easily.

“Is this correct?” I asked, my voice unsure as I came out from behind the wood panels and froze. Pidge was standing with her arms folded looked annoyed as Miume toyed with her hair with a loving gaze on her face. Pidge was dressed in a pair of drop waisted black pants that had a low hanging crotch with more fitted material that wrinkled down her small calves and a grossly oversized neon green jacket with white lines on the outsides of her arms.

“I look ridiculous.” Pidge complained, giving Miume a displeased look as Miume slicked her bronzy hair over her right eye and held it in place with two black bars.

“No, you look like you’re about to go rave which we need. Just put up your hood and you’ll be
fine.” Miume patted her head tenderly before turning to me.

“Rave?” I repeated the word, unsure of its meaning.

Miume gestured to Pidge’s outfit almost showcasing it, “Raves are a type of underground party, so to speak. You dress in this fashion and dance to upbeat music. It’s typically dark with flashing lights.”

I felt my brows pull together as I processed her words and tried to picture the scene. She must have read my confusion since she continued, “Don’t worry, it’s not going to be a fighting arena or anything like that. Raves are meant to be fun and a place to decompress!”

“Yeah!” Pidge piped up from under her hair, “We have very similar parties on Earth called raves too. Not that I go to them, I mean why would you wanna get sweaty in a dark place with strangers? The rave you describe Miume is exactly the raves we have on Earth! What are the chances!”

The gears were still turning in my head as Miume began to stalk over to me. I felt myself tense as she looked me up and down.

“Keith is going to lose it,” Miume smiled to herself before tossing another article at me. “These go on your legs,” she explained.

I caught the neon blue material and noticed it was the same fishnet design only it had thick bands at the top with straps.

“How do I wear these?” I asked, eyeing them carefully.

Miume produced a small trilling sound and gently pushed me down into the seat before lifting up one of my legs.

“Miume!?” I asked in shock, trying to pull my leg from her hand but she was surprisingly strong. Holding my leg in place, she slid the material upwards before reaching up and hooking it under the fishnet dress.

“Meow for your hair and makeup!” she smiled warmly at me, her aura even more overbearing. She was having too much fun with this.

“Makeup?” I looked at her confused before my eyes slid back to Pidge. She had pulled her hood, which had large cat-like ears, over her head and was slouched in the other chair sulking. The usually vibrant green aura now weighed down around her low and irritated. I briefly saw that her eyes had been defined with black lines around the edges and a matching neon green powder covered her eyelids with shimmery material ghosting her cheekbones.

“Hold still paw-lease,” Miume instructed, stepping in front of me with a few brushes in her hand. I tensed, closing my eyes and waiting for pain, but was relieved when none came. Instead, there were velvety soft strokes and cool liquids being swept over me as she patted the products gently over my face.

After a few breaths she stopped, “There, all done kitten.” Miume stepped back, folding her arms over her chest and looking impressed.

“Whoaah,” Pidge breathed, pulling back her hood slightly to get a better look. I looked between them, giving them a puzzled expression. My face felt different, but nothing seemed apparently wrong.
“If Keith doesn’t kiss you someone will,” Miume purred again mischievously, stepping aside so that I could look in the mirror. I widened my eyes as I took in the image of my face. My eyes had been outlined in black like Pidge’s only there were thick wings on the corners of my eyes. A matching neon blue covered my eyelids making my black eyes look even brighter and bigger. My lips were painted a dark black making them look fuller, and my cheeks seemed to be sparkling like Pidge’s.

“What is this?” I asked, touching my cheeks gently to find my fingers coming back sparkling as well.

“It’s called glitter and it’s so fun,” Miume chimed, beaming at my reaction. Her aura spun gleefully around us, the feeling almost contagious at this point.

“Glitter is fun?” I hear Pidge scoff from behind me. “And since when is all this dress up so important to a traveling doctor, huh?”

Miume stiffened but her cheerful demeanor never left her face, “Yes, I am a notable traveling physician, and that does require the very important task of blending when it is required. There is always a reason behind my actions.” She flicked her ears twice and clasped her hands together, “And besides, isn’t getting dressed up fun? Who’s to say we can’t enjoy it!” She all but skipped over to me and began messing with my hair.

Pidge grunted and pulled her hood over head again, “Well, I guess so.”

Miume pulled my hair out of its bun to reposition it into a two smaller buns on the top of my head with a slim ponytail coming out of each. A pair of matching hoop-like pink accessories fastened them in place on the sides of my head.

“I don’t look like me,” I mumbled to myself, pushing my cheeks together and looking from side to side curiously.

Miume and Pidge laughed softly at my reaction, their energies twining upwards together in an adoring fashion.

“Now just wear these and you are set,” Miume tossed me a dark grey cloak and a black mask along with a pair of neon blue fishnet fingerless gloves.

“What are these for?” Pidge asked, putting on her own mask. Hers was black like mine only it had bright green circle cutouts along the right side.

“It makes it harder for people to recognize us. It’s the black market as you said. People don’t generally want to look like themselves. So, the more you don’t look like yourself the easier it is to maintain anonymity and security.” Miume explained as she whipped on her own outfit.

“What do you think?” She announced after a few moments, twirling for us happily and confidently. She was sporting a neon pink and black outfit with a form fitting corset that cupped each of her breasts and sides but leaving the middle exposed and lined with black criss-cross ties holding the pieces together. Bright pink widely spaced fishnets lined her wrists and around her shoulders while thick black bands held them in place. A thinner band strapped across her chest making a heart shaped pattern. A ruffled multilayer black tutu styled skirt with pink seams danced just above her mid-thighs, exposing her stripe like markings. Rose gold thigh high semi-transparent tights ran up her toned legs with a lacy pink garter peaking out just under her fluffed skirt. Tilting her feet from side to side she showed off a set of neon pink platform heels with black soles. Matching chunky black bracelets climbed up her forearms, and a thick black banded collar with a large silver bell
dangled in the center of the heart shaped cut out on her chest. Her ashy hair was tied up in a high glittered ponytail with her fluffed ears at out the sides. She smiled at us before pulling on a white mask with a faintly pulsing cute cat mouth and whiskers stitched over her mouth.

“Wow,” Pidge and I said together which only made Miume smile wider, her aura flowing with vanity.

“Cute, right?” she mewed, twirling a little and feeling happy to be dressed up again.

“Lance better kiss you or someone else will,” Pidge smirked, using Miume’s words against her.

Miume rolled her eyes before looking at us again.

“I think you are done. Send the boys in,” a mischievous grin played across her face as she walked us out of the room.

“Oh boys,” she called out in a sing song voice, opening the doors to her room. They were sitting on the floor in a line and immediately stiffened as we walked out. Keith’s eyes widened before he blushed and looked everywhere but in front of him, his aura flaring up before quickly trying to contain itself. Lance’s mouth practically hit the floor before he smiled flirtatiously.

“Lookin’ good ladies,” he purred, giving us a sly smile. Miume returned his grin and winked which only made him blush more. The blue of his energy darkened with a new note I hadn’t seen before.

“Are we done?” Shiro questioned Miume while eyeing her carefully.

“Not quite yet! You guys are in need of a makeover,” Miume smiled a sharp toothed grin before moving aside and holding her arm out to let them into the room.

“Uh, I think I’m okay the way I am,” Hunk tried to protest while playing with his fingers nervously.

“Yeah, I agree,” Keith concurred, his eyes flicking back to mine before glancing away quickly.

“I said,” Miume cleared her throat, “Get in here and get ready or else we will stand out like a torn claw,” her smile dropped and she looked Shiro in the eyes with a non-negotiable gaze.

The three boys gulped before reluctantly standing up and slowly and walking into the room.

“We’ll be out in a bit. Just hang tight my kittens,” Miume smiled sweetly before closing the heavy doors, its sound echoing through the narrow maze of hallways.

“What do you think is gonna happen to them?” Pidge commented lightly while pulling her hood back so she should see properly. I looked at her then back and the door and shrugged. I watched their nervous energies spiking from behind the door. Through the hesitant muddle of blues, yellows and whites, Keith’s bristled with controlled annoyance. I could feel him backing away from whatever Miume had pulled out of her infinite closet for them.

After a few unnerving silent minutes, suddenly we heard shouting and what sounded like heated arguing with Keith’s and Shiro’s voices being the most prominent and both of their energies flared in objection. Pidge and I looked at each other in concern before our attention snapped back to the door.

“I said, sit your little human asses down and deal with it!” Miume’s voice rang clearly through the door in an authoritative tone before everything went silent.
“That didn’t sound good,” Pidge grumbled to herself, putting her hands deep into her pockets and shuffling her feet. I nodded, Keith’s uneasy aura made me anxious as I watched their twisting colors from behind the thick door. It was silent for what seemed like ages before Miume poked her head out looking triumphantly at us.

“Ready?” she asked in an excited voice, her ears pointed forward. Her playful aura shined brighter than the mixed ones behind her.

“Uh, sure?” Pidge hesitated before looking at me then back at Miume.

“Okay guys, stop sulking and get out here,” Miume called, stepping out and folding her arms over her chest looking proud. Her tails swished happily behind her.

“I don’t see why this is necessary. It seems a bit much.” Shiro grumbled, coming out first. He had on a neck-long mask that covered most of his face as well as a matching black cloak draped over him hiding his outfit underneath.

“Come on, show them,” Miume swished her tails impatiently. Sighing, Shiro unclenched his cloak to reveal a ripped black t-shirt with safety pins layering the tears to keep them closed. A mixture of studded belts lined his hips before a matching pair of ripped black jeans lined with more safety pins followed by his normal Paladin gear boots were revealed. His eyes were also lined heavily in black and his white hair was straightened down so that it hung over his eyes.

“Whoah, Shiro.” Pidge exhaled a low whistle, her eyes widening. “Don’t you look all pretty boy band.”

“I look ridiculous.” Shiro mumbled under his breath, folding his arms over his chest, his aura guarded.

“Welcome to the club,” Keith grumbled, sulking out next. He was in a skin-tight fishnet sleeveless top with a black choker around his neck. His usual black fingerless gloves hugged his hands as he fussed with the knee-length black cloak. He wore the usual tight black spandex of the Paladin uniform but had on black knee high combat boots. He pulled a black mask away from his face looking annoyed. The black of his dark irises were deepened by the smudged charcoal lines under his eye. My heart skipped a beat as he glanced at me, his eyes looking more prominent than usual while the cut of his shirt showed the defined muscles underneath.

“Tch.” He crossed his arms over his chest, a light hue covering his cheeks when his eyes flicked quickly to mine again.

“I dunno what you guys are talking about! We look hot.” Lance stated confidently, striding into the hallway and dramatically withdrawing his hood from his face. He wore a dark blue torn sleeveless tank that hung off of one shoulder with exposed sides. Shredded tight black leggings showed off his toned legs while various black belts hung from his hips. A bundle of multicolored bracelets lined his arms and his facial features were defined with the same black lines and smoky blends that Shiro and Keith had.

“Sure, Lance.” Hunk said meekly while pulling at his white cloak, “Is this really necessary?” He looked at Miume in disbelief.

“Of course it is!” Miume chided, her voice dripping with annoyance from their complaints. Why couldn’t they simply accept that they needed to adapt to this environment? Besides, she made sure their outfits complimented their appearances. Her hard work should have been praised, not criticized.
Hunk exhaled heavily as his aura dropped in defeat. He wore a low v-line skintight black shirt that contoured to his body well with neon orange striped sleeves that stopped just before his broad shoulders and accentuated his muscles. His usual tanned fingerless gloves covered his large hands while a pair of orange streaked black pants ran into a thick set of brown boots. Miume had let him keep the orange headband he wore in his casual day-to-day outfit, but had pulled his longer dark bangs to one side, interweaving the hair and band into a french braid that curved over the top of his head. The excess orange tied the braid in place before flowing down his back.

“Can we get this mission over with now?” Keith asked in an unamused voice. He refused to look at the group and his aura continued to waver awkwardly.

“You’re just jealous because I look better than you,” Lance taunted before receiving a death glare from Keith.

“Guys, let’s just focus on the mission. So what’s the plan?” Shiro broke their argument before it started and looked towards Miume who seemed to be lost in her work as she gazed lovingly around us.

She cleared her throat and stepped towards the center of the huddled group. “When we land on Trax we’ll need to split into two groups. Lance, Keith, and Umi and I will will comprise group number one. We will locate the first rumored anti-Zarkon group and try to establish an alliance, or at least make a good first impression. Shiro, Pidge, and Hunk will use the information our intel provided and locate and establish connections with the second rumored group. We’ll make a designated meeting spot for two AM. If anyone’s late, I’ll use the nano trackers in your masks and find you.” Her tone returned to its professional stat as she laid out the details. Everyone’s energies seemed to even out as they processed the information, feeling more at ease with the knowledge that Miume had means to track us if we were to get separated.

“There are some rules though. Don’t take anything from anyone. Don’t drink or eat anything that wasn’t sealed first or handed to you directly from the source. And most importantly, do not draw negative attention to yourself to get on anyone’s bad side.” Miume cautioned, her eyes moving to Keith who glared at her. “Also, keep your hoods up. The reason we are dressed like this is to blend in. It’s an underground market. That means people don’t want to be known and it’s much safer to be unknown. The less we look like ourselves, the less trouble we’ll have,” Miume finished.

“We can’t eat anything?” Hunk exclaimed, his eyes watering slightly, “What if we find some amazing alien food that you couldn’t find anywhere else and was a delicacy so you had to try it no matter what?”

“You don’t know what it could be potentially laced with, and how would you know you couldn’t find it anywhere else? Have you explored the entire universe? Besides, we won’t even start the mission until eleven P.M. so we shouldn’t even be hungry.” Miume glancing over at him and swishing her tails.

Hunk opened his mouth to respond before shutting it, realizing that she had made a solid argument.

“Isn’t that pretty late?” Shiro observed, still pulling at the cloak around him uncomfortably. He was all for appearance changes to blend in, but this felt a little extreme for his taste.

“Think of it this way; it’s one big clubbing district with secret resistance groups operating under the visage of a party. Unless you know who and what you are looking for, they are essentially invisible to the galaxy. The people we want to meet will be in the back of the clubs hosting them. We get in, talk to them, then we get out,” Miume detailed, folding her arms over her chest. “It might take some bargaining, but try not to sell your body parts in the market,” she smiled at them.
“Accidentally sell my what?!” Pidge gasped in alarm, her green aura spiking out.

“I’m just kitten,” Miume laughed, patting her head, “Mostly,” she mumbled to herself, rolling her red eyes to the ceiling.

“I heard that!” Pidge protested, now standing alert with her fisted hands at her sides.

“Come on, we only have a few hours until eleven. We better eat and rest,” Shiro decided, wrapping his cloak around him again and walking back down the hallway.

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“Alright, everyone remember the plan?” Shiro asked as we descended the pods towards the city limits. Allura and Coran had been forced to keep the castle up away from the city as there was no safe place to land at night. At least not one that wouldn’t draw massive amounts of attention to us. While I felt bad leaving Allura in the castle when I saw her energy drop from its usual optimistic charm, I did feel more at ease knowing we had an ally in the sky; an emergency back up if needed.

“Yup,” Keith responded, glancing back at me. He, Lance, Miume and I were in one pod and the other team in the second.

Miume told us that Kara had already descended to the city using a smaller one person pod from the castle, and was making negotiations to secure the Red Eyes a new ship. Tug was a man of few words, so he wouldn’t be much help unless you needed an intimidation factor, but even if he looked menacing in size, his aura said otherwise. And Oli, well Oli had been banned from the planet years ago for starting a fight at a famous black market joint. As a result he had to give a DNA sample which had been added to the ‘black list’ of aliens who were banned from the planet. This added at least some security, but once they had your DNA it was impossible to sneak in. The tallest buildings created a web of scanners that expanded over the entire city and read each DNA entering and leaving. If the DNA was on the ‘black list’ their ship would be barred from entry and frozen until the only authoritative aliens of the city would tow them back to space. Therefore Oli and Tug had opted to stay back on Trex and monitor the new administration of their plague antidote.

“Good, now try not to stare too much at what’s around you,” Miume instructed, “I know all of the flashing lights can be a bit distracting, but it’ll just make you stand out more.”

“Oh, I’ll only be staring at you,” Lance purred, winking at Miume who rolled her eyes. Their auras were dancing playfully around each other in ways I was unsure of now. Was it because of the mission?

“Whoah.” Pidge murmured quietly as we descended through the heavy smog that hung over the upper limits of the city like a wet blanket. Scarse skyscrapers poked through the top of the fog looking like metal islands hovering over churning grey mist. As the ship moved under the thick clouds, pulsating distorted lights moved around us as glimpse of rusted unevenly stacked buildings rose above us. The rest of their bodies were disguised by the clouds around us. Even through the cover of the pod the faint vibrations of pounding music brushed past us as we moved downwards. Carefully navigating the murky atmosphere until we finally broke through it, a maze of twisting structures of all shapes and sizes puzzle pieced together with flashing lights coming from every direction as they lined the shapes around us were revealed. The vibrations from the echoing music grew in intensity the closer we arrived. Miume pointed out a few clearer stacked rows of lined blue lights. Hundreds of ships resting at each port, some hovering just beside the stand alone structure,
their bodies too big for the garage like spaces.

“Well this isn’t exactly what I was expecting.” Shiro commented as we stepped out of the pods. Rickety metal groaned under our feet as it quivered with every beat of music. Flutters of rust flaked down from the uneven rafters holding up the layers of flat sheets of steel.

“Yeah, real safe.” Hunk gulped, carefully testing the structural integrity of the space in front of him with his foot.

“Stop fussing and follow me.” Miume shushed the group around her before swiftly pulling up her hood and making her way towards the glowing city.

Pulling my hood further over my face, I quietly followed her, my energy starting to prickle around me uneasily as twisting energies crawled across the buildings. Their long tentacles stretched in all directions, trying to overpower the ones closest to it.

Taking a final deep breath, I clenched my fists preparing myself for what might happen as we broke through the first set of rundown buildings attached to the ship port.

My eyes instantly widened as we were quickly consumed with churning energies of the bustling city around us. Mismatched buildings stacked together in anyway they could, towering upward before disappearing into the dense smog. Their structures swayed slightly with the music that ricocheted through the labyrinth of uneven, muddy streets. The heavy scent of rusting metal and other foul odors made my nose wrinkle in disgust as the thickly polluted air made my eyes sting and start to water.

Taking a small step out into a thin free space before us I could see that any place that wasn’t occupied by rickety metal was packed with stands of all shapes and sizes. Their posts could only be distinguished by the ripped cloth strapped across the top of the poles holding them up. Between the mashed notes of music and bass, it was amazing that the aliens surrounding us could even hear each other. Their sounds mixed with the music as they hollered and chattered loudly over one another in chaotic order.

The congested alleyway of a street was jam packed with quickly moving aliens of all energies. Bright, extravagant clothing of all colors, masks, and fabrics masked their true identities as they glided through the maze of aliens as if it weren’t congested at all.

“Again, try not to stare too much,” Miume whispered to Pidge, taking a step forward and motioning for us to follow here as she easily wove in between the bustling species expertly, pulling her hood over her ears and blending seamlessly into the masses.

“Stay close,” Keith murmured in my ear as he took hold of my hand, “You should close your cloak, just in case” He added, not looking at me.

I blinked at him over the rim of my mask in confusion before pulling my cloak tighter around me. His aura was anxious, flickering in and out defensively as we passed vendors on the packed street.

Breaking through into a larger circular shaped intersection, Miume stopped suddenly, turning to count us to make sure that no one had gotten lost. We gathered around a large structure in the center of the more spacious area that sat on a ring of a more polished metallic base illuminated with pulsing neon lights that flashed with each note of the music blasting from beneath its rim. A large broken arch extended upwards with rings of thinner metal hovering around it before a massive brightly glowing circle dangled from the arch’s end. Black foreign characters were painted on its face, two of which had a glaring outline of red around them. Its force vibrated throughout the air.
around us as the aliens moved in time with its beats, as if this clock’s presence was directing the flow of traffic, keeping it in organized chaos.

“We meet here at two A.M.,” Miume shouted over the blaring music as best as she could, “Make sure you keep your hoods up and remember the rules.” She glanced at us through her hooded vision. “Shiro, take your team that way,” she pointed down the alleyway to her left. The narrow opening squeezed between two mismatched buildings before disappeared into the shadows of colored lights.

“The club you are looking for is called Absol. It will have a white and black sign.” Miume tapped a few buttons on her hologram wristlet to send a generalized map of the city to the interface of the spare black band she had lent Shiro borrow as well as her instructions, “Give the bouncer the money I gave you and don’t look him in the eyes. The group will be in the basement in the far corner. From what I’ve heard there are red velvet curtains separating them from the rest of the club.”

Shiro nodded, placing a hand on Pidge’s shoulder like an overprotective brother. Pidge looked up at him through her bangs and her aura glowed warmly at his secure presence.

“See you in a few hours. Let’s go guys.” He nodded, pulling Pidge with him they disappeared into the ever changing crowd.

“Meow are we ready?” Miume looked over each of us before walking confidently down the street in the opposite direction. Different beats of music blended together and oscillated through the open air, bouncing from metallic wall to metallic wall to create new rhythms.

“I can’t believe we’re doing this.” I barely heard Keith grumble as his hand tightened around mine. I glanced at up him but his eyes were locked onto Miume as he followed her movements easily down the street, completely focused on the mission. As we reached the middle of the street it became even more crowded as aliens of all species talking and bargaining loudly over one another, not giving us a second thought as we passed through them. Miume’s disguises were working.

“Okay, we are here,” Miume called over the music and looking over her shoulder at us before lacing her arm easily through Lance’s, “Act natural. We enter as two couples. Give the bouncer your money and don’t look him in the eyes.” She instructed as her aura weaved into Lance’s hungry one with ease.

“Roger,” Keith confirmed, letting go of my hand and wrapping an arm around me protectively. I could feel how tense his muscles were, his energy rolling off him in unsteady patterns as it reacted with any alien coming closer to us as they glided through the densely populated street.

“Shall we?” Lance purred in Miume’s ear, giving her a seductive grin as they stepped in line.

“You good?” Keith asked, bending over to speak directly in my ear as well, his smooth voice sending goosebumps down my spine. I nodded, pulling my cloak tighter around me as we got closer to the large black-spiked alien in front of the doors. The closer we got the more anxious I felt. I had never done something like this before, and I was dressed so strangely. Any breeze immediately cooled my abdomen and upper thighs. I didn’t even have my knives with me, making me feel uncomfortably exposed and defenseless. Keith seemed to sense my anxiety as he glanced down at me, pulling his mask away slightly to give me a small smile before putting it back in place and stepping up to the alien. It had narrow glowing green eyes and overgrown rotting teeth jutting out from its black stained lips. Spikes lined its shoulders and arms and when it growled at us the spines bristled around him in warning.
Tensing, I resisted the urge to push a barrier around us as I flicked my eyes to the ground trying to calm my racing heart as Keith handed it the money confidently. Its gleaming eyes slid from him to me before counting the money and huffing at us. Jerking its head, I inferred that was its way to grant us entrance.

Once we were safely inside, I let out a held breath of relief. Miume and Lance were waiting for us, leaning against the black painted wall in another narrow zigzag corridor as music echoed down the darkness towards us.

“Phase two; Lance will come with me into the bargain. You two stand guard outside.” Miume instructed, pulling her mask down to talk over the pounding music.

Keith nodded, moving his hand from my shoulder back to my hand and squeezing it lightly. We made our way down a constricted set of unstable steps and I noticed the music becoming more intense the farther we went. The deeper we moved through the structure, the more my eyes adjusted to the speckled dim blue lights lining the edges of the stairs. This gave us barely enough light through the inky blackness to not fall down the narrow corridor. Taking a final calming breath, we descended the last stair into a low-ceiling warehouse looking room. The walls were painted with peeling black paint exposing the rusted metal underneath. Strobing multi-colored lights danced from the ceiling showing flashes of shadowed bodies moving to the music that was vibrating my chest. Placing a hand over my heart I tried to breath normally, the music’s pulses giving off their own energy. It felt like they were pounding into me, vibrating my bones. The heavy scent of sweat and lust coated the air around us, making it hard to breath as the moshpit of energies crashed against me. Tensing, I tried not to gag at the sudden change in smell. I was used to the smell of blood and rotting flesh, but the smell of warm masses of sweat made my skin prickle uneasily.

Miume scanned the area around us, her red eyes searching carefully for her target. Without a verbal cue, she pulled Lance behind her and moved through the mass of bodies. Easily slipping through them, she danced her way across the floor holding Lance’s hand. Lance followed as smoothly as he could but, even with a mask and hood shadowing his face I could tell he was smiling. Their auras bled into the mass of swirling ones before us and I lost sight of them.

“Are there really places like this on earth?” I called over the music to Keith. He looked back at me and nodded.

“Yeah, but they aren’t really my thing. Lance likes them more than I do, I guess.” He shrugged before pulling me along with him after Miume and Lance. After some awkward struggling to move past packed bodies we finally we emerged from the hoard of figures and reached the far wall. The warehouse was crammed full with barely any gaps of free space to move through save for the thin ring around the room where pockets of aliens rested.

Following Miumes gaze, I noticed a small metal plated door was tucked into a dark corner away from the strobing lights above. One wouldn’t have noticed it unless they were searching for a hidden passage.

“Okay, you two wait here. If anything happens, Umi I’m sure you will know,” Miume explained, pulling her kitten faced mask down to smile at me. I nodded nervously as my energy flexed uneasily around me. This environment was so different than anything I had ever been in. The energies in the room were almost overwhelming as they crashed around the space in rhythm with the fast paced music. Its force dulled Miume and Lancases energies in front of me, and I had to concentrate more to focus on theirs alone instead of the ocean of energies around us.

“Well then, see you on the other side,” Lance winked at Keith as he followed Miume through the
door after she punched in a code on a nearly invisible hologram screen filled with hieroglyphic symbols.

Looking up at Keith I tried to find his face, but it was shadowed by his hood. The dark atmosphere didn’t help either, but I caught the small rise of his chest as he sighed. His mask puffed outward as he pushed the air from his lungs before he leaned back against the wall. Placing a boot on it he crossed his arms, giving off a hostile and unapproachable vibe. His wine colored energy darkened around him and tensed into an unmoving shell around us. Looking down awkwardly I wasn’t sure what to do but follow his suit, leaning against the cold wall and hiding myself in my cloak. Readjusting it around me, I pulled the sides more securely over my shoulders to try and blend into the darkness as well. With the fabric wrapped entirely around me I felt more secure, like I had melted into the darkness.

After a few minutes of staring at my booted feet and not feeling any irregular patterns from Lance’s and Miume’s auras, I shifted my eyes upwards to gaze around me and I watch the aliens curiously. I wasn’t sure what they were doing but they seemed to be moving in beat with the blasting music. From the streaks of light I was able to make out a few thrashing shapes that were closest to us. Some had their eyes closed, others were pressed against each other intimately, while individual aliens raised what I assumed to be arms above the crowd as they rocked back and forth to the thumping music. I felt myself blushing as I imagined Keith’s body against mine, like it had been when he kissed me before quickly shaking the strange thoughts from my head.

“It’s called dancing.” Keith called over the music, his dark eyes had slid to the side and were gazing down at me. The shadow over his face almost hid them completely.

“Dancing?” I repeated. Looking up at him I saw his eyes travel down my exposed neck before snapping up to my face again.

“Yeah,” he stated simply, shifting his weight as his aura bubbled nervously.

I looked at him curiously. He didn’t seem to like the costume change either as he tugged at the choker around his neck uncomfortably. Sighing, I nestled deeper into the fabric of my cloak finding more security in its blanket of coverage. Looking out into the mass of shadows once more, I watched them in wonder, my body feeling compelled to move with the trance-like music as well. Blinking, I looked down to see my own foot had started tapping, but it wasn’t out of anxiety this time.

“Do you want to dance?” Keith asked, leaning down so I could hear him over the music more clearly. His watchful eyes didn’t miss a beat.

“I don’t know, I’ve never danced before.” I replied, looking up at him again.

“Maybe we’ll go sometime.” He suggested, scratching his mask-covered cheek and glancing away.

“But you don’t seem to like it,” I replied, “Your aura is nervous.”

He looked down at me and sighed before uncrossing his arms and hastily threw an arm around my shoulder to pull me against him again. His aura bubbled with a new nervousness now.

“That doesn’t mean I wouldn’t take you out there. There are plenty of things you haven’t experienced, and I want you to try them all,” Keith confessed in a gruff tone, looking pointedly at the dancing aliens. I felt my cheeks flush under the mask as I leaned naturally into him. His body heat radiated through his fishnet shirt and my thin cloak.
We stayed like this for a while. I occasionally heard him growl under his breath, looking directly at a few aliens who had wandered closer and stared at us before scuttering away.

“How long is this going to take?” Keith mumbled under his breath, pulling at the collar around his neck again.

“And it’s a done deal baby!” Lance’s voice drifted over the music before the metal door slammed against the opposite wall and the two strutted out. The sudden foreign noise caused me to jump as their energies came back into focus.

“Lance,” Miume sighed, shaking her head, her aura still mingling with his playfully.

Keith’s arm dropped from my shoulder and his body went rigid for a second as they walked out.

“So, it’s a success?” Keith asked, looking at Miume through their masks.

“Yup. We will need to have another meeting tomorrow with Shiro and everyone else, but they seem very interested.” Miume recapped, pulling her hand out from under her cloak to check the time.

“We still have some time. Wanna dance?” she suggested, looking up at Lance mischievously. He was obviously grinning under his mask.

“You know it, kittencakes,” He grabbed Miume’s hands and whisked her away into the middle of the dance floor swarmed with moving bodies.

“Kittencakes?” Keith repeated, his nose crinkling in annoyance.

My eyes wandered the crowd trying to see them but it was packed with shadows, their energies somewhere deep in the middle of it, completely buried under the other pulsating ones.

“They seem to be alright,” I murmured under my breath, leaning back against the wall again.

We stood awkwardly next to one another, a slim sliver of space separating our arms. I could feel Keith’s energy moving around him. It reached towards mine hesitantly before pulling back. His fingers twitched open and closed, barely brushing mine.

“Wanna dance?” Keith asked finally, not looking at me he held out a gloved hand. My heart skipped a beat. I could feel my own energy fluttering in excitement.

“Really?” I beamed, pushing my mask down so he could hear my small voice over the thundering music. He looked down at me before quickly glancing away and nodding. He took my hand and lead me into the swaying masses, trying to avoid Lance and Miume. Once Keith seemed to find an acceptable spot which was a small pocket between the dancing bodies, he stopped and turned to me. He withdrew his hood back just enough so that his purple black eyes could meet mine.

I blushed, quickly looking away. I tried to tug my cloak back into place as it had shifted open from moving through packed bodies and exposed the front of my outfit again. “I don’t know what I’m doing.” I admitted quietly, feeling a new bubble of nervous excitement fill my stomach. Keith made my heart beat in ways I had never experienced and I slowly found myself enjoying the newly terrifying experiences of emotion.

“What?” Keith called over the music, leaning down so his ear was at my head level.

“I don’t know what I’m doing.” I repeated in a louder voice, reaching up on my tiptoes to meet him
halfway.

“No one really does.” He shrugged, looking away shyly before taking one of my hands again and pulling me closer. His other arm wrapped around my waist. His energy jumped around him now at his bold action.

“Keith?” I asked, feeling my face flush as my heart skipped a beat. There was only a thin sliver of space between us now. His energy curled around me in a different way than it had before, almost in a starved manner.

“Just follow my lead and try not to laugh.” He said before slowly moving us from side to side. My body remained still for a few beats but he waited for me to adjust before moving us in beat with the music.

As we danced the energy in the room gradually become less and less overwhelming. It seemed to be consuming me but not in a bad way. Its once clashing energy now weaved through mine as it coursed in rhythm with the music. Closing my eyes, Keith’s distinct energy wrapping around me calmed the rest of my nerves, its color blurring out the other energies around us. I moved my body in sync with his lead, rocking my head back and forth slightly as he guided us from side to side. After a while I felt my body completely relax, smiling I tilted my head back and enjoyed the feeling of the pulsing energy around us. I let the waves of mixing energy wash past mine now as the vibrations of the booming base rumbled across my skin.

Keith looked down at the girl in front of him, smiling a bit as she lost herself in the music. For someone who had never danced before she sure knew how to. His fingers flexed nervously on her waist. He could feel her hot skin through the fishnet dress. He had to admit she looked good. Just being near her made his mind go blank. He had never put himself in a position like this, nor had he wanted to be close to someone as much as he did in this moment. His body craved more physical contact with the mesmerizing female just inches from him. As the next beat dropped, he sucked in a nervous breath as he took a step closer to her, closing the distance between them. She opened her eyes and looked at him in surprise but didn’t push him away. He had braced himself for some kind of recoiled shock, but when there was none his muscles relaxed. Letting out a held breath, he leaned down resting his forehead against hers and continued swaying their bodies. Closing his eyes he enjoyed the feeling of her body pressed against his. Her small frame seemed to mold perfectly to his.

I opened my eyes, peeking upward at his closed ones. His energy completely consumed me now. Both of his hot hands held my hips as our bodies pressed together. He held me tightly against him, but not in a way that I couldn’t pull away if I wanted to. Shyly glancing around, I noted how the other aliens dancing had their limbs intertwined, but most of them had their arms locked around the other. Swallowing nervously, I slowly I moved my hands up his chest and around his neck, copying the other dancers as best I could.

Keith froze under my touch, his aura jumping as his eyes opened to find mine my staring back. Biting my lip I glanced away, a dark blush dusting my cheeks as my heart skipped in my chest. I heard him exhale heavily before hesitantly moving a hand up my back and pulling me closer to him.

“You look really great tonight. I didn’t want anyone else to see you. That’s why I said to close your cloak more.” He admitted in a low voice, his warm breath making my shiver again as he spoke in my ear. I looked back at him. His eyes were darker now, hidden by the unlit room.

“Really?” I asked, my eyes trying to search his but it was still too dark.
“Really.” He murmured, nuzzling his nose against mine. I smiled, closing my eyes and relaxing my body against his. Our bodies still moved in rhythm with one another as the music continued to pulse through the musty air, enjoying the weight of the others body pressed against them. We stayed like this until we were both panting. It had gotten even hotter once we started dancing. The residual body heat from the close mass heated the space around us with a thick layer of humidity.

“Want to take a break?” he asked, noticing how hot my body was. I nodded, letting him take my hand and lead me to the outer part of the mob. As his body stepped away from mine I felt as if part of me had been pulled away. My energy reached out towards his in a desperate attempt to pull back its warm security.

Finding an unoccupied corner of the warehouse, we leaned against the cold metal. Breathing out easily, the air was less dense here and the raging heat from the pit radiated off my skin. We stayed like this for a moment before Keith turned to me, placing an arm just above my head, creating a curtain between us and the dancing aliens. His other hand gently touched my check, tipping my chin up so that I was looking right at him. His aura pulsed nervously against the beat of the music.

“Keith?” I asked, my heart starting to race as I became aware of his face being just inches from mine. My body started to tremble, but not in fear. It was an unfamiliar flutter of nervous anticipation.

“Umi, this might not really be the time for it but...” He glanced away nervously, taking a rugged deep breath, “But I like you.” He finished in a rushed voice his energy scattering around him awkwardly into the masses of colors behind him.

I blinked, staring at him with wide eyes as he gazed back at me, searching mine as he waited waiting for me to respond.
Rave Planet part 2

My hammering heart pounded in my ears blocking out the music. The shadowed world around us faded into the background as his face and energy became completely clear. The crimson fingers of his aura curled around us and created a private shell. Did he mean what he was saying? He liked me? Was his like in the way that Pidge and Miume had been alluding to? A deeper, more meaningful like that was different than the friendly bonds I had created?

“I- I like you too.” I stammered, still not entirely sure about what the word ‘like’ meant now.

Keith breathed out, his warm breath washing over my face. I felt his body relax a bit before he nervously closed the distance between us. His soft lips clumsily brushed against mine gently. I hesitated, not sure how to respond before my body decompressed back against the wall.

When I didn’t pull back he pushed his lips against mine harder, his hand slipping from my cheek, trembling fingertips ghosting down my arm to my waist and drawing me against him again as he pushed me against the cool wall behind us. I jumped slightly not expecting his reaction, my body freezing for a beat before slowly wrapping my arms around his neck with my fingers resting in his silky hair. I don’t know why I reacted that way, but it felt natural. I could feel his heart pounding in his chest and my own hammering against my ribcage. With the beating music dulling around us, all I could hear was the blood rushing in my veins. The sensation of his lips, his body pressed against mine, overtook any unease and replaced it with unfamiliar comfort.

Keith groaned against my lips before breaking the connection, resting his forehead against the cool wall next to my ear and his breathing staggered. I tried to control my own breathing, not releasing his hair from my fingers. I was unsure why I suddenly craved his touch. My energy fluttered unevenly around me.

“Damn, I don’t know what I’m going to do.” He half laughed, closing his eyes.

“Keith?” I asked again, his body still pressed against mine. I felt his aura curling around me, twining around mine.

He shook his head, opening his eyes before gently kissing me again. “Nothing.” He smiled, bringing his arm down from the wall to brush the hair out of my face. Both of our faces flushed as the air remained charged around us.

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Miume POV

“Kittencakes?” Miume called over the music as Lance dragged her into the middle of the dancing hot bodies.

“Did I tell you how beautiful you look tonight?” Lance cooed, swinging her around so that they were facing each other. His large hands easily found her hips as he held her nearly at arms’ length.

“Hmm, why no, I don’t think you did. Please tail.” Miume purred, stepping closer to him and enjoying how his face blushed as she smoothly rested her arms on his shoulders.

“Well, it starts with your beautiful eyes.” Lance continued, not missing a beat. One of his tanned hands left her curved hips to brush a thumb gently under her eye, taking care not to smudge the carefully placed makeup, “Then that very well fitting outfit.” He gave her a foxy smile but kept eye
contact to show her that there was more, “But, I’d have to say, your brains behind the operation and your negotiation skills really topped it off for me.” He smiled at her seductively. The hand resting against her cheek pushed the soft bangs from her face and trailed dangerously close to her soft sensitive ears.

Miume laughed, playfully hitting his chest but he caught her hand, lower his eyelids and carefully calculating her expression.

“May I paw-lease have this dance?” he courted in a low voice, taking another small step towards her. Miume felt herself resisting, but what could it hurt? They had time and it was just dancing. A celebratory dance for winning the negotiation and gaining another ally against Zarkon. Her ears twitched once in satisfaction as she rationalized another reason for dancing with him other than the ones her emotions told her.

She pulled her mask down, running clawed finger tips slowly down his chest, a low hum sounding in her throat as she smiled at him coyly and pretended to weigh her options. Lance gulped, his eyes widening not sure how to take her advancement. His previously confident demeanor began to falter. Miume loved toying with him. His expressions were so innocent and honest. He was so easy to read, like the rest of them. But she couldn’t help it when her heart skipped in eager anticipation for his next move. Unlike the others before, he still managed to be unpredictable.

“Well, maybe just one.” She replied, taking the final step towards him so they were almost flush against each other and swishing her tails.

“Well, maybe just one.” She replied, taking the final step towards him so they were almost flush against each other and swishing her tails.

“Only one?” Lance questioned innocently, leaning down so that their noses were touching.

“Mhm.” Miume purred, closing her eyes and using the arms draped around his neck to pull him the rest of the way against her before starting to slowly move her body with his. She enjoyed the feeling of his hot hands on her waist, his strong chest pressed against hers and the nervous hiccup of air that escaped his lips before he followed her movements.

As the songs blended together Miume found their bodies gradually pressing closer to one another until they were a tangled mess of heat and desire. Her hands wandered across his body from teasing his muscular arms to sliding her hands up and over his chest to hook around his shoulders, or barely skimming across the highest belt on his waist as they swayed seamlessly together. Lance followed suit as if unable to control himself. His fingers flexed nervously on her hips before carefully traveling upwards. He gauged her physical responses to make sure his actions were accepted before letting his fingers trail up and down her spine while occasionally dipping lower with ghost like touches. But he always kept one hand secured around her hips to keep them close.

Enjoying the sensation of his hands exploring her body she felt his hand move to the back of her head. Long fingers tangled with the loosened bits of hair at the nape of her neck before sliding upwards, as if waiting for her to tell him to stop. But when she didn't he slowly continued. Thin digits slipped through her silky ash locks before finally reaching the curve of her ear and gently rubbing it like he knew she loved. He gradually added more pressure to intensify the sensation. An uncontrolled purr of pleasure rumbled in the back of her throat. He had her completely figured her out it seemed, and she didn’t mind right now. Her mind was completely absorbed by the pulsing music and Lance’s closeness. She let her carefully controlled emotions flow freely. His presence had completely broken them free from their cage, and she didn’t mind in the slightest.

Languidly she opened her eyes looking up at him seductively under hooded lashes and ran her hands up his chest letting her nails drag against him lightly she saw his adams apple bob nervously in response. She smiled to herself and wickedly wondered just how much she could make him squirm under her touch. Carefully she leaned forward with exaggerated slowness, her lips hovering
over his neck. She pushed the voices of reason to the back of her head before gently kissing it.

Lance froze, a shiver running from his head to his toes, before his body almost turned to liquid under her touch. Miume purred, skimming her velvet lips across his neck and down his exposed shoulder. She felt him shudder as he unconsciously leaned forward into her teasing touches. Smiling to herself, she slowly nibbled her way back up his neck, pausing briefly as she nipped his delicious skin with more pressure at the base of his neck and just above his adam’s apple. Lance’s hands flexed against the flesh of her skin, trying to draw her closer so that their bodies could be pressed even tighter together.

When she reached the top of his neck she purred again, letting the vibration of her lips tickle just below his ear and making him jump. He had stopped moving all together now, and she could feel his heart hammering in his chest as the temperature of his skin started to boil. He was so cute when he was flustered. This only made her crave more of this reaction.

Miume moved her head back to look up at him. He stared at her, gulping when she gave him a seductive smile and gazed into his eyes with a smoldering intensity.

“I haven’t collected on those kiss and dashes yet.” Lance almost whispered, trying to be just as seductive but was a little too flustered to pull it off. His mind clouded with her tempting touches he found it hard to process his words, let alone get them out of his lips.

“Hmm?” Miume purred again, running her fingers idly through his lustrous hair, playing with him as she combed back his bangs.

“I think I’m going to collect now.” Lance decided, giving her a more confident smile, Eyes half-lidded, he leaned in and pressed his lips against hers. Miume’s heart skipped a beat before she eagerly leaned into the kiss wanting more. She felt Lance smirk against her lips, his hands moving with new found certainty from her hips up her back. One arm wrapping around the center of her back while the other wove through her hair, he dragged her closer to him. Their squared hips rocked back and forth as their mouthed moved almost desperately across one another.

Miume involuntarily purred against his lips as his strong hand stroked her back affectionately and they swayed in rhythm with the thumping base pulsing past them. She kissed him harder, trying to intensify it before he pulled away, smirking.

“That’s one.” He smiled seductively now, completely confident in his abilities.

“Just one?” Miume replied coyly, arching a perfect eyebrow in mock disbelief.

“Maybe later, kitten.” He leaned in, his lips barely ghosting over hers before pulling back. Miume eyed him in disappointment, trying to subtly lean backwards from her incline to meet his kiss. It would appear he knew how to play with her, too. Impressive. Rolling her eyes, she untangled her fingers from his hair and placed them on his chest again. She could feel his pounding heart though the thin fabric as her heart raced just as quickly.

“Un-fur-tunatly, we need to get back to the meeting point.” Miume sighed, not wanting Lance to let go of her. But the distinct vibration of the alarm on we wristlet was distracting.

“Wait, already?” Lance complained, looking down at her hologram watch and pouting. His arms were still locked around her, reluctant to let their closeness slip away yet.

Miume placed her hands onto his broad shoulders and stood on her tiptoes to look over Lance’s shoulders, “Where could Umi and Keith be?”
Lance shrugged nonchalantly, still holding her against him as he scanned the crowd over her head. “He has a watch doesn’t he, he should know.” Miume gave him a chiding expression indicating he was wrong, then smiled and rolled her eyes.

“I think I see Umi’s blue corset over in the corner,” She remarked, nodding towards the far back of the club and unwillingly let go of his shoulders. Even through the strobes of light illuminated the space in small bursts around them, Miume’s sensitive eyes picked up two figures standing alone from the group. Their slim hooded figures, were the only humanoid looking beings in the warehouse.

“Fur-iously... ’ Lance groaned as he let Miume’s smaller hand take his and drag him towards the outskirts of the crowd.

Although it was fun, Miume knew the mission was priority. She weaved between the masses with grace as she pulled Lance lightly behind her. Play time was over.

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Keith and I had stepped away from the wall, lingering closer to the thrashing mass so that I could try and find Miume’s and Lance’s energies somewhere within the rapidly swirling mixture of auras. Glancing back towards the middle of the crowd, I saw faint flickers of distinct blue and pink that had mixed together tightly moving towards us.

“There they are.” I nodded towards the couple of figures breaking through the sardine canned crowd.

“There you are.” Miume breathed in relief, smiling at me as she got close enough to see our shadowed faces properly. I gave her a shy smile in return, glancing away timidly when I realized Keith hadn’t let go of my hand even though Miume and Lance were right in front of us. Miume eyed me before moving to Keith. He gave her a weary look before flicking his eyes away. Her ears twitched happily and a smile crept onto her face. *Something good definitely happened* she thought to herself smugly.

“Time to head back?” Keith asked, looking from Miume to a crestfallen Lance. Keith parted his lips and looked like he might ask what was wrong, but shook his head instead not wanting to deal with it.

“Yes, it’s almost time to meet at the rendezvous spot. Follow me and don’t lag behind.” Miume instructed, straightening out her skirt and pulling her hand smoothly from Lance’s as she started for the exit.

Lance opened his mouth to protest before promptly shutting it and shoving his hands in hands in his small pockets before turning quickly on his heel and sulking after Miume. Her aura appeared to flutter around Lance’s in an impish manner while his twisted desperately to reconnect with hers.

Keith and I glanced at each other curiously before following them back through the crowd. The atmosphere around us seemed even hotter and more humid than before while the multicolored lights still flashing in tune to the pounding music as we maneuvered our way out of the masses, down the narrow zigzagged halls and towards the exit door.

Breaking through the final slick painted door, we finally emerged back to the outside world. Its cool air nipped at my exposed legs as we took a moment to orient ourselves. My ears tried to adjust to the sudden decrease in volume and I felt an unfamiliar ringing sensation in my head, making me feel slightly unsteady. Placing a hand against my ear I blinked a few times, letting my eyes refocus
on the brighter environment. The pulsating music slowly came back into the foreground, but its sound was dulled against the ringing in my ears as the once harsh lights lining the buildings seemed dim now.

Even though it was much later in the night there seemed to be no difference in the traffic on the street in front of us. If anything, there seemed to be more aliens bustling around, their forms still hidden under masks and fabrics.

We carefully moved through the crowd until the vibrating clock came into view. Shiro leaned heavily against it looking tired beneath his hooded frame. Pidge squatted on the ground with her covered arms dangling in front of her and an exhausted expression painted across her face, while Hunk swayed back and forth uneasily on his feet. His eyes were closed and his mask was stretched out covering his slightly agape mouth. It looked as if he were sleeping somehow. Each of their energies flowed lethargically around them in fatigue.

“Miume.” Shiro nodded, rubbing his face with his hand, trying to draw more energy in his voice.

“How did it go?” Lance asked, moving to inspect Hunk curiously from a few angles before poking him hard enough that Hunk scared himself awake. His eyes snapped open, dazed confusion filling his face before his dark eyes landed on Lance’s amused one.

“I’ll tell you once we get back.” Shiro replied, patting Pidge on the head and motioning for her to stand up. Miume nodded, waiting for them to gather their bearings before leading the way back to the pods. Shiro was practically dragging a half asleep Pidge under his arm as she mumbled incoherent words to herself, Shiro looking like he wanted to be nowhere else but in his room.

Lance was stumbling as he helped Hunk sleep walk through the tight allies of moving aliens and tried to avoid accidentally running into them on accident. I glanced at Keith who yawned, his eyes tearing up slightly from it. It wasn’t until we were back in the pods that I felt a wave of exhaustion. Falling back against the side of the cockpit, I kept Keith company as Shiro gingerly sat Pidge down next to Hunk. Rolling my neck from side to side, I tried to blink away the sleepiness willing myself to stay awake. I noticed Lance hovering over Miume who piloted the other pod as a sleeping Hunk overtook on the small bench in the back. Keith directed us back to the castle blinking more than usual to try to keep the sleep from taking over.

“Alright, everyone get a good night’s rest. We’ll debrief in the morning.” Shiro ordered drowsily, unclipping his cape and yawning loudly as we all exited the pods and entered the castle’s hanger.

“Sounds good.” Hunk yawned, already halfway down the hall to his room. The yellow of his aura felt muted as it clung to his slacked frame.

“Come on, Pidge.” Keith called gently, placing a hand on her head and directing her back towards our rooms. With her eyes hooded she slinked closely behind him like a small child.

“Good night.” I said quietly to Miume and Lance who stood there silently next to the pod, their energies mixing hesitantly around each other. I paused, giving her a concerned look but she shook her head and waved me off. Waiting a beat more, I finally moved back towards Keith who was corralling a disoriented Pidge down the hallway.

“There you go, into bed.” Keith shushed in a brotherly tone, positioning a nearly comatose Pidge in front of her door so that it would activate open.

“I want a full report later.” Pidge mumbled as she turned to find the hallway completely empty. “What?” she asked before shrugging and stumbling into her room.
“Keith?” I gasped quietly, his gloved hand clasping gently over my mouth and muffling my voice as my breath caught in my throat. After his hand had left Pidge’s head he had quickly pulled me into his room, the door sliding open and shut I tensed, reflexively gripping Keith's hand and twisting so that I could hyperextend his elbow over my shoulder posed to break it in one swift motion before freezing. Keith groaned in pain as I quietly gasped, immediately releasing his imprisoned arm and turning around. Opening my mouth to apologize Keith silently shook his head, placing two fingers against my lips.

“Sorry, I just wanted some more time with you.” Keith admitted softly, removing his hand from my mouth and running it through his hair lazily. Even in its sleepy state his aura still flickered nervously around him. Its brightness dulled quickly from lack of energy, like a fire after it had eaten through its fuel, only leaving burning embers.

“So we are hiding from Pidge?” I asked, glancing down shyly as I realized how close our bodies were.

“Yeah, I guess so.” He laughed huskily under his breath before looking back at me, his aura pulling mine towards his again. I had my back pressed against his door, one of his arms trapping me in place while his knee braced against the door on the outside of my thigh to support his cocked hip.

“Keith.” I nearly whispered as his body shifted forward carefully, closing the small distance between us again and kissing me softly for a heartbeat’s length.

“Sorry.” He murmured against my lips before pressing more firmly against mine and slowing moving his own against mine. Closing my eyes I relaxing against the door, kissing him back clumsily. I followed his lead and mimicked his actions as best as I could, enjoying the pleasurable electric feeling that coursed throughout my body. After a moment he pulled back, sighing heavily and resting his head in the crook of my neck. I leaned against the door without moving, my hands still at my sides. His actions and these feelings were still foreign to me, but I found myself craving them. And him.

“Stay here?” he asked, his voice trembling just slightly as his aura spiked nervously. I felt my heartbeat skip as the same nervous excited emotion filled me. I nodded, slowly bringing my hands up from my sides and placing them on his strong chest. His red energy released its tensed state and relaxed around us as he pulled back. Keith smiled at me drowsily as he trapped my hands against him. His hooded eyes blinked languidly, focusing on the black band on my collar bone just above the fishnet dress and causing his aura to flare once again.

“Uh, clothes.” He mumbled, his face blushing as he quickly averted his gaze and rummaged around his dark room before tossing me a black shirt and shorts. “I’ll, uh, just turn this way. Yeah.” He stuttered, making a point of covering his eyes while he turned around. Biting my lip, I felt myself blush as his aura mirrored my nervous excitement before gladly peeling off the skin tight clothes Miume had let me borrow. Its material clung to my hot skin as I carefully stepped out of it, not wanting to damage her clothing. Shyly picking up his shirt, I pulled it quickly over my head relieved to find its material soft against my skin. His musky scent filled my nose as I breathed in deeply and sighed happily from the smell. While his shirt hung down to nearly mid thigh I still slipped on a pair of oversized shorts that hung low on my small hips.

“Um, I’m done.” I announced quietly, my voice sounding too loud for the quiet room. Slowly he turned around, peeking through his fingers as if to make sure I was really dressed before glancing away sheepishly and grabbing his usual black tank top and sweats. Raking the tight shirt over his
head I felt myself blush as I took in his shadowed, toned back before I covered my eyes and turned around. I heard him laugh softly before the sound of the covers crinkling as they were pulled back.

“Let’s go to bed. I’m beat.” He yawned again. I nodded, walking over to him timidly before he grabbed my hand and swiftly pulled me down on top of him. He sighed contently. My face burned as my heart started to race from the sudden change in position. I tried to right myself up but he held me against him so that I remained laying on top of his muscular frame.

“Just a bit longer.” He mumbled in a sleepy voice, his breathing starting to even out as his aura relaxed around us. It gently drew mine towards its safe comfort and coaxing me to rest. Holding my breath, my cheek was firmly pressed against his chest and I listened to the strong rhythm of his heart beat. Its constant sound started to lull me to sleep as his aura blanketed over us. With his arms wrapped around me securely, the steady rise and fall of his chest against mine beckoned me to close my eyes. The crimson tint painted the inside of my eyelids as I completely caved into him. He breathed out a content hum as my full weight pressed against him. Carefully readjusting us into a more comfortable position, he kept his arms around my back creating a net of safety as his body heat radiated through his clothes. The soft breath from his lips gently tickled my hair as my head tucked under his chin, cheek still pressed against his neck. Gradually I felt myself drift off into a peaceful sleep, my aura weaving into his as I relaxed entirely.
“Shall I walk you back to your room m’lady?” Lance asking, giving her a tired smirk and holding his arm out as he bowed slightly with his other arm crossed over his chest, “I hear these hallways are pretty haunted.

Miume giggled softly to herself, her tails swishing nervously in anticipation. She didn’t want to part ways with Lance just yet, they were having so much fun tonight and she wasn’t ready to leave his intoxicating energy. She could still feel his lips on hers, making her blush and sparked a sudden desire.

“I guess just fur meow,” Miume replied coyly, smiling and taking his outstretched arm which caused Lance to grin even wider.

Slowly he escorted her down the hallway, taking his sweet time but Miume didn’t mind. She enjoyed her time with him. When they finally stepped in front of her door he sighed dramatically. “I guess this is goodnight.” Lance’s eyes dropped to their interlocked arms, looking disappointed, the black under his eyes had smudged out, making him look a little sexier than usual to Miume. Small traces of glitter dusted his face and neck from where she had teased him, while his lips were faintly smeared with her tinted lipstick.

“I mean...” Miume let her voice trail off, her head turning a fraction in conflicting contemplation. This was a bad idea. A very bad, bad idea to let him stay the night. But at the same time she really wanted him to. She felt such a strong burning need for Lance tonight, the desire was becoming overwhelming. This wasn’t going beyond toying. Right? Nothing more than simple pleasure. They weren’t a couple, they would never be a couple. Yet her heart still skipped in a new, loving excitement, when she thought about being near him. Her feelings towards the young Paladin leaking through no matter how she tried to stop them. He seemed to pull the emotions out of her effortlessly. Her tails swished in self conflict as Lance stared at her before smiling slyly.

“Are you inviting me in?” He slowly asked in a low voice, raising an eyebrow and leaning closer to her. Miume felt her heart skip as his lips closed the distance to hers. He pecked them softly before pulling away, “or are we still playing, kittencakes?” he tried to sound seductive, but his voice still tilted to the tired side.

“Maybe just fur a minute,” Miume whispered, smiling at him coyly before lightly dragging her finger down his cheek and stepping backwards into her room with a hungry stare. Shooting him a flirtatious smile she twirled around flouncing her skirt, and Lance’s mouth nearly dropped making her laugh in triumph. Even when he was tired he was still funny and entertaining to play with. The door nearly closed on him before he swiftly stepped inside, taking her hand and bowing her back slightly.

“Meow’lady,” He stated, leaning down and kissing her again. Miume warmly smiled. He was such a dork - an adorable dork who she enjoyed teasing. That’s right, that’s all this was. This was just more teasing fun, nothing serious, she thought to herself as she slowly kissed him back, pulling him...
towards her body and moving him towards her bed. Not breaking their kiss, she pushed him slowly
down so that he was sitting on the edge of her bed with her straddling him.

Intensifying the kiss, Miume’s tongue brushed his lips begging for entrance, which he readily
obliged. Their kissing grew wet and sloppy as tongues danced together in passion. Miume felt
Lance grin eagerly in their kiss when he suddenly grabbed her by the waist and playfully pulled her
on top of him, effectively trapping her against his chest.

Miume felt herself blush harder as she rested her hands against his chest, and she could feel his
heart pounding as he continued to passionately kiss her. At the rate this was going, it was going to
be a long night as she felt their energy building in an unspoken anticipation. She really wanted
more fun tonight, and dammit, she was going to get it.

She broke their kiss for a moment to breathe with her head spinning, then spoke with sultry voice,
“So, I’d imagine you’d like to stay the whole night, purrhaps?” and kissed him again, running her
one hand through Lance’s hair and the other down his chest.

Lance nearly choked himself out of their kiss before he replied in shock, “Wait, what? You- you
really want me to stay? Like, fur real ?” He stared at her in disbelief as she returned his stare with a
wanton look.

“We’re having such a fun time, why ruin it by ending prematurely?” she purred seductively, her
tails curling upwards behind her which ironically formed a heart.

Lance gulped hard, “Well, yeah, I mean, why end a good thing right? I’m more than willing to
continue for you, kittens,” He winked, but added in a more serious tone, “But are you really
okay with this? It can just be so hard to tell sometimes… with you.”

Miume’s ears drooped slightly, “Ah, yes. I know I can be conflicting,” she looked up at him, but
smiled and held his face. “Just know that I like being with you and that I think you’re loads of fun
and endearing. I mean, we’re just having fun! So, why don’t you prove to me how much fun you
think you are?”

“You’re sure?” he raised an eyebrow, his smirk returning to his face. He could live with
lighthearted some fun tonight as long as she was willing and wanting it, too. “You’re paw-sitive ?”

Miume bent her head down and giggled lightly, “Absolutely pawsitive, kittens.” With her
mouth already hovering over his neck, she took this opportunity to lightly brush her lips against his
exposed nape. Lance moaned lazily and his body stiffened under hers as she pressed her body
down on top of him and began to nibble lightly on his neck. Miume worked her way up his neck,
then jawline with small wet kisses and met his open mouth to embrace him in another heated kiss.

Lance placed his left hand over the small of her back and his right hand ran through her silky hair
again. He combed through her hair as they continued their sloppy kissing and ended up stroking
her right ear. He found it to be so soft like smooth velvet and he enjoyed the feeling of her ear
between his fingers. Miume’s other ear twitched slightly and she let out a needy moan from the
stimulation of her ear and their making out. Immediately picking up on this response, Lance took
his left hand from the small of her back and dragged it down over her ass and up her skirt to make
full skin to skin contact as he squeezed gently. He found she was only wearing a thong and was
happily surprised, chuckling greedily to himself as she continued to make a purring sound and kiss
him.

Miume was thoroughly enjoying this heavy petting and sought to escalate this to the next level.
With her right hand holding the side of his head, she dragged her left hand down Lance’s chest and
went up under his shirt applying light pressure so that her claws raked into his damp skin. He made a high pitched cry, which she mockingly giggled to. His reactions were just so fun! And his chest was so sculpted under these clothes. She needed this shirt off so she could completely appreciate his figure. Miume used her right arm to skate under Lance’s lithe body and grab hold of the bottom of his shirt tugging it upwards in a needy way. He quickly got the hint and sat himself up, bringing her up with him and Lance allowed her to rip his shirt up and off him, tossing it to the floor.

“Can’t wait to see the full glorious picture, huh?” Lance breathed as Miume went to address these multiple belts she had him put on for the mission tonight and began to unfasten them. Why did she have him wear so many again?

“How could I resist, right?” She murmured, “I like to play with the real deal.” Perking up, he quickly helped her in the belt removal and unzipped his pants when Miume suddenly pushed him back with her right hand onto the bed with harsh force.

Lance’s body bounced back up slightly recoiling from the force of his landing and he laughed while grinning up at her. Miume was straddling him, her hair tousled, covering part of her face and her tails rhythmically swayed behind her. Her face was flushed and she revealed a small smile as she dragged her right hand through her hair to push it back. Lance just stared at the gorgeous sight in front of him, feeling his pants become uncomfortably restrictive and thanking the Lord personally for this moment.

She skimmed her palms hungrily over his bare chest trying to memorize every lean muscle as she traced patterns on him with her claws. He was so sculpted for a thin guy and his arms were so muscular… that jawline… his abs… she loved it all! Miume bent down to pepper his body with wet kisses as she greedily took in all of him, starting from his clavicles, working her way down the chest, over his abdominal muscles that tightened under her lips and just above his waistband. She looked up at him quickly to see how he was reacting and laughed as she watched him completely melt before her touch. Lance’s breath hitched slightly as his body flushed while he watched her kiss and adore his body. Miume resumed her work, sloppily pecking her way back up his body with intermittent licks here and there up to his neck where she nipped and sucked to leave him marked. She left his neck to kiss him once more on his open mouth and smirked as she stared at him with desire in her eyes.

Sitting up again, Miume took his right hand with both hers and placed it onto her left breast, nodding in encouragement. He took the hint and began to squeeze and knead her breast while leaning up to make contact with her lips again. Miume returned the kiss and pressed her forehead against his and crushing her hips down onto him, beginning to rock slowly with want.

“Ahh,” Lance groaned in between their kissing. Her rocking was right over his groin and a great warm pressure was building up.

“Feeling good, little boy?” Miume teased, and bit his lower lip and sighing into him. He was almost too easy to play with and she loved messing with him.

“Ah, yeah, babe,” he squeaked out in response which made Miume laugh again. He could tell this was way too fun for her. But he couldn’t let her be the only teaser tonight. Lance reached behind her to rub her back with his left hand and felt for that damn clasp for her top, since this outfit happened to be an arousingly frustrating bustier. Finding it within a few heartbeats, he skillfully flicked his fingers undoing the clasp in one attempt and her top slid right down with no resistance. He smiled as she hummed in surprised at his speedy removal of her bra and went right to work leaving her mouth and placing his mouth around her left nipple. Miume let out an aroused mewl, closing her eyes and tilted her
head back in pleasure as he began to lick and suck gently on her breast. She bit back another moan as he continued and even started to use his right hand to thumb her other nipple and pinch it slightly. Lance smirked as he found he was able to produce plenty of purring and mewling by continuing this play.

Miume had her right hand gripped into Lance’s hair, arching her back and holding him in place to continue this heavenly work and her left hand clawed his upper back slightly in response to this stimulation. She found herself rocking more intensely over Lance’s hips and he was returning the motions rhythmically, growling from her clawing.

Feeling an intense sense of desire building up from below her, she grinded down harder and gasped to find that Lance’s hand had made it to her panties. He used his index finger to stroke through the cloth and upwards over her clit, causing a sharp high pitched mewl. Satisfied with the response, he repeated the stroking motions over her clit as it swelled with pleasure and a nice slick wetness began dripping down.

“Hah, you’re feeling good now too, kitten?” Lance used Miume’s own words against her and she panted something along the lines of a response, lost in the pleasure and feeling dizzy. It all felt too good for her to try to form coherent words at the time.

She grabbed his chin and tilted him up into another sloppy kiss, her tongue swirling around his in heated passion. He moaned heavily using the time to slide a finger up and into her dripping slit. Miume jolted and cried out again in pleasure which broke their kiss for just a heartbeat and Lance smirked again with cockiness. He slid a second finger into her going deeper then curved his fingers upwards into her walls, stroking a certain spot from within.

“Ahhh, that was it, that’s the heaven spot,” Miume panted out, becoming a complete purring mess. The pressure in her lower abdomen was surmounting to become nearly overwhelming and she desperately sought release.

“I guess it’s not that hard for me to get this kitty to purr, huh?” Lance continued to brag and tease her. Biting her lip, Miume took her left hand a clawed deeply into his back this time causing him to arch back and yelp in pain. Her claws felt like fire going down his bare back but then pleasure overtook the pain as his endorphins released to compensate. “Okay, I was gonna tell you that freaking hurt but I liked it and found it extremely hot so nevermind,” Lance breathed heavily.

Miume laughed at him and purred, “Oh, so now I know you like the pain, hmm?” But Lance again fingered deep into her and curved his fingers pulling out stroking that spot again which caused her to mewl out involuntarily and shiver.

“And I know you’re loving me,” he replied in a low voice. He decided it was time to change positions and let the real fun start. Removing his hand from within her, Lance grabbed onto Miume’s lower back, pushing up with his hips and rolled to the right tossing her lightly onto her back. He held himself over her, breathing raggedly with a knee between her legs. She had placed both her arms around his neck and let out a light giggle at the position swap. Her ears pointed outward and relaxed, hair flowing all around her, she had a soft blush to accompany the dreamy look she was giving Lance. Miume was being extra adorable and honestly, really freaking hot, Lance thought with his own arousal growing rapidly. All the teasing he was doing to her had built up an uncomfortable tightness of his own, and gazing upon her from his position on top of her, both bare chested and flushed, hearts pounding, he was quickly needing release.

Miume parted her lips feeling breathless and gazed into Lance’s smoldering eyes as she reached down to remove her panties entirely. She made a quick nod and gave him an expected look and tugged at the band around his waist. Lance understood and swiftly removed his own bottoms and
flung them onto the ground with force. Miume glanced down just to see how aroused Lance had become and was eager to continue this play. She motioned to take his semi-erected cock in hand and asked playfully, “May I?” licking her lips.

“Uh, yes please?” Lance answered without hesitation and lowered himself to kiss her once again.

She returned the kiss delving her tongue into his mouth and pumping him slowly. Lance choked in a falsetto as she continued to pump him gaining some speed to completely arouse him. With ragged breaths, he returned her passionate kiss in greedy desperation and she laughed while their tongues massaged each other. Miume used her thumb to swipe over the tip of his cock and felt the slickness from his precum. She swirled over a few times to collect some lubrication and pumped down on him squeezing harder.

Lance’s breath hitched as he jerked with pleasure and felt as though he was going to combust if he didn’t have release soon. He had propped himself on his elbows over her and was breathing erratically, his heart pounding throughout his chest and into his head. Using his left hand, he grasped Miume’s chin and tilted her head to meet her gaze. The desire she held for him at this moment was etched clear as day on her face as she breathed heavily, skin flushed and damp with slick sweat. Lance decidedly kissed her hard and began to gently thrust into her. With a relieved sigh, Miume opened her hips more to accept him and wrapped her legs around him. She let out soft mewls as he sank into her completely, her walls tightening around him.

“Ah, yes,” Miume purred as Lance began to set up a rhythm, the gentle thrusts becoming quicker and more desperate. Lance had craned his neck down to pepper her collar with wet kisses as he set their rhythm. Miume wrapped her arms around his back and dug her claws in tightly, raking down his bare flesh with each thrust. She wanted him even closer, she needed him closer than physically possible. This desire within burned so fiercely as she felt the immense pleasurable pressure amplify with every thrust as she was pushed back into the mattress. Miume’s head began to cloud as she purred and felt herself reaching the tipping point.

Breathing heavily, Lance was watching her every response and reveled in the sounds he was able to get her to make. She inhaled sharply as her breasts bounced in rhythm with every deep thrust and mewled when he nipped and licked her neck. Observing her arousal was doubling his own and he felt himself drowning in pleasure, finding it harder hold on.

“Miume,” he stuttered, “I think I might be close here…” His head grew hazier.

“Please, just a little more,” Miume pleaded, her own arousal almost reaching that edge, the pressure nearing its point. His thrusting became more erratic as Lance approached his own climax first against his will. Miume sensed this and decided to be kind to this heavenly boy. She cupped his face with her hands and whispered lavishly, “I only want you, Lance, please, only you,” then kissed him hard.

And that was just the final push Lance was desperate for as he felt the fire that pooled low in his abdomen release and the world dissolved into pleasure.

Feeling the pulsating aftershocks of Lance cumming inside her and his sinful sigh into her neck, Miume finally felt the immense fiery pleasure erupt from within her as she came seconds later, her body tensing around Lance as she dug into his back again to ground herself from the shockwaves of ecstasy.

Panting heavily, Lance lifted his head to look into Miume’s eyes that were glazed over with dreamy satisfaction. He leaned in to kiss her and she accepted him without resistance still feeling breathless and lightheaded. She smiled and purred when he lifted his head to break the kiss.
Completely spent, Lance rolled off of Miume and landed softly to her right, breath still ragged and recovering. Miume remained in her position panting gently, flushed and smiling widely. Lance turned his head to her and placed his hand on her face to direct her gaze towards him.

“Look, babe, I didn’t wanna be that guy who taps out early but…. I’m fur-eaking exhausted.,” he joked in a tired voice and laughed. It had been a long night and their little romantic escapade completely wiped Lance out.

Miume erupted in laughter and placed her hand over his, nuzzling it, “I don’t blame you, Lance, don’t worry.” She smiled and kissed his hand. “You did quite well. I was im-purr-essed,” she teased.

“Kittencakes, I’m de-fur-nitely the most im-purr-essive guy mew’ll ever know,” he replied in full confidence and winked at her. His cat puns were getting worse and worse, and she loved every moment of it. This boy was going to be the death of her, whether she wanted to admit it or not.

Miume continued to laugh and Lance smiled lovingly at her, just being satisfied in making her laugh at his corny jokes. She let out a yawn with a small mewling noise which completely melted Lance’s heart, “I get it, I’ve completely exhausted you as well. What can I say, I’ve got that manpower huh?” he smirked smugly at her, but yawned at the end.

“Oh, sure, that’s it. Definitely not the mission on top of all of our fun,” she replied sarcastically, smiling and turning over. Miume pressed herself against his bare body, her tails flicking his face before coiling around the two. Lance scoffed lightly, placing an arm under his head and wrapping his other arm around her waist. He nuzzled into the back of her head, breathing in her hair and exhaling long and hard. Miume’s ears twitched from the breeze and he smiled harder.

She grabbed the covers and pulled them up over the two of them when Lance protested, “Whoah, what’re you doing? It’s hot in here!”

“You sure that’s not just you?” Miume used his own corniness against him. He let out a small laugh. She continued to cover them, “Besides, I like to sleep with covers on so we’re sleeping with the covers on!”

“Oh, okay, whatever you say, kittens,” Lance mocked defeat and gave her a tight squeeze before closing his eyes for a final time.

Miume smiled to herself already reminiscing about the events already when she caught her breath quickly. She just had sexual relations with a member of the Voltron team. And with the one member she told herself she wasn’t going to do anything more than tease with. Well, then again, it’s not like this was anything more than just a fun night. They were adults and could share a sexy fun night without any strings attached right? Yes, this was nothing more than a fun adult sleepover, she thought trying to convince herself. Yet laying there, breathing in sync with this boy, she couldn’t fight the warm and pleasant feeling bubbling inside her. She decided she’d deal with it later and enjoy the moment as it was fur meow.
The first thing I was aware of was his even breathing then the warmth of his body tangled through mine. Moaning, I nestled farther into his warmth, my cheek nuzzling his chest and moving closer to him. Our legs were tangled, my arm draped over his broad chest, moving in tune with his breathing. I felt his hand flex against my exposed stomach making me jump just a little.

Keith groaned in his sleep, shifting his legs slightly, “morning.” He breathed in a tired voice, kissing the top of my head.

“Morning,” I yawned back, not wanting to move from his warm embrace.

“Sleep well?” He asked, his thumb rubbing the skin of my stomach as he tried to wake up.

“Mhmm,” I hummed against his chest, feeling completely at ease. “I didn’t have nightmares for the first time.”

“No nightmares?” Keith repeated, rubbing his eye with his other hand and trying not to jostle me too much.

“No, I think your aura helps me sleep,” I explained. I stretched my legs between his and felt my joints pop.

“Mmm, that’s good,” he yawned then scrunched his face in annoyance. “I have makeup on my face,” he commented, looking at his hand that was held over our heads. I rolled over just enough to look upwards to inspect it and sure enough black glittery makeup had rubbed off on him. I rubbed my own cheek realizing I never took off the makeup Miume had put on me.

“How does this come off?” I wiped my cheek again with more force but the glitter didn’t seem to be going anywhere.

Keith shrugged, laying his hand back down and taking a deep breath. I could feel his aura hesitating. I glanced up at him. His face was pressed into my hair and his eyes were closed. He sighed a final time before moving his hand from my stomach and up to my hand resting on his chest.

“We should probably get up before someone tries to wake us up.” He suggested in an irritated tone, most likely hinting at Pidge.

I sighed, allowing my eyes to close as I slowly sat up. My hair had come undone and acted like a knotted blanket around me now. Rubbing my eyes I frowned as my hand came back stained with black and blue. I heard Keith chuckle under his breath as he sat up.

“What?” I asked, giving him a confused look.
“You’ve got that after-party smudged makeup look,” he laughed, gently wiping the soft skin under my eye to try and remove it.

“That what?” It was too early for new vocabulary.

“It just means you slept in makeup and it’s smudged. It’s kinda cute,” he explained, smiling at me sleepily. I felt myself blush as I tried to wipe off the rest of the makeup from my eyes with no success.

“Here, close your eyes.” Keith instructed, his voice starting to wake up. I eyed him carefully before closing my eyes and remaining still. I felt him take bottom of my shirt and rub it against my eyelids gently. “There, that’s at least a little better. When we see Miume you can ask her how to get it completely off.” He said, letting go of my shirt.

I opened my eyes, feeling myself blush slightly. He still had one of his legs draped over mine with his left arm supporting his weight while his other arm rested gently across my turned hips, effectively caging me against him. His aura bubbled nervously before he carefully reached up and brushed my hair back exposing my face completely.

Glancing up at him shyly, I eyed the light smudges of black under his eyes. My fingers twitched in my lap as I instinctively felt the urge to help him like he had me. His tired eyes caught the small movement, waiting patiently as I slowly reached up and cupped his cheek in my hand. Closing his dark eyes he remained still as I carefully ran my thumbs under his eyes, trying to get the black from under them. But it only smudged further under my finger. Frowning to myself, I rubbed it once more, getting a small amount of color off at least.

Keith chuckled softly under his breath, slowly opening his eyes to make sure that I was done before I dropped my hands. A new blush flushed across my cheeks as I flicked my eyes away. My heart skipping a beat. What was that just now? Why did I suddenly want to do that?

“Thanks for staying,” He gave me a small smile, waiting until I glanced up at him again to peck me on the lips quickly. Faint red dusted his cheeks and he darted his eyes away, his aura fluttering once before settling back to its familiar steady beat.

I nodded, my face growing hot before I reluctantly climbed out of bed, carefully untangling myself from his embrace and feeling instantly colder.

“I’ll see you at breakfast in a bit.” Keith murmured, standing up and pressing his lips against my forehead before letting me go.

Padding softly into the hallway, I felt strangely at peace. The warmth and serenity of his aura was invigorating and I found myself craving it more and more after every dose. My own aura reached towards his with more ease now, accepting its comforting strength and security. Stepping into my room I smiled, something that once felt impossible to do now feeling more natural. Being with Keith and the rest of the Paladins gave me more confidence and security in my self and the team that I still couldn’t believe was possible. Even the Red Eyes were becoming more familial in a sense, especially Miume. Rubbing my makeup stained cheek again I turned on the shower wondering just how Miume was going to get the rest of this stuff off...

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Miume POV

Smiling in her sleep, Miume cuddled closer to the warm body next to her. Her leg was draped over
his hip and her arm around his stomach, tucked securely into his bare chest. Purring softly to herself, her ear twitched making Lance giggle in his sleep as they tickled his neck.

Slowly she woke up, blinking as his tanned smooth chest came into focus. Were those light scratch marks? Her heart skipped a beat as last night’s memories came flooding back. Oh dear gods, had she gone too far? No, this was just teasing. Simple innocent adult fun. Sighing tiredly, she flicked her tails and noticed they were tangled under the covers like the rest of their bare bodies.

Twitching her ears a final time, she decided it was time to get up and get Lance back to his room before someone came to find them. Smiling a bit, she gently kissed his chest trying to wake him up. She had gotten to his collarbone when he groaned, tightening his arms around her and smiling in his sleep.

“Miume,” He said, his voice thick with sleep.

“It’s time to get up meow,” Miume purred, kissing his collarbone and nuzzling her nose against him, enjoying his intoxicating scent. Lance groaned again in protest, rolling over onto his back and pulling her with him. She felt herself blush as he trapped her against him.

“Lance,” she mewed, reaching up to nibble his ear, “we can’t be seen like this.”

“Five more minutes, kitten.” He pleaded drowsily, still not opening his eyes and tightening his arms around her. Miume’s heart squeezed with happiness. Furballs, even when he was half asleep he was still adorable.

Huffing once, Miume reluctantly pushed against his chest, moving up until she rested on one elbow. She stared down at his sleeping face noting how peaceful he looked. Tenderly, she stroked his cheek trying to coax him awake.

“Mmm,” he hummed, catching her fingers and kissing them. “I could get used to waking up like this, Mrs. Future Blue Lion.” He smiled at her sleepily making Miume’s heart race again. He was reading too far into this and she knew need to shut it down quickly. But he was just so cute! She thought to herself, and I do like him. Wait no, not like that, I don’t like like him. It’s not serious…. Miume sighed, swishing her tails in self conflict she sat up completely, pulling all the blankets around her.

“Hey!” Lance protested, trying to cling to them his eyes fully open now.

“I said, it’s time to get up meow,” Miume gave him a playful smile, wrapping the blankets around her tighter, leaving Lance completely exposed. His face turned bright red as he sat up, wrapping his arms around her and hugging her tightly.

“Alright! I’m up! I’m up! You don’t have to be so mean and take all of the covers.” He whined playfully, making Miume laugh to herself. How is it that he could make her feel this good so early in the morning? And even when she hated waking up from a warm bed?

“Come on, meow, you need to get dressed, shower and get to breakfast before anyone notices.” Miume told him while playfully pushing against his chest. Lance gave her a flirtatious smile, leaning in like he was going to kiss her again.

“Care to join me?” he purred, pulling against the blankets to expose her.

Miume laughed and shook her head, pawing his face away lightly.

“Maybe you need a detox from these charms,” Lance winked, “Too much for you last night?” He
was full of confidence now, flirting easily.

“Pawlease.” Miume rolled her eyes, giving him a sly smile which only made Lance grin more.
“Come on, up and out.” She tried to shoo him away but Lance caught her hand again, kissing it gently before dramatically rolling out of bed. Looking over his shoulder and smirking at her devilishly

“Try not to stare too much.” He taunted as be bent to pick up his clothes.

Miume tried not to laugh as she got out of bed as well keeping the blankets curled around her. “Try not to get caught on the way back.” She teased, running a finger lightly down his exposed spine playfully. He shivered turning around and smiling at her again.

“Careful or I might just not leave.” He warned playfully, stepping forward and quickly pecking her on the cheek.

“Go on.” Miume mewed, pawing at him playfully as he reluctantly walked out of the door looking like a kicked puppy before winking at her and whistling down the hallway. Shaking her head Miume smiled to herself. What was she going to do with him?

Wiping my cheek again with my sleeve I tried to get the remaining glitter off of me but it seemed determined to stay. Sighing, I glared at my now sparkly dark blue sleeve. Even after trying to wipe off the excess makeup under the hot water of the shower it had barely come off. Instead it ran down under my eyes in faded, glittered streaks.

“What’s so great about this if it doesn’t even come off?” I mumbled to myself as I walked into the kitchen. The rest of the team was already slouched around the table, their energies moving just as lethargically as last night after meeting at the clock tower. It had clearly been a long night for everyone. I took a plate of food from Allura who stood in the kitchen looking brighter than the rest of us before taking my spot next to Keith.

“Good morning, my favorite Paladins!” Coran greeted loudly while entering the kitchen. His energy radiated off of him intensely, outshining the dulled ones in the room. “Aren’t you all just a chipper bunch this morning? I take it you all had an eventful evening!”

“Good morning.” Pidge greeted in a sleepy voice, pushing her glasses up and rubbing her eyes. Like me, she also had smudges of black around her eyes with traces of glitter. It looked like she was unsuccessful at getting the makeup off as well.

“Morning.” Hunk replied, trying to sound more awake than he was. His eyelids drooped to a half lidded state as his usually vibrant energy swirled slowly around him in dimmer shades now.

Pidge plopped down heavily on the opposite side of me, staring at me for a moment before taking a bite of green goo and chewing it slowly. I glanced back at her curiously, not sure what she was looking for. The forest green of her aura curled around her in its usual curious pattern, but it was thick with fatigue.

“You still have glitter on you.” She commented, her eyes drifting to Keith who was pointedly ignoring her. “Oh, I see now.” Pidge assumed in a mischievous tone, her brown eyes picking up Keith’s glittering neck. The familiar playful spark returned to her tired eyes as she looked at Miume next, who was sitting at the far end of the table, clearly trying to ignore Lance who was using his old pickup lines again. He sat down comfortably next to her and gave Miume his entire
attention, interacting with her more confidently and intimately. Lance’s makeup was smeared, not as badly as Keith’s or mine, and his hair was still damp from the shower.

“It was a long night for you guys, too, wasn’t it?” She teased, smiling widely at the two. Miume’s ears and tails twitched nervously in unison. Pidge had already guessed what happened and she had only taken two bites of food? Great. Sighing, Miume finished her food and pushed it away from her. Lance continued to eat happily, either unaware of or not caring for Pidge’s remarks.

“It was a long night for everyone.” Shiro summed up, entering the dining area and missing what Pidge was getting at. “Miume, were you able to negotiate with the group you met?” He asked, looking at her from across the table as he sat down heavily in his chair.

“Ah, yes,” Miume reported, sitting up a little straighter. “They wish to meet with us again tonight outside the city at sundown. They request proof, of course, that we are truly associated with the Paladins of Voltron, therefore we must bring at least one of the lions as evidence.”

Shiro nodded, “Our group requested that too. If we are far enough away from the city, after sundown should be fine. We’ll take Pidge’s lion since it has the cloaking device and it’s best to remain secretive.”

“I agree,” Allura stated from behind the kitchen counter. “It is best to remain hidden from Zarkon’s spies. The less he knows about our location, the better.”

“Excellent. I do need to go back to the markets today and get some medical supplies.” Miume announced, placing her elbow on the table and resting her chin on her hand. “Do we have anything on the agenda today specifically?”

“Other than meeting with the two groups again, no.” Shiro replied, looking to Allura and Coran then across our faces, “I guess today is a break day since Kara isn’t here.”

“Did you say break?!” Hunk brightened up immediately, his aura blossoming around him.

“Yes, but be careful. We don’t know this planet well.” Shiro reminded him in a cautioned tone.

“The city actually changes during the day.” Miume informed, her tails flowing behind her attentively, “It’s still not super safe purr-say, but it’s not as dangerous as at night. I would still recommend against wearing your Paladin uniforms, though. The planet turns into more of an older market that isn’t as seedy as it is at night, but still not exactly safe. It serves as more of a trading center, if you will. Most of the buildings are shut down or converted into other spaces during the day.”

“Really?” Lance asked, smiling wide at her and looking hopeful. Miume nodded matter-of-factly, trying to ignore the eager look in Lance’s eyes. She knew exactly what he thinking.

“It’s a fairly simple layout, however if you do happen to get lost, just ask for the giant clock tower and someone should point you in the right direction for free.” Miume explained, flicking her tails in satisfaction.

“Alright, if you choose to go out, you should go out in pairs.” Shiro instructed while crossing his arms.

“Perhaps we could do some scultrite shopping! Pidge, care to join the escapades once more?” Coran beamed at the small green Paladin.

“Nope, I’ve had enough of that place for now. I’m going to try and analyze that info Miume gave
me about the Zarkon prisoners.” Pidge stated while standing up and still looking tired.

“Will there be a food court?” Hunk piped up from the side, looking at Miume with hopeful, sparkling eyes.

Miume furrowed her brows and grimaced timidly in reply.

“Maybe a state of the art video chip for the new scanner I’m working on?” He tried again, “I need it to project things holographically but all the pixels don’t render properly without something gen six or higher.”

“Ah, I doubt it. It’s more of a rustic trading center.” Miume replied sheepishly and gave him a small apologetic smile.

“Welp, then I’m not interested.” Hunk decided, leaning back and crossing his arms over his chest. He knew he had nothing of value to trade for whatever alien ingredients or older scrap parts were down there. Nor did he particularly want to get into a bidding war with another alien.

“Do you want to go look around?” Keith asked softly, turning his head over to me. I looked at him before nodding. It did sound interesting, but going back on that planet with all the mingling energies, loud sounds, and claustrophobic streets made me feel anxious.

“Shiro, you coming?” Keith called out, glancing back at their leader.

“Maybe in a bit. Is there any chance of finding more anti-Zarkon groups in the daylight?” He questioned Miume who still appeared to be lost in thought.

Miume twitched her ears pensively, “Maybe, but it would be in the darker parts of the city.” She said after a moment.

Shiro nodded, “I’ll go with you in a bit, Coran. Allura, you can come too if you want. I’d like to come up with a solid meeting plan before tonight.”

“Sounds good, Shiro,” Allura replied as she took a seat next to him.

Miume nodded, standing up and stretching, “Well, if we want to go without changing completely, it’s best to go while there is plenty of daylight.”

“It’s a date.” Lance smiled, standing up and quickly following Miume to the edge of the room. He almost ran into her back when she turned around to face me again.

“Umi, are you coming?” She gave me a hopeful look. Her rosy energy twirled around her before reaching out towards mine like an outstretched hand.

I glanced at Keith who shrugged, as if leaving the decision up to me. Pausing for a beat, I felt an unusual spark of curiosity run through me. There was still so many things I hadn’t seen yet, and even though the planet had an overwhelming ocean of energies, maybe it would be different during the day. And if Miume was going down, then it would be okay, right? What if she needed protection? I couldn’t let her go alone and risk something happening to her. Even if Lance was with her, he didn’t have his bayard or armor, leaving him nearly defenseless if something were to happen. After silently debating with myself, I finally stood up and strode over to Miume who was
waiting for me with a small smile.

“Aw, come on. You guys are totally going to kill our date vibe.” Lance complained as he glared at Keith who had followed my lead.

“This isn’t a date.” Miume chided, looking flatly at him, “I am getting medical supplies then coming back. Purr-ly business.”

Lance sighed dramatically and slouched, “Can we at least do something later? In private? Together?” He whined but she ignored him purposefully, swishing her tails behind her.

“We are okay to go out looking like this? No more dress up, right?” Keith questioned, looking down at his usual red jacket black shirt and pants.

“Yes, but I advise against keeping your small pocket knife here, or more hidden. Some of them have light hands.” Miume cautioned with a smile, eying the knife strapped to the back of his belt.

Keith nodded in acknowledgment, slipping the knife from its holder and putting it on the inside of his coat.

After making our way to the spare pod hanger, we all piled into one small ship with just enough space for the four of us. Lance immediately called dibs on the controls, his energy flashing around him as he grinned back at Miume who rolled her eyes and diverted her attention out the windshield.

Carefully we descended back down to the planet. The thick smog still masked the buildings below as the golden honey sun washed over it turning the murky clouds into a fogged ocean that the top most layer glinted back at us. Reflecting the sun’s rays like a mirror, the light nearly blinded us as Lance gradually maneuvered us downwards. The orangey color lessened with each story we passed before the smog was too thick for the sun to penetrate through, leaving us in murky, dirty white clouds.

Breaking through the final layer of heavy smog my eyes widened as I took in the scene before me. The pulsating, lively city from last night had an entirely different energy now. It was as if we were on a completely different planet.

There was no booming music vibrating the ship, nor flashing multicolor lights lining the mismatched buildings. Their metallic faces were bare, uninviting, and cold. Their rusted structures were more apparent in the shadowed light from above. Instead of lights distinguishing buildings, now it seemed that they were determined by the peeling paint that clung to the steely buildings. Long curls of rusted metal and paint broke away from the main body and threatened to snap loose.

“Whoah.” Keith breathed, placing a hand on the back of the control chair and eyeing the city around us.

“It really is a different place.” Lance commented, directing us down into the makeshift bay from last night. Its unsteady structure saughtered into the outer part of the city, extending out over a wide canyon of dark churning mist. Its color hid the canyons depths and whatever lied beneath it.

“It’s not anymore comforting during the day.” Keith mumbled under his breath, cautiously leaning over the edge of the metal slat we had parked at, just enough to see the rolling mist beneath us.

“You can say that again.” Lance agreed before taking a step back away from the edge.

“Boys.” Miume’s sharp voice cut through their distraction. Their eyes snapped back to her as her tails swished behind her in mild annoyance.
“Coming!” Lance sang out, skipping across the rickety floor as quickly as he dared.

Peeking down beneath us, I watched the clouds curiously. The energy beneath it barely moved, almost as if there was nothing but an oblivion of air under us.

“Umi.” Keith called my name gently, his hand finding mine. He tugged me towards the others as Miume made her way to the city entrance.

As we neared the bustling city, I felt my aura prickle in anxiety. The energy from before had completely changed; it’s dark tendrils of onix changed into a less intense hue, which felt a bit more welcoming and less menacing than under the shadow of night.

Taking a final calming breath, Keith and I stepped out into the bustling street. Its constricted alleyways were still crammed with aliens of all shapes and sizes. However, they had changed out the elaborate costumes of the night for more plain and neutral toned loose clothing that trailed behind them like flags in the wind.

The broken down markets from before were still alive and cluttered. Ragged drapes of fabric strung across their posts as a variety of interesting trinkets dangled from the supports. Their shop keepers loudly called out over one another, trying to draw more of a crowd to their stand as they proudly displayed their goods.

A light breeze blew through the narrow alley, kicking up small trails of dust as its appalling smells brushed past me. Wrinkling my nose I squinted my eyes. It was a different scent than before, but still pungent enough to make my eyes water.

Glancing upwards, I felt an uneasy knot settle in my stomach. I could feel the energies of living beings moving throughout the stacked structures, but their windowless faces concealed whatever might lay inside. The skeletal remains of the towers moaned quietly as they swayed unsteadily from side to side.

“Whoah,” Keith mumbled to himself, looking around, “I wouldn’t have even guessed we were here last night.”

“That’s the point! It makes it safer for transactions.” Miume stated matter-of-factly, looking over her shoulder as her tails swished in self satisfaction.

“You just know everything don’t you?” Lance gushed, flashing her a smile again. Miume giggled, her eyes rolling and continued down the even narrower street. Their auras mingled almost fluidly with less resistance than before.

Keith huffed, shaking his head in annoyance as he followed the two towards the clock tower again. I let him tug me behind him, my eyes curiously scanning the new scenery around us. Some of the once towering structures had seemed to reshape themselves. Their walls slid downwards and across, somehow connecting to an opposite building before stacking upwards again. The new shapes of the buildings restructured the layout of the city entirely creating a new, unknown maze completely different from last night. How could the buildings move? I thought they weren’t supposed to change shape, like the castle.

Keith stopped abruptly in front of me, causing me to nearly run into him before I peered around his tall frame. Miume stood in front of a familiar looking clock structure, only it’s once glowing face wasn't illuminated and the pulsing music from its base was silenced. It towered in front of us like an immobile statue rather than a moving piece of art.
“If anyone gets lost, meet here at three o’clock. That allots us three hours of wandering. If we aren’t all here by that time then I’ll go and try to find you. I am trusting you to have enough common sense to not go into the places that clearly are not meant for uninvited guests.” Miume instructed clearly, turning around to face us. Her red eyes landed on each person in front of her to check that we understood her clearly before her face softened as she smiled directly at me. “Um, kitten, would you like to accompany me to the herb store? I think you might like it.” She proposed, stepping forward and swiftly taking my free hand. I blinked, looking at her then back at Keith, who looked disappointed with his energy flattening around him.

“Sorry, Keith. I am borrowing her for a bit. You boys go entertain yourselves and try not to piss anyone off.” Miume chimed, looking coyly between them before jerking me forward, away from Keith. She laced her arm through mine and hastily walked off in the opposite direction before the males behind us had time to process her actions.

“Miume?” I asked, stumbling a few steps as I tried to match her sudden quick pace. Glancing back my eyes met Keith’s. He had taken a few steps in our direction then stopped, the fiery nature of his aura flickering uneasily around him now. Lance’s voice drifted through the loud noise of the aliens around us, muffling his disappointed cry. I saw him and Keith watch us anxiously as we disappeared into the changing crowd.

“Is it okay just to leave them?” I wondered, catching my footing to catch up to Miume who was striding away quickly with purpose.

“Oh, they’ll be fine. Besides, I wanted some time with you!” She chimed, her ears twitching happily as her rosey energy bubbled around us; “I do a-paw-logize for taking you away from Keith though.” She added, giving me an apologetic smile.

I shook my head, not really sure what to say. I was sad that Keith wasn’t close, but I could still feel his aura wrapped around me faintly from this morning, making me feel a bit more secure.

Miume slowed our walking pace and let me look inquisitively through the various stalls around us. My arm subconsciously tightened around hers as my eyes rapidly scanned the continuously changing surroundings. There were so many things I had never seen before. Its content was a bit overwhelming to take in all at once as the energies around us started to cave in on my own, but Miume’s calm energy helped me to relax. Aliens were calling out over the chattering masses trying to draw in customers as the loud commotion surrounded us like the music had last night. With hesitant curiosity, I let the energies around us slowly wash over mine. Picking through their mash of colors, I tried to decipher the different emotions as the aliens bargained with each other. There was so much I didn’t know, didn’t understand. The surge of new information started to overstimulate me before Miume pulled us to a halt, drawing my attention back to her solid energy.

“Ah hah, here we are.” Miume proclaimed, her aura bubbling happily. I focused on the scene before me, letting the physical world filter back into view. We stood at the entrance of a white rusted building. It wasn’t as tall as the others, but the building next to it had moved onto this one’s roof before extending skyward. Its tattered cloth curtains flapped against the changing air as aliens bustled past it. The crusted black ink painted foreign symbols across it folding over itself. Unfamiliar smells wafted out of its doorless frame, but they weren’t rancid like the streets’ around us.

“This place has all the best herbs we need right meow,” Miume explained happily, smiling at me again before pulling me inside underneath the frayed cloth.

Blinking a few times, I tried to adjust to the sudden change in light. The room was blindingly dark in contrast to the stark brightness outside. The only source of light was what could seep through the
open frame we had walked through. Its natural color changed with the cloth door’s movements from the air currents. After a few beats I slowly lifted my eyes to assess the area around us. We had entered a narrow, high-ceiling room with slanted metal slats meeting to a point in the center of the space. Different plants curled over the cool metal and dangling down just above our heads. Their small tendrils blew lightly in the wind and a few with budding flowers dispersed small puffs of white pollen as they were disturbed. Thin metal shelves lined every available space on the wall towering up higher than I could reach without climbing on something. Its contents were filled with different shaped bottles, pots, or bushels of organic-like energies. A strong scent of various perfumed herbs mixed in the dusty air, the intensity making me cough uneasily as my eyes trailed across the multicolored vegetation.

“Miume, is that you my child?” An aged voice called out from behind a worn metal desk.

“Lugar!” Miume called out, her ears and tails perking up happily as she stepped up to the desk and beamed.

“Why, it’s been so long. What do you need my dear?” The voice asked warmly, cracking slightly with age. A tall alien leaned forward from the shadows. Their aura had been so calm I had barely noticed them since it melted into the wafting energies of the plants surrounding us seamlessly. As the alien leaned into the filtering light its massive, yet slender, stature was revealed. Pale, wrinkled skin showed through a thin layer of patched snow white hair that draped across her slender body. Two overly long arms folded onto the desk neatly and frail looking fingers intertwined as chipped yellow-black nails glinted when the sun hit just right. She smiled a cracked smile, her grey-white eyes looking gentle under silky white hair that was tied back into a loose ponytail before cascading downwards. Her oval-shaped face was a more peachy shade than her pale skin, well worn with aged lines that crinkled upwards as she smiled down at us.

“It has been quite some time, yes? I simply need the usual.” Miume returned her warmth, placing a hand on the alien’s with familiarity.

“Of course,” Lugar replied before her eyes traveled to me, “and you have a guest.” I stiffened under her soft steady gaze.

“Ah, yes! This is a new comrade of mine. She’s associated with the Paladins of Voltron, and is very dear to me. Her name is Umi.” Miume introduced, smiling warmly and looking back at me. I tensed, not sure what to do but nodded carefully making sure to keep my eyes trained on Lugar’s impressive frame.

“Don’t be afraid, child. I mean no harm. I am also working against Zarkon through medicine, like darling Miume,” Lugar said softly before slowly moving over to the rows of shelves opposite of the desk. Her motions were measured and labored, as if they took a great deal of effort. Yet her steps were graceful and her energy barely rippled in reaction to her movements. I felt my eyes widen in amazement. I had never seen such an elegant energy before.

“She’s been helping us for what feels like Ears in acquiring the medical supplies to aid in working on the affected planets,” Miume explained, leaning against the desk easily and taking a deep breath. Her aura was so calm, a placid pink rolling off of her languidly. This place must be relaxing for her. I nodded again, trying to relax too, but the mixture of herbal scents was starting to make me feel lightheaded.

“Are you feeling ill, Umi?” Lugar inquired, glancing over her thin shoulder at me. I blinked. How did she know? Had I become too off guard and easy to read?

“Ah, is it all the fragrances? I know the powerful aromas can be a bit overwhelming if you’re not
used to such things initially,” Miume inferred, giving me a concerned look but I shook my head then looked down unsure of what to do with myself.

“If you have time, I’ll make some tea,” Lugar offered, placing a few vials of various looking herbs down on the desk next of Miume. Her tails swished in excitement as she examined them lovingly before carefully placing them inside her coat.

“Tea would be most wonderful, thank you,” Miume accepted, placing a few weathered brass colored coins on the table.

Lugar disappeared behind a tattered curtain for a moment before returning with three steaming chipped porcelain cups.

“Thank you, my fa-fur-ite!” Miume chimed, taking a cup and inhaling deeply as her ears twitched happily. “Here Umi.” She held out the other cup for me. I looked at it warily before taking it in both of my hands. The light green liquid had violet petals floating lazily in its warmth. It had a soothing aroma, one that I had never smelled before but still somehow calmed my nerves. Sniffing it tentatively, the warm steam washed over my face before I took a small sip my eyes widened. It was delicious!

“Good, huh?” Miume smirked, leaning against the counter again and sipping her tea happily. I nodded, taking another sip, my dizziness starting to fade.

“It’s an old, well loved remedy to help ease the dizziness and over stimulation of the senses.” Lugar explained, leisurely slipping her own cup. I glanced at her from over the chipped rim of my cup and noticed her aura was a soft white. It twinkled almost delicately around the room touching all of the herbs in a protective manner. Her energy blended into the slow curls of the vegetative ones around us.

“I appreciate all you do for us, Lugar.” Miume turned her attention back to the elderly alien, “I am sorry that we can’t stay for longer. I need to go pick up two other humans before they start something.”

“It’s alright, my child. Come by again when you have the chance.” Lugar gave us a tender smile, sipping her tea contently. Miume smiled a bit and nodded, finishing her tea.

“Ready?” she asked me. I nodded, handing her my now empty cup. “Thank you again. We’ll come visit soon.” Miume waved before stepping back out into the grey-toned sunlight.

“Her aura was so soothing.” I commented quietly as Miume laced her arm through mine again as we entered the crowded street before us.

“She is a very kind being.” Miume cooed, looking more at ease than before. I nodded in agreement, feeling more calm myself as she directed us towards the next destination. The ocean of energies around us didn’t feel as intense as before. The force didn’t clashing as harshly with mine as they did earlier and instead slipped past us easily, allowing us to blend into the unknown masses.
“Aw come on!” Lance whined, staring after Miume and Umi as they walked away from the two males under the enormous clock tower quickly. “This was supposed to be a date!” he stomped his foot and huffed in disappointed frustration.

“Dude, this wasn’t ever a date.” Keith gave him an annoyed look before his attention drifted back to Umi. She had glanced back at him, her eyes worried, and the sight made his chest tighten uncomfortably. He had been hoping to spend more time with her, but Miume had promptly vetoed that idea… and she seemed more than happy about it too.

“Well, I guess if I’m stuck with you we could at least go explore.” Lance remarked, whipping around to look at Keith optimistically.

“Or we could just wait here.” Keith replied, folding his arms over his chest and leaning against the clock.

“Dude, boring.” Lance sassed, “You wanna lean against a clock for three hours when we could be discovering so many new things? Like clothes, maybe a fly watch, perhaps some knives?” He wiggled his eyebrows and accentuated the last word, “Come on, Keith! I bet there’s some cool stuff here.” He jumped up eagerly.

“No thanks,” Keith retorted, looking away from Lance and into the moving mass of aliens.

“No thanks,” Keith retorted, looking away from Lance and into the moving mass of aliens.

“Keith! Miume said we can’t wander around alone.” Lance whined, “I don’t like being stranded either, but who knows how long they will take!”

Keith sighed in aggravation his dark eyes hardening as he meet Lance’s hopeful ones. “If I agree to go, then you only talk when spoken to, and I decide which direction.”

“Alright fine! I didn’t want to talk to you much anyway,” Lance retorted, pulling his hands behind his head and strutting off in the opposite direction. Keith groaned, stuffing his hands in his pockets and reluctantly following the other male, already irritated that Lance wasn’t complying to his stipulation.

Wandering aimlessly down a few alleyways, the two found themselves quickly consumed by the towering apocalyptic-like structures surrounding them. Lance enthusiastically sprang from one stall to the next, his eyes wide with curious wonder as he took in the vast array of alien goods. His demeanor was open and hungry to see all there was to offer in the tight streets, while Keith kept his distance, eyeing the stands carefully and visibly grimacing at some of Lance’s actions and reactions to vendors.

“Keith, can you chill a bit? Your vibe is scaring off people.” Lance chided, coming back to stand next to him as his eyes still wandered across the buildings.
“Well, excuse me for not wanting to be here,” Keith grumbled under his voice before he was suddenly being dragged behind Lance. “Dude, what are you doing? Get off of me!” Keith protested, trying to rip his arm from Lance’s grip as his boots caught on the uneven ground.

“No way, we gotta check this out!” Lance yelled gleefully, his eyes lighting up in excitement. “I knew my ears didn’t fail me!” He pulled them into a towering blue building, its blacked out windowed door was propped open by a large rock that had a white spray painted circle on its lumpy face.

“What are you talking about?” Keith asked in an annoyed voice, finally ripping his arm from Lance’s hand as they entered a darkened building, the sounds of loud beeping and ringing echoing towards them.

“I can’t believe they have one!” Lance continued, practically running down the narrow hallway.

“Have what?” Keith called after him before sighing and jogging after him.

Catching up to Lance’s eagerly bouncing figure, he tried to comprehend his excited rambling. Keith crossed his arms over his chest as his eyes gradually adjusted to the dim lighting of the large space in front of them. He squinted and blinked rapidly in disbelief then shot a brief skeptical look at Lance as he took in what appeared to be an old school arcade found on Earth. Chipped machines with flickering lights and faded paint crowded the space in front of them as speckled sets of aliens played on the noisy game consoles.

“They have an arcade!” Lance turned to Keith, grinning widely and bouncing enthusiastically.

A flicker of temptation flashed in Keith’s eyes for a second before he stifled the feeling almost instantly. “No way,” He refused in a flat tone, not wanting to get closer to the buzzing sounds and flickering lights in the maze of aged machines. He darted his eyes around in an attempt to resist the spark of interest within him. They should be looking for supplies or something useful, and not wasting time playing games. But, did he really see a shooting game?

“Oh, come on. Just one game. Look! They even have a shooting game!” Lance begged, throwing a hand out dramatically and hunching over.

“No.” Keith repeated, folding his arms over his chest again and widening his stance. He tried to ignore the distinct sticking sensation of the grimy floors clinging to his soles. The longer they stayed the more Keith became aware of an unpleasant musty smell clouding around them.

“What, scared I’d kick your butt?” Lance taunted, raising an eyebrow slyly and straightening his stance. He knew Keith could be pretty anti-social, but who could resist playing something that felt so close to home? And Lance could practically see Keith trying to resist the temptation of relaxed competition.

Keith eyed Lance warily, “Like you could... I just don’t want to waste my time on these. We should go back and see if they are waiting for us.” He knew it had been maybe an hour, but what if they finished finding what Miiume needed? Maybe he could take Umi around and explore on their own like he initially wanted to. They could find rare knives or maybe something to help them train better. Maybe something she’d like to just have?

“Sounds to me like you’re scared. It’s a natural feeling, I get it, since I am the team’s sharp shooter and it’s my specialty. But you know, I bet you I can win against anything you try.” Lance teased, folding his arms over his puffed out chest in a friendly challenging manner.
“Like it would even be a competition.” Keith retorted, his eyes narrowing as he leaned towards Lance in an aggressive stance.

“Well then, why don’t you prove it!” Lance pounded his own chest with his fist confidently, squaring his shoulders and striding further into the dark arcade. Then he paused and barely turned his head over his shoulder to look Keith directly in the eye, “Unless you’re too chicken.”

“You’re on.” Keith finally took the bait, shoving Lance’s shoulders before his eyes landed on the shooting game he had noticed earlier.

“As if you could take on the sharp shooter.” Lance boasted as the two males arrived at the retro first-person shooter game. He swiftly grabbed the attached blue plastic pistol, spun it once unsuccessfully, then pressed start. “Sweet, free to play!”

“Eat your words.” Keith growled through a competitive smirk. He took the magenta gun that was just as weathered as the first and assumed a defensive stance, flexing his fingers over the trigger a few times to adjust to the sweat stained toy.

The machine’s fogged over screen flickered to life as it became engulfed in bright lights. Targets darted across the screen and corresponding blue and magenta crosshairs traced them with precision and agility. After a few minutes of rapid blasting noises and taunts between the two males, the screen blackened and magenta colored text in a block-like foreign language dominated the screen.

“Uh, does this mean you win?” Lance surmised while using the handle of his gun to scratch the side of his head.

The game continued to flash as red dots blinked on and off around the left side of the screen. Keith gave Lance a triumphant smirk, “Told you,” he shrugged, holding the toy gun over his shoulder while planting his other hand on his cocked hip.

“Beginner’s luck!” Lance protested, slamming his hand down on the golden start button between the split screens again. He couldn’t help the small smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth from the playful fury of competition.

“Get ready to lose again.” Keith grinned, his voice competitive. His body dropped its previously guarded demeanor as he slipped into a more relaxed stance now. He remained unwilling to admit that he was starting to have fun, and fun with Lance at that.

The two stood there for who knows how long, yelling and lightly shoving each other as they were consumed by the game. The dim room concealed how much time was actually passing until a bulging green alien appeared next to their machine. One set of slimy tentacle arms crossed over its uneven frame as its sides rippled over themselves while the other tentacles made shooing motions. The residual ectoplasmic goop dripped onto the floor and melted into the grimy material. What appeared to be a mouth gurgled a foreign language at them as its beady black eyes narrowed in what they could only guess was annoyance at the incompetent humans before it.

“Closing time?” Lance sheepishly smiled, his voice light as he glanced at Keith for confirmation. The low rumbling and bubbling sounds escaping the creature before them caused his face to suddenly drain.

“Oh god, they are going to kill us.” Keith mumbled plainly but quickly as he shoved the gun back in its damaged holster and hastily made a break for outside. Lance kept pace right behind him as the game master’s angered gurgles faded into the background and they sprinted into the now shadowed alleyway. The sun’s watery rays slid down the towering buildings, casting long dark
fingers that threatened to grab their feet as the males made their way back to the the clock sculpture as fast as their legs could propel them. The quiet sounds of music humming in the background faintly bounced off the walls as vendors pulled their ripped rags over their stalls closing them for business for the day.

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“Umi, do you feel their energies?” Miume asked again, pacing in front of me nervously. Her tails swished uncomfortably as her pink aura bristled around her.

“There are so many energies here. I can’t really tell.” I admitted in a worried voice. Stepping up onto the rim of the clock tower’s base, I glancing out over the crowd again trying to use the extra height to my advantage. “All I can tell is that they are getting closer from that direction.” I pointed to the left at a horde of morphing figures.

Keith’s aura was still the easiest for me to see. I had followed a faint trail of his crimson energy mixed with cool blue through the changing masses as best I could. But the constant mixing of auras made the colors distorted and hard to focus on.

Miume’s tails continued to swish anxiously as she stood on tiptoe, steadying herself on my arm while scouring the crowd with her red eyes to find them. We had been sitting at the clock tower’s base for about two hours now. Miume didn’t want to leave me alone as she went to search for them, but also didn’t want the boys to show up at an empty meeting place and go look for us, resulting in everyone getting lost. As more time passed, the more anxious she became and was conflicted on whether to leave me to search for the boys or wait together.

“I’m fur-eaking out a bit, Umi, I’m not kitten... seriously what happened to them!” Miume hissed in a strained voice, coming to sit next to me as I stepped down from my perch. Her tails hadn’t stop moving after the first hour had passed.

“I don’t know. Their energies don’t seem hurt though.” I tried to reassure her nervous energy and sat quietly next to her as she fidgeting with her hands in her lap. Biting my lip, I glanced at her twisting hands, my fingers twitching open and pulling back once before I slowly placed my hand over hers. Miume’s energy jumped from my uncommon action before she quickly clasped our hands together, squeezing them.

“They better be fine. What the hell are they doing?” She mumbled, looking out into the crowd again, her aura spiking anxiously again as her ears twitched. Shifting my weight, I tried to control the strange emotion of worry that started to bubbling in my stomach. Why was I worried for someone who could take care of himself? It’s not like he wasn’t competent or a skilled fighter. But not being close enough to directly help made my heart flutter in foreign nervousness.

Suddenly, a flicker of crimson broke through the ocean of energies around us, its vibrancy shining through with anxious familiarity as it quickly pushed through the surrounding masses. Perking up, the thin bonds connecting us pulled against my chest as I turned my head in the direction that they tugged. His aura seemed more frantic now, and I noticed Lance’s cool blue anxiously twisting next to his as they came closer. My body rose before I realized that I had stood up, my hand still gripped by Miume as I turned my full body towards them. Were they okay? I couldn’t tell. There were so many energies mixing around me, blurring the emotions too closely together.

“Miume!” Lance’s voice broke through the ones around us, making her spring up as well, her ears flying forward in attention.

“Lance!” she cried in relief as they emerged from the crowd. The two were panting and leaned
forward onto their knees as they attempted to catch their breath.

“Sorry to make you wait.” Keith huffed, wiping a gloved hand across his forehead and giving me an apologetic smile. My heart skipped, my aura relaxing around me as his comforting red came fully into focus. He was fine. There were no apparent external wounds, nor did his aura seem damaged. Letting out a quiet breath, I felt my anxiety slowly dissipate as his energy reached forward wrapping around me.

“Aww, were you worried about us?” Lance tried to flirt before Miume gave him a warning look, her ears flattening against her head. He squeaked guiltily in response, backing up as she took a strong step forward.

“Give me your paw!” She demanded, holding her clawed hand out.

“My what?” Lance repeated, his eyebrows pulling together in confusion, but his eyes hinted at fear from her stone glare.

“Ah, I- I mean, your hand! Give me your hand!” she stammered in an aggravated tone, her tails flicking twice behind her.

Cautiously, Lance extended his hand into hers before suddenly yelping and pulling it back as Miume smacked it with enough force to leave a bright, stinging red mark.

“It’s getting dark, you claw-brain! I was worried sick about you!! Do have any idea, any semblance, of how fur-reaking... dangerous it is here at night?” She scolded, her voice softened with each word before as she pulled him into a tight hug. Freezing, Lance’s eyes widened at her sudden embrace, obviously still very confused from the quick change in emotion. But he softened after realizing how concerned she was. His hand still stung from being slapped, but he returned her embrace. His flustered aura calmed down and carefully wrapped around the rosey one next to him in an attempt to silently comfort and apologize. When she pulled back from their hug, her attention immediately snapped towards Keith. Her red eyes narrowed as she glared at him and he tensed his shoulders.

“And you! What’re you doing? Go on, hug Umi! She was worried about you too!” She scolded, moving her hand in a dismissive motion before taking Lance’s in her other one and dragging him away. “And don’t get lost!” She called over her shoulder as she marched away, still scolding Lance.

Lance looked over his shoulder and smirked at Keith, “Follow your heart!” He called out in a sing-song voice before crying out in pain as Miume smacked him upside the head again.

I stared after them in confusion and not sure what to do. Did people usually hug to make up for worrying someone? Was it that obvious that I was nervous that Keith hadn’t been at the meeting spot on time? The thought of Keith’s arms around me, his strong aura securing mine against his, made me blush. Glancing away quickly, I tried to control my energy as Keith’s bubbled hesitantly next to me.

“Sorry for making you worry.” He said in a sheepish tone, rubbing the back of his neck before looking towards me timidly.

My eyes found the ground and I played with the ends of my oversized sleeves. “I’m glad you’re alright.” I confessed in a quiet voice before freezing. His arms wrapped around me and his chin rested on the top of my head. Exhaling loudly, his chest relaxed against mine and his aura returned to its usual rhythmic patterns.
“I’m really sorry, Umi. I’ll try not to do it again. Lance dragged me into some stupid place and we lost track of time.” He murmured, his voice barely audible over the increasing sounds of music and commotion around us. We stood like this for another beat before he sighed once more and let his arms drop from around me, but not before his hand found mine. He squeezed it gently once before his dark eyes finally meet mine. “Let’s get back before it gets any darker.” He gave me another apologetic smile.

I nodded, squeezing his hand back and feeling myself blush even more as he tugged me along. His aura curled around our intertwined hands nervously. He was looking straight ahead, a light blush over his cheeks as he tried to navigate us out of the crowd. We had just reached the edge of the city when the neon lights started to flicker on, the city’s atmosphere changing like the flip of a switch.

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“And where have you guys been?” Shiro reprimanded in a disappointed voice, “It’s almost time to meet with the anti-Zarkon groups and we haven’t even discussed the plan.” He folded his arms over his chest looking down as we stood in the escape pods bay.

“Sorry Shiro,” Keith apologized, trying not to look down, “Lance dragged us into some building and we lost track of time.”

“Dude, don’t blame it all on me! You were part of this too.” Lance protested, glaring at Keith for throwing him under the bus, again.

“You physically grabbed me and pulled me in there!” Keith retorted, giving Lance an annoyed look. The two locked eyes and leaned towards each other staring fiercely like irritated brothers.

“Enough. It doesn’t matter whose fault it is,” Shiro sighed heavily, “Just get changed into your Paladin suits and meet us at the green lion.” He rubbed his face tiredly before walking off.

“Thanks for throwing me under the bus!” Lance sulked, receiving another light smack from Miume who purred almost silently.

“According to you it was your idea,” she said folding her arms over her chest, “but Keith, you did go along with it against better judgement. Therefore, you are both at fault.” Her tone was stern, and her tails rose in exasperation.

Keith and Lance sighed together, apologizing again like scolded children.

“Come on, Umi. Let’s go to the green lion meow. You two, go get changed.” Miume ordered, taking my hand and dragging me away from Keith as we followed Shiro down the hall.

“Seriously, the nerve of those two! I was fur-eaked out.” Miume continued, mostly to herself, in an aggravated tone while pulling me into the green lion’s hanger where the rest of the team was waiting. It’s immense aura was dormant, but still powerful enough for me to feel the great strength the green lion possessed.

“Have a fun date?” Pidge teased in a sing song voice, giving us a sly smile as she dangled her legs from her perch on the green lion’s paw. She was in full Paladin gear as well as Hunk and Shiro.

“It wasn’t a date.” Miume replied with an annoyed undertone. She didn’t appear to be outwardly upset anymore, but her ears pointed backwards to reveal her now hidden irritation.

“But Lance told me it was a double date thing!” Hunk piped up from his spot next to Pidge’s perch on the lion.
“Right? Like that was my impression from his gloating,” Pidge adjusted her glasses and looked to Hunk innocently.

“Guys, focus.” Shiro’s authoritative tone cut through the room. He folded his arms over his chest and looked over our heads as I felt Keith and Lance’s energies approach us. “Finally.” He sighed under his breath as the two emerged in full uniform.

“So, what’s the plan?” Hunk spoke first, looking around the room uneasily. His eyes landed on Miume, who appeared composed but her aura was still fuming and I noticed a deeper red glint to it. His warm brown eyes then shifted to Lance next, who was looking in our direction with an apologetic face while Keith stood stiffly next to him with an emotionless demeanor. The fluttering blues from Lance’s aura contrasted with the still, barely vibrating red from Keith’s that hung to him like a layer of protection. The tension in the room was easy to feel, something happened and it was making Hunk more anxious about the meeting as his aura wavered about him.

Shiro uncrossed his arms and stepped towards the center of the group which was now forming a semi circle around him. “We take the green lion because of its cloaking ability. This will draw the least amount of attention to us, and it’s also the smallest which will make it easier to get in and get out. We’ll talk to the anti-Zarkon groups just outside the city. Coran and I scoped out a place earlier today and found some abandoned buildings that we can take cover behind. The smog and dump-like material on the outskirt of the city should give us enough cover to avoid being noticed. After we make contact with the groups and secure our positions, we’ll explain our mission and make sure both groups can come to an agreement and cooperate with us and themselves to form the alliance.” Shiro explained in an authoritative voice.

“So, we’re just talking?” Lance clarified, putting a hand on his hip, “and not showing off our lions? Or our skills? The power of Voltron?”

“No, we don’t want to draw attention to ourselves if we don’t have to.” Shiro replied, side eyeing him.

Lance sighed, obviously disappointed as his aura dropped around him while Keith’s flared once in mild annoyance.

“Miume, do you have any recommendations?” Shiro questioned, turning over to her. She had straightened herself with her ears pointed up and finally released my arm from her clutches.

“I would say to just try not to offend them, accidentally or not,” She kept her tone even and barely flicked her eyes to Keith and Lance, “Please maintain professionalism like the Paladins you are, and let Shiro and myself handle majority of the negotiating.” She flicked her ears at the boys.

Shiro nodded, surveying the group a final time. “Alright, let’s head out then. Umi, Miume and I will ride in the main cockpit with Pidge in case we need a barrier. Hunk, Lance, and Keith, you guys take the cargo chamber.”

“Roger!” Pidge affirmed, throwing her hand up in a salute before hopping down from her lion’s massive paw.

“Okie, boss!” Hunk chimed, throwing his helmet on and striding towards the underbelly of the green lion in haste to leave the awkward situation. His golden aura flickered nervously around him from the conflicting energies of Miume, Keith and Lance.

“Roger.” Keith replied, placing his helmet over his head and shooting me a final glance before walking over to the green lion briskly.
“Aw come on, I’ve have enough of Keith’s attitude for one day.” I heard Lance grumble as he turned and started towards the lion right behind Keith.

“Come on team, let’s go.” Shiro ordered, turning to Pidge who was patting her lion lovingly before it leaned down to let us in. My heart tightened nervously. I had never flown with anyone other than Keith before.

“Pidge is a great pilot, don’t worry.” Shiro said quietly, patting my shoulder before following Pidge into the lion. I tensed from his touch before nodding and taking a step into its opened mouth, following him with uncertainty.

The green lion was the same size as the red lion, but its energy couldn’t feel any more different. Instead of a fiery passionate force, it had a serene and almost cool toned ambience that held notes of inquisitive yearning. The green lion was more gentle in nature than the red lions fierce desire to perform, its calming energy wrapping around us without any hesitance or resistance. Pidge leaped into the pilot’s chair and the lion’s cabin roared to life as green light consumed us. Miume and I hooked our hands around the chair’s sides and braced the other against the walls to get a secure grip, while Shiro placed a hand on the roof to steady himself. The cabin felt so small with the four of use cramped in together. I wondered how it would have been with Lance, Keith, and Hunk in here too.

“Everybody doing alright?” Shiro’s voice sounded louder due to his close proximity. I flinched away from the sound, my energy flexing uneasily around me in our compacted arrangement.

“We’re nice and cozy like pigs in a blanket!” Hunk’s chipper tone was undercut by a hint of sarcasm over the intercom.

“Speak for yourself,” I heard Keith grumble before a sudden yelp filled the cabin.

“Dude! Your knees! They’re in my back! Move them!” Lance commanded in an exaggerated way.

Shiro looked at all three of us in the cabin with him before shrugging, “They seem to be fine. Alright, let’s go!”

Pidge fired up her lion as she replied to Shiro’s direction. Glancing at my hand resting against the wall for support, I took in the green lion’s energy for further inspection. It felt even more grounded, and almost whimsical, compared to the intense and wild nature of Keith’s lion. Steadily Pidge ascended us upwards before taking off into space and towards the planet.
The glassy honey golden sun had just slipped behind the far side of the smog curling around the edge of the planet when we descended into the thick blanket of pollution. Long shadowy fingers stretched towards us as the towering buildings obscured the last of its fading rays. The new darkness was quickly greeted by the bright pulsating lights as the nightlife woke from its slumber, music rumbling across the rusted faces.

“This doesn’t look sketchy at all.” Pidge sarcastically commented as we broke through the foggy atmosphere layer at the far edge of the thumping city.

Moving past the maze of towering stacks of buildings, the strobing lights gradually became more sparse as the bone vibrating music softened into muted pounding notes of bass. The crumbling city decaying further with each collapsing building we passed.

Peering out of the cabin window, curiously I watched the changing scenery. Heavily eroded metallic structures stacked unsteadily on one another, much like the dark city behind us, yet there were little to no energies here. My eyes only caught a few glimmers of scattered, scurrying colors deep within the buildings of the graveyard of a city we moved over.

Pidge expertly maneuvered us around the fragmented support beams jutting out of the once solid structures. Some buildings had even snapped in half from the weight of another pressing against it until it finally collapsed. This made half of the neighboring buildings timber over as well, debris flying as they crashed downwards and collided with the lower buildings. The ruins around us revealed echoes of what could have been a labyrinth of streets, but the ground was clogged with an ocean of misplaced parts that created an industrial blanket of metallic scraps and eroded beams.

“There.” Shiro pointed towards a rotted structure that appeared to be a collapsed shop surrounded by towering piles of garbage.

Pidge’s aura flickered uneasily as she guided her lion towards the designated meeting space. She carefully eased her lion down through the collapsed roof into a hollowed out dark space. The small size of her lion made evading the jutting bones and loose strings of broken lights of the decayed skeleton no difficult task.

“We are shielded from all directions here. Even if someone could see from the city, the height of this building would shadow us from their view. And, we can get in and out easily if anything were to happen.” Shiro assured while patting Pidge on the shoulder, “Umi, can you make a barrier around us when everyone gets here? Just in case.” He glanced back at me and I nodded, my eyes already scanning the dark space surrounding us. Pidge had kept the lights of her lion off in order to keep our position hidden. The lack of light automatically caused my energy bristle uneasily around me. I couldn’t feel any energies within the structure or around us, but the layered maze of dumped
metal scraps made surprise attacks easier.

The structural integrity of the building had all but eroded into nothing. Particles of rust drifted downwards like flaked ash as the wind’s echoed howls whispered through the broken walls. Swaying loose strings of lights and fluttering scraps barely clung to its dying supports. We could barely hear the pulses of music reverberating through the musty air. The unsettling smell of rot and acidity made my nose wrinkle. It smelled even worse here than it did in the main city. Casting my eyes upwards, I noted the muted colors flashing far above us that were hidden by the thick layer of smog that covered the topmost layer of this planet.

“Okay team, get ready.” Shiro called out, stepping out of the lion.

“Does anyone else get the feeling that this place is haunted?” Lance whispered, his voice quivering slightly as he looked around the dusky open space.

“Come on man, don’t freak me out anymore than I already am.” Hunk pleaded, walking up next to him with his bayard ready and aura flickering nervously around him.

“It’s not haunted.” Keith grumbled, rolling his eyes before carefully looking through the darkness, “Where are they? It’s so dark I can hardly see.”

“They are over there.” I said quietly, my eyes shifting downwards and nodding my head towards the far back corner. A new flicker of energy sparked to life in the darkest part of the space before several more flared up as well. Their physical forms were concealed by the shadows that they waited in as they carefully observed and analyzed us. Tensing, I took an unconscious step towards Keith while slipping knives into my hands under the cover of my sleeves.

“Hello?” Shiro called out, taking a single step forward hesitantly. He was greeted with silence. Shiro then turned to me and spoke in a barely audible voice, “Umi, can you tell how many there are?”

“There are more of them than there are us. than we haveAbout 20 total.” I responded, “Should I make a barrier now? There are two groups here.” My eyes shifted to a different part of the darkness as another bubble of auras slowly came to life. Their energies carefully and silently slipped through the shadows.

Shiro nodded before taking another step forward. “My name is Shiro, Paladin of the black lion, and leader of Voltron. I met with one of you at Absol while my fellow teammate, Miume, meet with the other.” He gestured cautiously to Miume who’s energy wrapped defensively around her, but appeared calm and aloof with her hands in her pockets.

My fingers flexed around my knives in my sleeves as I took another step towards Keith, focusing on his cautious energy before pushing a barrier around us. A faint flicker of pink purple barely disrupted the darkness around us as I expanded the bubble outwards to encompass the entire structure. It was a larger space than I thought, but standing still made it easier to make bigger barriers.

A heavy silence hung between us for a few tense moments before blue lights in pairs like eyes blinked to life as the rustling of fabric moved towards us.

“We did not mean to scare you. We are just cautious.” One of the lights spoke in a gruff tone, its dark violet aura barely wafting around its thick frame, as if trained to conceal its presence. Other than the floating pairs of blue lights, their figures were impossible to distinguish from the shadows.
“I understand. But we need to know that we can work together openly.” Shiro spoke, “We have brought one of the lions to prove that we are the real Paladins of Voltron. In return, we ask of you to trust us enough to show your faces.”

The blue lights looked at each other warily for a beat before cutting out abruptly, as if silently saying that they didn’t trust us enough yet to reveal their true identities. Shiro’s energy stiffened around him but he kept his face relaxed, trying to appear understanding when a new, dim yellow light came forward. A group of about ten aliens also dressed in black emerged from the darkness. Small bulbs of light held in their sharp black taloned hands barely illuminated their slender figures.

Blinking against the change in light, I flicked my gaze to see that Shiro’s energy slackened a bit as her took in the figures before us. This must have been the group he met with.

“It is good to see that you aren’t an imposter and part of Zarkon’s forces trying to weed us out.” The alien at the front of the group spoke. Bringing the glowing bulb down he enabled us to see his gaunt features. Four completely black eyes met ours as thin rows of sharp teeth hid behind pale blue tinted lips. Elongated arms rested just inches from the ground next to their haunched legs and long thin ears pointed outward from his bald skull.

“There are groups of Galra trying to find anti-Zarkon groups all the way out here?” Lance asked, his energy spiking in surprise.

The same alien nodded, his dark eyes glancing at Lance, “Of course. Any group against him is an enemy they want to wipe out.” He explained in a hushed voice before looking back towards the other group hidden in the shadows.

“We had to make sure as well.” Another deep voice rumbled before us. “I knew there were more anti-Zarkon groups, but I never imagined it would be from your club, Absol.” The mysterious voice spoke again before a brighter white light emerged from the darkness and revealing the second group.

Like the first, they also had black body suits to conceal their presences. As they pulled back the dark colored fabric, I could see that they had a bulkier build than the other group. Red striated skin mimicked exposed muscle only it was inked with black markings curled around their exposed arms and necks with some even reaching up and across their faces. No two tattoos were the same, but the figure who stepped forward appeared to have the most markings. Maybe this was their way of displaying hierarchy?

“I never imagined it would be you either, Camuel.” Absol replied, giving the tallest red alien a wiry smile.

“You two know each other?” Shiro glanced between the two groups’ leaders.

“We met many decafebs ago, but weren’t very close.” Camuel explained, coming closer to our group now.

“It’s good to know an old friend fights against this evil as well.” Absol replied, intertwining his elongated fingers together in front of him returning the cautious smile.

“Well, that makes things easier.” Pidge mumbled under her breath from my side.

“We see that you have brought the lion and it is indeed impressive. You have also brought the Paladins, whose appearances match the intel we have gathered and prove that you are indeed the true Paladins of Voltron,” Absol turned his attention back to us. His aura was a misty deep blue. It
fanned out cautiously around his team members as he decided if it was truly beneficial to work with such a huge threat to Zarkon, such as Voltron. “How may we assist you?”

Keith’s energy stiffened next to me as Absol spoke. Was he also worried about how they had gathered information on us? Was Voltron that easy to track? Were our faces known? Tightening my hands around the cool metal of my knives, I tried to relax my energy at the thought of being tracked. This planet was indeed dangerous.

“Right now we are gathering allies to strengthen our forces so that we can plan and launch an attack against Zarkon. The greater number of supporters we have, the better chance we have at successfully defeating his reign of terror.” Shiro spoke confidently, his lips slipping into a small relieved smile towards the end of his speech.

After a few silent beats of deliberation both groups nodded in agreement. Camuel replied first, “We will see what we can do. There are other groups here in the city, but as you know they are hard to find.”

Shiro nodded in understanding before taking another bold step forward and holding out two small blocks, “Here, take this. We will use these to communicate.” He offered the handheld communicators to the group leaders who eyed it carefully before accepting them. Their energies similarly defensively curled around them before cautiously expanding outwards.

Suddenly, I felt a small force brush against the back of my barrier. The residual energy of impact made my head turn instantly at the possible attackers. Quickly scanning the dark space where I had felt the impact, I caught the last few ripples of pink purple. My aura automatically spiked defensively as I tracked the scuttering energy that danced away from the electrical shock from where it collided with rear side of the barrier into the shadowed structures behind us.

“Something is here.” I whispered to Keith, my hands tightening around my knives. Keith had noticed my physical response, his body turning a fraction of an inch as if to intercept some kind of attack even though the shield was holding.

“Shiro.” Keith said in a low voice, shifting his feet enough so that he could see where I was looking and outside.

“Do either of you have any other members outside?” Shiro asked Camuel and Absol warily. He glanced back at me as his aura bubbled uneasily.

“They don’t feel bad. Just curious.” I reported under my breath. My eyes followed the foreign aura as it hesitantly skirted next to the outside wall. The pale amber aura danced closer and farther away from the shock it had received moments before. Its nature was inquisitive, yearning for knowledge about the beings it saw inside my barrier, but also confused about the nearly invisible barrier it had run into.

Absol answered quietly, his eyes traveling towards the broken outer wall just behind the green lion, “No, but this place is sometimes hosted as a location for remote underground market sales. It could be someone from that.”

“We should disband. This is no longer secret.” Camuel’s voice came from the darkness as as he flicked his light off again. The members of his group quickly followed suit and disappeared into the inky blackness.

“We look forward to working with you, Shiro, and the rest of the Paladins.” Absol’s eyes glanced back at our group before winking his light off as well. The eerie blue glow returning to their eyes
as we were consumed in darkness again.

“Thank you for your time. We’ll be in touch.” Shiro replied to the jet black space before looking back at us, “Let’s head out guys.”

“Thank god.” Hunk sighed in relief, his aura deflating as he moved back towards the underbelly of the green lion.

Keith glanced down at me before gently touched my shoulder, trying to get my attention. My body barely reacted to his physical touch as I stayed trained on the potential threat.

“Is it okay?” he asked, trying to find the source of threat through the blackness around us. His eyes could barely pick up on the translucent notes of purple pink curved behind the lion. Nodding, I flexed my fingers around my hidden knives again, trying to relax them a bit as the aura moved away from my barrier.

“We should go back,” I answered in a quiet voice, backing up slowly and releasing my knives. Miume found one of my sleeve-hidden hands and lead me back into the green lion as I kept awareness for any sneak attacks. The energies of the two anti-zarkon groups were long gone now, completely melting into the darkness and buildings around us.

Once we were in the air I peered down into the darkness. The strange aura had stopped moving and bubbled out in fear and confusion as we ascended back towards our ship. The being below only caught a slim glimpse of the green lion before Pidge reactivated the invisibility cloak and disappeared into the smog.

“They are not following us,” I reported, watching the remnants of my energy dissipate from around the building we had been taking cover in. “I think they were wondering what we were talking about. It didn’t feel bad, just… curious.”

“That’s good.” Shiro breathed out, “Nothing felt like the Galra?”

I shook my head in response. It was a species I had never come across before. The aura vibration was something I had never felt, and far different than the sinister tones of anything that had been around Zarkon.

We flew the rest of the short distance in in silence. The auras around me were more relaxed than when we had come down, but still uneasy about the whole situation. If there were Galra troops from Zarkon hunting anti-Zarkon groups, then that made things much more dangerous and altogether more critical for us to find as many allies as possible.

“Well that went far better than I thought it would.” Lance called out to the group after exiting the green line and stretching his long arms over his head.

“Agreed, that place was super creepy.” Hunk replied, shivering at the thought.

“Good job guys,” Shiro congratulated, taking off his helmet and giving us all a warm smile, “Let’s all get some rest then we’ll rendezvous with the Red Eye’s back on Trex to plan out the next steps and continue our training.”

“Aw man.” Pidge sulked, dropping her shoulders and dragging her feet as we walked into the main control room of the castle, her energy deflated around her. “Why can’t we ever get a rest day?”

Allura’s energy jumped up eagerly as her sparkling blue eyes landed on us while we entered the control room. Clasping her hands together she raised her eyebrows, “It was a success?”
Shiro smiled and nodded in affirmation.

“Wonderful!” her voice sounded relieved as she stepped back to her post.

Coran leaned against his motherboard with his arms crossed and looking proud. “Ah, look at you, young Paladins! Making new allies in the blink of a Weblum!”

Hunk and Keith grimaced in response to his analogy, their energies prickling uneasily. Tilting my head to the side, I glanced at Keith but he shook his head, silently telling me he didn’t want to talk about it.

“Allura, can you take us back to Trex?” Shiro requested, coming to stand next to her command deck.

Allura nodded before directing her attention to Miume, “Miume, do you have everything you need?”

“Yes, Kara has taken our new ship back to the base on Trex.” Miume responded, swishing her tails happily behind her. “She found quite the deal, and this new ship is even nicer than the one we had before! I suppose all things happen for a reason.” She purred softly in satisfaction.

“Great, then let’s go.” Shiro instructed as he glanced around the room at all of us.

“I really don’t want to go back.” Hunk sighed, plopping down in his designated chair and pulling up the control screen idly.

“Stop complaining. The training is only going to help you in battle.” Miume huffed in a slightly annoyed voice.

“Maybe we can go to the onsen later.” Lance thought out loud in a tired voice.

“Guys, let’s just get back and get some rest.” Shiro directed, sitting down and waiting for us to worm jump.
Landing just above Trex’s swirling outer atmospheric layer we descended carefully. The sun had just slipped under the thick clouds, making our journey more complicated as Allura tried to avoid the jagged mountains that threatened to swallow us whole.

“Umi, could you make a barrier around the castle?” Allura called from her spot, “I think the castle’s defenses will be too big and disrupt the landscape.”

I glanced at her before looking back outside. She was right. It was too narrow of a space to use the castle’s defenses, but I wasn’t sure if my barrier would be any better. Inhaling quietly, I closed my eyes letting myself focus on the warm energies around me. I could feel their eyes looking at me curiously as I stretched my energy out towards theirs before expanding it over the castle, trying to stay as close to its structure as possible.

“Wonderful. Thank you.” I heard Allura praise as we descended farther. I could feel the sharp rocks nicking against the barrier as we moved. Pink purple ripples of energy flexed across the ship’s outer surface, making Pidge’s aura jump inquisitively as she peered downwards to see more through the darkness. It seemed to take forever until we were finally landed, and I waited until the ship’s engines had turned off to release the barrier.

“Good job.” Miume smiled at me, her ears twitching forward as she looked at her small monitor again. “Was it easier?”

I nodded, not feeling as lightheaded as usual. Focusing on their warm energies did make it easier, but forming barriers that big was still difficult.

“I call first dibs on the onsen!” Pidge called out in an excited voice, jutting her hand into the air before hopping out of her seat.

“Hey! No fair! You guys had it first last time!” Lance complained, scrambling out of his seat.

“Girls first!” Pidge threw at him, crossing her arms over her chest as she looked up at him triumphantly.

“Not fair!” Lance whined, placing his hands on his hips, “Tell them Shiro.” He tried, looking over at our leader hopefully.

“Nope, not getting in the middle of this.” Shiro held up his hands palm side forward before standing up and walking towards the exit quickly.

“Hey!” Lance called after him as the sliding door shut. “Aw man.” He pouted as Pidge grabbed Miume’s and my hand before promptly dragging us out of the room. Her forest green energy bubbled with excitement. I pulled back slightly, still unaccustomed to her carefree touches and tugs of physical contact, but I allowed the smaller girl to lead the way out of the room. Glancing back at Keith his lips tugged into a thin smile, crimson aura warming as Allura eagerly hopped down from
her spot to join us. Coran’s sing song voice calling after us to be safe.

“Come on, you should be happy we are having girl bonding time.” Pidge called over her shoulder. She gave them a mischievous smile as her cunning brown eyes landed on Lance then Keith before the door open and closed again.

“I didn’t like the look of that.” Keith grumbled under his breath, slouching down in his chair he shook his head trying to rid it of Pidge’s gleaming eyes. She was definitely up to something.

Pidge had quickly dragged us down the long corridor, swinging our hands back and forth with a small skip in her step. Allura followed close behind with her calm energy flowing around us contently.

“I didn’t realize you liked baths so much.” Miume smiled, letting the smaller girl pull her down the hallway.

“It’s a warm bath and I get to spend time with you guys.” Pidge responded, looking back at us and narrowing her eyes playfully, “since you are both apparently too preoccupied with Lance and Keith to include me or Allura.”

Miume’s mouth dropped open a fraction, her ears twitching nervously before she quickly composed herself, “What do you mean? We have plenty of time to hang out.” She grinned, trying to mask her irritation.

“Oh huh.” Pidge rolled her eyes, green aura flicking.

“It is most fun.” Allura tried to appease the group as she walked next to us, a smile on her face. “And it provides such a wonderful opportunity to decompress and get to know each other.” Her aura bubbled innocently. She still couldn’t believe that Keith could show physical affection to another living being. Or the fact that Lance had stopped his obnoxious flirting ways towards everything and had directed all attention to Miume.

“Totally.” Pidge replied a loving smile returning to her face and the skip returning to her step.

We made our way up the small hill of a mountain towards the warm body of water. Pidge and Miume’s playful bickering filled the night as Allura’s pure laughter echoed off the sharp surfaces.

I couldn’t help but smile at their cheerful interactions. It was still so strange to see such relaxed auras; ones that mingled and mixed with the other instead of trying to overpower and dominate. Their warm auras surrounded mine easily, tugging gently on it, coaxing it to break its hard exterior shell and mingle with their own bright ones. And each time, I found it easier and easier to open up to them; to let my wall of energy relax around me and accept their loving, friendly natures.

My eyes wandered across the new flutters of energy that coated the once barren planet. Pidge’s root cannon had given new life to the bare terrain of mountains. The dark path was easier to follow now by the more distinct line of softly glowing emerald guiding us forward. After a short walk we appeared in front of the ambient pool of warm water again. The glossy rocks under our feet had dimmed from their previous luminescence when we had first been here.

We had barely gotten to the changing area when Pidge eagerly threw off her clothes and wrapped a towel around herself. She catapulted herself into the body of glowing liquid before the rest of us had begun taken off our first layer of clothing.

With less hesitancy, I slipped out of my clothes and pulled the thin towel around me securely. Feeling comfortable around people was still something I was trying to get used to. To entirely relax
my energy from its natural state of defense was still a foreign concept.

“Ah, this always hits the spot.” Miume sighed happily as she slipped into the steaming water. Her tails curled upwards in pleasure.

“Allura closed her eyes and tilted her head back against a softly glowing rock near the edge of the water.

I nodded, sinking down into the water and feeling much more relaxed than last time. It was still strange to be practically naked with the other female team members, but if this was an acceptable social practice, I guess I needed to try and get used to it. Glancing over at Pidge she was staring at me, her eyes just above the water, blowing bubbles through her nose. Her aura bubbled curiously. I tilted my head to the side, looking at her with a puzzled expression until she finally stood up, sighing dramatically with her hands planted on her hips. The sopping towel clung to her small frame.

“Are you really not going to tell us what happened?” she started, looking slightly dejected.

“What happened?” I asked in a confused voice.

“Come on.” Pidge whined, moving closer so that she could place her hands on my shoulders.

“I think she means at the underground rave.” Miume tried to explain. Her tails swished nervously; she knew this was coming.

I glanced from Miume to Pidge, my face feeling hot again. “We stood guard outside while Miume and Lance talked.”

“You just stood outside the door in the club idly while they met with the group. That’s all?” Pidge rose an eyebrow in disbelief. Her aura wrapped around me as if she were trying to pry details out.

I turned my gaze downwards to the glowing water, running my fingers through my damp bangs nervously. Pidge always had a way of pulling out whatever information she wanted.

“I knew it! Something totally happened!” Pidge declared, smiling widely before her eyes moved to Miume, “You too, missy. I know something happened.”

Miume froze momentarily before looking away, “Nothing other than the negotiation and some playful dancing happened. I don’t know what you’re insinuating.” She replied in a plain voice.

“Dancing?” Allura repeated with interest as she leaned forward from her spot across the pool.

“Yes, dancing. We were at a rave and had extra time. It’s an excuse to celebrate the negotiation’s success and have some fun.” Miume shrugged nonchalantly and busied herself with inspecting her nails.

“You don’t dance with just anyone.” Pidge huffed in an exaggerated voice. Miume flicked her eyes back to the smaller girl. She wasn’t going to get away with much here.

“Dancing with someone doesn’t have to have any significant meaning. You are just too young to understand.” Miume continued to avoid Pidge’s gaze by focusing on her nails.

“Meaning?” I echoed, looking at Miume. Did dancing have more than one meaning?

“Yes.” Miume paused trying to think of the best way to explain this without Pidge declaring that
she liked Lance. “People can dance as a means of having fun. Some find it more enjoyable to dance with another. Others prefer to dance alone. Dancing can also be a means of communicating feelings between one another. For instance, if you care about someone you may choose to only dance with them. It’s almost a way of expressing or creating a bond.”

Pidge leaned forward towards Miume now, “And what did your dancing mean?” she raised an eyebrow at her suggestively as her green aura wavered mischievously.

“Nothing in particular. It was purely for fun.” Miume’s voice was flat, but a soft blush dusted quickly across her cheeks.

“Uh huh, I’m sure the fun stopped there, huh.” Pidge snickered, rolling her eyes in disbelief. “And you?” her doey eyes landed back on me, their intense curiosity making me shrink down farther into the water. I retracted away from her forestry aura that grasped at mine and latched onto it, preventing mine from retreating further.

“I don’t know. It was the first time I have ever danced.” I admitted in a small voice, avoiding her gaze.

“Your first time?” Allura repeated, her eyebrows pulling together sympathetically as her aura dipped downwards in sadness.

I nodded, “It was fun. I didn’t know such things existed.” I smiled at the memory of Keith and I on the dance floor. So close...

Miume perked up and turned to me completely, “And what about Keith?”

“Keith said he would take me when we got back to earth.” I paused, feeling my face blush again.

“Ah, hah!” Pidge exclaimed in an excited voice. She pointed a finger at me as her aura flared dramatically around us, “I knew something happened!”

“Did anything else happen?” Miume pried carefully, leaning forward and resting a striped arm on the cool rock behind us to rest her cheek on her palm. She remembered the pair’s vibe after she and Lance found them. Keith still held his guarded demeanor, but appeared to soften that night, while Umi had appeared to be more physically comfortable in her environment and not anxiously hyper aware of her surroundings. It was as if she had been able to calm down next to Keith.

Biting my lip, a sudden rush of nervousness pooled in my stomach, making my aura tingle around me. I should be able to tell them about the kiss we shared. I should be able to tell them how he told me he liked me. Miume and Shiro had told me that being open with others meant talking, and interacting with them, but why did I feel so anxious?

“Umi,” Miume purred, placing an arm behind me on the rock as her aura bubbled towards me gently.

“Come on, this is girl bonding time.” Pidge cooed, taking my hands and staring at me with playful eyes.

Taking a deep breath, I reluctantly looked back up at her, “He kissed me and told me he liked me.” I finished in a rushed voice.

“He what?!” The three other members exclaimed at once, their auras spiking in collective disbelief. Flinching away from the sudden uptake in aura, I glanced away as my face heated up.
“Did I hear you correctly?” Miume sputtered, completely shocked that Keith would actually admit his feelings to her. No wonder he had seemed so nervous. “Well, kitten what did you say?”

“Yeah!” Pidge nearly jumped in excitement. “What did you tell him, Umi?!”

“That I liked him back? But I like all of you.” I answered, my brows furrowing in confusion now, “but why would he kiss me and say that? I don’t think he would do that to Shiro.” I looked away for a moment.

Pidge covered her mouth trying to hide her laughing, “Keith kissing Shiro.” She snickered.

“Umi,” Miume placed a hand on my shoulder now, “there are different types of like. Remember?”

“Different types?” I repeated, completely confused.

“Hmm, purr-haps we can explain this further,” Miume mumbled to herself, feeling sorry for Keith.

“You like us,” Pidge started, “but you like-like Keith.” She emphasized the first like and motioned her arms for further exaggeration.

“So I like him more than you?” I asked, tilting my head to the side.

“Um, in a sense, yes,” Miume tried again. “But you like us in the sense of wanting to hang out and have fun. You also like Keith in that way, but you also like him in the sense of wanting to do more with him.”

“More?” I looked at her, feeling my forehead wrinkle in confusion.

“Like kissing.” Pidge smiled mischievously, “or hugging, or sleeping with them.” Her voice trailed off suggestively.

My eyes widened, my face turning even redder. We had kissed and slept next to each other many nights. And it was true, I didn’t want to sleep next to nor kiss the people around me. Was this really the “like like” feeling they were talking about?

“Ah aha! I knew it! You totally spent the night with him.” Pidge declared triumphantly. “And, you too.” She turned her attention back to Miume, narrowing her eyes knowingly.

“Hush little one, we are helping Umi right meow.” Miume hissed at Pidge carefully through gritted teeth. “She told Keith she likes him, but it doesn’t sound like she meant the same ‘like’ as what he intended. Right, kitten?”

“I said I liked him too. But… he like-likes me?” I asked quietly, trying to piece the words together.

“Yes.” Pidge and Miume said at the same time, their auras nearly in unison.

“He wants to spend time with you, right? And he holds your hand, kisses you, hugs you, asks you to spend time with him.” Miume listed off, clearly trying to help me out. “These are things he does solely with you and with greater meaning behind them. His like carries greater meaning towards you than it would for the other members. Does that make sense?”

I nodded slowly, feeling even more nervous all of a sudden as my feelings started to make sense.

“I like-like him.” I whispered to myself, placing my hands on my warm cheeks. All of their words made complete sense now.
“Finally!” Pidge cried gleefully. Her aura erupted with joy as she beamed at me.

“I think you need to have another conversation with Keith.” Miume suggested. I looked at her with my eyes wide. She smiled at me gently, “Don’t worry, I promise it’s the same kind of like.” She patted my head.

Allura gave me an encouraging grin, “I can assure you that if these actions are true of Keith, then he must surely like-like you, too.”

Miume purred contently next to me as I took in the meaning of their words. My eyes focusing on the illuminated water around me, a new flutter tickling my stomach now.

“Oh, you’re not getting out of this either.” Pidge smirked, directing her attention back to Miume. “You totally like Lance.”

“I do not like him.” Miume replied in a flat tone, “I enjoy toying with him to see his reactions, nothing more.”

Miume’s red eyes quickly flipped over to Allura who was carefully getting out of the hot water. Fanning her face from the small sweat that had broken over her brow and reaching for a dry towel. Maybe she would be able to escape the small humans intense knowing gaze with the excuse of needing to get out of the warm water for safety reasons.

The soft ripples of colored water distorted my unfocused gaze. Glancing up i noticed that Allura had stepped out of the water, pulling her long white hair out of its tight bun it cascaded downwards with luscious volume. Blinking i returned my gaze to the pool, we had been sitting in the water for an extended period of time now, and my body was growing increasingly hot. All the talk about like-like and Keith only made me feel even hotter.

“Uh huh.” Pidge folded her arms over her chest. “This isn’t over.” her eyes narrowed before reluctantly dragging herself out of the water as well.

“Nothing is happening, stop imagining things that aren’t there just because you figured out Keith likes Umi.” Miume tried to distract the girl as she hoisted herself up onto the cool rock ledge.

“Umi, I think you should go talk to Keith tonight.” She looked back at me, her tails swishing happily as her aura bubbled around her.

“You’re sure it’s the same kind of like?” I asked, my hand resting over my racing heart. I had never felt this way before. I wasn’t even sure if it was real. Keith usually made my heart race and my stomach flutter in nervous happiness, but this felt like new, different than before. Was it possible to feel so many different types of emotion at once? Nervous happiness that made your heart hurt in a good way?

“Purr-omise.” Miume mewed, patting my head again lovingly.
As we made our way back to the castle the auras around me were more rejuvenated than before. Pidge and Miume bickered quietly with one another while Allura’s billowed out behind her. Turning the last small switchback down to the castle, streaks of bioluminescent light started to drip from the sky. Miume’s energy immediately dropped before she quickly stated her goodnights and all but sprinted back to the castle. Pidge hollered playfully after her and shook her small fist while Allura held out her thin hand curiously to the glowing rain.

Completely absorbed in my own thoughts, I hadn’t even realized there was glittering rain peppering my warm skin. Its coolness hissed quietly as it evaporated, and small puffs of steam appeared above my skin before rapidly disappearing. The terrain changed from colorless rock to smooth slates of metal of the castle. My bare feet hadn’t noticed the difference until the familiar sight of the base of a sliding door came into focus. Gasping quietly, I jerked my head upwards, my eyes widening as I looked both ways down the barren corridor. When had I gotten to the castle? Where were the others? Blinking, I glanced behind me and saw that the only aura trail was my own. Miume’s and Pidge’s energies ghosted across the hallway while Allura’s moved down the adjacent one.

The soft familiar pull of red against my aura tugged my attention back to the door in front of me. My eyes widened at the cool metal face in front of me with wafts of crimson curling outwards, stretching towards me as my heart started to hammer loudly in my chest. I was standing in front of Keith’s room now. Why was I here? When had I gotten here? Why was I suddenly so nervous? Placing a hand over my racing heart I tried to sift through the emotions rushing through me. Nervousness, comfort, hope, anxiety. Maybe it was because I had never like-liked someone before? I didn’t even know it was possible to like someone this much until Keith appeared. But it felt so natural when I was with Keith, so these feelings should be okay, right? I should let him know how I feel. At least that’s what Miume and Pidge and Allura said. With more understanding of the emotions welling in my heart, now was the time to express them. Swallowing, I timidly knocked on his door. His aura spiked in shock before relaxing.

“Umi?” Keith asked, he sounded surprised, clearly not expecting to see my back. “Everything okay?” his aura breezed through the doorway more powerfully now.

“Um.” I started quietly, taking my hand off my head and holding them to my chest, they trembled slightly.

“Do you wanna come in?” He offered, he seemed unsure of how to react. His aura was moving in
unsteady patterns. I nodded slowly, still not looking at him. Keith paused before stepping back to
let me through. He quickly glanced down the hallway before the door slid closed.

“Is something wrong?” He questioned carefully. Keith stood in front of me and tried to peer under
my bangs to see my face, “you seem nervous. Did something happen at the onsen?”

I took a shallow breath before glancing up at him, my face already burning. His eyes widened in
anticipation, not sure how to react as his energy flustered around him.

“Your face is really red, did you get too hot?” He placed the back of his hand on my forehead as if
to see how hot my skin was. I shook my head, reaching up and taking his hand. He paused for the
slightest of seconds but let me pull it into my chest. He could probably feel how fast my heart was
racing but he stood there patiently without saying anything.

“Keith,” I tried, glancing away again, “Um, when you told me you liked me at the rave... I didn’t
totally understand what kind of ‘like’ that was.” I paused as his energy became more uneasy, “but
now I think I understand what type of like it was. And-“ I squeezed his hand while looking up at
him shyly, my face burning even more now, “and I like-like you.” I finished in an even quieter
voice. Anxious bursts of barely noticeable energy rippled across my skin, but Keith didn’t seem to
notice.

His body stiffened, his face turning red before he quickly looked away. His other hand came up to
hide his face as he returned my gaze through his fingers.

My heart was beating so fast I thought my rib cage was going to break, but I felt compelled to
continue. “I don’t completely understand what all of these feelings are, but I know that I want to
keep being close to you.” My eyes found our hands resting over my chest and tried to even my
breathing. Knots twisted in my stomach as I waited for his reply.

Keith’s aura spiked upwards in irregular shapes, like a wild flame igniting. Its crimson depths
turned more vibrant and alive than I had ever seen. Its warmth radiated outwards to draw my
energy towards its homey center. Taking a deep breath, he gently pulled his hand away from mine
before quickly embracing me. His strong arms squeezed me tightly into his solid chest, securing
me firmly against him. One of his hands moved up to hold my head against his chest and I swore I
could feel his heart pounding as fast as my own. I froze from the sudden embrace for a beat as his
aura wrapped around us completely, enveloping me in his smoldering energy and coaxing mine to
relax against its strength.

“I like-like you too.” He admitted in a quiet voice. It was muffled by my hair as he hid his face in
it. My cheeks were growing even hotter as he squeezed me tighter. “I don’t really know what I’m
doing either, but I want you to be close to me too.” He nuzzled his face against my damp hair and I
could feel the smile on his face.

“Really?” I asked, biting my lip and smiling to myself.

“Really.” He replied in a reassuring voice. I sighed happily. The remaining tension of anticipation
melted away as my body relaxed into his. My heart skipped a beat as I wrapped my arms around
him as well, the action feeling more natural now as my fingers curled into the soft fabric of his
shirt. Breathing in his scent deeply, a foreign sensation of peace fluttered through my chest.

We silently stayed in each other's embrace for what seemed like an eternity before he sighed
heavily. He moved his hands to the tops of my shoulders and pushed me back gently, but kept our
distance close enough that my hands could still tangle in his shirt. I glanced up at him, light pink
still dusting my cheeks as small smile played across my lips. His eyes softened as he gave me a
crooked smile back before kissing the top of my head.

“If I don’t let go of you now I’m going to make you spend the night again.” He laughed under his breath, looking away sheepishly.

I felt the blush on my cheeks deepen as I quickly flicked my eyes away from his soul-boring ones. Slowly my hands came around his sturdy body to rest on his stomach lightly.

His muscles tensed under my fingertips before slowly relaxing. Carefully I bowed my head forward until my forehead met his chest. Closing my eyes an unfamiliar sensation of ease washed over me as his aura wrapped around me tighter. My muscles easily decompressed and my own aura wove through his. Hesitant fingers of pink purple ghosted over his bright crimson his aura that waited patiently until mine had entirely relaxed into his. Our auras completely melded together into a singular bond. His energy moved nervously over him before his hand found the back of my head, running his fingers through my damp hair slowly.

Nuzzling my nose against his chest I smiled to myself, “If you don’t stop that then I will want to stay here tonight even more.” I admitted in a quiet voice, mimicking his phrasing as best I could.

“Well, I guess we are stuck then.” He chuckled to himself, wrapping his other arm around me lazily as he continued to massage my scalp.

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“Miume!” Pidge’s whining voice was muffled under Miume’s hand. She had grabbed the smaller girl by the back of her collar and dragged her behind the nearest corner, holding a hand tightly across her mouth to smother her protests.

“Hush, we aren’t getting in the way of this,” Miume cautioned in a whispered voice. Her tails swished in anticipation as she peered around the corner to see Umi confused and standing in front of Keith’s door. She smirked to herself playfully. Perhaps Umi would discuss her feelings for Keith right here and now, and she would be lucky enough to be here to witness such a tender moment!

“But I wanna know what happens!” Pidge hissed back in a low voice, finally removing Miume’s hand from her mouth roughly and huffing.

“And we shall, but we don’t need to make her any more nervous that she already is. Now shush or else she’ll notice us.” Miume scolded softly. Pidge blew her cheeks out and folded her arms over her chest and looking disappointed.

“Fine, I’ll just sit here I guess,” She pouted in defeat before carefully leaning around the edge to see that Umi was still standing hesitantly in front of Keith’s door. “Do you think she’s really going to do it?” Pidge looked up at Miume who was crouched just above her.

“We’re about to find out.” Miume grinned and placed a hand on Pidge’s shoulder to make sure she didn’t run off and get in the way of things.

After Umi had disappeared into Keith’s room, the two couldn’t help themselves from silently creeping up to the door. They crouched on either side of the door, careful not to activate its motion sensor, with their ears tuned into the small murmurs behind the door, curiosity and intrigue burning them from the inside out. Miume felt a twinge of guilt for spying on her friend, but she knew that Umi needed the encouragement and support from her friends to give her the strength to confront these feelings.
She looked over to Pidge in front of her who had her ear firmly pressed against the door and her eyes squinted in concentration. It felt as if they had been waiting for hours before she dramatically sighed in exasperation. Pidge collapsed to the ground and crossed her legs then placed her cheek in her hand, an aggravated look crossed her face as she hadn’t been able to hear any juicy details.

“Do you think she’s coming out?” Pidge whispered in a bored voice. “I wanna ask her how it went. I need the details.”

Miume pursed her lips, “I am not sure.” She rose gently and stretched. “I suppose we will have to find out tomorrow.” As much as she wanted to stay, her legs had started to cramp from their prolonged tensed state of crouching. And even with her enhanced hearing capabilities she hadn’t been able to make out anything other than soft, undistinguishable mumbles on the other side of the door.

“Aw man.” Pidge sighed while standing up as well, “Then, do I have to go back to my room now?” she glanced up at Miume through tired half lidded eyes.

“Yes, and straight there. Don’t try anything funny. We’ve spied enough for one moon,” she warned sternly, holding a clawed finger out. Pidge grunted in response before skulking back to her room. Miume observed her with her arms folded to make sure she didn’t try to ruin the moment and stayed in her room that was just two doors down from where they had been listening. Umi and Keith needed their space now, and it was time they respected it. When Pidge was secured in her room, Miume let out a held breath. That went better than she assumed it would.

“Miume?” Lance’s voice drifted down the hallway, making her heart stutter as she whipped around to see him at the other end of the hallway.

“Lance.” She answered slyly and smiling a bit.

“What are you doing up? And down here?” He pried coyly, coming closer to her. She noticed a towel wrapped around his neck and damp tousled hair. He must have just been returning from the onsen. “This isn’t the Red Eye’s hanger.”

“Seeing Pidge off,” Miume replied coolly while glancing briefly towards Pidge’s door. Her eyes slid back to him languidly, “what are you doing down here?”

“I was going to ask Keith something.” His voice sounded a little off, perhaps annoyed she presumed. Upon further inspection, his skin was still flushed from the heat of the springs, and his hair glistened in the light. She bit her lower lip and leaned casually against the wall.

“I know you weren’t just looking for me?” Miume mewed in a flirtatious tone, trying to keep her voice low and hoping Lance would play along. Lance stopped his approach and took a slight step back. She saw his eyes glimmer and he gave her a sly smile.

“Whatcha gonna do about it if I was?” he pressed an arm against the wall completely sidetracked from whatever he was going to do now.

Miume hummed to herself, placing a finger under her chin cutely and twitching her ears. He watched her smile widen and was completely absorbed in her demeanor as she crept closer to him. Finally she was standing just in front of him and looked up at him with fiery red eyes, “I could think of a thing or two.” She purred back softly, reaching out and dragging a finger down his chest slowly. Lance gulped, his eyes widening, buying into her obvious game. Miume chuckled to herself. He was so easy to play with. Although now she was thinking about last night, and how she wouldn’t mind a repeat. She glanced up at Lance. He was staring down at her trying to compose
himself into a more aloof and cool manner. Why did he have to be so cute?

“Maybe we could take a walk first?” Lance offered, his eyes scrunching and visibly deflating as he realized he wasn’t flirting back the way he intended to.

“A walk?” Miume repeated dryly, raising her eyebrows. Well that de-escalated quickly.

“You know, to my room.” Lance tried again, in a smooth voice while flashing a mischievous grin.

“Ah, that kind of walk.” Miume smirked, laughing a little and swishing her tails in anticipation. And meow we’re back.

“Mhm.” Lance hummed, reaching out to cup Miume’s face tenderly. She purred audibly. He knew he was being smooth now. Miume returned his seductive smile, not missing a beat and leaned forward as if to kiss him before retracting suddenly. Lance furrowed his brow and slacked his jaw slightly, “You playin’ too much kittens.”

Miume twirled around to walk down the hall. Her tails lightly brushed over his face as she looked over her shoulder to wink at him. His mouth almost dropped to the floor and his feet tripped a bit as he stepped towards her. When he had composed himself he grabbed her hand, spinning her around and pushed her against the wall. Giggling, she looked up to meet his sultry gaze. He grinned at her hungrily before leaning down and kissing her.

She could feel her heart flutter lightly as she tilted her chin up to kiss him back. Lance placed a hand on the wall behind her, deepening the kiss for a moment for pulling back and giving her a confident smile this time. Damn he was good.

“Still wanna play?” he purred, his nose almost touching hers. She could feel herself blush and a familiar coil tighten in her lower abdomen. Why did he have to be so good at playing her games with her? And why did she like it so much?

Miume bit her lip yearningly, sliding her hands up his toned chest before leaning in, “Maybe fur a little while.” She whispered in his ear, making him shiver. She smiled to herself, enjoying his reactions but sincerely desiring his company.

“Then I guess we’ll need to go somewhere more purr-ivate.” Lance suggested after a moment, wiggling an eyebrow before taking her hand and leading her back towards his room. Oh boy she had done it now, but her heart skipped eagerly in her chest awaiting the fun to be had.
“Umi, did you find out when Keith is meeting us?” Miume called over to me as I stood, arms folded over my chest naturally, by the window of the common room. I had been looking out into the galaxies far away lost in my thoughts over the past few days events; I was marvelled at how far I had come with my powers, my new relationships, self identity, and of course, Keith. Keith had been so kind and open with me, especially in the recent past weeks. He was one of the only true caring people I’d known and I found myself continuously checking to see if the traces of red ghosting over my skin were still there. Like a warm blanket of security it wrapped around me like a constant reassurance. Most of my days I was thinking of him and desired to be near him. We both said we like-liked each other, and this made me happier than I had ever remembered feeling. Whenever I thought of that night, the fluttering feeling of anxiety and adrenaline coursed through my body, but it wasn’t terrifying. I was always excited. This was all still so new to me and was frightening, yet addicting.

“Hmm?” I turned my head a fraction away from the glistening stars to face Miume’s general area. She was sitting on the couch in the center of the room looking irritated.

“Were you even listening to me?” Miume’s tails swished in irritation, her ears flicking backwards briefly in mild annoyance. “I know we’re all technically space cadets, but you don’t have to be so extra spacey. I wanted to leave at five thirty so we could all have time for dinner before we arrived to the arcade Lance was raving about. I’m really tiring of that green goo Allura and Coran seem to have us bent on eating all the time…” Miume trailed off while fiddling with the hologram screen interface of her Pawport.

“Oh, I’m sorry…” I replied quietly while looking down at the ground. It wasn’t that I meant to be so distracted, nor did i fully understand what she was referencing, “I think he said he’d be done before dinner.” It was strange that we didn’t train together today. Kara had instructed me to work with Miume today, but she immediately had me go to her room for another dress up session for our date after we had finished. It was strange not training near Keith or during the same time as everyone else. It felt as if I were slacking, but Miume reassured me that because we had trained before the others had started that it was alright.

“No, no it’s okay,” Miume backpedaled in an apologetic tone, “I didn’t mean that to sound so harsh. I’m just quite hungry!” She looked towards me gently as I stared back at her and she smiled. Miume tried to lighten the mood again. “Has Keith told you what an arcade is anyway?” She motioned for me to sit beside her on the couch and I took a seat about a foot next to her on the sofa.

“He said that it had lots of video games? And there would be lights and music?” I stated hesitantly, “I really have no idea what any of that means though.” I fiddled nervously with the collar on the shirt Miume let me borrow. It was a dark blue long sleeved blouse with an attached collar and open space that exposed the chest slightly. It wasn’t as cold or exposing as I thought it would be. She
also put me in one of her black pleated skirts that she had to pin tighter around my waist, but I was thankfully able to keep my own leggings and thigh high boots on. The skirt was also stretchy enough to give me room to fight if needed. Although I didn’t have my knives, I felt more comfortable in this outfit than the one she had picked out for the rave.

“I figured he wouldn’t elaborate nearly enough for you to fully comprehend,” Miume laughed lightly. She straightened out her caramel colored cardigan, folded the sleeves up to quarter length then went to pull up a hologram on her Pawport. Miume too was wearing a pleated skirt and knee high socks with her tan heels to match the jacket. She swiped a few times on the Pawport’s screen and pulled up a few images. “See here,” she directed the screen towards my direction, “these machines have the games on them, and there’s different types of games with different objectives. For instance, this one is a shooting game so you use electronic guns to shoot targets on the corresponding screens.”

Concerned, I looked at her with widened eyes and Miume continued, “And no, you’re not shooting actual lasers or bullets, so don’t worry. It’s all virtual and recreational. So none of it is real. No one is getting hurt.” She smiled and I let out a breath of relief. Miume swiped through again and pulled up an image of a large game stand with the screen several feet wide and six chairs surrounding it. “Oh! This is my favorite kind of game! Trivia!” She mewed excitedly with her aura picking up around us, “The game will randomly select categories for questions and you have to respond with the right answer in the quickest fashion. The faster the better because then you’ll score the most points!”

I nodded slowly, trying to take all of this in. “So, what’s the point in all of these games?” I questioned. “Is it some sort of training facility?”

Miume chuckled softly, “No, Umi. It’s just fur fun!”

“Fun?” I tilted my head to the side in confusion. “What’s fun about it?” fun was still a concept I was trying to understand. To relax and not be training still felt strange.

“Oh, you’ll see. It’s all for recreational purposes, nothing serious, just for fun. And…” Miume added with a coy face and a teasing voice, “Arcades are a great way to get closer to people. They are quite popular dating sites.” She winked.

“Huh?” I sat up straighter on the couch to face her, “A date?”

“Yes! Date as in a courting ritual of sorts.” Miume explained and when I gave her a slightly annoyed look she resumed, “You know, like you do activities with a person to get closer and maybe have romantic endeavors. Like kissing... and even more fun stuff,” she purred, winking again. Out of everyone, she and Pidge talked at a level that I could barely understand and I found myself growing frustrated by it occasionally.

“Oh, that’s what you and Pidge were talking about earlier with Keith and me having a dinner, right?” Things were making sense and I smiled, finally understanding most of what Miume was explaining. But as the realization of the full meaning dawned on me and I realized that it meant Keith and I were going to do something specifically for like-liking someone I felt my cheeks flush. Did that mean I was expected to kiss Keith again? Or would he lead? What were the other fun things Miume was talking about? My heart began to pick up pace and I felt my hands become clammy at the thought. I wanted to do those things, but I didn’t know how.

“Meow you get it, huh,” Miume playfully jabbed my shoulder with her right elbow. Suddenly her aura all but exploded in vibrancy and she began jumping up and down in her seat gleefully,”You know what we should do!? We should do your hair and makeup! Get you all dolled up for the bi...
night,” Miume beamed.

“Oh, I thought that was only for missions...” I trailed off, feeling the pink still covering my cheeks. Miume had allowed me to keep my hair as I usually kept it, and didn’t put makeup on me like she had at the rave planet. I had been hoping that the change in clothing was the only thing we would do, but her excited energy was telling me otherwise.

“No, that was a special mission that required disguises. This won’t be a disguise, but it helps to make you look more... date ready! Come meow, Umi, it’ll be so fun and you’ll feel really good. And Keith will be su-purr surprised and happy to see you like that,” Miume chirped, placing her hands on the tops of my shoulders as gently as she could, but her nails bit lightly into my skin from her elated state.

“Uh…. I guess we could try?” I gave in reluctantly. Miume seemed to really enjoy dressing me up for some reason. But if it made her happy, I didn’t mind too much. It wasn’t brutal testing or anything, nor did it physically hurt.

“Yay, I’m so happy!” Miume squealed, her ears perked up and her tails flowed in glee, “Meow, let me just take your hair down like this...mhmm... and then let’s go to my room and get you extra purr-etty. Not that you weren’t before, it’s just all enhancement!” She nearly yanked me off the couch and dragged me close behind as she sprinted out of the room.

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“Miume!!” Lance sang out while entering the common room where they were scheduled to meet. He was wearing one of his nicer shirts with gold leaf patterns on the sleeves and dark slacks with a gold stripe down the side, clearly trying to look his best. “My darling kittencakes, are you ready for the big date?” Lance ran a hand through his perfectly combed locks and scanned the room expectantly before suddenly scrunching his face in disgust as he made eye contact with Keith who stood in the center of the room glaring at him. He too looked more dressed up than usual, wearing a black blazer with a red fitted shirt and his usual dark jeans. “Ugh! What’re you doing here??” he interrogated.

“I was about to ask you the same thing,” Keith retorted.

“I’m waiting for my girl so we can go on a fun little date together!” Lance smugly announced, puffing out his chest and gesturing grandly, “We were gonna go to that fancy arcade where I beat you at the shooting game. Best fifteen out of twenty nine, remember?”

Keith uncrossed his arms and placed a hand on his hip, “That’s funny, because Miume said that she, Umi, me and you were going as a group to bond. As colleagues. And I don’t remember you winning more than five times at best.”

“What?!” Lance exclaimed in shock, flailing his hands out to the sides dramatically and ignoring Keith’s last remark. “She told me it was just gonna be the of two us for a romantic date night!” Lance was more concerned about losing out on alone time with Miume and missing the potential to go home with her again.

“Well, she lied to you, dude. Dunno what else to say,” Keith shrugged with disinterest.

“I was looking forward to a real fun night and now I gotta put up with you?” Lance whined. He slumped over to the couch and collapsed angrily with a sigh.

“Hey, how do you think I feel? The only reason I’m going is because of Umi,” Keith retorted. He
sauntered over to the window to look out at the stars and ignore Lance.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, you’ve got your Umi. I get it mister ‘I can’t let her out of my sights’. Quiznacks, is this some kinda double date thing Miume’s planned?” Lance stuck his pinky finger into his ear to clean it out while continuing to complain loudly.

“Tch, probably. Although I don’t know why she would bother.” Keith grumbled. He looked at his watch which read a quarter after five, “Huh, they’re late anyway. Miume asked me to meet at five.”

Lance started to say something when Miume called into the room, “Boys, are you down here?” She walked in quickly with her eyes occupied on her Pawport. Lance made an audible gasp when he saw her. Voluminous ash grey hair flowed gracefully behind her, let down from its usual updo so it could fan behind her. Dressed in a well composed outfit that showed off her curvy figure in all the right ways her heels clicked assertively on the floor.

“Sup, kittencakes, how you doin’,” Lance winked, trying to sound as cool as possible.

Miume rolled her eyes and laughed under her breath at him, “Hello, Lance, I am well. And Keith, how are you today?” She looked up at Keith who was also staring at her a little taken aback by her changed demeanor.

“I’m fine. Where’s Umi?” He replied curtly, walking over to the couches.

“Umi should be right here. She was right behind me,” Miume spun around looking puzzled. Lance followed her every move obviously staring at her twirling skirt. “Umi! Where’d you go? Get in here!” she called out.

Taking slow steps, I entered the room sheepishly, scanning the room for Keith. When our eyes met, the crimson aura deepend then flared as he looked at me. Miume had spent all our remaining time working on my hair and make up for this date. She had pulled my hair in two large ponytails on the sides of my head and curled my bangs in with a very hot iron-like rod that had taken her a few times to get near me with before I finally sat still enough for her to set my hair that way she wanted. I thought she was going to hurt us somehow, but she expertly managed the tool with ease. She had giggled fervently as she applied make up to my face, and when she revealed her work by handing me a mirror, again I looked like me but with darkened features. My eyes had been defined with the onyx colored liner and a purple-black shading was applied to the lids. She used a deep plum color to paint my lips which reflected light like sparkles in water.

Miume glanced at Keith’s face over her shoulder and smirked triumphantly to herself. He appeared even more flustered as he visibly stiffened up. Everything was going exactly as planned.

“Damn, Umi, you’re lookin’ amazing! You’re so pretty, girl!” Lance complimented me, making finger guns and winking once.

I instinctively pushed back my right bangs with my right hand in modesty, “Thanks, Lance.”

He made a cheesy grin then made a gesture to Keith while clearing his throat, “Dude, you gonna say something?”

“Yeah, Umi, you’re... uhm... your face is good,” Keith stuttered then immediately looked down, plunging his hands into his pockets. Somehow it was much more difficult for him to express his feelings with others around to witness it.

Miume and Lance looked at each other then burst out laughing.
“Dude, that’s all you got?!” Lance teased Keith, cackling and grabbing his ribs while leaning forward.

“How un-fur-tunate…” Miume mumbled, covering her mouth with one hand while giggling with Lance.

I looked up at Keith and walked over to him in more confident strides, feeling strangely empowered. Stopping in front of him, I tilted my head up to meet his gaze, “Thank you, Keith,” I smiled sweetly at him, feeling a small rosiness dusting my cheeks.

Keith’s face flushed a deep red and he swiftly whipped his head to the left in complete embarrassment, “You’re welcome.” He replied briskly.

Lance stood up stretching, trying to direct the attention in the room back to him and Miume “All right, shall we head out meow?” He winked a Miume and extended his arm for her to link her own through.

She rolled her eyes again and took his arm smiling, “Yes, let’s get going. Umi, Keith, are you two ready meow?” Glancing back at Miume I couldn’t help but smile softly as their cotton candy auras blended together with ease and hummed at the same frequency. It seemed like each time i saw them together their energies were closer and closer together.

I nodded and Keith continued to stare at the wall. His crimson energy clung to him with an odd vibration and he appeared too nervous to look anywhere else. “Okay, let’s head out. We can use my new ship instead of the lions. Don’t want to attract any unwanted attention, do we?” She chirped. “Besides, I want to test it out with you guys!”

Miume had talked to Allura earlier in the day and asked if she would sneak them back to Trax for a few hours after training via wormhole. Allura gladly agreed as long as Miume gave her the juicy details of their dates later.

“Smart thinking, babe,” Lance smoothly stated as he tried to lean in for a kiss, but Miume shot him down by walking forward briskly and dragging him along whining.

Keith finally turned towards me as I started to follow Miume and Lance to exit the room. He swiftly grabbed my arm lightly and I immediately pivoted to look back at him, hair bouncing softly, almost glittering. Keith swallowed hard, and pulled me close to him. “You really do look really pretty today, Umi. I like your hair like that,” he spoke softly in a genuine tone, brushing my bangs lightly with affection. He stole a quick kiss on the lips, and I noticed some of my lip gloss glisten on his lips.

My eyes widened in surprise, but this was pleasant and I found herself giving into the kiss and enjoying it. Keith pulled back and reddened a little more. “Alright, I just had to do that. Okay, let’s go,” he sighed, satisfied and smiled.

He took my hand and began walking towards the door, and I all but skipped alongside him, a foreign bubbly feeling driving my happiness. Looking down at our interlocked hands, Keith’s red aura seemed to be brighter and more vibrant than usual as it started to curl up my arm, wrapping around my own energy with a pleasant security. An unknown, warm, strange and happy sensation started to flutter inside I walked slightly behind Keith and watched him lead the way. He made me so feel so calm and irrevocably happy! I wasn’t sure why, but I just knew that wherever he went, I wanted to be with him in his reassuring presence. It was as if my aura was craving his, and to be too far away from it made my own reach out and grab onto the red strands that clung to me. His residual trails of energy left a warm touch to my usually cold skin that I longed for.
“You know, for some reason I still get a bad feeling whenever we land on this planet,” Lance complained as he piloted Miume’s new ship and we entered the atmosphere of the market planet, “But baby, as long as you’re here I got nothing to worry about,” He grinned and nudged Miume with his elbow as he steered the ship towards the docking stations. Even during the day the unsettling churning of smoke like clouds beneath us made me uneasy. The cities edge dropped off abruptly into a dark oblivion of nothing.

Again for what felt like the tenth time already, Miume rolled her eyes at his cute little advances. She looked down at him with a sarcastic smile, “Oh yes, thank you Lance for offering your services once more fur a poor little kitten like me.”

“Kittencakes, I’m always ready to deliver some quality services your way, if you know what I mean. Ayy, ayyy?” He winked and Miume lightly smacked the back of his head with a whap and he yelped in slight pain.

I couldn’t help but smile softly at their interactions. Miume’s bubblegum pink aura tugged playfully at Lance’s, letting his cool blue wrap just enough around hers before she pulled back. It was like a game of chase, but her energy never lingered too far, always allowing his to be near.

“Do you ever take a moment to actually listen to the words you’re saying?” Keith groaned. He held onto my waist naturally as the ship shuddered around us. “And could you control the ship a little smoother? It’s getting rocky in here.”

“It’s the atmosphere!” Lance barked back, leering his eyes at Keith. “You’d have trouble too if you were piloting the ship. You know how rough this patch of ozone is!!”

“Still, there’s no reason for there to be such push back from the ship. If you would lighten up on the controls there and pull the thrusters that way,” Keith began a lengthy reply when Miume suddenly took her hands and smacked them both of them behind the heads lightly.

“If you boys don’t stop bickering like kittens, I swear by the gods I’m going to make you turn this ship around and turn you two into Shiro.” She scolded in an annoyed tone. Placing a hand lightly over my mouth I couldn’t help but stifle a small laugh as the two boys looked puzzled but ashamed, “Furballs, you’d think I was kittensitting,” Miume folded her arms and rubbed the bridge of her nose with her hand grumbling while her ears and tails twitched in irritation.

“He started it,” Lance mumbled as he pulled the ship down through the layers of atmosphere with a more steady control.

Keith shot him a look of disdain then sulked as he turned his gaze out the window.

“I don’t care who started it. I’m ending it,” Miume said sternly, flicking the back of Lance’s head and swishing her tails back and forth.

Miume’s eyes flicked to mine, giving me a quick wink before returning her attention back to Lance. I couldn’t help but smile. Their energies were all so light and airy. Even though they might not get along on the outside, their energies still wove between each others in a friendly manner. Lance and Miume’s auras evened out after the small bickering, while Keith’s sparking one quieted. The twisting lines of bonds started to blend together into a rich purple hue, wrapping over the ship like a protective layer. Watching them curiously I let my fingertips dance over the closest trails. Miume and Lance’s intertwined energies were emitting the same emotion that I felt when I was with Keith. Strange. Was there a similar note of emotion between people who ‘like-like’ each
other? When Pidge talked about her family, or when Shiro and Keith talked, their auras had different notes. They all ‘liked’ each other, but it was different than what I was seeing now. There were so many different notes to auras that I had never experienced or seen before and it was strangely invigorating.

“Umi, you okay? Lance isn’t landing too erratically for you?” Miume’s voice penetrated my thoughts, bringing my focus back to the physical world. Her voice was lighthearted, but her eyes looked sincerely concerned.

“Oh, no, I’m okay. Lance is doing well,” I replied and smiled gently.

“At least Umi likes my piloting,” Lance pressed in a bratty tone and Miume placed her hands on his shoulders squeezing her claws gently into them.

He winced for a moment before smiling and landed the ship without any more bumps or jerking motions.

Carefully we disembarked from the ship. The rickety metal groaned with each new weight pressed into it. Lance sweetly dusted a few stray flakes of rusted metal from Miume’s hair, a small smile playing on his lips as he looked at her in an adoring manner. When Miume glanced up at him, ears twitching from the sudden movement of her hair, Lance quickly looked away trying to hide his smile whilestuffing his hands in his pockets. Keith’s energy bristled in mild annoyance at the pair in front of us, rolling his dark eyes and shaking his head at them before quietly following Miume’s lead back into the crowded market. While the planet’s energy still made me uncomfortable, it seemed lighter than that past few times we had been here. Droves of other aliens, friendlier appearing than usual, were clattering the streets, briskly walking in straight lines and seamlessly flowing between each other. The heavy secrecy that hung in the damp, mildewy air seemed to have lightened just a fraction and it appeared that the other aliens had responded to it. Their faces and stances were more relaxed; their auras not as guarded.

Keith’s warm hand found mine, tugging me gently behind him as I looked around inquisitively. He followed Miume carefully through the narrow mazes of streets. even though we had been here, the smaller alleyways seemed to have shifted each time, creating a new labyrinth of buildings to navigate. Yet Miume still knew how to get to the unchanged middle circle where the massive clock statue rose above the masses.

“Meow remember,” Miume started with pointing upwards with her finger, “The sun won’t go down for another 2 hours, so when we leave here we just need to make it to the ship together and with haste. This section isn’t as sketchy at night as the other part of town we originally visited. Many aliens are still “normal” purr-se until the very late hours of the evenings.” she explained.

“Whatever you say, kittencakes. I’ve always got your back if you need some muscle and protection,” Lance smugly stated while flexing and Keith just face palmed.

“And I’ll always thank you fur that, Lance,” Miume sighed, “Meow why don’t you lead the way to this arcade then?” she smiled sweetly, hugging his left arm in a sudden burst of affection.

Lance’s eyes sparkled with determination and excitement, “Mew got it, baby! If you’ll all just follow me, the leader.” He spoke with confidence as he began parading through the streets towards the arcade’s location. Even though the side streets had changed, the bigger ‘main’ streets that spread out in every direction like a clock appeared unchanged. Their direction was the same, but the buildings’ shapes and structures changed as new buildings morphed into the next and found any space available to grow towards the smog filled air.
Keith had never let go of my hand since we left the shipyard and he tightened his grip as we followed Lance and Miume. The familiar warmth of his aura washed over my skin and surrounded us like a shield of comfort. The anxieties I had first felt on this planet were all but gone and it was because of his calming presence. Mimicking Miume, I shyly laced myself tighter around Keith’s arm and hugged him tightly. Keith stiffened up at first then immediately relax and pulled me close as well. A soft hum of contentment escaped my lips naturally, making me pause at first. This was something new, but it felt as if I had done it before. As if it were an acceptable responses to Keith’s actions.

“Alright, this is it!” Lance heralded their arrival to the arcade. Letting out a low whistle he shielded his eyes from the slanted rays of sun cutting though the jagged structures with his free hand. The ricketing off-white building had grown three stories higher and at least eight times brighter as rows of multi-colored lights rippled down its face and created a wave like effect that made the building look as if it were swaying instead of standing still. As we approached the building the sound of beeping and blasts increased. The single door that was propped open by a chipped rock with paint on it emitted loud pulses of sounds that didn’t mix together the way the music had at night. The faint smell of sweat and worn plastic wafted through its entrance following the changing glow of lights filtering just outside its door frame.

“Whoah! Did this place grow like thirty feet or something?” he called out to Keith who was also staring up at the now massive strobing building.

“Uh, I don’t think you’re wrong, man. This place definitely grew and changed,” Keith replied coolly, also sizing up the building before flicking his eyes back to the door.

“Oh, it’s so fun looking! Shall we go in? I wonder if there’s a cover charge… Lance, you have money right?” Miume still clung to his right arm and was gazing up at him with glistening large red orange eyes.

“Uh, what kinda money do they take here again, heh heh…,” Lance trailed off, fumbling for his wallet.

Miume smiled up at him through clenched teeth, her aura bristling around her, “Don’t tell me you didn’t bring any money to pay for your date,” she nearly growled through her sharp teeth as her ears flattened against her head.

“Wha-! No way, I’m totally loaded, babe, come on, heh,” Lance tried to sound cool and confident but his voice cracking was quite unconvincing and she squinted her eyes at him, “There wasn’t a cover charge earlier!” he protested.

“Tch,” Keith turned his head to hide the small grin that stretched across his face as he watched Lance’s pathetic display and their subsequent bickering. Tilting my head to the side, I watched Lance and Miume’s interactions curiously. Their auras reached out towards one another, tangled fingers interlocking as a new white shimmer started to sparkle between them. I wasn’t sure why but a new desire to feel as light as Miume and Lance’s energies washed over me.

Taking a small breath, I attempted to follow Miume’s lead. I clung tighter to Keith’s left arm and looked up at him with large eyes, “Money for your date?” I asked innocently, batting my eyelashes like I had seen Miume do just moments before and hoping that I had properly conveyed the expression. Even though I was still unsure what money was, or even what a date was, it appeared to be the correct terminology for this situation and I hoped I could express it accurately.

Keith’s eyes widened as his face became flushed again, red aura shooting upwards before moving rapidly in nervousness, “Date? Money??” He answered in broken up words, unable to form
sentences. His eyes seemed lost as we gazed at each other crimson aura moving in fluttered motions around us. Lance’s shouting brought him back to reality.

“No, look see! I have enough, more than enough!” He continued defensively at Miume who was now standing about a foot away with her arms crossed facing away from him.

She gave him a side eyed look, “Enough to get me a dessert too?” she playfully inquired her tails swishing mischievously behind her.

“Oh, now you’re just being high maintenance,” Lance pointed at her incredulously, stifling a chuckle.

Miume gasped with purposeful exaggeration placing a hand over her chest, “Oh my claws, you did not make such an insensitive claim about me!”

Lance nearly lost it laughing, “It’s not a claim, this is a fact!” He couldn’t contain his laughter any longer and just erupted at her ridiculousness. Miume smiled in triumph, apparently winning their little mind game here.

My eyebrows furrowed in confusion as I observed their interaction and noticed their energies still mingling easily with one another. Weren’t they just fighting? Why were they laughing now? I could have sworn Miume was going to strike Lance again, yet here they were laughing at each other and moving in to close the gap between them.

Keith noticed my puzzled expression and nudged me softly, “Don’t worry. They’re just flirting obnoxiously. And annoyingly.” he reassured me. His aura quivered lightly, but he appeared to be settling down. Carefully he wrapped an arm around me, completely relaxing.

Flirting? This was flirting? I thought flirting was holding hands, hugging, kissing, saying kind things - not insulting or fighting with one another. The world of romance and “like-like” continued to grow more and more confusing. Exhaling in exasperation i placed a hand against my head again, there was still so much to process.

“You two done over there?” Keith called out, keeping his arm around me as we walked up to the rainbow pulsing entrance of the arcade. Thankfully there really was no alien to collect any sort of payment like there had been at the club we had gone to for the mission.

Blinking my eyes a few times I tried to adjust to the new lights. Even though the space was filled with glittering lights and blaring sounds, there still wasn’t as much light as I was used to. Keith paused next to me making my feet automatically stop to match his pace. I looked forward to see that Lance and Miume were standing chest to chest, gazing into each other’s eyes playfully, completely consumed in one another presence and ignoring the physical world entirely. Tilting my head to the side, I watched them again, their auras still tangling playfully with one another as an overwhelming sensation of happiness pulsed around them mixed with something else? Something more hungry that I had seen before.

“Hello. Double date night. You wanted this. Let’s go,” Keith barked at them impatiently and snapped his fingers a few times to break their invisible bubble of happiness.

Keith’s words shattered that bubble as their energies jumped from the sudden burst of reality. They broke off from each other and walked quickly over to where Keith and I stood just inside the main entrance.

Following Keith’s lead we moved further into the multi tiered building. Bright rainbow lights
flashed around us, each dancing to the beat of whatever game was underneath it while corresponding music and effects echoed around it. Various structured games lined the walls before creating neat columns of rows within the space that stopped just in front of a cascading waterfall of fluid lights that lead up to the upper levels of the buildings. The aliens moving up and down it appeared to be walking on pigmented water that changed with each new pressure applied.

Laughter filtered through the air mixing with the loud sounds of the games around us as the more pleasant smell food wafted towards us. The arcade was crowded, but not so clogged that you couldn’t move freely or had to be overly cautious not to bump into someone like you had to be in the streets. Their different vibrations of energy rippled around them, helping me distinguish some of the pairs of aliens around us. Most of them appeared to have a more humanoid appearance, with a few sparse species that looked like nothing I had ever seen before.

Even though we were in an enclosed space with what appeared to only be one immediate exit and surrounded by a multitude of foreign aliens, I didn’t feel as tense as I had before. My energy relaxed around me as Keith’s wove through mine, giving me an extra layer of security. His calmness coaxed mine to relax further. Is this what having fun was? To relax and not be on guard at all times for an attack?

Propped in front of the first row of games was a large chipped black booth with four large bright white lit monitors that spread out into a semicircle. A faint red line glowed just behind it as if it were saying that we couldn’t cross. Miume walked up to the monitor that was second on the left and tilted her head trying to read the controls that inked into focus at her approach. Hieroglyphic symbols blocked into segments on the upper portion of the white screen while two circular images appeared at the bottom. Peaking around Keith’s shoulder I stared at the foreign symbols curiously. Could the others read this? Glancing up at Keith, his eyebrows were pulled together in confused concentration while Lance squinted at the screen. Miume’s ears twitched once as her red eyes scanned carefully over the screen again. “Uhh….” Lance was the first to speak as he scratched his head, “I don’t remember these controls being so complicated.”

“Yes! English! Yes! They always have English, thank god,” Lance exclaimed, obviously relieved. His aura jumped upwards before relaxing back around him and Miume.

“Yeah, we just walked up to the shooting game last time. Where did all of this extra stuff come from?” Keith inquired, glancing around.

“I told you guys the city transforms at night. It’s not uncommon for buildings to change shape and layouts here during the day to prepare,” Miume replied matter-of-factly. Then with a small “Ah hah!” she pressed one of the circular buttons towards the bottom of the screen and it immediately reoriented itself, spinning then stopping as a new set of symbols appeared.

“English! Yes! They always have English, thank god,” Lance exclaimed, obviously relieved. His aura jumped upwards before relaxing back around him and Miume.

“Mhmm, isn’t it convenient,” Miume muttered thoughtfully as she quickly scanned the information. She input some more commands which resulted in four transparent holographic cards with a symbol of a trident overlaying a crescent on them to flash across the screen before an unsettling churning noise grinded from under the it. Miume tilted her head to the side, looking just under the bright light before reached out to retrieve the images that had appeared on the screen moments before. Grinning widely she turned around to hold them up in a fan like motion, looking mischievously over the tops of them before handing us each a lightweight holographic card.

She held hers up as an example, “This is the game card. I’ve loaded it up so each of us can play up to 15 different games until we have to reload again. Depending on the game, you can win Chitz. Chitz are the currency used here to redeem prizes. We want to collect as many as we can so we can get an amazing prize!” She smiled widely with excitement and clasped her hands together, her aura
bursting around her ecstatically.

“Prize?” I thought out loud, turning the card over and inspecting it curiously.

“Yeah, girl, like a giant stuffed animal or something!” Lance replied eagerly, “Go check out the prize wall, they got tons of stuff. Stuff I bet Keith would love to win for you,” He smirked looking directly at Keith who gave him a death glare.

Keith mouthed out, “dude shut up,” but I already started replying, “Prize wall?” there were so many new words that I hadn’t experienced and it was making me more confused than usual.

“Yes, Keith. Why don’t you go show Umi where the prize wall is located and see if you guys can come up with a prize to win together,” Miume also stared directly at Keith with her ears rotating playfully and smiling too wide for his comfort.

“You two gotta be conspiring against me,” Keith muttered miserably to himself just barely audible. He shot Lance and Miume daggers with his eyes briefly and crossed his arms. His gaze turned to me and red dusted his cheeks again as his eyes traced the twirl of my bangs down to my lips then back to my eyes. Humming a deeper red, his aura flared as we locked eyes and I blinked waiting for him to speak.

“I think it was this way, Umi. Here, follow me.” Keith finally murmured as he placed a hand on the small of my back. With warmth radiating from his blazing aura, he guided me away from the game card podiums towards the supposed prize wall in the back corner of the arcade.
Lance and Miume turned to each other and high fived in victory while laughing together. “That was too perfect. Miume, my kitten, you are too good,” Lance cooed leaning close to Miume.

“Well, I am always one to be up for teasing other people, “she smirked back and leaned on him, “especially one as easy to mess with as Keith!” she snickered evilly.

“And this is why you’re my angel,” Lance purred as he bent down and nuzzled Miume’s nose with his own while she giggled and tried to push him away playfully.

He hummed as he pushed past her mocking protests and pecked her on the lips several times while she giggled, “Stop it!” she teased, “Don’t you want to go play some games?”

“What if I just wanna play with you?” Lance whispered and wrapped his arms around her waist.

Miume had to resist the urge to melt into his strong arms. He really did know how to play her game well, but she was here to win. Not only in the arcade, but with this teasing as well.

“Not here you, clawbrain,” Miume smiled back, “Let’s go find something interesting for the both of us.” She took his hand and led him down a row of bright glittering game systems. Her red eyes scanned the rows of machines until the word ‘trivia’ on a marquee with several other languages hovering in the middle caught her eye. With a sudden rush of adrenaline, she nearly sprinted towards the machine, dragging a shouting Lance behind her.

“Oh, you’ll see!” she replied with her eyes focused on the quiz game a couple of yards down. An outer circle of hovering black game chairs and monitors surrounded a large onix square that had circuit-like blue lines streaking down its sides. The lights pulsed vibrantly in their dormant state as they waited idly for someone to come play.

Abruptly stopping in front of the machine, Lance collided into Miume’s back, “Ack! Sorry babe,” he quickly apologized before his eyes landed on the glowing lights in front of them, “Um, what kinda game is this?” Upon further inspection he noticed that there were shifting columns of alien words rotating with English on the screen in front of them. Each set of columns had a different color to indicate what Lance assumed to be categories. It was a trivia game and his face dropped, “Wait, what? Trivia? Really??” he asked incredulously.

Miume grinned back at him, “Why yes! What an astute observation, little boy. You’ll do well then if you’re that clever. I happen to love trivia games since the intellectual stimulation can be so rewarding! And… a smart brain is sexy, don’t you think?” she winked at Lance as her tails twirled
behind her.

He smirked with confidence, “Well, you’re gonna see just how astute I am then!”

He boldly took a seat and patted the empty one next to him inviting Miume to sit. She glided over, sat down promptly, then scanned her game card on the side of her chair where a blinking yellow light came to life from the pressure in the seat. Lance followed suit, “Pick any category you want. You’ll find that I have superior knowledge in anything.” He bragged on, tapping his head lightly.

“The game randomizes the categories, you doof,” Miume snickered. Bright white and cyan blue lights beamed outward as the game came to life. The game’s title changed to a hologram of a giant swirling sphere that resembled a blue-green planet covered in orange clouds. The globe projected straight up from the cube as Lance’s and Miume’s seats glowed red and orange.

“Ah, let me change the language for you, kitten.” Miume purred in a teasing voice, reaching out to touch the holographic planet so that a smaller screen appeared. Scrolling through a few prompts Miume finally tapped the only word Lance could recognize; English.

“Hey, it’s not my fault Earth doesn’t teach alien as a foreign language.” Lance defended himself but kept his voice light.

“‘Alien’ isn’t a language. There are many galactic languages. Don’t be insensitive,” Miume chuckled under her breath before tapping the screen twice so that the planet swiftly spun once.

“SPIN FOR CATEGORY,” read the large white words curved over the planet hologram. Lance’s seat flickered as his monitor was chosen to roll for the category.

“Looks like I’m the chosen one,” he joked and waved his hand over the monitor to begin the selection process. Miume smiled over to him and brushed some of her bangs behind her ear. The cuteness of the action caused a light blush dust Lance’s cheeks before he snapped his attention back to the categories on his screen.

The projected globe’s orange clouds turned white and the globe appeared to rotate rapidly as different names of categories cycled over its surface, “SCIENCE AND MATH. ART AND MUSIC. GALACTIC HISTORY. INTERGALACTIC TRAVEL. SPACE FUN. GALACTIC POP CULTURE. UNIVERSAL POWER SOURCES. SPACE SPORTS.”

The globe gradually winded down, stopping on intergalactic travel. Lance looked over to Miume, “Oh this’ll be so easy for me since I learned so much at the Garrison and I’m super smart from all my tough training. I am an ACE pilot after all,” he gloated, wiggling his eyebrows at Miume who appeared unimpressed.

“Let’s just see how well you fare then,” Miume mewed coyly in reply as she turned to face the globe which had now opened up on itself like a blooming flower. The center of the globe shone like a bright star as the first question’s text overlaid it in black outlined letters, “Known as a potential harvest point for Hydrochlonolalus aerofuel in the Trion Galaxy, this organic fuel source is commonly found on planets with high concentrations of oxygen and nitrogen in their atmospheres.”

“Uhh,” Lance groaned out quietly as four choices popped up on the monitor screen in front of him. He raised a finger and looked perplexed as the gears in his mind raced through old memories from the Garrison. He gulped as he realized he hadn’t learned any of this intergalactic fuel business during his studies. He only learned about the Milky Way galaxy and their nearby galaxies for Earth. He didn’t even know where the Trion galaxy was!
Miume had already made her selection and her screen shone with a powerful white color. She glanced over to him to see him sweating and gave him an evil smirk, almost hissing, “You choose your answer yet, little boy?”

“Uh, yeah sure, of course I did,” Lance tried to sound sure of himself as he chose the first choice and just shrugged to himself. He closed his eyes as his board lit up white as well and the holographic star in the center seemed to supernova and explode with fanfare music as the correct choice was revealed, “Correct answer: Pthalium. Chitz rewarded: 150.”

Lance opened one of his eyes to look down at the choice he had made which read Pthalium.

“Yahoo!” He hooted punching his arms into the air.

Miume laughed, “You seem a little su-purr-ized. Were you not confident in your choice?” Her tails swished back and forth in a teasing fashion.

“Psh, yeah, of course I was,” Lance blatantly lied and place his hands behind his head as he leaned back, “I’m ready for the next question. Are you, kittencakes?” he arched an eyebrow in friendly competition.

Giggling to herself she pointed a finger gun at him, “Mew know it!”

Several rounds went by with Miume scoring perfectly on every question and Lance miraculously choosing the right answers every time through sheer intuition. Soon enough they had collected around 1000 Chitz each.

As fun as trivia was for her, Miume was growing bored and wanted to try something else. There was a surplus of games and she didn’t want to waste their entire date sitting and picking answers. She desired something more exhilarating, fun, something they could team up together to have fun and bond.

“Lance,” Miume started sweetly, turning to him and placing a hand on his thigh. He visibly flushed pink and smiled widely with half lidded eyes, “Do you have any ideas for another game? Maybe purr-chance?”

“Well, I can think of a few games we could play, just you and me…,” He cooed and she rolled her eyes removing her hand from his thigh. She liked to flirt and he just didn’t stop being entertaining. It was hilarious, and she thoroughly enjoyed teasing him. Because that’s all this continued to be, just teasing…right? Why was she yearning for this play so much?

“I meant here, you furball,” she smirked while standing up and straightening out her skirt.

Not looking disheartened at all, Lance sprang up next to Miume, “How about a shooter game? Those are fun! Keith and I played one last time and I kicked his ass, naturally.” He winked at her, “The sharpshooter never misses, and I’m the sharpest shooter on the team.”

“That’s right! You were telling me how im-purr-essive of a shooter you were when we first met. Do you recall?” she took his hand and started walking away from the trivia game down another aisle lined by noisy machines. They were bound to run into one shooting game eventually.

“Um, yeah, I think I do,” Lance looked upwards squinting and trying to remember the events, “I think I was telling you about beautiful Blue and the team…”

“And how everyone else goes ‘pew, pew, pew ’ but you only need to go ‘pew!’” Miume fondly finished his sentence, emphasizing the gun noises and using her free hand to emulate a gun.
Lance turned a shade of red and stared at her with wide eyes, “I said that to you?” he gasped in horror, his feet coming to a dead stop.

“Yes, you really did,” she chirped, using her index finger to push closed his agap mouth before her eyes noticed a two-person shooter just a few more systems ahead.

“Oh my god… can… can I just blame that lameness on the drugs you had me on?” he sounded dejected, placing a hand over his face in embarrassment. He couldn’t believe how silly and immature he acted when they first met. And that was her first impression too! Groaning internally he wished he could go back and better control his mind.

“I suppose you could chalk it up to the analgesics I was pumping through you. However, I just thought that it was sincerely your endearing and charming purr-sonality. And I liked it.” Miume spun around to face Lance and saw that he still appeared sad and lost in thought. Unable to even hearing her sweet, honest words. Coming to a stop Lance bumped into her chest, the sudden contact bringing his eyes back into focus. He audibly gasped in surprise and went to say something when she stood up on her toes to reach him and sweetly kissed him on the lips. Tugging down lightly on his shirt to pull him down to her height his body automatically responded to her touch.

Lance’s eyes widened before he smiled and closed them to reciprocate her kiss. She pulled away and tilted her head to the side, ears rotating slowly in content and her tails lazily swaying. “And what can I thank that pleasant kiss for?” He asked while placing his hands around her waist and leaning closer.

“You seemed a little sad, so I had to fix that. I am your physician after all,” she smiled back at him, gently wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Well, then I say we get out of here and play some doctor then, huh?” Lance purred in a low voice and Miume took her right hand and pulled his head back hard, “Ow!” he jolted.

“I said none of that in here,” she sternly scolded, then leaned into his exposed neck, “But, maybe later,” she murmured giving him quick little nips to the neck. His body instantly melted under her touch and giving way to her control. Smirking triumphantly to herself Miume gave him a final hidden nip before pulling back. She loved how his body reacted to her touch, his reactions never becoming boring, and making her long to see more of his expressions to her teasing. She found herself thoroughly enjoying her time with Lance. This was new to her, she usually bored of her boy toys relatively quickly after she figured them out. Yet, somehow Lance was different. Not only was she not tiring of him, but she enjoyed more than just his physical company and was finding it hard to deny the feelings bubbling up in her chest.

Letting him go with some force, she turned elegantly on her heels, making sure to let her soft tails brush lightly against his face as she walked over to the shooting game and left him to stand there dazed. “Are you coming along meow? We have a game to play,” she called over to him, effectively snapping Lance out of his little trance.

“Oh you know I’ll be anywhere you go, kitten,” He replied smoothly and strode over to her, “Meow, if you’ll let me, I’ll show you how the sharp shooter kicks ass at the shooting games.”

‘Paw-lease, show little me how it’s done,” she joked, waving her game card over the monitor and picking up the large purple and white glowing gun. She wasn’t trained in shooting and had only played shooting style games briefly before, so she doubted she’d fare very well against Lance. Afterall, he really did have an amazing eye and great sniping skills. Miume decided to see how far they could go with this game then move on to another if needed. She figured that he needed a little pick me up, and what better way than for him to show his skill. She just knew that whatever they
did, she’d have the most fun as long as she was with him.
Racing Hearts: Keith POV (Space Arcade part 3)

Chapter Notes

~This is the final part of Space Arcade, i hope you enjoyed Lani’s fluff~

*Just what have I gotten myself into,* Keith thought uneasily to himself as he stood beside Umi. Her large raven colored eyes flew open wide at the mass array of sparkly and soft prizes hanging over the ‘Chitz Exchange’ wall.

“Uwah” she involuntarily breathed as her eyes scanned the racks taking it all in. There were just so many adorable prizes to be won, she’d never seen or felt anything like this before. Like that large five foot purple glittery stuffed dragonbeast or that three foot rainbow colored Weblum plushie and even that massive pink eight legged alien beast with swirls patterned down the sides. They were all pretty cute and Keith could tell they made Umi feel so warm and happy by the way she raised herself on her toes to get a better look as her eyes sparkled. She’d never come across objects that made her feel this way before, usually it was an energy or aura, but she determined she had to have one.

Suddenly something extra special caught her eye: a two foot plush red rabbit with a giant black sparkling bow on for a collar and an actual bell that rang softly when you held it. On top of that, it emitted a gentle glowing essence that made her feel at peace, almost giving her a sense of comfort. She was immediately infatuated with this stuffed creature and didn’t even notice herself running over to stare at it in detail.

Keith was smiling fondly while watching Umi hop around the prize bar, completely taken by these stupid stuffed creatures. Her reactions were irresistibly cute and he had to cover his face partially to stop himself from staring too much. “You find the one you like the most?” he commented lightly when Umi became captivated by the red rabbit plush. She simply nodded while keeping her eyes fixated on the plush. Keith smiled a bit to himself at her endearing enthusiasm. He’d never seen her act so natural and carefree. “Well,” Keith continued casually walking right next to Umi, “How many Chitz is it? I bet I could get you anything you want easily. It’s no big deal,” He smiled at her.

Umi tilted her head to the side, squinting her eyes at the numbers just under the rabbit before sighing. “I can’t read it.” her voice dropped a note in frustration.

Placing a hand reassuringly on her shoulder, he felt a pang of sympathy towards Umi. There was so much she had missed out on since her time with Zarkon. He was angry with Zarkon for taking so much from her, but more importantly he wanted to help Umi and give her everything she wanted.

“That’s okay. Now let’s see here,” Keith leaned forward to inspect the price closer, “Oh, well that’s not bad - wait, *ten thousand chitz* ?!” Keith nearly choked on his own spit. Umi glanced over to him, tilting her head to the side as she tried to understand. Her twirled bangs gracefully followed her head and bounced delicately reflecting the multi colored lights from the prize bar brilliantly.

“That’s okay. Now let’s see here,” Keith leaned forward to inspect the price closer, “Oh, well that’s not bad - wait, *ten thousand chitz* ?!” Keith nearly choked on his own spit. Umi glanced over to him, tilting her head to the side as she tried to understand. Her twirled bangs gracefully followed her head and bounced delicately reflecting the multi colored lights from the prize bar brilliantly.

“Is that a lot?” she inquired softly, dark eyes dancing back and forth as she read his aura changes. Standing upright he ran a hand through his perfectly messy hair, “Umi, that’s gonna be a lot of games. Like, it’s gonna take more than one trip to the arcade I’m guessing…,” Keith tried to
explain, but Umi just furrowed her brow in confusion and almost… Annoyance? Was Keith really getting an annoyed vibe from Umi right now? “Umi, look, you only get, like, 50-100 Chitz per game, and that’s only if you do well. And the games with the most Chitz are typically all up to chance or impossibly difficult.” He scratched the back of his neck nervously.

Umi held her gaze with newfound determination, something Keith hadn’t seen before in her over something so trivial. “What’s the problem,” she quietly challenged and Keith gulped hard, “We can do it. It’s only 10,000 Chitz, Keith.” Her voice only waivered slightly at the numerical value, no doubt trying to remember the correct value.

“But Umi-” Keith tried to plea but she cut him off abruptly.

“Keith. I can do this. We, can do this,” her voice hardened into a familiar driven note.

“Umi, what if I got you the small black rabbit coin purse instead?” Keith tried again, sheepishly pointing towards the smaller object on a lower level of prizes.

“Keith,” Umi looked up at him with her beautiful raven eyes sparkling, “I need it.”

Keith immediately went a shade redder and looked away quickly not being able to handle this level of adorable right now. His heart raced and his hands felt clammy as he tried to think of a way to resolve this, “Okay, I’ll try….” he answered in defeat. He couldn’t resist her.

Umi grabbed his hand with both of hers and held it happily, “Thank you, Keith!” she beamed. He mumbled something to the effect of an agreement since he couldn’t form words again. As he scanned the area in an attempt to avoid her previous stunning gaze, he noticed a hovercraft racing game. Hell yeah, he nodded to himself.

“Hey, Umi, you piloted a ship right?” Keith asked guiding her towards the game gently.

“Only the one I escaped…,” Umi looked down with a frown, her voice trailing off and becoming quieter.

Quiznaks, change the subject STAT , Keith panicked to himself, “But for fun racing! Do you know what racing is?” he smiled. Umi shook her head and returned his gaze with innocent eyes. “I think you’ll like it” he grinned as they approached the four large hovercraft games. Each hovercraft was built more like a hoverbike but with four distinct styles. One was a purple hue with two large front wheels and rear wheels with a more circular appearance. Next was a bright orange yellow triangular craft with one slim front wheel and two slim rear wheels. After that came a cyan blue hoverbike with no wheels and finally there was a fluorescent green craft with two large wheels.

“Here, hop on any of the crafts. I’ll try to find where we scan our game cards,” Keith guided as he boarded the purple craft with ease. Umi grabbed the yellow one next to him and easily hopped up on it with natural agility as he waved his hand over the craft’s interface on the head of the bike trying to find where the game card would be scanned. The orange rectangle between the handlebars flashed once as a single beep signaled the acceptance of the card. Umi followed suit and scanned her card successfully.

“Now, all you need to do is pull the throttle here on your right,” Keith began to instruct Umi who was watching with wide, attentive eyes, “Use this clip for a nitro boost, but you only get a few boosts depending on your thruster bar right here… then you use this to break. To turn you want to lean your body on the direction you wanna go and push all your weight for sharper turns.” Keith demonstrated each motion as Umi watched intently and copied some of the motions herself.
“There you go,” he smiled warmly, loving the way she mimicked his motions gracefully, “Now let’s do a practice race first so you can get the hang of it. Then we’ll do the full thing, and I’ll warn you. I’m not holding back on you,” He smirked getting into position on his bike and glancing to his right to lock eyes with her. His gloved hands subconsciously flexed around the controllers as his heart started to race with excited competition.

Umi felt her heart skip as she made eye contact with him then assumed a similar position on her bike. Leaning down to lower her center of gravity like Keith had, she too reflexively gripped the throttle. The screen in front of her seemed to open up and project the race track around her in three dimensions, completely engulfing her craft in a little holographic cube causing the rest of the game room to fade away. The sound of wind blowing across an open space filled the projected space around them as the hoverbike started to hum and vibrate. Keith could see Umi tense at the projected cube until she glanced over and realized the hologram was still permeable and she could see Keith through her projected wall to her left. She noticed that he was in his own little hologram cube that projected the same track as what lay in front of her hovercraft. Keith watched her shoulders relax as she realized she wasn’t trapped, but rather in some kind of simulation. A sand dusted desert with plentiful canyons and cliffs stretched out in front of them. Huge red symbols flashed above them and made her wince at the stark brightness. A giant number three counted down in front of them in a booming voice.

Three. “Umi, just pull the throttle as soon as the countdown hits ‘go’,” Keith coached, glancing over to her with a smile.

Two. Umi’s eyes flicked to the side, her head forward and nodded once in response. She pulled her hand back on the throttle to acclimate to the drag and pull on the handle. She felt over the nitro pull as well to familiarize herself.

One. Umi breathed in deeply, closing her eyes. This almost felt natural to her.

GO! A large digital alarm sounded and Umi’s eyes flew open as she yanked on the throttle instantaneously, causing a jet booster on her holocraft to ignite and propel the craft up and forward on the virtual track. She automatically hyperfocused on the course in front of her, throwing her weight left, then right, then returning to her center as the track curved ahead. The craft under her vibrated and reacted to her movements, the sound of some kind of engine filling her ears, as artificial wind fanned across her face and completely immersed her into the digital world. Looking ahead on the track, Umi noticed a large cliff approaching and her nitro boost handle began to flicker with a pink and orange signal. With perfect timing, she pulled back the nitro boost handle and the throttle simultaneously which sent her craft soaring over the large canyon’s gap. The machine under her lifted upwards as the boost activated, the track disappearing as she flew over the cliffs edge. Little orange hoops appeared in the air and she manipulated her weight on the craft to send herself gliding through the hoops which gave her craft extra boosts and kept her airborne.

Looking around the hologram, she noticed it was semi-realistic, having an animated appeal but yet moving and reacting in a way that made her feel as if she were really there. She smiled widely as an intense adrenaline rush surged through her, feeling icy as it passed over her then burning. She let out a genuine laugh as she controlled the craft, landing back on the virtual ground and easily weaving in and out of the caverns of the track, taking the largest jumps for the extended boosts in the air and for the pure adrenaline rush. Umi quickly glanced at Keith, and the track he was skillfully gliding over looked familiar… In fact she had already passed that part of the track!

Keith looked over to her again to see how she was doing and his jaw dropped. She was basically circling him as she soared through the track with ease, which he could see from the mini map on his screen. With new determination, he pulled harder on the throttle and began using the nitro
boosts over smaller hills and bumps, which propelled him faster, allowing him to start gaining ground and catch up to her.

He saw Umi notice this and smirk to herself, now doing the same and gaining even more ground. Keith laughed to himself at her natural skill and deviated from the course in response, going over a larger hill and hitting a turbo platform which gave him a good boost over a couple yards and placed him right behind Umi’s hovercraft.

Surprised, Umi revved up the throttle and used her remaining turbo boost over the upcoming hill. Keith was doing the same and gaining ground on her. They both seemed to hit the edge of the cliff at the same time and used their nitro boosts simultaneously, the finish line in site. However, Keith realized he had used too much nitro earlier, noticing the red light flickering from the control. He desperately cranked the handle, but his nitro bar was completely empty, and this cut him short. Umi zoomed right over the finish line a good craft’s length ahead and upon crossing the red line her screen flashed blue and orange making a cheering robotic chime.

“WINNER!!” projected above her as the map collapsed and returned to the main screen and another line of text appeared underneath, “New Record! Bonus Chitz earned. Please roll for multiplier”. The throttle handle glowed in rainbow hues prompting Umi it pull on it hard and a multiplier wheel appeared. She looked to Keith perplexed, and he nodded his head, “Pull the throttle, Umi. Looks like you’ve won something big!”

Nodding, she yanked the throttle and the cube illuminated bright yellows and blues. Clicking rapidly for a few seconds, the clicks became slower until it landed on ‘5x’. “Congratulations! You just won 2000 Chitz! These will be applied to your game card. Thank you for playing!” With that the words promptly disappeared, the holographic cube receding back as the vibrating of the bikes slowed to a stop.

Umi’s smile grew large and she whipped her head to face Keith in unbridled excitement, “Did you just see that!” she exclaimed in a voice that was loud for her, “I just won 2000 chitz! If I do this a few more times, I’ll have enough for that prize,” she beamed. Even though she didn’t understand the numerical value, she assumed it was close to enough for the prize.

Keith was just smiling like an idiot back at her, he couldn’t help it! She was being so adorable and she even beat him on a racing game. Umi beat him, Keith! He was equal parts impressed and aroused. She really was something amazing.

“Wait, how many did you get Keith?” she inquired in her usual softer voice, pushing back a silky bang.

“Well, I was right behind you, so it’s probably close, right?” He remarked then looked at his monitor which read, “LAST PLACE: You earned 100 Chitz. Thank you. Try again!”.

His face dropped, “Are you kidding me?! That was a good match!! And I was second! Not last. What, is this game rigged?” He spurted out, clearly flustered at the lower score.

Umi covered her mouth and laughed a little, “We could always race again.”

Keith grinned, happy to see her loosen up so naturally and even giggle, “Good plan, best two out of three?”

She returned his grin in friendly competition, and Keith couldn’t help the small laugh that escaped his lips. He had never witness Umi acting so relaxed and carefree. She wasn’t shrinking from the flashing lights or darting her eyes around wildly in alert to potential threats. Instead, she was
smiling, laughing, zooming around the holographic race course with him and genuinely enjoying herself. Umi was so light and carefree, and a bubbly warmth swelled up in Keith’s chest as he hoped she was healing.

The two held five more races, but since Umi’s first score was so high, they couldn’t break the record to get the multiplier. After the games, the two only racked up a total of 5000 Chitz. Holding up her game card curiously the clear crescent had turned a yellow color. She furrowed her brow, looking to Keith expectantly.

“No, we still don’t have enough.” Keith’s mouth was a fine line as he shook his head gently.

Umi’s face hardened a little more, trying to understand the values and clearly feeling more frustrated. She turned her attention back to the thin card in her hand and turned it over a few times, mulling over the the value of Chitz needed. Keith saw her chest rise and fall as she continued to consider all options in steadfast determination.

“See Umi,” he sighed as they disembarked from their hovercrafts and the game shut down, “I told you it was gonna take some time,” he half smiled apologetically. Looking back to Umi, Keith could easily see how motivated she still was. Her mouth was set in a hard line like it did when she was concentrating on something as bursts of adrenaline pumped through her, pupils dilated in excitement from the game.

“Let’s find Miume and Lance. Maybe they can help?” Umi offered, returning Keith’s gaze with wide, adoring eyes. Keith nodded and allowed this adorable girl to lead the way, her small hand finding his quickly as she tugged him towards Lance and Miume. It was easier for him this way. He had never seen Umi like this, so open and even suggesting outside help. He didn’t know how to respond to the sudden change.

Umi paused only briefly, her eyes roaming over the dark space as she appeared to trace the different colors and lines of energies around them. Keith couldn’t help but watch, he loved how she could get lost in the energies of others; her eyes glossing over, focusing on things he couldn’t see. With a quick blink she could snap between physical and nonphysical sight. Her hand tightened around his fingers as she pulled him in the right direction, easily zoning in on Miume and Lance he assumed.

The sound of a crowd cheering drew closer as a large multicolored game surrounded by aliens of all sizes came into view. A huge screen covered the back wall next to the rainbow of staircase that connected the stage to the ground floor. Two robot humanoid looking figures moved across the screen as if they were dancing as multi colored arrows glided upwards in every direction. Their patterns were almost hypnotizing as they continued their steady stream upwards to the beat of the music vibrating the air just in front of them. The crowd grew louder as the couple approached, becoming slightly over-stimulating for Umi as her body stiffened next to Keith’s, and a barely visible flicker of energy flashing a few inches in front of her. Keith sensed this immediately and squeezed her hand, hoping this would comfort her like before. Her shoulders slacked and she let out a held breath, his aura instantly providing relief. Even though he couldn’t see how his aura reacted, he had noticed that small touches such as these seemed to calm Umi down when she was uneasy. He assumed that his aura must change at least a little to calm her. The more time they spent together the more Keith was able to pick up on her subtle body changes and reactions. He found himself reacting simultaneously to this, as if naturally intuned with her.

Umi paused at the rim of the gathered crowd, her dark eyes lifting upwards, tracing something separate from the dancing screen before them. Keith turned his gaze upwards as well, wondering what she was looking at. Were Miume and Lance watching this as well?
Approaching closer, he found that Lance and Miume were moving on these multicolored steps on the stage in unison to the scrolling arrows to upbeat music with corresponding flashing colored lights. The crowd seemed to cheer at certain points in the song where the two had to jump or pose, and a large “COMBO” shot out from the screen from a 3D hologram.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Keith grumbled, wiping his hand down his face as he stepped closer to Umi. She turned to him and gave him a puzzled look. “They’re playing goddamn Dance Dance Revolution. Of course they are. Space DDR, who would have thought.” He sighed to himself, ducking his head down and shaking it while smiling slightly. “It’s a dance game, watch for a second. It’s ridiculous.”

Umi blinked before returning her attention back to the screen and stage. She watched with wide eyes as Lance and Miume pulled off these combos and were jumping on the pads as the colors instructed, even spinning for some reason at certain commands. Both of them were smiling and giving each other ridiculous looks when needing to pose. They really did seem to be in sync. Their auras tangled easily with one another now as new white strings laced their energies together before blending with the rainbow lasers from the hologram game that reflected in Umi’s eyes. The upbeat music was similar to the rave of their last mission and Umi couldn’t help but tap her foot a bit and bob her head involuntarily. Keith only smiled at her and tapped his foot lightly with her.

The music picked up once more, the arrows on the screen increasing in speed as the beat quickened. Umi’s eyes traced the symbols, trying to follow them with mild difficulty. Yet somehow Lance and Miume didn’t miss a single step, pressing on the corresponding arrow colors in perfect unison. As the music built rapidly into a crescendo the crowd started to bounce enthusiasm, the energy in the room charged with excitement, as both Lance and Miume jumped up before landing in a dramatic pose. The crowd went wild as the game cycled through pinks, violets, yellows and cyans and the giant words “PERFECT SCORE” jumped out at them with lasers. Under that heading bright orange letters spelled out, “PRIZE: 5,000 CHITZ.”

“We did it!” Miume jumped up happily, colliding into Lance’s arms which were of course open for her. He spun her around as the dance platform they stood on cycled through more colors then stopped on a bright purple hue. With a high five they exited the platform as two other aliens jumped on to become the next players.

“What did I tell you, kittens? I’ve got the moves, you’ve got the groove, we make a purr-fect pair,” he chimed holding up his game card. The crescent was now a light cyan instead of the yellow color Umi and Keith had.

“I must say, I was im-purr-essed,” Miume smirked, holding her card which also shone that same cyan color. The color must have something to do with the amount of Chitz you have, Umi quickly figured out. She nearly ran over to a victorious Lance and Miume, easily weaving through the crowded mass.

“How many Chitz do you guys have?” she inquired with urgency lacing her voice. Her eyes shone with a fiery ambition as the adrenaline coursed through her. That rabbit was hers.

“Oh, hello, Umi! Are you having fun?” Miume replied and went to hug her, but Umi grabbed her shoulders first and stated again, “How. Many. Chitz?”

Laughing warmly at Umi’s seriousness, Miume held up her card, “Well, we’ve both acquired 5000 each from that last game. However, to sum up our previous rounds, we both have 9000 Chitz each,” she grinned and looked triumphant.

Lance swooped in, placing his arms around the two girls’ shoulders, “Yeah, you could say we’re
Chitz Rich, bitch!” he hooted. Miume giggled and Umi held that steadfast look on her face as the gears were churning in her mind. She was agile. She could mimic the motions of that game without a problem and earn those chitz. Maybe that would be enough for her prize. She could do it.

“How many rounds did it take you to get 5000 chitz?” she asked, watching as an alien couple stepped off the dance platform and another took their place.

“We first played three rounds to see who could win the best two out of three,” Miume started and Lance jumped in excitedly, “But then we noticed there was a double couple mode for double the points, and even quadruple on certain songs! So, naturally, with our beauties and skill combined and we achieved the PURRFECT score!” he hugged onto Miume a little more while she rolled her eyes with a smile.

“Is it hard?” Umi pressed. No matter the difficulty, she could adapt and win. She just needed to get her card to turn the same color as Miume and Lance’s then she would be close enough.

Smiling to himself, Keith found Umi’s passion and commitment charming. Her drive to do what needed to be done to complete her goal was amazing. No doubt she could expertly move on the dance floor given her training and athleticism. Lost in his thoughts, he barely noticed Umi stride over to him and stand squarely in front of him. Blinking back into the world, he was about to speak when he noticed the fire in Umi’s raven eyes. No, she couldn’t want him to go up and play DDR, especially in front of so many others.

“I’m sorry, Umi, no, I can’t-” Keith tried to reason with her, but the way her eyelashes batted as she blinked and she bit her plump lower lip, he couldn’t help but start to melt.

Fast forward fifteen minutes and Keith was hating himself for being put in this scenario. Why did he have to care about Umi so much that he just followed what she did? No matter how ridiculous or against it he’d be otherwise, he couldn’t stop putting her above himself. Not that it was a problem. It was just something new for Keith. He had never gotten close enough to someone to want to put their best interest and happiness above his own. Unfortunately that’s how he found himself on the large elevated dance platform, surrounded by a crowd of cheering aliens and facing a huge ten foot monitor with rainbow hues projecting outward. He sighed long and hard. He hated this. It went against every fiber in his body to be out in the open doing something so potentially embarrassing. Yet he couldn’t help himself. He needed to be next to Umi. He needed to do this for her.

But as he turned to look at Umi, who had rolled up her sleeves, cracked her joints, and relaxed into a defensive stance preparing herself for the music, he smiled. Just like in training, she exhumed that focused and deliberate concentration on the task at hand. He loved this determination of hers and how she became so serious about her goal, even if it was a silly rabbit plush. Not only was she incredibly cute and gorgeous being lit up by the multicolored lights, but her motivation and passion inspired him to give this stupid game a chance. For her.

The platform underneath them came to life with bright red hues while pinks, cyans, yellows, and violets lit up the arrows Keith was required to step on. He cursed to himself as the music cued and the spotlights around the stage circled down on top of Umi and Keith. A huge drop of beats suddenly started and the screen illuminated with commanding arrows. He followed as best he could, missing a step here and there since the beat was surprisingly fast. Keith looked over to Umi to see if she was struggling too. To his amazement, Umi glided over the steps hitting them perfectly on time and spun when instructed to, posing as the beat commanded. How was she a natural at this?

“Keith!!” Keith heard the familiar sharp tone of Lance’s voice shout from behind him to his left,
“Use the groove! Your GROOVE” Lance tried to give him advice but Keith only blushed and cursed harder. This was a lot more difficult than he thought. He looked back at Umi as a guide. Her movements resembled those she used on the battlefields during practice and sparring. Wait, this dancing was just like sparring wasn’t it? Stepping exactly where you need to be in order to strike or dodge.

Changing his perspective, Keith breathed in and out, focusing on Umi’s presence and repeated Shiro’s words, “Patience yields focus.” His eyes flew open as the next beat dropped, increasing the speed of the music slightly and changing up the steps. With new focus, he skillfully hit every beat and arrow as commanded, spinning in unison with Umi who looked over to him with emblazoned eyes. She gave him a small smile as she realized he was moving in sync with her just like in training.

He grinned back and nodded, the enthusiastic crowd behind them fading away until all Keith could hear was the music and Umi’s soft breaths as she moved next to him. The two jumped up when the game instructed, posed and slid as the stage lights pounded with the music. The crowd grew even wilder with each “COMBO” and “PERFECT” that shot from the screen above them in hologram letters. Soon the beat began to build up for a final time, reaching the climax of the song dramatically and directing Keith and Umi to spin into a jump, slide and pose together perfectly on beat.

“EXCELLENT! NEW HIGH SCORE!” the stage projected. “Prize: 5000 Chitz”.

Umi looked over to Keith panting, and he returned her gaze. Despite the rigorous movements of the dance, her hair was still perfectly twirled without a strand out of place. Her face flushed modestly from the exercise and her soft lips glistened in the rainbow lights as she panted gently. Overcome by their victory, teamwork and her impressive moves, Keith walked over to embrace her.

“We did it,” Umi sighed, lightly wrapping her arms around his strong frame.

Keith hugged her tighter and whispered in her ear, “It was all for you.” As he took her hand to walk her off the stage, Umi blushed suddenly and found herself smiling wider than she had all day.

Miume bounded over to them enthusiastically, her tails waving in excitement. “You guys were absolutely amazing! An astounding purr-formance!” Miume chirped as she scooped Umi’s hands into her own.

“What does purple mean?” Keith held his up as well.

“Purple means 10,000 Chitz!” Miume beamed as she continued to hold Umi, “Well that’s at least what the guide indicated over on the wall there. And there. There, too.” She tilted her head to the side to gesture to the the color coordinated poster just to their left that indicated what each color of
the card meant in terms of Chitz gained. There were several plastered on the walls but they were
difficult to see in the dark room.

“10,000 Chitz?” Umi and Keith repeated in unison happily. Miume released Umi as her face lit up
in excitement and Keith briskly scooped Umi up to hug her tightly. They smiled and laughed as he
put her down gently.

Lance wrinkled his face, “Ew, when did you get so corny,” he scoffed playfully. In all their time
together Lance had never seen such a relaxed, nor playful Keith. He couldn’t help but tease at his
one sided rival, his brotherly love for the mullet head coming through as he teased the other male.

A light blush flashing across Keith’s cheeks at his sudden bold move of public affection. He
punched Lance in the arm with some force, “Shut up.”

“Dude, ow!” Lance jokingly yelped, rubbing his arm as if Keith had actually hurt him.

“Boys!” Miume snipped. Her red eyes slid from a somewhat irritated Keith to an indignant Lance
before she smiled warmly. “Let’s go home.”

The ride back to the Castle seemed a little too crowded for Keith with all the large stuffed animals
Lance had gotten for Miume, all of which had some sort of cat theme. She stood behind his pilot’s
chair, her arms draped over his shoulders as she embraced him. Her tails swished adoringly behind
her as she looked out the windshield at the passing stars.

“I think you should line all these fine prizes around your bed to make sure you don’t forget who
got them for you, and you can think of me every night because of it,” Lance smirked as he talked
quietly to Miume.

“Well, why wouldn’t I have the real thing there the whole time?” she purred, teasing him just
above a whisper.

He grew mildly flushed but continued, “Baby, you know I’ll be there whenever you ring.” She
giggled as she nuzzled his neck.

Keith rolled his eyes. All these stuffed dolls were overkill. You could get the point across with one
as far as he was concerned. And he did, he thought smugly to himself as he looked on to Umi who
was under his left arm. She was cuddled next to him on the ground and hugging the coveted red
sparkly rabbit with the black bow to her chest tightly. It was softer than he expected for an arcade
toy and much heavier. No wonder it was 10,000 Chitz. That struggle was worth it though.

As Umi glanced up to him with sparkling eyes while embracing her rabbit, he couldn’t help pulling
her into a soft kiss. She smiled back at him, appearing more comfortable and enjoying the ride.
Keith was satisfied in knowing that she was able to actually have carefree fun for once. No fear.
No punishments. Just unbridled joy and love with friends. He silently thanked Miume and Lance
for playing their part in bringing Umi happiness, and he knew he would do anything to ensure Umi
remained safe and happy.
Stress Knitting

“It’s over. We finally finished!” Hunk groaned, collapsing onto the ground and rolling onto his back while exhaling loudly.

“Thank god. I swear Kara doesn’t care if she kills us or not.” Pidge sighed tiredly, sitting on the ground next to Hunk who continued to moan dramatically.

“Come on guys, it was only a week.” Shiro tried to comfort them, giving his team a weary smile. Even though it had only been a week since we had returned to Trax, the tests Kara had designed for training seemed to be getting more difficult. While we still trained together, she had designed them so intricately that they tested each of our personal weaknesses while simultaneously strengthening our teamwork and individual skills.

Although the members of Voltron already had bonds formed before I joined, they seemed stronger and more solid now. The training and time spent together reaffirming their trust and support fortified the integrity of their bonds. They each truly cared for one another and wanted them to do their best as well as give each other as much support as they needed. The team almost subconsciously picked up where the other couldn’t.

Glancing down I lightly touched my chest. The white bonds that had started protruding were thicker now, reaching more confidently towards the strings that my team members were trying to connect to. Smiling softly to myself, I enjoyed the warmth of their touch. I still couldn’t believe any of this was possible.

Lance’s loud voice broke through my thoughts, drawing my attention back to the physical world.

“I dunno what you guys are talking about! I hardly broke a sweat.” He bragged in a flirtatious tone, trying to flex his arms as Miume walked up. She raised an eyebrow at his attempt and rolled her eyes.

“Says the person who was screaming the entire time,” Keith grumbled under his breath, accepting the water pouch Coran handed him.

“I was not screaming!” Lance protested, flopping down among the group and taking a long sip of his own water pouch. Keith rolled his eyes, not having the energy to waste on this argument.

“You all did very well. There were remarkable improvements from each of you.” Miume began in an analytical tone, her eyes scanning over the data in front of her on her tablet.

“You bet I improved the most, huh?” Lance smiled seductively, gazing at her with half lidded eyes.

Miume glanced over the rim of the monitor at him. He continued to become increasingly more confident since their romantic encounters and she wasn’t sure how to take his new advances since it was all just fun and games. Nothing serious. Maybe she needed to toy with him some more, knock him down a few pegs on the overly confident scale.

“Actually, Hunk improved the most.” She said in a flat tone, looking Lance directly in the eyes as his face dropped in disappointment before side-eying Hunk with a small smile. Even though Lance appeared disappointed, his energy bubbled in excitement. He truly was happy for his friend to succeed so well.

“On what scale?” Lance argued, sitting up now, “I don’t think he had to fight of hordes of blood-
lusting bugs!"

“No, but he did have more mentally challenging tasks and showed great courage.” Miume shrugged turning to Hunk, “Very well done, Hunk!” She gave him a reassuring smile as his face lit up at the news. His friendly energy expanded around him in surprised glee.

“Taking on bugs is mentally challenging.” Lance huffed under his breath, leaning back and pretended to sulk more than he actually felt. The blue aura around him dimmed at the news, but still reached out towards Hunk’s. Their bonds quivered in mutual respect and growth.

“So now that training’s over what do we do? Just sit around and wait? Was that all the training? When do we hear back from those groups on the rave planet?” Pidge glanced up at Shiro. We had been waiting to hear back from the allies we had meet on Trax to move forward with the Zarkon attack. With each passing day I felt the seed of anxiety growing larger in my stomach. I knew the attack was something that was going to happen, but was I powerful enough to help Voltron as much as I could?

“We can’t just sit around on our hands and keep waiting for a reply. Each day Zarkon hurts more and more people.” Keith argued in a hard tone, his aura tightening around him and me.

“No, but we do need to prepare for the battle in more ways than just physical combat.” Allura’s voice floated through the training room, “We are in need of more scaultrite so that we can make multiple wormholes to jump through if needed.” She crossed her arms looking down at us with a diplomatic face.

“Didn’t you mention that it’s one of the hardest things in the universe to obtain?” Hunk asked in an uneasy voice, feeling a familiar pit of despair growing in his gut.

“Precisely, which is why we need stock up on it while we can. Coran just ran some diagnostics and it seems like there is a weblum in the next galaxy.” Allura explained in a casual tone.

“Oh yeah, sure no pressure. We just have to obtain one of the most difficult substances to collect in the universe!” Pidge replied sarcastically. She promptly pushed up her glasses and admitted in a more serious tone, “However, it would help to have extra in case of emergencies. We can’t afford to get stranded. As much as I hate to admit it, it would be the most logical plan to stockpile all supplies while we have the time.”

“I agree with Pidge.” Shiro moved next to Pidge and placed a hand on her shoulder. She looked up at him and gave him a tight-lipped smile, her aura stiffening around her as it grew more uneasy.

“Wonderful, I knew you would agree!” Allura clasped her hands together in satisfaction. Her blue eyes sparked with determination as they scanned the group.

“Why do I not like the direction this is going...” Hunk mumbled to himself as Allura set her eyes on him.

“I think it would be most rational to send Hunk, Lance, and Keith to obtain the scaultrite.” She said, placing her hand under her chin in thought.

“Um, why do we have to include him?” Lance jerked a thumb to his side to point at Keith, his cool blue aura spiking in annoyance.

“I don’t like it either but it’s called teamwork.” Keith shot back while glaring at him, the red of his aura darkening in irritation from Lance’s remark.
“Guys, just think of it as a special operations mission.” Shiro tried to defuse the situation as Lance and Keith glared at each other. Tensions were high in the training deck as my chest tightened from the aggressive static accumulating from their energies. Clearly the grueling team training we had gone through today was starting to wear on them.

“Then why can’t just Hunk and I go?” Lance questioned with defiance as he threw an open hand towards Hunk for emphasis.

“Because you will need the red lion’s agility to distract the Weblum while you and Hunk use the yellow lion’s strength and mass to secure a position. Besides, it’s safer with a small close knit group!” Coran chimed in, twirling his mustache as he strode into the training deck.

“Distract it?” Keith asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Web-what now?” Lance tilted his head to the side and looked to Hunk who was confused as well.

“Weblum! One of the most integral parts of our universe. It is a giant species of worm that eats dead planets and reconverts the quintessence remnants into the building blocks of new solar systems. A very important part indeed. Weblums are an immense source of scaultrite and harvesting the material is a job for only the most capable of gatherers.”

“Okay, but why do we need to distract it if it’s just eating dead planets?” Keith continued.

“Well, the most important part in obtaining the scaultrite is to activate the Weblum’s digestive system in its third stomach. By distracting it, you’ll allow Hunk and Lance entry into the worm so they may enter the beast s . This means that once those two reach the third stomach, Keith, you’ll have to figure a way out to activate it so that they can collect the products!” Coran explained in a matter-of-fact tone.

“As you’ll see in the high quality and immensely educational instruction videos I’ve prepared, the weblum has a defense mechanism that allows it to destroy entire planets for consumption. It’s deadly face laser!” Coran continued in an excited voice, now hopping from one leg to the other as he acted out demonstrations.

“F-face laser?” Hunk stuttered in a nervous voice while shrinking in on himself, his aura twisted around him in uneasy patterns.

“Yes! So remember to avoid flying directly in front of its face, avoid the incinerating laser that will completely annihilate you, and finally, don’t touch anything that’s going to kill you.” Coran beamed with enthusiasm.

“Okay! I don’t like the sound of this. On second thought, maybe just Keith and Hunk should go.” Lance deferred in a sheepish voice.

Allura placed her hands on her hips and stared down at the designated team of three, “No. You all need to work on your teamwork anyways. Just think of it as a team building exercise.” Allura stated in a non-negotiable tone.

“If I may, I’d like to interject,” Miume spoke up, her tails swishing back and forth anxiously, “I don’t like this. Taking on a Weblum is an extremely dangerous task, let alone actually accomplishing and obtaining the scaultrite.” She grimaced and flattened her ears against her head.

Tilting my head to the side I tried to understand her aura as it started to vibrate in almost a fearful way? I had never seen Miume’s aura react like this. Was it really that dangerous? Sliding my eyes back to Keith I couldn’t help the bubble of anxiety in my chest. His aura had evened out, the way it
did when he needed to be just a Paladin and focused on a mission.

“If we backtrack to Trax, I’m sure Kara or I could find more scaultrite for us. There are other, more effective and safer, ways to obtain it.” Miume tried to negotiate, but Coran simply shook his head.

“Do not fear, second commander of the Red Eyes. They will be fine!” Coran claimed confidently, “They are the Paladins of Voltron!” He jumped into a victory stance with his hands on his hips and looked to the distance.

“Besides,” Allura rebutted, “we can’t be sure that Trax will have scaultrite, or if they will sell it to us in the quantity we need. The Weblum is a guaranteed success.” Miume opened her mouth to respond, but Hunk was faster.

“Extremely dangerous? We just barely survived Kara’s tests and now you want us to go on an ‘extremely dangerous’ mission?” Hunk asked incredulously and air quoted Miume’s words.

“We’ve been preparing for situations like this.” Shiro stepped up, “Kara’s training has strengthened each of us. Even if it is dangerous, it’s not up for negotiation. We need the extra scaultrite for when we face Zarkon. We are going to have to be able to wormhole at any moment to any distance.” He crossed his arms over his chest and held Miume’s gaze evenly. Their auras bristled against each others, almost in conflict.

Miume’s eyes hardened but she kept her composure, knowing there was no chance of changing their minds once they were set on something.

Keith spoke up, his tone unwavering, “Shiro’s right. We have been training for this. If we need to get the scaultrite to have an edge over Zarkon, I think we should go through with this mission. We have to trust ourselves and our lions that we have the abilities to do it.”

“Well at least we know if Keith gets ejected into space his lion will go fetch him.” Pidge snickered under her breath, trying to lighten the heavy mood. Keith stiffened, his aura rigid, before shooting her a warning look. I blinked, unsure what Pidge had said, but Keith shook his head and refused to meet my gaze.

“Great! Everyone get some rest and we’ll set out in an hour.” Allura smiled, turning on her heel and striding back to the castle’s main control room to make preparations.

“I’ll help Coran lock down a more precise location of the Weblum.” Pidge volunteered, pushing herself off the ground and following Coran.

“Allura, we should come up with more battle plans to coordinate with the anti-Zarkon groups.” Shiro moved next to Allura who nodded in agreement as he exited with her.

“Uh, I guess I’ll go make something comforting. You know, since this could be my last meal and everything.” Hunk tried to joke but his heart wasn’t in it.

“Miume?” Lance asked gently, slowly standing up and eyeing his anxious angel next to him. She glanced over at him from her position a few feet away, and he could see a twinge of pain in her eyes as they seemed to start to glisten.

Miume’s heart squeezed and throat tightened as past memories flooded her brain, “I don’t want you to go.” She finally said, turning to Lance and facing him head on. Taking a deep breath she closed the distance between them quickly, gripping his hands in hers, “Please, Lance, don’t go. It’s just too dangerous.” Her voice was filled with sincere concern. Her rosy aura carefully wrapped...
around Lance’s, its movements slow and calculated, as if she were afraid the ocean blue of his would break away from hers.

“I know it’s dangerous, but what’s more sexy than kicking danger in the behind and accomplishing a mission?” he gave her a sly smile, trying to get her tails to stop swishing in an uneasy fashion.

“Being dead isn’t sexy at all.” she whispered in a hard, unamused voice, her red eyes finding the fluorescent white floors, “I don’t want you to end up dead. I do not want you going.” Her voice was quiet but he could hear it start to waver slightly.

“There’s no way I could end up dead. I’ve got this beautiful lady waiting for me,” Lance tried to comfort her in a light hearted voice, letting go of one of her hands and gently tipping her face up. Miume could feel her eyes starting to water more as her aura quivered uneasily around her.

“You simply don’t know what you’re getting into. It’s too dangerous!” Miume jerked her chin away from his hand, gripping his other hand even tighter in hers.

“Someone’s gotta defend the universe.” Lance replied softly, squeezing her hands gently, “Besides, I can’t let Keith take all the credit and be cool.” he added trying to lighten her mood.

“This isn’t about being cool! It’s about life or death situations and I don’t think you should go! It is too dangerous and you are too inexperienced with this creature!” Miume tried to control her voice from being too loud or hissing. Her ears flew back on her head and were completely flat, her tails bristling.

“Miume, did something happen” Lance slowly questioned. He spoke sincerely, the flirtatious tone in his voice completely gone.

“I don’t want to talk about it right now. Go tell Shiro you aren’t going. Doctor’s orders.” She demanded and looked up at him with unwavering eyes.

“Miume,” Lance said in a gentle voice, “I have to go, and I promise I will come back.” He gave her a small smile, holding her face now.

“You don’t know that. You aren’t educated enough about the situation. There are too many unforeseeable, unpredictable factors.” Miume maintained, not returning his smile.

“Then teach me so I can better understand.” Lance offered, not breaking her gaze.

Miume paused, her voice getting caught in her throat as she tried to push back the faces of her old team. She knew in her heart that she couldn’t change his mind. That he wasn’t part of a medical team like she was. That he was experienced in dangerous tasks. But it still didn’t change the heart clenching fearful pain that gripped her now. Taking an uneasy breath her tails dropped down, brushing against the floor in defeat. If she couldn’t stop him, she had to give him as much information as she could to keep him safe. To decrease as many potentially deadly factors as she could.

“You don’t go near the laser, not in any sense of the word. Not even for some stupid competition,” she reluctantly instructed. “You stay away from its face, you stay away from the white translucent gelatinous organisms, and the stomach acid and reflux emitting structures. And you just... you just stay away from it!” she could feel herself starting to ramble anxiously as she tried to keep her voice from shaking or getting too loud again. “Just stay away from it.” She almost pleaded now.

Lance stared at her for a moment, not sure how to react to her sudden pleading. Miume seemed genuinely terrified of this Weblum and he wasn’t sure why. But he did know that he couldn’t let
Hunk and Keith go in alone especially if this mission was as dangerous as Miume was telling him. He had to help his teammates. It was his duty.

“Miume, I have to go. Hunk and Keith need me. The team needs me. I promise I’ll be careful.” He asserted, pulling her into a hug as her whole body stiffened, tails going rigid before softening.

“Please... don’t go, for me?” she begged, her voice vulnerable, and she gripped his the fabric of his shirt.

Lance pulled back, moving his hands to her face and he saw her eyes were dewy, “Miume, I have to go on this mission. I’ll remember everything you told us, and pay attention to the old movie Coran made like 10,000 years ago to get us through this.” He assured her and gave her a crooked smile before kissing her tenderly on the forehead, “I gotta go get Blue ready. After I get back we’ll do something fun.” He winked before jogging off towards his lion’s hangar.

“You better come back.” Miume whispered to herself, her tails moving from side to side anxiously as a pit formed in her stomach and her heart starting to race.

As Miume and Lance started to talk I quietly took Keith’s hand and led him out of the training room. Miume’s energy was tingling in ways I had never seen from her. The raw emotion behind her carefully constructed wall was breaking through as Lance’s gentle blue tried to fill the cracks and reinforce its support.

For some reason it felt like they needed to be alone, that I was invading their space too much by watching their auras.

Keith followed me out of the room before taking lead and moving us towards the red lions hanger, mumbling something about needing to get in touch with his lion again.

I leaned against the cold paw of the red lion twirling one of my knives in my hand nervously. Since I had gotten here, Keith had never gone on a solo mission. None of the Paladins had for that matter. I didn’t even know where he was going, or what a welbum was, but I was sure it would be too far to feel his aura. Biting my lip the familiar bubble of anxiety start to rise in my chest. Why was my heart fluttering so uneasily? He must have gone on solo missions before he had rescued me so why was this any different?

Miume’s words kept replaying in my head. Her aura had spiked out almost in fear when she tried to convince Shiro that the mission was a bad idea. I wasn’t sure why she felt that way, but her reaction made me feel more restless than usual.

“Umi?” Keith’s voice penetrated my thoughts as he waved a hand in front of my face. I blinked, my vision coming back into focus. I looked up to see him standing in front of me now, helmet tucked under his right arm. “You okay?” he questioned, tilting his head a fraction to the side to look at me. I paused, feeling his aura wrap around me as if trying to make sure I was alright.

“I don’t know why but I feel uneasy about this.” I answered in a quiet voice, my eyes searching his.

“Is it about what Miume said? I’m sure she’s just being an overprotective doctor.” Keith tried to reassure me.

I shook my head, glancing down at the thin black knife in my hand, “Her aura seemed scared. Why would she be so scared?” I pressed.
Keith shrugged, leaning against the red lion’s leg next to me, “Maybe she’s seen what it can do. I mean it does have a giant laser of destruction that it uses to completely obliterate planets.” Keith started before glancing down at me. My eyes had widened, the color draining from my face as memories of planets blinking out of existence from Zarkon’s canons flashed through my mind. “Not that we are going anywhere near that.” He half laughed, mentally face palming himself. Sighing, he turned so that he could look down at me head on.

“I promise we will be okay.” He gave me a small smile, his energy reaching out and curling around me reassuringly. I glanced away, my energy pulling away from his slightly in hesitated worry. I still wasn’t feeling completely confident in this mission now.

“I won’t be able to protect you if something happens.” I stated quietly, my chest feeling tight.

“Red will be there though. She won’t let anything happen to me.” Keith replied, reaching up to pat his lion. Letting out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding, I let my grip loosen on the knife in my hand. I was so confused with all of these new feelings. I had just barely understood the concept of liking. Was this part of it? This heart numbing pain of not wanting them to be in harm’s way or so far away from you that you couldn’t protect them if something happened?

“Umi.” Keith breathed, gently touching my face. I glanced up at him again, a light burn dusting my cheeks from his careful touch. “We will be okay.” He smiled at me gently before his eyes drifted over my head. Reacting instantly to the slight movement of his eyes, Lance’s confident blue aura lofted into the room before quickly stopping and pulling back.

“Sorry to interrupt, but we are read to set out if you are.” Lance’s voice called from just outside the hanger, his back turned and obviously trying to give us privacy.

“Just waiting for the go signal.” Keith responded, glancing back at me to give me a final smile before putting his helmet over his head and nodding at Lance. His aura hardened around him as he mentally prepared himself for the mission. Swallowing quietly I nodded back to him, taking a step back to give him room to get into Red. My energy wavered uneasily around me. Small ripples of lightning like electricity moved down my arms as I watched him assume his position in the pilot’s cabin.

The red lion’s energy instantly erupting from its dormant state at Keith’s commanding touch. Its blazing warmth rushed past me, making my shiver from its power.

Looking up at him a final time our eyes meet. The coal black of his revealed no signs of fear or hesitation. Just trained confidence. Inhaling once more, I braced myself as he shot out of the hanger. Streaks of red illuminated the area in front of me, their power wrapping its reassuring hands around me.

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Folding my arms tightly over my chest, I tried to keep my hands from shaking as the uneasy pit in my stomach tightened the farther away the lions flew from the castle. We had gathered in the control room, watching the red and yellow lion disappear into the darkness. Keeping my face as emotionless as possible, I tried to mask the worried thoughts underneath. Everyone else had seemed to easily busy themselves with something so why was I the only one who seemed nervous? Pidge’s aura was its usual bubbly one, Shiro the quiet calmness, Allura and Coran and their authoritative confidence.

Sighing again, I slid one of my knives into my hand, feeling more at ease with its coolness pressed against my hot skin. Absently curling and uncurling my fingers over the familiar material, I tried to
ignore the sudden sense of loneliness. I had been alone for so long that now the absence of his reassuring presence left me feeling cold.

Closing my eyes I tried to follow the residual trails of red energy, but they stretched farther than I could feel. Swallowed by the darkness that stretched on for an eternity, it vanished as if it hadn’t existed at all.

Biting my lip my heart squeezed painfully at the sudden feeling of loss. Why couldn’t I have just gone with them? Why did it suddenly hurt so much to not have him near? What was this constant buzz of anxiousness running across my aura like a live wire? Its unsettling feeling prickling over my skin like icy needles.

Once they were finally out of sight, I couldn’t stand still any longer. Turning quickly on my heel, I walked out of the control center and started wandering down the halls. Twirling my knife through my fingers nervously, I tried to push my energy self out towards space to find his calming red aura, but there was only a thin strand left behind. Biting my lip nervously, I paced the hallways feeling like I had to keep moving. I felt worried that the warmth of his residual energy would cool and disappear altogether if I stopped moving. The familiar gut wrenching feeling of being a caged, helpless animal crawled up my spine making me shiver and shake my head at the dark emotions.

Passing across the threshold into the Red Eye’s wing my feet paused. Waves of frantic fear and yearning crashed against me. Flinching from the sudden intensity, I turned my attention down the hallway. Thin twisting tendrils of rosy pink seeped through the metal door in anxious patterns. Long fingers stretched into the hallway as if searching for something, ghosting over any surface it could find. Tilting my head to the side, I carefully walked closer to Miume’s shut door with light steps, trying not to disturb the uneasy energy that danced around me. Fear radiated from its semi-translucent tentacles, becoming more and more intense with each approaching step. Stopping just before her door, I absently placed a hand on its cool surface. I had never seen her aura like this before. Usually it was bubbling around people in a protective way, but now it seemed to be reaching out in every direction like it didn’t know what to do.

Before I even registered what I was doing my fingers knocked on her door. Her aura spike in sudden shock before pulling back tightly, as if trying to compose itself for whoever was approaching.

“Miume?” I called out in a quiet voice, lowering my hand as the door slid open and peeking my head into the room.

“Ah, Umi, it’s just you.” Miume breathed, trying to sound less anxious than her aura indicated.

“Um, I noticed your aura... are you okay-“ I started before my voice drifted off and my eyes widened. A large nest of multicolored yarn tangled across the floor, over her bed, and around Miume’s small frame which sat in the middle of it. Two needles posed in her faintly shaking hands, a knitted unknown mass pooling in her lap before mixing with the array of colors strewn across the room. Bristled tails swished anxiously behind her as she looked up at me with worried eyes. I noticed a thin sheen coating her large eyes as they bore into me. Glancing away quickly I wasn’t sure how to react. I had never seen Miume like this, and the sudden change was unsettling to feel.

“I knit when I don’t know what to do, okay.” Miume huffed, looking down at the tangle of blue yarn and skillfully moving her hands around the needles. I nodded, not entirely sure what she was doing but took a step inside the room so that the door shut behind me, leaving me in the sea of yarn and other small knitted creatures.

“I don’t really know what this is,” I picked up a small yellow fish from the floor.
“It’s called knitting. You use yarn and needles to manipulate the yarn into shapes.” Miume explained, her voice rushed as she kept her eyes on her work. I nodded again, taking another step towards her. Her aura moved around the room in random patterns, as if trying to find someway out.

“Your aura seems like it’s not okay.” I continued quietly, slowly sitting down on the ground in front of her and curling my knees into my chest, “Do you want to talk about it?” I hoped that was the correct phrase. Keith has said something similar when I woke from nightmares. It seemed like an appropriate thing to say to someone in distress.

She paused from her work, glancing up at me with glistening eyes. I blinked. Was she trying not to cry? She seemed like too strong of a person to cry. Her aura was usually so well composed; a carefully constructed wall that hid any unpleasant emotions.

“Miume?” I asked, gently pushing my energy around her, trying to collect the fragmented bits of her aura to see if this would ease her. I glanced back at her, still trying to soothe her but my energy seemed just as anxious. The edges jittered uneasily and made it harder to create a solid base to collect Miume’s crumpled energy into.

“I didn’t want him to go.” She finally murmured in a small voice, “It’s too dangerous.” Her clawed hands clenched the tools between them.

“I don’t really know what a Weblum is but I didn’t like the sound of it either.” I admitted, looking down at the mess of yarn around me. My feet were somehow already ensnared in its tangled mess.

“If anything happens to him,” she stopped herself, a light peach hue dusting her tanned cheeks as she bit down nervously on her lip. Her aura reacted in anxious embarrassment now. Its true feelings came through for a quick flicker before pulling back.

“Why is it so dangerous?” I asked, not entirely sure if I wanted to hear the answer. Coran had said a slew of words I didn’t recognize, other than destroy, dangerous, and difficult.

Miume’s shoulders dropped, her needles resting in her lap. “It was my fault that my team was almost completely killed by a Weblum.” She admitted after a moment. I glanced at her before resting my cheek on my knee and quietly waited for her to continue.

“We needed more scaultrite. The last of our mirrors had shattered in a freak accident. I-I thought I knew what I was doing but I was overly confident. We got in without an issue, I mean that part’s easy. Avoid the massive laser, simple enough.” A dry laugh escaped her lips, “However, once we were inside, I thought we knew what we were looking for, but its immune system attacked us in greater masses than I could have imagined. Most of my team didn’t make it out of the first stomach, and the ones who made it to the third stomach didn’t last much longer either. I couldn’t have predicted that it would burn the laser through its stomachs.” Miume rambled her fingers working quickly over a blue mouse shaped bundle of yarn.

I clenched my hands into fists to keep them from shaking. Keith had gone into something so dangerous that most of Miume’s team had died from?! I didn’t understand all of what she was saying, but I could understand that most of her team died in the beginning, and then more at the end. My heart skipped painfully in my chest as the full weight of what their mission was pressed against me. What if he didn’t come back? What if he was injured? What if Lance and Hunk didn’t come back? What if he gets stranded? What was I going to do? My mind started to wheel as Miume knitted away furiously, her aura curing in every direction, knotting around itself unintentionally. Swallowing, I carefully I pulled some of the yarn between my fingers, trying to distract my racing mind like Miume was doing. Pausing, I glanced down at the yarn. It was much softer than I thought it would be. Its texture soothing my calloused fingers.
“Miume.” I broke the silence. Her ears twitched showing me she was giving me part of her attention as she continued the furious work.

“I also feel uneasy with Keith going to such a place. But I also know his aura is strong. So are Lance’s and Hunk’s. I-” I paused, “I want to think they will come back unharmed.” I bit my lip not sure how to process the emotions swirling around me.

Miume sighed, “I want to think that too, but it’s so dangerous. I simply don’t know what to think! I am fur-eaking out! Look at all the creatures I have knitted!” she held up her hands showing they were tangled in yarn like the rest of her legs. The small blue mouse bounced to the floor and rolled over in my direction.

“Miume, what if we make them something for their energy to come back to? Do you think that would work?” I asked, looking at the blue mouse as it lay sadly between us.

“Like... charms?” Miume wondered, her tails moving less anxiously now. She looked up at me with newfound hope in her eyes.

“Charms?” I echoed, confused.

“Yes! As in, an object someone holds on to to feel protected or loved or at ease. Oh my gosh, that’s it!” Miume’s aura spiked in excitement, the sudden change making me flinch away from her for a moment as she grabbed the blue mouse. “We can knit these for each of them! That way, they can bring it on their next mission so that we are always with them and we can bestow our best wishes upon them!” Her voice quickened as it rose an octave in exhilaration, holding the blue mouse out for me to see. I eyed it, not entirely sure what she meant. But if I could infuse some of my energy into it and give it to him maybe it would help him feel a little bit closer.

“I don’t know how to um...“ I paused, forgetting the word.

“Knit?” Miume offered, holding up her needles. I nodded, looking around the mess of yarn around me.

“Well then, come over here and I’ll teach you. It’s su-purr easy, and a great way to take your mind off of things!” she chimed, patting the yarn pile next to her. I scooched my way over to her. Her aura was still anxious but it held a note of relieved excitement now.

“Meow, hold these like this.” She placed two needles in my hands and held hers up for example. I tried to follow, the needles feeling thin and frail between my fingers. “And do this, one two three, one two three, one two three.” She started moving her fingers in skillful rhythmic motions. I watched for a while before slowly trying to copy it but the needles slid from my fingers.

“Are there any thicker ones?” I asked, eyeing the needle as Miume pushed a ball of red yarn into my lap.

“Thicker? Why would you need that?” her ears twitched curiously, “Also you get red, for Keith.” She smiled slyly at me. I glanced away feeling my face heat up.

“They feel so thin, “I paused, “could I use my knives?” I asked, trying not to blush. Why was I feeling embarrassed about using the tools I had received so long ago? They were a familiar weight in my hands, a means of survival that I had learned to use with practiced precision.

“Um purr-haps. The yarn may just tear though.” Miume said in an unconvinced voice. I shrugged, unsure what would happen either before pulling two knives between my fingers and posing the yarn they way it had been before. Carefully I moved my fingers, twisting the yarn like she had
shown me.

“Or not.” Miume said to herself, watching me as I slowly moved the yarn around the razor blade with just enough pressure to keep the fragile material from slicing.

“Are you making one for Lance?” I asked, trying to distract her from my hands. The yarn tore immediately after, making me sigh as I started again.

“W-what makes you think I’m making it just for him?” Miume laughed nervously, her aura moving away from fearful and towards shy again. “We are making them for the whole team. Divide and conquer!”

“But isn’t the blue one for him?” I observed, nodding down to the blue mouse in front of us.

“Maybe meow it is, but before I was just knitting and blue happened to be the color I picked up!” Miume’s voice fluttered uneasily as she defended herself, pulling yellow yarn towards her and quickly working it into a mouse like shape.

“You are so fast.” I commented under my breath, looking at the newly formed yellow mouse in awe. Miume laughed softly to herself while relaxing back into the pillow of yarn behind her.

“It just takes practice,” She smiled, slowing her fingers slightly as she started on black yarn.

“Like training?” I asked, my eyebrows pulling together in concentration as I carefully pulled the yarn against the edges of my knives.

“In a way, only this isn’t for physical means or gains. It is more for emotional release, enjoyment, and even for showing someone you care and are thinking about them.” Miume tried to explain, purring quietly under her breath as if she were humming.

“Showing someone you care about them.” I echoed, feeling a warmness bubble inside me. The icy fingers of worry that clutched around my heart began slowly melting away.

Miume nodded, her aura relaxing against mine now. I glanced up, watching our auras as they swirled together, melting into a serene hopeful warmth instead of rubbing in ridged anxiety against one another. Maybe knitting tiny mice did make you feel better. I carefully leaned back against the pile of yarn with Miume, still trying to form the mouse shape. She coached me through it slowly, leaning in closer to me so that our arms were resting against each other. I paused, looking at them but not feeling like I had to move away. I felt better when we were physically connected for some reason. Were we bonding? Miume had said that talking and opening up to people was bonding, so maybe that was what we were doing.

After what seemed like hours of being lost in the sea of tangled yarn, I perked up. Keith’s familiar vibrant red energy was coming closer. Miume’s ears twitched at the same time, immediately catching my distraction as she turned to me. Biting her lip her, red eyes searched my face as I concentrated on the approaching energies.

“They have returned, no? Does anyone seem hurt?” she asked eagerly, gripping the blue mouse in her hand now as she leaned forward expectantly.

I glanced away trying to focus on their auras again, my attention drawn to the sudden spike of Miume’s energy before traveling back to Keiths radiant one. Closing my eyes I pushed my energy outwards, reaching towards theirs to intercept them. One by one their energies brushed against mine, passing through it and moving into the castle. They all appeared to be fine, relieved almost. There were no notes of sadness, pain, or hesitancy.
Opening my eyes, I breathed out a held breath, “They all seem fine.” I confirmed carefully cupping the tiny red mouse in my palms. Miume breathed out a sigh of relief, gently kissing the blue mouse before blushing and looking away as she realized her actions.

“Let’s go greet them! Make sure to give that to Keith.” She purred, nodding at the red mouse before scooping up the other colored mice. Her aura bounced around in shy excitement as she leapt up to exit the room, her energy already searching for Lance’s.

I blushed, a wave of embarrassment washing over me at the thought of giving Keith such a small item. Was it normal for people to give such things to the people they like? Shaking my head, I tried to clear my thoughts as I trailed behind Miume, a relieved excitement growing within me with each step towards Keith’s homey energy.
“Kittencakes!” Lance called out, bounding out of his lion and towards Miume in Blue’s hanger. “See, I told you we would be fine,” he gave her a confident smile and placed his hands on his hips triumphantly. Miume rolled her eyes, holding her hands behind her back and appearing more timid than her usual demeanor.

“What’s that?” Lance prodded, trying to peer behind her, “Oh! Did you make something for me while I was gone?” His voice teasing, his face scrunching into smug satisfaction.

“Shut up, we made one for everyone.” Miume huffed, giving him a playfully annoyed smile before shoving the small blue mouse into his chest plate and looking anywhere but in front of her. Her bright pink aura spiked in light embarrassment but she kept her face neutral.

“Aww! It’s so cute!” Lance cooed happily, his voice breaking at a high note as he caught the gift quickly before it fell. Bringing the small object up to inspect it closer, his eyes immediately lit up, “You sure it’s not a declaration of love?” His voice dipped into its usual flirtatious note as he raised an eyebrow. Miume shook her head giving him a playful smile before reaching up and wrapping her arms around his neck, pulling herself up on her tiptoes so that she could be at his head level.

“I’m really glad you made it back in one piece,” she murmured in his ear before quickly letting go and stuffing her hands deep into the pockets of her white medical coat. Lance’s face flushed, not sure how to respond as he looked from the intricate blue mouse and back to Miume. His aura flustered around him as he tried to understand Miume’s true feelings with the gift. He knew she liked to play, and he loved the game. But he also felt as if this were a boost of confidence he needed to confirm what he assumed were her feelings for him.

“Umi,” Keiths voice drew my attention away from the pink and blue swirls of energy as he descended down from the red lion, smiling at me.

As his strong, uninjured aura wrapped around me, I breathed out a relieved breath. Giving him a shy smile, I turned hiding the red mouse in my long sleeves as I closed the distance between us. “Back safe and sound.” He said lightly, tilting his head down to look at me. I nodded, biting my lip as a sudden rush of anxiousness washed over me. It was a different type of anxious than before. Not an unsettling pit in my stomach, but a heart fluttering one that warmed my skin. Miume said it was just a charm, right? Would it be okay to give it to him so boldly now like she had just done to Lance?

“I’m really glad you made it back in one piece,” she murmured in his ear before quickly letting go and stuffing her hands deep into the pockets of her white medical coat. Lance’s face flushed, not sure how to respond as he looked from the intricate blue mouse and back to Miume. His aura flustered around him as he tried to understand Miume’s true feelings with the gift. He knew she liked to play, and he loved the game. But he also felt as if this were a boost of confidence he needed to confirm what he assumed were her feelings for him.

“Umi?” He asked, placing a hand under my chin so he could tilt my head up to look at him. I felt myself blush as our eyes met. “See, I’m completely fine.” He gave me a small smile, his aura gently pulling mine towards his in an effort to show me that he really was fine.

I nodded, glancing away before taking his other hand and placing the mouse in it and quickly letting go. Keith paused, looking down at my other hand curiously.

“It’s a charm.” I almost whispered, not looking at him, “so that you can stay safe.” I felt my face heating up as my heart thumped unevenly in my chest. Why was I so nervous about giving him something so small?

Keith was quiet for a moment, his aura stilling around us, I glanced back up at him. His cheeks were dusted red, biting his lip he tried not to smile too much.
“Thank you, I love it,” he finally admitted in a low voice as he looked at me with shining eyes.

I breathed out in relief, his aura bubbling happily around us now. He liked it, I couldn’t believe it. I smiled at him a bit, feeling more at ease with him closer now, my muscles finally relaxing from their tensed state.

“Let’s go put this somewhere safe then meet up with everyone else.” He suggested, closing his hand around the small red mouse and taking my other hand.

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“No way!!” Pidge squealed happily, holding her green mouse up in front of her eyes, smiling widely. “It’s sooooooo cute!” She jumped up and down gleefully before hugging Miume tightly around the waist. Miume gasped softly from the impact before relaxing and patting the smaller girl on the head lovingly.

“I’m happy you like it. Umi helped me!” Miume looked over at me and smiled. I half-smiled back in response, standing halfway behind Keith. The adoring nature of the auras around me was a bit overwhelming.

“Well I think mine is the cutest” Hunk declared, moving his mouse from side to side in front of his face, looking at it adoringly.

“No way, mine is totally the best quality!” Lance proclaimed, holding out his mouse proudly in the palm of his hand.

“Hey Hunk, we can totally play with these with the mice! Miume will you make more for us?” Pidge asked, completely ignoring Lance as she beamed up at Miume.

Miume looked down at the girl still hugging her, “Of course,” she replied, trying to pry her hands from around her waist. She was all for hugging, but this was a little too much right now. What she really wanted was to be in Lance’s arms, but that wasn’t appropriate right now, nor was she willing to fully admit to herself how much she wanted to be held by him right now.

“Yippee!” Pidge cheered happily, skipping over to Hunk who immediately started mock fighting with their mice, making toy voices and all.

“Oh the mice will simple love these.” Allura smiled, she placed a hand delicately on her cheek.

“Or perhaps they will get jealous.” Coran teased lightly, “the detail on the mustache is simply fantastic!”

“Guys, we need to focus now.” Shiro tried to steer the conversation back to the task at hand while holding his mouse gently, “While you were gone, Allura, Coran, Kara, and I might have found another planet with rumored potential allies we could connect with.”

“More anti-Zarkon groups?” Keith guessed, leaning against the far wall, arms crossed over his chest.

Shiro nodded, “The name is roughly translated into Banshblood,” he looked at Allura for her to continue.

“We are fairly close to it.” Allura stepped forward, bringing up the galaxy map. “It doesn’t look like the friendliest planet however,” her voice seemed wary as she expanded the map around a specific planet.
“Uh, it has the word blood in it. How friendly can it be?” Hunk asked in a nervous voice as she brought up images from the planet.

A large solar eclipse cast its dark shadow over the black dusted ground of the planet before us. With the planet’s sun hiding behind a pitch black moon, the only traces of its existence shown through the eerie white glow that danced around the edges of the moon.

Unlike most solar systems, this planet was located in a deep part of space. Void of any forms of light it orbited in a constant state of milky grey light.

Its inhospitable appearance detering most forms of life, small clusters of buildings spread out over the barren land. Each town laid out in the same repeated grid like structure, misshapen black buildings neatly lined in rows with blacked out windows. The only difference between the bunches of buildings was the massive spire that laid in the middle. Its structure towered up above the neighboring buildings as black rusted metal steeples reached towards the blackened sky. Each steeple welded into a different designs, as if marking which town was which. The building’s face was decorated with abstracted grey-scaled stained glass images that barely reflected the low light emitted from the sun above.

“Gee, that looks real friendly.” Pidge said in a sarcastic voice.

“Most of the alien life there is nocturnal or extremely sensitive to light.” Miume explained as she recognized the planet. “I’ve only heard whispers of anti-Zarkon groups here.”

“Well, it’s worth a shot.” Shiro offered, looking over at her, “We need to get more allies on our side.”

Miume nodded, “We might need a change of costume again though. Fitting in is always better than not!”

“Not. Again.” Keith growled, looking annoyed as he crossed his arms tightly over his chest.

“What’s wrong with our Paladin gear?” Lance wondered. “Wouldn’t it be better for them to recognize us as the Paladins of Voltron? Ya’know instead of hiding who we are and having to prove it later?”

Shiro nodded in agreement, “I understood needing to hide out identities at Trax, but if this planet isn’t a black market I think it would be better to show who we really are. Maybe they would come to us instead.”

“Well, nothing really, I just like dressing up.” Miume smiled innocently. “But, Umi I think you and I should try and dress closer to the culture of this planet. Since your space suit is different than the Paladin’s it will make you stand out more, as well as make the rumored groups suspicious.”

I sighed quietly next to Keith. As long as it wasn’t as revealing as last time it would be okay. But it still made me feel uncomfortably exposed to be dressed in something so foreign, something that couldn’t conceal my knives.

“Great, we’ll set off in a few ticks then. Paladins, go get some food and rest.” Allura instructed, closing the map.

“Umi, come with me?” Miume asked innocently. I bit my lip, my shoulders tensing uneasily about what was about to happen. Why couldn’t just wear my normal clothes? That wasn’t Paladin gear. It wasn’t that I minded letting Miume dress me up, but I was still uncomfortable during missions in the unfamiliar types of fabric.
“Can you not put her in something so revealing this time? Make sure she’s actually comfortable.” Keith side stepped in front of Miume to grumble quietly at her as the other Paladins dispersed.

“And here I thought you liked what she wore last time,” Miume purred sarcastically, her red eyes gleaming up at Keith before taking my hand and dragging me down the hall. I glanced back at Keith, his face was a light shade red, his mouth set in a hard thin line as he tried to come up with something to say back but failing.

“Now you sit here.” Miume ordered, smiling at me as she pushed me back into the small metal chair in her room. “And tell me what style appeals to you the most.” Grabbing the pawport off her bed she tapped the screen a few times before a hologram screen flickered to life. Smiling to herself she handed me the device, using her clawed finger to swipe back and forth, the holograms image reacting as she did. Pictures of female human looking beings shown on the screen, each swipe showing a different outfit and style.

Carefully I accepted the device. It weighed less than I thought. The screen was surprisingly realistic as I swiped through different pictures curiously.

“Are these from Earth?” I asked, looking up at Miume who had moved to the overspilling closet to our left. After our last trip to her team’s homebase she had quickly packed a large bag of clothes and items she might need. Since all of her previous belongings were destroyed by the lava, she needed to restock her clothing supplies as her team temporarily moved into the Aria castle.

“Mhmm,” she hummed, picking through the pile of rumpled clothing, “I believe its the correct search for the styles closest to what we need.”

Making a silent ‘oh’ sound I returned my gaze to the different images until a specific one caught my eye.

“Um-” I spoke up, Miume paused her search immediately, a few articles of fabric strewn across her shoulders, “What is this?” I asked, looking at the image in front of me.

“Ah, this is called Punk Goth in English, I believe, but we call it ‘Kuroemo’ in Pyma,” Miume tried to explain, looking from me to the image. “I wouldn’t have expected you to like this one though.”

“Is it bad?” I questioned, glancing up at her and furrowing my brow. Should I have picked something different?

“No, quite honestly, it fits Keith purr-fectly!” She smiled at me, “I think I have something that could work for this.” Placing a finger lightly under her chin, her eyes looked back at the overflowing mess of clothing.

“You seem to have everything,” I remarked, watching her with wide eyes as she sifted through the mountains of clothes.

“I like shopping, and I travel around a lot so looking the part and blending in with the community helps when trying to conduct research or set up secret deals and alliances.” Miume informed me in a nonchalant tone, her tails swishing behind her lazily. “People are more willing to talk with others who look like them rather than someone in a medical coat,” I nodded, kind of understanding, “The similarity creates a sort of familiarity which calms the subject and opens them up for questioning and bargaining.”

“Ah hah!” Miume exclaimed happily, twirling around and holding up a few pieces of clothing and a pair of thick looking boots. “Here, try these on,” she instructed, tossing them over to me.
Catching them easily I glanced down to inspect the pile of clothes she threw me. More fishnets? I looked up at her but she had already busied herself looking for another outfit. Sighing quietly, I went to work stripping out of my usual outfit. I turned my back away from Miume who was still consumed by trying to find a specific article of clothing.

Awkwardly hobbling on one foot, I tried to pull the fishnets up hoping it would be less difficult than last time, but still found myself struggling until I finally pulled them up and around my waist. Reaching for the black skirt I was relieved to find that it was a thicker material than the last skirt Miume had lent me.

Carefully stepping into it I fumbled around to find the zipper for a few beats before securing the material around my hips. It was longer than the first skirt, stopping just before my knees, but its material wasn’t as stretchy. I frowned as I let my stance widen and gauged just how far I could go before the material would tear. It was more restrictive than I wanted, but still lose enough to at least have some freedom to fight if needed.

Turning half way around I grabbed the final black and red checkered shirt folded over the back of the metal chair. Reclasping the plated guard I wore around my stomach I felt at least somewhat protected as I pulled the skirt over my shoulders. Its material felt soft against my skin as I slowly matched the black buttons through the corresponding slits. I was surprised at how well the top fit around my slim figure.

Eyeing the black boots uneasily, I held them up to inspect before stepping into them. Their heel was larger than the one on my regular boots, so it seemed like walking would be more difficult. Surprisingly the weight was amazingly light on my feet. Zipping them into place I delicately touched the silver spikes that lined the sides, expecting them to be sharp, but was disappointed to find that they were dull and not pointed like a weapon that I could make use of.

“Are you really going to wear that plated sash?” Miume asked as I turned around slowly, trying to adapt to the new shoes.

I looked up at her to respond but she sighed and shook her head dismissively, “Well at least you can’t tell you are wearing something through the shirt.”

I glanced down at myself, she was right. The plaid shirt showed no signs of ruffled, or hidden material under it.

“Now,” Miumes voice drew my attention back to her as she posed in front of me cutely. Twitching her ears at me as she brought a curled hand to her cheek like a cat’s paw.

She had zipped herself into a soft, fitted pink pastel dress that was cinched at the waist with a moss green bow in just the right place. The material bubbling outwards with just enough volume to twirl with her movements. Delicate looking white collars with lace detailed around the edges stopped just short of her collarbone. Black ribbons from the small bow tied around her neck draped over the collar’s star embroidered material. A black shawl slid off her exposed shoulders, bunching around her elbows where she held it in place. Turning her knee to the side she showed off sheer white stockings that stopped just before her thighs, delicate lace detailing matching the stars on her collar as soft pink heels adorned her legs. A final black and pink bow clipped just under her right ear elegantly pulled her ashy hair back from her face.

“Wow,” I commented under my breath as she walked back over to me.

“Cute, isn’t it?” She beamed, twirling from side to side, the dress flowing gracefully around her. I nodded, glancing down at myself and feeling very out of place. Is this why Miume seemed
surprised that I choose these colors? “There are different styles on this planet don’t worry, kitten.” She patted my head lovingly before pushing me back into the metal chair and pulling her fingers carefully through my bangs.

“Now what to do with this...” she murmured to herself, reaching behind me to unwrap the knot on the top of my head and gently bringing a comb through my long locks. Humming quietly to herself she pulled my hair into a few different positions before settling on pinning a small line of black bows to hold back the hair covering the right side of me face and leaving the rest down. “There, just leave it like that.” she smiled stepping back and eyeing while pulling out a makeup kit. I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. I rarely let my hair down. It would get in the way if I needed to fight, obscuring my vision and leaving me open to attack. Miume gave me a sympathetic smile as she posed a soft bristled brush her her left hand.

“Close your eyes please.” she instructed, waiting for me to do so before brushing the same powder as last time over my eyes. I sat as still as possible, but the tools were still foreign against my face, making me flinch involuntarily. Miume paused each time I pulled away, waiting for my face to relax before resuming her work and humming quietly to herself.

“Okay, and done.” Miume announced, withdrawing her hands reluctantly. I could tell there was still more she wanted to do but she doubted I would willingly sit through it.

Slowly I opened one eye at a time, my lids feeling heavier than usual. Blinking a few times I finally brought my eyes up to the mirror Miume was holding out for me. My eyes widened as I took in my new appearance, still amazed that Miume could make me look so different, yet make it look like me at the same time. My eyes had been lined heavily in dark black, the lower lids rim smudged out like smoke while a light pink dusted my cheeks. Curiously I touched them, I wasn’t blushing, so why were they pink? A shimmery peach pigment stained my fingers as I pulled them back, you put powder on your cheeks too? Returning my gaze to the mirror I lightly touched the shimmering black that tinted my lips. Its color a stark contrast to my pale skin.

“Like it?” Miume asked, her aura bubbling excitedly around her as she handed me a spiked piece of fabric. Nodding i smiled up at her as i took the material, unsure what she was handing me.

“You put it on like this.” She smiled happily at me, clearly pleased with her work as she demonstrated placing it around my neck.

Giving the material a skeptical look I slowly pressed the non-spiked side of the fabric against my neck, trying to push back the residual feeling of cold metal clasped around my neck. Swallowing I allowed Miume to snap it into place, the material felt heavy against my skin, but it wasn’t cold like the metal had been.

Miume’s ears flicked once as her eyes hardened at my subtle reaction to the choker. She opened her mouth to say something but closed it, settling for giving me a concerned look, seeing if I wanted to take it off, but when I didn’t respond she shook her head, as if trying to clear an image from it.

“Okay we should be approaching the planet soon,” Miume thought out loud as she applied her own makeup, lining her eyes like mine to make them stand out boldly before applying a brighter blush to her cheeks. Focusing on the makeup in front of her instead of my stiffened shoulders she applied a liquid lilac color to her lips. She rubbed them together before smacking them once and assessing her look. Swishing her tails, she pulled a pearl beaded band from the side of her closet, twisting her full locks to the side and tying it in place.

“There, now we won’t stand out.” She turned back to me, smiling and taking my hands in her soft ones.
“Are you guys ready yet?” Keith’s annoyed voice called through the door before two sharp knocks echoed through Miume’s room.

“Coming.” Miume called out in a high pitched voice. Keith's energy immediately flinched away from it as Miume gave me a wink.

Blinking I gave her a confused look as she pulled me up from the chair, her aura twirling mischievously behind her before she quickly threw me in the direction of the sliding door. Gasping from the sudden directional change, my feet caught awkwardly from the different shoes, making my balance tip forward as the door slid open. My hands collided with the solid material of Keith’s Paladin armor.

“Are you going to do that every time?” he snapped in an annoyed voice, his hands immediately going to my shoulders to steady me.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Miume rolled her eyes upwards innocently as she stepped out behind me. She scanned the hallway for Lance, her tails dropping slightly when he wasn’t there.

“He’s in the blue lion waiting for you to get there.” Keith answered her unspoken question, glancing at Miume with hard eyes.

“Waiting for me?” Miume repeated, puzzled, her ears twitching twice as her aura danced around her.

“Yeah, you are riding with him, and Umi is with me. Kara is going to ride with Shiro.” Keith explained in a monotone voice, his hands still resting on the top of my shoulders.

“Ah, well in that case,” Miume straightened herself, swishing her tails, “I’ll meet you guys on the ground then.” She gave Keith a meaningful look, gesturing for him to do something.

Keith returned her motions with a cool glare, his aura bristling around him in annoyance while pushing down the small flicker of embarrassment. Miume sighed dramatically, waving her hand in front of her face and walking down towards the blue lion hanger. Keeping her tails as still as possible she held her composure as best she could, but her aura bubbled in excitement.

Once the tips of Miume’s tails disappeared around the corner, Keith’s hands released my shoulders and he glanced down at me. I looked away quickly, taking a small step back and pulling on the ends of the sleeves of my shirt.

“I think she just likes dressing me up.” I tried to explain in a quiet voice.

“Me too, but-” his voice caught in his throat, ”you- you do look great. I never imagined I’d see you in something like this.” he admitted, his aura spiking nervously as he cleared his throat.

My aura jumped at his words. I glanced back up at him,”Is it weird?” Our eyes met briefly before he quickly flicked his away from me, a light blush dusting his cheeks.

“Nope, not weird at all. Let’s go.” He spoke in a rushed voice, grabbing my hand and leading me down the quiet hallway towards the red lion. Following just behind him I bit my lip, a small smile playing on my lips as his aura wrapped around us. Its movements more flustered than before, pulsing quickly as if to show how quickly his heart was racing. At least he seemed to like the wardrobe change.

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“Alright guys, here’s the plan.” Shiro instructed as we descended down onto the planet. “We each take a cluster town and try to get info about this anti-Zarkon group.”

Watching the lions just beneath us, my eyes widened as we were slowly consumed by the shadowy planet. As the lions’ giant paws passed through the first layer into shadow the vibrant color seemed to be stripped away. The greyscale planet muddied any incoming color into its muted greys and blacks. The forest emerald of the Green lion slipped into a dying moss color as we moved through the darkened skies until we were completely swallowed into the colorless planet.

“Must be back before dark.” Kara’s harsh voice came through next.

“Isn’t it already dark?” Lance asked, eyeing the shadowed planet. As we got closer there didn’t appear to be any movement. Not from wind, living beings, anything. It was as if the world had frozen in time, laying stagnant in place like an old photograph.

“No, the sun is still up.” Miume explained, “We have approximately five hours before it sets, and we would not want to be here at night.” She placed a hand on Lance’s shoulder and squeezed it lightly. He glanced up at her and flashed her a coy smile. She laughed under her breath and shook her head.

“And why not?” Pidge asked, her tone uneasy.

“This planet resembles something like *Halloween* on your planet. I believe that’s what it’s called according to my research. At night, it becomes completely black, in total darkness, most lifeforms transform to adapt to the absence of light. They become more beast-like, if you will. They have adapted to surviving in total darkness.” Miume tried to elaborate, “From what I’ve read it’s an eat or be eaten hierarchy. Any being that smells, or looks different, perhaps appears weaker, becomes prey. We,” Miume paused, “we are weaker. We do not want to be stuck here at night if we are unable to see in the dark. Especially with the appearance and scent of the foreign and strange Paladins of Voltron.”

The group remained silent as we further descended, their auras wavering in hesitation trying to fully take in the gravity of the situation.

“The clusters of towns we see here,” Miume continued, her voice growing more uneasy, “during the day they are considered neutral grounds. At night they are supposedly separated by species, or class, and are intended to be safe zones for those who are designated. But no one who’s not adapted to this planet has lived through the night to confirm that theory.”

“Great, that makes me feel loads better.” Hunk commented in a nervous voice.

“Also don’t let them drink you.” Kara warned in a monotone voice.

“Drink us?! Like our blood?!” Hunk cried out in panic, “Like, *vampires* ?!” he emphasized the last word.

“Err, perhaps, if that’s what you call the blood drinkers on Earth. Most of the species here feed off of fresh blood. And since *we* are fresh blood we just need to be careful. During the day there are laws preventing blood drinking and hunting to keep at least some type of social order, however at night it’s fair game.” Miume continued, her tails twitching anxiously. She wasn’t particularly fond of this planet either. No matter the species, the creatures that lived on this planet were able to sustain off of the limited plasma from those of the other towns, and the rare delicacy of those unfortunate enough to descend into their home. Sometimes they even had micro evolutions in the population from this intake of alien sustenance. But from what Miume had read, those micro
evolved species didn’t last long, as they were usually weaker and less susceptible to the darkness.

“Any other tips?” Shiro questioned in a wary tone as we got closer to the black sanded ground.

“Don’t stare too much at anything or anyone, and try not to offend anyone,” Miume instructed, holding onto Lance’s shoulder tighter as they touched down just outside the town cluster.

“Remind me again why we thought this was a good idea?” Lance’s concerned voice asked.

“I agree, we don’t even know for sure if there's an anti-Zarkon group here.” Hunk added, his aura twisting nervously around him.

“We don’t.” Keith replied, “but think about it. What better place to hide then some crazy dark planet that's probably totally hidden at night if there's no light.”

“True,” Pidge hesitantly started, “Green’s not picking up any huge energy readings. So there must not be enough quintessence here for Zarkon to even bother. But still.” her voice trailed off as she looked downwards.

“We need every ally we can get.” Allura spoke through the dash, “if there is even a small chance they could be hiding out here, we must check it out.”

Shiro nodded in agreement, “Okay, since it looks like there are more of us than clusters, Pidge and Hunk go together and search the one to the left.” Shiro decided.

“Got it.” Pidge and Hunk replied together, swinging their lions off to the left.

“Keith, Umi, you take the cluster to the right. Lance, Miume, you take the one behind us.” Shiro instructed.

“Roger.” Keith confirmed, piloting his lion away from the group we started our way to the town resting just at the curved edge of the planet.

“You got it.” Lance replied, swinging his lion around as smoothly as he could while flashing Miume another flirtatious smile.
“Okay, stay close.” Keith murmured in a low voice as we touched down. I nodded, uncurling my fingers from the back of his chair, my aura stiffening around me as I took in the dark area in front of us. The lions boosters displacing the black sand beneath us. Blowing it out in every direction, it seemed as if we were disturbing a still picture with unnecessary motion.

Slowly Keith and I excited the red lion. Stepping off into the dense sand not even a whisper of wind moved past us. The was air cool and thick, hanging around us in motionless suspension as we moved through the muted environment. The soft crunches of sand under our boots sounded like breaking glass, each step louder than the last.

Flexing my fingers my dark eyes shifted across the barren land uneasily. Compared to Trax’s continuous motion and sound, this planet appeared frozen in time. Like we had regressed back in time to a more primitive period where living beings were scarce and the world was irrevocably silent.

Not even a wisp of cloud like substance floated above us. The abyss like sky swallowing the atmosphere outside the planet so that only source of light came from the singular eclipse. Its constant shadow never changing as we stepped through the towns line. Broken iron spokes bent in unnatural directions poked out from the sand just in front of the first line of buildings. Creating an unfinished sense of boundaries that dared you to break them.

Keith and I shared an uneasy look as the soles of my boots connecting with hard cobblestone that stretched out in mismatched mosaic patterns before us. The still air around us shifting into an unwelcoming weight against my chest as we crossed entirely into the town.

Resisting the urge to shiver I stepped subconsciously closer to Keith as he shifted his weight just in front of me. His aura tightening around him as he took in the silently hostile environment.

Unnaturally twisting and tilting buildings rose from the grey stoned ground. Varied shades of black coated their faces of rotted wood or crumbling brick as blacked out windows barely reflected the eclipses light that washed over us in a monochromatic palette. Their structures barely standing, or being held up by iron rods bent into the desired direction. Their mismatched parts scraped together by what ever they could find to build with on the barren terrain.

“Does anyone even live here?” I asked in a hushed voice, my body turned a fraction to the outside, ready to respond to an attack. My eyes flicked across each potential opening as my energy bristled restlessly around me. I could feel that we were being watched, but the windows were so tinted I couldn’t see inside to pinpoint a direction. What scarce energies that were around us we so unnaturally silent that they nearly blended into the dull atmosphere around us. The greyscale of colors mixing together, making it hard to differentiate between what was living, and what wasn’t.

“I dunno, let’s go check in there.” Keith suggested in a weary voice, talking just above a whisper. As if anything louder would draw more unwelcome attention towards us.

I nodded, following his line of vision towards the one of the only open doors around us. Its rickety wooden slab propped open by an iron poker, its sharpened tip spiked into the ground between a thin opening in the uneven cobblestone.

Blinking I tried to adjust my eyes to the sudden change in light. The shadowed world around us vanishing for a split second as blacked flames blasted me with heart. My eyes instantly drawn to the light before flinching away from its brightness.
Slowly my eyes adjusted to the room around us. Black iron spokes curled up like metallic vines towards the ceiling as it circled the black fire pit that sat in the middle of the shadowed space. Its brightness flickering like a distant star, barely illuminated the room despite its heat.

Smooth black painted wood stretched across the far side of the victorian era room. Its polished face reflecting the dancing flames. While deep red velvet seats lined the bar, their color stripped of its usual depth. Tilted rows of misshapen glass filled with variously colored liquids lined the back brick wall.

Tattered blackened blood red curtains tied behind torn leather couches that grouped in small circles around the edges of the room. While a few sanded metal tables scattered throughout the rest of the space.

Pale, almost translucent skinned being sat posed in frozen stiffness. Decorated in black and white gothic clothings they nearly blended into their environment. Female looking aliens had their hair pulled back into elegant shapes while more masculine figures had theirs slicked over with icy perfection. Large top hats sitting weightlessly on their heads as grey gloved hands rested neatly over the polished wood.

Dozens of pairs of red-gold eyes stared us from the shadows. The room instantly coming to a halt as we entered before slowly returning to the quiet ambient chatter. Even as their prying eyes turned their attention away from us I could still feel their penetrating stare. My aura went frigid around me, I had never experienced such intense gazes before. Not even from the Galra who watched me fight for my life in the ring.

“Well, this isn’t creepy at all.” Keith murmured under his breath while taking my hand and carefully pulling me towards the bar. Now that we were inside I could feel subtle differences in the auras around me, but they still had the same monotone overlayer, making it difficult. Scanning the room with hesitant curiosity I watched the subtly changing auras around us. They barely pulled away from their owner, moving in slow, calculated heartbeat pulses. My hand tightened around Keith's as a familiar, blood thirsty nature started to seep through their controlled physique. It was quieter in nature than the Galras, but just as bone chillingly savage in craving.

“May I help you, sir and madam?” A lavishing silky voice slid across the bar towards us. Glancing forward I was surprised to see a human like being in front of us. Inkly black veins showed under his translucent skin as scarlet eyes flecked with gold stared down at us under thick silver lashes. Slightly pointed ears stuck out under neatly slicked back sliver hair dipped with black. Folding his long, thin, fingers over the counter his elongated black stained nails glinted in the low light.

“Ah, I have heard whispers. But I believe you shall have better luck over there.” he nodded towards a group of aliens lounging against black velvet cushions in the farthest corner of the tavern. Their pale figures sipping red liquid leisurely from tall crystal glasses. As if knowing that we were looking one of the males looked up, his gold eyes resting on us momentarily before smiling a mouth full of sharply pointed teeth and moving his skeletal finger in a come hither motion.

“Thanks.” Keith replied, nodding to the bartender before walking over to the small group on the
couches. I followed just behind him, my eyes hardening as we approached. Their colorless auras mingled together in practiced motions. Each moving close to the other, but not close enough to touch while still giving the illusion of one greater mass of energy.

“I hear you are looking for some whispers.” The male hissed in a low voice as his blackened lips pulled back into a snaky smile, his eyes roaming over us hungrily.

“Yes, do you know where we can find them?” Keith asked, he hovered just in front of me, his aura guarded as his right hand stayed motionless next to his armoned thigh, ready to summon his bayard if needed.

“That depends on who wants to hear.” The female next to the male cooed. I blinked, taken aback by her haunting beauty as she leaned forward from the shadows. Large ruby red eyes shone brightly in the dim lighting. Blood red lips pulling back into a shark toothed smile, her ghostly white skin never wrinkling. A lacy charcoal high collar set with deep red gems dangled from her neck. The ruby hanging just under her bony collar bone connect to a black lace trimmed top with a plunging neckline that disappeared into a black stained red corset that was intricately stitched with inky black ribbon. Ashy grey petal like folds of a dress bloomed from her waist, cascading down under the table.

Placing a thin hand under her chin elegantly she tilted her head to the side. A sliver of silver hair clung to her smooth cheek as the rest was pulled back by black clips. Giving us a lusty smile she tapped a long red tipped nail on her cheek. Deep black ribbon stitched across the inside of her wrists, held in place by silver rings pierced through her skin.

“The Paladins of Voltron do.” Keith replied in an even tone, neither friend nor hostile but his aura was more guarded than before. I glanced up at Keith then back to the stunning alien in front of me. I had never been so captivated by someone before. The muffled hungry aura fading into the background, becoming part of the lowlit space my body rocked forward a degree. Her eyes shifted to me and she smiled, showing her teeth a bit more.

“You don’t seem to be part of that group.” she reached up as if to touch me before Keith moved the rest of the way in front of me. Freezing the air on the back of my neck stood on end as Keith's warm aura warded off the suddenly intense hostile hungry one reaching out towards me. It’s dark fingers stretching out like claws, biting into Keith's energy. Shifting backwards I internally cursed at myself, I had subconsciously leaned forward towards a dangerous being. I had been so entranced by her beauty that I had almost forgotten the bloodthirsty nature lurking behind her stunning features.

“She is part of us.” Keith cut off any further questions about the matter in a flat tone.

“Hm.” the second female purred, she was just as beautiful as the first. “That doesn’t sound very interesting. I thought you would at least compensate us for the information.” Placing an onyx colored silk glove to her cheek her silver lined lips dipped down into a frown. Clouded stormy irises drinking in our appearance.

Keith’s aura spike in frustration now, “that's not how this works.” he replied in a hard tone.

“No, but we do need something for this valuable information.” the male drew our attention away from the pouting female, his eyes barely resting on hers to give her a warning look before returning his enchanting orbs back to us.

“And how do we know it's going to be valuable? For all we know if could lead us to a trap, or a
dead end.” Keith countered smoothly

“You don’t, that’s what makes it fun.” the first female smiled.

“We don’t have time for games. Do you want us to defeat Zarkon and make sure your planet is spared or not?” Keith’s eyes were unwavering as he looked at each of the beings in front of us.

“True, we do not wish to be destroyed. This is the only place we can live.” The male's voice sounded bored as he stirred his drink lazily with a taloned nail.

“Are you going to help us or not?” Keith’s voice was growing impatient, his aura bristling in annoyance as it waived in front of us.

“My, my, aren’t you the impatient one.” The second female’s velvet voice slid through the shadows towards us, her shining eyes dimming for a beat before refocusing on us, ”you are not fully human are you.” She tilting her head to the side, a new amused smile stretching across her face.

Keith stiffened next to me, his fingers twitching towards his bayard as he waited for their next move while the second female’s eyes slid to me. “You seem to be though.” Her intense gaze made my shoulders go ridged. How could she tell that Keith was part Galra and I was only human?

“What do you want in exchange.” Keith asked, drawing the attention of the group back to him.

“Maybe a bit of that delicious Galra blood.” she purred, leaning forward, clawed hand reaching forward like a dangerous hook as her aura drew closer to her intended prey.. A light growl left my lips as my hands tightened into fists, a flicker of pink purple energy flashing in front of Keith as her finger grew closer. A small spark of lightning broke across my barrier, shocking the female's hand lightly in warning.

A low hiss or surprise escaped her silver dripped lips, her hand immediately recoiling from the spark of light and pulling it to her chest as if it were injured, “Perhaps I was wrong about you.” Her clouded eyes gazed at me with hungry curiosity, “may I have a taste to know what else mixes in you?” She raised her thin eyebrows hopefully.

“We were told it’s illegal to give blood,” Keith’s firm voice broke through the intense stating between me and the female in front of us, drawing my attention back to him.

“Ah,” the male held up a translucent finger, wagging it back and forth, “you were told not to let us drink from you, there are no laws saying you cannot freely donate.” Holding Keith’s gaze he took a long sip of the red liquid. The first female smiled with hidden wicked intent as her finger traced the rim of her glass in a slow circle, waiting for our responses. The soft high pitched whine from the glass made goosebumps erupt across my skin. Clenching my fist tighter I pushed down the unnerving sensation of being stalked. The energies here just like the ones in the ring. Hungry for victory, for blood. And I needed to beat them.

My eyes carefully traced the energies in front of me, letting them come entirely into focus. The male lazily tangled around him in an uninterested manor, he was the least threatening. The first female’s energy danced around her like a spiked crown, waiting eagerly for its time to strike. While the second female’s energy slithered in calculated motions, reaching forward towards its prey in a teasing fashion before pulling back. Shifting my weight carefully to my back foot I tensed my muscles in anticipation to fight. The second female was the most dangerous, if she worked with the first, that could make for a deadly combination if not careful. And the male, while he didn’t seem interested, I was sure he would join in if the other two started something.
Keith glanced back at me, silently gauging my response to their proposal. I looked up at him and his aura immediately reacted to my expression. Tightening around us it pulled against mine, as if telling me not to attack. While asking what I thought we should do.

We held each other's gazes for a few beats, inaudible interpreting what the other was feeling. Neither of us wanted a fight to break out, and we knew we needed information. But was it worth it to give them blood? What would happen after we did?

His dark eyes searched mine carefully for a beat more before a subtly nodded, my feet sliding forward an inch to stand just next to him.

“If you tell us what we want, I will give you some of my blood.” I finally spoke, Keith’s aura going ridged next to me I saw him shoot me an uneasy look for my peripheral vision.

I knew that he had wanted to give them his blood in exchange. But we didn’t know what they would do with it once it was given to them. And he was a Paladin of Voltron, if they used his blood to track or hurt him, sell it to Zarkon, then it was better if it was mine. I could leave Voltron, deter Zarkon away from their important mission.

While a small part of me all yearned for information. Could they really tell me who I was? If I was still mostly human? What had all of Zarkon’s experiments done to me? The aliens who first kidnapped me and awakened my third eye?

A twinge of guilt stabbed my heart as the selfish realization crossed my mind. I had never felt guilt before. All of my actions before Voltron were done in an attempt to survive. But now that I had people I cared about, an uneasy sensation churned in my stomach. Was it alright to want to know this?

“Oh, very interesting.” The second female purred, stormy eyes brightening in excitement as she laced her frail fingers together and rested her chin on them. Glancing towards the male for approval.

The male's black lips set into a hard line, his face becoming unreadable as he contemplated the negotiation. His golden eyes finally leaving the empty, red stained, glass in his hand and rising up to look at us.

Keith and I stood silently next to one another, our bodies tensed in anticipation.

“Alright, I accept your offer. We have heard of a group in the place west of here. That resides in the basement of the tallest building. They do not have a name, but I am sure they would be willing to talk.” the male spoke in a hushed tone, his voice barely audible in the near silent tavern.

“Thank you.” Keith responded, his aura still tensed uneasily around us as he glanced down at me, a flash of concern crossing his face.

The aura in front of me sparked to life, like a predator finally closing in on its prey. Their shining eyes boring into me as they waited. I looked back at Keith and nodded, slowly bending lower to retrieve the thin knife I had hidden in my boot when Miume wasn’t looking. Glancing at Keith quickly for reassurance he gave me a tight nod before I pulled back the sleeve of my shirt. Quickly running the dullest part of my blade over the back of my wrist, avoiding the main vein, but hoping to get enough blood to pay back the aliens in front of us.

Watching the three beings in front of us carefully, I wiped the blood from my knife on my sleeves before extending my bleeding arm outwards. The male held up his empty glass, wordlessly
accepting my offer as I let a few drops of blood spill into the stained cup.

The tense anticipation of the room snapped as soon as my skin sliced open. Every energy breaking away from the shadows quickly before pulling back in restrained control as they realized who was receiving the blood.

Hungry auras swirled behind us, waiting dangerously in the shadows for the perfect time to strike but knowing they couldn’t in the daylight. We were safe for at least a while longer.

Inhaling deeply the second female unconsciously leaned forward across the table, “Ah, what a complex aroma.” her eyes glazing over hungrily as she reached for the glass, bringing it to her nose and sniffing before taking a small sip.

“What does it taste like?” The first female asked, leaning sideways to get closer to her companion, sniffing the air between them.

“It is mostly human yes, but there is mixture of alien I do not recognize. Some ancient clan, and maybe a small amount of Galra,” the second female informed, closing her eyes and breathing in again. “Very curious, how could human blood have traces of other but not be mixed?” She opened her eyes to look at the other two aliens.

“It is rare,” the first female said, her eyes moving back to me. “Was it forced?” she tilted her head to the side inquisitively. My chest tightened uncomfortably, how were they able to tell all this just from a few drops of blood? I had never been injected with another’s blood. So why was mine tainted with Galra and the aliens that kidnapped me?

“Ah wait, you are missing things my dear.” The first cooed, snatching the glass away from her partner with elegant force. The second female hissed at the first, baring her teeth in annoyance but stopped at the male growled lightly under his breath.

Bringing the glass to her nose the first closed her eyes and breathed in deeply once before carefully dipping her finger into its base and bringing a blood stained finger to her lips. Her ruby eyes igniting with desired thirst as she tasted my blood.

“How could you miss it.” she looked at the second female with half lidded eyes, “she has the life power.”

My energy froze around us, heart coming to a painful stop as the three looked back at me. Their craving auras growing darker with lust.

“Lies, there is no such thing other than the druids.” the second hissed, reaching for the glass but the male snatched it away quickly. His gold eyes watching me intently as he brought the rim to his lips.

“My, my, aren’t you the rare taste.” his voice was low as he licked his lips. “Tell me, how does a human poses traces of Quintessence, Druid, Galra, and other while not having more than one blood?”

“It doesn’t matter. Thank you for the information.” Keith’s hand found mine before quickly pulling me towards the door. The rest of the aliens eyes following our movements carefully, their bodies turning as we passed, the fresh scent of blood drawing all of their attention. My aura hardened around us as the shadowed ones surged forward, their darkness trying to overpower and stop our escape into the dim outside light.

Keith kept a straight face, shoulders squared as he strode towards the door, barreling through the
oppression energies until we broke through the taverns threshold. The eclipses light bathed us quickly, pushing away the tendrils of energy that clung to us as Keith led us away from the building.

“Shiro.” he called out, tapping the right side of his helmet once we were a few paces away from the bar.

“Keith, what’s wrong?” Shiro’s voice came through immediately.

“Nothing, we got some information on the town you are in. Go to the basement of the tallest building.” Keith relayed in a low voice, giving as little detail as possible incase curious ears were lingering.

“Understood. You guys head back to the red lion and wait.” Shiro instructed, his voice drifting off in distraction.

“Roger.” Keith replied. His eyes moved back to me as we moved through the seemingly deserted town, “are you alright? I could have given them my blood.”

I shook my head, squeezing his hand, “they seemed more interested in mine. I don’t know how they could tell so much from so little.” my voice trailed off as I tried to understand but my energy prickled around me. Each structure we passed drew more and more attention to us. The hidden energies inside awakening for a brief moment from the scent of fresh blood before coiling back into the darkness in disappointment.

Keith gave me a concerned look before slowly nodding, “let’s get back to Red quickly.I don’t like the way it feels here. Especially now that you’re bleeding.” he murmured in a low voice, his eyes sliding across the barren terrain carefully. I nodded in agreement, taking a larger step so that I could walk next to him.

“Thereir auras were so hidden quiet, I can understand why Miume was concerned.” I breathed under my breath, more to myself than to Keith.

“What do you mean?” he glanced down at me.

“All of their auras blend into the atmosphere, unless you really pay attention you won’t even notice the blood thirstiness.” I shivered, “I can’t image what it’s like at night.”

“I don’t even wanna know.” Keith’s hand tightened over mine, “lets just hurry back.”
“Ready for this kittencakes?” Lance asked, flashing her a charming smile.

“Uh huh.” Miume rolled her eyes and playfully swatted his chest before turning serious, “this is a mission we can’t screw around.”

“You said screw.” Lance chuckled, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively. Miume groaned, shaking her head as she took his outstretched hand to help her out of the lion.

“What am I going to do with you?” She sighed, her tails swishing behind her.

“I dunno, what are you going to do with me?” Lance purred, leaning in a fraction with a teasing smile on his face.

“Enough guys...” Shiro’s voice cut through Lance’s helmet, making him cry out in surprise a small mewl of shock frizzled Miume’s tails.

“Sorry.” Lance apologized, rubbing the back of his helmet sheepishly.

“Come on.” Miume ran her hands down her dress to smooth it out before walking towards the black and grey buildings.

“I forgot how the solar eclipse fades out any color here.” She grumbled to herself, ears twitching backwards in disappointment as her carefully constructed outfit dulled into watered down colors.

“Well, I still think you look stunning.” Lance didn’t miss a beat as he swiftly captured Miume’s hand and dipped down to whisper his complement in her ear.

A small blush flashed across her cheeks, her heart skipping a beat from his smooth transition from sexually flirtatious to sweet and caring. Immediately picking up on the fact that she was disappointed that her outfit wouldn’t be seen as usual on this planet and quickly complimenting her to ease her mind.

Coughing into her free hand she turned her head to the side, trying to hide the shy smile on her lips. How could he read her so easily?

As they stepped under the large iron sculpted arched entrance to the town Miume couldn’t help but shiver. She definitely was not fond of this planet.

Miume’s heels were silent as the dense black sand abruptly transitioned into soot colored bricks neatly lined into streets. All sound seemed to be absorbed into the silent air around them. Tall, oily, black iron lamp posts spaced evenly down the road. Barely illuminated white flames danced behind frosted glass as intricate swirls of melted metal curled under their lamps.

Refined, luxury looking chromed buildings lined neatly on either side of them. Creating a solid wall of identical looking ebony structures. Blacked out windows hiding what secrets lie within their walls. While raven black brick stairs lead up to each front door.

“Woah.” Lance gasped, his mouth slacking open, “it looks like we went back in time.”

“Try not to stare too much.” Miume reminded in a hushed tone, her tails swishing warily as they walked farther into the city.
Only a few humanoid aliens scattered across the street in front of them. Wordlessly interacting with their environment like a silent movie. Even from this distance Miume could tell they were staring. It was too easy to tell that they didn’t belong, even if she had dressed to fit the part.

Lance glanced down at Miume, his eyes watching her carefully. He had never seen her this cautious before. Was she really that worried about the species on this planet? Returning his gaze to the clouded town he took in its uncomfortably silent stillness. As they moved slowly down the street the buildings began to morph as they worked their way farther into the town. The buildings changing from identical copies to slight variation. Differently shaped windows with greyed stained glass portraits and misshapen doors with curling iron bars welded to their faces. Intricately designed wooden signs painted in monochromatic colors dangling from their posts.

Finally passing under an arched bar that hung between two buildings abstracted pieces of blackened metal hanging from its metal frame that hung did the town entirely change. The aliens that were sparse from before were now freckled around them. Small groups of aliens moving gracefully through the street. Their feet silently gliding across the thick brick.

Unnaturally tall, pale figures ghosting over the brick road, women holding various lacey black umbrellas over their frail figures to shield them from the small amount of sunlight coming down. Black and white gloves covered their pasty skin as elegantly designed dressed formed to their bodies. Beautiful corsets snugly pulled their waists inward before layered fabric flowed out behind them. Colorless hair tucked away neatly on the tops of their heads, held in place by beautifully constructed pieces of metal and jewels. Top hatted men glided across the brick, bright eyes hidden under their rims as their hair was combed back perfectly. Well fitted suits tailored expertly to their frames as tails drifted behind them. Some wore white gloves, while others used black canes to move with unhurried motions. Miume’s ears perked up as she took in the elegant style of the area around them. She couldn’t help but purr under her breath, something about men in fitted Victorian era suits made her heart skip.

“Uh, Earth to Miume, where do you wanna check out first?” Lance asked, waving his hand in front of her face looking slightly disappointed by her lack of responsiveness to him.

“Sorry, how about over there?” Miume replied, snapping back to her senses and quickly scanned the shops around them before nodding towards the open cafe looking area.

“A cafe?” Lance asked, his voice skeptical before shrugging and moving towards it.

“Follow my lead.” Miume instructed as they got closer, easily slipped her arm through Lance’s to match the socially accepted way for men and women to walk she anxiously adjusted her dress with the other.

As they crossed the nearly silently bustling street Miume determined that this cafe-like space was indeed owned by the younger generation of aliens. Mismatched iron tables and chairs spilled out into the otherwise empty street as ripped umbrellas spread open over them. A few couples of aliens occupied the outdoor area, while others moved easily in and out, a silver dipped bell chiming near silently each time the wooden door opened and closed. There were few males in tight fitting suits like the older generation, but a majority were in loose black skinnies and baggy torn t-shirts. The females ranged from the clothes like what Umi had picked out to what Miume was wearing and everywhere in between. Some even wore a more relaxed versions of what the older females wore. But their fashion was polar opposite of the tight knit, well fitted material that the everyone else appeared to be wearing.

Miume had noticed that while a majority of the population they had passed were older. Their complexion was smooth and young, but their demeanor and movements were aged. While the
younger generations seemed to peel away from the older generations strict way of dressing. As if each generation slowly evolved into the final form of pristine Victorian vintage. But started with their own, defined fashion before being sucked into the traditional customs of this town

“Well you fit in here.” Lance whispered under his breath, a smile flashing across his face.

“That’s why I wore it.” Miume smirked back, feeling more confident in her clothing choice as Lance pulled open the heavily tinted door for her.

They entered a rather small space, crammed with black iron clawed tables and matching chairs, crooked bookshelves lines the walls that had been stripped of black paint to expose the dark brick underneath. Dimly lit black iron dipped chandeliers hung from the evenly constructed ceiling. As the scent to burning wood filtered through the space as flickers of faded embers slowly snowed downwards from the lamps before disappearing just before the audience underneath them.

A glass bar stood at the back of the cramped space, the dim firelight flickering in its reflection as a collection of mismatched glass bottles filled with grey colored liquid and various floating objects crowded within its glass confinement. A slender female leaned against its cool surface lazily, one elongated hand stirring a concoction of brewing liquid in a rusted metal cauldron. Carefully placed cups of all sizes dangled from deteriorating nails stacked through the cracks in the brick. As cracked plates balanced dangerously behind the tea cups handles..

Miume surveyed the area completely intrigued. How could there be such a drastic gap between generations? The older generation seemed to be from old English history, while the younger from a modern gothic time frame.  Her red eyes settled on a lone alien tucked into a corner table. Unnaturally thin, ghostly white skin, and elongated features he camouflage well with the rest of the crowd. Raven black hair tied back into a high ponytail, exploding shaved sides with cut out designs. The pale skin at his neck appeared to be carved out into an intricate design, almost like an inlaid necklace that dipped below the frayed grey material of his loose shirt. Dulled red, nearly black eyes stood out under their heavily charcoal lined lids. Metal rods pierced through his ears in chris cross shapes while a metal chain connected back to his singular lip ring. Long thin fingers absently played with the ring, sharpened black talon like nails twisting it as he scanned the pages of an aged book.

Miume swished her tails, immediately intrigued by his demeanor, he would be an excellent person to interview.

“I think I’m going to go talk to him.” Miume decided in a low voice, nodding towards the male her eyes had targeted.

“Talk, or flirt?” Lance asked, noticing how her eyes traced over him and her tails twitched in eagerness.

“Purely for research reasons!” Miume defended herself, giving Lance a sharp look before unlacing her arm so that she could move freely.

“Well you can research me when we are done getting information.” Lance tried to play back, suddenly feeling the need to draw her attention back to him.

“But I hardly ever come to this planet. I want to see why there is such a gap between generations.” Miume replied in an analytical voice.

“Well you’re the one who said we came here on a mission. I don’t want you going off and flirting with all these dude to try and learn something!” Lance protested, trying to control the volume of his
voice in the muted environment around them. The only sound echoing through the space was quiet chatter and the muffled notes of aged paper crinkling with the occasional clink of glass.

“Well you, flirt with everything that appears female.” Miume huffed, crossing her arms. She didn’t understand why Lance was so upset. They weren’t a couple. They were only playing. So what did it matter if she filtered a bit to get some information?

“But I’m not right now!” Lance countered.

“Right now, key words. Come on let’s just see if he knows anything.” Miume swished her tails at Lance before striding over to the young male. As she approached he looked up from his book, taking her in before smiling a sharp toothed grin and setting down his book.

“Why, hello there.” Miume cooed in a seductive voice, smiling back at him.

“Hello,” he replied in a smooth voice, gesturing for her to sit down in the unoccupied set across from him. Miume smiled a bit more before placing an elbow on the table and leaning forward. Chin propped on her hand delicately as her tails swished rhythmically behind her.

“We don’t see many newcomers here. To what do I owe the pleasure?” he asked, Miume noted his teeth were slightly different than the older generation. Instead of an entire mouth of sharply pointed teeth, only the four canines were pointed. Curious, did the rest of their teeth grow in with age? Like baby teeth?

“Well, my friend and I are here looking for something and I was wondering if you could help us,” Miume purred, completely intrigued. You could still see the black veins under their pale skin, but it seemed less prominent than the older generation. Did the darkness of their veins help indicate their age like their teeth? This certainly was an intriguing planet that few were brave enough to study.

“Friend?” Lance sputtered before his face dropped, “Fine two can play at this game.” turning on his heel he gave his back to Miume.

His eyes wandered around the small cafe until they landed on a slender female sitting a few tables away. Dressed in a tight black crop top that dipped down into a plunging neckline she stood out from the rest of the more conservative fashions around here. Tight black and dull red tinted paints hugged her legs before disappearing in a sleep pair of black spiked heels. Red tried to show through her naturally black hair, but the planets grey scale stripped away its vibrancy as it was pulled up into a messy top bun. A few strands delicately framing her smooth porcelain face. While a deep red hourglass shaped broach hung from a black leather color fashioned around her thin neck. As some sort of jagged jet black spikes jutted from her neck on either side. Shooting Miume a final glare over his shoulder he marched over to the woman and smoothly slid into the open chair next to her.

Her deep blood red eyes glanced up at Lance under thick black lashes, a slow, seductive smile crept over her plump black glossed lips as she elegantly set her black teacup down and leaned forward. Lance gulped, his body tensing as he realized he had gone way over his head.

“Hello,” her voice was silky, eyes hypnotizing as she reached out a pale hand and ran her coal black nails under his chin adoringly. Lance’s eyes widened, flicking back to Miume before back to the alien in front of him.

“Why hello there.” he tried to act smoothly.
“And what might your name be, human?” she asked, her voice lulling as a sweet, soft vibrating noise filled the air around them. But it was so subtle Lance had barely noticed, his eye captivated by the blood red ones boring into his. Her pupils quivering and ensnaring his attention completely to her.

“Lance, and m’lady?” he asked, leaning forward slightly and resting his chin on his hand, eyes half lidded.

“Arachna,” she almost crooned. Lance eyes were glazing over, every moment she made seemed to pull him in further to her enticing charisma.

“Would you happen to know any interesting things around here?” Lances voice slipped out, completely absorbed.

“Hm, depends on the time of day.” she, stroked his chin again, making him lean in even more.

Miume’s ears twitched in the direction of Lance, the barely audible high pitched vibration sound pulling her attention away from the side tracked conversation. Her eyes moving from the attractive alien in front of her towards the seducing alien he had chosen to try and gain information from. Her red eyes narrowed, ears flicking backwards in annoyance, he was practically leaning halfway over the table towards a female alien. Large blue eyes glazed over, mouth hanging open slightly, completely entranced. What was so good about that female anyways? Miume narrowed in on the vibrating spikes lining the females neck, they were moving so quickly you could hardly tell they were quivering at all. But Miume knew, her ears instantly zeroing in on the annoying sound that she had noticed before. It was her. An overwhelming surge of anger rushed over Miume. What did that woman thing she was doing to her Lance? Metal clattered loudly behind her as she marched over to the challenging alien, her feet moving before she registered what was happening. Ears pinned back, tails bristled she felt her nails elongate as a familiar beastly strength pulsed through her.

The threatening females attention shifted towards Miume, her eyes narrowing as her dark lips pulled down in annoyance. The soft hum of vibration quieted down to nothing but a warning note of possessiveness.

“Excuse me. What do you think you’re doing?” Miume demanded between clenched teeth, a clawed hand landing on Lance’s shoulder and yanking him back with enough force to snap him out of whatever trance he was in.

“Miume?!” he exclaimed, confused as the muddied glaze over his eyes cleared.

“You are interrupting my food.” the female alien hissed, her voice dripping in hostility as she retracted a hand.

“Food?” Lance’s voice cracked as his eyes widening as he came back to his full senses. His hands reaching up and patting down his chest to make sure he was fine.

“He is not anyone’s food,” Miume growled in a low voice, her tails swishing dangerously, ears back, and pupils narrow as the ruby of her eyes started to burn, boring down on the unwelcomed challenger. The hand on Lance’s shoulder tightening unconsciously.

“He is not anyone’s food,” the alien replied coldly, rising slowly from her chair to place her palms on the table. The spikes coming from her neck curling in and out now in a threatening warning.
“He is not for you to consume.” Miume let out a controlled hiss, using her hold on Lance she pulled him back easily as she took a challenging step forward. The feet of the chair screeching loudly under him, but Miume hardly heard it. Placing a clawed hand on the tablet she leaned forward, glowing at the alien who stood just below her eye level. A growl rumbling in her chest as her lips pulled back to expose sharpened canine teeth.

The female alien stiffened at Miume's advance, her pupils constricting as a strained hiss escaped her lips. Two jagged pincher like extensions had grown from the smooth charcoal gums above her top row of teeth. Just above the knifelike set that was clenched tightly together. The spiderlike appendages protruding from her neck began to vibrate again, letting off a high pitched frequency as they quickened almost blindingly fast.

The two females glared at each other with dangerous intensity. The room around them had become entirely silent now, not even the soft clinks of glasses was heard. Lance sat stiffly under Miume’s hand, not sure if he should try and stop it, or if their staredown would end peacefully. He could feel a different, powerful, radiance coming from Miume, one he had never experienced before. Glancing down at the hand on his shoulder he noted the change in her nails, it was subtle, but definitely there. Was there more to Miume that he had yet to learn?

A heavy footstep just to the side of the group broke the fierce tension between the table. The room snapping back to its usual, calm, demeanor. Each alien returning their attention to what they were doing as if nothing had happened at all.

“There are no feeding rules in the daylight, you know this.” the female who has mixed liquids behind the bar folded her long arms over her small chest, eyes hard as they landed on the female alien before shifting her attention to Miume. “And no fighting rules in my shop.”

Miume’s gaze never broke from the ahranoid like alien in front of her, tails still dancing dangerously behind her but her grip loosed around Lance’s broad shoulder.

The alien meet her gaze equally before dramatically plopping down in her metallic seat again, waving a hand dismissively in front of her face.

“You have a mean little kitty there, you best be careful boy.” the female alien warned, her eyes running over Miume as if she could see something else. The spikes on her neck still curling in and out but the high pitched frequency has stopped, “I wouldn’t want to make that kitty too mad.” her eyes narrowed. Her voice dripping with poison as she gave up her meal reluctantly.

Miume growled a final time, baring her teeth at the spider like alien before grabbing Lance’s hand and dragging him out of the cafe. Lance stumbled behind her for a beat as he regained his footing, surprised by her sudden increase in strength. Shooting a final look back at the enchanting alien he gulped. Her eyes had narrowed, darkening until her they appeared entirely under her thick lashes. Lips pulled tight into a concentrated line as the legs on her neck flexed in aggravated patterns.

Heatless, color stripped sun bathed down on them as Miume silently pulled Lance behind her. Passing a few quiet buildings until they had almost exited the main street did she turn quickly on her heel, hand flashing out with blinding speed as she smacked him upside the head.

“What the hell were you doing?!” her voice was tense as she tried to control its volume, her tails swishing angrily.

“What were you doing? You were totally jealous kittens.” Lance smirked back, leaning forward a hair so his face was closer to hers. Miume’s face flushed, her shoulders stiffening she turned sharply, smacking him in the face with her tails as she crossed her arms tightly over her
chest.

“I was not jealous, shut up. You just completely failed to notice that she was an arachnid type alien who had entirely ensnared you into her trap.” Miume huffed.

“Aw come on, you were totally just jealous that I was flirting with someone besides you.” Lance replied lightly in a coy voice, gently rubbing her ears trying to get them to unflatten.

“Don’t touch me right meow!” Miume swatted his hands away, but immediately missing his soothing touch.

“Come on, just admit that you were jealous and totally have fallen for these charms.” he smiled at her seductively, wiggling his eyebrows.

As intense as the situation had been, he had never seen Miume snap like that. She was usually in tight control of her emotions, keeping them strictly in check. Even if he had been in hypnotized under some aliens spell, she could have intervened different that she had.

“I was not jealous! You can flirt with who ever you like, I don’t care.” crossing her arms tightly over her chest she pointedly looked away before pausing. Chewing on her lip her tails flipped in contemplation. “Well maybe just a little.” she admitted in a quiet voice, her cheeks burning again as she verbally admitted a small portion of her feelings. She didn’t want him to flirt with anyone else. Even if it was a mission. He was her toy and hers alone.

“Ah hah! You totally like me!” Lance grinned widely, his heart skipping happily in his chest at her confirmation. He knew she liked to play, but it made his chest swell with confidence to have some reaffirmation.

“I do not, just shut up.” Miume tried to deny, shaking her head as her tails continued to swish behind her and pouted.

“Come on kittencakes.” Lance purred, his arms coming around her from behind, he rested his head in the crook her her neck.

“Stop it!” Miume mewled, wiggling until she broke free of his comforting embrace. Her face flushed red as she smacked his arm, with less force this time, while looking away.“We are on a mission, come on.”

“Uh huh, just keep telling yourself that.” Lanc’s airy voice teased gently behind her as he pulled his hands behind his head, unable to stop himself from smiling.
“Keith,” I whispered quietly, squeezing his hand as we walked out of the towns iron pitched border and towards the red lion.

Keith’s eyes slid down to me, silently asking for me to continue, “we are being followed.”

“By how many?” Keith asked in a low voice.

Wordlessly i counted on my fingers how many energies I felt, unsure the correct numeral response. Keith watched me from his peripheral vision, barely nodding when I held up three fingers.

“I think it’s the ones from before,” I whispered, my shoulders stiffening as their hungry auras prodded towards us from the muted air around us.

“It’s probably because you gave them some of your blood,” Keith sighed quietly before discreetly glancing over his shoulder only to find the entrance to the town barren. “I don’t see anyone, are you sure?” He questioned before abruptly stopping.

“Keith?” My voice sounded too loud for the eerily silent planet, my body frozen midstep to match Keith’s when my body tensed. Blood thirsty energies pulsed towards us, not from behind, but from in front now. Slowly my eyes shifted to look forward, my muscles automatically reacting defensively as the three aliens from before lounged carelessly against the red lion.

“How did they -,” Keith started before taking a defensive stance.

“Keith to base. We might wanna wrap things up soon,” He whispered into his helmet, placing two fingers to its smooth exterior to activate the camera.

“Kind of in the middle of something important. What’s happening?” Shiro replied, his voice distant as a few other deeper voices echoed in the background.

“That intel Umi and I got, we had to exchange blood for it, and now I think they want more.” Keith tried to be as vague as possible, knowing that the aliens in front of him would most likely hear his conversation.

“You what?!” Miume’s hissing came through, making Keith wince.

“Not now Miume, what’s the situation?” Shiro’s concerned voice tried to defuse the situation.

“Three on two, very hungry looking - wait Umi!” Keith broke off as I stepped out from behind him, my hands curling into fists. Ripples of energy pooled over my skin as I took in their carnivorous lust. Their energies mixed together into a solid mass now, its blood thirsty craving pulsing off them in powerful waves now. Breaking apart from the singular muted energy of the planet and becoming unnervingly clear.
If just three energies could create this much hostility, I didn’t want to image what kind of war zone this planet turned into once it was entirely dark.

“Why are you here?” I demanded in a hard voice, shifting my weight just in front of Keith.

“We just came to get another taste,” the second female cooed innocently, standing up from her relaxed position against the red lion and leisurely taking a step forward. Tensing my feet automatically shifted into a defensive stance, a barrier flexing out in front of me and pushing outwards with just enough force to kick up the sand just in front of the advancing alien. Her keen eyes flicked quickly from the settling dust to the translucent barrier in front of her. Her lips curling into a wicked smile as her eyes shown in amusement.

“Umi,” Keith’s voice was low and warning. His energy jumped around him at my sudden defensive play.

“You are very interesting indeed,” the closest female smiled, her teeth pulling back to show rows of sharp teeth. A hand delicately coming up to rest on her pale cheek as she studied us hungrily, elongated nails tapping her temple thoughtfully.

“We don’t want any trouble, our bargain is over,” Keith came forward, placing a hand on my shoulder to try and relax my position and defuse the situation.

“Oh, but that’s not how things work here,” the first female teased, coming over and placing an arm on the second’s shoulder lovingly.

“Well that’s how this is going to work,” Keith’s voice was harder than before, his aura growing more uneasy as he assessed the situation. We were outnumbered by one, but both of us were experienced fighters. Yet we didn't know what kind of power these aliens possessed, putting us at a disadvantage.

“I think we have the advantage my dears,” the second female purred, taking another step forward, her hands morphing into beast like claws. Inky black stretched up from her spear like tipped nails, dying her hands before tapering off just below her pale elbow. The dark veins under her skin visibly pulsating now.

A low growl escaped my lips as I slipped deeper into a defensive stance, pushing a barrier around us again. This time further, letting the snaps of energy bite outwards at our opponents. The two females jumped backwards with ballet grace, amused giggles ringing out into the still air.

“How about just a bit of that Galra blood and we go away?” The male offered, stepping forward now from his shadowed position under the red lion. My eyes snapping to him immediately, he had been so quiet one would have easily forgotten him, but I knew better. The females were the distraction, while the male was the silent assassin.

“Yeah, like I’m gonna believe that now,” Keith retorted, his steps mirroring the first female as she started to circle the barrier. Long nails trailing carelessly over the barrier, watching the pink purple ripples moving across its rounded shape with curious hunger.

The male shrugged nonchalantly before adjusting his sleeves,” what a shame, the sand is no good for spilled blood. It soaks it up too quickly. That’s where it’s marvelous color comes from,” his striking eyes darkened with ravenous intent.

“Don’t move.” I instructed to Keith in a hushed voice, glancing back at him he nodded. His fingers brushing against the side of his leg armor to activate his bayard at any moment, other arm half
raised to bring his shield to the ready.

Returning my gaze forward I glared at the aliens in front of me. The second stood just feet from me, her beastly hands pressed against the barrier in a lowing fashion. Palms laid flat against its semi-translucent exterior, a taloned index finger patiently tapping against it. Ripples of pink purple moving across its surface with each impact.

Squeezing my fists tighter my eyes narrowed on my first target. Static electricity bubbled out around me before I pushed it outwards, sending a controlled electrical shock around my barrier. Jolts of pink purple lightning sizzling as they juttered in random direction.

The female's eyes glinted with amusement before the burst of energy snapped at her sunstarved skin. A sharp, animalistic cry pierced through the air, her eyes flashing completely pitch black as a vicious snarl escaped her lips while she curled a steaming hand into her chest. The unpleasant smell of burning flesh wafted through the air, making my nose wrinkle.

“Leave, now,” I said in a warning voice, clenching my fists tighter. The blood thirst desire to eat radiated off them now in powerful pulses. The smell of burning flesh mixed with the fragrance of my blood driving them towards insanity. Their crave was just as blood curdling as the desire to win in the gladiator ring on the Galra ship. Only it wasn’t just me, they wanted Keith as well. A surge of protectiveness pumped through me at the thought. I wasn’t going to let them near Keith.

“Annazella!” The first female cried out in shock before her face contorted in rage, “why you lowly human,” she snarled, bringing her clawed hand up to strike the barrier. Turing my attention to the next threat I pushed my barrier forward until it collided with her. Striking her hard enough to force her backwards she screeched in pain, polished shoes slipping in the sand as she tried to regain balance.

“Leave.”I demanded again, pushing energy around the barrier again so that it crackled loudly, electricity running through the air in dangerous snaps.

The male alien took a step back, eyes widening slightly as I turned my icy glare onto him. He flinched unintentionally, as if expecting some kind of impact like his companions had received.

“Come, we should leave now,” he admitted in a dissatisfied voice, eyeing me carefully as I held his gaze, my body poised in its defensive crouch, crackles of energy running around my barrier still.

“But!” Annazella demanded, her hand still clutched to her chest a seething rage oozed from her aura now.

“We cannot break this,” he retorted in a final voice, nodding towards the line in the sand where my energy swirled around, pushing the sand outwards in slow pulses

The first female growled menacingly at us while retreating back towards the male carefully. Her body had dark splotches of black where my barrier had come in the most contact with her skin. It wasn’t sizzling like the second females skin, but a charred smell wafted off her as she moved. Shifting my gaze to her I tracked her carefully, not trusting their motives.

“You win for now humans,” she hissed through clenched teeth.

“Don’t come back,” Keith spoke up in a hard tone as he came to stand next to me again, his energy still tense.

“You are prey, and only prey,” Annazella snarled.
My eyes snapped back to hers, an unfamiliar pit of rage flashing through me. I was not prey, and neither was Keith. I was a warrior, and I was free now. I didn’t and wouldn’t belong to anyone else, and I wouldn’t let anything happen to Keith.

Clenching my fists my nails bit into the skin of my palms. My energy snapping around me as an astral projection rushed forward before I had registered what was happening, flashing a metaphysical knife upwards the smooth cheek of Annazella sliced open.

Stunned her eyes widened, unable to move to process the speed at which my attack had come from. Its nearly invisible state already retreating back to my physical form.

A beat of shocked silence passed us before she slowly brought a clawed hand to her cheek, pulling it back to see black stained her fingers.

“What did you do?!” she screeched, the skin already starting to heal. Threads of pale grey muscle restitching itself as skin stretched across the wound to pull itself back into place.

“Leave.” I repeated in a low voice, curling and uncurling my fingers as energy ran over my barrier. Making it flicker in and out of visibility.

“Come, she possesses things we cannot see,” the male determined, grabbing Annazella’s uninjured arm and dragging her silently back towards the decaying town.

The first female paused before growling at us a final time and following her companions back towards the safety of the shadows. I turned, watching them without releasing the barrier. Waiting until they were far enough away that the blood thirsty energy faded back into the grey scaled one of the planet did I release my barrier.

Breathing out in relief I turned to face Keith who was smiling at me. “What?” I asked, giving him a confused look.

“Nothing, that was just cool,” he shrugged, glancing away as his energy bubbled shyly.

“Cool?” I repeated.

“Yeah, you could have fought them with full power, but you didn’t. It looked like you had more control over your powers, and kept things from getting more tense. Who knows what would have happened if it turned into a full fledged fight. That whole creepy town might have come out to join,” he admitted, looking up towards the sky, his face dropped slightly. “Uh oh… Incoming,” he grimaced.

I glanced upwards to see that the blue lion was descending on us with the other lions not far behind. I had been so focused on the hidden energies around us i hadn’t even noticed the bright ones of the Paladins. The blue lion had barely touched down when Miume emerged from it, running towards us with a scary face.

“Umi! Keith!” She called out, her aura flaring with anger, “what the hell do you think you are doing?!” she exclaimed as she reached us. “I gave you simple rules. Simple! And you break the most important one! I mean come on Umi? I would expect this from Keith or Lance but not you!” Her aura changed from angered to flustered then to concerned. She raised her hands and I flinched, expecting to receive a punishment but her arms wrapped around me squeezing me against her tightly instead. I froze, muscles stiffening in shock against her warm embrace.

“I don’t know what I would have done if you got hurt or worse,” she whispered, holding me against her with a strength I hadn’t felt before. I tensed, not sure what was happening, she was so
mad before but she now was hugging me? “Seriously, please be more careful Umi,” she pulled back and held me at arms length, her eyes glistening with tears before she quickly blinked them away. I stared at her in confusion. Why had she been so worried? And why had she not struck me as a punishment for disobeying orders? I thought hugs were only used to convey good emotions? Or to comfort someone?

“Why is your aura so concerned? Weren’t you mad at me?” I asked, not sure what to do as I stood stiffly in front of her.

Miume sighed heavily, shaking her head, “I only scold you because I love you,” she smiled.

“Love?” I repeated, tilting my head to the side, even more confused. The word love felt strangely familiar, yet completely foreign at the same time. Was it a word from Miume’s home planet?

Miume let out an exasperated breath, letting go of me to place a hand on her face, “Not this again, think of it as I care for you deeply, does that help?” She tried. I nodded slowly, still not completely sure but not wanting to strain the situation. Miume’s energy moved around her in tired, complex movements filled with varied emotions that I could hardly comprehend.

“Just... don’t do it again okay. If you got hurt think about how it would affect others too, okay?” She gave me a tired looking smile.

I glanced down, curling my shoulders inwards slightly to make myself smaller. I had never been scolded like this before. She didn’t even hit me.

“Wait wait, that’s it!? You’re not going to smack her like you do me?” Lance exclaimed, looking perplexed.

“Well that’s because you like it,” Miume teased, turning and winking at him playfully. Lance’s mouth nearly dropped, his face turning beet red at her correct assumption.

“Oh my god,” Keith groaned, followed by a chorus of other dissatisfied sounds that echoed through his helmet. I glanced at him, but his face was partially hidden by a hand now as he shook his head. Miume had let go over me to go smack Lance upside the head again but he responded by purring this time instead of his usual exclamation of protest.

“Oh, nope, we are done,” Shiro responded, “Go home, get a room,” the black lions boosters started to powerup as he spoke.

“Ew guys.” Pidge whined, wrinkling her nose and turning her lion around to follow Shiro back towards the castle. While Hunk’s nervous laugh echoed out of Keith’s helmet next, “Uh, no comment.”

“Wait, who would like pain?” I inquired, thoroughly confused now. I went back to looking at Keith for answers but his face was flushed bright red as his aura spiked nervously around him. I opened my mouth to ask what was wrong but he quickly grabbed my hand and dragged me towards the red lion.

“Nope, not talking about that. Just forget it even happened. Come on let’s go.” he stammered, his aura dancing anxiously.

“But, is Lance okay?” I continued, looking back at Lance with concern.

“Yup Lance is just fine, let’s go,” Keith replied curtly, tugging me harder as the red lion lowered its giant mouth to let us enter.
“But pain?” I pressed, looking back at Keith.

“Oh, oh! I can tell you!” Pidge excitedly offered, whipping her lion around as her face appeared on one of the holograms as Red came to life. Keith’s shoulders went rigid, his eyes narrowing at Pidge as his face turned redder.

“Don’t you even dare!” He threatened, tightening his hands on the controls as red slowly lifted us into the air. Greyed sand swirling around us as we moved upwards.

“Umi, when two people care about each other very much,” Pidge sneered, her doey eyes glinting mischievously through the monitor.

“No, Pidge shut up!” Keith stammered in a flustered voice.

“Keith?” I asked, peeking around the command chair to look at Pidge curiously.

“Sometimes people like it when-,” Pidge started rambling.

“I said no, Pidge!” Keith nearly yelled now, slamming his hands down on the control system so that it blinked out, all sound being cut off from the other lions.

“Keith…” I tried again, but his face had flushed deep red, one hand still hiding his face as he piloted us back towards home. Tilting my head to the side I tried to peer under his bang covered face but he shook his head, refusing to look at me.

“No, just... no, not today. Not ever, you don’t ever need to know that.” His voice was shaky, aura completely flustered now it moved with erratic patterns around us. I sighed in confusion, stepping back just enough to hold on more securely to the command chair. What was happening, who could like pain?

As we landed in the red lion’s hanger, Lance was already waiting for us, leaning up against the wall looking smug. Keith eyed him warily, taking my hand again and pulling me towards the exit as his aura bristled uneasily. As we passed Lance he broke off from the wall, slinging an arm lazily across my shoulder.

“Hey Umi, wanna learn a few new things?” He asked innocently, pulling me away from Keith and giving me a sly smile.

“What?” I asked, still confused as my feet paused at Lance’s offer for new knowledge.

“About this whole pain thing-,” he started before yelping, his arm dropping from my shoulder as he spun around. Keith stood behind him, fist closed and fuming.

“Lance. Shut the fuck up,” Keith glared daggers at the other male, his tone cold and threatening.

“Yeesh, you didn’t have to literally punch me!” Lance retorted, rubbing the back of his head tenderly.

“Then shut up!” Keith growled, shoving Lance out of the way and taking my hand again. “God you aren’t safe here, let’s go back to our room,” he continued in a rushed voice, taking off jogging down the hallway and taking me with him.
“Alright guys, Miume planned out another training day for us,” Shiro announced, standing in front of us with his helmet tucked under an arm. After returning from the ghostly planet we had to wormhole to a random spot in space, trying to give us as much distance from Zarkon as possible while the anti-Zarkon groups rallied.

While we waited we had resumed training in all aspects. Fighting, flying, formations, castle defenses. Anything and everything that could prepare us for the final battle that was brewing around us.

“Not Kara?” Pidge asked in a relieved voice, visibly sighing in alleviation.

“No, not Kara today! I want to see exactly how much you have improved in regards to our previous studies in a tightly controlled setting,” Miume declared, standing next to Shiro and holding her small tablet in front of her. Red eyes locked on the holographic screen that projected up from it, her ears were pulled back a fraction, tails swishing in agitation behind her as she refused to look up.

“Does it involve going back into creepy tunnels?” Hunk inquired, his voice worried as his aura twisted uneasily around him.

“No, we will be training inside the castle today on the training deck,” Shiro informed us, holding his free hand out to gesture to the room we had already gathered in.

“Thank quiznack, no more bugs” Lance murmured to himself, lightly nudging Keith’s arm only to receive a warning look from the other male.

“No. Now let’s get started, shall we?” Miume replied curtly, swishing her tails slightly as if she was agitated about something. She briefly shot a hostile glare at Lance before spinning around and marching authoritatively up to the training decks control box

“Dude, whatever you did to piss off Miume is about to come back and bite us in the ass,” Keith grumbled to Lance as we waited for Miume to start her training.

“I didn’t do anything!” Lance protested, looking completely offended by Keith’s comment.

“Uh huh,” Keith rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest.

“SoOOOO, what did you do exactly?” Pidge chimed, leaning closer to Lance and smirking mischievously.

“Nothing!” Lance exclaimed incredulously with his arms flailing.

“I mean, maybe it had something to do with that alien you were telling me about. The one who was a pretty spider lady who would have eaten you unless Miume had stepped in. But then you teased her about being jealous and-” Hunk began to ramble as Lance’s face turned to horrified shock, his
arms quickly making grand gestures over Pidge’s head to ‘shut up’.

“Enough prying, I’m sure nothing happened. Let’s just focus on training and showing her how much we’ve improved,” Shiro scolded lightly.

“Alright, for warm up, we’ll begin with something called dodgeball in your language i believe.” Miume stated analytically from the viewing box above us. Her red eyes gazed down almost codly upon us. Her state making my energy prickle uneasily around me. What was dodgeball? Could it be harder than the first tests she put us through?

Glancing up at her I tried to find her eyes but she quickly flicked them away. Her aura curling closely around her in a guarded fashion. Tilting my head to the side I watched it, I had only see this happen when Pidge was teasing her about Lance. But her bonds with Lance had grown steadily stronger in the past month. Even now the pulled at each other, but Miume’s seemed more resistant than usual. Had something really happened on the last mission?

“Sweet, I love dodgeball!” Lance called happily, and high fived Hunk who was also smiling eagerly. Their elated voiced breaking my thought process and causing me to jump from the sudden noise.

Miume looked at Lance, a small, almost sinister smile crept over her face before she looked down at the controls in front of her. “Oh, this is not normal dodgeball.” her tails curled behind her eagerly, “Your objective is to defend your teammates. Umi, I want you to try and make barriers around each of them individually..” She instructed, not looking up from the controls.

I glanced back up at her, feeling anxious. I hadn’t really worked on making five separate barriers yet.

“Ready?” Miume called, her hand posed over the red start button she gazed down coolly at me.

Taking a deep breath I reached out to quickly place my hand on each of the Paladins’ backs. Focusing on the bonds between us I pushed my energy around them like a thin layer of armor over their skin before taking a defensive position and nodding up at Miume.

“Go!” she called, slamming her hand down on the red button five small drone like machines immediately sprang to life, shooting up from the floor and spinning around the room quickly in erratic patterns.

Okay everyone takes one.” Shiro instructed, his right arm glowing purple as he activated his small shield and poised himself to attack or defend. We slowly made a circle, each Paladin standing with enough distance to fight and defend, but close enough to cover each others back.

Flexing my hands I slipped into a natural defensive position. Pushing a thin layer of protection around myself I focused on the bonds tying me to each of the Paladins. If Miume wanted me to hold five barriers, then I wouldn’t be able to fight as well. Keith glanced at me and nodded, already understanding my thought process his feet slid sideways a hair to put himself between me and the targets.

“Roger.” Keith replied, his bayard forming into the usual sword he held it up as his dark eyes started tracking the spinning drones zipping through the training deck.

“Let’s go.” Lance smirked, looking through the crosshairs his gun was trained on the zooming targets.

“Go!” Shiro commanded. A flurry of understanding echoed through the room, each of the Paladins
pushing off from their designated position and rushing towards their first target.

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“How come this seems worse than being outside.” Pidge huffed, bracing her hands on her knees and wheezing for air.

“Because she’s totally kicking our butts.” Hank replied in a raspy voice as he tried to regain his breath.

“You totally did something to piss her off.” Keith shot at Lance, glaring at him under sweaty bangs.

“I didn’t do anything! Don’t be jealous just because I’m doing better than you!” Lance retorted, folding his arms over his chest and looking away pointedly.

“Guys, just focus on taking a break when we can afford one.” Shiro sighed, wiping the back of his hand over his forehead. “Umi how are you holding up barrier wise?” he asked, glancing over at me.

“I’m alright. It’s not has hard now.” I replied, wiping my cheek and trying not to sound as winded as I felt. Shiro nodded in approval before glancing up at Miume. She had been running us through drill after drill, each seeming to require more stamina than the last. Even if we were just fighting against drones or training robots, the programs Miume or Kara had created had been the most intense yet. Each exercise jumping between levels of difficulty and pushing us to near exhaustion.

Swallowing I took an uneasy breath. Creating and maintaining separate barriers for moving parts wasn’t as difficult as it was before. But that didn’t mean it was easy. With each exercise I felt my concentration slipping. The longer we went, the harder it became to keep everyone safe at all times while still looking out for myself.

But unlike the first times we had trained together, the Paladins knew and understood my abilities better. Our teamwork had been strengthened in ways I had never experienced. Each working simultaneously to achieve the same goal as smoothly as possible. We were running more like clockwork now, completely in tune with the other gears and moving parts. The resistance and hiccups in formation had been almost completely worked out. And the bonds between me and the others as well as between themselves was growing stronger and more defined each day.

“Okay, last exercise.” Miume’s voice came from our side instead of up in the command box. Twirling a set of blue and white cuff looking objects on one finger she smiled devilishly at us.

“Uh, what are those for?” Hunk asked, pointed at her hands nervously.

“Lastly, we will focus on working directly with each other. Sometimes in battle your partner will get injured and be left incapacitated, and you will have to make accommodations for that.” Miume explained, dividing us into groups. She carefully guided us by our shoulders to rearrange us.

As she spoke my heartbeat start to quicken. The cuffs might be different in color and shape, but they were still restraints.

Squeezing my hands into fists I tried to ignore the uncomfortable prickle of anxiety that wrapped around my wrists. Invisible remnants of constricting cold metal tightening around my skin as flashed of my time on Zarkon’s ship rushed past me.

“Now, one of you will get on the other’s back.” she instructed, a finger pointed upwards.”that
person will be the ‘injured’ teammate.” her fingers did air quotes around the word injured.

“What?!” Keith nearly choked, his aura flashing outwards in shock. I glanced up at him, was he worried about this exercise as well? Luckily Miume had paired us together, while putting Lance was with Hunk, and Pidge with Shiro.

“I said,” Miume turned her cool gaze to Keith, “one person is to be carried, might I suggest Umi as she is smaller than you.”

“Dibs on being carried!” Lance called, raising his hand excitedly before scampering up Hunk’s back. Hunk hardly had time to react before Lance was latching himself easily across his broad shoulders. Sighing quietly he admitted his defeat and waited for further instructions.

Keith sighed, glancing back at me before crouching down slightly so that I could get on. His aura flickered nervously around him, trying to pull inwards and hide itself but tremors of excitement could help but flare up.

Tilting my head to the side I watched him for a beat before slowly moving to wrap my arms and legs around him. This was just part of the training, and he had carried me before, so why was his energy so nervous? Was he also unsure about the cuffs that would be binding us together?

Carefully I shifted my entire weight onto his muscular back. Heat radiating upwards from under his suit as beads of sweat slicked back some of his thick hair.

Keith’s body tensed under mine as I locked my arms across his neck and legs around his waist. Energy flaring once as my breastplate connected with his backplate. The curve of the jetpack making it awkward to hold myself in place.

Shiro had insisted that I started training in the extra space suit so that I could get accustomed to its weight and movements.

Keith let out a quiet sigh, his large hands coming up to cup the bottom of my thighs as he shifted his weight forward to stand up. Even though there was armor between my legs and his hands i could still feel the warmth pooling in his palms. His fingers twitching in nervous contractions as Miume walked over to us, a sly smile played on her lips as she held up a pair of cuffs.

I tensed, an uncontrollable shiver running down my spine as Miume readjusted my hands. Placing one above and one under the opposing arm she locked my wrist and forearms together. The cuff automatically adjusting to the size of the plates covering my arm so that it could securely lock me in place.

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Tightening my grip i swallowed nervously, trying to keep my energy from buzzing around me and shocking Keith. His energy jumped as he watched Miume place the restraints over my arms. His fingers squeezing the gear around my thighs my focus shifted from the uneasy pit pooling in my stomach to the person supporting me.

“I can hold myself in place.” I murmured quietly my head resting next to his.

“We haven’t started yet, it’s fine.” he replied, his aura bubbling anxiously as his fingers flexing nervously against my thighs again.

“Oooh kinky.” Lance winked at Keith who shot daggers at him as Lance was effectively cuffed to Hunks back.

“Oh, so you would like this?” Miume purred, giving Lance a coy smile. He grinned eagerly in
response as Hunk visibly shuddered.

“Ugh! Shut up, Lance.” Pidge groaned as Keith and Shiro shook their heads in mutual discomfort.

“Can we just get this over with please. I’m starving.” Hunk winced, dancing uneasily from foot to foot his aura twisted around him uncomfortably.

“Kinky?” I asked, tilting my head to the side as much as my compromised position would allow me too. I didn’t know what that word meant, but everyone's reaction to the word made it seem like it was a bad thing. Furrowing my brows in confusion I glanced around the room. This was just training, why was everyone so uncomfortable? Had they never had to carry a comrade before? Or was it whatever the word kinky meant?

“Don’t ask.” Keith groaned, shaking his head as he interpreted what I was about to ask. I tried to peer sideways to see his face but he was pointedly looking away, red flushed across his cheeks.

“Alright, each of you will have a robot to defeat. Prepare yourselves.” Miume called, waving a hand over her head as she walked back to the control center.

My attention snapped back to Miume, her tails swishing behind her in satisfaction. Digging my nails into the hard plates protecting my forearms a dreaded sense of weakness washed over me like icy water.

The metal constraints seemed to tighten around me arms, squeezing tighter and tighter as my heart started to hammer in my chest.

Shifting my legs around Keith's waist I tried to find the best position to defend myself and him. If I was unable to use my power, or my knives, what could i do to win.

Keith tensed under me, his head tilting a fraction to the side at my antsy movements he opened his mouth to ask but Shiro's voice cut him off.

“Oh boy.” Shiro whispered to himself, readjusting the smaller girl on his back. Their energies twisting uneasily around them.

“And start!” Miume called, her hand slamming down on the red button and engaging the robots as they quickly dropped from the ceiling.

“Hold on tight.” Keith murmured, one of his hands leaving my thighs so his bayard activated.

Nodding my muscles tensed around his body. My fingers digging into the hard material of the armor around my wrists I tried to suppress the anxious pulses of energy trying to ripple over my skin as flashbacks of the gladiator ring ran across my mind. A small tremor moved through me as my breath hitched once before slowly coming down.

I couldn’t use any more power than this. Not unless i wanted to receive a painful shock of electricity from the cuffs around my wrists in return. One that could hurt Keith because we were so close.

Biting my lip my eyes hardened as I tried to think of ways I could help Keith from my compromised position.

Keith tensed under me, his body growing hotter as he slipped into a defensive position. Fingers twitching under my thigh once before he reluctantly let go to balance into a fighting stance.
Taking a step back he brought his sword up. Eyes tracking the robot as it landed with a loud thud in front of us, the floor vibrating under us.

“Ready?” he asked in a low voice, his hand moving back to my leg as he grounded his stance.

“Ready.” I responded, squeezing myself closer to him I his aura wrap around my completely, easing my anxious one.

“Try not to choke me.” he laughed a bit under his breath as the robot lunged quickly towards us, taser staff raised over its head.

“Sorry.” I murmured, tensing my muscles in response to Keith’s movements with the robots. We danced back and forth for a few minutes before he was in the right position, swinging his blade upwards he cut through the air the robot had just been in. The tip of his blade breaking through the first layer of its metallic structure. My muscles flexed in response, a flash of energy snapping in front of us as a subconscious barrier pushed in front of us towards the robots counter attack.

Gasping quietly I braced for repremandence but none came. Slowly opening my eyes I looked down at my chained wrists. There wasn’t any punishment?

“You’re supposed to be injured. Let me protect you.” Keith breathed in a labored voice.

“There was no punishment.” I whispered more to myself than to Keith. My eyes watching the ripples of energy pulsing over the skin of my suit.

“What?” Keith tried to respond before the robot was on us again. Cursining lightly under his breath he blocked its attack, the reccoshe of force vibrating through us as he forced the staff from the machines hold.

If there was no punishment then it meant I could help Keith. My heart skipped a beat in relief but my legs started to shake in tension from being locked in the same position for so long.

“Are you getting tired?” he asked, glancing back at me briefly.

“I'm alright.” I replied, shaking my head before refocusing on the robot. If I couldn’t help him with my barriers, then I could help him read and interpret the next attack. “Duck left then strike upwards.” I instructed. Keith shifted his feet to receive the blow, ducking left before striking upwards and slashing the robot's chest enough to unbalance it. He instinctively jumped at the opportunity, bringing his sword around to finish it.

“Yes!” he cheered under his breath, his left hand going back to support my leg as soon as the robot crashed to the floor, electrical sparks jutting from its pierced chest.

“Good job.” I breathed, my body relaxing against him.

“Thanks for the support.” his cheeks pulled upwards to indicate he was smiling through labored breaths. I could feel his heart hammering in his chest, his shoulders rising and falling rhythmically as they pressed back into my body. He had released his bayard back to its dormant state, hot hands supporting my weight against him now. Blushing I realized just how close were now that there was no threat to win against. Even through the Paladin suit I could feel the heat radiating against my covered skin, how close my body was pressed against his as my legs locked around his waist. Shaking my head I tried to ignore the unfamiliar warmth pooling in the pit of my stomach as I registered how my body molded perfectly into his.

“Wonderfully done, team!” Miume called from her spot, looking down at us with a pleased smile.
on her face. Her aura curled around her happily now, the underlying agitation nearly gone.

“Can you unlock us now?” Pidge asked, trying to wave her hands from Shiro’s neck as she pulled them upwards in an attempt to unbind herself.

“Coming.” Miume sang, swishing her tails as she descended the short staircase towards the sweating paladins.

“So,” Lance started as Miume unlocked his wrists, “How was Umi being handcuffed to you? Close enough for ya’?” Lance teased, jabbing Keith in the side. Keith shot a death glare at him, making Lance laugh before holding up his hands playfully and walking away.

“There you go.” Miume smiled at us as I slid down from Keith’s back, shaking my arms out a bit to get blood flow back in them. Rubbing my wrists gingerly I tried to ignore the lingering feeling of entrapment as images of the cell I was held in flashed across my vision. The uncomfortably ghosts of cold metal locks around my neck and wrists lingered across my skin.

Keith glared at Miume as she walked away, her tails coming dangerously close to hitting his face.

“That was totally planned.” he grumbled, running his hand through his sweaty hair before briefly glancing back at me, his eyes landing on my hands wringing gently across where the cuffs had been.

“Umi-” he tried before I shook my head, dropping my hands and flexing my fingers a final time. There were no restrains, this wasn’t Zarkon’s base. And the cuffs that Miume had chosen didn’t have a negative reaction to my powers. They were safe. I was safe.

“Come on guys, lets get some grub then hit the sack!” Hunk called, rubbing his stomach hungrily “As long as it’s not more green goo.” Pidge shivered.

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“Much better.” Hunk sighed contently, leaning back in his chair.

“Much better than green goo.” Pidge smiled in agreement.

“Well, I’m going to shower and sleep. I need my beauty rest.” Lance declared, standing up from his chair dramatically before winking suggestively at Miume who promptly rolled her eyes but couldn’t help but smile softly to herself. Her energy bubbling in playful excitement. The strained bonds between them had relaxed back to their usual easy push and pull game of tag.

“Sleep sounds great right about now.” Shiro half yawned, pushing up from his seat and rotating his shoulder an an attempt to alleviate some of the tension that had built up during training.

“Yeah, I can’t wait for bed.” Keith stretched his arms over his head as well before looking at me, “shall we?” he asked.

Pausing I glanced up at him, suddenly feeling self conscious of our closeness before nodding slowly and moving to follow him out of the dinning area. After Miume had released me from Keith’s back a new, nervous-excited pool of emotion had pitted in my stomach. Distracting me from eating, from focusing on the old terrors of Zarkon, from any of the conversation that had been held at dinner.

Keith’s careful eyes caught my slight hesitation, his brows pulling together a hair before he turned
his head and walked out of the kitchen.

Breathing out quietly I silently appreciated his respect for space. There was a mutual understanding that there were things neither of us knew how to talk about, or things we didn’t want to.

“Good job at training today.” Keith's voice broke the awkward silence between us, rubbing the back of his neck nervously as we walked back towards our rooms.

“Thanks, you too.” I replied, glancing up at him shyly. His aura still wrapped around me, this time with more hesitation than before. It had lost its outer shell of fierce protectiveness that came forward during training or missions. And exposed a softer, more vulnerable side that had undertones of emotion I had never experienced before.

Its warmth pressed against my skin, making goosebumps rise, as I instantly thought of his physical body pressed against mine.

Biting my lip I cast my gaze downwards, Keith and I had been physically close before. Yet this time it felt different. After training, when I had been able to think, the only thought that filled my mind was how hot his skin was, the masculine smell of sweat, his shoulders rising and falling as his heart beat pumped across his skin and moved over mine.

What was this? Why was I suddenly craving more of his touch? A touch that was closer than just the hugs we shared, or how I would rest my chest on his head during sleep.

What was this new tension of heat pooling under my skin?

“Thanks.” he murmured, not looking at me as well. Flicking my eyes upwards I gazed at him curiously. I wonder if he felt something as well. If we both liked each other, then wasn't being physically close an okay thing? Biting my lip again I became lost deep in my own thoughts.

“Umi?” Keith's voice brought me back to real time. Blushing my eyes widened in shock as I refocused on the physical world around me. Keith tilted his head to the side so that he could see my face better.

“You okay?” he asked, his voice dipping into a concerned tone. Glancing away my body tensed as a deeper blush dusted across my cheeks. My body reacting in ways I didn't understand.

“I’m just going to go shower.” I stuttered before quickly stepping forward so that the automatic door of my room clicked open. Why was I so nervous? Just because my body had been pressed against his hot one didn’t mean anything. It was just a training exercise. And we had hugged before. But why did this time feel so different? Placing my hands on my burning cheeks I tried to calm my fluttering nerves.

“Ah-” Keith started, but I was already behind the closed door. Its click cutting him off completely. “Okay.” he murmured to himself, turning back to his room. His body feeling more pent up than usual. Why did Miume have to decide on that training exercise? He couldn’t get the feeling of her weight against him out of his head. Her legs wrapped around his waist. Groaning to himself he covers his face with his hand, it was time for a cold shower.

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Sighing contently I stepped out of the shower, wrapping a towel around myself. So far I had discovered that showers were one of my favorite spaces. It was warm and small, my own personal oasis where I could be with myself and get away from the darkness that clawed at the back dark corners of my mind.
Grabbing the comb Allura had graciously lent me I pulled it gently through my damp hair. Letting the soothing rhythm calm my mind before my eyes flicked to the black shirt folded neatly onto of my beds blankets. Pausing I walked over to it, bending down to touch it but pulling my fingers back in contemplation. Was it okay to wear this again? If he wasn’t hear? Should i return it? Was it normal to exchange clothes? No that wouldn’t make sense, my clothes would fit him.

Sighing again I finished drying myself off, slipping on a pair of black underwear that Miume had given me. After she realized that I really only that the clothes on my back, she had rummaged through her closets to find suitable articles for me. Explaining that it was normal, and hygenic, to change undergarments and wash them along with my usual outfit.

Pausing for a beat I finally plucked the soft black material of his shit from my bed and pulled it over my head. Bunching the material at the colar and bringing it to my nose I inhaled deeply. A small smile creeping onto my lips as his comforting musky scent still clung to the material, filled my nose.

Even if he was just next door, he felt closer every time I wore it. The faint traces of his aura wafting off its fabric and curling around my frame.

Breathing out contently i draped my thick hair over my shoulder and started running my fingers through it absently before two sharp knocks made me jump.

“Umi, can I talk to you about-” Keith’s voice came from just outside, not waiting for a response before walking walked in with a determined face. He froze, midstep as his dark eyes landed on me sitting on the edge of the bed. Aura flaring his mouth dropped open before he quickly snapped it shut, spinning around swiftly he covered his now beet red face with his hands. “oh quiznack-I’m sorry i didn’t mean to- ah-changing. I mean walk in on you changing. Oh quiznack, i’m sorry.” he stammered, his aura spiking nervously in every direction now.

I blinked, tilting my head to the side curiously. “But I am done changing, it is alright.” i said, glancing down at myself and not seeing a problem. His shirt came down mid thigh and I had something on under.

Keith turned around a tick, peeking through his fingers before snapping back to face the door, “that isn’t dressed.” he said in a flustered voice.

I looked down at myself again before looking up at him, “is it because i don’t have the bra on? Or shorts? I can put them on.” I questioned while walking over to the small closet next to the door. It held only a few belongings. The clothes I had come to Voltron in, one of Pidge’s smaller shirts and pair of shorts, and a few undergarments Miume had given me.

“Ah no, its okay.” Keith stuttered, grabbing my hand quickly as I reached for the short material. Jolting slightly from his sudden touch I glanced up at him but his eyes pointedly staring over my head and boring holes into the opposite wall of my room.

“I looked down at myself again before looking up at him, “is it because i don’t have the bra on? Or shorts? I can put them on.” I questioned while walking over to the small closet next to the door. It held only a few belongings. The clothes I had come to Voltron in, one of Pidge’s smaller shirts and pair of shorts, and a few undergarments Miume had given me.

“Are you okay? Do you have a fever?” I asked, giving him a concerned look as I reached up and gently placed the back of my hand against his forehead like I had seen Miume do to Lance when he was sick.
“Uh, yeah, no, I'm fine.” Keith replied while carefully taking my hand from his face and averting my gaze.

Blinking I processed his confusing statement before slowly leaned back until my full foot rested on the floor again. “Did you want to spend the night together again?” I asked, giving him a hopeful look.

Keith's Adams apple bobbed as he swallowed hard, his cheeks turning a shade redder. “Um, well that and—” he paused, glancing at me shyly. I looked up at him, waiting patiently. His aura was the most nervous I had ever seen. Flicking in and out while tripping over itself as it tried to appear somewhat stable.

Letting out a deep breath he flicked his away away again, tipping his chin down so that his damp bangs hung over his eyes. “And maybe ask if we could try some other things.” his voice trailed off as his aura spiked dramatically.

“Some things?” I echoed, tilting my head to the side not understanding.

Keith swallowed before finally meeting my gaze, “It's kind of hard to explain. But uh—” he paused and moved his eyes to me, “maybe something a little more,” he paused again, “physical?” he almost questioned his statement before shaking his head as if to clear it, “do you trust me?” giving him a confused look I nodded slowly, unsure where this was going but knowing that I did indeed trust Keith.

“So—” he started awkwardly, “Do you trust me to try things and if it feels uncomfortable I'll stop if you say?” he asked

“What kind of things?” I asked, feeling like I was missing something. “More physical things? But we are already close?” I tried to process, but the flutter in my stomach started to tickle, as if trying to give me some kind of clue as to where this was heading.

Keith paused for a beat longer, his face turning a shade darker before he leaned down and pressed his lips into mine. My eyes widened in surprise, I hadn’t expected him to kiss me.

He kissed me carefully, waiting until I relaxed into the kiss to break apart and peck my lips a few times.

“Like that,” he pulled back, letting go of one of my hands to gently tip my head back so that his lips could ghost over my neck. “and this,” he whispered. Glancing up at my from his position. Lips hovering over the collar of his shirt. Shivering I squeezed his hand reflexively, unsure how to react to the difference in kisses. His lips left traces of warmth over my skin that quickly cooled and left me wanting more. Keith watched me carefully, gauging my reaction before smiling a bit and moving back to my lips. Kissing me slowly he brought his arms around my waist, pulling me securely into him and waiting for my body to relax against his before deepening the kiss.

Closing my eyes my body went limp in his arms as I kissed him back, one hand sliding up to rest on his chest while the other snaked around his neck. Unsteadily trying to follow his lead as he kissed me harder. Keith smiled into the kiss before slowly moving his lips from my chin and down my neck like he had done before. My skin igniting under his seductive touch.

“Mm” I hummed, pulling myself closer to him reflexively. Keith's aura jumped at my reaction before he slowly slid his hands down my back until they rested just over my hip bones. Pausing for a beat his hot fingers flexed over the thin material before pulling me closer. Bringing his mouth back to mine he deepened the kiss once more, his breath starting to hitch as his aura flexed around.
us. His hands twitched once more before carefully pushing up the fabric of my shirt to rest his
calloused hands on the bare skin of my hips. Taking in a staggered breath my head started to feel
light. Brilliant crimson filled my vision as I became increasingly aware of his hot body pressed
entirely into mine. My heart starting to hammer as my skin tingle under his intoxicating touches.

Breaking our kiss Keith took a rugged breath, “Jump.” he murmured against my cheek, pulling on
my hips. I paused, looking up at him quickly before wrapping my arms around his neck and
jumping as carefully as I could. Keith stumbled awkwardly, grabbing the bottoms of my legs
clumsily to help hoist me up. Giggling I latched my legs around his waist for the second time
today.

“Hm, don’t laugh at me.” Keith chuckled under his breath before capturing my lips again. Smiling
against his lips I tried to suppress another giggle as his hands slid from my thighs to my butt, one of
his thighs cocked upward slightly to support me.

Keith’s lips distracted my thoughts as he held me there for a few more beats. The air growing
hotter and hotter between us before he carefully walked us backwards to the bed. Waiting until the
back of his knees found the edge to dip down onto it. His hands shifting so that my legs wouldn’t
get caught under him as he keep my hips lined with his.

Gently biting my lip his fingers dug into the flesh of my waist, pulling me so that I grinded against
him.

Taking a staggered breath I broke away from him, face flushing as a new warmth flooded through
me. Pooling in my stomach and making me shudder as I felt a new hardness between us.

“Still okay?” he asked in a breathy voice, pausing. I glanced away, my face still hot before
nodding. Why was I suddenly feeling so shy? Was it normal to feel this way? And why was my
skin getting so hot? We weren’t working out or moving too much, yet a small sweat broke across
my skin and my heart was thumping unevenly in my chest.

“Tell me to stop if you don’t like it.” he murmured quietly before gently kissing me again. Closing
my eyes I leaned into the kiss as he waited a few beats before slowly moving his lips against mine
again. Waiting for me to respond each time before gradually deepening the kiss.

Keith’s hands paused on my hips, aura flaring nervously before he slowly rocked my hips against
his again, pausing for my reaction before pulling me against him again. His lips leaving mine to
kiss down my neck again, each pressure sending shivers down my spine in unknown pleasures.

Gasping quietly my fingers found his hair, tugging on it gently I followed his movement, my skin
starting to feel feverish now as my heart hammered in my chest. Keith moaned softly against the
hollow of my throat, his nails digging into my skin his hips meet mine again. Tilting my head to
the side my breath hitched as I exposed my neck to him, my skin craving the touch of his lips.
Skimming his lips across my throat he paused, biting down experimentally on the side of my neck.
Gasping quietly my hips rolled automatically against his, fingers tugging at his locks. Smiling to
himself Keith continued to nibble up my neck.

Biting just under my earlobe one of his hands left my waist, hesitantly pushing up my shirt before
lightly tracing up my back. His fingers ghosting over the first of the scars on my back I flinched,
reflexively pushing myself away from him. He froze immediately, hot hand hovering over the
raised scar tissue, eyes finding mine.

“Too far?” he breathed, his heart hammering in his throat, breath uneven.
Biting my lip I averted his gaze, the path of his hand burning into my back. “Are they okay? I whispered, my hands starting to shake lightly as they gripped the tops of his broad shoulders. He paused, giving me a confused look before understanding.

“Of course they are.” his replied softly, his other hand leaving my hip to push my hair out of my eyes. Trying to coax me to look back at him.

Taking an unsteady breath I didn’t meet his gaze for a few beats, my heart thumping unevenly in my chest as a nervous chill frosted over my skin.

“Even this one?” my voice was barely audible as my hands slowly left his shoulders. Fingers trembling slightly I swallowed hard before pulling down the v-neck of his shirt, exposing the jagged scar that stretched unevenly across the skin of my sternum. Of all my scars, this one was the most painful. Forcibly reopened countless times my skin strained to close each time, the quintessence barely able to heal its constantly refreshed wound.

Keith’s eyes followed my hand, aura jumping in surprise as my fingers reached for my shirt before freezing. Eyes widening in surprise before his face softened.

“Even that one.” his voice was gentle but genuine, smiling at me endearingly before pushing against my back to arch it. Leaning down he gently kissed between my breasts, his soft lips pressing against the scarred flesh easily until he reached its base. Tenseing against his touch I squeezed my eyes shut, unsure what was happening. “I think you’re beautiful.” he breathed against my skin, hot breath fanning across my sternum and making me shiver again.

“And, I really like you.” he moved to rest his forehead against mine, looking at me directly now. My heart stuttered to a stop before kickstarting and hammered in my chest, heat washing over my skin again, pushing away any insecurities of deformed skin away and replacing it with a new craving for more.

“I really like you too.” I whispered, kissing him again. He kissed back, pressing his palm into my back again he traced upwards, pulling my closer with each inch. Curling my fingers into the fabric of his shirt I tried to entirely relax into his touch as his fingers ghosted over each new scar. Slowly but surely adjusting to the loving touch of of his rough hands.

Lips faulting against his a new nervousness made my heart skip before I slowly slid my hands down his chest. Fingertips dancing lightly over his shirt, his muscles contracted under my touch. Stopping just before where our hips were connected I leaned back just enough to shly kiss his neck like he had done to me. A low rumble sounded deep in Keith’s throat as he rolled his hips against mine roughly. The motion causing my breath to staggered against his neck, fingers curled in the fabric of his shirt as I kissed just above his adam's apple. His long digits dug into the skin of my hips in response as he grinded me against him again while I explored his neck.

“May I?”his voice was rugged as he pulled against the edges of my shirt. Nodding I leaned back enough to help him pull the shirt over my head. Glancing shyly I tried to ignore how hot and exposed my body was as Keith’s dark eyes wandered over my pale skin. Their depth deeping lustfully with each movement of his eyes. But i didn’t feel afraid, or on display like I had been with the druids. His eyes wandered over my body as if he were trying to memorize each curve, dip, and scar.

Biting my lip I glanced shyly back at him under hooded lashes, my hands uncertainty slipping under his shit and hovering over his tensed abs.

His aura spiked in radiance, its color becoming more vivid before calming down. A smile stretched
across his face as he quickly rucked the fabric up and over his shoulders and discarding it somewhere behind me.

Pausing we both gazed at each other now, breathing hard, heat pulsing from our skin as we took in our new circumstance.

My eyes instantly finding the discolored skin curling over his right shoulder. A thin scar standing out against his smooth skin. He had scars too, probably more than I could even see, but a small comfort eased my previous hesitation about showing him all of mine. He was a warrior just like I was, and he was strong, this scar was just a physical marking to show it.

Blinking I traced the edges of the healed wound with feather like touches. Keith let me explore it for a few beats before gently capturing my hand in his, kissing my palm once before placing my hand back on his chest.

Resting my hands on his bare chest, his heart thumped strongly under my touch. My skin becoming increasingly aware of his skin against mine. One of his hands pressed against my lower back while the other cupped my waist. Bodies pressed together in inexperienced ways but both parties enjoying the uncharted territories of exploration.

Keith was the first to move, leaning in to kiss me again, moving his mouth against mine he pulled me down onto of him, without breaking the connection, before rolling us over so that he hovered just above me. One arm resting over my head, supporting his weight as the other hands fingers trailed down my cheek, to my neck, over my collarbone and stopping just over my breast. Pausing, his aura spiked anxiously, his mouth faltering over mine as he tried to think of his next move. His fingers finally deciding to move and skim lightly over my smooth skin. The action making me shiver.

Slowly I traced my hands down his chest, dragging them along his hot skin. Letting my fingers explore the curves of his muscles. Keith groaned against my lips, pushing a knee between my legs as his full palm came down on my breast. Gasping I arched my back against his touch. My heart hammering in my chest, body burning I tried to control my breathing as he kissed hungrily down my neck, skimming his lips over my collarbone he squeezed my breast experimentally.

“Nhg.” a foreign, breathy, sound escaped my lips, as my nails dug into his back, trying to clutch him closer. His muscles automatically flexing under my touch he ground his knee between my legs harder as his hand squeezed my breast again. His lips trailed down my sternum in slow, hot kisses before ghosting over my other breast. Hesitating for a beat he drew in an unsteady breath before kissing my chest carefully, his lips moving uncertainty. Taking a staggered breath my head rolled backwards, eyes shut as I squirmed under his touch, trying to get closer to him. A new, burning craving for contact blazing through me.

Our energies ran over one another, tangling messily as they tried to fuse closer together. Dragging my hands down his back again I stopped just before his sweats and traced my palms back up his chest. His lips connecting with my nipple lightly.

Moaning quietly I arched my back into his touch, my nails digging into his skin as energy rippled over my skin. Energy pulsing from my hands and across his chest his body flinching as a small spark snapped between us

Freezing my eyes sprang open, the sensation of my energy flowing over my skin rushing back into focus as Keith’s intoxicating touch stopped momentarily.

“Did you just shock me?” Keith asked, his breathing labored he glanced at me curiously. His
response halfway between a laugh and disbelief.

“I- i’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to, i don’t know what happened.” I stammered, pulling my hands quickly back my chest.

“No, its okay. I just wasn’t expecting that,” Keith tried to reassure me, shaking his head, the tips of his hair tickling my face.

“I’m so sorry. Did i hurt you? I’m sorry.” I tried to control my breathing, it was coming in short fast bursts now as fear crept up my throat.

“You liked the pain?” I repeated, completely confused. Keith’s eyes slid back to mine before he nodded, brushing a few stray strands of hair from my flushed cheeks.

“But, who likes pain?” my heart was still pounding rapidly in my chest as I tried to understand.

“Uh, that’s also hard to explain.” Keith half laughed, his breathing slowing back to normal. Eyebrows pulling together I stared up at him in bewilderment. Breath still uneven my body was still hot to the touch, as my skin burned the memory of his hands into it. The aching pit in my stomach slowly starting to fade back into a dull burn.

“I-I don't understand.” I stammered, a wave of sudden overwhelming anxiety washing over me. Dousing the fire that danced over my skin.

“Umi?” Keith asked, picking up on my anxiousness as I shrunk back into the bed.

“I- i’ll be right back.” I stuttered, quickly and ungracefully moving out from under him. Keith shifted immediately, letting me move freely.

“Did I go too far?” he asked, his eyes full of worry and confusion as he sat up. Grabbing his shirt and clumsily pulling it over my head. I didn’t understand what was wrong with my body, it was too hot, my heart throbbing unevenly as an unfamiliar craving for things i didn’t understand threatened to consume me.

“No, I just-” I paused turned back to face him, my face still flushed, “I need to go ask Miume something. I’ll be right back.” I blurted out in a shaky voice before stumbling out of the room as quickly as possible.

“Umi!” Keith called out before the door slid closed.
Clutching the fabric around my chest I stood tensely outside of my door for a few beats. Heart thundering against my rib cage as my breath caught unsteadily in my throat.

Placing a hand on my head I started to pace in front of my door.

What was happening to me? What was this intense new feeling? Was this normal? Why did Keith like when I shocked him?

“Miume will know whats happening, right?!” I whispered to myself. Taking a steadying breath I pushed my energy outwards, feeling for Miume’s my feet shifted forward a step because quickly bolting down the hallway as silently as I could towards her rose energy. Skidding to a stop, I wrapped my hand on her door once before moving close enough for it to open.

“Miume!” I called, stepping in as the door slid open, my breathing irregular.

“What do you think Miume? This kind of victory pose?” Lance asked, flexing his arms over his head, “or this kind of-” he paused eyes looking upwards at the intrusion.

Miume and Lance sprawled out on a mass of tangled yarn covering the floor like a carpet in their pajamas. Lance’s head rested in Miume’s lap she gazed down at him with amusement and love, hand mid-stroke in his smooth hair. While Lance looked up at her with confident adoration, one leg cocked upwards as the other one was lost in the sea of yarn.

Miume’s red eyes sprang upwards, tails bristling in surprise at the sudden visitor. Her energy jumping nervously her body tensed as if to push Lance from her lap before she realized it was me. Her hands aura relaxing as the door revealed my face.

I had been so preoccupied by my own racing heart that I hadn’t even noticed Lance’s energy laced around Miume’s.

Clutching the fabric of my shirt I swallowed, opening my mouth to explain my sudden arrival but Miume was already pushing Lance from her lap, red eyes gleaming with understatement.

“Lance, i need you to wait outside for a few ticks.” Miume declared as she stood up and tugged a confused Lance up with her.

“But kittencakes!” he protested as she dragged him across the room. His feet pulling a tangled wad of yarn with him.

“Nope, just sit and wait like a good boy and maybe you’ll be rewarded later.” She purred, pushing him out the door completely while taking my wrist and pulling me the rest of the way into her yarn filled room.

“But Mium…” Lance called out before the door slid shut in his face, muffling the last of his
“Umi,” Miume cooed, placing her hands on my shoulders and gently pushing me down onto soft, yarn filled, floor.

“I-I’m sorry I can come back,” I stammered, my thoughts as tangled as the string beneath me.

“No, no it’s alright kitten. You need me.” Miume smiled as if she already understood what was going on, her tails swishing back and forth eagerly.

“How did you know?” I asked, looking at her with wide eyes.

Miume shrugged, rolling her eyes to the ceiling. “Just do.” she smiled to herself.

I swallowed, pulling my knees to my chest. They were still shaking slightly but not from anxiousness this time. I bit my lip, glancing down not sure where to start and suddenly feeling shy about asking Miume for help.

“I’m guessing something happened between you and Keith,” Miume purred, patting my head tenderly as she took a seat just in front of me. My face still burning while the places he had touched were still feverish. Their ghostly hands still skimming over my body.

“I don’t understand what’s happening to my body.” I paused, “for some reason I felt like you could help.”

Miume smiled every wider now. She knew it! Her training method had worked, and she had frustrated Keith enough to finally get the ball rolling.

“Well, how about we start by explaining a bit about what happened?” Miume proposed, her ears twitching curiously as her aura wandering over mine as if it were trying to collect more information about the situation at hand.

My face flushed hotter now as i tried to explain what happened, “U-Um...” I stammered. “I don’t know some of what we were doing. But there was lots of kissing. Kissing in places I’ve never been touched before.” pausing i let my voice trail off as the feeling of his lips on my chest made me squirm slightly.

“Did it feel nice?” Miume prompted, tilting her head to the side, tails swishing slowly.

I glanced away again before nodding shyly. “I liked it, but there were other things I didn’t understand. I-I wanted more?” my lips frowned as i tried to put everything into words.

“And that’s natural to feel.” Miume responded softly, patting my head again, “as long as it feels safe and you are enjoying it.”

I nodded slowly, looking back at her, “I was scared about my scars,” pausing again my cheeks flushed again, “but, he said i was beautiful-” my heart squeezed as i repeated what he had said to me.

“Of course not. They are nothing to be ashamed of, my kitten.” Miume crooned, her energy wrapped around me, trying to soothe its prickling waves.

“My body still feels hot.” I admitted quietly, “Is that normal too?”
“Mhm,” Miume hummed, “did you want him to continue?”

“Yes! For instance, did you want him to continue kissing you? Maybe your stomach felt like a spring was starting to coil in it?” she explained in almost a mothering tone but wore a mischievous smile.

Blushing again as the dull aching in my stomach came back to the forefront. Miume eyed the girl in front of her. It looked like she wanted more but was completely confused about what exactly it was that she wanted. Miume determined she’d have to remedy this and drop some… fun knowledge.

“Umi, do you feel like your body wants to be closer to Keith? In every aspect?” she asked leaning forward.

Pulling a ball of yarn into my hands i tried to distract myself from the feeling of his hot hands running over me. “I do, but I feel like I don’t understand exactly what that means.” I answered quietly.

Miume paused. She’s not getting it.. this might be harder than she thought. “For instance, do you want his hands to touch you? All of you?” she asked with her hands gesturing, trying to emphasise a point.

I swallowed, the feeling of his body pressed into mine consuming my brain. Miume’s ears twitched. Even though Umi didn’t know the exact terminology she got the basics of it.

“Maybe you’re body feels frustrated, like you couldn’t get close enough? All of that is normal! If you feel safe and like you want more, just tell him. He’ll understand.” Miume continued. “It’s completely natural to feel what you are feeling. Even if you can’t put it into words.”

“Miume,” I asked, looking her in the eyes now, “is there something that I should know exactly about this?”

Miume blinked. That was much more direct that she was expecting. She could almost see the gears of the girl in front of her turning, trying to piece together the missing information.

“There could be. However, all you really need to understand is that if you feel like you want to continue, you can. You don’t have to stop. It can be scary sometimes not knowing, but trust Keith won’t hurt you.” Miume offered. She wasn’t sure if Umi knew anything about sexual intercourse at all. When did Earthlings learn this information? Wasn’t she captured? Did Miume really have to explain this to her??

“What goes after just kissing?” I asked, hoping to fill in the gaps of feelings. I knew I yearned for more but I didn’t know of what just yet. I wanted to know what more I could be with Keith. What had Keith meant by more physical? Kissing was physical, but he wanted more?

Miume smiled a bit, glancing away and distracting herself idly with a piece of yarn. “Well, that’s usually what we would refer to as... sex.” she said slowly.

“And that is...?” I asked, feeling even more lost now as Miume continued to say new words.

“Ah… well,” Miume took a deep breath. Hopefully Keith wouldn’t come back to bite her for this one. But she had to tell Umi! She felt almost obligated to and wanted Umi to experience everything
wonderful in the world, including relationships and all the activities involved in romance. “When
two people… beings, I suppose, like-like each other very much, they engage in what is known as
sexual intercourse. It is usually considered the most intimate way to be with someone, however
sometimes we perform this act for fun because it is very pleasurable.” She tried to explain this in
the simplest terms she could so Umi could understand better.

“Intercourse?” I blinked, not recognizing the word.

Miume chuckled softly to herself before holding up her hands to demonstrate. “When you and
Keith were being intimate, you were like this.” she moved her hands so they were rest on top of
each other, “when you have sex it’s more like this.” she then slid her fingers together so that they
were interlocked. My eyes widened, face turning a new shade of red as the pieces slowly came
together. *There she goes, now she understands at least a bit more*, Miume thought to herself.

“So, it’s like just like holding hands but with the rest of the body?” I asked in an excited voice

Miume tried to suppress another giggle. *Okay, apparently she didn’t quite get it still*.

“Um, not quite.” she started, leaning back on her hands now, “It’s more like he will take his sex
organ, the penis, and slide into your sex organ, the vagina! Then there’s a lot of thrusting and
moaning and immense pleasure…” she let her voice trail off as she looked almost sheepishly up at
Umi.

My eyes widened, “He what?!” i exclaimed, my mouth dropping in shock.

Miume gave me a small smile and nodded, “That’s the basic definition of intercourse! I guess we
could say it’s a mutually agreed form of pleasurable penetration.” She grinned at me with a small
blush coloring her face.

I shook my head a bit trying to process these new words and concepts. “So… what does that all
really mean?”

Miume darted her eyes, trying to think of another way to describe this. She knew she was being too
analytical and biologic. She needed a new approach. “Okay, so let me try to break this down for
you. I’m going to try to not be too scientific, although your human anatomy is shockingly similar to
mine as I’ve found in my studies so I’ll try to teach you as if I would my sisters.” Miume started as
I leaned forward ready to listen.

“All right so we have something called a vagina, it’s the sex organ between our legs and when
you’re actively engaging in sexual acts, which include kissing, petting and stroking each other’s
bodies, holding hands, and moving your bodies against each other - called grinding if you will -
you’ll notice a sort of burning and anticipation build up between your legs and lower abdomen.
These sexual acts, things we do to each other and our partner stimulate that organ, and you’ll notice
it aches for something.”

Miume was gesturing as she explained to me, using her hands to point to her lower stomach and
and clenched her fist slowly to demonstrate. I simply nodded taking in the information. She
continued, “That aching is for physical touch, for something to touch it and stimulate it. But it’s
not just the vagina that’s important, there’s another little organ just above it that’s important called
the clitoris! Make sure that gets touched but just in the right way.” Miume began to ramble a bit but
when she saw my confused face she slowed down again and placed her hands into her lap.

“Sorry,” Miume laughed lightly, “Anyways, so you guys will be touching each other and
stimulating the areas that ‘burn’, such as your breasts, neck, butt, hips, back, chest, anywhere you
wish to be touched just let it happen as you feel the need for it. It’s a wonderful thing to be touched in such a way…” She looked dreamily to the side and smiled as if remembering something, her tails curled up involuntarily. “But you must reciprocate this touching as well! Your partner will want to feel these same things too, you know? So do what you feel is right and don’t forget to ask him what he likes! If he knows…” Miume snickered placing her clawed hand over her mouth to hide her grin.

Again I nodded taking it in, all this information making more sense. I recalled how feverish I felt as Keith’s hands glided over my body, touching my breasts and the way he kissed my body. It did feel wonderful. “So how do I know what he’ll like?” I asked. I wanted to make Keith feel good too.

“Oh! I mean, you could simply ask,” Miume answered me sitting up promptly. “Or you could have fun and just try things, like lightly brushing your nails over his chest and back, kissing his neck and sucking slightly to leave marks, those are great! I even like to nip and lick Lance…” she started then suddenly stopped and covered her mouth as her tails and ears stood up, completely embarrassed.

“You what?!” I exclaimed in surprise, watching Miume’s aura spike in shyness.

“Umm, just, like, fur-get that last part! I got carried away…” She blushed and looked down, holding herself and turning back and forth slightly. “B-but regardless! You just do what feels right. Sometimes you’ll find your hands traveling his body. Embrace this and think of it as trying to memorize his body, really feel them and commit to memory his muscles, chest… arms… abdomen… everything! You can appreciate them too! Trust me, these boys are heavenly.” Miume had a little gleam in her eye and smirked.

“Basically,” Miume carried on, leaning back a little with one of her arms and the other waved in front of her gesturing to me, “you’ll get to a point where everything feels wonderful, and you’ll want to touch each other in a more sexual way. So you ‘play’ with each other. You’ve seen each other naked yes? Well if you haven’t, and you didn’t know, boys have different anatomy! You’ll know he’s excited when his… umm… member?” her nose wrinkled at the word, “I’m just gonna say penis, is upright and hard, like it’ll feel more solid but this is good. You want to stroke that too and touch it, just play around because believe me he’ll like it.” She gestured some kind of pumping motions with her hands casually, “and long story short, you’ll notice you’ve become quite wet down there, and that’s exactly what we want! Because then you’ll want to take his hard penis and place it inside you. That’s what I was referring to with my hands here.” She placed her hands together again and interlocked the fingers.

I blinked, my face flushing an even bright red now. Never had I even imagined anything like this! Placing my hands on my face, I slowly tried to process. Did he really want to do that? Was that a natural thing to do and feel? Is that what the hardness was when i was sitting on him? My mind started to run in circles then Miume’s voice broke it.

“Yup, quite visceral of an image, huh? But trust me, once inside you, it is quite heavenly. In fact, he may finger you first, which is when his fingers go inside you first. This is all what we call foreplay and it is important to turn you on - that is get you ready and that coil building that burning started in your lower belly - for when he enters you.” She had her hands clapped together now in front of her and cocked her head to the side smiling.

Mouth agape, I blinked twice more. While i didn’t understand everything she was saying, things definitely made more sense now. “And after all that what happens?”

“Oh, well then you cum.” Miume responded plainly, then giggled and laid back on the floor. She rolled on her back and looked slightly to her side up at me. With half lidded eyes she dramatically
placed her arm across her chest and the other hovered over the area between her legs. “You’ll have him thrust into you over and over” she flicked her hand a few times over her groin, “and you want him to keep going until that fire here” she circled her lower abdomen now with that hand slowly, “Explodes!” she slid her hand down between her legs in a dramatic fashion, tossed her head back closing her eyes and emphasized the word. I gasped in shock.

“I explode?!” my voice hitched as unpleasantly gooey pictures flashed through my mind.

“No no kitten. Not actually. It’s just an expression.” Miume quickly backpedaled at my response.

Miume rolled over onto her stomach and propped herself up on her elbows with her tails swishing behind her coyly, “It’s not as scary as it looks or sounds. It’s an amazing feeling and it makes your whole world melt in pleasure. ” a knowing smile crept over her lips, ” You’ll love it. And he will too! I’m sure he’ll want to make you feel good. Speaking of which, all of this attention to you will definitely turn him on too and typically being inside you feels so good to him too so he’ll cum too and you’ll know it!” She held her head in her hands and winked at me.

“There are a host of other sexual acts you can do with him too,” Miume continued, “Just remember; if you feel like you want to keep going, then do so and go! If not, you stop. Everything you are feeling is completely normal and it is okay to act on and continue those feelings. Keith will understand and listen to you as well. The most important thing is consent and trust. This is an intimate act and it a method of conveying the feelings you have for each other through physical means.” Miume explained, patting me on the head before pausing, “Speaking of which, does Keith know you are here?” her red eyes slid down my frame, eyeing my clothes.

Gasping i bolted to my feet, i had been so consumed in what Miume was telling me that i had forgotten that i had run out of the room in the first place. “I left him waiting.” I said, my voice was flustered again as i quickly looked from the door and back to Miume.

Miume paused before she burst out laughing, “You left him in the room alone!! That’s hysterical!” Oh poor Keith , she thought to herself amused, he must be so confused right now. “Well what’re you waiting for? Go on, go talk to him, or continue where you left off.” she managed to say in between laughter, making a shooing motion at me as i frantically tried to decide what to do.

Nodding i gave Miume a small smile my heart fluttering in a new way this time, “Thank you, I think I understand a bit more.” taking a calming breath i turned and walked out of the room quickly.

Miume watched as she got herself up, tails swishing happily. She sighed, her little Umi was growing up!

“Am i allowed to come in now?” Lance asked, poking his head through the door Umi bolted out of and giving her large sad eyes.

“I suppose you can, meow.” Miume chuckled, patting the yarn filled floor beside her again. His face lit up immediately as he bounded back into the room, sliding back into his previous position and demanding her attention. “You were a very good boy waiting so patiently out there” she mewed leaning down to kiss him.
Keith sat on Umi’s bed, hand against his head. “Oh god, what have i done.” he whispered in horror to himself for what seemed like the thousandth time.

“Did i scare her? Did I go too far?” his legs started tapping anxiously again, “was it bad? She said she liked it. Oh god what could she be talking to Miume about. Is she okay?” Keith’s mind wheeled around and around as he waited anxiously for her to come back. Was she even coming back? Maybe he scared her so much she didn’t even want to come back to her own room. Should he go back to his room? What if he left and she came back and felt rejected by his absence?

Groaning Keith fell back heavily onto the bed, covering his face with his arm. “What happened.” he sighed to himself again.

“Keith.” i called breathlessly, rushing back into my room. Keith bolted upright immediately, his eyes wide, aura spiking nervously.

“Umi!” Keith started, standing up quickly, “i’m so sorry i went too far. I didn’t mean to scare you.” he started fumbling for words, his aura fluttering anxiously around us as he ran a hand through his messy hair like he did when he was nervous, one hand held out as if trying to explain something.

I paused, tilting my head to the side, “but i wasn’t afraid.”

Keith stopped, giving me a confused look, “you weren’t?” he asked

Shaking my head i shyly took the final steps towards him, his muscles tensed nervously as i approached. “Then why did you suddenly need to see Miume?”

I paused, a blush dusting my cheeks as i glanced away. “I-I didn’t understand what i was feeling. This is all new to me and i got confused” i explained quietly, “but Miume told me it was natural and that i should keep acting on these feelings.” glanced up at him i bit my lip nervously.

Keith sighed loudly, his arms pulling me into him his aura relaxed around him, nearly dropping to the floor in relief. “Well i could have told you that.” he mumbled into my hair.

Pausing, his body tensing aura moving in uncertainty , “does this mean you wanted to continue?” he asked after a moment of silent.

“You mean sex?” i asked, moving so that i could look up at him.

Keith made a choking noise, one of his hands leaving my back to cover his face. “Oh god what did she tell you.” he asked, his voice full of mock horror.

I looked at him curiously, not understanding his reaction, “she just said if i felt like i wanted more, to do more.” i tried to clarify.

He sighed again, pulling my head against his chest. “If you want more i will gladly give you more. But there’s no rush really.”his voice seemed to struggle slightly at the end as his aura danced around us.

“Do you want it also?” i asked, listening to his heart at is started to race in his chest. Aura jumping it flared outwards before he cleared his throat.

“Of course, but not until you do. We can try a few other things before getting to that.” he tried to sound more calm that his aura showed.

“Other things?” i echoed.
“Maybe another night?” he breathed, resting his chin on top of my head, “i think Miume sucked the energy right out of me.” his arms relaxed around me but still holding me against him.

I blinked, still confused from his reaction but nodded into his chest. He let out another long sigh, “do you want to get back in bed?”

Nodding i let him pull me back towards the bed, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, i just got worked up after you left.” he said, pulling me into his chest again and breathing in deeply.

“Sorry for worrying you.” i murmured into his chest, slipping my arm under his and wiggling closer to him.

Keith shook his head against the top of mine gently. One of his hands skimming down my arm until it cupped the back of my thigh and pulling on it carefully, silently asking if it was okay. Nuzzling closer to him i relaxed my thigh against his hand, letting him move it up and over his hip before sliding his hand back over my waist. Sighing contently this time his muscles started to relax.

“Can we just stay like this for awhile?” he whispered, his aura wrapping around us, pulling mine towards his.

Curling my fingers around the fabric of his shirt i pulled myself closer to him, my leg flexing over his hips to connect us closer. Just being close to him like this was more than enough. The aching in my stomach dulling as my body relaxed against his. I nodded into his chest, feeling my previous confusion washing away as his energy curled around me. The steady strum of his heart pulsing with his energy, pushing away any uncertainty or anxiousness. Sighing happily i nuzzled my head against his chest, feeling completely at ease.

“Sleep well.” he murmured against my hair, kissing the top of my head.

“Sleep well.” i hummed back, closing my eyes.
“Alright guys, we have some important things to discuss this morning.” Shiro started as we sat down for breakfast.

“You mean about the other anti-Zarkon group?” Pidge inferred, sitting down next to him.

It was only yesterday that we had gotten the information about a group of anti-Zarkon rebels on the haunted planet. Hovering just outside the dark planet’s atmosphere, I could hardly sleep with their bloodthirsty energies looming beneath us. The entire planet seemed to vanish into the darkness of space, the eclipsed sun losing its thin sliver of light that ringed around its edge. Its entire energy shifted, losing its nearly invisible grey-scaled presence and morphed into a bloody shade of deep red. A ghoulish howl echoed towards us as its once silent cover transformed into a shrieking wind of territorial fierceness.

I had hardly been able to sleep with its daunting aura wafting towards us. It was like a dark storm cloud, slowly swirling outwards and consuming everything in its menacing presence. I couldn’t help but push a barrier around the castle, my energy nervously prickling around me until Allura assured me that we were far enough away, and that the castle’s defenses would activate if anything drew close.

Even though it was morning, barely had any light illuminated from the eclipsing sun. Yet it was still far better than the empty hole of blackness we floated in the night before. The planet's energy shifted back to its entirely silent composure. If the anti-Zarkon group could survive on such a terrifying planet, they had to be strong. Or at least very good at hiding and concealing their presence during the night. This could make them great allies in the fight for the universe.

Shiro nodded, his cool gaze falling on me and making me shrink back into my chair. “They agreed to join our cause, but in return, we must never return to that planet unless it’s for emergency purposes.”

“They agreed to join our cause, but in return, we must never return to that planet unless it’s for emergency purposes.”

“We are banned from a planet?” Lance asked in almost disbelief, mouth half full as he stared at Shiro.

“I’m sorry.” I whispered, looking down and squeezing the long fabric of my sleeves.

“Not so much banned, per se. But if we go back and they get a whiff of Umi’s blood, it’ll be trouble.” Shiro clarified, sighing heavily, “Let’s make sure to listen to all instructions next time.”

I nodded, keeping my head down and my eyes on my lap. Keith gave my knee a squeeze under the table, offering me a small smile but I sighed quietly while pushing my bowl away. I had lost my appetite.

“But we have another group! That’s three now, correct?” Allura broke the awkward tension
hanging around us.

“Yes, maybe more if the other two groups from the rave planet found the other allies they mentioned,” Shiro responded, “The group we found yesterday also mentioned hearing about a few others not far from this planet.”

Taking a bit of food he relaxed back into his chair before the castle alarms burst to life, its jarring ring jerking us from our conversation as red lights flooded the room.

Bolting up from my chair, I whipped my head around quickly to look for a possible attack. My heart jumped into my throat as the blaring sound rang painfully in my ears.

Keith stood tensely next to me, one hand resting on the hilt of the knife belted to his hips. Dark eyes quickly scanned the room as Allura threw her hand forward, activating the castle’s hologram screens to look for intruders.

“What?!” Hunk exclaimed, dropping his green goo in shock.

“Shiro! Come in, Shiro!” A crackled voice broke in and out around us before Absol’s pale blue face flicked to life on the monitor. The image was blurred, distorted lines running across his face as his mouth moved but no sound was heard. Only harsh static feedback with intervals of what sounded like explosions firing in the background was recognizable.

“What?!” Absol tried to explain, his voice raspy and out of breath. His words came in unsteady patches. The background noise of drilled shooting and yelling in various alien languages filling the gaps in speech.

“What?!” Lance blurted out in shock, quickly shifting to his feet. His eyes were wide as he gazed up at our ally.

“What’s going on?” Shiro asked in a calmer, but authoritative voice.

“I will send you location. Please hurry.” Absol responded before his image vanished and was replaced with a blinking red dot a few galaxies away.

“We are being ambushed. Zarkon has fleets coming, trying to demolish anti-Zarkon groups. Camuel and I came to a planet to meet with another group but were found out.” Absol tried to explain, his voice raspy and out of breath. His words came in unsteady patches. The background noise of drilled shooting and yelling in various alien languages filling the gaps in speech.

“What?!” Lance blurted out in shock, quickly shifting to his feet. His eyes were wide as he gazed up at our ally.

“Where are you?” Shiro asked in a calmer, but authoritative voice.

“I will send you location. Please hurry.” Absol responded before his image vanished and was replaced with a blinking red dot a few galaxies away.

“Paladins, get to your lions. Allura, get us ready to jump.” Shiro commanded, pushing his chair back and spreading his large hands over the cold table. “Miume, get your team ready to provide medical support. Umi, you go with them and give barrier support on the ground.”

Miume nodded, standing up and looking at me. Her aura curled around her closely, void of all emotions.

“Allura, land the castle with the particle barrier up so that we can give them some cover until Umi can create a solid barrier then offer group support if needed.” Miume instructed while typing away at her pawport.

“Roger.” Allura confirmed as she and Coran jogged to the main control room.

“Umi, come with me.” Miume called, waving her hand as Kara appeared at the door next to her.

“Good luck.” Keith murmured, squeezing my hand once before bolting out of the room with the
rest of the Paladins.

Nodding, I quickly made my way over to Miume who was already rattling orders in a calm voice. A hologram bubble floating above her screen as she talked into it, the voices from her teammates responding in time with her through it.

“Umi, grab your suit and meet me at the castle entrance.” Miume directed, shooting me a quick glance as she and Kara bolted down the adjacent hallway.

Nodding, I turned on my heel, sprinting down the hallway towards my room. Barely waiting for the door to slide open completely, I grabbed the smooth white helmet on the shelf. Reaching for the chest plate, I paused as Allura’s voice rung through the intercom. We were close to jumping. I didn’t have time to fuss with putting on the space suit. Giving it a hard look, I tucked the helmet under my arm before cutting back out into the hallway.

“Ready to jump in three, two,” Allura’s voice started counting down as Miume and I positioned ourselves at the castle's entrance with the rest of her team.

My heart started to beat faster as Allura opened the wormhole. Bracing myself against the wave of powerful crystal energy, we warped instantly to the coordinates Absol had given us.

“Kara, you’re setting up tents and equipment.” Oli started as he fit a small white ear piece into his ear. “Tug and I will take left. Miume you and other girl take right.” Miume glanced at me, and I nodded in understanding.

“A little exciting, yes?” Oli mused to me, an emotionless smirk tugging on his thin lips.

“It is battle. Naturally has excitement,” Kara looked unamused as her long tail slithered on the ground in anticipation. Tug only breathed heavily in slow, even patterns, their auras moving with practiced control. Neither excited, nor overly fearful. Just a controlled neutral formation of tensed anticipation for the battle to come.

Fitting my helmet over my head Miume held up her pawport to it. She pressed a few buttons and waited for my helmet to sync with their ear pieces.

“Testing.” Miume’s voice came through the helmet instantly.

“Loud and clear.” Shiro affirmed. A small icon appeared in the right corner of my visor to indicate a connection.

“Pidge, when we exit I’ll need a status report on what’s happening in the air. Red Eyes will focus on the ground.” Miume instructed while zipping her pawport securely into her lab coat.

“Roger.” Pidge responded, another light blinking on my visor in a different color.

Taking a steadying breath, I tried to relax my tense energy. The combination of auras around me made my own start to prickle in anticipation. Would Zarkon be there? What if he found me? Or Haggar? What kind of battle will it be?

Shaking my head, I flexed my hands over the cool material of my knives. I let my eyes wander to the group around me. I needed to know what they would bring to the fight. While I had seen Miume’s two other two teammates in passing, I had yet to actually meet them or get a solid read on their auras.

The larger of the two aliens next to us nodded in acknowledgement to Oli’s orders. A small growl
rumbled in the back of his throat as he rolled his four muscular arms in anticipation. Smooth tan skin mixed with a deep red undertone seemed to absorb the light above us. Folding two of his four arms across his broad chest he widened his stance, standing like a mountain with powerful haunched legs. Thin, red slit eyes that slanted upwards across his bare head gazed coolly back at me. A calm, yet underlying dangerous aura wafted off of him.

Dressed in a fitted white, sleeveless shirt with a thick black collar, his presence would have been dismissive if it weren't for his sheer size. Inky rubber gloves ran up his muscular arms just before the tops of his shoulders. Airy dirt colored cargo pants tucked into sturdy combat boots stopped just before where his knees bent backwards. A black belt cinched into place at his waist with various small bottles dangling from it as a larger black satchel strapped across his back. Mouth set into an unreadable line, a white earpiece was cuffed to the side of his earless head. A black wristlet like the one Miume wore wrapped around one of his massive wrists.

The smaller green skinned alien lazily leaned on the wall next to Tug. His wavey magenta hair and acorn horns barely reached Tug’s elbows. One shiny black military boot rested on the wall behind him, arms crossed tightly over his gold pendant pinned chest. A pale green overshirt fitted across his small frame as matching flowing pants tucked neatly into his knee high boots. Billowing orange sleeves disappeared into elbow length black gloves that knotted through his middle finger as matching tangerine fabrics draped behind him. Eyes closed, his mossy green aura curled around him in slow, almost cyclical motions.

Tilting my head to the side, I studied Oli curiously. The soft rhythmic ticking of gears clinked from his form. From what I had seen, his motions were more mechanical than Miume’s. His aura was almost restricted; free flowing in some ways, but withdrawn in others.

“Red Eyes, we are descending. Prepare yourself.” Allura called out, breaking me from my trance and drawing my attention back to the mission at hand.

“Brace yourselves.” Miume responded, her aura tightening around her and becoming nearly silent. Barely moving around her, its usual bubbly demeanor pulled back into its more cool professional form. Turning slowly, the five of us faced the door.

“Particle barrier up,” Allura informed us as a rush of rocket boosters filled the foyer of the castle. The floor trembled lightly under our feet as Allura carefully brought us down. A final rumble indicated that we had landed and a new surge of practiced control washed over me as I took a final deep breath, preparing myself for battle.

“Main entrance opening,” Allura called through the speakers.

“Get ready, team.” Miume’s voice was calm as the castle’s main door cracked open. A low rumble came from Tug’s direction as Kara’s long tail slid across the floor twice, almost as if it were counting down the ticks until the door was finally open.

Grey light immediately flooded our vision as the castle doors slid open. A wave of ashy dust rushed past us into the hanger. Pulling a hand up to shield against the sharp rays cutting through the settling debris, we quickly jogged down the castle’s ramp. The thundering sound of chaos grew louder with each step. The translucent plates of the particle barrier blurred the outside world, shielding us from its war broken environment.

As my boot came down on the hard ground, my entire body froze into place. Muscles iced over as my heart stopped painfully in my chest. Blood running cold, an overwhelming intense wave of emotion crashed against me. A tidal wave of fear, death, and rage swallowed me like an avalanche. A chill breaking over my skin, I started to tremble. Completely petrified into place.
Bodies littered the crater punctured planet. Dismembered limbs scattered across the blood stained ground, mixing with the shambles of broken sentries. Their figures were distorted by the wavering lines of the particle barrier before me. Disembodied screams faded into muddied, underwater cries before a searing high pitched white noise rang loudly in my ears. Its sound pierced through my skull until all I could hear was the deafening frequency.

Smaller fighters screamed up and down through the planet's atmosphere, their lasers drilling into the hard ground and leaving a ricochet of explosions in their wake. Residual tremors quaked through the ground beneath our feet. Loose rock broke free and tumbled in every direction as their bullets pounded against the blue translucent particle barrier of the castle like a downpour of rain. Sentries swarmed the ground like a siege of ocean waves, coating it in a layer of chaotic firing.

“Umi!” Miume’s voice floated towards me, “Umi!” she yelled again, clamping her hands down on my shoulders and shocking me back to reality.

Gasping, air rushed back into my lungs, my eyes snapping to her red ones. Blood pounded through my veins as I choked for air. The crushing weight of surging emotions swallowed my own energy until all I could feel was their chaotic mix of feelings. The deafening sounds around us rushed forward, their intensity pounding against my skin, making my bones vibrate.

“Umi! I need you with me right now.” Her voice came back into focus as my attention honed in on the feline humanoid in front of me. Her eyes were cool and determined, nails digging lightly into the tops of my shoulders as she stared at me with a well composed face. Her aura swirled around her in practiced, calm movements.

“I need you to focus. We need your barriers in order to help people.” Her voice became clearer the more she talked, grounding me back into my senses.

“Protect people,” I murmured to myself. Visions of the Zarkon arena flashed through my head. Blood stained rock stretched out in front of me as foreign blood soaked my clothes. Energy-less bodies were strewn before me like discarded tools. This was like nothing I hadn’t seen before.

“Yes, protect people.” Miume squeezed my shoulders again while shaking me lightly. Slowly my eyes slid beyond Miume’s face and towards the open area of chaos. The familiar scene of battle and instinct to survive began to settle throughout me. Shoulders relaxing under Miume’s hands, I refocused on her face, my eyes hardening with acceptance. This was a mission. I needed to protect them.

Miume studied me carefully, red eyes reading my expressions and subtle movements before removing her hands from my shoulders. Slipping my knives into my hands I squeezed them, my body composing into a stilled state as my brain prepared for combat.

“Ready?” she asked, still eyeing me. Then, she softened for just a tick, “You can do this, Umi.”

My eyes drifted back to hers and I nodded once. An icy calmness washed over me as I focused. Closing my eyes, I relaxed my hands around my knives, and took a final deep breath before pushing a barrier outwards. Breaking past Aria castle’s particle barrier, I stretched it as far as I could, waiting for the indicative strain of tension that I had reached my limit to open my eyes.

Miume nodded at me before turning back to the war zone in front of us. “Allura, we are ready to go.” she relayed, touching the white clip on her ear briefly.

“Understood. We’ll use the castle’s defenses to take out incoming fighters. Voltron, you take out
the larger ion ships.” Allura instructed. She opened a small section in the barrier for us to pass through as a flurry of rogers filtered past my helmet as we all determined our roles.

Turning her attention back to me, Miume gazed at me with cool eyes. We stood just outside the castle’s protection. Ripples traced over the curve of my barrier as the sentries who had been blocked out previously now fired against it.

“Umi, can you tell which people are alive and which aren’t?” she asked in a matter of fact tone, drawing my attention back to her. Her reserved and controlled demeanor had returned once more.

Blinking in surprise from her question, I flicked my eyes outwards, scanning the war ridden terrain in front of us. The clashing energies of different species of aliens ran rampant in all directions, scattering across the rocky surface. The ones closest to us paused for a beat in confusion as a nearly invisible layer of pink purple energy bubbled over them. Their weapons lowered just a degree until they realized that the advancing sentries were locked out and they now had to focus on the ones that were inside the barrier. Masses of bodies covered the ground, some completely intact while others were scattered across the space. Discarded and lost weapons laid like unmarked graves as bullets continued to berate the open air.

Letting the sound fade around me, I submerged myself into the astral world. A sea of tangled energies opened up in front of my vision. Vines of multicolored auras waved back and forth like kelp caught in the tide. Some auras were fiery and alive, while others barely held on. A majority of the bodies around us barely had any energy, Their colors dulled and fading, scarcely clinging to their physical form.

“That one,” Pointing towards the nearest live energy, a larger red alien laid on the ground before us. My feet automatically started towards it, waiting for Miume to follow and give her next orders.

Bullets continuously ricocheted off my barrier from all directions. Ripples from their impact scattered across its dome while streaks of blue lasers zipped overhead. Explosions illuminated the smoke stacks of already downed fighters. Their residual forces shook the ground.

“Perfect. Tug, Oli go to the left and help as many as you can. Kara, set up base.” Miume instructed, waving her hand at the focused aliens who nodded in agreement before they jogged off in the opposite direction. They knelt down in front of the first body, expertly attending them before quickly moving towards the next. Kara swiftly turned and assessed the area closest to the particle barrier for the flattest ground.

As we approached the red alien, I noticed his aura reeked of fear. Its large blood stained clawed hand applied pressure to a bleeding wound in its chest. Ripped armor from his opposite arm created a makeshift tourniquet knotted around his heavily bleeding upper thigh. His sharp blue eyes hardened as we neared, his other hand twitching to the weapon laying by his side.

“My name is Doctor Miume Maolatte. I am a medic of Voltron here to help,” Miume stepped forward and kneeled down next to the alien. A hologram screen appeared over her wristlet as it quickly scanned his large body taking his vitals. “I need you to show me the wound on your chest. The tourniquet you applied will suffice until we get you back to base camp.” Miume spoke calmly to her patient while pulling on a pair of pink gloves.

“Voltron, huh, glad to know it’s actually real.” The red alien laughed ruggedly under his breath before groaning in pain as he removed a large hand from his chest. A gaping hole torn through and through the right pectoral muscle was revealed. Seared flesh bubbled around the impact zone before burning the internal structures. Charred flesh dripped down the wound as black blood pooled on the already soaked ground. With each labored breath the cut bone of his ribs expanded
and contracted painfully. My stomach lurched at the gorey sight before I quickly flicked my gaze away and scanned the area for approaching sentries. Squeezing the cool metal of my knives my stomach settled. I had seen blood and dismembered bodies before. This was nothing I couldn’t handle.

“Umi,” Miume brought my attention back to her as she pushed white gauze carefully into the wound, waiting for it to expand to fill the space before packing it securely, “I need you to help me carry him back.” The patient glanced up at me as I lowered myself next to him. Pulling his uninjured arm up and over my shoulder, I hoisted him upwards, supporting his weight as his limp leg was useless.

“I will take him. You care for the next person to your left.” I nodded to the next body that laid motionless a few yards away. Miume paused, her hand half supporting his weight before letting go and testing to make sure I could actually carry it.

She blinked and and raised her eyebrows as if mildly surprised, “Hmm, I supposed you’re far stronger than you appear. Of course, I’ve always believed that about you. Good then. This will make the division of labor much easier on us. Deliver him to Kara at the large white tent then come right back.” Her tone returned to its more analytical side as she turned on her heel and briskly strode to the wounded being I directed her to.

I nodded. Taking a deep breath, I shifted the barely conscious alien further over my shoulders before jogging back towards Kara, half dragging, half carrying, him behind me. His energy was fading quickly, but still desperately clung to its physical form. He had probably lost too much blood, and needed Kara’s care immediately.

Kara looked up as I approached. She flicked a small capsule onto the ground and suddenly a white cloth material sprung to life before slowly starting to expand. Taking a step forward, I moved to lay the alien down on it but Kara stopped me.

Holding a hand up, she silently gestured me to stop. Pulling out a thin silver device, she aimed a red dot on the ground. A narrow laser burned through the rock easily, and quickly cut a long strip out just before the medical tents she had set up behind an upturned section of rock.

Walking on the newly carved line, she tossed a few white capsules into the broken earth like seeds. Semi-transparent purple shields sprang to life from its crack. Curling inwards slightly, they created a fence between medical base camp and war.

“Set there.” She pointed at the white cloth on the ground before flicking more capsules in a neat row next to the first sheet. Each one popped open to reveal a smaller item before it slowly started to expand into a different shape. Some were sheets like the first. Others contained towels, gauze, and smaller pieces of various medical equipment.

Nodding, I carefully set the alien down before jogging back towards Miume. Her white coat stood out easily against the dark environment. She was kneeling down in front of another alien wrapping something around it meticulously.

The once overwhelming energies around me had faded into muted colors; their screams of emotion dulling into the background. The only thing I was continuously aware of was the barrier around us. The constant song of explosions as hundreds of impacts pounded against my barrier were barely audible now as I consumed myself in finding the next energies to protect.

“Alright, they’re good to be taken to camp. Go towards the white tent, please.” Miume instructed in an authoritative voice as a blue-grey alien hoisted their injured comrade over their shoulder and
nodded.

Without looking, she addressed me next, “Okay, Umi. Next one.” Her ears twitched in different directions, responding to the chaos of noises around us.

I nodded and surveyed the space around us. There were more bodies than I had initially seen. Piles that I had previously thought were upturned rocked were actually masses of bodies clumped together. Fallen comrades tried to cover the other in an attempt to protect them, while other forms were crumpling parts of smoking sentries. Quickly sweeping my eyes over the area, I skimmed past the energyless forms searching for beating auras, when a small flicker of red caught my attention.

“There.” Taking off towards the wavering energy, I felt Miume’s solid aura follow behind me. Picking my way through unsteady rock shards and loose ground, we finally made it to the only living energy in this next section. While searching through this debris, I was briefly aware of Oli and Tug making their way through the left half of the battle field. Other aliens were finishing off the last lines of sentries inside the barrier while others helped carry comrades towards the white medical tents.

Kneeling down to the next patient, I noticed this alien had more humanoid characteristics; a broad chest plated in black metallic material; muscular arms wrapped around their bleeding side; a strong jawline clenched tight with jugular veins popped in strain as moppy black locks matted to their face. Their deep maroon energy, even though it was fading, had a strong, determined presence to it, relentlessly digging into its physical body and refusing to be released into the blood coated air.

My heart skipped. Their features reminded me of Keith’s. His face flashed through my mind. Swallowing hard, my eyes landed on the large shard of debris jutting out from their neck. Chest rising and falling in erratic movements a slurred gurgle wheezed from their blood stained lips with each struggled breath. An uncomfortable warm dampness coated over my knees as the spreading pool of blood beneath me soaked through my clothes. My eyes shifted focus to the massive abdominal wound they were trying to clutch together to prevent himself from falling apart.

“Umi, I need you to take this and apply pressure on the abdominal bleeding.” Miume drew my attention back to her, “I need to stop the bleeding near his trachea before he drowns in his own blood.” She had already discarded her previous gloves and was pulling on a new pair after tossing me a wad of white pads.

Nodding gravely, I glanced back down at the bleeding alien, trying to ignore the unsettling similarities between them and Keith and his red aura. Carefully removing their hands from the gaping side I paused, my stomach churning involuntarily. Nearly half of their torso was missing. Skin ripped brutally away from the bones, striated muscle clung to any purchase it could while tissue limply dangled from the broken ribs. Deformed internal structures twisted in unnatural positions as bubbles of blood rose with each breath, spilling over their gouged side and splashing against the deepening pool.

Setting my lips in a firm line, I focused on their faltering crimson energy tendrils. Laying the pads across the wound like I had seen Miume do before, I pressed my smaller hands against as much of the wound as I could, applying as much force as I dared. The white pads quickly stained red, becoming overly saturated with blood and spilled outwards. Coating my pale hands, I tried desperately to stop the bleeding. The warm sensation was all too familiar as it soaked through the long sleeves of my shirt, crawling upwards while the blood at my feet threatened to swallow me.

“Sir, can you hear me?” Miume called after scanning him with her Pawport, trying to get the alien’s attention, “I need to remove the shard of metal from your neck and stitch it closed before
you bleed into your lungs,” she tried to explain. “It’s going to hurt, but please try not to move.” She glanced at me again, “I’ve secured his airway as much as possible. Try to hold him down as best you can.”

Nodding, I shifted my position to secure his legs under mine while still keeping pressure on the continuously bleeding wound. Miume waited for me to settle in before giving me a final nod and applying pressure around the neck puncture to carefully removed the shard.

The alien gurgled a strained scream of pain, body going rigid and pushing against Miume’s hands, but she forced him back into place. Uneasily, I watched Miume work meticulously on her patient, hands steady as she smoothly pulled the chunk of debris out. Discarding it quickly, her other hand applied even pressure to the open wound while simultaneously grabbing the prepared materials in her satchel, cleansing the wound, then stitching the wound closed completely.

The alien gasped wildly, watery choking sounds gurgling in the back of their throat. Blood bubbling from their lips, they struggled to breathe. A sporadic seizure caused them to cough violently. Blood splattered across us but we remained unphased. Miume continued to work on stopping the bleeding for a few more beats before sighing heavily, her tails dropping.

The energy around his body quietly vanished. Blown out like a flame it was gone, wisping away with the next gust of wind and disappearing into the air. My heart stopped. Body rigid. The red energy was gone. Keith’s energy was gone. My breath hitched as Miume stood up, ready to move to the next patient. But I sat there frozen next to the still warm body, slowly taking my blood stained hands from the disemboweled abdomen and looking at them. Hot blood dripped from my visor and down to my chin. Red splatter coating my vision, my breath started to come in short, shallow bursts.

“Umi,” Miume said carefully. She stood over me as shock gripped my body.

My body started to tremble. Eyes frozen wide, all I could see was the blood on my hands as Keith’s warmth cooled rapidly around me before completely vanishing.

“Umi, we need to move. I know it’s traumatic to lose a patient, however there are more that we could save and need our help.” She tried to be as gentle as possible, but she was so hyper-focused that her voice was more monotone than she intended.

“It’s gone.” I whispered to myself, unable to peel my eyes from my red hands.

“What’s gone?”

“His energy.” Closing my hands into fists, I stopped my shaking. An overwhelming sense of rage burned into the pit of my stomach. It wasn’t right. He couldn’t be gone. Squeezing my eyes shut. “They are all gone.” I murmured to myself, anger consuming me now.

“That’s what happens during war.” Miume started walking before noticing I remained frighteningly still on the ground. “Umi?”

Clenching my teeth, the energies around me surged forward, my body automatically hyper-focusing on them as my eyes flew open. Screaming, I slammed my fists down into the blood soaked ground, splattering it over my clothes as my energy exploding outwards. Charging forward, it ripped through the solid ground that laid in its way.

Whipping my head towards the advancing sentries just outside my barrier, I bolted to my feet with knife in hand. Twisting around, I threw my knife. A small whistle cut through the air as it hurdled
towards its target. Breaking through my barrier, it plunged deep in the chest of the first sentry.

“Umi!” Miume shouted after me as I sprinted towards the edge of the barrier, knife in hand. The hair on her tails stood on end in concern as she watched me rush towards my enemies.

“Umi!” Keith’s muffled voice echoed through my helmet, he sounded far away and faded. Murmurs of other voices lurked in the background of Keith’s voice, but they faded back into the sound of my blood rushing through my veins.

Letting out a battle cry, I charged forward. Crashing through my shield, my hand connected with the hilt of the knife as I rammed my full weight into the sparking robot. Using the momentum of the fall, I quickly twisted the knife out and hurled it towards the next sentry, their targets locking onto me.

Slinging out a slew of knives, I created a bubble of an opening around me. Sweeping my leg in an arch, my foot collided roughly with another, as I continued my attack on the never ending flow of machines.

Taking a staggered breath I opened my hands, charging them with hot energy. Lightning snapped from my palms as I leapt forward, hands outstretched as I pounced powerfully on my next prey. Hands slamming onto either side of its mechanical head, I forced my energy inwards letting its power tear through the sentry. Shards of pink purple energy exploded around me. Metallic chunks skimmed past my skin but I didn’t feel it.

“You will stop.” I growled. Allowing the robotic energy of the sentry come into hyper focus, I linked the grounded sentries together. Thin lines connected them like prey trapped in a spider web. Energy coursed through my body while collecting into my palms. Nails dug deeply into the dead sentry as I yelled.

A powerful shockwave of energy ripped across the web of tied energies. Sparking like a live wire brilliant pink purple lightning exploded outwards. Shards of energy bursting through each sentry as electrical energy rampaged through their electronic systems, short circuiting the entire army to a dead stop. The advancing fire and steady march of metal feet became silent.

Breathing hard, I released the fried robot from my grip. Wiping the blood from my chin I stood tall feeling my energy course through me powerfully. Feet planted firmly on the ground, I set my eyes on my next target.

Slowly I raised my blood-coated hand, moving it upwards until it covered the ship directly above us. Static energy ran over my barrier as it curled outwards, sparking dangerously outwards as snaps of lightning lashed towards the invading ship. Swirling channels of pink purple wrapped around me like churning storm clouds as I willed the barrier further outwards.

“Everyone get away from the barrier edge!” Miume commanded, dragging another alien farther inward as electrical energy crackled through the air. “We don’t know what will happen if that barrier collapses!”

“She’s going to try and take out the ship!” Pidge cried out in horror. Her eyes shifting from her position in Voltron down to my location. The energy emitting from my barrier was so intense that the green lion picked up on it.

“Umi!” Keith desperately shouted, his voice penetrating my engrossed focus on the Zarkon ship directly above me. The electrical current around the barrier sputtered in response to his voice. My eyes drifting towards Voltron, hand still posed in front of the battleship.
“Umi, leave the ships to us. Focus on keeping your barrier up.” Keith tried to reason with me. My eyes slowly started to refocus on the physical world. “Listen to me. Leave it to us.” he tried again. With each word coming through my helmet, my heart started to slow. The ragefully charged energy calmed steadily. Familiar red tendrils brightened around my energy, wrapping around it securely and grounding me. He wasn’t gone. He was still alive.

Taking a staggered breath, I slowly moved my hand downwards. The threatening current around my barrier flickered out as his voice brought me back.

“Just focus on keeping your barrier up from the ship's cannons.” Shiro’s voice came next as they sliced through a smaller fleet ship. An eruption of explosions lighted up the dark sky in its wake.

Closing my hands into fists I nodded, turning my attention back to the main battle ship above us with a new calmness. Slipping into a defensive position, I flexed my hands before relaxing them into a familiar half raised hold.

A beat of eerie silence passed. Each team preparing their final moves. The grounded sentries were all destroyed. Sparking remnants littered the war destroyed planet. The Galra’s only move could come from above.

The silence was quickly shattered as a colossal blast exploded behind me. The shock shoved me forward but I quickly regained my footing as a mask of churning smoke swallowed my barrier. The surface beneath my feet rocked violently from the impact. I whipped around, eyes hardening as I took in the ambush.

Another battleship had appeared just behind Aria castle. Its ion cannon started charging for another deadly blast as the effects of the last one blew across the barriers. The particle barrier held, but could it withstand another direct hit?

Clenching my fists, I took a step forward before freezing and turning back to the charging energy gathering behind me. They were firing from all positions now. One cannon attacked Aria castle, which was also defending the medical base. Another rested just over me, ready to blast my barrier, while a third fired its thousands of lasers at Voltron who was trying to attack and evade at the same time. Another army of fighters emerged from the new battleship, swarming around Voltron and trying to thin their focus. Others bombarded my rippling barrier with an assault of bullets.

We were trapped.

“I will help direct where to make it stronger.” Absol’s stoney voice came from behind me. Flicking my eyes to the side, I acknowledged his presence before returning my focus to the mass of energy collecting in the cannons barrel. Absol gave me cautious look before standing next to me. A spear-like weapon stabbed the ground next to his feet with one large hand holding its staff in a firm grip.

“From the right.” He steadily directed. I shifted my hand slightly in response to his voice. I focused on thickening the barrier as a few fleets buzzed past, trying to break the barrier in a uniformed attack. Their bullets danced off of it easily.

“You need to take out the ion cannon before it fires,” Miume called into her head piece, glancing up at us from her position as she tightened a belt tourniquet around a dismembered alien.

“On it,” Lance responded in an airy voice, making Miume’s ears twitch one.

“The ion cannon is charging. Prepare yourself.” Absol murmured in a low voice, his body tensing. His energy pulled back into a defensive shield.
Refocusing on the larger ship I breathed in deeply, moving my hands in front of me. I slid my dominant foot forward, ready to brace against the impact. Pooling my energy directly in front of me, I strengthened the wall as the opposing sides of my barrier flickered in and out as they started to lose energy.

“More power.” I whispered to myself, trying to flex the edges of my barrier back into place as the main ship’s cannon started to light up.

“Everyone behind the barriers!” Miume commanded, throwing her hand backwards to indicate moving farther inwards before kneeling down next to another fallen soldier.

“We need to stop that stat.” Pidge’s voice wavered through my helmet.

“On it.” Shiro responded, his voice coming back into focus as he finished cutting through another line of fighter jets. “Hunk, shoulder cannon.”

“Roger!” Hunk called back, his pilot’s cabin lighting up.

Biting my lip, I formed thicker walls in front of us. My knees started to tremble as I pushed past the energy reserved my body had.

Voltron fired at the ion cannon at the same time it fired at us. Squeezing my eyes shut, I felt Absol press his hand into my back as we braced for impact.

“Come on!” Keith yelled, as their bullets connected with the ion cannon. A massive explosion detonated above us. Light erupted around us as shockwaves pulsed down and outwards. Wincing against the blinding light, Absol and I were forced backwards a few inches from the sheer power of the blast. Gritting my teeth, I forced myself forward, planting my foot deeper into the ground and trying to hold my place. Absol pressed his hand into my back more firmly, keeping us from sliding further.

Searing heat crashed over us, consuming us in a fiery vortex of chaos as hurricane winds ripped open the earth around my barrier. Crying out in pain, blisters started to bubble over my palms as I forced my hands forward. The blast melted the layers of energy, breaking my barrier apart by the seams as I strained to hold it together. The shell of pink purple energy starting to flicker in and out of focus as it took direct impact from the powerful blow.

Taking a staggered breath my knees buckled, hands lowering as the shockwaves mellowed out. Reaching up, I wiped the blood from my mouth with the back of my hand, taking labored breaths. The world started to blur out of focus as less intense waves of dust washed past us.

“Shiro! Second ship firing!” Allura cried out desperately.

“No,” Shiro breathed, his aura spiking in fear.

Looking up, the whole world slowed. Voltron rocketed towards the second battle ship. With its immense sword raised, Keith’s battle cry echoed in my ears as my eyes widened. The second ion cannon drew power inwards, a bubble of destruction concentrating into the center of its barrel as defensive lasers shot out in every direction trying to stop Voltron’s advance.

Heart stopping, the sound of blood rushing through my veins filled my ears before a deafening bomb exploded outwards. Voltron’s sword came down milliseconds after. The ship split in half as clouds of destruction covered the sky. Drawing in a sharp breath, I threw my hands upwards and across my face. Forcing a barrier outwards, it flexed open as far as I could stretch.
Rock exploded before us. The planet rocked in shockwaves as the cannon’s bullet detonated feet from the base of my barrier. Chaos erupted from the epicenter as the laser drilled deeper in the planet. Forcing everything out of its path, a fiery storm of molten rock and debris launched forward. A cyclone of twisting wind screamed upwards as deadly jaws of rock hurdling outwards.

My barrier shattered around us ticks after the initial impact. A tidal wave of surging destruction was immediately released. Crying out in pain, I was ripped from my spot. Absol’s body collided with mine roughly he wrapped his arms around me, taking most of the impact as we were thrown backwards.

Hitting the ground hard we skidded across the solid rock. Its sharp teeth bit into our skin as we rolled out of control before Absol slammed his staff downwards. His blade barely broke into the ground and jerked us to a painful stop, its stoney integrity cracking from strain. Shrieking wind lashed across our skin as rocks shattered dangerously in every direction. Herculean waves of heat crashed relentlessly forward. Its power threatened to tear Absol and me from our barely grounded position.

I was scarcely aware of a second explosion detonating behind us as an opposing colossal wave of wind whipped forward violently. Crashing against the wake thrashing towards us, the counter forces battled viciously against the other, neither able to overpower the invading force.

I could hear the cries of terror echo loudly from my helmet over the shrieking winds as Miume and her team braced for the dual impacts. Their energies screamed wildly, spiking without control in every direction in panicked horror, begging me for protection.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I tried to push a final barrier forward, but I had used too much energy. Weak flickers of pink purple tried to form into solid walls but were quickly broken apart as residual waves of energy pulsed around us. Drawing the last drops of energy, I strained to create some kind of shield for my comrades. But it was futile. There was no more energy to summon.
Aftermath (War Zone part 2)

Gradually the wind currents died down and the quaking ground resided to small tremors. The overpowering siege of destruction subsided into slowing tumbles of rock as their momentum was lost.

Coughing harshly, dust coated air drifted aimlessly as small particles of debris snowed downwards. Residual crashes of falling rock thundere somewhere in the distance as their unstable form gave way. The high pitched ring from before pierced my hearing as Absol rolled off of me. Taking rugged breaths, the familiar iron taste of blood filled my mouth. Red tinted my vision as my helmet flashed warning signs across the visor. Their alarms were overtaken by the white noise note ringing in my ears.

Dragging my arms backwards, I pushed myself shakily off the ground, still trying to get my bearings as the world trembled around me. A thick cloud of dust hung over us, blocking anything other than a few yards from view and making it hard to breath. The congested air coated my throat like a constricting collar.

Spitting the blood from my mouth, I forced my legs upwards and unsteadily got on my hands and knees. I hissed in pain as fresh blisters tore on the destroyed ground. My body became partially aware of the new bruises forming over my skin.

“Are you alright, girl.” Absol’s voice gradually came back into focus. His bloodied face appeared next to mine. A large hand was placed carefully over my back, while the other supported his injured side. Bullet beaten armor broke apart in places as burns grazed across his skin.

Blinking I nodded, pushing myself up into a sitting position. Muffled chatter echoed through my helmet as Miume’s team rapidly recollected themselves from the blast. The Paladins tried to reconnect with us on the ground but a harsh static disrupted their words.

“Do you require medical attention?” Absol’s hand patted by upper back lightly.

Shaking my head, I unsteadily got to my feet. The world tilted sideways as black tunnels holed my vision. My feet staggered a few times. I had to make sure Miume was alright. What about Keith? Voltron? Aria Castle?

Pulling my head backwards, I tried to find Voltron in the descending fog of dust. My heart skipped in relief as its massive structure stood solidly across from me. Its form rose above the settling ash of planet.

Breathing in again, I forced my feet forward. Mechanically I took wobbly step after wobbly step towards Miume’s energy. I could barely see the faint flickers of bubbly pink filtering through the settling dust. Its form fuzzed in and out of focus. Its color tinted red through my blood splattered visor.
My barrier had failed. What happened? Was she alright? What about the beings I was tasked with protecting? My mind was barely able to handle the thoughts trying to race through it. Pushing them down and away to the corners of my thoughts, my body slipped into familiar numbness. Blocking out the pain and distorted ringing voices. I just had to get back to the base.

Slowly I emerged from the dust into a new scene of controlled chaos. The purple shields Kara had planted earlier were cracked or missing. Tents ripped from their stakes as medical supplies scattered in a smooth arc where the particle barrier had been. Unearthed rock created unsteady walls as deep gashes forced longer routes of travel to the medial center. The pervious medical triage was now broken into smaller groups as less injured soldiers helped reposition their fallen comrades on anything that was remotely flat.

Agonised cries filtered in and out of focus as blood soaked bandages and blankets filled my blurring vision. Charred earth and blood filled my nose, but my body didn’t react to the deathly smells of decay.

It was my fault.

All this chaos was my fault. The energies laid out on the ground barely clinging to their physical forms as fading auras desperately wrapped around their owner. But so, so, so many bodies had no energy. Their life force wiped from existence. Masses of flesh stripped of life laid there motionless surrounded by grieving partners whose own energies could barely process the events that just happened.

My breath hitched uneasily as I moved farther into the swirling ocean of dying energies. My feet slid numbly forward.

“Umi!” I was vaguely aware of my voice being called. It sounded far away and distorted, as if I were deep underwater.

“Umi!” Recognizing the sound of Miume’s sharp voice, she broke through my daze for a tick, making me flinch.

“Are you hurt?” her voice faded in and out as she quickly flashed a light across my pupils. “You managed to cover most of the blast. There’s no need to worry. We are all fine,” she continued to talk in muted notes as she inspected my hands. She gently lifted them forward and exposing their lightly burned faces.

“Here. This will heal most of it.” She took a pouch from her dust coated medical jacket and carefully applied a thin layer of cream it to my raw palms. The soft sting of pain caused me to flinch again but Miume held my wrist tightly, finishing her work quickly. “Besides the exhaustion I assume you are experiencing, for the most part you appear okay. Now, go rest somewhere. Doctor’s orders.” I barely heard her voice before she dashed off towards the next more urgent patient.

A delayed nod bobbed up and down as I refocused on my drying hands.

Slowly, I turned towards the castle. All thoughts leaving my mind, I walked blindly forward until my knees collapsed beneath me. Slamming into the hard ground, I barely registered the twang of pain as I slumped forwards against an upturned rock.

Somehow I pulled my knees to my chest, tucking myself away against the cold, uneven surface of the rock. The world blurred entirely out of focus. The commanding shouts from Miume and her team faded into nothing but a soft buzz.
"No!" Keith cried in desperation as the planet burst apart beneath them. Voltron’s blade had sliced through the middle of the cannon halfway through its firing sequence. It lessened the blow, but couldn’t completely stop the ion blast from striking the ground. The cannon’s shaft dipped downwards at the sword’s impact just enough to deter the main blast from hitting Umi’s barrier. However, the blast was still powerful enough to sink far into the planet’s core, forcing everything in its path outwards and creating a chaotic storm of debris.

The first blast concealed the castle in a thick smokescreen obscuring it from Keith’s view completely. A bright stream of blue light had cut through the atmosphere ticks before the second ships ion cannon blasted. Aria castle’s ion laser sliced through the Galra ship after its detonation, their blasts firing simultaneously at each other. The Galra’s powerful blast collided against the castle’s particle barrier with vibrating force. Shock waves of residual energy bursted in every direction. Swells of chaotic wind and dust swarmed violently together from the opposing forces before rocketing upwards into a twisting tornado of debris. Keith’s eyes widened in horror as unearthed ground consumed the planet below and a fiery wall of energy erupted from the core impact. Violent waves of wind, rocks, and other material hurled outwards blocking all sight as he tried to get a closer visual on the planet’s surface.

“Did we stop it?” Pidge spoke first, her eyes searching the hologram screens as they waited for the dust to settle. The tip of an unprotected castle broke through the smog as it slowly drifted away.

“I think it hit the ground, not the barrier.” Lance tried to confirm. He strained his eyes to see, but couldn’t stop himself from looking for Miume first.

Silent beats of tension passed as the Paladins tried to get a birds eye view of the situation. Keith’s heart pounded painfully in his throat. His palms started to sweat as he gripped his controls.

“There!” Hunk cried in relief, bringing up an image of a battered looking Umi and Absol yards from where the blast had detonated. Then picture of the havoc wreaked medical base camp came into view. Supplies were strewn everywhere and covered in dust, large gashes ripped through the planet in rippled patterns. Its force tearing through the medical camp with less destruction that one would have imaged. Medial tents torn apart, some torn from their stakes, while others barely clung to their posts.

“Thank gosh.” Pidge breathed out a held breath and hung her head in relief.

“Come on, we need to get down there and assess the situation.” Shiro determined in a calm voice.

“Roger.” Keith murmured to himself. His hands barely relaxed around the throttles of his lion as he watched Umi stagger to her feet. The image was blurred and distorted from the passing rolls of dust, but he could just make out her wiping the blood from her mouth.

Landing just outside the impact zone, Voltron waited for the dust to settle before disbanding. Keith quickly exited his lion and ran towards the medical camp. Lance was on his heels as Shiro motioned to Hunk and Pidge to help Absol.

Keith’s feet barely faltered as he entered the medical camp while Lance came to a sudden stop, a horrified gasp leaving his lips as he took in the heart wrenching scene in front of them. Blood reeked in the air as injured allies tried to tend to their wounds. In a word it was terrifying. This was their first real taste of what war really was. A brutal icy shock of sickening reality pierced through him.
Too many bodies lined in rows with blood stained sheets covering their forms laid beside him. An uncountable amount of mangled bodies laid uncovered and exposed to the elements. Nauseating gashes, lesions, and ruptures of bodies rested unattended. The supplies were limited and running short. Aliens who could withstand their wounds for longer periods of time were assessed and quickly moved past; the medical attention and supplies needed use on the more life threatening and urgent patients. While those with too severe of injuries were moved to a separate quadrant of the camp, their comrades accompanying them and trying to ease their pain as they breathed their limited breaths.

Agonized groans of pain slipped into desperate choking before falling silent. Soft murmurs of prayer and goodbyes filtered just after. The fear of death crept into even the bravest of soldiers. Its icy claws clamping down against their struggled breaths until there was no more.

Bile rose in the back of Lance’s throat as a sickening slosh of bodily fluid and gore coated the unearthed ground beneath his feet. Its contents splattered against the white of his paladin armor, the glaring contrast making his stomach churn. Some of the areas had become so thick with the wet sludge of intestine and other internal organs that you couldn’t distinguish what was ground and what was mass of discarded flesh.

The thick, unsettling taste of copper coated Keith’s tongue. Licking his lips he tried to swallow the taste of blood, but the iron scent hung across the camp like a damp cloud. Seeping into the very pores of his being, it made his skin crawl with the disturbing sensation of being bathed in blood.

This was war. Death was part of this world. Cruelty and pain was unbiased, destroying everything in its path and wreaking havoc on anyone who dared stand up to it. The only way to stop that toll from rising was to stop Zarkon’s reign of terror.

Clenching his fists, he turned his head away from the fallen allies and towards the only still standing medical structure, leaving Lance to collect himself.

“Umi!” Keith called, rushing into a torn white medical tent. He hadn’t seen Umi outside in the bustling center. Aliens of all species rushed past him carrying makeshift blankets and supplies to wounded warriors as the Red Eyes attended for the medical triage they had determined. Smaller roles were designated to volunteers, those who weren’t nearly as injured as others to help regain some kind of order after the destructive blast.

Keith noticed the tips of Miume’s ears in the mass of the crowd perked in the direction of his voice. Glancing up she immediately recognized his frantic search for Umi.

“Miume, where is Umi?” His eyes landed on her as he took a few careful strides in the tent, stopping just before her as she tended to a painfully carved out patient on a gurney.

“She’s sitting outside. She’s mostly okay but she’s in shock, probably due to the immense amount of energy she’s just expelled. I need you to take care of her because I have more urgent patients to attend to,” Miume stated curtly before turning her focus back to the heavily bleeding alien that was quickly being worked on by her assistants.

“Got it.” Keith nodded before ducking out of the tent again. His eyes scanned the congested area around him more carefully until they finally landed on Umi’s small frame curled between two rocks a short distance away from the camp. “Umi,” he breathed, jogging over to her. She didn’t look hurt from this distance. If she was, he was sure Miume would have cared for her.

Slowing his pace he came to a stop in front of the frozen female below him. Kneeling down in front of her his heart dropped. Her eyes were wide and unfocused. Dried blood stained her cheeks
as she stared blankly out of the blood splattered helmet visor. Curled in on herself she seemed completely unaware that he was in front of her.

“Umi.” he said gently, reaching out slowly as if not to startle a cornered animal. She didn’t even blink, not registering his voice.

“Umi.” he tried again, carefully brushing his hand over her exposed cheek. Slowly but surely she’d come around. He hoped.

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Blotched grey and red dots blurred into deformed figures across my vision. A crushing weight encompassed my entire being, its pressure threatening to snap my ribs as my heartbeat echoed soundlessly across my desensitized skin. Then a light pressure on my cheek registered through the dense haze.

Flinching, my eyes refocused on Keith in front of me. I blinked. When had he gotten here? His lips were moving but I couldn’t understand what he was saying. His fingers gently stroked my cheek again, coaxing me back to reality and his presence. My skin was barely aware of his warm touch, still frosted over in icy shock.

“Can you stand?” he asked, worry painting his face. Slowly I nodded, understanding the final part of what he had been saying. He breathed out in relief, shifting backwards before offering me a hand and helping me up.

Pausing, I looked at his hand, his red aura coming in and out of focus as my energy gradually reached out for his. My blood stained hand finally rested in his suited one. The heat of his energy barely warmed my numb skin as he helped me to my feet. Knees shaking, I stumbled forward, but Keith caught me easily. Pulling an arm over his shoulder he supported my weight.

“Let’s go get you cleaned up.” I heard him say, his voice still muffled as we slowly made our way back into the castle.

I wasn’t sure when but somehow we arrived at my room. Keith’s hands squeezed my bruised shoulders softly. The familiar scent of my room faintly drifted through the heavy fog that covered me. Light curls of red wafted around the space, gently pulling my energy towards it. It coaxed my pink purple aura away from its stiff hard shell around me and towards the homey warmth of Keith’s brilliant red.

“I’m going to take your helmet off now, okay?” his voice penetrated through the blank mist covering my thoughts. He eyed me carefully before moving with exaggerated slowness to remove my helmet. His energy wrapped around me protectively, gradually pulling me back to reality.

“Umi,” His face came back into focus, “can you take your clothes off for me? They are soaked with blood.” I blinked, slowly processing his words before nodding and mechanically unlatching the rusted gold colored plate around my waist. It clanged against the floor loudly, its sound shattering the silence around us. My body moved as if it were on autopilot, pulling the blue dress down before working on the black under-material. My hands shook as I tried to unzip my boots.

“Here, sit down.” Keith offered softly, carefully pushing me down to the ground before unlatching my boots and removing them gently. The coolness of the metal floor slowly seeped through my skin, goosebumps raising as I gradually became more aware of my body.

“I’m going to clean some of the blood off, okay,” Keith’s voice came through again, “It might feel
a bit weird.”

I blinked again, trying to concentrate on his face as he kneeled in front of me, holding a cloth in one hand and waiting for me to recognize what he was doing before slowly placing it on my blood stained cheek. Flinching away from the warm material on my cheek, I squeezed my eyes shut.

“Sorry.” Keith murmured, placing his other hand gently on my opposite cheek he wiped the blood from my face.

Sluggishly, his presence next to me became clearer. His red aura drew mine towards it carefully. Its warmth melted the frozen encasement around me, leaking through, pooling around me, thawing my energy, and drawing it back.

“Keith.” My voice hit my ears before I realized I had spoken, breaking once as the heat from his hands came into full focus.

“Hey.” He paused his work, giving me a small smile.

“Keith.” My breath hitched painfully in my throat as crushing emotions I didn’t understand enveloped me. Leaning forward my arms latched tightly around him. The numbness shattered violently around me, breaking open my chest and forcing the air from my lungs as I clutched Keith's strong frame against mine. Short shallow bursts of breath left my lips as I squeezed my eyes shut, my body starting to tremble as the full weight of crushing emotions crashed down onto me while Keith wrapped his arms securely around me.

“Shh, it’s alright now.” He whispered, pulling me tighter against him as he buried his head against the side of my neck. One hand slipped up to hold my head against him as my fingers dug into the lines of his chest piece.

Shaking my head tears stung in my eyes, each breath more painful than the last as I gasped for air. Tightening my arms around him, I buried my head in his shoulder.

“I thought you were gone.” My voice cracked again.

“I’m right here.” he tried to soothe me, rubbing my back in slow, rhythmic motions.

Shaking my head against him, my arms constricted around him. Flashes of familiar red energy blowing out of existence played behind my closed eyes. Cold, energyless bodies laying limply in a field of blood stripped of their warmth. Their energy had nothing to return to. There was nothing.

“I-I can’t.” I stammered, trying to control the overwhelming sense of loss that compressed into my chest, snapping my ribs as my body struggled to take in full breaths. “I can’t lose you.” I tried to finish, my fingers curling into the fabric of his suit as I clung to him.

Keith paused, his aura spiking anxiously before compressing around us tighter. Red tendrils tangled with mine, trying to fuse them together into an impenetrable wall around us. His arms squeezed me closer to him, holding me with restrained strength.

“I’m not going anywhere.” he mumbled into my hair, stroking the side of my head comfortingly.

“I don’t want to fight without you. I can’t.” I whispered.

Keith’s arms stiffened around me, “We will always fight together. Even if I’m in Voltron, or on a mission, I’ll always be with you.”
“But if I’m not with you I can’t protect you.” I breathed out in a shaky voice, “I can’t protect you if I can’t see you. If you are too far away. If I’m not in the red lion. I can’t shield you.”

“Even if we are separated, the rest of our team will protect me. And I’ll always do everything I can to come back to you,” he tried to assure me. “I promise I will never leave you alone.”

I shook my head again, hiding my face in his shoulder as tears finally spilled over. My heart clenched painfully in my chest as a sickening knot twisted in my stomach. The thought of Keith’s energy disappearing, never being able to see it again, made my blood run cold with fear. Was this what it felt like to be afraid of losing someone? I had only ever experienced fear for myself, my own life. But now it seemed like my entire being would break apart if Keith sudden wasn’t there. As if I would lose part of myself that I had just started to understand.

“I promise to do everything in my power to protect you. Even if that means taking good care of myself.” Keith answered in a quiet voice, stroking my back again.

Biting my lip, I swallowed hard pushing him forward slightly so that I could look at him. Keith’s dark eyes met mine with unwavering compassion. Holding my gaze, I searched his eyes as he moved a hand back to my cheek. Cupping it gently, he tilted my head upwards a hair before pressing his lips gently onto mine.

“I’m not going anywhere.” He vowed, resting his forehead against mine and closing his eyes.

Releasing my hold around him, my hands moved to his chest. Fingers hooking around the dip in the suit’s collar, I squeezed my eyes shut, “I like you so much.” I confessed.

He nodded his forehead against mine in silent agreement. His dark eyes opening again, he locked gazes with me. Their color deepening with lustful hunger they bore deep into me but I wasn’t afraid. Slowly he moved to kiss me, carefully placing his lips against mine as he pulled me completely into his lap. My body accepted his touch without hesitation, my raw skin craving his awakening touch. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I kissed him back harder than I had ever before. Keith’s lips paused briefly before moving around mine, his fingertips digging into the skin of my lower back as he tried to pull me impossibly closer.

Breaking the kiss we both pulled back just enough to steady our heavy breathing. But neither wanted to pull away entirely, as if any distance was too great in this moment.

“I think we need to get the rest of this blood off.” he said in a low voice, leaning back just enough to steady out heavy breathing. But neither wanted to pull away entirely, as if any distance was too great in this moment.

“I think we need to get the rest of this blood off.” he said in a low voice, leaning back just enough to glance backwards at the shower.

Shifting my eyes to the shower my brain slowly processed what he was implying. A light blush dusting my cheeks, I swallowed before nodding. My hands started to tremble in nervous anticipation. I wasn’t sure why the sudden desire to be closer and express how much Keith meant to me consumed me. But I knew it was something I had to do now. Even after something so horrible, it felt right. Needed.

Keith gave me a tender smile before leaning in and kissing me again. Slowly moving his lips over mine his hands crept up my back until they ghosted over the edge of the black cropped undershirt I was wearing. Taking an unsteady breath, I moved my arms from around his neck as he pulled the material over my head as carefully as he could. Tugging gently, it became stuck on my bun.

Letting out a breathy laugh, he shifted me out of his lap so that he could stand, pulling me upwards with him.
Giving him a shy smile I crossed an arm over my chest out of habit. Keith glanced away quickly, a light hue of red coloring his cheeks before he tugged me forwards towards the shower.

Glancing down at myself, my heart lurched uneasily in my chest. Blood coated my legs, some clumped together and dried while some dripped downwards, speckling the floor.

Turning my free hand over slowly, I bit my blood stained lip. Cracked, dried liquid caked my hands, pooling around the healing blisters scattered across my palm. More sunk into the cracks of my fingernails and stained their opaque surface. It slipped through every dip and crevasse in my hands, creating a blotched map over their faces.

The sight of blood didn’t bother me. I had been soaked in it too many times to count, becoming entirely desensitised to its smell, taste, feel. But this was different. I was covered in the blood of people I had been trying to protect.

Closing my hand into a tight fist, I silently vowed that their deaths would not be in vain. I would stop Zarkon so that this never had to happen again. I would never let Keith’s energy disappear again, or any of the energies of the people I now cared for.

Keith watched my from the corner of his eyes as he unlatched his breastplate. His energy vibrated with controlled hunger. Glancing up at him, I uncurled my fingers pulling my hand behind my back. I was unsure how he felt about blood.

Taking a step forward, he pulled my hand out from its hiding spot, “It’s okay.” He reassured softly. Keeping his chest towards me, he took a half step back before reaching back and blindly groping for the shower button.

Glancing away, my eyes rested on the blood splattered chestplate. The blood on my hands must have smeared off while he was holding me.

Traces of heat danced under my skin at the thought of his hands on mine. His body pressed into me, lips moving over mine.

Flushing red, I flicked my eyes back to my blood soaked feet. The teeth of a zipper sliding down was barely audible over the consistent rush of water hitting the smooth tile of the shower. The soft plop of damp fabric landing at the edge of my vision made my eyes widen.

Shyly sliding my eyes upwards, I peeked at Keith from under my lashes.

Toned muscles defined his athletic frame. Broad shoulders turned a fraction away from me, exposing the scar curving across his shoulder. Heart thumping uneven in my chest the same nervous excitement flutter filled my stomach as my skin craved his touch.

Peeling off the blood splattered black under material on my legs, I kicked it to the side. I grabbed Keith’s outstretched hand and took a shallow intake of air. Keith’s aura was less nervous than before as he pulled us both under the steaming water. Reaching up, his hands fluttered over my hair before he sighed.

“You’re gonna need to take that out yourself.” He half laughed. Speckles of water danced across my skin as his sturdy shoulders blocked most of the water.

Smiling a bit, I pulled my hair from its place. Keith shifted awkwardly to the side in the cramped space so that the hot water slid over me. Closing my eyes, I basked in its warmth, running my hands instinctively through my hair and letting the hot stream of water splay my hair in any direction it chose. Damp locks of raven black clung to my body as the blood slid from my skin and
swirled down the drain.

Keith hummed quietly to himself, prompting me to open my eyes as he gently took my cheek in his large hand again. Rubbing his thumb across its smooth surface, he smudged off the rest of the blood that caked my cheek.

I glanced away as he slowly moved his hands from the tops of my shoulders down to my hands. With careful motions, he massaged the blood and dirt from them before carefully taking my blistered hands in his. Turning them upwards, the steady stream of water pounded against their open faces, making me hiss lightly in pain. I instinctively tried to pull them backwards but Keith held them firmly.

“Sorry.” He murmured under his breath as he lightly traced his thumb across my palm, helping the blood wash away.

Turning my hands over, he worked on scrubbing the diluted blood from the deep lines of my fingers and nails. Using a small amount of soap to suds them, he continued until finally the water pooling in our cupped hands ran white.

Once they were clean, he released them and bashfully lifted a hand up and ran it roughly though his wet hair. Dark locks of black splayed across his face, steaming drops of water dripping from their ends. Eyes hooded under messy bangs, he gazed quietly at me. Smooth trails of water traced down his body, highlighting each dip and curve of muscle before disappearing at our feet.

Unable to stop myself, I reached up to wipe the damp strands away from his face, exposing his ravenous eyes. Their intensity burning through me, I quickly flicked my eyes away, shivering with nervous excitement.

Biting my lip, I tentatively slid my hands from his face down, spreading my fingers over his solid chest. Taking a shallow staggered breath, I quickly reached up on tiptoe and pressed my lips into his. He paused, aura spiking in surprise before quickly encasing us. Moving his lips carefully over mine, he waited a few ticks before deepening the kiss. Lustful need overtaking his usual controlled composure, Keith pressed his body against mine, pushing me back into the cool tile of the wall. Jumping slightly from the harsh change in temperature, I gradually relaxed my shoulders against it. The tile’s coolness was quickly forgotten as I responded to his lips on mine, becoming entirely consumed in his fierce crimson red.

Carefully he intensified the kiss, roughly moving his lips over mine before running his mouth across my exposed neck. His hands trailing up and down my back, before moving to my stomach. My muscles tensed in anticipation as he bit down on my neck gently, pausing to make sure it was okay before leaving a trail of marks up my neck. Humming I closed my eyes, pressing my chest against his as I tilted my head to the side to give him more access. Keith smiled against my collarbone before sucking its delicate skin, earning another soft sigh of contentment from my lips. Running his hands over my body, his palms curved over the line of my hip, pausing for the briefest of beats before shyly skimming his finger tips down my butt, stopping at the back of my thigh. His hands flexed against my muscles before pulling it up and around his waist. I gasped in surprise as he pressed himself against me, steadying my unbalanced weight and moving his mouth back to mine and moaned. Our bodies were completely flush now. A wave of pleasurable heat pulsed through me, making me shudder.

“Keith.” I breathed against his lips. My heart kickstarted rapidly in my chest as he pushed me more firmly into the wall. Our bodies were almost unbearably hot against each other but we couldn’t pull away. The cool tile on my back was the only source of relief as he wrapped an arm around my waist. Arching my chest against his, he tried to get impossibly closer. His hips involuntarily rolled...
against mine, causing a breathy gasp to escape my lips. Nails biting in the tops of his shoulders, I clutched him closer.

“Too much?” Keith broke our kiss to look down at me. His voice was labored as he tried to catch his breath.

Taking unsteady breaths, I shook my head. I slid my hands back up his chest so that I could brush the splotches of hair clinging to his face away from his eyes. My eyes automatically traced the streams of water pouring over his skin, watching them curve along his strong jawline before dripping down at the center. They mixed with the droplets that clung to the tip of his nose and rolled down to the lines of his neck, over his defined collarbone and across his chest before descending farther. I swallowed involuntarily, snapping my eyes back up to meet his. He gave me a knowing smile.

“Should we dry off?” he asked, his chest rising and falling against mine quickly. I nodded, unable to form words. The steam of the shower made it hard to breathe and my body started to overheat. I couldn’t tell if it was from the temperature of the steaming water, or the closeness between Keith and me.

Kissing me gently once more, he reluctantly released his hold on the back of my thigh letting me slowly slide it down and away from his body. Reaching backwards, he blindly fumbled for the right button to turn the water off. The shower feeling even tighter than before, there was only a thin sliver of space between us. Hearts still racing, skin flushed, chests rising and falling unevenly, we both tried to catch our breath.

Sliding my hand across the opposite wall, I unlatched the shower door and stumbled unsteadily out of it as cold air rushed forward. Keith’s hands easily found my hips to steady me as we stepped out of the steaming box. Inhaling deeply I filled my lungs completely, shivering from the sudden change in temperature.

Pulling away from his touch slightly, I grabbed the towel on the wall, wrapping it around both our waists and giving Keith a shy smile. He gave me a tired smile back, brushing the hair from my neck lovingly. We stood there quietly for a minute both consumed by gazing into the other's eyes before Keith broke eye contact, shifting his hips backwards and clearing his throat. His fiery aura jumped once in embarrassment.

I glanced away, feeling like I should be embarrassed but not fully understanding why. Biting the inside of my cheek, my fingers started to tremble as I shyly let the towel drop from around us. The cool air already started to dry the last droplets of water decorating my skin.

Swallowing hard my heart skipped unsteadily in my chest as I unsurely stepped back a few paces. Playing with the ends of my wet hair, I waited until the back of my knees hit the bed before meeting Keith’s eyes. His dark eyes widened before quickly refocusing as his chest ridged in nervous anticipation. He took a sharp intake of air then shook out his wet hair before taking a step towards me. The hungry aura pulled back ever so slightly as if debating that what he intended was okay before it started to buzz around him.

Letting out a held breath at his slow advance, I slid backwards on the bed making room for him as he reached out for me. Refusing to let me move farther away he drew me back swiftly against his hot frame. Capturing my lips once more, he tipped us backwards with one hand cupping the back on my neck while the other supported his weight on the bed. Holding himself over me he, leaned back just enough to look at me.

“Still okay?” he nearly whispered, his heart still pounding loudly in his chest. I nodded, glancing
up at him again as my body relaxed back into the soft bed sheets. He gave me a crooked smile before kissing me once more. Finally closing the small sliver of space between our bodies, a new heat ignited over my skin. My energy flexed around me before rapidly colliding with his brilliant red in a ravenous need to be closer.

Curling a leg around his waist he groaned against my lips, pressing himself closer as he deepened the kiss. His hips involuntarily rocked against mine and I jumped slightly in surprise as something hard pressed firmly against me. He paused, moving his lips carefully over mine as he waited for me to respond to him before experimentally rolling his hips against me again.

Moaning quietly, my eyes fluttered shut as my leg flexed against him craving him to be closer. Keith seemed to understand, shifting his weight forward he eagerly let his lips explore my neck and chest. Leaving new soft bruised marks, he bit down on my delicate flesh. His thigh pressed firmly between my legs I squirmed under him. His breath caught in my throat as his lips ghosted over my bud. A shiver ran through me as he teased my sensitive skin with his lips while his other hand traced random patterns across my side. His fingers continued dancing downwards in agonizing slowness.

Shifting his weight backwards, his teeth grazed along my neck as his hot digits trailed across my hip bone. They dipping down and hesitantly ran across the soft skin just under it. Sighing contently, my back arched against his chest, hips pushing against his. He took the opportunity to slip an arm under me to support my weight and trap me against his broiling skin.

Biting down just under my earlobe my breath hitched, hips rolling against his in response. Heart stammering in my chest my breath started to come in short shallow bursts. My body began feeling feverish under his as a small sweat broke across my skin.

Tucking his head into the crook of my neck, he groaned against my skin. Shuddering, his aura flexed around us. His breathing was staggered and muscles tensed. They vibrated quietly as he froze above me.

“What do you mean?” I asked in a breathy voice when he didn’t elaborate, skin cooling rapidly now.
“I don’t have any kind of condom.” He half laughed at himself, aura spiking in disbelief.

“A what?” I questioned, my lips pulling into a confused frown.

Keith rolled off me with a heavy sigh as he shook his head. Propping himself up on an elbow, he rested a cheek on his hand and gave me a tired smile as he gently caressed my cheek. Smiling I closed my eyes, enjoying the sweet sensation as the air returned to normal around us.

He sighed again, moving an arm under my head and bringing me to his chest. His red aura wavered in exhausted motions now.

“I don’t know if I have it in me right now to explain.” He murmured into my hair.

Curling into his chest, I breathed in his intoxicating scent. Closing my eyes and humming quietly to myself, a content peace radiated throughout me. Keith chuckled lightly to himself as his thumb gently stroked the space just under the first scar on my back. The energy between us started to swirl into sleepy patterns, pulling its counterpart closer and trying to ease any lingering tensions.

“Are you okay with just sleeping?” He asked after a moment, his fingers drawing random patterns in the skin of my back now.

Pausing I opened my eyes, seeing nothing but the tone of his skin. My body gradually acknowledged that heavy cloud of exhaustion that hung over me now that my heart had stopped pounding.

“I used so much energy.” I mumbled into his chest, already forgetting why we had stopped our heated moment as the steady rhythm of his breathing lulled me to sleep.

“You deserve to rest.” I vaguely heard him whisper, his lips pressing into the crown of my head before I slipped into a deep unconsciousness.
Lance sat next to the entrance of the white medical tent as patiently as he could. The last time he had checked on Miume she had waved him away dismissively as she worked on another patient. Sighing heavily to himself, he skipped a rock out into the blackness of the cool night. She had been working nonstop for several hours now, but it seemed like things were finally settling down. He’d helped as much as he could with the others, mostly just carrying critically injured anti-Zarkon aliens to the healing pods until they were completely full. He aided in grabbing water, food, blankets, simple things, but anything to help her was enough for him right now. She had an eerie still calmness around her like he had never seen before.

The white tent flapped open snapping Lance’s attention back to the entrance. Miume strided out running a hand through her hair as she untied it from her usual ponytail. Shaking it out she looked completely exhausted.

“Miume!” Lance called, scrambling to his feet as she made her way towards the castle doors.

“Lance,” she jumped in surprise, turning around quickly. He instantly noticing how dull her usually vibrant eyes were, and how her ears and tails sagged uncharacteristically. She seemed to lack her sparkle.

“Hey, you okay?” he asked, his voice soft and full of concern.

“Of course I’m okay.” she replied in a flat tone, turning to continue walking back towards the castle.

“Uh huh.” Lance mumbled to himself, jogging after her.

“Really, Lance, I’m fine. I don’t need you to follow me right now. I just need to sleep.” Miume tried to wave him off as she continued down the uncomfortably silent halls. After the majority of the patients had been cared for the atmosphere turned into stone, weighing down heavily on everyone.

“Well then, how about we cuddle?” Lance offered, trying to lighten the mood as they made their way towards Miume’s room. His long strides kept pace with her smaller ones easily.

“I’m not really in the mood, Lance.” she stated almost dismissively, making Lance pause momentarily.

“But you’re always in the mood!” he countered, keeping his tone light and hoping some of his playful teases would reignite her usual sparkle.

“Not after that many people just died.” Miume replied in a colder tone, turning to face him as they stopped in front of her door. Her ears laid flat down and her eyes were even darker now as the stench of decay clung to her clothing.

“That was darker than I expected.” Lance commented quietly before looking back at Miume, “but it’s not your fault they died.” He added in a gentler tone.

“War is dark, Lance. And of course it’s my fault, at least to a large degree.” Crossing her arms tightly over her chest she looked away from Lance, “I was their doctor.” Miume replied grimly, turning on her heel as the door to her room slid open.
“Kittencakes,” he started as he quickly entered the room behind her.

“I said I’m not in the mood for this, Lance.” She gave him a warning look as she stripped off her now blood stained medical coat and gloves. Releasing a burdened sigh, she let them drop heavily into the soiled laundry hamper, almost reluctantly letting them go as if she wanted to hold onto the memory of how she could have done more.

“Hey now, it’s okay to be upset. It was a hard day.” Lance soothed, stepping into the room so that the door closed completely. He moved carefully as to not trip on any of the yarn that laced around the floor.

“I already told you, I’m fine. I just need some sleep and some space to clear my head.” she explained, turning around to strip off the rest of her grimey clothes and throw them haphazardly into a pile in the corner. She took a moment to exhale slowly once more and close her eyes while she placed her residually stained hands on her head. Lance watched her silently as she stood there holding her head, chewing his lip in silent contemplation. He knew Miume could clam up, shutting down all conversation to hide behind her usual wall of emotions. But he could see the large cracks splintered across it now. As much as she wanted to ignore them, he knew he needed to help her address them. After a few seconds, she breathed in again and ruffled her hair, breaking Lance’s internal debate.

“Well, I don’t believe you.” he continued carefully, leaning against the wall and crossing his arms. He gazed at her challengingly, knowing she would try to brush it off, or give him the cold shoulder in hopes that he’d leave her alone.

“Well, you should.” Miume retorted, slipping on a fresh shirt and grabbing a towelette from her cluttered nightstand to wipe her face.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to be ‘fine’ after a day like today.” He leaned forward and tilted his head to the side. With one leg propped behind him on the wall he kept his posture relaxed.

“As I stated before, I’m used to it.” Miume shrugged, refusing to look at him. She turned to the small hanging mirror and started to try and wash the horrors from her skin. Her stomach churned as thoughts of her own inadequacy raced in her mind. Sure she was used to losing patients, but today had been particularly rough. So many seemed as though they were doing well, yet she couldn't prevent their untimely deaths in the end. She lacked complete knowledge of their anatomy and physiological processes and missed obvious injuries or issues that could have prevented their rapid deterioration. Because of this, so many more lives were lost that could have been prevented - should have been prevented… if she was only good enough. She should have been good enough. She should have been able to save them.

“You don’t just get used to that kind of thing.” Lance’s voice snapped her back to reality and out of her self loathing thoughts, “Sure you become somewhat desensitized to it, but it’s never one hundred percent covered. You’re allowed to feel bad about it if you want to. Your feelings are valid and you tried your best.” The sincerity in his voice poured out, easily slipping through the cracks in her defenses and washing across her skin in ways she had long forgotten.

Breathing out heavily, Miume ran a hand over her damp face. Her well composed mask started to waver, threatening to break as he continued to speak. Her throat and chest tightened and she held her breath. Was it really okay to be so sensitive in such hard times? She had to be a well composed physician. There was no time for this. Yet, he spoke with such confidence, compassion, and earnestly it seemed as if it was okay to be vulnerable. Was it really okay to be this candid with him? Why did he have this effect on her? How was he so easily able to pull the emotions she had locked so deeply inside of herself out and make it seem normal? Like it was okay to be emotional over
“Please, just stop.” Her voice was barely above a whisper, ears laying back as she looked at the tangled strings on the ground. “I need to be alone. Please leave.”

“Not until you admit it’s not fine.” Lance bargained, crossing the room to stand behind her and place his hands gently on her lightly trembling shoulders.

“Lance.” She warned, her ears twitching.

“Miume, it’s okay to not be okay.” he said quietly. “You don't have to be so stoic all the time.”

“Well, I have to be okay!” she whipped around to face him, tears stinging her eyes, “and I have to be strong.”

Lance’s face softened, “Being strong doesn't mean never showing emotions, or pretending these horrible things don't affect you.”

“Of course it does. If someone sees me crying they will think I am weak. That I can't do my job effectively because my female emotions and immaturity get in the way.” She shot back, biting her lip as her tails swished anxiously behind her.

“Crying doesn't make you weak. It makes you alive.” he pursued, sliding his hands down her arms soothingly before taking her hands. “It’s okay to show emotion. It's okay to cry when you feel the need to. It would be weird not to. You just worked so hard to save as many people as you could and that pain of not saving them all must be tremendous. That alone is so sad. You're allowed to feel sad about it. You did your best and I am here for you.”

“But I couldn't save most of them,” she repeated softly, barely whispering and gripping his hands in hers as they started to shake.

“And that's not your fault. You did everything you could. But sometimes the body just can't heal. That's not your fault.” he comforted, squeezing her hands back.

“I have to be better.” Miume murmured, avoiding Lance’s eyes, “I know we lose lives but if we were better… if I was better... we could save more people. There would be less loss. With what little I accomplished today, it's just not enough. I'm simply not good enough.” She pursed her lips and let out a sharp breath.

“Miume.” Lance coaxed softly, willing her to look up at him. Taking a deep breath she finally met his eyes, a jolt of electricity striking her heart as she was swallowed by his deep blue compassionate ones, “You are enough.” His voice unwavered as he spoke sincerely from the heart.

Miume’s breath hitched as she crumbled under him. How did he understand so much so quickly? How could he be so sure of what he was saying? And why did she instantly want to believe him?

Shaking her head, she closed the distance between them and hid her face in his solid chest. The emotions she suppressed all day came surging forward. Sadness, loss, anger, frustration, self hatred, disappointment, gratitude. Lance wrapped his strong arms around her, trapping her into his comforting embrace. He rested his chin gently atop her head between her soft ears.

“It's okay to cry. It only shows how strong you are.” he murmured into her hair, squeezing her lightly.

“I don’t cry.” She half laughed, her shoulders starting to tremble as tears spilled over her cheeks.
“I didn’t see anything. Promise.” he assured in a light voice, holding her against him as she moved her arms around him and tightened her grip around his waist, seeking security.

They stood like that for a while longer as she sobbed quietly and lightly, Lance rhythmically rubbing soothing circles into her back until she was ready. Miume finally pulled back, wiping her eyes with the back of her hands. Lance looked away pointedly until she was done, and she looked up at him then smiled sheepishly.

“Now do you wanna cuddle?” he joked, giving her a charming smile. Miume half laughed, shaking her head and pushing a hand against his chest playfully.

“You could cuddle anywhere any time.” she giggled, her tails brushing against his face lightly as she moved past him towards her bed. As much as she hated to admit it, she really just wanted him to keep holding her. She felt safe, secure, and grounded in his embrace.

“Well that just makes me sound easy.” he teased, shrugging off his jacket and sliding into bed next to her. He pulled her into his chest, dragging the blankets around them then held her tightly. He murmured into her hair softly, ‘I’ll always be here for you if you need it. You don't have to be walled up around me. I'll take care of you.”

“And what about you?” she asked, snuggling into his chest and making a soft purring sound of contentment. Lance made a dismissive snort and continued breathing in her hair as her ears twitches tickling his face. “Who's going to take care of you? It seems to me you are using your charming jokes as a deflector right now.”

Lance laughed quietly under his breath before shrugging, “Eh, you don't need to worry about me. I’m totally good all the time. Tough guys like me is always calm, cool, and collected.”

“What about all that talk about never being one hundred percent immune from things like this?” Miume countered, running her fingers down his chest absently. “Didn't you just lecture me on this matter?”

“Well,” Lance let his voice drag out as she shrugged nonchalantly again, “I’m more concerned about caring about you since you need it right meow. So that's the only thing on my mind.” he replied, kissing her forehead gently.

Miume paused. No one had ever been like this with her. She wasn't used to someone caring for her in such an individual and intimate basis. She always had to push her serious feelings aside and focus on caring for others. No one had ever really solely cared about her and her emotional needs. As nice as it felt, why was Lance acting so dismissive about being cared for himself? Every one deserved to be cared for, especially someone as special as Lance.

“I will take care of you too, you know.” She glanced up at him with large, glittering red eyes. Lance quickly averted his gaze, an unusually serious expression taking over his handsome features. He seemed to be internally battling with something he couldn’t yet bring up.

“Nah, you have to care about so many others! You don't have to waste your time to worry about me. I'm fine, really. I mean, nobody really says anything when I'm not really anyway, and I don't want to burden you any further. You have so many more important things to worry about so why worry about something as unimportant as my silly feelings from time to time, you know? I bounce back quickly, so quickly that nobody even notices - not that they need to! Like I say, I’m just the seventh wheel in Team Voltron. Eighth if we count Umi now!” he laughed under his breath again as he rambled on in a light voice but kept a pained smile.
Miume’s ears twitched as she pulled back to look towards his face and made a confused and angry expression, “Lance, what? No! You are not just the eighth wheel. How could you think such a terrible thing about yourself? You are very much a part of Voltron as the other team members are.”

He made another dismissive sound and chuckled softly then looked down at her with glistening eyes. “Miume, you wouldn't understand. It's okay. You don't have to worry about me so much. I manage just fine. I've got you here for me to support and that's enough for me. It doesn't matter if I'm not given as much attention for as much as everyone else. I'll be fine!” He smiled sadly and pecked her forehead again, squeezing her tightly against his chest as if silently trying to comfort himself with her embrace as well.

“I may not understand everything right now, but I'd like you to know that on this team, or any other team for that matter, you’re the one I care about the most. Thank you very much.” she said pointedly, sitting up on her elbow so she could look him in the eyes. He returned her gaze with stormy sulking blue eyes and let her caress his hair. “Even if you don't believe me, I will always care for you, too. And I want to take very good care of you.” she purred at the end leaning down to kiss him tenderly on the lips.

Lance laced his fingers through her hair and returned her kiss, smiley softly against her lips. Did Miume really mean all that? She was so busy with everyone else, how could she possibly have time to care for him as well? He didn’t want to burden her further with his unimportant self doubts. Yes she spoke so sincerely, her ruby eyes boring deep into him, trying to burn away his insecurities.

Miume intensified the kiss, purring into his lips and snapping Lance out of his swirling thought. His tongue brushed hers in response, “and I know what you're thinking… I really do mean it Lance. Let me show you…” she whispered against his lips before she slid her tongue into his mouth to meet his and gripped his velvety hair.

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~~ KEITH

“Keith.” Shiro’s voice drifted through the door before three sharp knocks echoed through the room. Keith jerked awake, facing the door in disorientation. “Keith, are you in there?” Shiro’s voice came through again.

Blinking, Keith tried to blink away the sleep from his eyes before the door slid open. He froze, face flushing red as he ripped the blanket up to completely cover the sleeping girl next to him.

“Keith, we need everyone in the main room now. We have to discuss a battle plan~” Shiro rambled as he stepped into the room before stopping abruptly. His eyes landed on a shirtless Keith frantically trying to cover the body next to his with little success.

“Ah~” Shiro started before turning around, covering his eyes with his hand. “No, just no I don’t want to even think about this right now. Just get dressed and come to the main room. We need to ready a battle plan to get the prisoners back.”

“Um, r-roger.” Keith fumbled for words, his brain going completely blank “This isn’t what it looks like.” He tried to explain but Shiro was already heading out the door.

“Nope, don’t care right now. Just get dressed and come on.” Shiro waved his mechanical arm dismissively and stepped quickly out of the room.

“Shiro~” Keith called out desperately before the door slid closed, engulfing him in blackness again.
Sighing heavily, he dragged his hand down his face. Well that was a great way to wake up. Groaning quietly to himself in mortified embarrassment, he got out of bed as carefully as he could, untangling himself from her grasp before slipping into his usual black skinny jeans and top. Pausing, he glanced back at Umi. She was sound asleep. She was usually a heavy, almost coma-like, sleeper when she was recovering her energy. Even if he tried, he doubted he would be able to wake her, at least not without getting the living daylights shocked out of him. A subconscious line of defense developed to protect her comatose state. He gave her a tired smile before leaning over and gently kissing her exposed cheek, laying his red jacket over her as a substitute for him.

Shiro glanced up at Keith as he walked into the main room. Everyone but Lance was there. Pidge gave him a sinister smile, gaining her a death stare from him as he crossed his arms tightly over his chest.

“Where’s Umi?” Shiro asked, his voice neutral.

“Still asleep, recovering her energy.” Keith replied, his face turning a light hue of red.

Shiro nodded, understanding before turning to the two commander aliens in front of them. “So, how many prisoners are we talking about?”

“At least ten,” Camuel reported, crossing his arms as well.

Before Voltron had been able to get to the planet, the Galra had raided the anti-Zarkon groups. Blind siding them with a surprise attack that hit hard and fast. Taking out most of their transport ships, and capturing as many opposers as possible before warping away as the larger battle ships came to finish the job.

“We should get them back as soon as possible, before they are killed.” Absol declared in a grave tone. Shiro nodded again in agreement. The heavy weight of the situation pressing down on the group as they tried to collaborate.

“Hit them so fast they don’t even know what hit them!” Lance’s voice drifted through the door as he sauntered in, casually patting down his tufted hair.

Shiro glanced at Lance as he strode to his chair, “This isn’t just one fleet are are talking about. This is a Zarkon base ship. We can’t take it lightly.”

“No, but you have our support as well.” Camuel vowed, nodding deeply once.

“Yes, but I think we should take a day to regroup and rest. It was a long, hard day.” Hunk suggested, “we can’t expect to be successful if we are all running on fumes.”

“I agree. I’m exhausted.” Pidge raised her hand as she spun in her chair, “That was one intense battle. And that was just on this planet! With three battleships. Imagine how many ships the base would have…” her voice trailed off as the dangers of the full scale of the operation crept through the room.

“But the longer we wait the more time it gives them to prepare for our attack and to interrogate and hurt our allies,” Allura interjected, narrowing her eyes from across the table. “Zarkon will assume that we will come for our allies. Try and exploit our weakness.

“Yeah, but how are we going to take on his entire base? Especially if he knows we are coming.” Keith challenged, leaning against the wall with his arms still crossed

“Perhaps with Umi’s barrier.” Allura offered, looking at him expectantly.
Keith paused, “That could work, but she needs time to get her energy back.”

“Well of course! Once she’s in tip top shape she could offer defensive support to Voltron. That way you guys can get to the base in a jiffy, get the prisoners, and get out.” Coran determined, looking at Allura for confirmation.

“Yes, if she could provide Voltron with a barrier, then you could fly straight to the base without needing to fight directly.” she explained. “Our particle barrier can only do so much. Her individual barrier would provide you with sufficient protection and mobility to get in and out of the base while we and our allies distract the fleets. We only need her to create one for Voltron, saving her energy reserves and expediting this rescue mission by not having to fight all the bases defensive power.”

“That’s a lot of pressure.” Keith retorted, his voice unconvinced. “Red and I alone could easily get in and out without the need for a barrier. As long as you guys distract the Galra, I can get the prisoners myself.”

“But we saw the power of her barrier on the battlefield.” Camuel argued, the fatigue evident in his voice.

“It was most impressive.” Absol added while stroking his side that was bandaged up carefully. “She single handedly ensured that our team and the medical staff survived those ion cannon blasts. Defense of that magnitude is paramount in our siege on the base.”

“Even if she could sustain that much direct impact, I don’t know how long she could keep it up.” Keith argued, “we need a better plan. One that doesn’t completely rely on Umi.”

“I agree.” Shiro intervened, “we need something more, as a backup. I have full faith she could do it, but after a battle like today it might be difficult. We also don’t want to draw out all of Zarkon’s defenses, if we go in as Voltron it will be a full scale battle. If we could do something smaller, it would be faster.”

“So, we use the green lions invisibility cloak to blind side them.” Pidge offered, “locate the prisoners in the green lion, go in, get out.”

“Then we need Shiro or Keith to go in because only they can use the galra tech.” Lance reminded the group.

“Okay, so you guys distract Zarkon using Umi’s barriers, and Shiro and I will go get the prisoners.” Pidge shrugged.

“Then we are talking about four moving targets for Umi to shield and we already know that’s difficult.” Keith rebutted in a hard tone

“What if the medical ship were programed with the invisibility cloak?” Miume interjected, stepping out from behind Lance, “that way you could keep in the Voltron formation while my team follows behind in stealth until the last second. Then split and Shiro can get in quickly and get out?”

“That could work. But that means leaving my lion unpiloted for some time.” Shiro thought out loud, “Since Umi broke the connection between Zarkon and I though, I haven’t felt his presence. So the black lion would probably be safe if Umi were to guard it.” Shiro paused, looking around the room, “any other ideas?”

“I think it’s the best shot we have right now.” Allura concluded, glancing at Keith
“Our teams can also offer distraction with what ships survived the attack.” Camuel offered, looking at Absol who nodded in agreement.

“You will not be fighting alone, they are of our teams.” Absol confirmed.

Shiro nodded, uncrossing his arms, “I guess everyone take the night to rest and prep for tomorrow. We need to hit them hard and fast. So the sooner the better. Pidge can you program their ship?” he looked at Miume

“On it!” Pidge piped up before taking Miume by the hand and leading her down towards their ships hanger.

“We will go ready our groups.” Absol informed, turning and clasping a hand on Camuel’s large shoulder as he passed

“Everyone else, go rest and regroup.” Shiro finalized, running his hand down his face in a tired manor. “Keith, check on Umi and make sure she’s as rested as possible.

“Roger.” Keith nodded at Shiro before ducking out of the common area and back towards his room.
First Attack on Zarkon

“So I am putting a barrier around Voltron until we get to the base, and then individual barrier for Shiro’s lion?” I tried to clarify.

“Yes, but defending the black lion is most important since Shiro will be in the base. Do you have enough energy for that?” Keith asked, sitting on the bed next to me.

I paused, glancing down at my hands for a moment before nodding. My energy was almost completely restored now after sleeping for a few hours. “How much longer until we leave,” I asked

“Maybe an hour at most. We should get food and rest a bit more.” he placed a hand over mine, “you sure it won’t be too much?”

I glanced back up at him, my energy hardening around me “we need to rescue them. Before it’s too late. Before the Druids—” i paused, my throat tightening “I am as rested as i can be.”

Keith eyed me before nodding, squeezing my hand before standing up and giving me room to get out of bed. His face flushed a light red before he, whipping his head to the side, eyes nailed to the opposite wall as I changed. I looked at him curiously, why did he feel that he should look away? Hasn’t he already seen everything? Was it normal to look away while another person was changing? His aura fluttered around the room anxiously as I tried to understand his sudden flusteredness.

Zipping my suit into place I took a deep breath before locking the breastplate across my chest. Its weight more present than before, its heaviness making itself known. Biting my lip I glanced up at Keith who was securing the metal guards around his forearm.

“I will be with you, yes?” I asked in a quiet voice.

Keith paused, looking back at me. “Yes, and we will get through this,” his voice was determined. Glancing down I nodded, my hands starting to shake with anxiety as my chest tightened.

“Umi,” Keith gently, pulling my gloved hands into his, “we are going to get through this, and we are going to save those prisoners, you have enough energy to do this”

I glanced up at him, his aura had stopping moving around nervously and was now a solid bright essence filling the room, completely consuming us in cool determination. B reathing out quietly I closed my eyes, trying to relax against his familiar presence. The edges of my energy trembled in anxious anticipation. But Keith’s fiery aura pulsed over mine, reaffirming its presence and security.

“Lets go rescue our comrades,” he squeezed my hands tightly, prompting me to open my eyes. Gazing up at him my eyes searched his for a beat before I nodded and squeezed his hands in return. We were going to get through this, Zarkon wasn’t going to kill our new comrades, and I was strong enough to beat him. I wasn’t going back to his base, I was free.

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“Allura asked as Miume fit a space helmet over her ears.

“Yes,” she turned to glance at Shiro who stood next to her.

“Alright team, we go in with Voltron, once Miume is in position at the base we’ll break formation.
I will go in with the Red Eyes team to get the prisoners. Keith, you and Umi stand guard over the Black Lion and the medical ship since you aren’t moving, Umi, it should be easier to have a single barrier, correct?” He glanced at me for confirmation, when I nodded in agreement he continued.

“Once we break formation Voltron team will lose Umi’s barrier so be careful. The Red Eyes and I will get the prisoners as quickly as we can and get out. Then we reform Voltron and return with Umi’s barrier over all of us.”

A flurry of rogers came from the different group before we moved towards our designated hangers.

“Entering wormhole now,” Allura called through the intercom, “prepare yourselves.”

“Ready?” Keith asked, his fingers flexing over the controls in anticipation.

“Ready,” I replied back quickly, snapping my belt into place then curling my magnetized fingers over the back of the command chair.

“Red Eyes Team ready to go,” Oli’s mechanical voice came through the main frame of the Red lion, a small icon appearing in the upper right corner of the red hologram screen.

“Arriving in three, two-” Allura counted down. Keith put his lion in gear before rocketing out of the hanger at full speed, already being pulled into a Voltron formation.

Tensing my muscles I gripped the top of his chair, the magnets pulling from the force as we were ejected into space. My heart skipping a beat painfully as Zarkon’s base came into view. It’s dark aura churning through space like a threatening storm cloud ready to unleash its deadly nature. Blood thirsty hunger oozed powerfully through it, deep magenta tendrils curling through its impending darkness like bolts of lightning. Shivering involuntarily my energy spiked defensively around me in response to its cruel nature. Jumping forward quickly before pulling back and snapping in warning. Shaking my head I swallowed hard, willing myself to focus in Keith's brilliant red aura around me before letting the other vibrant energies of Voltron bleed into view. As my aura relaxed around me, I pushed a barrier out around Voltron as the lions merged together. Letting my energy flow down the bonds between us, their interconnected form came into focus as i solidified my shield.

Taking a final steadying breath I opened my eyes, facing his ship head on I felt my aura flare in anticipation. He wasn’t going to hurt my teammates. I would never let Keith or any of the other precious energies I had formed bonds with disappear like I had seen before.

“Alright team, lets go. Miume follow the path we clear for you,” Shiro commanded, putting Voltron into position before launching us towards the ominous storm of malicious energy.

“Roger,” Miume’s voice came next as Zarkons base unleashed an eruption of fighter jets as its first layer of defense.

“Prepare for impact!” Shiro called. The colossal ship bursting to life as hundreds of deadly beams of light hurdled across space. Its second line of defense already locking onto our location while simultaneously attacking Aria castle and the aiding ships scattered behind Voltron.

Gripping the edges of Keith’s command chair tighter I pushed the barrier out farther, giving Miume’s ship some amount of protections as we blasted through the first wave of attack. Their ships ricocheting silently off the barrier, creating rippled patterns of purple pink around us as we cut effortlessly through the trail of explosions. Blinding orange-red lights decorated the space around us as Zarkons fighter jets shattered to pieces across my barrier.
“Hunk, form shoulder cannon. Let’s lay down some covering fire,” Shiro commanded as we broke through a cloud of debris and smoke. Pulling Voltron to a brief pause, residual streams of smoke drifted over us as the massive cannon appeared on the shoulder.

Hunks bright energy surged upwards, consuming Voltrons aura momentarily as his bayard connected with his lion. The massive amount of energy collecting to the top side of Voltron as the canon materialized. Its powerful blast knocking Voltron back a tick as we fired at the opposing ship.

My eyes widened at the sheer power emitted from the blast, a tremor of intense pulsing aftermath energy quaked through Voltron. Voltron really was the universe's ultimate weapon.

“Keith, form sword.” Shiro called next. Keith energy automatically responding to the order. His energy spiking in anticipation as he thrust his bayard into the designated opening, twisting it as it locked into place.

“Lets go,” Keith smirked, tightening his hands on the controls he swung them into place, easily cutting through another fleet of jets.

We worked our way through each wave of defense before finally getting close enough to the ship. Aria castle using their ion blast against Zarkons ship as they fired their cannons back. The small collection of anti-Zarkon ships that were still working zoomed in and out of focus, their bullets drilling against the sentries.

“Voltron hold position, we are moving to base.” Oli’s voice instructed.

“Got it.” Shiro replied as Keith swung the massive blade in an arc motion, creating a bubble of room for the Red Eyes.

Glancing backwards I followed Miume’s energy as the moved past us quickly, maneuvering expertly around the bullets and disbre before hovering just under one of the four corners of Zarkons ship.

“We are in position.” Oli informed as their ship lost its invisible advantage."

“Alright, disband Voltron. Hunk, Lance, Pidge keep taking out as many fighter jets as you can. Keith, Umi, protect the Black lion and their ship.

“Roger.” Keith confirmed, his lion disconnecting from the rest, their energies pulled apart. Breaking its solid formation into individual powerful energies. Voltron's energy was far more intense than I had experienced in basic training. The Paladins will to fight enveloped Voltron into a beaming beacon of pure energy.

Keith moved his lion in front of the black lion, holding a defensive position as the other Paladins spread outwards in different directions. Taking a deep breath I refocused the edges of the barrier, pulling it inward for a beat before expanding outwards towards Shiro and Miume’s auras.

Watching Shiro’s aura shift from inside the black lion and out into free space towards the Red Eyes ship my energy flexed automatically, reinforcing its solidity to protect Shiro’s exposed state.

“Still good?” Keith asked, glancing back at me briefly before snapping his attention forward as Red flashed incoming warning signals. His aura flared in response to the attack, manueving his lion swiftly while firing at the incoming fighter jets.

“I’m fine,” I replied, tensing my muscles in reaction to different areas of the barrier being hit. Pink purple ripples faded in and out as their bullets tried to penetrate my shield.
“Alright, ready?” Shiro asked, holding himself in place on the outer edge of the ship, his right hand glowing pink.

Miume nodded, kneeling next to him with Kara and Tug on either side of her. Shiro nodded once before thrusting his illuminated hand into the metallic exterior of the ship. His hand easily melting through its dense mass he cut out the rough shape of a circle. Pulling back to cover his face as the metal ring popped out of place a small vortex of pressure burst forward.

“Follow my lead.” Shiro instructed, pulling himself through the opening and disappearing into the flashing red warning lights.

Miume nodded to her team members before following. Jetting herself through the opening and landing in a half raise position her muscles tensed uneasily as her tails swished behind her. Kara dropped down silently next to her, hands already fisted as Tug finished their train. His large frame barely making a sound as his boots connected with the cold metallic floor. Shiro was a few feet away, squatting behind a thin wall, checking for enemies as silent warning lights rang through the breached hanger.

“This way.” he murmured in a low voice, glancing back at his team before quickly darting out from his cover.

Miume followed his lead, quickly moving to his previous hiding spot and waiting for Shiro to give the okay to move in further. Keeping herself low her tails swished anxiously behind her as Kara and Tug ducked behind her. Miume had never done an infiltration like this before and was glad to have Kara and Tug behind her. Kara was the tank of their team, not only with her armored skin, but with her fighting abilities. And while she had never seen Tug fight, Miume knew his size and strength would be a good advantage.

She also trusted their leader, Oli, with her life. Knowing that he would do anything to keep his team safe. Even if he was complaining about being left behind to babysit the ship, she was glad it was him.

Shiro silently motioned for Miume to move after a group of quickly marching sentries blindly went into the depressurized hanger. Their programming only looking for threats they could see, they didn’t have the capacity to think and look for hiding enemies.

Taking in a sharp breath Miume bolted towards Shiro as soundlessly as possible, Kara and Tug waiting just ticks before following her.

Quickly flattening themselves against the adjacent hallway and waiting for their next move.

Glancing down Miume noted Shiro tapping his finger rhythmically against the wall before moving us forward again. His motions seemed practiced, more like muscle memory than strategic planning on the spot.

“Are you timing movements?” Miume asked in a low voice, trying to figure out the pattern as they moved carefully through the ship.

“Yes, I memorized the sentries pattern before escaping.” Shiro’s voice was just above a whisper, eyes still focused on the corridor before them. Miume nodded, understanding before glancing between Shiro’s tapping hand and the centuries movements. She almost had it figured out, tapping her gloved hand against her thigh in the same pattern as Shiro. This would come in handy if they
“Pidge, can you tell us exactly where the prisoners are?” Shiro asked, sliding out from the wall and ducking to the next hiding space.

“Give me a tick.” Pidge replied, her voice distracted as blasts echoed through the mic. Miume gazed through the dim hallway, her ears twitching in response to the clicking of centuries as they moved past them. Her ears movements restricted by her tight helmet.

“Green is picking up a cluster or heat signatures five hundred feet down and to the right. It looks like they are guarded, so be careful.” Pidge responded quickly, Allura's voice filtered in and out of focus as she gave overarching commands to the groups outside.

“Thanks Pidge,” Shiro commented before glancing back at the team behind him. “Kara, you are a fighter right? You come with me and we’ll strike first. Tug, you and Miume provide back up. Kara nodded, taking a step past Miume and slipping into a defensive stance, her long tail coiling silently on the smooth floor. Shiro tapped his finger twice more, waiting as two sentries passed before bolting down the hallway as silently as possible, Kara on his heels.

Shiro slipped behind the last cover wall, peeking out of it briefly before nodding at Kara. Kara nodded in response, her hands curling into fists as Shiro launched himself stealthily from the hiding spot. His right hand glowing he moved to take down the first guard. Kara cut out from behind the wall simultaneously, ducking under Shiro’s attack, her hand flashing out like a snake’s strike as she grabbed the second guard’s neck and easily snapped it. Miume and Tug crept up behind them, cautiously looking around. Tug’s arms were half raised as he backtracked next to Miume, keeping their backs covered.

“This is it,” Shiro huffed, taking a deep breath before placing his hand over the entrance pad. The metal door automatically slid open in response. The team tensed, not sure what to expect as they were greeted with silent darkness.

Miume glanced at Kara then down to the now dead Galra post. Kara noticed, shrugging simply “I snap like rowspar egg between my hands,” her voice unconcerned as she returned her attention back to the pit of darkness before them.

“Uh huh, I can see that.” Miume mumbled quietly to herself, carefully stepping over the robotic body.

“Come on guys,” Shiro waved them in as he cautiously took a step inside the dark room while clicking on the flashlight attached to his wrist and running it across the room. Pale light slid across a large open room. Revealing about ten aliens of all shapes and sizes chained by their wrists to the dark metal walls. Their eyes wincing at Shiro's harsh light, unable to tell what was happening until their eyes adjusted to the sudden light. The stench of blood hung damply in the enclosed space, pained groans echoing through the shadows.

“Shiro!” One of them tried in broken language, pulling harshly against its chains as their eyes adjusted to the figures emerging from the darkness, “trap!” It cried out desperately, their rough voice tearing through their throat as the heavy metal door slid shut with a deafening click of a secured lock. Entrapping Shiro and Kara into its black hole.

“Kara!” Miume called in panic, rushing forward, she tried to join her comrade before the door slammed shut. “Kara!” The fur on her tails stood on end now, bristling against the material of her
space suit.

“Hello there champion,” a druid’s icy voice slide through the inky blackness.

“Kara, keep your guard up.” Shiro warned, moving his hand to Kara’s cold skin, finding her whereabouts in the limited light. Scanning his flashlight across the walls he tried to locate where the attack would come from.

“Who is champion?” Kara asked in a low voice, her tail moving across the floor carefully, its sound barely audible despite the ominous silence.

“I am,” Shiro replied in a hard tone, “I can’t explain it now,” bringing his hand up an intense purple glowed brightly, illuminating the room a bit more.

A dozen or so of chained prisoner eyes shifted uneasily through the room. Their bodies tensed in anticipation as they braced for a fight they couldn’t even see. The sound of rugged, labored, breathing whispered across the room as they waited.

“Understood.” Kara nodded, shifting her feet into a wider stance her tail coiled behind her as a counter balance.

“One of yours severely wounded our master, an eye for an eye is only fair,” its voice came through before something slammed into Shiro’s chest. Crying out in pain he tried to right himself, moving his hand back and forth trying to find the Druid.

“You stole our ultimate weapon,” a bone chilling voice sliced through the darkness, “using her against our master.”

Taking a shallow breath Shiro moved his light in the direction of the voice, his muscles going rigid as flashes of the ring raced through his mind. Their trauma distracting him long enough for a druid to appear in front of him. Eyes widening Shiro tried to react, but the witch was too fast, a dark energy ball blinding him with sudden light before Karas hard tail smacked him across the lower abdomen. Forcing him backwards barely far enough for the attack to skim past his armor. Sizzling crackles of energy breaking dangerously across his chest plate.

“Shiro.” Kara called over her shoulder as she restabalized herself. Another Druid materializing in front of her, ball of light connecting with her braced arms. Loud cracks of tile echoed through the room as Kara was forced backwards. Keeping her forearms across her face Kara’s powerful legs pushed back against the druids attack, withstanding its force long enough to faint to the side. The energy ball colliding with the metal floor from the sudden loss of counter force. Its strength shattering the metallic ground easily.

Grinning to herself Kara used her lowered position to strike upwards, her fist cutting through where the druid had just been.

“I’m alright ,” Shiro reassured, activating his shield as another blind attack lashed out from the darkness. Striking his shield with thunderous force

“It cannot hurt me so easily. Free prisoners.” she commanded, “I see in darkness.”

“Got it,” Shiro responded, as Kara’s pupiless red eyes slid across the room. Carefully tracking the different heat signatures of the aliens around them, looking for the abnormality of dark spots where the Druids came and went. Pushing off the ground and sprinting towards the first prisoner. Narrowly escaping another clawed hand as he ducked past another attack. Trusting his hand outwards it glowed pink again, easily melting the restrains of the first prisoner.
“Shiro, low,” Kara’s voice drew his attention away from his work, ducking instinctively the wall above his head exploded as the Druid’s energy ball crashed into it. Sharp shards of metal splintering across the air, impaling the barely freed alien. They cried out in shocked pain, flinched away from the brutal attack. Spinning around Shiro’s glowing hand cut through empty air before cold hands gripped his neck. Easily lifting him off the ground and slamming him into the destroyed wall with crushing force. Gagging the air was forced from Shiro’s lungs, a breathy curse leaving his lips as he grabbed at the large hands viced around his neck. Using the boosters on the soles of his boots he kicked upwards. Ignited boots skimming across the fabric of the druid before it vanished. Letting the rest of Shiro’s attack cut through swirls of smoke.

Coughing harshly Shiro tried to regain his breath, unsteadily landing on his feet he used the wall for support before quickly returning his work. Refisting his mechanical hand to slaughter through the rest of the thick chains holding his allie.

Another witch appeared behind Kara, its talons nails racking across the scaled skin of her back. Ripping open the fabric of her space suit the nails cracked with contact. Her thick skin impenetrable by such attack. Growling under her breath, Kara swung her trail around. A low whistle piercing the darkness as it sliced through the air. Ruby orbs connecting briefly with a solid mass before the druid completely dissolved.

“Keep going.” Kara commanded as she reached up and ripped the chains out of the wall of the closest prisoner. Shiro blinked in shock before nodding and rushing towards the next allie. She really was a tank. And he was glad she was on his side.

Cutting through the next prisoner’s chains he caught the alien as they dropped heavily. A large wound gouged out of their upper thigh, they could barely support themselves. “Move to the far wall.” he instructed, placing a hand on its back and guiding it towards where the small group had formed.

“Shiro, we can’t take much more of this.” Keith’s voice came through the linked connection, blaring warning sirens broke through the explosions drifting in the background.

“We ran into some trouble.” Shiro came back, his voice labored as he sliced through the next set of chains. The allies who weren’t injured had formed a small defense in front of their weakened teammates. Blindly trying to anticipate the next attack.

“Right block.” Kara shouted. Reactivating his shield another energy ball slammed into it seconds after. Its power creating a spider web of cracks across its face. Grunting Shiro was thrown off balance. Body automatically rolling to disperse the impact he looked up, feet sliding to a stop. Breath catching glowing gold eyes pierced through him as its claws slashed across his exposed abdomen.

Crying out in pain he instinctively cradled his wound with one hand, his other glowing pink, ready to attack as the Druid raised a dark swirling mass above its head.

“You take our weapon, we take Voltrons champion.” its hissed with venomous hate.

Gritting his teeth Shiro fisted his hand, shifting his feet to dodge when Kara's solid ivory fist punched through the front of its large hood.

The druid screamed in pain, its form already dissolving to avoid her attack before completely vanishing into the blackness.

“Thanks Kara.” he breathed, getting to his feet shakily.
“We must hurry.” Kara replied curtly, her breathing barely labored.
“Kara! Shiro!” Miume cried, pounding her fists against the metal door she tried to pry it open. She knew that they needed to be quiet, but her teammate was in there, and it sounded like they were fighting.

“Tug, try to open this,” Miume commanded, stepping back, her tails swished uneasily as she glanced both directions down the hall. Her fingers tapping against her leg as she tried to anticipate the next sentry rounds. But how long had it been? When was the last squad they had seen? Their presence must have been detected by now. Would they send more sentries? Galra soldiers? They didn’t have any weapons, would they even be able to handle an attack?

“Roger,” Tug replied in a deep voice, flexing his muscular arms before curling his fingers around the doors frame and pulling. Grunting under his breath he squatted down, digging his large digits into the small crevasse that lined the door. Veins popped out of his arms from the amount of force he was using to pull but the metal only groaned, refusing to mold to his command.

“Come on.” Miume pleaded under her breath, taking a half step back she continuously switched her gaze from one end of the empty hall to the other. Her tails moving anxiously behind her as she restarted her tapping.

“I can only bend it.” Tug huffed, letting go of the door frame and shaking out his arms.

“Then do it!” Miume snapped, her eyes glancing down at the destroyed robots for any sort of weapon. Her red eyes finally landing on some kind of gun. Carefully she pulled the weapon from its mechanical grasp before examining it and uncertainty pointing it towards where the next round of centuries was supposed to come.

Tug nodded, returning his fingers to the support where the door meet the wall and pulled. Growling his fingers dug into the metal deeper, small indents forming under his thick digits. Taking in a large breath he squeezed the limited amount of purchase he hand, pulling the metal pieces apart with all his strength.

“Come on Tug.” Miume urged, aiming the gun down the corridor, the sound of marching footsteps drawing close. Her heart started to beat faster in her chest, palms becoming slick with sweat as her hands started to tremble without her control.

A low growl rumbled like thunder in the back of Tug’s throat as he strained to free his comrades. Muscles starting to quiver in fatigue he pried the metal apart. High pitched groans echoing down the hall as the first group of centuries rounded the corner, guns flaring.

Miumes breath hitched as she fired back, swiftly ducking behind the sliver of ridge protruding just in front of the door to try and lay down some covering fire.

“Any time now Tug!” Miume hissed, squatting down and firing blindly during the breaks in laser assault.

“Grabo.” he murmured to himself, the mental bending open just enough for his fingers to slide through. Gripping the inside of the door he forced it open. Metal protesting loudly as bullets zipped past him.

Karas smaller hands gripped the thin opening under Tugs work, ripping chunks of metal away until they finally hand enough room to escape.
Shiro emerged first, shield open he created a small blockade for the fleeing prisoners.

“Go, go, go!” Shiro commanded as the prisoners filled out as quickly as they could. Some carrying others that were too injured to move quickly. Even though it had been less than a day they had already been tortured.

“Come on!” Miume shouted, moving out from her defensive position to stand behind Shiro and continue her rapid fire. Thankfully taking out a few robots, they collapsed to the floor, lessening the heavy intake of fire they were receiving.

“Keith, we are on our way out now. Hold out just a bit longer.” Shiro informed, his side throbbing painfully as he continued to hold his position.

“Come,” Kara demanded, hoisting Shiro up and over her shoulder easily before quickly jogging back towards their entrance point. Wincing in pain Shiro kept his shield open as Miume back pedaled, still firing until her gun clicked. Its trigger becoming stiff and useless. Cursing Miume hurdled the gun back at the marching soldiers. The solid material nailing one of them in the head, tipping it backwards and causing a domino effect of unsteadied centuries.

“Oli, create the bridge now!” Miume commanded, tapping the side of her helmet briefly.

“What you think I’m amettrue? I already made it.” Oli snided, making Miume roll her eyes.

Since they had breached the hanger, Oli had to create some kind of secured opening for them to get through. One that didn’t require space suits. Luckily he had already modified the base of their ship for such function, while it was still in the beta stages, it would have to work.

“Good because Umi can’t take much more of this.” Keith came back, cutting off another comment Oli was about to make.

“Neither can we,” Lance’s struggling voice came through next. “We are getting swarmed out here.”

“On our way.” Shiro responded, his voice shaking from pain as Kara carried him back.

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“Umi, we are about to exit can you give us some cover?” Shiro asked, his aura was close enough now that i could sense its distress.

“Yes. Are you alright?” I responded, glancing backwards towards their energies. It was a mixture of fear, pain, and relief.

“I’m fine, we just need to get back to the ship.” Shiro dismissed in a rough voice.

“Let’s hurry.” Keith commented, commanding his lion to give us some covering fire as I expanded the barrier farther, skimming it over the outside of Zarkons ship.

“Thanks Umi.” Miume called through her head piece as she helped load the injured aliens onto her ship hastily before turning to Shiro and frowning at his glowing wound.

“Use this to get back. It will only last a few minutes though.” Miume instructed in a hushed tone as she pushed a clear capsule into Shiro’s chest. It’s form immediately growing around his form, sealing his ripped space suit.
“Thanks.” Shiro nodded, waiting for Miume to close the bridge between her ship and Zarkons to jet back out into space and towards his lion.

“Are we in position to leave?” Shiro asked as his lion roared to life.

“All set here, lets go.” Miume called back, nodding to Oli who set the ship into gear.

“Aria Castle ready.” Allura responded, “we can’t hold much more of this heavy fire!”

“Okay team, form Voltron! Umi I need you to give enough cover for both of us to get back.” Shiro instructed.

“Yes.” I responded, my knees were already starting to shake from depleting energy . I didn’t know if i had enough energy to get us back safely, “Miume please stay as close as possible.”

“Understood.” Miume responded, glancing towards the red lion before it flew outwards to meet with the rest of the incoming lions.

The edges of my barrier flickered in and out of focus as I pushed a larger barrier around Voltron. Closing my eyes and letting their immense energies flow through me, melding our auras together and drawing on them for more power.

“Hunk, form shoulder cannon. Let’s get out of here as quickly as possible.” Shiro commanded as Voltron rocketed towards Aria castle. The anti-Zarkon fleats already retreating.

“On it!” Hunk reported, slamming his bayard into place a new surgance of vibrating energy rolled across Voltron. Shivering from its power I flexed my barrier out farther, focusing on Miume’s energy as they tried to keep up with Voltron in their smaller ship.

Taking a staggered breath I unlocked the magnets from my boots and hands, letting myself slid to the floor. The belt giving me enough slack to rest on the floor without having to disconnect from the command chair.

“Umi what’s wrong?” Keith asked, turning back to look at me briefly as Hunk’s cannon fire lite up the space around us, illuminating the cabin with bright oranges and yellows.

“Nothing, I’m just trying to conserve energy.” I responded in as steady of a voice as I could, closing my hands into fists I squeezed them tighter. Trying to stop them from shaking lightly I closed my eyes again, refocusing on Miumes energy jumping anxiously behind me.

“Hold out for as long as you can.” he murmured before returning his focus to the battle in front of us. Taking a deep breath I pushed the barrier out farther, the edges flickering unstably as the infinite sieges of lasers pounded against my barrier. Their force vibrating across my skin as the rest of the sounds around me faded into muddied notes.

“Brace for impacts!” Shiro called as he drove us forward through the relentless downpour of fire. Miume’s energy continues to follow as closely as possible as we rocketed towards home base.

Wincing my breathing started to stagger as their fire intensified. The healing blisters on my hands starting to bubble again from the heat of their lasers as we crashed through Zarkons advancing fleats. Their ships breaking apart as they collided with my barrier. Residual sparks of energy bristled across its surface as distorted ripples of pink purple disrupted Voltrons sight.

“We have an iron cannon locked on us!” Lance called in a distressed voice
“He have to evade it, Umi can’t take much more!” Keith shoot back, his voice distracted as he cut through another smaller fighter jet. Trying to lessen the amount of impacts my shield was taking.

“Come on, we are almost there. Just a bit farther. Let’s try to make it there before it fires!” Shiro directed in a strained voice.

“Our ship can’t handle your speed.” Oli’s aggravated voice cut through the cabin, their ship lagging behind Voltron.

“Give it all you got.” Shiro responded, barely slowing our advance as Aria castle rocketed towards us. Trying to break through the swarm of ships firing at them.

My muscles tensed as the ion cannons energy started to charge the air, static volts of energy snapping around space as my energy responded it the incoming attack. Taking a staggered breath I pushed off the ground, pulling myself back up so that I could directly see the threat. Tightening my grip on the edges of his command chair the air on the back of my neck stood on end. Flexing the edges of my barrier I tried to reinforce its strength, but the continuous barrage of fire kept breaking it down.

“Come on.” I pleaded under my breath, eyes trained on the cannon aimed for us. The red lions cabin flashing red as warning signals echoed around us.

“Just a bit farther,” Shiro gripped his controls, “Allura ready the jump!” Their particle barrier flickered in and out in random patches, its strength at its limit and threatening to fail as they tried to give us cover from above.

“Ready when you are.” Allura responded, “but the faster the better.”

“Alright, Umi, just focus on Voltron, we are going to carry them. This is taking too much time.” Shiro decided, pulling Voltron to a quick halt.

“What!?” Miume exclaimed as Voltron turned around, its large hands carefully enclosing around their ship.

“Careful we just bought this!” Oli called out angrily while shaking his fists.

“Ion cannon incoming!” Pidge cried. Snapping my head back my jaw clenched, eyes hardening as the cannon fired. Letting the extended part of my barrier collapse I refocused my energy directly in front of us, trying to strengthen its wall. But its form flickered in and out, threatening to shatter on impact.

“Move!” Keith commanded, swinging his lion around to try and avoid the rapidly approaching laser.

“Full thrusters!” Shiro called, wincing as bullets broke through the back of my weakened shield. Pounding against Voltrons exterior the Red lions cabin shook from the force. A new barrage of warning signals piercing my ears.

“Let’s go home!” Lance whooped in a determined voice as Keith thrust his controller's forward. Voltron sprung to life, exploding forward with such speed I was thrown backwards, the belt connecting me to the chair snapping taught. Gritting my teeth I hardened my barrier with everything I had, the world moving in slow motion as Voltron shot forward. The ion cannons ray barely skimming the outskirts of my barrier, its force ripping through my layer before ricocheting outwards. Bursting my shield apart we were entirely exposed.
Crying out in pain my eye site blacked out momentarily, knees collapsing underneath me.

“Disband and go to your hangers in three, two” Shiro counted down, letting go of Miume’s ship as carefully as possible. Using Voltron’s momentum he sent them hurtling towards the closest open hanger as Aria Castles barrier disappeared. Their ship pinwheeled out of control, boosters desperately fighting to re-stabilize themselves before crashing into the castle.

“Hold on.” Keith called back in a strained voice as his lion disconnected from Voltron, the force splitting us into different direction. Allura opened the wormhole simultaneously, trusting that the lions would make it into their hangers by time we were swallowed in a jump.

Keith pulled the controllers back, maneuvering his lion back into its designated hanger as steadily as possible, its massive claws sliding down the launch tunnel he tried to pull us to a stop.

Tensing against the force of our skidding I was barely aware of Miume’s energy attaching to the ship. She had made it in safely, her bubbly aura spiking in enraged fear.

Jerking to a rough halt I let out a held breath, my fingers finally relaxing from their death grip on the top of the command chair. My shoulders sagged as I whipped the blood dripping down my chin when I froze. Energy snapping into fatigued attention ice crept over my skin. Heart stopping before jumping in my throat I slowly looked backwards. The back of the red lion fading out of focus as my body started to tremble involuntarily.

Menacing negative energy charged behind us at an alarming rate. Collecting into a solid mass its form continued to grow. With each tick becoming more powerful. Its strength was entirely different than an ion cannon blast, something I had never experienced before. Yet it felt so familiar. I knew this energy. Sinister phantom hands wrapped tightly around my neck as the hellish mass continued to manifest.

“Keith.” my voice was barely above a whisper as I slipped into a defensive stance, energy crackling around us in the confined space.

“What’s wrong?” his voice was hard as he half moved out of his seat, hands automatically reaching towards the controls again as he turned to look at me. Ripples of static electricity running across his skin as I tensed in front of him.

“Kittencakes, you made it!” Lance’s voice came through the headpiece, his pitch jarring against my ears.

“That was the worst landing ever!” Miume responded, her voice rising an octave in adrenaline rushed fear.

“Oh it wasn’t that bad.” Lance joked lightheartedly.

“You threw us into the hanger!” she replied in an angry tone.

My muscles tensed as the growing collection of corrupt energy came to an iier halt. Something was coming.

“Everyone get back in your lions!” my voice hit my ears before I had realized I spoke, my breath coming in short shallow bursts as the negative energy rapidly intensified once more. Like a spark landing on oil before its explosion.

“What? Why?” Lance’s confused voice came back through the red lions speaker.
“Just do it!” Keith retorted in an tense voice, his fingers itching to their controls. 

“There’s an unknown object locked onto us!” Pidge cried out in a panicked voice.

“Entering wormhole!” Allura announced, the castle’s booster power increasing as black lightning like energy exploded towards us. The ignition erupting with chaotic speed it charged forward. Loud snaps of hungry energy crackling through the intercom.

“New attack thingy!” Hunk cried from his lion, yellow aura spiking in fear.

“Hurry up and jump!” Lance exclaimed, grabbing Miume by the hand and quickly dragging her towards his lion as the rest of her team ran back to their ship.

“Umi, barrier!” Shiro commanded as I thrust my hands forward, energy sliding off my hands and forcing another barrier to wrap around the base of the ship, the last part that was exposed outside the wormhole.

Black energy collided with my shield with destructive force. Shattering it instantly my barrier caved inwards, freezing for the briefest of beats before bursting backwards. Snapping back like a taut band they canceled each other out. The force knocking me backwards as energy surged forwards into the hanger before exploding outwards chaotically in every direction. Opposing energies ripped through the hanger as a blinding white light swallowed us momentarily.

Wincing from the harsh light I cried out in pain. Black energy running rampadly over my skin and clawing viciously at my own aura. Sinking its venomous teeth in my muscles and tearing them apart as it rapidly streaked upwards towards my chest.

Screaming pain bumed into me as glowing black tree like veins pulsed under my skin. Dangerously slithering up my arms and towards my heart my breath hitched in agonized fear.

Squeezing my eyes shut I forced my palms to close. Cutting the connection of dark energy that carved into my skin just before my shoulder joints. Another bubble of energy ruptured around us as the direct line of energy was stopped. Shoving me back against the command chair Keith cursed, trying to rebalance himself as well.

Streaks of hungry black lightning raced across the faces of the hanger. It’s sinisterness snapping hungrily at my purple pink energy it tried to consume it. Both energies fighting for dominance, trying to overpower the other. Pink purple energy crackled dangerously as it zipped through the space, swallowing every bit of darkness it could until there were just baby steaks of inky lightening crackling across the walls. Residual sparks of energy danced off the smooth metal surfaces as the charged air started to fade.

“What was that?!” Keith demanded before being thrown to the side. Cursing he quickly re-stabled himself as his lion slipped backwards back towards the ejection hole. An invisible force was dragged us out of the hanger.

“What’s happening?!” Lance called in a terrified tone, his lion sliding out from its hanger as well, controls unresponsive as he started pulling on them at random.

“Try to stick together!” Shiro commanded, struggling to keep his lion from spiraling out of control as its hind legs dipped off the hanger platform.

“We lost the integrity of the wormhole!” Allura cried, her eyes desperately scanning the controls in front of her as the lions signatures were forced out into different parts of the tunnel. Her fingers rapidly tapping the hologram screens to try and gain full control of the wormhole back.
“Hold on!” Keith called back, gripping his controllers as we smashed through a wall of the wormhole tunnel. Shoving my feet to the base of the command chair I pressed myself against it with limp arms, squeezing my eyes shut as we were ejected into an unknown part of the universe. I was vaguely aware of Shiro’s aura entering the same hole we had before everything became a blur.
Stranded

Chapter Summary

~So I have a habit of writing monster sized chapters...and defiantly needed to break this one up because 34 pages is too much to edit at a time ^^*~

Blinding blue white lights consumed the red lion as we rocketed sideways through the compromised wormhole. Bracing against the opposing momentum the cabin shook violently as we crashed through a random exit point. Harsh white blinded us momentarily as we barreled through the new atmosphere with terrifying speed. Red warning alarms blared through the small space as the red lion’s nose dipped down as we turned ourselves over. My stomach lurching upwards as a new g-force slammed against us.

Cursing loudly Keith pulled frantically on the controls trying to regain control over his unresponsive lion. His feet jammed against the front dash of the lion his muscles strained to hold him in place as he desperately tried to right us.

My breath caught in my throat as we rolled over again, the force snapped use to the side which threw me off balance. The belt connecting me to Keith’s command chair pulled taught, it quivered violently in tension, before it was ripped apart.

My eyes widened as I was thrown backward, barely able to stop myself from tearing off the back command chair. Wincing in pain the magnets on my boots pulled me to a violent stop, my arms hung uselessly at my side, I tried to fight back against the inertia shoving us backwards.

Willing my arms to move I shook as I strained against the counterforce as we plummeted through the sky. My fingers barely brushing the top of the command chair, I compelled my body to push through the mind-numbing pain. Every small movement seemingly snapped the connective tissue in my arms.

A small cry of pain escaped my lips as I stretched myself farther trying to find purchase. Magnets barely clicking together as the red lion tipped over itself. My weight shifted forward, slamming me into the back of the command chair before it ripped me backward again. My palms connecting to the chair only ticks before I was forced backwards again, my arms screamed in pain at the sudden stop.

“Fuck, fuck, come on!” Keith roared at his lion, the crushing force relentlessly pounded against us as we rocketed towards an ominously churning storm of grey and black.

“Umi! We need barriers!” Keith called back to me, his voice distraught as he pulled on the controls of the lion in futile his body trying to press further into the command chair to avoid the impending impact.

My heart stopped as I stared at him with wide eyes, there was no way I would be able to make a barrier right now. Even if I had the energy my arms burned like there were hot irons picking apart the fibers of my muscles. If it weren’t for the magnets securing me to his chair, I doubt I would have been able to hold on, their connection molding my fingers around the curved edge.
“Umi!” he cried again, his voice cracking in desperation, as we slammed into the first layer of atmosphere. A deafening explosion erupted around us as we barreled blindly downwards, the red lion being swallowed by the vortex of charcoal clouds.

Squeezing my eyes shut I was rammed against the back of the chair before being ripped to the side. The magnets connecting my hands and feet painfully jerking me to a stop before I could hit the opposing wall. My arms started to throb as the red lion was thrown in a different direction before starting to tumble head over heels sightlessly. Thundering wind screamed past us as unknown objects barraged the outside of the lion.

“Come on, come on!” Keith yelled over the intense noise, his lion tossing and turning violently before finally dipping down into a terrifying high-speed nose dive. Hurdling downwards into the darkness. Streaks of black ripped past us in any direction.

The tip of the lion’s nose broke through the planet’s blacks and greys, puncturing its cavity only to reveal a more dangerous one.

Endless waves of rolling grey sand dunes moved like a mixed ocean. Opposing winds churning violently against the other, streaks of monochromatic sand currents cut through each other. Random wisps of grain kicked upwards into colossal tornados. Their deadly vortex stagnant as the opposing currents battled for dominance before one finally overtook the other, violently exploding apart and sending chaotic twists of sand in any direction, its weaker streams being consumed by larger ones.

The air sliced through us with shrieks of wind against metal, their force twisting the red lion to their will as small beads of dust and sand drilled against the exterior. Creating another layer of unnerving vibrations.

“Umi!” Keith cried out, his voice panicked as he leaned back farther in his seat. Bracing himself for the impending impact.

Eyes widening my breath caught in throat, arms shaking in agony I willed myself to pull away from the safety of the magnets holding me down.

Crying out in pain I unlatched my hands and right foot from their secured position, forcing my arms out parallel in either direction my breath started to come in short shallow bursts as I relied on one anchor point to keep me from being crushed into part of the cabin.

Squeezing my eyes shut I compelled my fingers to open, exposing my aching palms as I pushed a barrier outwards. The black streaks running up my arm pulsed more vibrantly as I activated my power, sinking its poisonous ink further into my system and tearing my energy apart from the seams.

Blood dripped from my lip as I clamped down on my lower lip to keep from crying out. Arms shaking violently a flicking bubble of pink purple wrapped around us. Dipping my head down I strained to focus on Shiro’s energy, pushing a weak barrier around his form, unable to protect his massive lion as well.

Letting out a strangled battle cry I braced for impact as we barreled into the ground. Barrier shattering instantly from the crushing force we were thrown forward. Sand exploding around us, masking any sense of direction the red lion flipping over itself, our momentum drilled through the sand. Screaming bone snapping weight slammed against me. Body hurdling forward I viciously collided with a hard metal surface. My singular anchor point ripped from its hold my head cracked against the metal I was barely aware of a thin flicker of energy wrapping around me before
Warning alarms screamed through the cabin, their strobing lights overly bright in the dim environment. His lion shuddering under him Keith grit his teeth as he strained to hold himself in place while reaching out to try and catch his unconscious comrade as she limply slid downwards in their roughly sliding sideways state.

The back of the lion slammed to an abrupt stop. Painfully jerking her passengers around before becoming still. Keith groaned, waiting a tick to remove his hands from the controls to make sure they had actually stopped.

Legs pressed firmly against the front dash for support he let out a long held breath. Umi’s unconscious body sagged against him, stopping her from slipping further across the front of the lion.

Keith’s eyes hardened as he pulled the levers of his lion once more, hopeful that she would respond but when he was greeting with nothing he let his hands drop.

Letting out a sigh he placed a hand to his helmet, “Shiro.” he called out and immediately winced as harsh feed back cut through the intercom.

“Great.” he grumbled under his breath as he shifted his eyes upwards, his heart dropped as he looked out the slanted windshield. Shrieking wind screamed past him, bullets of sand pounded against his lion with vibrating force.

“This is Keith, Umi Shiro and I crash landed on some planet. Does anyone have coordinates on us?” he spoke into his helmet again, anticipative that someone would hear him. But again, he was greeting with skin crawling static. “Hello, this is Keith. Can anyone hear me?” he tried again to no avail.

Pinching the bridge of his nose he breathed out once more, “patience yields focus.” he repeated to himself, trying to ground himself before his eyes slid back to Umi. His heart skipping in his chest as he took in her unconscious form. Anxiety making his blood pump faster as the reality of their stranded position set in.

Blood dripped from a self inflicted gash in her lower lip, traces of smeared blood whipped across her chin and the back of her gloved hand. Another sliver of red running down the side of her face, a darkening bruise forming at the top of her forehead.

“Shit.” Keith cursed, carefully maneuvering his legs to help Umi ease down the rest of the awkwardly titled cabin to rest against the side wall. An unconscious groan of pain leaving her lips as her eyebrows pulled together, breath catching once.

Freezing Keith looked down at her, hands barely touching her. Had just that slight movement of sliding hurt that much? Did the impact of their crash affect her that much? He knew that there was some amount of physical pain associated when too much force hit her barrier. But they had crashed before, on harder surfaces without her getting physically hurt.

Keith slid his eyes carefully over her form, looking for any other sign of distress without removing her armor. His eyes finally resting on her quivering hands. Light tremors spasmed up her arms.
Hesitantly placing his hand against her arm his eyes hardened as an abnormal amount of heat pulsed from her skin.

Had she gotten physically hurt from whatever dark energy had hit them in Aria Castle? His fingers twitched as he debated what to do before reaching back and pulling his Marmora blade.

Flicking his eyes to her face once more his stomach twisted uneasily as he slowly pulled the tight space suit away from her body. Pressing the tip of the knife against the material it sliced open easily.

Cutting as gently as possible he pulled the suit away from her burning arms. His eyes widening as a new sense of panic jumped in his throat.

Pulsating lines of black spiderwebbed up Umi’s pale arms. Heat radiating from them as her muscles quivered uncontrollably. Her chest rising and falling erratically labored breaths left her lips as her face contorted in pain.

“What the hell is this?” he breathed out in horror, heart rate spiking in concern. She was bleeding from her head, probably had a concussion and who knew what else was injured under her armor. And now there were foreign black veins glowing under her skin that covered how much of her body? Just her arms? Her legs? Torso?

On top of that, they were stranded, with no communication going through, on some deadly wind sand planet who knows how far away from Shiro.

Taking a nervous breath Keith turned his attention back to Umi and tried to keep his emotions under control.

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“Umi! Umi wake up!” Keith’s frantic voice penetrated through the blackness that consumed me. Flickers of nervously pulsating crimson breaking through it and pulling me forwards.

“Umi, I need you to wake up.” he tried again, a desperate note slipping into his voice. How long had I been unconscious?

Slowly my eyes fluttered open. Blurred red and black gradually coming into focus as my head rolled to the side, a pained groan escaping my lips. Muted pulses of a high pitched ring echoed through my ears, gradually becoming louder. Blinking I tried to clear my hazy vision, Keith’s face coming in and out of focus as dim red light distorted the background. His dark eyes watching me with uneasy anxiety.

“Umi!” he breathed out in relief, head dropping as his shoulders sagged.

“What happened?” my voice cracked as I winced, my body registering different types of pain. My arms burned, head and ribs throbbing, as other aches sunk deeper into my muscles. A heavy weight pressed down on my chest, making it hard to breath, as if the breastplate had crushed into my ribs. Licking my lips the familiar taste of iron coated my tongue. Hot traces of blood slid down my face, thin drops dripping over the edge of my eyebrow. Catching in my long lashes before being rapidly blinked away.

“We crash landed. I’m so sorry, where does it hurt?” he asked, his hands fluttering nervously over my body, not sure what to do.

Taking a few more unsteady breaths my eyes shifted to the discarded black space suit material and
arm guards at Keith’s side. The rest of the dead cabin coming into focus as my head cleared.

Slowly I looked down at my burning arms. Fingers twitching sharp stinging sensations shot upwards making me groan. Inky veins pulsed under my skin, creating an unsettling iridescent underglow. The main branch of black breaking apart into smaller and smaller branches it wrapped like a boiling vice around my slim arms. The epicenter of torment centering in my palm like a black hole. Throbbing with every breath and sinking further into my skin, threatening to swallow me whole.

Sinister icy black nails dug relentlessly into the fibers of my muscles, it's dark energy trying to seep deeper and deeper into my being. Prickling like thousands of hot needles across my skin as it fought against my natural pink purple energy.

Wincing I squeezed my eyes shut, tipping my head backwards to try and ignore the pain seizing my body.

Keith watched me silently, his aura twisting in uneasy nervousness. His hand barely resting on my thigh as he debated what to do.

Letting out a shaky breath I willed my arms to relax from their continuous spasms. The vibrancy of cobalt black veins gradually disintegrating. The unsettling glow fading as my energy worked against the invading one.

“I think my arms are healing.” I murmured more to myself than to Keith as their shaking slowly turned into faint tremors.

Keith opened his mouth to question me but closed it as he realized that the dark veins were disappearing. The heat radiating from them cooling back to normal body temperature.

“Where are we? Where’s Shiro?” I questioned, moving to sit up before wincing, my body protesting loudly against my action.

“Careful, don’t move just yet. Let me just take your helmet off first.” Keith lurched forward to stop me, hands hovering over the tops of my shoulders as I gingerly leaned back against the side of the cabin. Waiting a beat he reached forward and carefully removed my helmet, making sure to avoid jostling my head as he did so. The color of his face draining as he pulled it all the off. Energy spiking upwards in concern.

“What?” I asked, my eyebrows trying to pull together but the drying blood tugged against my skin as I looked up at him.

“You’re bleeding and have some nasty bruises forming. And what do you mean your arms are healing?” his voice wavered only slightly as he tried to control his composure. Red aura pulling inwards to conceal its worry.

“It was the Druids magic that hit us, my energy is getting rid of it. I am used to it, but this time it was different. Darker. More powerful.” I tried to explain, attempting to shrug but grimsing as hot pain shot down my arms and across my chest.

Keith eyed me warily for a moment before shifting to slide across me and down behind the tilted command chair. Running his hands across the floor before a small twang of metal caught my ear. An airtight door popping open, its contents threatening to spill out.

“Even if your energy is healing, we should still clean and wrap your other injuries.” he spoke while rummaging through the contents in the small cabinet.
“I am alright. Are you? Where is Shiro?” I questioned, my energy bubbling in nervousness. Keith’s aura was tense, vibrating quickly to itself as he tried to control himself with a calm demeanor. And I couldn’t even feel Shiro, meaning he wasn’t close enough to see.

Biting my lip again the gash reopened, a bubble of blood popping open as I carefully tried to flex my fingers. Cringing away from the stinging sensation pricking my skin my breath caught in my throat. The pain was less intense than before, but residual dark energy still pulsed through me. My own energy taking longer than I had experienced before to push out the darkness.

I had been used to the Druids trying to implant their energy into me, trying to rip open my third eye into something more powerful. Something much more sinister in nature. But my aura resisted, pushing against the darkness and retaining its original form and vibration. Refusing to become corrupted with druid magic.

“I’m fine, your barrier blocked most of the initial impact.” Keith responded while ripping open the zipper of a small medical bag and taking out a packet of clear goo like we had seen in the castle before.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t keep it.” I replied quietly, looking down and attempting to clench my fists in aggravation. I still wasn’t strong enough to keep him safe.

“No,” Keith paused his work to look at me, “I’m sorry for asking. If it weren’t for you I don’t know if we would even be here right now.” he gave me a weak smile while shifting back over to me. Pressing his feet into the wall I was leaning against and pushing back against the command chair for support.

“This might sting a bit.” he commented as he tore open the familiar pouch of goo and jiggled some out on to his fingers. We both gave it a weary look, still put off by its texture but Keith continued to gently apply it to the small gash in my forehead.

Holding the open packet between his teeth he fumbled around in the emergency medical bag for a sanitary wipe to clean the rest of the blood from my face.

“Where is Shiro?” I pressed again, my eyes following his movements as he dabbed the residual goo against my skin.

“I don’t know,” he admitted after a moment, “I think the wind is disrupting our communications or something. Or it could be because we crash landed and our lions needs to rest a bit first.” his dark eyes glanced over my head, a deep frown setting into his features.

“Winds?” I echoed, following his line of sight as best I could from my compromised position. Flinching from the movement I became increasingly aware of the intense howling just outside our pocket of security. Its shrill wailing set my teeth on edge as a never ending siege of bullets drilled against the red lions exterior. Its force creating tremors across the metal, threatening to break through.

“We are on some desert planet.” Keith explain, standing up to get a better look outside, “I don’t think we could even go outside without your barriers from the strength of these winds.” he glanced back down at me, aura tightening around him.

“But we have to find Shiro, he was injured.” I insisted, struggling to stand up. Keith’s face dropped, his hands quickly moving to help me to my feet. Supporting most of my weight I leaned heavily against him. My body becoming more aware of the deep aches.
“Injured?” he paused, eyebrows pulling together as he gave me a concerned look. I nodded, my head instantly throbbing at the motion as I looked outside, my aura hardening around us. Monochromatic sand whipped across the red lion. Lashing against us with relentless force it tried to pry open our metal cavity. High pitch screams of wind pierced my ears as its claws slashed against the red lion.

“I don’t know what happened. When he came back to the black lion his energy seemed hurt.” I paused, closing my eyes and trying to focus on finding his energy again but there was nothing, “I can’t feel him.” I frowned as my knees buckled under me. Gasping in pain I gripped Keith's waist for support as he automatically shifted to hold more of my weight before helping me slide back down the wall.

“We are probably just out of range.” he tried to reassure me, “Does anything else hurt?” his eyes ran over me again, tracing the dimly pulsing inky veins under my skin.

“I can’t really tell.” I replied honestly, flexing my hands again the stinging pain settled into my skin, but the burning sensation had dulled to thinly spread warmth across my arms.

“Your body is probably in shock. You should take an easy. But,” he paused, aura stiffening as he debated our options, “if Shiro is hurt I want to find him as soon as possible.” Keith moved back to the control chair, testing out a few levers but his lion was silent. “It looks like red still needs to rest.” he sighed heavily, slumping back awkwardly in the diagonal chair.

“I just need to rest a bit more, then I could make a small barrier.” I tried, curling and uncurling my fingers again. My energy wafted lethargically off me, my reserves nearly depleted they pooled together. Quivering ripples trying to regenerate.

Clenching my fists I willed my energy to recuperate faster. I had to find Shiro, and the only way to get outside was with a barrier.

“What? No you can’t possibly have the energy to do that.” Keith shook his head, seeing through me easily. Sighing I leaned back against the side of the red lion chewing the inside of my lip in contemplation as the wind shrieked outside.

“What if you carry me?” I glanced up at him, “like in training? Then I could make a half barrier instead.”

Keith flicked his eyes back to mine, internally debating what the best battle plan would be. “If you’re on my back I couldn’t use my jetpack. And who knows how far away Shiro is.” he paused, looking down at his arm guard. “What if I support most of your weight? I’ll use my shield under your jetpack to avoid getting burned. Then if you can create a half barrier we use it like a kite to move faster.”

“A what?” I asked, giving him a confused look.

“A kite. It’s something that catches air and moves through it.” he tried to explain before returning his gaze back outside and frowning.

“I can do it.” I reassured him but he didn’t look convinced.

A few beats of tense silence passed between us before he let out a loud sigh. “I can’t think of anything better. But you have to rest some first. Hopefully by then red will be feeling better or well get some kind of connection to Shiro.”
Nodding my aching body relaxed back against the cool surface of the red lion, my eyes fluttering shut in exhaustion.

“Wait, Umi don’t sleep yet, you probably have a concussion.” Keith turned abruptly in his chair, almost falling out, his aura spiking nervously

“A what?” I asked, opening my eyes again to give him a tired look.

“It means you brain might be swelling or something and it’s bad to sleep for medical reasons I don’t understand but,” he breathed out, “Just, rest with your eyes open, please.” he sighed in a dejected voice, climbing out of the command chair and sitting next to me. I gave him a confused look before nodding slowly, his warm aura soothing me as it carefully wrapped around us. Pulling at my energy with tender fingers it slowly melded them together. Rejuvenating me.

“Keith?” I nearly whispered, shyly turning my palm upwards, not having the energy to completely move my arm right now. Glancing sideways at him through my bangs I saw him give me a half smile before he carefully took my hand in his, his arm resting just next to mine. Sighing contently I leaned against him, my aura slowly starting to recharge itself.

We sat silently together, listening to the roaring wind drilling grains of sand against the red lion. The light in the cabin slowly fading as we started to be buried under its never ending movement.

Watching the shadows stretch across the cabin of the red lion my energy started to buss in anxiousness. With each passing tick the layers of sand accumulated their deadly coffin around us. The shrieking wind whipping its contents around the red lion, searching for any weakness that could tear apart and expose to its tundra.

Keith sat quietly next to me, his energy prickling uneasily as he mulled over all the possible outcomes of different tactics. I could practically see the gears in his head churning, his muscles subconsciously twitching in response to different thoughts.

Taking a quit inhale I flexed the hand that wasn’t holding Keith’s. Tipping my head down a twinge of pain pulsed across my scalp but quickly faded. The intense burning sensation from the black veins under my arms had dulled into a lukewarm temperature. Their dark faces diluting into watery streaks of black under my pale skin. The black pit in the center of my palms had shrunk back to the size of a fingertip, its angry pulsations quieting to dull murmurs.

Pulling my fingers into a tight fist I closed my eyes. Now that the inescapable broiling pain was gone, my body gradually started to register the rest of its throbbing aches.

Taking a shallow breath I pushed myself away from the wall, grimacing against the new onset of hotness shooting across my body. An involuntary hiss left my lips as I gripped Keith’s hand in response to the pain.

“Umi-” Keith started before I carefully shook my head, ignoring the immediate throbbing as I struggled to sit up entirely.

Keith’s aura jumped in concern as he quickly shifted to help me, hands barely hovering over my shoulders, eyes watching my closely.

“I’m alright. The burning is gone.” I reassured him, giving him a tired smile. He didn’t return in, face still painted in unconvinced caution.

“We need to find Shiro.” my eyes slid back to the sand shelf stacking against the side of the lion. “Before we get stuck.”
Keith followed my line of sight, his face hardening a hint as he accepted the fact that we would soon be entirely under an ocean of sand. Letting out a loud breath he moved his dark eyes back to mine, carefully studying my face before pausing. Blinking I titled my head to the side a fraction, waiting for him to explain.

“I think the goo we used on your cut helps bruises.” he leaned forward to inspect it closer, his voice full of welcomed surprise.

“What?” I asked quietly, reaching up and carefully brushing my fingers around the slightly raised bump at the top of my forehead. Blinking, I pressed my fingers against it harder. The familiar throb of broken blood vessels was hardly there at all.

Keith gently pushed my hand out of the way to inspect it himself. Gingerly touching it and pausing to see my reaction. When there was none a relieved breath left his lips before he turned and looked at the discarded medical bag.

“I’m sure you have other nasty bruises under your suit. What if we put some goo on them? Maybe it would help the pain?” he flicked his eyes back to me as he reached for the opened package of oozing goo.

Attempting to shrug I tried to hide the flinch of pain that flashed across my face but Keith caught it. Aura tightening around him he shifted back next to me.

“Do you think you can get your armor off?” he asked, eyeing the scruffed white material.

Nodding I pulled my arms upwards, willing them not to shake from exhaustion as I hooked my fingers around the edge of the suit and pulled. Grunting in discomfort I tugged again, but my fingers slipped against the material without my consent. Limply returning back to my aching sides.

Frowning in frustration I cast my eyes away from him. A humorless smile tugged at his lips as he reached forward to help me.

“It’s alright, I’ve got you.” he murmured quietly while carefully unlocking the my breastplate.

A soft pop echoed around us before I breathed in sharply, chest rising quickly my lungs fully expanded now that the crushing weight of the plate was relieved.

Coughing once I winced in pain while trying to rapidly refill my lungs to full capacity. Keith eyed me warily before gently guiding my body away from the side of the cabin. One hand balanced on my waist to help support me while the other worked on unzipping the suit without jostling me too much.

Biting my lip red dusted my cheeks in embarrassment as I tried to support my full weight, but not being able to.

Keith’s aura spiked dramatically behind me, drawing my thoughts away from the deep set aches throbbing through my muscles. His hands freezing mid back as he drew in a short breath.

Turning a fraction I glanced back at him, “what’s wrong?”

Letting out a heavy sigh his shoulders slumped downwards. “Your back, it’s completely covered in bruises.” he paused, aura vibrating in concern now, “I don’t know how to check for internal bleeding. Or whatever its symptoms are.” he ran a hand roughly through his hair in dismay.

I paused, trying to understand everything he was saying. “But I am getting better, not worse.” I tried
to comfort him.

He glanced up at me through messy bangs, crimson aura twitching in restrained hope. “That’s true.” he admitted after a moment.

“And,” I paused again, glancing down at my pale hands, “I think my energy protects me when I can’t. I don’t really know how to explain it.” I looked back at him, “it’s like when I fell, you said it looked like I made a barrier, but I didn’t remember doing that. Before I blacked out, I thought I felt my energy around me. Like it was trying to protect me.” my voice drifted off as I sunk deeper into thought, examining my hands again in hopes of getting some answers. But whatever had happened, was gone now. And I wasn’t even sure if it was real. It could have just been residual energy around us. My my energy moving forward as I was thrown around the cabin.

Keith considered my words silently, his hands going back to carefully unzipping the rest of my suit and pushing it up and over my shoulders. Red aura darkening as it tightened around him.

“That still doesn’t change the fact that I lost control of my lion.” he spoke, disgust creeping into his voice, “you could have gotten even more injured and I couldn’t do anything.”

“Hell, you already are injured, and I made you protect us again because I couldn’t do anything.” he clenched his teeth, turning his head away from my injured back.

“Keith.” I said quietly, reaching backwards until my hand rested against his thigh. “There was nothing you could do. The red lion was hurt from the magic.”

I paused again, “you didn’t do anything wrong. The belt Pidge made broke, and the magnets didn’t hold.” I tried to sooth his defeated energy.

We sat in tense silence for a few beats before Keith finally let go of his held breath, aura dropped around him as he tried to come to terms with what had happened.

Slumping forward he barely rested his head against the part of my back that wasn’t covered in black and blue splotches. “Thanks Umi.” he murmured before leaning back, “I’m going to put this goo stuff on now.”

I nodded, pulling my aching arm forward into my lap again. Jumping from the products coolness I flinched in pain. The icy sting gripping my skin before gradually spreading outwards, seeping into my burning muscles and soothing them.

Letting out a held breath I relaxed my muscles, enjoying the quick effects of the mysterious alien medicine.

Keith’s gloved hands worked meticulously across my back, massaging the sticky material into my skin until he was certain he had covered every affected area. His eyes roaming across my exposed back once more he paused his work, “feel better?” he asked.

I hummed in response, nodding once as I closed my eyes. A comfortable chill sunk into my flesh, cooling the deep aches of my muscles.

A smile tugged on Keith's lips, aura relaxing around him at my response, “let’s wait a few more ticks for this stuff to set in, then we’ll try and find Shiro.”

I glanced back at him, giving him a weak smile and nodding a final time. Keith gave me a half smile back while zipping my suit back up for me. Sighing I leaned back into his chest, seated between his legs in the cramped space his abs tensed as I let my full weight press against him.
Closing my eyes I tipped my head back to rest against his shoulder, his hands twitched uncertainty at his side as we sat in silence for a few more beats.

Slowly I started to flex the muscles of my back, rolling my shoulders carefully to test the pain but was relieved when dull throbs pulsed across them instead of agonized aches.

Breathing out I pushed myself away from Keith, shifting into a squatted position his hands hovered just above my hips in concern.

“Ready?” he asked in an unconvinced voice, hands still posed over my waist.

Nodding I unsteadily moved to my feet. “We need to find Shiro. And that” I nodded to the twisting black and grey sand outside the lion, “it’s getting bigger.”

Keith shifted his gaze from me to the increasing height of sand building upwards. “The sand.” he explained the word I was looking for before picking up my discarded suit materials. “Good point.”

“Here.” he offered me the cut fabric. “We should try and cover you as much as possible.” he slid the severed arm pieces back into place before fitting the arm guards around them.

He frowned at his work. The space suit hanging loosely at the top of the armor holding it in place. The skin tight seal now more baggy and threatening to slip from its place.

“Well i guess that will have to do.” he muttered to himself.

I nodded, fitting my helmet back over my head as Keith climbed back into the command chair. Trying a final time to revive his lion but was greeted with silence. Sighing to himself he pressed two fingers against the side of his helmet.

“Shiro. Shiro do you copy?” he called out, grimacing against the harsh static feedback. Flicking his eyes back to me he tried again, “Shiro. This is Keith. Do you copy?”

A tense few beats stretched past us. Both of us listening intently to the jumbled garble of feedback, hoping for even a glimpse of response.

“Come on.” Keith begged quietly, hands tightening around the controls of his lion as we waited.

A startled gasp escaped my lips as a bright blue arrow appeared across the face of my visor. Lines of directions flickering in and out of focus before finally steadily blinking. A singular arrow pointed to the bobbing stagnant blue arrow in the middle of the screen.

“Yes!” Keith’s voice cracked as he bolted forward in relief. “We have a connection.”

Red aura flared around us, brightening the increasingly dim cabin with rejuvenated determination.

“Ready?” he asked, sliding out of the seat to face me. I nodded, giving him a weak smile as he shifted past me to reach for the tilted emergency exit.

Fingers curled around the airtight seal he glanced back at me a final time, making sure I was entirely ready, “make as small as a shield as possible okay?”

I nodded, awkwardly climbing to brace myself against the top of the lion and the command chair. Heart starting to thump faster in my chest as we prepared our departure.

Keith nodded in response, inhaling a deep breath before pushing against the small opening.
Once. twice. Then a third he strained to pull it open.

“Come on, open.” he groaned to himself, arms strained as he pulled his all his strength.

“Fuck.” he cursed, letting his arms drop. “There too much sand built up.”

My energy flickered in nervousness, eyes quickly glancing towards the nearly covered windshield then back to Keith. My vision distorted from the blinking arrow indicating Shiro’s location.

“Come on Keith, think.” he breathed, pinching the bridge of his nose before he turned quickly. “The underbelly.” he murmured to himself.

“Underbelly?” I repeated, following Keith’s line of sight.

He nodded, gingerly taking my hand and leading me towards the back of the lion.

“Okay, brace yourself.” Keith called over the deafening echo of wind thundering through the hollow carrier.

Nodding I sunk lower into my spot, trying to flatten myself against the wall of the red lion as Keith manually cranked the door open.

Wind whipped inwards, tearing at us with vicious claws as sand exploded forward. Wincing against the harsh change in pressure I closed my eyes. Breathing in once before pushing my energy outwards. A weak flicker of energy bubbled around me, barely blocking the lashes of wind as Keith struggled to hold his position. Still pulling the cavity open just wide enough for us to slip out.

“Ready?” he called over the wind, arm brought up to shield his vision.

“Ready.” I responded. Uneasily slipping out of the small opening.
Wind immediately thrashing against me, shoving me sideways I gasped in pain. Hands automatically moving to press against either side of the opening to pull myself out into the open.

Sloths of sand slid across the soft terrain. Ear piercing shrieks of wind penetrated through my helmet as I braced myself against it while Keith slid from the safety of his lion.

My barrier flickered wildly as it rapidly tried to remake itself as the barrage of sand demanded to break it.

Opening my suit's shield I pulled my arm upwards, trying to block against the sand curving around the edge of my barrier.

“"It looks like Red is blocking most of the storm," Keith commented as he maneuvered next to me. "Are you sure you have enough energy?" He checked a final time, pulling my arm over his shoulder, shield generating over the arm wrapped around my waist he hoisted a majority of my weight against him.

Swallowing I nodded, mouth set in a hard line I flexed the edges of my barrier to cave around us. Mentally preparing myself for what was about to come.

The red lion was lodged sideways, sand piling against her, but did offer us a pocket of light protection from the surging winds around us.

“Okay,” Keith nodded, shifting to support my weight more, “follow my lead." He lifted one boot out from the sand trying to bury it, activating the booster.

Slowly we inched across the space of the red lion, Keith paused at its massive rear paw. Glancing back at me, he gave me an uneasy smile before pulling us up onto her paw, my boots automatically latching to the metal we lurched forward but were forced to a painful stop.

“On my mark,” Keith shouted over the wind, half crouching I followed his lead. My arms already starting to ache again we were barely held down by the magnets on my boots. The red lion still shielding some of the treacherous winds to come.

Swallowing I gripped Keith’s hand in mine, forming a thicker layer around us as Keith pushed off the red lion’s paw. Boosters thrusting us upwards the howling wind snatched us in its deadly claws.

Gasping in pain and shock we were hurled blindly forward. Wind tearing at our feet, surging sands crashed against my barrier we were swallowed by the churning mass of chaos.

Different streams of wind shoving us with monstrous force we were entirely at its mercy. Roughly jerking from one direction to another our feet barely sunk into the soft sands before being thrown in another direction. The thick darkness of swirling sand making it impossible to see more than a few feet in front of us. Only offering wisps of sight as we moved from grey to black. A small break
“This is working better than I thought,” a strained smirk crossed Keith’s lips as he grit his teeth. Using his jetpack to try and keep us on course to the steady stream of direction that covered our visors.

A breathy laugh was all I could manage, flinching against the sharp stings of sand pelting against us. The half dome covering us rippling constantly, no slivers of relief given as we trudge forward.

The wailing wind dulled into a sharp high pitched ring echoing through my helmet, brutal welts of pain bubbling across my skin as sand drilled against my barrier.

Panting my arms started to quiver, knees nearly buckling with each landing we struggled forward. Fighting against the tides of wind thrashing us in any direction we continued onwards.

“Shiro!” Keith called out, wincing as we were thrown diagonally before a sharp snap of wind thrust us forward.

A hot lash of pain whipped across the back of my barrier causing me to cry out in pain. Knees coming out from under me we buried into the sand a few yards.

Grunting Keith strained to pull us upwards, desperate to keep us on our feet as the wind caught my barrier again.

“Shiro, can you hear me?” Keith shouted again as we were dragged forward. Feet tripping over the sand we fought to keep our footing.

“I can't feel him.” my voice was nearly swallowed by the shrill shrieks of wind I squinted against the ocean of swirling grey.

“The wind must be messing with our communication,” Keith responded in a tense voice, his hands tightening around me as he tried to calm himself.

“Shiro!” I called, wincing as another stream of wind caught my barrier. Whisking us in another direction.

“Shiro!” Keith yelled after me, pushing off the sand again as we were brought down. Jetpacks flaring he tilted us down a degree before shooting off the ground. Trying to barrel forward against the wind with little success.

“Keith,” Shiro’s voice broke through the radio in scattered pieces.

“Shiro!” Keith breathed in relief. “Umi and I are locked and headed towards your location.”

“Keith,” Shiros distorted voice came through again, “I can barely hear you, I’m by a sand dune. I can’t get out of my lion,” he spoke slowly, hash wind feedback crackling through our helmets as we tried to communicate.

“Umi and I are on our way,” Keith tried to explain, “don’t move, it’s too dangerous.”

A garbled response made me wince as we pushed off the ground again.

Taking a labored breath black started to seep around the edges of my vision. The familiar taste of blood dripping in the back of my throat as we pushed forward.

Swallowing I clenched Keith’s hand in mine, squeezing my eyes shut as we were jerked forward
I can feel him,” I breathed, opening my eyes my body slacked against Keith's as vertigo took my balance.

“Umi, stop pushing yourself,” Keith’s voice was hard as he shot me a look while gently squeezing my ribs.

“We need to find some cover, we can’t move forward like this,” he grit his teeth as we pushed against the opposing forces.

“I can’t see anything,” I squinted against the twisting streams of sand.

“And our visors aren’t giving us any terrestrial readings.” I could hear the frown in his voice as he staggered to the side, another current catching my barrier.

We drudged forward as best we could, fighting against the tidal waves of wind and sand for what seemed like hours.

Taking an uneven breath I swallowed the blood creeping up my throat. Blinking rapidly to try and focus on anything. Large, shapeless masses filled my vision, twisting wind throttled in every direction. The landscape constantly changing as we made our way towards Shiro.

Squinting the edges of my vision blurred. My arms burned, rib muscles pulling painfully as Keith supported my weight.

“I see something,” my voice barely made it past the bone vibrating wind.

“Where?” Keith called, straining his eyes to see something, anything other than swirling grains.

“In front of us. It's not moving.” I nodded ahead of us, still trying to determine if what I was seeing was real, or just a mirage of shadows.

“I can’t tell. We are too far away.” Keith voice hitched involuntarily as another gust of wind picked up, throwing us upwards. My stomach lurched at the sudden change in movement before wincing as another punch of wind slammed against.

“Brace yourself!” Keith cried as our upwards trajectory changed into a plummeting decent. Thrusting his feet outwards he pushed against the downwards force with his boosters.

Gasping my barrier filtered in and out of focus. Harsh stabs of sand piercing against our space suits. The single pallet ground rushed forwards before I could see what was coming. Feet shoved into the sand my knees buckled. Keith cursed, hand gripping mine as we hit the ground hard.

The relentless wind tore us from our momentary stagnancy. Ripping us forward my barrier barely held as we tumbled forward. Bodies sinking quickly into the sand it offered us little help as we were dragged forward.

Cursing Keith grabbed my arm, twisting me forward so that he could clumsily grab my legs. The soft sand disappearing my breath caught at our momentary suspension. The air forcing us outwards as my barrier burst apart. Unable to hold its form any longer we dropped.
Gasping we crashed blindly downwards. Keith trying to pull me against him to brace our fall his boosters kicked on.

Straining against the decent I tried desperately to summon another layer of energy to protect us, but only faint flickers of pink purple sparked to life before quickly dying.

Keith cried out in shocked pain as we crashed into a solid mass. My body jerking to a painful stop as my body collided with his. Distorted pain rushed forward, gripping my body as we slammed together.

Black spots danced across my vision as the air was forced from my lungs. Breathing heavily I slowly oriented myself. The high pitched ring of wind fading drastically as its howl ripped above our heads. Eyes shifting upwards shadowed sanded walls towered above us. Drifts of sand slipping across its crevasse while the rest blew over. Creating a mask of darkness over us.

“Are you okay?” Keith’s voice came in and out of focus as faint echoes of shrieking wind bounced downwards.

Blinking I found Keith’s face in the lowlit space. “I think so.”

Breathing out loudly once Keith groaned. Shifting my weight in his lap. “At least we found cover.”

A dry laugh escaped his lips.

A tired smile tugged at the corners of my mouth as black encroached on my vision. Muscles involuntarily shaking from exhaustion and pain I couldn’t help but lean heavily into Keith.

“You did great.” Keith praised, gently rubbing my shoulder as we took shelter in the dark ravine.

Nodding I took an unsteady breath before swallowing the build up of blood in my throat.

“Shiro, we found some shelter and will move soon.” Keith informed while activating his flashlight and sweeping it across the sanded canvas. Distorted shadows bounced off of smooth ribs of eroded sandstone. Streams of monochromatic sand slipped downwards, sliding down the rigid walls like sand in a time turner. Uneven hills of sand disappeared into the dark stretch of the small canyon.

“We are close enough to Shiro now that our connection is stable. And we have cover. Its alright.” he spoke while turning and half squatting in front of me.

Biting my lip I glanced at his back skeptically before sighing heavily. Legs barely holding my up, I would only slow us down further if he had to help me stagger across the bumpy terrain.
Placing my hands on his shoulders I leaned forward until my full weight pressed against his back. His red aura jumped once before quickly quieting. His large hands instantly finding the back of my thighs and hoisting me the rest of the way up.

"Just don't sleep okay." he murmured over his shoulder as we started down the shadowed covered way, my right hand pointed outwards to give us light.

"Is this because of the concussion?" I asked, hoping I got the name right.

"Yeah, I don't know why but I'm sure Miume would kill me if something else happened to you." he half laughed at himself. I nodded, not completely understanding what kind of injury it was, but knew that if Miume thought something was wrong she was most likely right.

We walked in easy silence, watching the shadows stretch farther down the already dark walls. Shrieking winds dulled into the background as I focused on his breathing. A flicker of faint purple sparked to life a short distance away. A flame dancing through darkness drew me from my foggy thoughts.

Perking up I shifted my position on Keith back, shining my light farther down the cavern. Trying to find an exit point.

"What's wrong?" Keith asked, stopping in his tracks and turning his head a fraction to try and see me.

"I can feel Shiro’s energy, we are close." I informed him, sitting up a little higher to try and see farther down the dark ravine. Faint pulsations of purple vibrated the bonds connecting us. Their strings finally coming into focus now that we were closer. “I think we can keep going this way.” I said, tilting my head to the side and squinting into the darkness. The black tunnels wavering in front of my vision still made everything fuzzy, but the strings connecting us seemed to stretch on in a straight trajectory.

"That’s good. Shiro did you hear that?" Keith asked, shifting my weight slightly as he started walking again.

"Yeah, you guys are showing up on my monitor now." his relieved voice came through our helmets with more clarity.

"We’ll be there soon, just hold on." Keith instructed, glancing back at me and looking more relaxed. His tensed aura relaxing around him.

"I can walk now, it's alright." I offered, Keith’s legs had started to tremble more with each step, his breath more labored than before.

"It's alright." he easily brushed off my words while taking another step forward. His booted feet sinking into the soft sand, creating an extra layer of resistance.

"Who said not to push themselves." I grumbled to myself as I struggled against his grip as best I could.

"You are injured, it’s fine just let me care for you." he argued, his hands tightening around my thighs, causing me to wince in discomfort, “Sorry, just hold still we are almost there.”

Sighing I rested my chin on his shoulder again, knowing I didn't have the energy to actually fight him. His shoulders relaxed as my chest pressed against his back again, his aura curling around us in a soothing manor.
“Guys, we might have a problem.” Shiro’s nervous voice broke through our quiet moment.

Keith paused, his muscles tensing as his aura snapped back into a solid shield around us, “what’s wrong?”

“The sandune just in front of my lion is shifting.” he reported in a hushed tone. Aura spiking in concern.

“What?” Keith asked in a confused voice, his feet faltering a beat before he pushed forward again.

“It sprouted legs and is starting to move.” Shiro clarified

“What the-” Keith breathed, “How is that even possible?”

“Set me down, we need to run.” I leaned back, pushing against his back.

“You can’t run.” Keith retorted in a hard voice, refusing to let go of my squirming legs.

“Then go get Shiro and come back to get me.” I countered, still struggling to be released but each movement created a ripple effect of aches across my body.

“I am not leaving you.” Keith said in a final tone

“Then set me down now. I can feel its energy. It doesn’t feel evil but the sand makes it fuzzy.” I argued while kicking my legs out and wincing from their soreness.

“Keith, listen to Um i. I don’t want us to get separated again, but my lion is still nonoperational. I am stuck and we don’t know how this thing will react to us.” Shiro finalized in a calm voice.

Keith breathed out a frustrated breath before moving. “Don’t let go of me.” he warned setting me down quickly before gripping my hand. “Use your jetpack and follow my lead.” he pushed off the ground, his jetpack kicking to life he pulled me forward, mine responding seconds after his. We used the momentum to power us forward, the howling wind becoming louder as we neared the grey colored exit.

“Keith, stop.” I called softly, pulling against his hand he responded immediately, turning quickly to face me. We paused steps from the cracked opening leading to Shiro.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, trying to sound calm as his aura flared around him. I shook my head, placing a finger over my helmeted lips. He understood quickly, turning back to the exit and crouching low this time, one hand hovering just over the summoning spot of his bayard.

“An energy woke up.” I whispered, creeping up behind him to peer out into the storming sands.

“What did?” Keith asked before his eyes widened.

The massive mound of sand just outside the canyons exit twitched once with monstrous force before settling back into stillness. Sand broke loose from its side, instantly being snatched up by the violent wids and blown in different directions.

Keith glanced back at me quickly before the ground started to tremble under our feet. Sand pouring over the lip of the cavern, its walls quaking unsteadily.

Keith brought up a shield, blocking the sudden cascade of sand as the dune of sand in front of us shifted again. A deep groan echoed down the ravine, overtaking the shrill octave of the winds. Massive black, sand caked, segmented legs rose upwards with exaggerated slowness. Another gust
of sharp wind whipping past us as its body removed our protection.

Loud snaps popped as its joints extended to their full length, unfolding to support the weight of the beast they belonged to. Black grey sand spilled from their form, partially solidified chunks breaking away from its dark underbelly and crashed downwards.

Keith’s hand tightened over mine as we watched the majestic beast. Its form starting to vibrate quickly now it blended into the swirling masses above as waves of sand plummeted downwards. Shaking off the excess weight it seemed entirely unaffected by the herculean winds.

Pausing its quaking its form came back into focus. Its massive shape breaking through the churning winds. One colossal crustation leg groaned as it raised upwards, moving like molasses before coming down into the sand. Its sharp point penetrating deeply before another leg slid forward.

“It's like a crab.” he breathed, watching the beast move in awe.

“A what?” I asked, not breaking my eyes away from the captivating creature. Despite its intimidating size, it had an uncharacteristically small energy. A bubble of inky magenta pulsing within its massive core, barely any trails of energy wafted away from it as it lethargically crawled away from us. As if it were trying to preserve any and all energy it had managed to save.

“It’s an animal on Earth. But they are supposed to be tiny, not the size of a mountain.” Keith whispered back.

I glanced back at him then quickly back to the shifting mound of sand. It quivered quickly again, excess sand being shaken off before continuing its movements. Its large legs lumbering along, the entire sand dune looked as if it were walking through the thrashing streams of sand.

“They must live under the sand.” Keith tried to reason, letting his shield lower from above us a slosh of sand spilled around our feet.

“Then why is it moving?” I asked.

Keith shrugged before looking back at me, “I don't want to find out.” I nodded in response, my eyes trying to keep focus on it as it trudged away, leaving deep grooves in the sand as it moved. Its shell of sand becoming more camouflaged as moved farther away, completely blending into the swirling masses.

“Let's go.” Keith breather, carefully stepping out to the edge of the ravines shelter and looking for the black lion.

“There.” I nodded towards another, smaller, shadowed mass in front of us. Shiros energy bubbling just inside it.

“Think you can give us one more barrier?” Keith asked reluctantly, shield already bracing against the new surgants of wind.

“Shiro, we have eyes on you, get ready to let us in.” Keith called out, squeezing my hand once more I nodded. Taking a steadying breath before pushing out another thin layer of protection. Its translucent face flickering in and out of focus before holding its shape.

“Roger.” Shiro responded, background noise of him shifting through the black lion came through the headset.
“Alright, ready?” Keith asked a final time.

I nodded, tightening my hand around his. I took a small step towards the back lion. The wind instantly catching us again it catapulted us in the direction of the black lion. Wincing in pain Keith grabbed the top of my arm, pulling me into him as his jetpack pushed against the force of the wind, attempting to slow our descent enough to grab onto the edge of the black lion. My magnetized feet slamming into the metal we were forced to a stop. Wind tearing relentlessly at us with savage claws.

“Shiro, open up now!” Keith called, bracing himself against the wind, one arm curled around me while his other hand gripped the edge of the black lion's massive mandible. The lion's mouth popped open with barely enough room for us to slide through, wind instantly crashing inwards at the new opportunity.

Once the black lion's jaw was securely shut we breathed out in relief, leaning against the inside of its mouth breathing heavily. Sand pooling around us the wisps of chaotic wind died down as its source was cut off.

“Thanks Umi.” Keith breathed, giving me a crooked smile before shifting position to move towards Shiro, letting me recover for a few beats longer.

I nodded in response, trying to keep consciousness as the black holes around my vision threatened to close. That was as much energy as I could summon until I had actually rested.

“Keith,” Shiro greeted him, breathing out a held breath his hands still on the controls of his lion.

“Shiro, are you okay?” Keith moved to place a hand on the back of the command chair, giving his leader a concerned look.

“Yeah, I'm fine, I felt Umis barrier just before impact,” he easily waved Keith off before looking back at his lion’s controls, “it feels like my lion's operational again. I guess she was waiting for you guys.” shifting his controller experimentally, his lion responded slowly. “But barely at that.”

“As long as we can get to the red lion. Maybe we can find another cavern like Umi and I found to camp out in until we can get ahold of the castle?” Keith suggested, glancing back at me. I nodded, barely stumbling into the main cabin of the lion.

“It’s worth a try.” Shiro shrugged, his voice strained as he looked forward again.

“I can feel the druids energy in the lion's.” I struggled to pull myself into a standing position. Leaning heavily against the frame of the black lion and whipping the residual blood from under my nose.

“What?” Keith asked, moving to support my weight again I easily leaned into him, not having the energy to resist the aid.

“When the magic hit the wormhole, some of it must have hit the lions too. It's not much, but maybe that's why the lions aren’t working.” I tried to clarify in a tired voice.

“So we are stuck?” Shiro asked, glancing back at up.

I shook my head and immediately regretted it. The cabin distorting from dizziness. “it seems like the dark magic is fading, since there’s no direct connection.”

“Well that’s good.” Keith started before pausing, the wind abruptly coming to a halt, twisting
masses dropping quickly. Plumes of dust kicking up from the downfall of sand before quickly settling into an eerie silence.

“The wind.” Shiro breathed, shifting his attention back to the front of his lion.

My eyes moved forward muscles tensing at the sudden change we finally got the first look at the planet we had crash landed on.

Pale red sun leaked through the murky clouds hanging over us. Ripples of grey black sand stretched out endlessly before finally dipping along the curved edge of the planet. The sands twisting seams oddly calm now as the terrain laid icily motionless in front of us.

Towering crooked shelves of hardened sand rose up from the still ground to our right. Their uneven forms weathered from the relentless erosion of sand whipping against its exterior.

“Does anyone else have a bad feeling about this?” Keith asked, his voice just above a whisper, one hand curled around the edge of the command chair.

“I don’t know, but we should move now before the wind starts again.” Shiro decided, settling deeper into the black lions main command chair and flexing his fingers over the controls again. Taking a deep breath he closed his eyes, the bonds connecting him to his lion sparking to life. A low growl echoed around us as Shiro experimentally pulled a lever upwards. The black lion sluggishly responding

“Alright, let’s go get your lion Keith.” a strained smile pulled at Shiro’s lips as we located the red lion, its massive form nearly buried under the ocean of colorless sand. Shiro moved us carefully across the quiet planet towards Keith’s lion. Now that the winds had stopped, the lions seemed to be able to respond easier. The black magic trailing away with each foot traveled. The black lion leaving it behind as we moved forward, its malicious energy unable to cling to the pure energy of the lions.

“I wonder where that crab thing went.” Keith mumbled to himself after a few quiet beats. Carefully shifting my weight so that I could rest on the floor of the cabin instead of trying to stand with him. Breathing out a relieved breath I gladly leaned against the cool metal of the cabin.

“Maybe it knew the wind was going to stop.” Shiro tried to shrug but winces at the motion.

“How wouldn’t it move when the wind stopped instead though?” Keith wondered out loud, steadying himself as the black lion touched down. Its heavy paws sinking into the sand, slipping us lower into the still terrain before stopping.

Barely any red metallic paint was visible under the sand trying to swallow it. Its form lodged against a looming sand dune, “well that must have been what stopped us.” Keith sighed.

“Let’s take cover in the mountains to the west. I’m sure we can find an alcove to take shelter in for the night.” Shiro glanced at the rolls of mountainous dunes. Long lazy-looking shadows were crawling down the sides of them, their fingers stretching towards us. Each tick slinking closer and closer as the auburn sun sunk lower. Only a sliver illuminating the dark lands around us.

“Alright, Umi stay here I’ll go get the red lion.” Keith instructed while moving to exit the black lion.

Dropping down easily into the sand he stumbled only slightly to regain his footing in the unforgiving terrain before sliding down the new wave of sand covering the upper half of the lion. My energy automatically tensed as he moved away from me I strained to see up above the dash,
waiting for the familiar firey burst of energy from the red lion before easing back against the wall.

“How are you holding up?” Shiro asked, glancing back at me.

“I am fine,” my eyes slid down his form, locking onto the angry glowing lines of purple slashed across his lower abdomen. “You need medical help.”

“I’m fine, it can wait.” he waved off my concern while turning to face Keith who was ascending from the shell of sand. A waterfall of dirt cascading from the red lions form his lion shook, trying to eradicate the rest of the annoyance. Shiro waited until his lion was sand-free before maneuvering us towards the misshapen mountains.

“Your body is trying to reject the druids energy. But it can’t full y.” I pulled myself up into a wobbly standing position, trying to keep my voice even, “I can take the rest out, it might help the pain. But Miume can only heal the cuts.”

“Umi, I’m fine, really. You look exhausted anyways, and used a lot of energy today.” Shiro said as we lethargically moved towards the mountains. The lions barely having the energy to fly more than a few meters from the ground the uneven mountains seemed to be getting farther away instead of closer .

“You are in pain. Please let me help.” I paused and looked down at my hands, “we are a team, we are supposed to help each other.” I countered in a quiet voice. I knew my energy was nearly depleted. Only a few watery droplets of purple pink wavered in my reserves. But Shiro had taken me in, and helped me so much. I wanted to help him, and the rest of Voltron in any way i could. Even if my energy was low, I would be able to recuperate after a bit of rest .

“I can wait.” Shiro replied in a final tone

Sighing I closed my eyes, talking clearly wasn’t going to change his mind, and while there wasn’t much dark energy there was still enough to cause significant discomfort. Taking a deep breath I opened my eyes, biting my lip in silent contemplation for a beat longer before taking a step forward and gently placing my hand over his wound. Focusing on the weakly pulsating strands of dark purple I pushed the final reserves of energy away from my palm.

Dark energy had stitched itself into Shiro’s skin, piercing through his calming aura and infecting it like ink spreads out on watery paper. The sinister energy automatically reacted to mine as I reached for it. Snapping outwards it lashed sharp teeth at me while trying to bury deeper into its host.

Wincing I pulled against the druids magic, carefully prying it out of Shiro’s body, knowing I had limited time. My purple pink energy wavered around my hand, barely holding shape as I dug deeper, pushing past my energy reserves and summoning energy that wasn’t there .

“Umi, what are you doing?” Shiro’s protest barely hit my ears as the world started to fade in and out. The black tunnels encroaching further across my vision as I pulled the dark energy outwards.

“I’ve almost got it” I muttered to myself, not having the strength to argue. Closing my eyes I inhaled deeply once move, pulling my hand away from the bleeding gash and closing my fingers around the twisting tendrils of evil. Hissing in pain I forced a small snap of energy to break across the lines of darkness.

“Umi, stop its fine.” Shiro pushed my hand away from his chest before wincing.

“You are my teammates, my family. Let me help you.” I murmured quietly, the words feeling foreign against my lips as I pulled my fingers slowly to a fine point, the deep magenta energy
twisting itself around my hand as if I were gripping a thorned vine. The faded inky black veins on my arms started to glow faintly under my skin again.

I heard Shiro sigh, out of relief from pain or frustration, I couldn't tell. Moving my hand away from his chest I gently pulled the rest of the dark purple energy from his, his own white energy helping push it towards the anchor of my hand.

It wasn’t extraneous, but just holding my injured arm up was enough to make it start to throb again. A strangled sigh of relief left my lips as the last of the energy detached from Shiro. A soft popping noise bounced between us before my knees gave way, the world going black.

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Keith

“Umi!” Shiro called in alarm, quickly glancing down as his teammate collapsed beside him. His lion barely passing through the narrow crease between two distorted sides of a mountain.

“What happened?” Keith’s staticky voice broke through Shiro’s helmet.

“Umi tried to pull whatever druid magic was attached to me, then fainted from exhaustion.” Shiro explained in a tense voice while carefully maneuvering his lion through the sanded folds of their cave, searching for a safe spot to land.

Keith cursed under his breath softly, “she’s used way too much energy today.”

Shiro nodded in silent agreement, casting his eyes downwards once more before quickly flicking them up to narrowly avoid a sharp shard of rock jutting out from the darkness. His lions lights sliding across the uneven ridges before finally settling on an open space.

Keith followed Shiro’s path, laying his lion down in front of the small opening they had come from while Shiro rested his lion at the other. The space was compact enough that their lions curled into a half circle just to fit.

Letting out a long winded breath Shiro turned in his seat, gingerly moving to pick up his unconscious teammate. Wincing in pain heat lashed across his skin as it tore further apart. A new hotness slipping down his spacesuit as fresh blood dripped from the wound.

Carefully he made his way out of his lion, the cuts on his abdomen ached, but it was less intense than before. The deep rooted nails of what he assumed to have been the druids magic was gone. Now just the regular pain from an open wound hindered his movement.

“Umi!” Keith called out as he jogged towards his leader, Umi cradled in his arms with a pained expression. His heart skipping a beat as he noted the streaks of blood staining the white armor of his legs.

“I can take her.” Keith reached outwards while Shiro carefully transferred the weight. Letting out a soft breath of relief before leaning back heavily against the cool metal of his lion. His legs barely letting him rest there for a beat before he slumped downwards in pained exhaustion.

“What happened to you guys?” Shiro asked while applying pressure to his side and grimsing.

“Umi made a barrier before the wormhole got hit, I think these black veins are from that.”

he
nodded to the top part of her arm that was exposed while gently placing Umi on the ground, one leg bent to support her back. “Then we were sucked out of the wormhole with you onto this planet and I made her put a barrier around us.” Keith frowned, casting his eyes away from her before moving to unlatch the arm guards to make sure the black veins hadn’t come back.

“Her barrier took most of the impact. But she had already used a lot of energy during the battle, and was injured from whatever dark magic hit us.” Keith explained while easing off the useless space suit sleeves. A small breath of relief escaped his lips when he saw that the black veins were still just a faint undertone under her skin.

Shiro nodded, taking in the information and glancing down at his wound. They had each been through a lot today, but the hard look on Keith’s face told Shiro that Keith was being hard on himself.

“Whatever that dark magic was, it did a number on our lions. Not to mention the wind.” he attempted to shrug but groaned in pain.

“Tck.” Keith spit under his breath, moving his free hand and placing it against the side of Umi’s helmet.

“Umi, I need you to wake up for me.” he tried to coax her away but her breathing had evened out into slow, deep sleep breaths.

“I don’t think she could wake up even if she wanted. She looks exhausted.” Shiro glanced between the two in front of him, a small smile tugging on his lips.

“She hit her head pretty hard though, isn’t sleeping supposed to be bad for that?” Keith asked, looking up at Shiro, eyebrows furrowed in concern.

“Generally yes, but if she needs to sleep to recuperate energy then she probably can’t wake up because she’s recharging.” Shiro suggested.

“Yeah, but Miume is going to kill me.” Keith muttered before sighing heavily and readjusting to lean back against one of the black lions massive paws. The last slivers of light dancing across the uneven shapes of the cave.

“I’m sure she will be fine with some rest.” Shiro tried to reassure the anxious male in front of him. “We should find something to make a fire with before it gets dark though.” he moved to stand up but immediately winced as his abdominal muscles pulled painfully.

“Shiro, rest. I’ll do it.” Keith spoke up, his voice rising a note in concern for his mentor as he carefully laid Umi’s sleeping frame down onto the soft grey sand. “I’ll get some of the clear goo stuff first, it helped Umi’s bruises.”

Shiro raised an eyebrow in question but Keith jogged across the small area towards his lion and disappearing for a few beats. Grabbing the opened packet of goo and an emergency blanket folded under the floor next to where he found the packet before jogging back towards Shiro. Keith tossed the items towards him as he passed. Climbing up and over the black lions tail to venture further into the enclosed space, flashlight scanning for anything that looked like it could be flammable.

Boring grey sandstone faces looked back at him as Keith searched. The cavern almost baren except for a few decaying plant like structures. Their colorless twigs barely supported by crumblng stems the last rays of sun leaked through the caves opening.

“This will have to do.” Keith mumbled to himself as he yanked the plants easily out of the soft
sand. Shaking them off as gently as he could, but thin strands of blackened vegetation still fluttered loose.

Keith had just made it back to the half field sized opening they had taken cover in when a shrill shriek barreled down the darkness towards them. A burst of wind rushing along the top of the cave, causing a cascade of loose sand to break loose from the jagged walls. Flinching away from the high pitched note stabbing against his ears he tossed the limited supplies down lazily. A low whistle hummed on a different note than the shrieking wind. Its tune funneling down deeper into the cavern before disappearing. The air around them repressurising as the counterforce of winds canceled each other out, leaving them windless in their hideout.

“Looks like the storm picked up again.” Shiro commented, glancing over the red lions back towards the swirling streams of sand moving through the mountains. The swiftly changing waves masking the opening before blending into the darkness.

“Maybe that’s why the crab moved, to reposition itself.” Keith shrugged, eyeing Shiro’s exposed torso, “feeling better?” he asked, nodding towards the cuts.

“Much, this stuff really does wonders.” Shiro replied, giving him a weak smile, his chest still aching, but the angry puffy lines around the wound were less red than before.

“It helps with bruises too.” Keith added absently as he crouched in front of the pile of dead vegetation and started moving them into position to be lit. They lapsed into comfortable silence as Keith worked on lighting the fire before moving back and resting against the black lion’s paw. Letting out a long breath he carefully moved Umi so that her head was rested in his lap before removing her helmet to try and give her some more comfort, the black blanket stretched between the three of them.

They sat quietly for a few beats, letting the crackling embers and muffled howls of wind fill the void. “She called us her family.” Shiro’s voice broke through the dim fire light Keith glanced up at him, eyebrows raised in shock.

“I think she’s making progress.” Shiro gave him a tired smile, “and it seems like you guys are getting along well.” a brotherly knowing glint flashed in his eyes before he tipped his head back and closed his eyes.

Keith’s face flushed before he quickly snapped his head to the side. Using the shadows to his advantage until his heart had calmed. His eyes drifted back down to her relaxed, sleeping face. Soft even breaths leaving her partially part lips. Unable to help himself he absently brushed her silky black bangs back from her cheek. A smile tugging at the corner of his mouth he nodded. “She’s come a long way.”

“I’m glad you have each other.” Shiro spoke with his eyes closed, relaxing further into the black lion.

Keith smiled a bit to himself, running his fingers over her exposed cheek, “thanks Shiro.”

Shiro nodded, opening his eyes a crack to glance at Keith before closing them again “Let’s take the night to rest, we’ll figure out how to get back to the ship in the morning.”

“We should take shifts. You rest, i’ll take first watch.” Keith agreed, looking up at Shiro’s exhausted face again.

“Thanks Keith.” Shiro barely muttered before his head lolled to the side, breathing evening out as
he fell asleep.

“Everyone's had a long day huh.” he whispered to himself, brushing his fingers over her soft cheek again.
"Miume!" Lance quickly responded to the incoming threat. Grabbing Miume's hand and dragging her the short distance to his lion who already had its head down and mouth open, ready to receive them. He was glad that Miume had landed in his hanger, and while her ship was close, instinct told him he had to protect her.

"Wait, Lance!" Miume tried to take her hand out of his, "my patients-," tripping over her feet at the sudden directional change she glanced over her shoulder with a fleeting look as he pulled her up and into the blue lion. She could faintly hear Oli calling out her name as the intercom linked in her helmet erupted into different voices.

"What’s happening?!" Lance called out as he promptly sat down in the command chair, his hands reached for the controls automatically as the blue lion roared to life. The lion’s blue translucent screens lighting to life in the small cabin.

"I don’t know, Umi feels something coming," Keith responded before a deafening detonation erupted behind them. The sound barreled down the hanger corridor, it moved toward them with a thunderous vibration. Blinding light rushed past them before breaking apart into a new madness of color.

Black lightning hurdled down the enclosed space towards them with monstrous hunger as Umi’s purple pink energy chased after it. Small explosions occurred around them as the colliding energies reached a point of impact. Their forces canceling each other out. Dark energy washed over them, zipping across their skin and the surfaces of the blue lion high pitched snaps of static burst around them as the blue lion lurched sideways.

Gasping Miume gripped the edges of the command chair to steady herself, tails standing on edge as a foreign chaos consumed the hanger. Her teammates cried out in surprise, the Pawport on her wrist started rapidly blinking red in warning. Distorted waves rippled down the blue lion’s screens before blinking off and on once more rapidly.

"What is that?" Miume called over the pankied yells of the other paladins before her eyes widened. Nails biting into the command chair, a new fear gripped her heart as her team's ship slid down the hangers launch pad.

"Red Eyes!" She cried, her body freezing over as the ship slipped sideways before finally dropping off the ledge of the castle. Oli’s voice broke through her helmet in garbled tones, but no clear words could be heard as his signature on her Pawport vanished from sight.

"Hold on kittenscakes!" Lance’s voice hitched an octave up as they were sucked down the hanger next, their weight dropping as the blue lion’s hind legs lost grip. Miumes stomach lurching
upwards as they were forced away from the safety of the castle, streaks of black and pink flashing across the distorted lines of the wormhole.

Miume dug her nails into the softer part of the command seats material, her body going rigid as she squeezed her eyes shut. A new light enveloping them the lion started to vibrate violently as they were thrown in a random direction. The claws of druid magic scraping against their skin it tried to sink its poisonous venom into the blue lion before they broke away from it.

The couple braced themselves against the oppressive strength of g-force they shot through the compromised wormhole. They sliced through its wall into a different part of space, the cabin coming to an abrupt stillness. Miumes body lurching forward a momentary suspension gripped them.

Miume peaked an eye open at the brief moment of stillness before her heart started to beat faster. Time snapped back with terrifying speed as they surged forward into a freefall.

“Lance-,” Miume’s voice hitched as they rocketed towards a thick misty atmosphere, jagged teeth of solid ice glinted at them as they cut through the top of the slow moving atmosphere. Dense puffs of smoke-like clouds wisped past the top of the ice pillars that towered over the planet, their dangerous faces rapidly approaching.

“Hold on kittencakes, I got this.” Lance tried to reply in a calm voice as he pulled on the lions levers, but it was useless, his lion was completely unresponsive. Streaks of cold air whipped past them as they hurdled downwards, the blue lions nose tipped into a dive they gained speed at a heart clenching rate.

Emergency alarms blared through the cabin as the transparent screens flickered in and out of focus. The lights of the cabin blinked on and off in a strobe effect as Lance tried to regain control of his lion. The constricted space shuddering violently as they plummeted downwards, its force making it near impossible for Miume to keep her death grip on the back of the command chair.

Lance jammed his feet against the dash of the blue lion, straining against the counterforce showing them backwards he grit his teeth. Trying to keep his cool, he pulled again on the levelers, hoping desperately for some kind of response as they hurdled towards the masked planet.

“Come on, Blue!” Lance cried to his lion as they smashed through the first layer of atmosphere. Freezing air slammed against them with an entirely different force. Its bitter teeth snapping at their skin, icing it over quickly as thin fingers of icicles crept down the edges of the blue lions dash. Their nails dragging against the surface with skin crawling notes. Loud cracks of ice forming broke through the intervals of screaming alarms.

Miume’s sharp teeth clamped down on her lower lip in an attempt to hold in her terrified screams. Tails wrapped around her ankles her eyes were frozen open as they blindly free-fell through the thick clouds of the planet’s atmosphere. Each passing tick the air grew colder and colder around them, her body

“Blue!” Lance’s voice cracked in deep set panic as they burst through the last layer smog screen.

A blinding light erupted around them, making the pair wince against the sharp rays of light. Squinting through the pain Lance’s hands gripped the controls as he faced the unknown planet head on. His breath catching in his throat as his heart painfully skipped a beat before rapidly jumpstarting in his chest. A new frost started prickling at his skin as a different sense of panic gripped him.
Pure white reflected back at them, its surface refracting light like a polished mirror. Immediately snow blinding its victims and masking the endless rows of sharp teeth jutting upwards. Each plane like a different hungry mouth, overflowing with jagged lines of skull piercing spikes. Their faces glinting as they stretched upwards. It dangerously snapped at them as Miume and Lance screamed downwards, trails of white clouds streaked off the blue lion.

Massive pillars of ivory zipped past them, impossibly tall spires of ice racing upwards before disappearing into the misty clouds. Their thick forms layered with crack and misshapen chunks as parts of it broke away. Monstrous snaps echoed around them as colossal shards of ice busted away from their base. Their forms forced away as new ice crawled upwards, its form forever changing with lethargic growth.

Knifelike spokes dripped down the ledges of ice jutting away from its mountain formation. Dangling dangerously from above like a game of russian roulette. Their massive daggers ready to break loose and violently pierce through its victim at any moment.

Banks of snow built up around the towers, their enormous drifts barely clinging to the frozen face. Drizzles of partially solidified pebbles cascaded downwards while boulders of misshapen ice tumbled blindly downwards from above them. Crashing into the thick snow blanket below or smashing apart as they collided with other formations.

“Lance!” Miume cried in terror now as they rocketed downwards. An ear splitting crack snapped around them, giving the pair barely any warning before something roughly collided with the blue lion.

Crying out in shock Miume dug her nails into the top of the chairs material as she was thrown sideways. Desperately, she tried to hold herself in place the lion was forced sideways with monstrous force. Her nails tearing away from the command chair her body slammed against the metal wall with enough force to knock the air from her, her head snapped back against the wall painfully as her helmet cracked loudly in her ears.

Gasping in pain Miume blindingly clung to the wall as they hurdled sideways.

“Hold on!” Lance called behind him as he pulled on the levers of his lion uselessly. His body lodged sideways he fought against the counterforce shoving them downwards.

“Yeah, no shit!” Miume shot back at him, her tails prickling at his response as she tried to right herself. She took a few deep breaths to try and calm herself before she lurched off of the wall. Leaning forward she pushed against the g-force, trying to stumble back upwards to the command chair. Her feet trembling with each step, one hand splayed across the floor for balance she stretched for the chair’s base.

Gloved fingers barely brushing against it she lunged forward against the crushing force trying to shove her backwards as they crashed diagonally through space.

Wrapping her fingers around the curve of the chair she gradually pulled herself upwards. Fighting against the counterweight her muscles started to shake with strain before she finally locked her arms around Lance’s neck. Nails digging into the tops of her arms her muscles tensed as they raced towards the solid side of another tower of ice. Its smooth face glinted dangerously back at them.

“Come on Blue!” Lance gritted between his teeth, straining against the force ramming them sideways he willed his lion to respond.

A small flame of energy sparked to life in his chest, his lions energy rushing forward a faint
surgance of power rushed through Lance. His hands clamping down tighter on the controls he yelled out while slamming a lever forward.

The blue lion scarcely responding, tipping over on itself a degree more her massive claws skimmed past the blockade of ice. Sharp shards breaking away easily as the blue lions nails sliced through them they narrowly passed the towers face. The blue lion rocketing forward the massive mountain of ice quickly disappeared, another instantly taking its place.

“Lance!” Miume screamed now, her pitch rising in terror she squeezed her eyes closed. Muscles going rigid the hair on her tails stood on end as they hurdled forwards.

She expected her mind to go plank with fear, but she had trained herself to calmly analyze situations instead. Her heart skipped painfully in her chest as she quickly went over all possible outcomes. What their certain death would be upon impact.

First she would slam against the command chair, instantly crushing her rips they would collapse under the pressure. Her head would be mildly protected from her helmet, but there was no neck brace to keep her neck from snapping backwards. Her clavicle would break next, from how her arms were wrapped around the chair.

While the lions of Voltron were strong, her thoughts ran rapidly with the possibility of the entire lion being crushed on impact. If they hit a shard of ice, it could break through the lion and impale them from a different angle.

Her mind flashed to Lance as she squeezed his frame subconsciously tighter against her. Heart stopping in fear now her medical mind went over what injuries he would have.

The command chair seemed to have some kind of gravity program to keep the paladins in place, but if the were crushed from the front he would be killed instantly or injured beyond recovery.

“Miume!” Lance cried, snapping Miume back to the present as he pulled up in a final attempt to slow them. His lion responding just enough for him to swing right, the high pitched screech of metal screamed outwards as they brushed past the smooth ice. Its formation cracking and breaking as the blue lion rushed past it before barreling head first into a snow drift.

Miumes heart stopping scream pierced Lance’s ears as he gripped his lions controls. Setting his jaw into a hard line his body tensed as he tried to slow their collision. He knew Miume wasn’t attached to anything like Umis suit had been modified to do. That she would be hurdled forward without any safety net of restrain.

Miume’s nails tore at the tops of his shoulders but he barely felt it, his mind wheeling with how to lessen the blunt force trauma of impact as much as possible as they plowed through the first shallow snow bank. The blue lion vibrated violently as the snow shoved against them. Creating a small layer of resistance they slowed, but only barely before shooting out of the snow bank. Snow exploded around them, the harsh light blinding him again as his lion skipped across another snow covered shelf of ice.

Grinding his teeth Lance fought to control the lion as it tried to roll over on itself, one of his lions paws catching on a concealed peninsula of ice. Skidding parallel to the ice formation they bounced unsteadily as hills of snow decelerated them before the lion shot through the last layer of snow, hanging in momentary suspension before dropping down into the ravenous jaws of ice and snow below. The blue lion blew past the first small plume of snow, breaking apart the smaller accumulation of ice before viciously colliding with a dense mass that forced them to an abrupt stop.
Miume's body slammed against the front of the command chair, momentarily blacking out from the whiplash her arms slacked from their death grip around Lance. Knees buckling her trembling body slowly slipped to the floor. Shoulders rotating back into place she slumped against the command chair, uneven breaths leaving her lips as blood pounded through her veins. Adrenaline coursing through her and dulling the initial shock her body was experiencing as faint spots of tenderness painted across her skin.

“Miume.” her name bubbled from Lance’s lips as his head lolled to the side. Vision going in and out of focus as the high pitched ring in his ears started to fade. Blinking he tried to orient himself in the dim cabin before a shock jolted his body back to reality he snapped his head upwards.

“Miume!” he called again, voice hitching in concern as he whipped around in his command chair, eyes wide and searching before landing on Miume’s slumped form against the back of the command chair.

“Miume, hey, are you alright?” Lance’s spoke quickly, heart pounding in his chest as he quickly scrambled over the command chair.

“I am alright.” Miume half laughed in relief as she placed a hand over her racing heart. Had they really just landed without being crushed into oblivion?

Lance breathed out a sigh of relief as he bent down to Miume’s level, an ear splitting snap of lightening cracked through the still air above them. A monstrous clap of thunder following quickly after it the snow around them started to vibrate. The blue lion’s cabin shaking intensifying as the charging rolls of booming stampede closer. A fractured section of accumulated snow split apart, releasing a tidal wave of unstable snow.

Miume’s eyes widened as she whipped her head upwards, body freezing as a powdery storm of snow crashed downwards. Its mass blocking everything in sight as it charged towards their stationary stance.

“Avalanche!” Lance’s voice hitched in fear as he scrambled back into the command chair, hands barely resting on the controls before the blue lion was consumed in heavy snow. The cabin going dark as white surged around them.

Its force ramming against the blue lion and sweeping them in its unstoppable course. Miume cried out in stunned horror as Lance cursed under his breath. Gripping the controls of his lion he willed for her to respond, but the cabin remained dark, no spark of life ignited as the slipped blindly across the planets dangerous terrain.

“Brace yourself.” Lance tried to keep his voice calm as he strained to hold himself in place, the blue lion sliding backwards as deafening thunder rumbled around them. Unseeable clots of compacted snow pounded against the exterior of his lion while liquid like snow crashed around them. Ensnaring its victim with monstrous force the storm was over before it seemed to start.

The blue lion unsteadily jerked to a stop as the roaring vibrations around them quickly dulled. Only small trickles of snow danced between the lions crevasse as the snow instantly started to solidify. Becoming a compact casket of concrete.

A few beats of silence passed, the only sound coming from the pairs heavy breathing as the processed what had just happened. The dense snow blocking all forms of light a dim glow of emergency lights filled the cabin.

Exhaling unsteadily Miume let her clawed grip on the command chair loosen.
“Miume?” Lance turned around to face her, tan face paling slightly.

“Lance,” Miume nodded, taking a final breath to recompose herself. Grabbing onto a different part of the command chair she hoisted herself up, the blue lion was titled nearly vertical making it impossible to stand properly.

“Are you alright?” Lance started but Miume’s eyes were already assessing the situation, her brain quickly processing the possible outcomes. Going over any and all information he had learned about snow and ice planets. Or avalanches in general. To say the least, her team didn’t focus on such planets. They were usually left alone as they were considered tundras, bare of any value.

Her tails dipped downwards as a new cold settled between the two. She knew avalanches had slim survival rates for species caught in them. But they were in the blue lion, which seemed to have an unlimited amount of oxygen. That was good.

“Miume.” Lance's voice broke through her multiple trains of thought.

“Oh, sorry. What did you say?” Miume blinked, returning her red gaze to Lances.

He was leaning forward, hand placed over her, blue eyes hardened in concern as he stared at her. Muscles tensed, breathing unsteady, pupils dilated to adjust to the low light environment.

Good, he didn’t appear to be hurt, or in too much shock. That would make things much easier. Her brain trailed off to an image of a loopy Lance, one she had just meet and sedated with pain medication. A faint amused smile pulled at her lips but she quickly hid it, now was no time to reminisce about such things.

“Oh kittenscakes,” Lances face dropped once he realized he had her attention, “I- I’m so sorry.” his voice caught in this throat, “are you hurt? Did you hit your head? Oh quiznack i am so sorry. I should have done better, i shouldn’t have crashed. Just blue, and the wormhole, and the black magic. And that's not an excuse but-” he started to ramble out different apologies, hands fluttering in expression.

Miume frowned, “Lance.” she placed a hand on his helmeted face, making him freeze. “I am alright. You could have killed me but the worse i have are some bruises. Nothing is broken.” she tried to calm him as he looked at her with wide eyes, the vein in his neck bulging under his space suit she could see the fast pulsations of his heart.

“No, its my fault.” he insisted, “I’m so sorry I should have done better.” Lance apologize again, his eyes downcast, partially hidden by the shadows he turned his body a fraction away from her.

Miume’s shoulders dropped at his change in demeanor, her face softening, “Lance.” she said gently. When he didn’t look at her she coaxed his chin up with her finger. “If you weren’t an amazing pilot i would be dead right now. You moved around the ice pillars, and into this soft snow bank instead.” she looked him directly in the eyes, “not just anyone can do that.”

“Well an even better pilot wouldn’t have crash landed and gotten us stuck in a freakin avalanche.” Lance retorted in a defeated tone

“Your lion was unoperational, as you said, and you did the best you could with the circumstances.” Miume tried to comfort him, her shoulders starting to shake as the adrenaline dulled and she became more aware that they were encased in ice.

“You’re cold.” Lance noticed right away , eyes carefully looking over her again, as if trying to see some damage
“We are stuck in snow.” Miume responded in a flat tone, her eyes drifting past him to see that the lion was still indeed buried under snow.

She frowned, pulled an arm around her stomach subconsciously. Why did it have to be snow? Or even cold? She hated the cold.

“Hold on, I think there’s emergency blankets.” Lance murmured more to himself than to Miume, pulling himself out of the command chair and slipping down a short distance to run his large hands across the floor. Searching for a small nook an airtight seal popped loudly between them. The small compartments supplies nearly spilling out as Lance rummaged around for the emergency blanket.

“Does anything hurt?” Lance asked again while climbing back into the command seat. His shadowed eyes glancing at her again.

“I’m alright, really.” Miume carefully rotated her shoulders and neck to demonstrate that she was fine. But Lance caught the small wince that flashed across her face as the soreness started to set into her muscles. “there’s just some bruising.”

Lance sighed quietly, refusing to meet her gaze as he passed the thick blanket to her. The air between the couple settling into an uncomfortable heaviness.

“Lance,” she nearly whispered after a few tense beats.

“Hm?” Lance hummed in response, still not looking at her he slouched in his chair. Drumming his long fingers against his muscular thigh in condescending contemplation. Miume could see the wheels of negativity churning in his head. The thought of him blaming himself and thinking he wasn’t good enough made her heart squeeze.

“It's warmer with two people.” she tried to lighten the mood, holding the blanket open for him as she perched on the armrest of the command chair.

He sighed, shaking his head, “I don't deserve that right now Miume.” he looked back at the snow covered opening. “Maybe I can try and dig us out a bit.” he glanced at the emergency hatch while chewing on his lip.

“What do you mean you don’t deserve this?” Miume’s tails dropping a hair at his direct rejection, “And I doubt we can get the hatch open. It's safer to stay put and wait for the other to find us or for your lion to start working again.”

“I mean.” Lance’s voice cut through the air with bitterness, “I’m clearly not cut out to be a Paladon, i don’t have a thing.”

“Of course you have a thing. You’re the sharp shooter!” Miume responded quickly, her voice earnest

“Only you tell me that kittencakes.” Lance gave her a humorless half smile, a dry laugh leaving his lips.

“No,” Miume shook her head, “Shiro and the others say it as well.” she paused to shiver, “Well, maybe not Keith, but he’s a jerk anyways so don't worry about him.”

Lance gave her a sad, tender smile, “Please put the blanket on Miume, i don’t want you getting sick. Your team and Voltron need you.”
Miume huffed, letting the blanket fall from around her shoulders as she crossed her arms, “Not until you come over here and share with me.” she looked up at him, eyes softening slightly “if you hadn’t been a Paladon, or been piloting this lion, I would be dead right now. I know it. But, because you are a Paladon, and have such a strong connection with your lion, which proves you are meant to be one, we didn’t have smash into those ice pillars.” she started in a soft voice.

“you’re ‘thing’ “ Miume leaned forward, one hand doing air quotes, “is that you are incredibly compassionate towards others. You are always putting your team members well being above your own. You are always working hard even when they aren’t looking or saying you are slacking. You have great ideas and help your team in more ways than I can count.” she started to ramble a bit, “you are brave, and smart, and handsome, and funny, and always make others laugh and feel at ease even in the darkest of times.” she paused, heart skipping once she glanced away “and you made me of all people catch the feelings for you.” she finished quietly, her cheeks heating up as she confessed her feelings.

Lance sat quietly for a few beats, mouth partially opened to respond but being unable to as he processed everything Miume had just said before giving her a coy smile, “so you caught the feelings did ya’?” he asked, the familiar light sparkle returning to his ocean blue eyes.

Miume rolled her eyes, shaking her head, “that’s all you got from that?” she joked lightly.

“Well, that’s the most important part right?” Lance smiled at her with a bit more confidence.

“Only you would think that.” she Miume gave him a playful smile her tails swishing from side to side for a beat before her face turned more serious again.

“But Lance, you are much smarter and greater than you think. You give it your best all the time. I’ve never met anyone who is always gunning a hundred percent of the time. You don’t show others your “weak points,” Miume did another airquote for emphasis, “you don’t let them know when you are feeling sad, instead you lighten the others moods and make them smile. You have a strong, unbreakable, bond with your lion. She responded to you even though her systems got corrupted by the druids magic.” She patted the cold metal of the dash lovingingly, “ Your amazing piloting skills saved us from being crushed to death. You fought the entire time, keeping calm, to make sure that i didn’t get hurt.” Miume paused again, looking up at Lance, “You have a big heart, and any team would be lucky to have you.”

Miume tried to stress her points as a sudden overwhelming need for him to understand and feel validated gripped her. She hadn’t experienced this sense of need in a long time. Her heart bubbled up, spilling open with expression and desire to help. To help in a different way that she helped her patients. She needed Lance to understand his worth, to feel entirely supported, and if she could help him achieve that she wanted to do anything she could. The same way Lance helped her validate her own feelings and emotions.

She glanced back at Lance, but he was staring at the floor again, struggling for words. Biting his lip his eyes shinnied in the dim light, tears dancing behind his lids and threatening to spill over.

“I miss them.” Lance admitted quietly after a few quiet beats.

“My family?” Miume asked gently, scooching over so that she was closer to him, her feet dangling off the command chairs edge.

Lance nodded, his body shifting automatically to be closer to hers “I just-- left. They have no idea where I am. They probably think I'm dead for all i know!” his voice cracked as he lost his cool composure, “and I don’t want the others to see this because everyone is dealing with their own
things. Hunk misses his parents. Pidge is still looking for her dad and brother. I just- I just want everyone to be happy.”

“And you make everyone happy. Your charismatic charm makes any situation better.” Mume smiled at him, pulling the blanket over them as she coaxed Lance’s head against her chest and wrapped her small arms around around him. ” and your family, if they are anything like you i don’t think they think you are dead. I think they are fighting every day like you. And when you get back to earth , which you will, they will understand that you defended the universe! Do you know how big of a deed that is? They are going to be so, so proud of you Lance”

She paused, leaning back so that she could look down at him. Her heart clenching with emotion she barely understood as he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand . Taking a deep breath she pulled him into her more securely. “You, Lance, are defending the entire universe from an evil force. You are a critical part of the team meant to save everyone. Without you, there wouldn’t be a Voltron, or a blue lion, or even any hope. You are giving people hope all over the universe.”

Lance paused, letting Mume’s words sink in as he leaned against her chest, listening to the steady thumping of her heart.

“I dunno, i feel like anyone could pilot the blue lion. She’s a good girl.” he sighed in dejection. Mume’s tails swished at his words, she knew he was struggling.

“Not just anyone can be a paladon. They have to be brave, and courageous, and willing to lay their life on the line to save someone elses. Which you have done, multiple times.” Mume defended him, “you have this unique gift of caring for people like I’ve never seen before. And a natural talent to do what’s right. Not many people can do that.”

Lance was quiet for a long time, she could see the wheels turning in his head as he tried to process this, but he needed one last push of reassurance . Taking a deep breath she pushed him back again so that she could look him in the eyes,”Lance,” she said quietly, waiting for him to meet her gaze.

“You have many things , and are such an important part for Voltron and to me. You are so much more than you think. I know it can be hard to accept it, but please, just trust me on what I'm saying?” she gave him a small smile.

Lance’s deep blue eyes searched her sparkling red ones before he sighed, closing his eyes and resting his head on hers. “Thank you Miume.” he breathed.

“My time.” Mume whispered back, gently rubbing his damp cheek with her thumb. They stayed like this for a while, silently expressing their emotions to each other before the dead cold set deeper into their bones . Making them both shiver as the air frosted around them, making it harder to breath. Each inhale burning their lungs as their eyes stung. Splintering cracks of ice broke across the blue lion. Their snaps echoing through the hollow compartment they were taking cover in as the snow further solidified around them.

“Alright kittencakes, looks like it's time to share some body heat.” he gave her a wink, causing her to giggle.

“Who's the doctor now?” she purred in a teasing tone, moving so that she could sit between his legs he wrapped his strong arms around her. Pulling the blanket over them to create a toasty cocoon. Mume hummed in content, snuggling deeper into his warmth. Even through his cool chest plate she could feel his natural heat radiating off him.

Lance naturally cradled Mume into his chest, relaxing as her weight rested against him. His mind
slowly relaxing from its vicious cycle of torment, Miume’s words breaking the wheel and replacing it with sound support.

They sat quietly together, listening to the ice encase the blue lion and low rumbles of shifting snow around them. Small puffs of air expelled from their mouths with each breath as the frigid temperature dropped further.

“You know, I just thought of something.” Lance spoke, resting his chin on her shoulder.

“Hm?” Miume mused, her ears twitching and tickling his cheek as she sunk deeper into his presence.

“Snow is made from water right? Well Blue always heals faster in water. But since this is like cold water it will probably take her longer to recover from that witches magic” Lance thought out loud, “’Since its still water though, she should be operational without much external help.” Lance slipped a hand out of their cocoon of warmth to pat the side of his lion.

Miume paused, her ears twitching again, “you know what, you’re right. If she heals faster in water this unresponsiveness is probably just a delayed process since it's so cold.” Miume perked up at the thought, “Maybe we can dig ourselves out soon!”

“Aw what's the matter, don’t wanna spend a romantic night buried under snow?” Lance teased lightly as he nibbled on her cheek playfully.

“No, it's too cold.” Miume laughed under her breath while shooing Lance’s lips away from her face. Silently begging that if what Lance had told her was true, that the blue lion would become operational sooner rather than later. She sincerely hated the cold, or anything to do with cold things, but being wrapped in Lance’s arms made the situation slightly more bearable.

Lance shook his head, kissing the top of her head at her response before pulling her more securely into his chest. Shifting her smaller frame so that Miume was tucked completely under the blanket. Tails and all.

They sat quietly together, each wrapped in their own thoughts as they waited. Lance’s fingers absently strummed random beats into the top of Miume’s arms.

Even though Lance was providing a generous amount of body heat around Miume, there was only so much they could do. With each passing tick the cabin dropped another degree. A thin layer of ice had crystallized around the windshield of the blue lion. Distorting the dense snow with spiderweb veins. Their artic fingers stretched across the outside of the lion, searching for any gap to sneak inside and coil around their limited source of heat.

Nestling deeper into the blanket Miume had barely closed her eyes, her body resorting to sleep to conserve energy when a faint noise made her ears twitch.

Frowning in confusion she burrowed her head further under Lance’s chin, passing the noise off as more tumbling rocks of ice when a similar sound caught her sensitive ears again.

Opening her shiny ruby eyes a crack she listened, her brain fogged on the edges of sleep. Another small noise echoed through the snow. Something different than the sounds they had grown accustomed to in their isolated position.

An uneasy knot started to form in her stomach as she sat up, ears pointed forward in attention, tails still at her side.
“Miume?” Lance asked, shifting in the command chair and brushing the stray hairs of Miume’s voluminous locks away from his face.

“Sh, I hear something.” Miume placed a hand on his chest to silence him, her ears flicking to the side as they caught another noise. She was positive now that it wasn’t the same sounds of settling snow or creeping ice.

“What could possibly be here babe?” Lance tried to play off, but at Miume’s flat look he held his hands up and mock zipped his mouth shut. Miume rolled her eyes before returning her attention to the new notes around them.

Closing her eyes she tilted her head to the side, honing her focus to any new vibration around them.

Sitting as still as possible her ears flicked towards the new direction of sound. A faint, almost sluggish, scrap echoed through the snow. Its beat irregular, but pushing through the snow with labored shuffles.

Miume frowned, opening her eyes “I don’t know what it is, maybe it's just shifting snow.”

“That could be it.” Lance shrugged, easing back into his seat “what could be under avalanche anyways?”

“You tell me.” Miume murmured to herself as she leaned back against his chest again. The knot in her stomach still twisted uneasily, gnawing at her consciousness the last clouds of sleep disappeared around her.

Miume and Lance huddled closer together. Lance’s legs bouncing up and down to try and keep some amount of warmth and blood flow while his hands rubbed up and down Miume’s arms. The pair involuntarily shaking now a thin layer of condensation had frozen over the interior lens of the blue lion, making the cabin even colder. Its rawness cutting through their blanket and space suits and painfully extinguishing the last remnants of their body heat.

“W-when d-do you think sh-she’ll be ready?” Miume tried but her teeth were chattering now, her tails curling around them to try and offer more body heat.

“I-hopefully soon.” Lance tried to respond, but his jaw was locked in an attempt to keep himself from shaking.

“W-what hap-pened to spa-space suits stopping c-c-cold.” Miume huffed, pulling her arms around her tighter and flexing her hands. As much as she wanted to curl in on herself she needed to continuously flex her stiffening joints to keep blood flow. She could already tell that her body was focusing on heating her core rather than extremities. Her fingers had become more frigid and her toes had already turned to stone, so cold that they felt warm.

Lance tried to laugh up his blue tinted lips only cracked. Miume’s brows furrowed in concern. If they didn’t get some kind of heat soon, hypothermia and frostbite would set in faster than she was willing to admit.

Why did it have to be a planet of ice? Why couldn’t it have been some nice beach? Or field of flowers. Of all the masses in the universe, why did she have to be stuck on one so unwelcomingly cold?

“P-please blue lion.” Miume’s voice broke into unsteady pieces through her shivering. Reluctantly pulling her hand away from her core to reach out and pat the closest surface of the blue lions cabin.
“She’s still not telling me anything. T-the cold must be affecting her more than we thought.” Lance tightened his hold around her.

Miume sighed heavily, her ears going flat against her head she buried it under the blankets. There had been an awful, barely audible, scratching noise coming from the snow and it was slowly driving her insane.

“You still hear it?” Lance asked, resting his chin on top of her head, placing his hands over her ears to try and give her some relief.

“Y-yes and it’s so annoying.” Miume hissed through her teeth as she tried to keep them from chattering.

“Kittencakes, your lips are turning blue.” Lance tipped her head back to inspect them, “maybe i should warm them back up.” he wiggled his eyebrows, trying to lighten the mood. Miume barked out a shaky laugh, giving him a coy smile her eyes lit up mischievously.

“Want to see how warm we can get?” she purred, shifting so that she could straddle his lap while she brushed her lips across his. Lance’s face flushed despite the cold tones settling into his skin. Miume smirked, happily jumping at the distraction. Anything to get her mind away from the polar temperatures and jarring clawing of snow.

“Challenge accepted.” Lance growled back playfully, giving her a cocky smile he wrapped his arms tighter around her lower back, trapping her against him. Miume’s tails swished behind her as Lance leaned in, cool lips finding hers. Unable to help herself Miume smiled into the kiss, wrapping her arms around his neck to hold the blanket around them as Lance eagerly deepened the kiss.

Lance playfully nipped at her lips, large hands splayed across her lower back he coaxed her forward. Miume gladly slid forward, pressing her chest against his a low purr rumbled in the back of her throat. The air between them starting to heat as their hearts pounded in their chests.

“Mm Lance.” Miume hummed breaking the kiss to catch her breath and resting her forehead against his.

“Too far?” he asked, breathing hard now

She shook her head, kissing his nose, “no, if we get too steamy our sweat will just freeze and make us even colder.” she leaned back to give him a cunning smirk, “hypothermia kills ya know.”

“So,” Lance dragged on, rolling his head dramatically to the side, “you’re saying all we gotta do is keep the steam down?” Lance asked, his eyes drifting downwards, “that might be kinda difficult.”

Miume gave a half laugh, shaking her head and running her fingers affectionately through his soft hair. Lance closed his eyes at the feeling, leaning his head into her hand a loving smile slipped across Miume’s lips. Damn had she caught the feelings hard for this earthling.

She opened her mouth to respond to him when the jarring sound from earlier suddenly shattered the intimate silence around them. Lance opened his eyes, glancing at her before turning his head in the direction of the new sound.

“You hear it now?” Miume whispered in a hushed voice

“Yeah, it sounds like-” he paused, tilting his head to the side as the noise came again, “digging?”
Miume’s ears twitched in the direction of the sound again, “what could be digging through this?” she reluctantly asked. She did not want to find out the answer to this question, especially not while they were immobile.

Lance shrugged, “maybe it’s just new ice forming.” his warmer hands reached up to cup her face and bring it back to his.

Miume’s tails dropped at the thought, that didn’t make her feel any safer. Being encased in snow was one thing, but trapped in ice was entirely different. Would the blue lion even be able to break free if the ice started to wrap around her joints? What if snow had made its way into the inner workings of the joints and started to freeze?

“Whatever it is, I don't want to find out.” Lance’s thumb stroked across Miume’s cool cheek, drawing her attention back to him.

The hair on Miume’s tail started to stand on edge as the distinct sounds of snow being moved became louder. The muted notes of another sound shuffling just after each slosh of snow moving inched closer. The rhythm of movement becoming more vibrant with each shovel.

“Lance-” she whispered, her nails digging into the fabric of his stomach.

“Lets see if Blue is feeling better.” Lance tried to keep his voice calm as he carefully untangled himself from Miume. The instant loss of body heat making them both shiver as he reached from the controls.

“Come on beautiful.” Lance whispered to his lion, trying out the levers. Nothing happened. Not even the cabin lights blinked on in momentary life. Miume bit her lip, holding herself just behind Lance, her tails swaying nervously.

“Maybe she doesn’t like the cold.” Miume offered, wrapping the blanket around herself tighter.

“Maybe.” Lance mumbled to himself, trying the levers again.

“Lance-” Miume started before her voice was drowned out by the ear piercing scrap of metal dragging across the back of the lion. Miume’s ears flattened against her head as a new layer of goosebumps broke across her skin.

Lance froze in his chair, eyes widening as he looked back at Miume. His hand silently twitching to grab his dormant bayard resting at the base of the command chair. His fingers barely ghosting over its smooth material when they were shoved to the side. Bayard skipping away as Lance lurched unsteadily in his chair, Miume’s voice hitching her hands found his arm. Nails biting into the fabric of his suit as another long slice of skin crawling song of metal scraping against metal echoed through the hollow cabin.

A beat of silence passed before the rhythmic clawing of snow being dug through ghosted next to them.

Miumes heart skipped, her wide eyes trailing the sounds as her ears tentatively poked forward again.

Lance silently climbed down from his position at the command chair, kneeling next to Miume he pulled them as quietly as he could behind the chair. One hand resting just in front of her he braced his feet against the tilted floor to hold them in place. Cautiously he craned his neck to peek around the rim of the chair that was shielding them from the front view of the lion as the clawing noises crept closer.
The lion's body starting to tremble as the mysterious force moved against them. Slipping down further before being forced to a stop, the compacted coffin of snow stopping their decent.

Miume curled her fingers over Lance’s tense shoulder as the sightless sound echoed loudly through the small space. Snow scrapping backwards shuffled through the cabin. Large, elongated strokes of brush like movements wrapped around the blue lion. Another unknown being swimming easily through the snow at their side, while another focused on the nose of the lion.

Miume’s tails stood stiffly being her as small traces of light started to leak through the lessening snow above them. Her heart skipping a beat in fear as a rough fan of claws dug through the last layers of snow in front of the windshield. Their sharp tips scraping across the surface, breaking through the lay of ice that had encased around them.

The creature paused at the difference in texture. The snow becoming silent around them before it experimentally pawed at the blue lion again. A low grunt rumbled just out of sight before a stubbly blue-black snout fogged over the windshield.

Miume gripped Lance’s arm as the creature curiously sniffed the blue lion, running its clawed paw across the face of the blue lion again. The jarring sound of scraping metal made the pair wince, but they remained silent. Watching and waiting for what was going to happen.

“Maybe it’s friendly.” Lance whispered hopefully after the creature’s massive head moved away from their small pocket of vision.

“It’s clawing the lion.” Miume protested as the creature shimmied over the lion. Thin, pale white fur with blue and black speckles slid past them. It’s short, blubbery body dug past them, a naked black tail wiggling as its massive webbed feet easily shoveled the snow away from its body as it tunneled through the dense material.

“It looks like a giant mole.” Lance muttered quietly, “no way it could hurt us.”

Miume gave him an annoyed look. She had read plenty of Earth books, but a mole was a creature meant to be held in a human’s hand, not the side of the lion’s arm.

The mole like creature shifted around the edges of the lion, blindly bumping into it before changing direction. Miume and Lance turned, listening to it crawl around the edge of the lion, its claws moving around the back side of the lion before roaming downwards. With each shovel of snow the blue lion shifted. As if breaking free from the ice case they had been frozen into.

“I think it’s helping us.” Lance shifted his weight to gaze down the interior length of his lion.

“How would it know we needed help?” Miume asked in a hushed voice. The sound of its claws slicing through snow still made her fur stand on end.

Lance shrugged, moving out from behind the cover of the chair and pulling Miume with him. “Lance!” she hissed, trying to hold him in place but he moved back into the command chair as its head came back into view, its breath fogging the window again.

“Um, hello Mr.mole!” Lance called out nervously, waving a bit, “can you, uh, help us? We are a bit stuck-” he tried before the creature screamed. A scraggly high pitched note erupting from its tiny open mouth, rows of sharp black teeth coming into view.

“It’s not trying to help us!” Miume shrieked in distress, holding her hands over her ears as they flattened over her head.
“You don’t know that!” Lance protested as the create bit down on to the blue lion, its teeth unable to penetrate the blue lions frame a sharp echoing noise split across the space. “Okay nope, nope, trying to eat us!” he quickly changed his mind, pulling on the controls again as the snow around them gradually became filled with the same digging noises. A low rumble vibrated through the snow, shifting the blue lions weight as she started to quiver from residual energy.

“It called more!” Miume whisper yelled, her eyes widening as the blue lions weight shifted downwards again, her hands reluctantly leaving her ears to grip the command chair.

“Oh come on!” Lance cried, tugging on the levels again as blind masses of claws started scraping against the loins exterior, violently trying to pry it open. Each swipe making the blue lion shiver, its weight shifting ever so slightly.

“Lance.” Miume cried softly, gripping the side of the command chair.

“Come on blue.” Lance coaxed his lion, looking up at the creature as it latched itself to the face of the lion, its claws trying to break through. “Blue!” he cried again, voice hitching in concern.

A beat of tense silence passed before his lion finally roared to life. Blue translucent command screens lighting up the space so quickly Miume had to shield her eyes from the sudden change in light.

“Yes!” Lance cried happily, gripping the controls, “let's get out of here beautiful.” he trust his controller's forward, the blue lion leaping to life. Pushing through the snow easily they catapulted upwards. Her large paws easily distributing her weight to dig upwards before bursting through the top layer of snow.

“We made it!” Lance’s voice cracked as he turned around, smiling widely at Miume who had tried to release her death grip from the back material.

“Thank the moons.” Miume breathed out a shaky laugh.

“Thank you blue, we couldn’t have done it without you.” Lance cooed at his lion, patting her controllers affectionately. “Now, lets see if we can find the castle.” Lance moved his fingers over the screen trying to find the others.

“How about landing and doing that.” Miume suggested, trying to keep her voice from shaking. Even though she trusted his flying skills, she still wasn’t keen on flying and typing. Especially not with a maze of mountain sized glaciers of ice and snow around then.

Shivering Miume pulled the blanket around her tighter, even though it was significantly warmer now that they weren’t buried, but still cold enough to cover her skin in goosebumps. Thick, dark clouds slowly churned across the sky. Their forms sinking downwards, exposing three pale purple moon spread across the sky. Their faces barely illuminating the terrain around them. Its light soaking into the clouds and barley reflecting across the glassy ice. Its weak light shimmering like dull stars scattered through the ice.

“Nah, I got their location, we can get home soon.” Lance responded easily, “ready blue?” he asked before rocketing them towards the top of the planet's atmosphere. Miume closed her eyes, digging her nails into the material again to hold herself in place. She had already decided that she wasn’t going to go flying for a while.
~sorry for the delay, things have been crazy and I couldn't find time to edit, or get in the mood to properly edit. I'm sorry if there are spelling mistakes T^T~
Also, this planet might seem familiar, but i swear i wrote this before we ever saw a planet like it. I was shocked to see such a similar environment in Voltron.

Deep rumbles of thunder echoed through the blackness around Pidge. Its dull drums fading in and out of intensity as her body started to vibrate, shaking her from the inky darkness hanging over her conscious.

Groaning Pidge’s eyes flickered open, the claps of thunder becoming louder and louder until its force rushed past her with each monstrous boom.

“Pidge, Pidge can you hear me?” Hunk’s loud voice yelled through the speakers of her helmet.
“Pidge!” he called again, his voice hitching in concert.

Grimincing against the loudness of his voice Pidge placed a hand on the side of her throbbing head, “Stop yelling would ya’.”

“Oh thank quiznack! You’re awake!” his voice flooded through her headset again.

“What happened?” Pidge blinked to adjust her eyes, tipping her head to the side as the white armor of her suit came fully into focus. Her hands flexing over the controls of her lion, the tremors from before becoming more clear as her brain pushed away the last clouds of darkness.

Glancing up she tried to fully orient herself, eyes scrunching in confusion at the sigh of Hunks massive yellow lion crouched in front of her, blocking her view from wherever they were. The rolls of thunder continued to rumbled around them, its force reverberating through her lion.

“I’m not really sure, the last thing I heard was that the wormhole had been compromised. We shot out at some random point in space and I was just barely able to grab you before crashing into this crazy storm!” Hunk explained quickly, his voice almost frantic.

“Wait what?” Pidge blinked again, her eyes roaming over the dark cabin of her lion. Mind churning over the information Hunk had given her. The pieces falling back into place as she remembered the events that had happened before she blacked out.

There was only one part that didn’t make sense, “what storm?” she looked up at Hunks lion again, trying to see him but being unable to.

“Oh, right, you can't see.” he gave a sheepish laugh before continuing, “We landed on some electrical storm planet, kinda like the surface of Jupiter.”

“Um what?” Pidge asked, checking the controls of her lion and frowning, “my lions not responding.”

“Yeah mine either. I was barely able to get us to this shelter. But i don’t think it will last us for
long.” Hunk explained, hints of concern filtering back into his voice.

“Where are we exactly?” Pidge asked while leaning forward and running her fingers over the controls of her lion, trying to get some kind of response.

“I don’t know, we got ejected out into some random solar system from the wormhole.” Hunk sighed, “I haven’t been able to get any kind of reading of where we are, or the castle or other lions.”

“Okay—” Pidge dragged out, waiting for further explanation. Her body on edge from the continuous vibrations rumbling across the bones of her lion.

“I was just surprised we hit a planet at all. From what I can tell it’s just the two of us here, but” his voice wavered, making Pidge raise an eyebrow, “If my reading are correct, I’m pretty sure the electrical currents are eroding the lions. I mean the lions are okay right now, but we won’t last that long in this environment. And your lion doesn’t have a protective shell like mine. So I’m sure the green lion will be affected more.” he started to ramble nervously.

“Great. So we crash landed on a deadly planet and your lion is the only one working,” she sighed, leaning an elbow on her command chair and placing her head on her hand.

“Uh, well kinda, mine not working anymore.” Hunk’s nervous laugh filtered through her helmet, “ It’s like it knew we had to get to some cover, and as soon as we hit the rock behind you, it stopped working.”

“So we are stranded.” Pidge clarified.

“So as of right now yes. We are stranded.” Hunk’s voice lost its sheepish apology, dropping down back into concern.

“So now what?” Pidge asked, “we can’t just sit here if the lions are being eroded. What does it look like out there?”

“Um try swirling masses of dust, boulders, metal I think, and who knows what else, and electricity.” Hunk reported in a nervous voice. Another loud crack of thunder breaking around them, residual flashes of blue lightening glinting off the head of the yellow lion.

“Great.” Pidge sighed again, trying to peer around Hunk’s lion. She was just barely able to make out the masses of dark red and grey clouds whipping behind the yellow lion. Large unknown objects hurdling through the churning storm. Blue streaks cut through the darkness, lighting up her glasses as thunder crashed. Its force creating a continuous shake to her lion as different songs of masked objects pelted against the yellow lion.

“You said this was an electrical storm? What makes you say that?” Pidge asked, fiddling with her lion again but finding it still unresponsive.

“Well it seems like there’s a constant current that’s been circling around us. The boulders are all coming from one direction, and the front of my lion seems less affected than the side directly blocking the current. When I was carrying you over to this rock cover thing it looked like there was an eye a ways out. But it hasn’t passed over us yet.”

“How long do you think it will take?” Pidge asked, leaning back in her chair, becoming more aware of the intense electrical charge around them.

“Well it depends on how fast the storm is moving, how big the planet is, if it's moving in a
singular line or will change direction.” Hunk started to ramble out variables, “but seeing as my lion is struggling to even stay on the ground I’d say it’s moving as fast as two maybe three category five hurricanes put together. I was only able to see the eye of the eye of the storm briefly, but we landed pretty far away from its center. But these chunks of flying metal and rock are taking a toll my lion. And the lightning is a whole other story. It's crazy, kinda looks like its raining but with electricity ya know.”

“Hunk!” Pidge tried to keep her voice from sounding too harsh, but he had started to ramble into nervous endlessness.

“Right, sorry.” she could practically see him smiling sheepishly, “well I'd say two, maybe three hours at most.”

“Can your lion hold that long?” Pidge asked, eyeing the yellow lion in front of her.

“Uh, maybe?” Hunk’s voice was a question

“Well is there any other cover we could get to? Is your lion still nonoperational?” she asked, pulling on the levers again, but nothing happened.

“Well it looks like the structure you are under will hold for a while, but not forever” Hunk’s voice drifted as he shifted in his lion, trying to gain a better understanding of their surroundings. “It looks like it’s some kind of metal-rock hybrid. But its still cracking from the force of this wind.”

The sudden sound of a small detonation exploded from just behind Pidge, making both of them jump, hearts hammering in their chest. Its force rechosheing across the lions as wind whipped past Hunks lion as the makeshift shelter crumbled to bits. Its material instantly being caught in the rip tide of wind and hurdled into the twisting mass of debris. The yellow lion groaned in protest, its massive claws breaking across the solid rock under them as they were forced sideways a few inches. The green lion scraping against the side of Hunk’s lion with ear splitting screams of metal.

“What was that?!” Pidge exclaimed, gripping the controls of her lion in hopes of some defensive response, but her lion was still quiet.

“Lightening, I think lightening just took out part of the rocks.” Hunk’s voice hitched into slight hysteria at the sudden shock.

“Okay well that’s not good.” Pidge tried to calm her racing heart, “we need a better course of action. You can’t reach the castle either?”

“Nope, my lions still as a rock.” Hunk’s voice lightened a bit as he made a joke.

“Not now Hunk. We are in a swirling vortex of lightning and metal chunks.” Pidge retorted in an annoyed tone.

“Right. Sorry.” he apologized, “so any ideas?”

Pidge was silent for a few beats, her brain quickly running over any other potential courses of action. “Well I think our best shot is getting as close to the eye as possible then using that to get out. If the winds strong enough to move you then my lion doesn’t stand a chance. Especially if she is weak.” Pidge paused, looking up at the yellow lion again, “how long until you think the lions are operational?”

“I dunno, maybe half an hour to a few hours?” he guessed, shrugging. “We don’t even know what we were hit with in the castle. But it seemed to really affect our lions.”
“True,” Pidge mused, relaying the events of the castle, “it seemed to be some kind of counter-force
energy to what Umi’s is like. Like a negative polar to her positive.” Pidge returned her gaze to the
crumbling rock, her stomach twisting uneasily, “do you think this structure will hold?”

“Possibly.” Hunk’s voice was wary, unsure how to respond to her comment about energy.

“Well we don’t really have much of a choice do we.” Pidge sighed and collapsing back heavily
into her chair.

“I hope the others are okay.” Hunk mumbled, his voice deflating.

“I’m sure they will be. Keith has Umi. Lance has Miume, that’ll be interesting.” she smirked to
herself. “And Shiro knows how to take care of himself. I’m sure Allura and Coran are working on
finding us right now.” she tried to comfort herself and him.

“I hope you’re right.” Hunk murmured to himself. Glancing out the window anxiously. The world
around them was a chaotic mass of swirling multi-colored clouds, illuminated by frequent flashes
of blue lightning streaking across the clouds in elaborate spiderweb patterns. Thunder roared over
the sound of the wind and tumbling debris its voice demanding to be heard before lightning
cracked to life. Distant explosions echoing between roars of thunder as the deadly voltage struck its
next target with relentless force.

Hunk had been lucky to even find cover in the treacherous wasteland. Scare towers of heavily
corroded metal structures braced against the constant storm, but were eventually bent to its will.
While others were so heavily eroded that their formation dissolved into dust when struck by
lightening, vanishing into the storm as if it were never there to begin with.

“Hunk!” Pidge’s voice brought his attention back from the swirling vortex of doom around them.

“Huh, what?” his attention snapped back into focus.

“I asked, can you see the eye?” she replied in a dry voice.

“No, not yet. Still just masses of clouds looking like they could kill us at any second.” he
shrugged, unable to bring himself to even laugh nervously.

“Well that’s comforting.” Pidge grumbled to herself, sinking lower into her seat and folding her
arms over her chest. There had to be something else they could do. Something besides sitting and
being eroded by metal and lightning. Her brilliant mind worked through all the information she
had been given along with all her knowledge about storms and space.

“What direction was the eye going?” Pidge asked.

“Um clockwise?” Hunk informed her, a question in his tone.

“And what distance do you guess we were from it when we landed?” she continued.

“I’d say about thirty miles or so.” he glanced back out the window but still only saw the ocean of
clouds whipping past them.

“We we have at least a half hour, if we are lucky.” Pidge talked to herself, “maybe we can try
bonding with our lions? Get them working again? Like in the forest?”

“It’s worth a shot.” Hunk replied, not seeing anything else they could do.
“Well your lion is from the earth right, maybe you have an advantage in this barren wasteland.” Pidge suggested.

“More like deadly wasteland but yeah I see your point.” Hunk chuckled lightly to himself before closing his eyes and flexing his hands over the controller's.

“Just bond.” Pidge whispered to herself, closing her eyes as well, the roaring sounds from outside fading to the background as she concentrated on her lion.

“Come on boy.” Hunk murmured to his lion, trying to reach out to his lion. He was faintly aware of a dull heartbeat like light pulsing behind the back of his eyelids. Closing his large hands around the controls he focused on the dim yellow beats, unable to help himself but follow them into the darkness of his subconscious. It was a small, dim yellow light. Flicking just out of reach Hunk followed it deeper, reaching out towards the light. A weightless flash of yellow pulsed towards him, running up through the base of his palm, through his network of veins before expanding through the web of energy making up his lion. The interior structures of his lions cabin illuminating to life behind his closed lids.

“Woah, hey, I think I feel something!” Hunk’s surprised voice broke through Pidge’s concentration.

“Well keep focusing on it.” Pidge responded flatly, still not feeling anything with her lion.

Hunk sighed, flexing his fingers over the controls again and focusing on the dim yellow light. “Is that you boy? I know something got weird in the wormhole, but we really need you right now. Only your armor can withstand this stuff.” he talked to his lion, each word seemed to make the light glow brighter. Each pulse of illumination bringing more clarity to the bond between him and his lion.

“So come on, let's get out of here. We have to get back to the ship. Lance and Miume could need our help. Umi was practically passing out and I’m sure Keith is freaking out. Shiro might be hurt. And who knows about the prisoners.” Hunk continued, gripping the controller's now he could feel the yellow light pulsing in tune with his heart beat. Eat thump of his heart making the light glow brighter as the compassion for his teammates grew, trying to overtake the fear creeping up his spine.

“I know it's scary outside, and we’ll probably take some damage. But my friends need me. They need us.” he finished in a stronger voice. As the final words rolled off his tongue the light consumed him entirely, pulsating strongly against him.

“Woah!” Pidge’s surprised voice brought him back from the brilliant yellow behind his eyelids.

“Woah, woah what?” Hunk gasped as the inside of his cavern completely lit up and becoming functional. A low pur rumbling deep in the heart of his lion.

“You did it!” Pidge exclaimed happily.

“I did? I mean i did! I totally bonded with my lion!” Hunk responded proudly. “Now, lets see.” he scanned the monitors what were flashing with warning lights. Fingers typing away, trying to find any readings he could.

“Can you tell how close the eye is? We probably only have a small margin of time to actually get out.” Pidge asked.

“Yeah I'm looking now. It seems like it’s coming around in about ten minutes or so, so we are
lucky.” Hunk paused, “but, it's not going to come directly over us, we need to move about three miles to the south to reach it if my lions scanners tracking it correctly.”

“Great, my lions still not working through.” Pidge’s voice dropped a note at the realization.

“Well, maybe that's a good thing because your lion isn't armored like mine.” Hunk tried to sound confident, “maybe I just carry you like before so you don't take too much impact?”

“Would your lion hold with that much distress?” Pidge questioned.

“Uh I don’t know, but it's the only chance we have. And this structure isn’t going to hold for much longer.” Hunk shifted the head of his lion a degree to survey their hiding spot. The metallic rock was being stripped away layer by layer by the harsh wind. Its once solid looking face withered and threatening to break apart.

“Okay, well let's wait for it to get a little closer. How long will it take to get to the eye?” Pidge tried to guess the calculation, but not being able to see the storm's trajectory made it hard.

“It looks like it shouldn’t be too hard. The main problem is avoiding all the flying boulders and shards of metal impaling metal.” Hunk tried to keep his voice light.

“Gee, sounds easy.” Pidge grumbled to herself. Glancing outside she could see the terrane better with Hunk’s head moved. Her heart clenching uneasily at the sight. Walls of thick clouds ripped past them at blinding speeds. Neon blue lightening cracking through the darkness in tick intervals. Giving them strobes of sight as it cast shadows over the masked debris rocketing clockwise.

Sighing she pushed her glasses up her nose again, “alright, I trust you to time it right. Pick me up when you are ready.” she responded in a more confident tone while sinking lower into her command chair and gripping the controls for some kind of vantage point.

“Well that would be about-” Hunk paused, moving his lion into position, large jaw opening “now!” his bent down to grab the green lion easily by the back of the neck. Hoisting it upwards as the yellow lion uncrouched itself.

“Woah really!” Pidge panicked as she was quickly stripped of shelter. Wincing against the sudden light change in light and momentum they were immediately swallowed by thick clouds.

“Hold on tight!” Hunk called over the roar of the thunder as he bounded towards the opening.

“Hunk!” Pidge called out, her voice rising an octave in panic as she held onto the controls of her lion.

The deafening explosions of thunder crashed against them, her lion vibrating violently now that it was entirely exposed. Snaps of hungry lightening burst in every direction, breaking apart the smaller masses hurtling through the dust storm.

Hunk maneuvered his lion around the massive flying chunks, narrowly skimming past them with the thin margin of visibility. Lightening pulsed through the deadly storm, viciously striking the ground in random bursts. Its force causing eruptions of rock and metal, new clouds of dark sand blinding him momentarily. Hunk barely avoiding another volt of electricity crashing in front of him. His large hands pulling his lion back, massive claws tearing through the earth as they skidded to a halt.

“Come on boy!” Hunk urged his lion, cutting sideways as another steely boulder crashed past them.
“Hunk! The eye is coming from the right!” Pidge called over the storm, her eyes glued to the calm opening in the continuous chaos.

“On it!” Hunk responded, throwing his lion in gear he bounded towards the clear opening. Rock and metal smashed against his lion, but its tough outer armor broke it apart easily. Its strength pushing them through the wind clawing at their side, trying to tear them from their forward trajectory so that they would be lost forever in its inhabitable storm.

With each forward bound the intensity grew. Gritting his teeth he fought against the wind as it howled past them. A surgance of blinding lightening crashed downwards, residual static sparking off his lion as the paladins cried out in pain.

“Boulder!” Pidge cried out in panic, her small feet kicking out as if to try and backpedal away from the incoming threat.

Letting out a battle roar Hunk pushed his lion into a final bound, narrowly skimming the boulder as it rocketed under them only to be blindsided by another as it came around the far side of the storm. Yelping out in surprised panic his lion was thrown to the side, getting caught in the riptide of wind.

“Hunk!” Pidge screamed, gripping the controls of her lion as they ricocheted off the different levels of wind. The calm eye of the storm moving farther away as they were forced sideways.

“Hold on!” Hunk called, summoning all of his energy he slammed his hands forward, igniting the lions thrusters with all his might. Its strength giving them a final small boost towards the center, they burst through the final layer of wind, lightening coursing over the outside of the lion they crashed forward into stillness. Echoes of thunder and angry snaps of lightening barely breaking through the calm circle of peace.

Hunk skidded to a momentary stop, a small uptake of rusted sand billowing around them. A beat of silence passed between them before a bubble of hysterical relief laughter left Pidge’s lips. The storm raging around them but they were safely encased in calmness.

“Oh yeah!” Hunk called out in excitement, first pumping once to himself before retracting his controllers and rocketing towards the starless space above them.

“That was crazy!” Pidge exclaimed, trying to control her racing heart as they burst through the final layer of destructive atmosphere and into open space.

“I can’t believe that actually worked!” Hunk panted as he came from his adrenaline high

“I can’t believe we made it out in one piece.” Pidge breathed, leaning back in her chair and relaxing her death grip from the controls. The screens around her flickered to life as her lion came back online. “Oh now you wake up.” she mumbled sarcastically before lovingly patting her lion, “good to have you back girl, now let's find the castle and everyone!”
Sleeper Agent

Chapter Notes

~ I'm sorry for the delay in posting. The past two weeks I haven't been feeling inspired to edit. But I hope you like this chapter! We only have one more chapter before the finally of book 1!!! what are your thoughts so far? Should I edit book two and three and post them as well?

Slowly I became more aware of the red aura floating around me in the darkness. It’s crimson hue spread outwards like ink in black water. Pulsing lightly across my pale skin and coaxing me from sleep.

“Umi.” Keith’s muddled voice called through the blackness. A hot pressure pressed against my shoulder, shaking it lightly.

My eyes fluttered open as Keith said my name again, his face coming into focus after I blinked a few times.

“Keith?” my voice cracked from sleep as I reoriented myself.

“Hey,” his face visibly relaxed as I became more awake and responsive. “We stopped at Kara’s home planet to regroup.”

“Kara’s home planet?” I repeated, shifting to sit up, but finding it difficult. Deep set aches groaned to life as my muscles moved to reposition myself. A familiar warmth spread across my chilled skin as I realized my body was rested against Keiths. One of his armored arms draped lightly across my lap to hold me in place, while the other supported my neck. My head cradled against the solid material of his chest plate.

My breath caught in my throat at the realization, a light pink flushing across my cheeks.

Keith’s body stiffened as he noticed my response, his eyes flicking away quickly as his adams apple bobbed nervously in his throat.

“Yeah, we figured it would be best to get out and regroup.” he responded before glancing back at me, his fingers flexing over my exposed arms.

“Is everyone alright?” I asked, moving to sit up further and relieve some of the weight that he must have been holding from my unconscious frame.

“Yeah, looks like everyone had a pretty rough time but no ones seriously injured.” he informed, moving his hand to my back and helping me move from his lap to the floor. Carefully I shifted from his lap, my legs wobbling as I gradually put my full weight on them. Waiting a beat before fully rolling back my shoulders and loosening my support on the arm of the command chair. The muscles in my back protesting softly from their bruised faces, but nothing appeared to be severely injured.

“Is Shiro alright?” reaching upwards I gently rubbed the tender mark across my forehead.
Keith's eyes watched me carefully as I regained physical stability, hands fluttering just over the command chair arms as if afraid I would collapse again.

He nodded at my question, barely settling back into his chair when he was satisfied I had recovered enough to stand on my own. “From what I’ve see yes. You shouldn’t have pushed yourself so much.” he scolded lightly.

I paused, shifting my gaze away before glancing down at my hands. The pool of inky darkness had faded entirely now, the pale surface of my skin reflecting clearly back up at me.

“He was injured. I had to help.” I closed my hand into a determined fist, looking back at Keith with unwavering eyes.

His dark eyes held mine for a few beats before he sighed heavily and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I know no one could have stopped you. So thank you for helping him,” he looked back up at me, “just next time, please be more careful. We were stranded on a desert planet with limited medical supplies. I don’t know what I would have done if something else were to happen to you-” he paused, choking on his last word before clearing his throat.

I small smile flickered across my bruised features as I nodded back in agreement to Keiths statement. His words making my heart flutter in ways I still didn’t understand.

“How long was I asleep?” I questioned, absently tracing my fingers down my exposed arms, searching for any lingering pain and breathing out quietly when i found none.

“About a day and a half, how are you feeling now?” Keith shifted forward in his seat again, eyes carefully moving across my feature, searching for any signs of distress.

“I am fine. Just a bit tired.” I responded, letting my eyes wander back to the window of the red lion my pupils constricted at the bright light reflecting up off the large flat grey stone that stretched out in front of us. The green and blue lion resting on either side of the red lion, Aria castle docked in front of us and blocking the rest of the planet from my view. Turning my head a fraction to the side I squinted at the endless rolling blue liquid expanding outwards to the clear horizon. A fuzzy haze hanging just over the water, almost like steam rising.

“Where is everyone else?” I turned back to Keith, not seeing the other Paladins outside on the shimmering rocks.

Keith opened his mouth to respond, arms crouched to push out of the command chair but in a way that was reluctant to do so. Tilting my head to the side I blinked, not understanding his sudden nervous aura.

“Paladins, team meeting outside.” Shiro’s voice cut through the question forming in my throat.

“Guess that’s our que to leave.” Keith breathed out in response before giving me a half smile and standing up. I closed my mouth, watching him carefully as he moved around the command chair before nodding and moving to follow him outside.

As soon as we stepped outside of the lion we were hit with a wall of blistering heat. Squinting I shielded my eyes from the blinding lights reflecting harshly off the metal and stone around us. My body shrunk away from the intense heat, skin eruption in goosebumps as the scorching temperature bathed me. A mirage of shimmering air rose from the ground as the sun's rays reflected from every surface. Its hot energy burning upwards, soaking into the black material of my boots as if I had dipped my feet in lava.
Licking my lips I tried to swallow but found my mouth drier than I would have liked. The oven like environment sucking the moisture from my skin.

“It’s so hot.” Pidge complain while waving both hands in front of her face. A sheen of sweat breaking across her brow.

Keith held a hand over his forehead, pulling at the collar of his space suit with the other. Mouth set in a firm line as he squinted against the mirror like terrain we stood on.

Taking a side step I took cover under the thin sliver of shadow cast downwards by the red lion's jawline. My eyes adjusting to the newly bright environment enough to let my other senses come into focus.

Powerful rhythmic crashes of water pounded against the stone behind the lions. Its mist evaporating almost instantly and offering no drops of relief for my parched skin. Residual glitters of water glinted through the clear air before disappearing, the high ledge we stood on dry as sandpaper.

Squinting against the glare of the castle I tried to locate the intense songs of chatter chirping in front of us. Its sound jarring against the calming pulses of water. An ominous cloud of twisting energy rose up around the castle. Its notes dangerously beautiful, enticing the unsuspecting prey to come in, but not out.

My muscles tensed in response to its hazardous vibe. Keith glanced back at me, noting my change in posture, his own body reacting subconsciously to my tensed state he opened his mouth to ask what was wrong before Lance’s loud voice cut him off.

“Miume, kittens?” Lance’s worried voice drifted towards us, “what’s wrong?” his aura spiking anxiously as he tried to keep up with Miume’s fast pace.

She walked briskly forward, arms crossed tightly across her chest as she ripped her shoulder form Lance’s grip.

“Nothing, I said leave me alone right now.” she snipped back, glaring at him coldly as she came to an abrupt stop.

“Kittencakes is this about being on an ice planet?” Lance jerked to a halt, nearly hitting Miume as he did so. “I thought I already apologized for that, but I’m sorry.” Lance tried to apologize but Miume laid her ears flat against her head, tails swishing in aggravation near her feet.

“I said,” she turned her stoney glare to him, “just leave me alone, I’m not in the mood, Lance.” her upper lip was curled back slightly now, exposing her cat like fangs. A low growl rumbling in the back of her throat.

“Kittencakes-” Lance started, moving towards again her but she took a quick step back, snarling at him now. Her tails fizzing out and curling around her defensively.

Lance stopped immediately, holding his hands palms forward now and crouching down every so slightly to try and make himself smaller.

Miume’s ruby eyes darkened, slit pupils constricting as her breath started to come in short shallow bursts. Tails swaying dangerously behind her now she reached up with a shaking hand to clutch the crystal necklace resting against her collar bone. Her neatly filed nails catching the sun's rays and reflecting it back, exposing their elongated form. The red markings on her cheeks wavered across her smooth tan skin, slowly stretching backwards and expanding outwards. Like water color
spreading across a damp canvas.

“Miume.” Lance said softly, taking a half step forward with exaggerated slowness.

Miume hissed through clenched teeth, placing her opposite hand on the side of her head and hunching over. Her entire body starting to shake now.

“Keith.” I whispered quietly, cautiously stepping out from the shadow I had taken cover in and taking his hand. He paused, body reacting to my touch as I pulled him a step backwards while moving in front of him. A weak barrier flickering around us as my feet slid into a natural defensive state. Eyes never leaving Miume’s form.

The energy around her had lost its usual bright pink color and deepening into a dangerous burgundy shade. The natural airy bubbliness that curled around her morphing into sharp shards. Each one swaying outwards before pulling inwards, their shapes reminding me of her tails.

“Something’s wrong.” I murmured more to myself than to anyone else. My energy started to bristle uneasy around me, small snaps of lightning dancing across my skin as I watched her morphing aura.

“What?” Keith asked, he had stepped forward, shoulders in line with me and bayard in hand.

I didn’t respond, eyes trained on Miume. Her aura had never emitted such pure power before. Its shape and size continuously growing as she grew more distressed and agitated.

“Miume.” Lance tried again but Miume hissed at him, taking another step back and curling in on herself now. Her whole frame shaking violently, tails stilling in a half arch around her. Lance paused, eyes full of confusion before slowly reaching out to touch her shoulder. Miume’s ears shot forward at his advance, a vicious growl ripping from her throat as she lashed a clawed hand outwards with lightening speed, swiping Lance across the cheek.

Lance yelped in surprised shock, hand immediately going to his bleeding cheek as he took a staggered step backwards.

Miume glared upwards, blood red eyes glowing under the shadow of her bangs. Lips curled back and fully exposing her elongated fangs.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Shiro demanded, stepping forward from the sudden commotion as Miume let out a low growl. Her body shrinking in on itself before a huge burst of ravenous red energy exploded outwards. Its force snapping forward and throwing Lance and Shiro backwards with ease as it carved into the smooth stone around us. Bubbling outwards a deafening deep set rumble barreled through the air, scattering foreign creatures of flight from beyond the castle.

I had barely closed my eyes from the sudden burst of brightness before it was over. A wall of residual wind blew past my barrier, a ring of dust and sand curving around its base as the air settled around us.

“Miume!” Lance called out, moving to push up from the ground before freezing. Blue energy spiking in fear his eyes widened, mouth falling agape.

Crouched in the middle of the shallow depression of rock stood a nearly seven foot tall feline creature. A warning snarl ripping through barred teeth, spear like canines glinting in the sun. Large, pointed ears with black tufts of fur laid flat against the beasts head. Short grey fur hugged close to its muscular body, black-grey markings decorating it with red accents. Their shapes and patterns mirror the markings that tattooed Miume’s skin.
Ferocious glowing red orbs narrowed as they locked onto Lance’s half raised position. One massive paw taking a dangerous step forward. Pitch black talons scraping against the smooth stone with bone chilling notes as the feline slipped into a hunting stance. Large ash grey tails with ends dipped in black swayed slowly behind her.

My hands tightened into fits, one foot stepping forward to rush towards Lance but held myself in place, unsure how the Miume would react.

The other Paladins stopped in their tracks, stunned by the sudden transformation while Miume’s team paused in tensed uncertainty.

Eyes quickly flicking between Lance and the giant cat that was now Miume my breath slowed. Miume’s muscles tensed, her body shifting forward with the slightest of movements towards Lance, tails slowing to a still behind her she readied herself for an attack.

Shoulders going rigid my voice echoed through the hollow space before i realized i had spoken. “Run!” I yelled at Lance, quickly pulling Keith a few quick pace backwards as Lance scrambled to his feet.

Miume’s aura snapped around her, its hunting stillness shattering into an offensive attack as she sprang forward. Lance let out a startled scream as he narrowly avoiding her swiping paw. Shiro rushing forward, shield activated he grabbed hold of Lance’s upper arm and pulled him sideways, making a beeline for Keith and I’s position.

“What just happened?!” Pidge’s alarmed voice came before beside us, her body frozen between two directions. Naturally wanting to return to the safety of her lion, but also unsure if she should stay on the ground and provide assistance.

“Get to your lions!” Shiro commanded as he half dragged a Lance towards the red lion. A booming roar vibrating through the air as Miume cut to the side. Bounding two easy steps towards her fleeing prey.

My eyes widened at her excelling advance I pushed a barrier outwards. Extending it forward as quickly as I could but there was tension. Like a rubber band drawn too tight and threatening to snap. A pang of pain splitting across the back of my head.

A thin bubble of pink purple barely reached around the back of Shiro and Lance when Miume lunged forward. Ramming a shoulder against the barrier, almost testing to see how it would hold. But with enough strength to push me backwards. Wincing I thrust my hands outwards, bracing against the force as my feet slipped backwards, barrier digging into the rocks it protested loudly.

“Miume!” Lance called up to her, his eyes wide in fear and confusion. His blue aura whipped around him wildly, trying to find something to ground itself too, but finding nothing.

Another aggressive growl came from deep within the beasts chest as it crouched again a few feet away. Pacing back and forth, analyzing its sheltered target.

“Dude I dont think thats Miume anymore.” Keith flicked his hand downward his bayard changed into a sword as he took an offensive stance.

“What are you doing!” Lance exclaimed, grabbing Keith’s wrist and forcing it downwards, “of course that’s Miume! You can’t just go slashing her!”

“No!” Kara’s thickly accented voice called through the air. She and her team stood tensely at the edge of their ship based on the opposite side of the new crater.
“Look at the patterns of the fur, it’s the same ones Miume has.” Pidge’s voice filtered through the boys helmets. The green lion crouched on the ground, frozen, and waiting for commands.

“But how could someone as small as Miume turn into that ?!” Hunk questioned in a nervous voice. His lion also coming to life but staying motionless.

“Miume is of the Pymerian clan.” Kara spoke up louder, her head tilted to the side a fraction as Oli spoke quietly to her, “powerful clan of warrior cats!”

“Warrior cats?” Shiro echoed, hand still posed on Lance’s shoulder to keep the male form exciting the barrier.

“Incoming!” Lance cried, my attention snapping forward as a large paw batted at the side of my barrier. Grimsing from the pressure i tried to restabilize my footing before she came again. This time with clear striking force. Nails ripping across the surface, creating a pool of ripples across the face of my shield.

“No time to explain!” Kara called across the distance again, one hand held out in front of their small commander Oli as Miume’s ear twitched in their direction. Her body automatically sinking into a defensive position, ready to spring into action at a seconds notice.

“Then how do you propose we fix this situation?” Keith challenged, his voice on edge as Miume’s large paw came down on the barrier again, making it flicker in and out of focus as I fought to keep focus. While my energy had recharged significantly, I still wasn’t at full fighting strength.

Widening my stance I slipped into a defensive position, eyes tracking Miume as she paced in front of us.

Impossibly powerful red rolled off her in advancing waves. Each curl sweeping across the stone like a deadly mist, flowing closer and closer to its target.

Was this really still Miume? My dark eyes hardened as I continued to watch the feline. Tracking her careful steps as her large paws moved near silently across the smooth surface.

Narrowing my eyes I saw it. A small glimmer of bubbly pink shining between the ashy grey fur of her chest. Its color nearly swallowed entirely by the dark magenta, but it clung close to its beastly form.

Gasping my eyes barely caught the lightening fast motion of her tails whipping around as she spun. Their size barreling through the air I pushed a thicker wall around us as they slammed against the barrier.

Staggering against the strength Keith caught my side, steadying me as Miume backed away again for another attack. Her glowing eyes gleaming as she calculated her next move.

“She’s still in there,” I breathed, focusing again on the space where her necklace usually hung. A small amount of her usual colored aura continued to flicker through the mass of deep raging red.

“Of course she’s still in there.” Lance protested, shooting a glare at Keith, “she’s just a bit upset about the cold from the ice planet we landed on or something.” he tried to defend her.

“Something else must have happened.” Allura’s concerned voice spoke up.

“I don’t think this is about that.” Pidge piped up through the helmet speakers again.
“Then what?!” Lance exclaimed in distress, throwing his hands forward.

“Well the wormhole was corrupted by the druid’s magic, and the lions. What if her pawport or something got infected?” Pidge suggested, her voice uncertain.

I blinked, turning my head towards the green lion. Had the other lions been affected by the dark magic as well?

Furrowing my brow I returned my gaze to Miume, she held it evenly, eyes calculating. We watched each other carefully for a few beats, the faint shades of dark purple and black wavered through the angry red consuming her energy.

It was there, the dark energy. It had somehow attached itself to hers, leaking its venomous corruption into her.

“There is dark energy.” I murmured, more to myself than anyone else, “I think I have an idea.” my feet carried me forward before anyone could respond.

“Stay behind the barrier!” I called, rushing forward, outside of the barrier’s protective reach.

“Umi!” Keith yelled, his aura spiking with worry his fingertips brushing against my exposed arm as I rushed forward. Miume roared at me, rearing upwards and slamming her front paws against the ground to challenge my advance.

“Miume!” I called, slowly my pace and holding my hands up to show that I meant no harm. Her blood red eyes narrowed suspiciously before she attacked with such speed I was barely able to push a barrier around myself. Her paw sticking from the side she easily batted me away. My barrier took most of the impact, but the force threw me off my feet, shattering ticks after her paw swept over my body.

Gasping I quickly oriented myself in the air, turning to roll into a landing, my feet barely getting under my before her raging aura loomed overhead.

My bruised muscles pulled painfully across my back, causing me to wince as I brought my arms upwards. Another barrier barely flickering to life before her spear like teeth clamped down. Spiderwebs of stress broke across its curved edge, the tip of her upper knife like tooth peeking through the shield.

“Miume!” I cried upwards, arms straining to hold the structure of my barrier as her jaw muscles stressed to crush inwards.

Rampant, animalistic energy ran around Miume. The druids darkness fueling the anger and making her eyes blaze with fury.

“Miume!” I called again as she released her deathgrip on my barrier. Her body rearing upwards again, large form blocking out the sun momentarily before massive paws rammed downwards in a powerful pounce.

Gritting my teeth I rolled to the side, using the momentum to push myself off the ground and sprint diagonally away from her but she was there in an instant. My feet skidding to a stop across the smooth faces of rock I narrowly ducked as her tails lashed sideways. The residual wind from the attack knocking me off balance I quickly re steadied myself for another attack.

Taking a deep breath I tried to calm myself as she feint right then lunging left. Diving to the side I hand sprung off the ground with my hands before pushing off with as much force as I could muster
to launch myself into the air. Aiming for her tails I stretched both arms outwards, grabbing hold of
the coarse fur.

“Miume!” I yelled over her ferocious roar, squeezing my eyes shut I pushed my energy self out
towards hers.

Raging red energy consumed a small pocket of barely visible pink. Its massive feline form standing
over her smaller one, caging her within its chaotic madness. It bared its teeth a thundering wrath of
sound barreling towards me as a thick wall of lividity slammed into me. Its force throwing my
energy self backwards into my own body with blunt force intensity. Her tails ripping around to
sling shot me into the air.

Crying out in pain my fingers were torn from the fur of her tail, our energy connection shattering as
I was catapulted into the air.

Muscle memory took over as air rushed past me, bringing myself into the right position I braced
for stoney impact but Miume was looping along next to me, ready to catch me when I was most
vulnerable. Bringing my arms across my face I pushed a barrier around myself again just as her paw
as snagged the edge of it, slamming me the rest of the way into the ground.

Tensing against the impact the rock around us splintering outwards, the barrier shattering ticks
after hitting the hard terrain. My body slamming roughly against the rock, bouncing once from
residual force before my hands steadied me. Groaning I tried to right myself as another dark
shadow blocked the intense heat of the sun.

Breath catching i swung an arm upwards, a weak barrier flickering to life as her massive jaw
opened, crushing down and around my bubble. Straining against her power my eyes flicked back to
Lance.

He stood at the edge of my stagnant barrier, Shiro’s large hand anchoring him down as he was torn
between wanting to do something but not knowing what to do. Blue eyes desperately searching for
any solution while Keith stood beside him, bayard still formed into a sword ready to try and break
through at any moment. If it weren’t were Shiro’s mechanical hand firmly planting him in place I
was sure he would have rushed forward by now.

Miume’s growl shook the earth around me as she continued to chew on my barrier, trying to break
it open as her large paws held me in place.

Biting my lip I tried to think. My eyes catching a glimpse of Kara and Tug carefully sneaking
laterally to me, Oli at her rear. They too were unsure what to do, but Kara’s skin was impenetrably
strong, and Tug’s strength might be able to help. Oli and Miume had the closest bond from what i
had seen of them. But Lance. Lance was different.

Flicking my eyes back up to Lance i watched his ocean blue aura. It swayed around him, reaching
outwards towards Miume, but pulling back in uncertainty. Their bonds stretching between each
other we tight, but not strained. Only vibrating in strained confliction on how to help.

Setting my mouth in a hard line I nodded to myself, turning to look up at Miume as she eyed me
with murderous intent. Carnivorous mouth chewing across the barrier, large paws trapping me in
place.

Carefully I shifted my feet, her illuminated eyes tracking my subtle movements, waiting for my
next play.
Taking a final deep breath I threw my raised arm sideways, swinging the barrier left as I shot forward between her paws. Using the sliver of an opening to break between her triangular engagement.

Her jaw instantly snapping closed, paws seizing inwards at the lose in tension as I darted ahead. Sprinting under her for a few strides before breaking outwards in the opposite direction from my holding barrier.

Kara reacting as I expected, body lowering before bolting diagonally to me. Creating two lines of sight for Miume, two targets for her to choose some. The momentary distraction giving me enough time to turn and make an arch away from Miume.

“Lance!” I hollered, his body instantly reacting to my voice “run towards me.” I instructed.

“What?!” he exclaimed, mouth dropping in disbelief. The split distraction ending as Miume turned her attention back to me. An angry yowl ripping from her lungs.

“Trust me!” I yelled, jumping backwards to dodge another swipe from Miume’s paw as she came at me again. Tug had slipped into my peripheral vision, muscular arms raised to catch Miume’s attention for the briefest of ticks before refocusing on me.

Lance hesitated for the briefest of beats before squaring his shoulders and sprinting towards me, a battle cry leaving his lips.

Miume’s large ears twitched backwards, tails fizzing outwards as she spun around. Her tails narrowly cutting through the air above my head. Another deafening roar scattering the native animals around us as she looped forward. Massive paws vibrating against the stone, loose pebbles jumping upwards.

Lance made a small sound of fear in the back of his throat, faltering in his step slightly before charging forward towards me at full speed.

Inhaling deeply once I cut to the side before pushing off the ground with as much strength as I could. Throwing myself into a full tilt sprint i tried to catch up with Miume as she zeroed in on her initial target.

Kara run parallel to me, red, irisi-less eyes watching me intently. Trying to interpret my next move as Miume’s stride changed. Her body arching slightly as she pushed off the ground, readying herself to strike a deadly pounce.

“Umi!” Lance cried in fear now as Miume’s tails dipped downwards as a counterweight.

There .

My eyes focused on the narrow opening before finding Lance’s face.

“Slide towards me!” I yelled, voice winded from sprinting I took a final stride forwards. A small burst of pink purple energy snapping around my feet as I folded my non dominant leg under the other, sliding under Miume’s swirling tails and between her legs. Smooth stone creating the perfect friction I sailed forward, one hand outstretched as Lance moved into a clumsy slide. One arm coming up to protect his face as Miumes paws closed in.

“Come on!” I screamed, reaching for Lance at the same time his did, pushing a barrier around us just as Miuem’s paws struck. Deflecting the blow that would have crushed us my body slid past Lance’s for a beat as we grabbed each others forearm. Gripping onto the warm metal of his suit I
used his momentum as a counterbalance to stop myself. Rolling onto my stomach I pushed myself off the ground, dragging Lance with me I stretched for the fur just below her neckline. Miume’s body in a downwards motion as her legs braced for the impact from her attack.

“Dont let go!” I shouted as my fingers latched into a thick patch of fur. Miume’s body shook with anger, thrashing to the side, paws stamping downwards as I closed my eyes and pulled against Lance’s calming blue energy. Using it as an extra boost I pushed my own energy outwards before forcing Miume’s pink out of the raging red. Linking out energies together before pulling Lance’s astral self out next to mine we were suddenly consumed in black.

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“What just happened?!” Lance panicked voice echoed around us, his hand gripping mine as he looked around the sunless space wildly.

“We are in the astral plane.” I explained in a winded voice, taking a step forward my feet sunk into grainy black sand. Cool white waves tinted with blue washed slowly against the endless shoreline in silent rhythms.

“The what?” Lance asked, his voice cracking in hysteria from the adrenaline rush of almost being crushed to death.

“It’s like energy.” I paused, taking another uneven breath, “I don’t know how to explain it, I just need you to reach Miume.” I tugged on his hand until I felt him take a step in my direction.

Squinting I looked down the barren beach line, searching for Miume’s energy. Looking down at my free hand I tightened my grip on the thin strands of pink tying us together. She was here, but the beast energy was so strong it tried to hide her.

Setting my jaw i looked up again, concentrating on Miume and our memories together until a faint outline of glowing pink came into focus a few paces down the coastline.

“There.” I breathed, pulling on Lance’s hand he followed unsteadily. Eyes still roaming the barren plane with awed curiosity and confusion.

I stopped a few feet away from the lightly glowing outline of Miume. She was curled in on herself, holding a hostile defensive position and hissing in warning as we approached. Ears laid back flat across her head, nails clenching her arms as she held herself, tails curling around her.

“Kittencakes.” Lance nearly whispered, his aura dropping a note at the sight of her aggressive stance. Plumes of angry red tinted with purple and black rose around her. Its shape twisting in and out of a large cat like beast.

“Lance.” I drew his attention back to me, “I need you to calm Miume down.”

“What?” Lance asked, eyes widening, “I can barely calm her down in the real world. How do you expect me to calm her down in here? I don’t even know where here is!” he threw his free hand to the side in exacerbation.

“You don’t have to understand it right now, just calm her how you would in the real world.” I tried to explain while taking a staggered breath. Holding three energies in the astral plane wasn’t something I ever thought I would be able to do. I wasn’t even sure how I managed to do it. Or how long I could manage to keep us here.

Lance hesitated a beat longer, his energy pulling back slightly before steadying itself. He took a
slow breath, calming himself further before stepping forward. Keeping hold of my hand, but pulling it behind his back and giving his full attention to Miume.

She growled in warning again, teeth bared, tails frizzy. The glowing aqua crystal dangling from her neck pulsed with dark energy. Inky black veins snarred around its translucent shape, much like the markins I had found on my skin.

“I can draw out the druids energy, but I need your’s to calm her.” I murmured in a low voice, “It’s like she has two energies. The giant cat one and her usual one. The druids is also there, making her angry.” I tried to explain, the edges of my vision starting to fade into blackness.

“I don’t really get it, but if this will help her then I’ll give it my best shot.” Lance responded in a more confident voice.

Miume watched us warily, hissing once more while shrinking away from Lance.

“Miume.” Lance said in a gentle voice. She growled at him, her eyes narrowing. “kittencakes.” he tried again, slowly raising one hand as if to reach out for her.

“Don’t come any closer!” she demanded, taking a quick step backwards the energy around her scattering as if it wanted to run.

Lance’s shoulders dropped slightly at her harsh rejection, but he quickly recovered “Miume, it’s me, Lance.” he gave her a small smile, “I know you don’t want to hurt anyone.” he slid a foot forward in the sand, instantly understanding her emotions.

“I said leave me alone.” she snapped in a defensive voice.

“Well that’s not possible Kittencakes. We caught the feelings for each other so I can’t leave you alone now.” Lance spoke slowly and softly, taking another step forward and carefully reaching out to take her hand that was clutched to her chest now. She growled at him in warning, not moving away from his advance as he ignored the growl and captured her small hand in his.

I breathed out in relief now that we were all connected. The strain of distance lessening with physical touch.

Miume’s pink energy was almost fearful, spiking outwards as Lance’s reached towards her. But the druids energy from her gem retaliated, igniting the fiery warrior aura inside of her and demanding hostility. Miume growled, jerking away from Lance’s comforting touch but he tightened his grip. Refusing to let her run away as red energy swelled around us.

Closing my eyes I focused on the druids energy, pushing my own pink purple one towards it. The dark energy noticed mine instantly, sparking out aggressively and causing Miume to cry out in pain. She placed a hand on her head, ears pulled back in distress as she fought to control the massive red energy around her.

“Miume!” Lance cried, his voice full of concern he gripped her hand tighter, breaking through the wall of beast like energy that threatened to consume her.

“Go away.” Miume tried to push away from his but Lance stepped forward, trapping her hand into his chest.

“I’m not going anywhere.” he vowed in a determined voice. The cool blue from his energy self rolling off him in smooth motions like the tide next to us. “I’ve fallen for you hard Miume, and I don't plan on going anywhere. I dont think its possible for you to hurt me, or anyone else, you are
too kind in nature.” he tried to soothe her as Miume stared at him with wide eyes. Her energy moving around anxiously as she started to shake.

They held each others gazes for a few long beats, the silent waves lapping against the shore as Lance’s aura worked through her mixed one. Ocean blue cooling the vexing red while simultaneously pulling against the pink he knew and loved so well.

“I don’t like being like this.” Miume’s voice cracked, “I’m not a monster. I’m a doctor.” she tried to say, her eyes glancing away shamefully.

“You aren’t a monster,” Lance bent down to look her in the eyes, “sure you surprised us by turning into a giant cat, but that means there’s just that much more of you to love.” he gave her a more confident smile before returning to a serious tone, “and you are Miume first, then the doctor. A doctor is just part of who you are, but firstly you are the amazingly smart and talented kittencakes angel from heaven.”

As he talked his aura washed over her in rhythmic waves, slowly pushing the hostile negative energy off and letting the tide pull it far out into the endless balck sea. Her bubbly pink energy gradually growing as the ferocious red quieted. Retreating back to its dormant state, resting just inside her necklace.

Once Miume’s energy had calmed i took another deep breath to steady myself before pulling against the druid energy. Wrapping mine around the rooted base of its darkness while Lance swept the strands clinging to the outskirts of her energy off.

“Sorry this might hurt.” I whispered, trying not to interrupt Lance as he reached forward to brush his fingers against her cheek lovingly.

Securing my hold on the weed clinging to her crystal i tugged, uprooting its vile energy as gently as possible. Miume winced in pain, hunching her shoulders as I forced the rest of the druids energy from her necklace.

Lance made a sympathetic sound in the back of his throat, stepping closer to her as she leaned into his grounding aura for support.

Biting my lip i pulled against the black viens with as much energy as I could until a soft popping sound echoed around us. Its venomous hold breaking lose and withering into nothingness.

“Miume!” Lance cried in concern as Miume’s knees buckled. His hand instantly releasing mine to pull her into his chest while slowly sinking them down into the textures sand. The remaining wisps of darkness fading as Lance’s energy encapsulated them.

“Lance.” Miume breathed, her eyes flickering open as if she had been underwater and was finally coming up for air.

“Hey beautiful.” Lance smiled.

Miume blinked, reorienting herself before shying away from Lance’s embrace. “I-I’m so sorry.” she said softly, her tails dropping.

“You don’t have anything to apologize for.” Lance quickly stopped her, “this is just part of who you are. And it’s a bit badass to be honest.” Lance comforted, carefully running his hand through her hair.

“I don’t like this part of me.” Miume whispered, not meeting his gaze, “I’m not an animal. I’m a
“Who said you were an animal? Looked like you were a stronger more powerful version of yourself to me.” Lance tried, kissing her forehead softly, “you are still the same Miume to me. Just with the added bonus of whatever that was called.”

Miume gave a half laugh, glancing up at Lance she couldn’t help but smile as his aura consumed her completely. Her body relaxing into his as she found herself being held in place and protected.

“I’m sorry I can’t hold this any longer.” my voice broke their quiet moment as I took a staggered breath before my energy self sagged to the side, the world going black.

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Slowly I opened my eyes, my face pressed against something soft and warm as the sun blinded me again.

“Umi.” Miume said softly, her hand gently shaking my shoulder. Blinking my eyes moved up in the direction of her voice. She was hunched above me, giving me a tired smile. Blinking again I became more aware that my face was pressed against her stomach, Lance’s hand still gripping my forearm he lay next to us, his other hand reaching up and entangled in Miume’s.

“What happened?” I asked, slowly sitting up the world started to spin as heat rushed over my body, making me uncomfortably hot.

“You put us in some astral plane, I think.” Miume informed, glancing down at Lance who was still face down. “are you alright?” she asked, looking back at me.

Nodding slowly I placed a hand on my head, trying to rite myself as the edges of my vision blurred between black and clear..

“I’m sorry.” Miume apologize gently, her ears drooping as she cast her gaze downwards.

“For what?” I asked, give her a confused look.

She glanced back up at me, realizing that I really didn’t know why, “I don’t like that side of me. I was even out of control. It felt like I wasn’t in control of myself.” she paused, eyebrows pulling together, “there was just so much rage, but you helped me Umi. Thank you. I hope i didn’t hurt anyone.” her eyes scanned me carefully this time instantly noticing the faint black veins under my skin and bruises forming on my head and shoulders.

“This is from when the druids energy canceled out with mine.” I quickly explained, looking down at my arms. Miume nodded, moving to roll Lance over and freezing. Her tails bristling as he aura jumped at the sight of his exposed face. Three harsh lines clawed across his cheek, trickles of dried blood running under each mark.

“You weren’t you” I tried to comfort her, meaning to place a hand on her arm but missing. The edges of my vision turning completely black now the rest of the shapes around me blurred out of focus.

“That’s not an excuse.” she mumbled to herself, gently placing a hand on his other cheek to coax him awake.

“Mm kittens?” Lance moaned, his eyes flickering open before his eyebrows knitted in concern, “what’s wrong?” he asked, sitting up and reaching for her face again. She shook her head,
shrinking away from his touch.

“I’m sorry for hurting you.” she apologized in a small voice, her voice full of shame.

“Miume.” Lance said gently, reaching for her face again he pulled their foreheads together. “You have nothing to be ashamed of. That is part of who you are, and the druids did something that took you out of control. It wasn’t your fault, please don’t feel bad.” he tried to comfort her.

Miume sighed, closing her eyes she tried to compose herself. She could still feel his cool energy washing over her, pulling her worried out like the tide. Breathing out quietly she leaned into his touch, unable to help her craving.

But was drawn out of her bubble of bliss by Keith’s harsh voice calling for Umi. Her ears twitched in mild annoyance, her brain clicking back into its usual analytical mode. The bruises on Umi surely weren’t just from Umi’s barrier breaking like she had seen her beast form do. And judging by the shape of his lion, he must have crashed pretty hard wherever they had been ejected into space.

“Umi, kitten, what happened to you after the wormhole?” Miume inquired as she sat back enough to see her face, but keeping her hand in Lance’s.

I blinked, unable to fully focus on what she was saying, “We crashed on some desert planet.” I paused, hoping I used the correct word, “Shiro was with us, he needs you to look at a wound he got from the ship.” leaning against my hands to try and support myself against the hot rocks.

Miume’s ears flattened against her head in agitation, so she was correct. Her eyes scanned the me again, this time noticing that the belt I used to clip myself in place was broken. Her tails swished as her energy bubbled in concern but I barely noticed. The world fading in and out as my breathing became shallow.

Miume narrowed her eyes, turning her cold gaze to Keith who froze mid step.

“Miume.” he addressed her curtly, noticing the tension building in the air between them.

“Excuse me Lance.” she patting his hand as she stood up and marched the last few steps towards Keith who shrank back every so slightly.

“Care to explain the bruises on Umi’s forehead and arms?” she asked in a cold tone, crossing her arms tightly over her chest.

“I-” Keith started before his gaze shifted to Umi who was slumped over on the ground now. “I crashed the lion into the planet and she took some nasty hits because her belt came loose and I asked her to make a barrier even though she was exhausted.” he reported quickly while attempting to move past Miume who pressed a hand firmly into his chest.

“You what?” Miume tried to control her voice as anger flared inside her again. He was self-proclaimed best pilot yet he crash landed into a planet and probably caused more internal damage that what she was seeing on Umi.

“Look, I’m sorry, okay, can I go get her now? She’s-” Keith started before Miume’s hand cracked against his cheek. Causing his head to whip to the side painfully.

“You. Are very lucky she’s not more hurt.” Miume threatened in a deadly tone before turning on her heel, her tails smacking him in the face as she did.
Keith brought his hand up to his stinging cheek, still stunned as Miume instructed Lance on how to properly carry Umi towards the castle.

“Well, that wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be.” Keith grumbled to himself before moving to follow them.
We had converged and regrouped on Kara’s home planet as it was the closest non-Galara invaded planet we could find. Even though the lions were working, they still needed time to rest and expel the rest of the dark magic that still clung to their framework.

Aria castle as well, it was still functional, but its core internal workings were still malfunctioning due to the corrupt nature of the druids magic.

The Red Eye’s also needed space to work and treat those injured from the surprise attack that Zarkon had ordered, as was the same with the aliens we had rescued from Zarkon’s base. Some were in worse shape than others, but the healing pods in the castle reduced their healing times drastically.

Kara’s home planet was also a treasure trove of medical ingredients. The thick jungle forest that covered most of the continent we had landed on had a surplus of ingredients they could use for a variety of treatments.

Gazing out towards the dense sea of vegetation I let my eyes wander across its interwoven network of massive leaves and vines. Each rush of air swaying their tops like water rolling in the massive ocean that extended behind the castle.

Saturated colors of moss green and vibrant purple stretched out for miles around the castle. The only open spot being the decently sized expanse of rock we had docked on. Its sharp cliff dropping off abruptly into the churning ocean below.

Even Though we had been here a few days, my energy was still uneasy about the colossal vibrations coming from the jungle. Its very being seeming to have its own heart beat while echoes of other hidden beats lurked within its shadowed canvas.

I had only seen a cluster of neon colored feathered creatures scatter across the sky after a deep ripple had disturbed the jungle floor a distance out from the castle. Shrill shrieks of distress coming from large orange beaks filled with rows of teeth. Their elegant multicolored feathers trailing behind them as they circled the tree tops for a new place to nest.

I wondered what other creatures lived here. There was so much I hadn't seen or experienced, the gap in knowledge between me and the other Paladins made my stomach drop in ways I didn't understand.

Sighing softly to myself again i closed my eyes briefly when the familiar pattern of footsteps stopped just behind me.

“Umi.” Keith’s voice filtered through the vacant common room.

Turning i let one arm slide from the back of the couch, keep my other resting against the top i faced him. His crimson aura danced anxiously around him as he stood at the base of the couch, a small black duffel hanging in his left hand while the other rested on his hip.

Tilting my head to the side, I examined the strange looking red fabric he wore as shorts. A crumpled black shirt sitting just over its waistline.
“I-uh-” he stuttered, his face turning a light hue of pink as his aura fluttered around him. His free hand reaching up to scratch his cheek with an index finger.

Blinking i waited for him to continue, curious on his different choice of clothing.

“I was just wondering if you wanted to go to the beach with me or something. Since we are done with practice and all.” he flicked his eyes away from me, hand going stiff at his side as he choked the last few words out.

“Beach?” I repeated, not recognizing the word.

Keith's eyes glanced back at mine before dancing away again, his aura faltering a beat at my question.

“Yeah, its uh-” he paused, “full of sand, like the planet we landed on with Shiro. And has water around it.”

I hummed quietly to myself, trying to imagine the desert planet with water, but was unable to. Maybe it was like the astral plane i had pulled Lance and Miume into? That had water and sand. But it was dark, and had no temperature. It was uncomfortably bright and relentlessly hot here.

“Umi?” Keith's voice brought me back. I blinked, refocusing on him he gave me a small smile. His energy relaxing back around him now it floated forward, coaxing mine towards it.

“Can we go?” I asked, referring back to when Kara had warned us not to wander too far into the jungle. That it wasn’t safe for weak humans.

“It’s not that far.” Keith shrugged, “I let Shiro know and we can take care of ourselves.” he paused again, eyes running across my frame, “you will need a change of clothes though.” another smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

My eyebrows pulled together in confusion, “we need armor to go to the beach?”

Keith barked out a small laugh, shaking his head, “no, we don’t. We need swimsuits.” he tugged at the strange red fabric of his shorts.

“But i don’t have that.” I nodded to his swimsuit.

“I know, I’m guessing Pidge or Miume will have one you can borrow.” Keith explained as he reached forward to take my hand.

“Miume is with Kara.” my voice echoed through the corridor as Keith lead me towards Pidge’s room.

“I know.” he responded simple, pulling us to a stop and quickly rapping against Pidge’s door. Her forest green energy jumped in surprise before settling down. The metal door sliding open ticks later.

“Keith.” she stated in a plain voice.

“Pidge.” Keith responded just as neutral, but his aura waivered around him in tense nervousness. “Do you have an extra suit Umi could borrow?”

Pidge raised an eyebrow, a mischievous smile dancing across her face, “you happen to be in luck loverboy.”
Keith's energy spiked at her last word, his eyes narrowing in a dark glare. Pidge only laughed, shaking her head and taking my other hand.

"We’ll be out in a minute!” she called as her door slid shut, cutting off the warning daggers Keith was shooting at her.

“What is a swimsuit?” I asked once the door had closed.

“Its clothing that can go in water.” Pidge explained as simply as she could, turning to her closet and rummaging through a few overly-stuffed drawers.

“You get wet at the beach?” I questioned, holding up my hand and stroking the fuzzy orange alien that floated across the room towards me. Its companions hiding under a mountain of other materials, curious gazes watching us.

“Ah ah!” Pidge exclaimed, turning around with a bright smile. “Miume totally knew you would need this eventually.”

“Miume?” I blinked, eyeing the dark articles of clothing uneasily.

“Yes, she knows these things.” Pidge tapped her temple, “now strip.”

After a few ticks of struggling and uncomfortable maneuvering I had managed to finally put on the suit Miume had grabbed from her massive closet on their teams base.

“Um-” I started, looking down at myself.

The dark blue, nearly purple suit clung uncomfortably to my pale skin. Its thin fabric foreign against my skin. Two thick bands curved around my shoulders before dipping down into a sharp angle and stopping at the tip of the deformed scar between my breasts. A diamond shape cut out in the middle, leaving part of my stomach exposed. Stappy, thin shoes loosely stayed on my feet. Their bare colored faces awkward against my rough feet.

I gave Pidge a confused look as she grinned triumphantly at me, her emerald aura twisting around her in satisfaction.

I opened my mouth to question her clothing choice but a soft cloth hit my face instead. Blinking I grabbed it with quick reflexes before realizing what it was.

“Swiped it from your room.” she answered easily, pulling her hands up behind her head, “figured he would at least try and ask you.”

My face burned, heart jumping in my chest in ways I didn't understand. Why did I suddenly feel so shy in a swimsuit? Or that Pidge had found Keith's shirt in my room.

“Now, go on.” Pidge shooed me teasingly towards the door.

“But-” I started before the door slid open, Pidge’s hands quickly connecting with my back and pushing. The flimsy material at my feet catching on the smooth metal of the hallway I tripped.

Keith's strong arms instantly steadying me, red aura flaring around me. Biting my lip I stepped back, quickly tugging his soft shirt over me. The comforting fragrance of his skin calming my nerves.

We stood there silently for a few ticks, Keith struggling to find words while I avoided his gaze.
“Uh- shall we?” he stuttered awkwardly, holding out his hand.

I nodded in agreement, silently taking his hand and letting him lead me to the castle’s entrance. My thoughts too preoccupied with trying to untangle the unfamiliar feelings fluttering in my stomach to notice Lance’s clear blue energy.

“And where do you think you’re going?” he abruptly popped out from a side hallway, jutting his finger at Keith's chest.

“Dude.” Keith huffed, placing a hand on his heart and relaxing his startled stance, “you can’t just do that!”

“I didn’t do anything. The question is what are you doing?” Lance interrogated again, leaning forward and scrunching his eyes.

“The beach.” Keith answered simply, tugging on my hand to move past him.

“Woah woah woah wait!” Lance exclaimed, side stepping Keith to cut him off. Keith gave him an annoyed glare, aura prickling in agitation.

“How come no one told me there was a beach?!”

Keith raised an eyebrow at the other male, “we are on an island, there’s gotta be at least something.”

“Well the only thing I've seen is jungle and scalding rock!” Lance defended himself before narrowing his eyes again and giving Keith a suspicious look, “you broke the rules didn’t you.”

Keith let out an irritated sigh, “it's not a rule, Lance, just a precaution.”

“Says who!?” Lance demanded.

“Says no one! Dude just let it go.” Keith brushed past Lane.

“Well i guess if someone was going to break the rules it would be you.” Lance huffed, crossing his arms over his chest.

Keith paused mid-step, mouth pulling as his energy bristled. “And what's that supposed to mean, huh?” Keith turned, taking a challenging step forward.

“Nothin’.” Lance shrugged, turning his head to the side, “once a rule breaker always a rule breaker. We don’t know what's out there. And if Kara of all people says it's dangerous then I’d listen.”

Keith's shoulders relaxed slightly at his comment, “she also calls us weak humans.”

Lance paused, “well yeah~” shaking his head he returned to his cool demeanor, “i mean, i guess if Umi is with you you'd be safe.”

Keith's hand tightened around mine. “Just butt out of my business okay. The beach is like a five minute walk, it’s fine.”

Lance’s energy perked up at the last part of Keith's statement, eyes opening and shining with a new mischievous glow. “Oh really now?” he placed a hand under his chin, “well, if you can go. I don’t see why I couldn't. It would be a great date spot~” he paused, eyes shooting back to Keith's.

“Not fair! How could you of all people think of that before me!” Lance exclaimed in shock.
Keith’s face flushed red as he snapped his head to the side, “it’s not that hard.” he grumbled.

“You are literally the least romantic person i know.” Lance jabbed, “i’m sure my beach date with Miume will be much more romantic.”

His blue eyes glanced at me, a small apologetic smile tugging at his mouth, “sorry Umi, it's just facts. Keith is horrible with romance. I on the other hand am great.” he turned back to Keith, puffing out his chest, “when you need advice, come to the master of love.”

“Lance!” Keith's voice cut the other male off abruptly.

The tan male huffed, tilting his chin up and turning his head away. “I’m going to go plan my super romantic beach date.” he called over his shoulder.

Once Lance was far enough down the hallway Keith let out an agitated groan, “finally.”

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The walk was short, as Keith had said. A small path already cut through the overgrown tangle of vegetation claiming the ground from where he had ventured the past few days. Species of plants clung to every and any surface they could grow on, stretching to absorb the sparse sunlight scattering through the canopy of thick leaves above us.

Colossal purple veins curled upwards, wrapping around the massive girths of the jungles trees before spreading outwards like a network of roots in the sky. Orange spotted ivy dangling from the tips, their leaves creating a web to ensnare any unlucky creature. While upturned roots created a maze of the ground. We had to move with deliberate placement of our feet to not trip.

Finally we broke free of the dense vegetation. The last wall of fern like leaves clinging to our skin, trying to pull us back into its shade.

Stumbling a bit from the uncomfortable shoes I staggered at the sudden change in footing. The massive suns arching across the sky instantly blinding me as their intense heat beat down on us.

Blinking i tried to clear my vision, the chaotic sounds of the jungle fading as rhythmic rolling waves crashed across the ivory colored sand before us.

Gasping the cool ocean breeze took my words as it brushed past us.

Lightly shimmering bone white sand stretched out in both directions before disappearing at the base of towering sheer cliffs. Their faces refracting the sunlight like a mirror while steam rose upwards. The air baking against the smooth rock.

Clear, translucent blue water lapped the soft beach in front of us. Staining the white sand tan as its cool faces retreated back into the depths before rolling forward again.

“Wow.” I breathed, not being able to tear my eyes away from the beautiful landscape in front of me. The soft ivory sand squishing between my toes I subconsciously leaned forward to sink them further into the lukewarm sand.

Its silky texture seemed to absorb most of the heat from the suns brutal rays. Leaving the beach a temperate oasis of relief from the baking rocks around us.

Keith watched me from the corner of his eye, a smile across his face as the welcomed breeze combed through our hair again.
“Umi.” Keith’s voice drew my attention back to him.

He smiled at me, aura relaxing around him as he tugged my hand forward again, pulling me further out onto the beach.

Using his opposite hand he tugged open the zipper of his duffel, fishing through it before pulling out a medium sized towel.

Letting go of my hand he aired to towel out, letting it settle neatly onto the sand before dropping the duffel onto it. Kicking off his boots easily he gripped the bottom of his black shirt and racked it over his head. Shaking his black locks out and running a hand through them while he squatted back down to rummage around through the duffle again. A green canister appearing in his tanned hand.

My coal black eyes roamed over his sun kissed skin, memorizing the toned muscles of his back and shoulders before my cheeks flushed pink and I quickly averted my eyes away. Only to shyly peak at him from the corners of my vision as he squirted a tan liquid into his palm before running it over the top of his exposed arms.

Blinking I tilted my head in curiosity. Keith noticed my gaze, a light hue dusting his cheeks as his aura flustered for a beat before calming.

“We need sunscreen. The suns on this planet are crazy hot.” he explained, turning his torso towards me and applying more tan lotion.

“Sunscreen?” I echoed before raising a hand over my eyes and gazing out at the brilliant orange orbs shimmering above us.

“It keeps your skin from being burned.” Keith spoke while rubbing both hands over his face.

“Burned?” my energy spiked in concern as i quickly shrunk back to the last stretch of shadow across the sand.

Keith paused, instantly realizing his choice of words before quickly back pedaling, “no not like burn burn. More like uh-” he paused to think, “your skin will get red and irritated.”

Flexing my hands I watched him carefully for a few beats, examining his skin. There was no redness, but a small sheen of sweat started to form on his shoulder blades.

Keith waited, holding out the bottle for me when I finally took a step back out into the warmth. “It’s alright, you won’t get hurt.” he promised.

I paused for a beat more before slowly shaking out the same cool tan substance Keith had used. Bringing it to my nose I sniffed it hesitantly, my nose instantly crinking at the artificial scent and making Keith chuckle gently under his breath.

Casting the suns a final wary glance i applied the lotion to my skin. It immediately offered cool relief from the burning air around us. Masking my skin like a layer of protection my shoulders relaxed in contentment.

Once I was fully lathered I handed the bottle back to Keith, his aura flexing outwards in hesitant contemplation. Tilting my head to the side I gazed at him curiously, waiting for him to speak.

He sighed, shaking his head, a small smile playing on his lips as he realized I had noticed his change in energy.
“Could you-” he paused, scratching the back of his neck shyly, “get my back?”

I blinked, not understanding his flustered aura before taking applying more lotion to my hands and holding them upwards in preparation. Keith turned, keeping his head down while I gently placed my hands on his back. A light current of nervous energy danced across my skin as I ran my palms over his shoulders. Massaging the protective liquid into his skin.

We stood stiffly in silence, my heart fluttering in my chest. Why was the action of helping him making me so nervous? I had seen him shirtless before, so why was this different?

Reluctantly I pulled my hands from his strong back, the energized current dying down as out physical connection broke.

“Thanks.” he murmured under his breath, turning to take the bottle from me.

A few beats of silence passed us again, the only sound coming from the rhythmic roll of waves in front of us before Keith finally spoke. “Miyme mentioned that we have to let this set for a few minutes. Do you wanna take a walk or something?”

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding, my muscles relaxing as I nodded. Keith smiled, aura loosening to its usual patterned beat as he held out a hand.

Accepting his hand he tugged me forward, down the impossibly long beach line. His fingers working to intertwine mine and making my heart skip. He rarely held me hand like this, our interlocked fingers feeling more intimate than usual.

Blushing my eyes glued themselves to the ground as we walked forward. Calm ocean breeze lapping against our warm skin.

We walked in easy silence, hands binding us together as our energy worked to further intertwine themselves. His red threading through my pink purple. Stitching them impossibly closer as a white hued string started to coat the middle of the bonds.

Sighing contently i squeezed Keith’s warm palm. Both our hands coated in a light layer of sweat, but neither of us minded.

A low hum sounded in my throat, an unknown tune coming to life. I couldn’t remember where i had heard its notes, but the melody came naturally. Pulling at the dark covers blanketing my memories from earth.

“Keith.” I asked quietly once the song had gone blank, “are there beaches on earth?”

His foot faltered in its step, energy pulling back at my abrupt question. I looked up at him, searching his face as a small, almost sad smile flickered across his features.

“Yes, but they aren’t like this one.” he responded, focusing his eyes on something far away, “earth isn’t nearly as hot either. And the beaches aren't surrounded by jungle or burning rocks.”

I nodded in understanding before biting my lip, another wave of shyness made my stomach flip, “can we go sometime?”

My voice was quiet, almost swallowed by the sounds around us, but Keith somehow heard. His eyes finding mine his smile changed to bittersweet. “Of course.” he promised.

Smiling a bit I tilted my head back, exposing my face to the sun, “I'd like that.”
“Me too.” he squeezed my hand in response before pulling us to a stop.

“Wanna go for a swim?” he asked, taking a step towards the clear water.

I paused, feet still rooted to the sanded ground as flashes of acid pools jumped across my vision. Aura pulling inwards I tensed, taking a half step back before the blue hued water came back into full focus.

Keith watched my expression, eyebrows pulled together in confusion and concern. “It won't hurt you.” he assured, unlocking our fingers but keeping them connected at the tips he took another step back, letting the water lap across his feet.

My chest tightened, body automatically moving forward to pull him from harm's way but his didn’t react in pain. Crimson aura pulsing evenly, showing no signs of distress.

“On earth, people swim in the ocean.” Keith explained, shuffling another step backwards. Darkened sand sinking around his large feet.

When I didn't move his face softened, “Umi.” he coaxed my eyes up from the changing water, “what do you see?”

I paused, hand tightening around his for a beat i struggled to find the right words. Would it be alright to tell him? Would he understand?

He waited patiently while I debated, my mouth pulling into a firm line before I exhaled. Breathing in the salty air until my lungs were full of its calming energy.

“I see acid.” I answered, looking down at the water its natural image flickered between bubbling toxin and peaceful blue.

Keith nodded, waiting for me to continue, “on Zarkons base, i had to protect myself from it.” I tried to explain. “Use my power. To get stronger.”

“You don’t need to use your ability here. It’s not acid. I’m not hurt, and you won’t be either.” he spoke gently, waiting for me to step forward.

“Promise?” I finally asked, flickers of purple pink filtering in and out of view.

“Promise.” his voice was unwavering.

Swallowing I carefully dipped my toes into the cool water. Bracing myself for the sharp burning sensation, but none came.

“See, nothing dangerous.” Keith smiled, stepping forward to fully hold my hand again as i took another hesitant step inwards.

The translucent blue swallowed my feet briefly before quickly pulling back out with the tide. Streaks of darkened sand moving with it as my feet sunk into it.

Keith took hold of both my hands, leading me step by step out into the ocean before we were nearly waist deep. The weight of the water pushing against me, its strength gently lifting my up and down as the waves rolled in and out.

“What does it feel like this on earth?” I asked over the calming rhythm of water.

Keith nodded while pulling me backwards once more, my feet leaving the soft sand I instantly
pulled backwards but Keiths stopped me.

“‘I won’t let go,’” he promised, his body rising as another wave swept lazily past us.

“I can’t-” my voice bubbled as I bobbed weightlessly upwards, “I don't know how to-”

“Swim?” Keith finished for me as he let the next roll of water pull him closer to me. His strong arms wrapping around my waist and holding me against him.

“It’s alright.” a shy smile curved upwards as he guided my hands to his shoulders. The tips of my nails digging into his skin as i uneasily shifted in the water. Legs kicking outwards in reflex bubbles zipped across my skin.

“Keith.” my voice hitched as we swayed upwards before sinking down. The temperate water splashing cool droplets against my exposed skin while it moved easily around us. Capturing our bodies and lulling us back and forth. Keith's feet barely touching the bottom, but anchoring us in place just enough to not be swept out farther by the current.

He held me against him, letting me adjust to the water before carefully prying my fingers from his skin and placing them on his chest. Leaning backwards he pulled me closer, letting my form lay over his as he floated. My legs being held up by the water we stayed their weightlessly, almost as if in space with no gravity.

Long streaks of black billowed out around us as my loose air spread outwards. Damp strands clinging to our salt licked skin.

Keith closed his eyes, humming a low note of contentment in his chest. Bright red aura relaxing into the water, mixing with its constantly changing shapes. Trails of our mixed aura swam away as different small currents picked them up, carrying them off into the endless sea of luminescent blue.

Gradually my body relaxed against his, energy dipping down into the water in exploratory movements until I finally rested my head against Keith's. One of his large hands came up to stroke my back, thumb dragging across my spine.

We floated silently for what seemed like an endless period of time. Each of us contently being in the others presence as the calming energy of the ocean lulled our energies to rest. Its blue hue curling upwards, each tendril rolling in motion with the physical waves and running through our energy. Gently pulling and pushing it until the tense notes released.

Closing my eyes i listened to the unknown song of the ocean. The paced laps of water against the sand, movement of water as it swam around us. The quieter noises of jungle singing softly in the background.

There were so many sounds I had never heard before. My ears eagerly picking up different notes and courses as the planet sung.

It wasn’t until Keith shifted forwards that i opened my eyes, legs pulling inwards more naturally than before as Keith guided me back into a vertical position.

“Want to head back to the beach?” he asked, letting another wave push us gently forward his feet touched the sand below.

I sighed, leaning back into the water until my head was tipped upwards. Hair fanning outwards i heard Keith laugh to himself before pushing off the sanded floor. His body moving mine
backwards enough until he hovered just over me, grinning.

“Don’t want to leave?” he teased.

I smiled, unable to help myself a small giggle bubbled from my lips before Keith quickly pressed his lips into mine. They tasted different than usual. Softer to the touch, with a hint of salt clinging to them.

Blushing I flicked my eyes away in surprised embarrassment, making him chuckle again while he rolled to the side. Hand finding mine and tugging me towards shore.

Sighing I followed, body moving more confidently in the water, as if I had swam before. Did I swim on earth? Did I live near an ocean?

I let Keith guide me back to shore, waiting until my feet could easily touch the ground before shaking saddening thoughts from my head.

A small yelp of surprise stunned my ears as Keith shook his wet locks out. Spraying me with a cold barrage of droplets.

He grinned at my response, energy bubbling playfully around him I narrowed my eyes. His dark ones widened as he realized what I was about to do. Spinning quickly on my heel my long hair fanned out around me, another assault of water covering Keith's slick skin.

He barked out a laugh, covering his face in mock fear, waiting for me to stop before quickly closing the distance between us. Dropping his shoulder I was only able to take a small step back before he hoisted me upwards.

Shrieking in playful surprise I pushed against his shoulder as he easily bent me over it. Holding my legs steady as they kicked outwards he spun us around.

Laughing I squeezed my eyes shut, waiting for him to stop. My heart flipping happily in my chest as warmth spread through me. The emotion of happiness becoming more natural and less unknown.

Slowly Keith stopped, dramatically staggering as if he were to drop me before pulling me back up and placing me on my feet.

A few bubbles of laughter still escaped my lips as I tried to calm my racing heart. Keith's eyes light with playful joy.

Draping my damp hair back over my shoulder I combed my fingers through the new knots.

“Shall we?” he asked, holding out his hand again. Unable to help myself I smiled wider, gladly accepting his hand as we walked back towards the towel and duffel bag. The brilliant colored suns starting to dip lower in the sky, their heat less intense as shadows slid down the steaming faces of rock.

Letting out a long sigh Keith plopped down onto the towel, drawing me with him he easily pulled me into his lap. Trapping me with his legs as his arms wrapped around my stomach. Head buried in my drying hair he breathed in my scent deeply.

My stomach somersaulted again as he squeezed me tighter into his damp chest. Muscles tensed for a few beats before relaxing against his familiar hold.
Leaning back against him he easily supported my weight as we gazed out on the shimmering water. Sinking suns casting a mist of orange across its clear surface.

“Umi.” Keith mumbled against my skin.

“Hm?” I hummed in response, tilting my head to the side so that I could see his face.

His aura bubbled once before he pressed his lips against mine again. Still stained with the taste of salt I leaned into the kiss.

“Thanks for coming with me.” he murmured against my lips, pulling back just enough to connect our gazes before capturing my lips again.

I smiled into the kiss, shifting my position to better receive it.

Reluctantly he pulled away, a small smile still playing on his lips as he breathed out heavily before resting his forehead against mine and closing his eyes.

Taking a calming breath I nuzzled my nose against his, eyes closing in contentment we sat there silently as the first sun dipped further under the horizon.
The intensely burning suns of Kara’s home planet, Zomber, were slowly sinking down under the horizon when we gathered in the main control room of Aria castle.

Pale streaks of orange cut through the large windows, bathing the curved room in watery rusted gold.

“The time has come.” Allura started, stepping forward on her captain podium. Her energy sparkled around her, its beats trying to pulse steadily, but not fully being able to.

The room stilled to an impossible quietness. Each anti-Zarkon group leader standing tensely in a semi-circle around Allura. Their auras sobering in the understanding that battle was soon to come again.

“I thank each and every one of you for your courage in fighting against Zarkon. And for joining in Voltron’s coalition to defeat this great evil that has plagued the universe.” Alluras bright eyes stopped on each leader as she spoke before finally turning to each of the Paladins.

“I know we have just suffered a great loss, but we have no time to spare.” her eyes hardened as she raised her hands upwards. Twin columns rising from the floor to meet her thin hands. “But we have just received crucial information. A Blade from Marmora has completed their mission in creating an accurate model of Zarkon’s ship.”

Allura closed her eyes briefly, energy charging around her for a beat before a large blue hologram appeared in the middle of the room.

“Woah.” Pidge murmured from beside me, her calculating eyes quickly scanning over the floating ship.

“As we can see there are four main chambers off of the central body of the ship.” Shiro spoke next, coming forward and spinning the model. “And its power source.” Shiro used both his hands to push outwards, expanding the image to an internal layout. “Is here. Naturally in the heart of the ship.”

“If we can disrupt, or destroy its main source of power, we can immobilize everything run by it. Zarkon’s ship, the ion ships, fighter jets.” Shiro explained, his coal eyes scanning across the room until the found mine. “This will force Zarkon out. We know he wants the black lion, even if the bond is severed. But he won’t have a choice but to face Voltron once we destroy its energy source.”

Tightening my hands my aura hardened around me as I understood what my orders would be. Keith’s aura stiffened next to him as he realized what Shiro was about to say as well.
“Umi, we need you to destroy the mainframe. Your energy seems to counteract whatever dark one they have.” Shiro turned his gaze to Keith, “Keith, you will go with her. You can interact with their tech to get where you need to go.”

Keith nodded next to me, arms crossed tightly over his chest as his hard gaze cut through the holographic image.

“Pidge. I need you to render a map for them to use.” Shiro shifted to look at Pidge. She nodded, mouth set in a firm, unreadable, line.

“Umi and Keith, you will use one of the pods rendered with the invisibility cloak function to land here.” Shiro zoomed in on another section of the ship. A small opening for a fighter jet hanger coming into focus. “This is the closest and most direct path to the mainframe.”

“Understood.” Keith’s voice was void of emotion as he accepted his mission.

“Paladins, we will launch the initial attack in front of the castle.” Shiro continued, “we know Zarkon will respond quickly, but we need to give Umi and Keith an opening.”

“Absol, Camuel, Chikami, Shinzu,” Shiro looked at each of the leaders, “you will take your forces, and the others you have been in contact with, and wait five dobosh’s before you wormhole to one of these quadrants.”

Shiro glanced at Allura who nodded, drawing her hand across the hologram image so that six segments appeared, each a different color.

“Each of you will take on quadrant. Keep Zarkons forces busy as long as you can.” Shiro turned to Ulaz and Kollivan, “the Blade will help with defending the Red Eye’s medical team.”

“Miume, you and your team will be positioned here.” Shiro moved the map to a small cluster of rock formations. “Anyone who is injured gets treatment here.”

“Are we sure that’s safe?” Miume spoke up, her tails swishing, “if each injured ship goes to one direction. The only real cover around, I might add, don’t you think they’ll catch on?”

“Yes, that would indeed be a problem,” Coran strode forward, “but this is where the castle comes in.” he twirled the right side of his mustache. “We will be positioned in front of you, give you cover while the Blade provides another lay of defense.”

Coran reached up to interact with the map so that Aria castle appeared, using his fingers he positioned it in front of the small outlander cluster of rocks.

Miume’s ears twitched in contemplation, “purrhaps. It is still risky though.”

“Indeed. But this position also allows quick access to the ship if anyone needs a healing pod immediately.” Allura elaborated.

Miume placed a hand under her chin, studying the map, her tails swishing as she mulled over the information.

“That is true. I will speak to my team for confirmation.” Miume finally agreed.

“Yes, please inform them.” Allura nodded at Miume before turning back to the group.

“This war has been going on for ten thousand years. Killed too many innocent lives, planets,
civilizations, cultures.” her eyes hardened as her hands drew into fists, “tomorrow that changes. Tomorrow we will defeat Zarkon.”

“Defeat Zarkon.” Absol supported before each leader of the anti-Zarkon groups quickly agreed as well.

Shiro nodded in agreement, pulling his shoulders back with more confidence, “once Umi has destroyed the mainframe, and Zarkon is drawn out, Voltron will defeat him once and for all.”

“To victory.” Chikami raised their humanoid hand upwards.

“To victory!” the rest of the group agreed with somber conclusion.

“It's been an honor flying with you all. Now go rest, we launch at dawn.” Shiro finished.

Some hid it better than others. But the tension in the room drew taught, each energy pulling backwards, retreating from the impending war that charged forward.

Fear, anxiety, recognition and acceptance of possible death settled into each of the energies around me. Weighing down on them with crushing force, but the will to live and drive for peace fought against that heaviness.

Each of the groups clasp hands, their eyes meeting with a unified expression of trust. Knowing that at dawn this might be the last time they see each other. Old friends. Family. Bonds new and old torn apart by the brutality of war.

Slipping knives into my hands I clenched the cool material. This is what Zarkon has created. A universe full of death and fear. Stripping away life like he had mine. And tomorrow it would stop. I would stop him. Using the power he forced into me against him. Their ultimate weapon destroying its vile creators.

“Umi.” Keith’s warm hand came down on my shoulder, snapping me from my thoughts.

“Are you alright?” his eyes searched my face, trying to understand what I was thinking.

I nodded, casting my gaze to the hologram ship. “Tomorrow it ends.” I whispered more to myself than anyone else.

Keith watched me carefully, aura still tensed with practiced restrain of emotion. “Tomorrow it ends.” he echoed before turning to Shiro.

“How am I going to join Voltron when Zarkon comes out. There won’t be enough time for me to get to my lion here in the castle.”

“You are bonded with your lion aren’t you?” Shiro's aura flickered in concern, “you should be able to call the red lion when you need.”

Keith paused, crimson energy filtering in hesitation. “You have tonight to learn if you can’t.” Shiro pushed, seeing Keith's wavering response.

“You can do this Keith.” Shiro’s voice softened as he placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder, squeezing it once before exiting the command room.

Keith breathed out a long breath before turning to me, “I’m going to go see red. You should rest as much as possible.” he offered a faint smile, his hand finding mine.
I nodded, squeezing his hand as he moved us back towards our room.

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Time passed without recognition. The dark room a timeless capsule as I lay there, tucked under the blanket that smelled like Keith, faintly glowing tendrils of red wafting off its soft material. Trails of crimson and purple pink the only source of faded light in the blackness.

Sighing I pulled the covers around me tighter, trying to hide from the overwhelming energies churning around the castle. Their emotions pulling at my energy, trying to draw it under its cold ocean of tensed unease.

Burying my face into the familiar scented pillow I heard the quiet click and slide of the metal door opening. The hall light blocked by the fabric of the pillow.

I waited until the door had closed before shifting to watch Keith’s shadowed figure cross the room with light steps. His vibrant aura curled off him in tired motions, creating an outline of his figure as he slipped out of his boots.

The bed dipped next to me as he sat down heavily, racking his shirt off before leaning back. Letting out a long breath before allowing himself settle into the bed.

I watched him silently, waiting for his energy to mellow, but it reached towards mine. Pulling it under the warm blanket of protection before finally realising some of its built up tension.

“Can’t sleep?” his voice broke the silence as he turned his head on the pillow to gaze at me in the darkness.

Sighing quietly I opened the toasty cocoon of covers I had created, offering him his section. A crooked smile tugged at his lips as he accepted the blanket, sliding under it and capturing me in his strong arms. Pulling me into his solid chest as he breathed in my scent.

Humming I nestled into his warm embrace, muscles automatically relaxing as his bright aura pushed away the encroaching ones.

We stayed silent in each others embrace for a few ticks before Keith finally breathed out. His body decompressing next to mine.

“How did it go with the red lion?” I questioned softly.

“Good. I think we have it down.” Keith murmured a tired response, “why are you still awake?”

“The energies.” I paused, “they are so loud.” I tried to explain.

Keith made a noise of understanding as he tightened his arms around me, “then just focus on mine.”

I nodded, already feeling sleep pull at the corners of my mind as Keith's protective aura shielded over mine. The bonds between us stitching together, pulling us closer together as he held me. I never imagined I could form bonds like this, and I was determined to keep them alive. I would protect Keith with my life.

Closing my eyes I let the feeling of our energies running together lull me to sleep, his red aura pulsing rhythmically behind my eyelids.
The jarring sound of the castle’s alarm shattered my calm sleep, snapping Keith’s room into focus with pulsing blue lights.

It seemed like I had just fallen asleep when the alarm clock went off. The morning coming too soon for all of us.

Keith and I stayed still for a moment, his body tensing as he mentally prepared himself for the battle to come. His aura hardening as he fully woke, arms flexing around me he drew me further into his chest.

“Ready for victory?” he asked, voice thick with sleep.

“Ready.” I pushed back enough to face him, holding his gaze for a beat before leaning forward to kiss him quickly. Pulling back I closed my eyes, resting my forehead against his as his energy sparked to life, enveloping mine in a firmer layer of armor. Thick and impenetrable, white bonds solidifying with a new strength. Taking a deep breath I opened my eyes, leaning back and giving him a small smile.

Keith studied my face once more, hand coming up to brush my messy bangs from my face before giving me a crooked smile in return.

“Let’s go.” Rolling over he pulled me from bed, the warmth quickly leaving my skin as my bare feet touched the cold metal floor.

We got dressed in silence, pulling on our space suits and locking our armor into place. The air between us heavy, but the bonds between us bright and light. Uplifting the pressing weight of our mission.

Tying my hair into a tight bun I breathed in deeply. Letting the energies around me come back into focus. The constant note of fear and death had faded back as a new, louder, vibration of determination and strength pulsed forward.

Keith waited patiently while I let the twisting energies around me settle. My own forming around me with more confidence and strength that I had experienced.

“Ready?” he asked once I meet his gaze.

“Ready.” I nodded, taking his outstretched hand.

“Alright everyone, we leave in one dobosh. Do what you need to get ready.” Shiro ordered, taking a plate of food and sitting down next to Hunk and giving him a strong pat on the back. The yellow Paladin gulped nervously, giving Shiro a wavering smile.

Keith and I took our usual seats at the table, the green goo unappetizing as ever.

Pidge sat on the counter, fingers rapidly typing away, glasses glazed over by the glare of her computer. Allura leaned next to her, bowl in hand and eating absentely while occasionally feeding Pidge a spoonful of goo. Her fingers barely pausing on the keys as she chewed.

Coran was nowhere to be found, his bright energy dancing around the lower levels of the castle. Most likely double checking things for the fourth time.
Lance sat in front of us, eyes sunken in from lack of sleep, but crystal blue energy wafting around him with little fluctuation.

The hour passed in a blur. Last minute orders being sent out, confirmations from the two other anti-Zarkon groups to make sure they were in position. Finishing touches on invisibility cloaks for the pods and Miume’s medical ship. And tense moments between the Paladins as they parted ways to their designated lions.

Keith and I were positioned outside a small capsule vessel, waiting for Allura to jump us. The rest of the emergency pod hanger empty, ghostly echoes of energy whispering around us as each team left for their section of the plan.

“Everyone to your positions. We jump in two ticks.” Allura called through the castle’s intercom. Her voice clear and void of hesitation.

“That’s our que.” Keith turned to face me.

I nodded, glancing up at him, my heart started to thump unevenly in my chest. The castle’s crystal bubbling with energy as Allura prepared for the wormhole.

“Umi,” he said carefully, “we can do this.” he gave a confident smile before leaning down and kissing me quickly. Pulling back his dark eyes held mine as his hand found mine before leading me into the small ship.

“Ready to jump in three,” Allura counted down as we locked ourselves in place.

“Let’s do this.” Keith’s hands gripping the controls, energy prickling around him with confident sparks.

“It’s been an honor.” Shiro said through our helmets, “now let’s go kick some Zarkon ass!”

The ship lurched through a wormhole, the castle barely vibrating as we rocketed towards our destination. The energies around me growing quieter with each tick until they became silent. Pulling in tightly to their physical owner and trying to control the mixture of emotions swirling inside them.

Closing my eyes I exhaled slowly, my aura flexing around Keith and I as the ship slowed. The crystals’ energy fading as we exited the wormhole.

Zarkon’s powerful energy exploding before us, I automatically tensed, trying to sink further into my seat to get away from its monstrous depth of darkness. But we continued forward, towards the churning storm.

“Alright Paladins let’s go!” Shiro commanded in a strong voice, his lion roaring to life. “Lay down some cover for Keith and Umi.”

A flurry of understoos came back with just as much strength as Keith moved us into position, his aura tightening around us, fingers flexing over the controls once more.

“Let’s do this.” he murmured, activating the invisibility function before launching us outside of the castle’s protection.

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Zarkon reacted immediately to our ambush. Infinite numbers of larger ships and fighter jets
warping between the lions and his massive ship as they clashed head on with each other. The Paladins zipping in any direction, avoiding direct attack as fleats of nimble ships targeted them.

Silent explosions berading around us as Keith zoomed forward, maneuvering the ship expertly around the flying debris and chaos. Breaking through clouds of aftershock our ship sloshed to the side as a new wave of bombs detonated to our left. Momentarily blinding us with brilliant colors of white, red, and orange.

Cursing Keith steadied the ship, narrowly avoiding the Yellow lion as Hunk rocketed past us, jaw blade activated and easily slicing through the side of a larger ship.

Gripping the edges of my seat, I kept my eyes locked onto Zarkon's colossal ship. Deep purple and black clouds of energy swirled around it like a hurricane. Long strands whipping outwards and corrupting anything unlucky enough to be snared by it.

Streaks of bright purple and pink snapped through its thick storm of darkness. Veins of lightening breaking through the layers of energy and illuminating its true depth of evil.

“Alright, we are almost there.” Keith informed calmly, bringing my attention back to his steady crimson aura. Carefully he navigated the ship along the blinking path on the inside screen of our helmets towards the lower tier of the ship. An open hanger void of dispatching ships coming into view when a line of stray bullets rammed against the back side of the ship.

Gasping in shock my energy flexed outwards in natural response as we were sent spinning off course. The back side of the ship smoking, warning lights strobing to life as the residual waves of impact tremored through the ship.

Cursing Keith strained against our sideways momentum, fighting to regain control of the ship as our invisibility cloak flickered in and out. Exposing our ship, warning signals of target lock ons flooded the sides of the main screen.

“Hang on!” Keith's voice was tense as he tightened his hands on the controls, bringing the ship back to a rocky course of control. Blockades of bullets slammed against the front of our ship as the hanger open fired on its incoming threat.

“Save your energy.” Keith commanded as I pushed a thin layer of protection around us. Our own ship firing a line of cover as we crashed into the hanger. The damaged back of the ship catching roughly on the side and sending us sliding. Our momentum barreling us forward as Keith continued to fire. Smoke and flames erupting around us as smaller fighter jets and centuries exploded.

Bracing against the quaking force we were jerked to a painful stop. The ship crashing into a support beam, the main windshield flickering off from damage. Smoke immediately swelling into the opening and offering a shifting mask of protection.

Taking a steadying breath I looked at Keith, but he was already searching for another potential threat as emergency lights flooded the destroyed hanger.

“Come on,” he turned back to me, extending a hand.

I nodded, taking it and quickly jumping down from the smoking ship. Crouching we moved with stealth under the cover of fuming ships to a shadowed corner of the bay.

“Alright Pidge we are in,” Keith murmured in a low voice, his hand moving so that his Bayard activated. His neck strained as he peaked out of our cover for incoming centuries.
I squatted next to him, muscles tensed as my heart started to hammer in my chest. Poisonous claws of energy sinking into my skin, spreading an icy chill through my blood and freezing me in place.

“New directions coming your way.” Pidge responded quickly. A new map appearing across our helmet visors, a blinking arrowed line indicating where we needed to go.

“Thanks Pidge.” Keith said in a low voice while shifting his weight forward to move once the small group of centuries marched past us. Their illuminated parts disappearing into the smoke.

“Let’s go. Stay low and follow me.” Keith whispered, leaning out carefully once more to check the surroundings before nodding and quietly running to the next hiding place.

Taking an uneasy breath I clenched my fists, willing my body to follow Keith's. Each step forward more difficult than the last. The further inward I ventured into the ship, the greater and thicker the sinister storm became. Wrapping around me like a frozen vice, clenching my heart to a painful stop while needles of vile evil stabbed into my skin.

Clenching my fists I tried to push the deathly energy away from me. My energy bristling around me uneasily as I glanced up at Keith, waiting for his signal before forcing my legs to move. Slipping into a familiar crouch and darting silently to the next spot of cover. Each step strained as I pressed forward. Frozen muscles strands snapping with hot pain as I slowly broke free from the icy cage around me.

Keith gave me a concerned look before shifting his attention to the next set of robotic soldiers marching unknowingly past us.

Pulling a knife from my boot I took another labored breath. The darkness hanging over us like a heavy cloud. Its diabolical energy threatening to strike us down at any moment. My energy worked carefully over my skin, breaking through the cracked ice so that Keith’s warm aura could soothe my frozen skin.

“Umi.” Keith said softly, placing a hand on my shoulder and bringing my attention back to the physical world.

“Zarkon can’t hurt you anymore. You are too strong from him. For all of them” he assured me quietly, giving me a small smile before directing his attention back to the hallway.

Watching his frame I breathed out a final long exhale. Letting the darkness clawing at my energy wash away from me. Keith energy immediately wrapping around me, helping my aura push the final hooks of Zarkons energy from my body.

Settling into a more relaxed crouch my body slipped into its natural instinct of combat. Energy stilling into a motionless stealth. Waiting for any change in vibration to alert me to a new threat.

We snuck soundlessly through the labyrinth. Treading with light feet and sticking close to the shadows, ears focused on any metallic sound of approaching footsteps. But the lair was eerily quiet other than the occasional tremor as the ship took damage. Carefully following the map Pidge had sent us we slipped past centuries as they followed their programmed paths. Winding our way deeper and deeper into the chaotic cyclone of energy until finally arriving at a daunting set of double sliding doors. A separate note of chaotic evil pulsed outwards like large black waves. Its powerful epicenter hidden behind the locked gate.

Creeping forward the last few paces Keith and I stayed nearly back to back. Scanning each direction of the endless hallway, but it was barren.
“Well that was easier than expected.” Keith mumbled while placing his hand on the screen next to the door.

“Something doesn't feel right.” my body tensed as I did a small circle around us, taking in our surroundings once more while we waited for the doors to open. My energy bristling with unease as we waited.

“Lets just hurry up and get inside before someone notices us.” Keith reached back, grabbing my hand as the colossal door groaned to life as it accepted Keith’s hand print.

Jogging forward we froze only a few steps through the threshold. The doors revealing a massive, nearly empty, room. Plagued magenta walls plummeted downwards, coded lines of glowing pink lining their faces as they stretched endlessly below us into the watery shadows.

Dark pink slabs of smooth metal towered above us before curving into a dome. A corrupted crystal hanging from its center like an upside down mountain. Black faces poisoned with angry glowing lines of dark energy.

A singular, narrow, suspended bridge extended to the middle of the impossibly large room. Its rounded metal face molding into a semicircle at the tip of the polluted crystal.

“Wow.” I breathed to myself, taking a few unsteady steps out onto the floating bridge.

“Let’s go.” Keith tugged on my hand so that we briskly jogged towards the dangling power source. Our feet barely crossed the invisible marker for the halfway point when blinding purple lights flooded the room. Flashing once before fading into deep purple strobes of silent warning.

“Shit.” Keith cursed, letting go of my hand to face the closed doors.

“Get to the mainframe!” he turned half way back to me, eyes focused before he pushed off at a full sprint to close the distance between him and the impending opening. Bayard activated and half raised to slash through the programmed access point to try and delay any enemy alerted to our presence.

Nodding I returned my gaze to the massive crystal. Its power rolling off in intimidating waves of darkness. The mineralized surface looking more metallic as large purple roots streaked upwards. Their twisted nature reminding me of the black veins that burned into my skin after direct contact with the druids energy.

Slowing my pace the last few steps I inhaled deeply before exhaling. Staring up at its colossal shape my energy skipped once in uncertainty before I shook my head. Clenching my fists and planting my feet firmly into the metal at the main frames base.

“I can do this.” I whispered to myself, letting my muscles relax before unfisting my hands and placing them on the sinister crystal. My energy instantly reacting to the polar opposite one, bright flicks of pink purple crackling outward before finally settling across my skin.

Breathing out once more I closed my eyes, summoning the light pink purple energy of my physical form.

Its electric like nature curled around me, coursing through my body. Its current drawing into the center of my hands, charging them.

“Today, I will defeat you.” I vowed to myself. Eyes opening with newfound strength I pushed the glowing energy from my palms into the ships power source. Snaps of purple pink lightening
danced around me as my energy surged upwards. Residual sparks of lightening echoed through the silent room as focused my power.

Taking another breath I summoned another wave of energy. Shards of pink purple bursting from the internal structure of the crystal. My power forcing its way upwards, coursing through the dark veins rooted to a once pure source of energy and overtaking it.

My energy had just barely reached the top of the colossal rock when a wave of residual power crashed against my back. Bright flares of fiery orange reflecting off the dark mirror I faced as deafening explosions detonated behind me.

Keith’s battle cry cut through the destruction erupting behind me, his sword clashing against a foreign object.

My hands twitched on the structure, pulsing energy faltering as a new battle broke out on the opposite side of the bridge. Its metal frame trembled under my feet but I kept my back turned in blind trust. Biting my lip and drawing more power into the center of my palms before shooting it upwards. A loud snap bursting above me as my energy broke through the crystals base.

“Umi! Shield yourself!” Keith's strained voice echoed through the vibrating air as stray bullets drilled into the far opposite wall. Micro explosions ricocheting through the large room.

Flinching away from the heat of the lasers shooting into the stone I pushed a thin layer of protection around me. Another set of bullets finding home against it, ripples of impact scattering across the barriers face.

Gritting my teeth from the split concentration I forced another wave of energy upwards. The crystals energy screamed in protest, flashes of dark energy lashing outwards, trying to expel mine from it but finding no purchase. Sharp streaks of lightening cut through the crystal from the inside out, corrupting its natural structure.

Shards of stone shattered from its colluded base as splinters of my energy broke across each face. Its massive structure starting to bow and snap from the sudden change of energy as mine stretched outwards.

“Umi!” Keith cried, breaking my concentration my head snapped to the side as a flicker of sinister energy appeared just behind me.

Baring my teeth at the druid spikes bristled across my barrier as it approached. Hands trapped on the crystals surface a low growl escaped my lips as a needellike whip of energy lashed outwards, cutting through the air as the druid vanished.

Sinking lower into my position my eyes scanned the area around me, anticipating its next attack.

Keith fought vigorously half-way down the bridge. Sword slashing through centuries as they marched endlessly forward. His shield activated against their guns he cut them down as quickly as he could. Shoving their robotic bodies from the walkway, their plummeting figures firing blindly upwards before exploding as they crashed into the endless pit below.

A flash of glowing black drew my attention away from the battle, eyes cutting to the side as the druid materialized once more, large energy ball raised high.

Bracing myself for impact my hand slipped from the wall, retrieving the knife from my boot and hurling it forward in a flash of movements. The druid lunged sideways, narrowly avoiding my attack as I sent another pulse of energy around myself. Spikes stretching outwards to impail the
witch. Its glowing eyes widened in surprise as my energy struck through its misty body. A line of bullets nailing against it before the druid had time to fully disappear. Its body screaming in agony before vaporizing into nothing but a wisp of ashy smoke.

Whipping my head to the side I saw Keith give me a weary smirk before sending another array of bullets towards the entrance again. His targets finding true as he aimed upwards, a large chunk of support beams splintering from its hold and crashing downwards, effectively blocking the entrance and crashing a large portion of centuries.

Giving him a silent nod back I caught a small glimpse of the final druids entrapped with us. Haggar’s gold eyes glowing with vexing hatred as her hunched frame looked between Keith and I. While the other loomed dangerously close to Keith as he placed himself between them and me.

Turning back to the pillar I summoned more energy to my palms before shooting it upwards. Another wave of pink purple energy rampaging up and outwards, reaching further and further with each pulse.

Keith engaged in battle once again, letting out another charged yell as he fought off the encroaching druids.

Closing my eyes I let his voice fade to the background as I pulled at the dwindling pool of energy inside me. Sending rhythmic pulses of energy up and outwards my electrical natured energy ran rampant through the crystal, destroying its internal mainframe.

I had just reached the third spire running through the ship, leaving me to face just one more when Keith’s energy faltered behind me. Its fiery nature changing from intense ferocity to flickers of fear.

My body plunged into ice water as I shifted my gaze backwards. The world slowing around me as one of the druids materialized above Keith. Dark energy ball raised, glowing eyes locked onto him with murderous intent. Keith’s sword was on the downward swing, his center of balance too far forward to dodge.

Breath catching, heart clenching painfully, my eyes widened in horror. Pink purple energy collecting around me and pushing outwards into a spirit form before I registered what was happening. My astral form sprinting forward with elongated steps as time continued to play in exaggerated slowness.

Keith’s eyes dilated as he realized his misstep. Body instinctively trying to pull away from the incoming blow.

The druids magenta robe flapped soundlessly above them, clawed hand extended forward as the charged ball of death swirled dangerously. Expressionless mask looking down on him with haunting yellow orbs.

Letting out a silent battle cry I lunged forward, pink purple energy wrapping tightly around my hand as I swung forward.

The druids eyeless mask registered my form ticks after my attack. Opposite hand curling upwards with another attack.

My palm slammed into the druids chest as their charged hand collided with my own. Blinding light exploding around our points of impact. Energies pluming outwards like a bomb before rapidly drawing inwards into a chaotic battle of survival.
Screaming my energy surged forward, lightening streaking from the center of my hand as the druids spirit was ripped violently backwards. Black connective ties instantly rupturing with vicious force as I drove its energy backwards. Stripping the life from its monstrous form as it shrieked in agony.

Its talons pierced my translucent skin, desperately trying to anchor itself onto me but my energy burst outwards. Tearing the darkness away from my light one.

Anguished screams echoed through the open room as the druids energy dissolved into thin air. Its physical body crumpling to the ground before vanishing into nothing but dust soon after.

The sound of cloth being forcefully ripped apart vibrated in my ears. Its seams tearing one by one as its material was shredded. The connective strings tying my spiritual self to my physical form snapping apart with agonizing slowness as the world continued to move lethargically.

The bottom of my collar bone shattered. Splinters of bone impaling under my skin as my chest muscles ripped open. An invisible pressure punctured through the tissue of my lungs, ribs violently snapping on impact as blood erupted from my mouth. My vision momentarily blacking out as the air was forced painfully from my lungs.

A tormented cry left my lips as my knees buckled, hands slipping from their position on the wall my vision blurred around the edges. A high pitched whistle canceled out every sound but the tune of my blood rushing through my veins.

Knees numbly slamming into the cold metal floor I blinked through the red tint covering my eyes. The familiar warmth of blood streaking down my face barely noticeable over the searing pain in my chest. Blood bubbling from my lips with each staggered breath I staring up at the deformed crystal with exhausted determination. *Just one more push* I thought desperately to myself as forced my limp hands upwards. Mind numbing adrenaline canceling out the unimaginable pain of my right side I dug my gloved nails into hardened surface of the dying crystal once more.

“More power.” I whispered to myself, my words gurgling as I choked on my blood.

Forcing my fingers flat I searched deeper within myself. Closing my eyes and summoning the last drops of my energy reserve.

Weak breaks of lightening danced to life as I pushed a final wave of energy upwards. Pink purple racing through the streams of light already implanted into the corrupt crystal. Its force streaking outwards, desperately stretching for the final roots of darkness clinging to the mainframe.

The tips of my energy burst through the ends of each branch of support. Muted explosions detonating the crystal instantly starting to vibrate under my palms as its nature was completely fried. The mainframe screamed in agonized pain. Large shards of crystal breaking free as it started to crumble. Letting out a breathy gasp for air the world faded to black.
Keith’s eyes widened, air catching in his throat as the druid attacked. Large energy ball reflecting across his helmet visor as his muscles involuntarily tensed in anticipation.

Hands gripping the hilt of his sword he willed his body to move. To do anything to dodge. But his balance was tipped too far forward. Downward stroke of his blade swinging his momentum off its center of balance.

Time played with agonizing slowness, the energy ball curling outwards with each painful tick of the clock. Its darkness consuming Keith’s vision when a translucent hand stretched forward. Bright snaps of familiar lightening breaking through the silence filling his ears.

Dark eyes dilating as he shifted his gaze to the side, his heart skipped in his chest as Umi’s pink purple energy rushed past him. A surge of warmth washing over him as a blinding light exploded in front of him.

Eyes snapping shut he winced against the brightness but it was over as soon as it happened. Blinking on and off before he had time to process what was happening. His feet stumbling to regain balance as the battle change rapidly around him.

The druids masked form shrieking in bone shattering agony as it shuddered violently in front of him. One hand clawing upwards, energy ball disappearing into a shadowy mist. While its other hand stretched blindly outwards, talon nails hooked inwards as its robed form shivering before disappearing into nothing but wisps of hazy smoke.

Freezing momentarily from shock time slammed back into rushed focus, knocking the breath from his lungs. Whipping his head to the side, lips parting the world around him disappeared as he took in Umi’s slumped figure. Haggar’s decrepit form materializing next to her, hissing in rageful loathing as her clawed hand reached downwards.

Protective rage seized Keith, boiling over in his blood his hand reached backwards, drawing his Marmonan blade from its holder.

“Stay back!” he yelled, his voice tearing through the space with deafening power. Marmoran blade cutting through the air with a low pitched whistle.

The witches keen eyes barely registering the attack before she vaporized. The blade slicing through where her form had been ticks before embedding into the thick crystal behind Umi. Airy whisps of smoke blowing backwards as the blade impaled the crumbling crystal, shards of dark mineral splinters away.
Keith rushed forward, jet boosters giving him an edge as he reached for Umi. A large detonation exploding from above him making the entire room vibrate with shockwaves. Large chunks of metallic crystal breaking free and crashing downwards.

Sliding on his knees Keith activated his shield, bracing against the downpour of falling rock that threatened to crush them.

Cursing Keith pushed the shard of corrupted crystal from his shield, its form tumbling off the side of the suspended bridge and plummeting into the rapidly growing pit of destruction.

“Umi!” Keith gripped Umi’s shoulder with his opposite hand, arm still upturned to guard against the hail of crumbling stone.

“Umi!” He yelled again, his voice swallowed by another explosion. Heat barreling down the enclosed space, fiery oranges and red billowing outwards. Another shockwave of quakes rocked through the space, the floating bridge groaning in unsteady protest as its metal frame threatened to bow.

Cursing Keith curled over Umi’s unconscious frame, shielding her from the heat that barraded them.

Waiting for the un-steading tremors to fade Keith pulled backwards, eyes searching Umi’s face. He knew that she would fall unconscious from using such an enormous amount of energy. But this was different.

Her pale face was drained of its usual pink hued undertones. Blood leaking from her eyes like red tears as the same crimson liquid stained her colorless lips. Trails of blood curved across her cheeks, dripped from her nose and mouth. Its dark color a startling contrast from her ghostly white face.

Keith’s heart started to beat faster in his chest, breaths coming in short shallow bursts as he carefully tipped her head to the side, parting her lips to let any remaining build-up of fluid out so that it wouldn’t drown her.

“You.” Haggar’s sinister voice cracked through the bombardment of explosions erupting overhead. Robe billowing around her as a thin finger pointed at Keith’s form. “What have you done to my weapon?!”

Keith’s muscular shoulders went rigid at the witches words, his simmering blood starting to burn as he turned to face the Druid.

“She is not a weapon.” his voice was low and threatening as he stood, hand gripping the hilt of his Marmoran blade. Another loud snap splintering through the crystal as he removed it.

“My ultimate weapon.” Haggar continued, bringing her hands upwards, volts of lightening dancing from her palms as she charged them.

“She’s not a weapon!” Keith roared this time, pushing off the trembling metal with full force he charged at the witch.

She hissed in warning, throwing a swirling ball of dark energy towards him and rushing forward.

Dodging Keith danced around her attacks, keeping himself in front of Umi as the witch tried to advance on her.

Sharp shards of crystal and metal rained down on them, blinding detonations and quaking tremors
creating an unbalanced arena.

“Pidge, I need a way out now.” Keith commanded in a labored voice, his sword cutting through open air as Haggar disappeared again. A loud snap of metal drawing his attention upwards, a large chunk of metal bowing under the collapsing mainframe and plummeting downwards.

Cursing Keith jumped, rolling away as its deformed side caught the edge of the bridge. The bridge screamed in protest, its structure bending downwards under the force before part of broke free. The tension releasing like a taut slingshot and sending Keith momentarily upwards.

His dark eyes instantly finding Umi’s limp frame as it jumped from the change in motion.

“Pidge!” Keith cried as he lunged forward again, slicing through the air as the druid disappeared. Her vanishing act growing tiresome as she filtered away from his attacks. Sending balls of darkness from the shadows he was narrowly able to avoid them.

“Little busy right now!” Pidge replied in a tense voice, echoes of explosions coming from both helmet feeds.

“This room is about to implode I need a way out now!” Keith shot back, his feet stumbling backwards as he deflected another blow of lightening. The ceiling slowly caving inwards as it lost structural integrity, the dangling crystals barely holding on as their splintered faces broke free.

Thick purple bars of steel exposed themselves as the metal plates were blown off. Their large forms barely holding together like a stack of twigs, ready to collapse at any moment.

“There.” Keith breathed to himself, one of the branches of steel vibrating violently against its peers. Friction building between the layers as another blow detonated above them.

Letting out another battle cry he lunged forward again, swinging his blade in large, deliberate, arcs. Pushing the druid backwards. Her frail form barely avoiding his attacks as he quickened his pace, increasing the intensity.

Breathing hard he fought onward, muscles screaming in protest, but he scarcely heard them. The sound of his pounding heart drowning out the explosions around him.

Dark eyes flicking upwards he tried to time the release of tension in the beams above. Its colossal frame dipping lower and lower as more weight build on top of it. The ships structure collapsing from the inside out.

Wincing in pain from the witches lash of energy Keith continued to press his advance, occupying her attention.

A skin crawling screech of metal was the only warning given. Its high pitched scream cutting through the barrage of detonations as the beam broke free.

Its weight snapping inwards with violent force and releasing the accumulated tension downwards with crushing weight.

Smirking Keith shifted his weight backwards, activating his boosters to launch himself away from the downfall of structural beams.

The witch paused at his sudden retreat, her attention solely focused on getting her weapon back and taking out one of the paladins that the jarring rupture of metal hadn’t registered.
Gasping her haunting eyes shot upwards, mouth parting in disbelief as the colossal sized pile of beams smashing downwards.

“No!” her coarse voice echoed outwards before being buried under the landslide of metal. Its force pulverizing the witches frame as they free fell.

Tumbling their splintered forms broke on impact. The bridge shaking violently it dipped downwards again. Supporting beams shrieking in protest as they started to bend to the monstrous weight bearing down on it.

Stumbling Keith ran as quickly as he could back to Umi. Jumping and boosting himself to re-balance as the bridge shuddered under his feet.

Umi’s lifeless frame sliding downwards an inch as the bridge started to bow under the weight.

Carefully collecting her into his arms he supported her head in the crook of his arm. Propping her up in hopes of relieving fluid build up.

“Umi.” he called over the booming thundering around them. Shaking her form as gently as he dared he willed her to open her eyes, but she remained motionless in his arms.

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Muffled blasts echoed through the inky darkness swelling around me. Small flickers of diluted red tried to break through it. Their weak flames dancing in and out of vibrancy, but their warmth continuously stretched towards me.

Reaching forward through the bone chilling blackness I tried to grasp the heat, desperate for its hotness.

Keith’s muted words floated through the emptiness as I pushed against the darkness. His burning aura stretching forward, thin trails of warmth wrapping around my fingertips and tugging me upwards. Trying to pull me from the cage of isolation.

Slowly my eyes flickered open. The world around me fuzzy while dark rings vibrated around the edges of my vision.

Shakey colors of red and orange swarmed overhead as shapeless objects plowed through it.

High pitched ringing canceled out all other sounds into muddled notes. Keith’s watery voice trying to break through, but being unable to.

Lethargically I shifted my eyes sideways, their unfocused lenses finding Keith’s face. His dark eyes were wide, brows drawn together in desperation or concentration I couldn't tell. Mouth moving silently his words were drowned out by the piercing whistle in my ears.

Blinking I tried to clear my vision, but the weight of my eyelids were too heavy. My eyes drifted closed again.

“Umi!” Keith cried, his hands gripping my shoulder, his voice snapping my eyes open again I tried to focus on his face but the world around me was muddled. The black rings around my vision encroaching further and further, their blurry lines taking up more of my sight with each watery blink.

Lungs starving for oxygen I gasped, trying to take a breath, but a crushing pressure pressed against
me, making it nearly impossible.

Wincing in pain I tried again, but only swallowed blood.

Coughing my body seized in mind numbing pain before going limp in Keith’s arms.

Taking labored breaths I tried to find Keith’s face again. An icy shiver rushing over my skin.

“Keith.” I tried, my voice cracking as the metallic taste of blood coated my tongue.

Keith’s eyes hardened, his mouth pulling into a strained line of controlled emotion. “I’m right here.” he spoke carefully, trying to keep his voice from shaking.

The ground under us rocked violently but Keith held me solidly against his chest. Face a mask of calm, but his eyes betrayed him. Flickers of fearful concern flashing across them.

Willing the black rings around my eyes to vanish I searched his face. There was no blood, only matted hair slick with sweat. He was okay.

Relief flooded through me as I tried to smile, but I wasn't sure if I managed it. My entire body numb against his.

Keith swallowed hard, his eyes flicking upwards another cloud of color reflecting from his helmet visor.

“Come on Pidge, this whole place is going down!” Keith voice was rushed, filled with stressed tension as he squeezed me against him. Thumb nervously stroking my shoulder as he analyzed the space around us.

“You are fine Umi. we’ll get you to Miume soon, it will be fine.” he rambled to himself, shifting his weight to pick me up.

Blinding explosions rained down on us, heat swallowing us as metal screamed in agony as it snapped. Its weight instantly crumbling under the pressure while unknown objects fell from above.

Keith’s voice faded in and out as he barked orders to the other Paladins.

Swallowing the familiar iron taste I tried to clear my throat. My conscious mind slowly becoming aware of the searing pain in my right side. The unsettling low whistle of air as it left my lips, lukewarm liquid flowing inside my space suit. It’s dark material masking the discoloration well. With each painful breath more blood bubbled from the open wound. Ruptured muscles strands pulling tightly while sharp shards of bone dug under the different layers of skin.

“Keith.” I tried again, my voice barely a raspy whisper.

He froze, snapping his attention back to me he looked down at me with wide eyes. “Love you.” the words tumbled off my lips but I wasn't sure if they were audible. The unusual words had flashed through my mind even though I had never heard them before. I tried to find his face again but the world was black.

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Keith’s heart lurched painfully as Umi’s eyes closed. Her body going impossibly still as her head lolled against his chest, a fresh trail of blood dripping from her slightly parted lips.

“Umi-” he breathed as another explosion detonated above them. The suspended bridge vibrating as
an intense heat barreled downwards, its hungry jaws of yellow and orange snapping as the cloud descended. Cursing he curled himself over the unconscious girl, bringing his shield cover them as a new storm of debris rained down on them.

As the vibrating stopped he uncurled himself from over her, taking a deep breath he calmed himself and re-assessed their environment.

The core of the main frame crystal dangled by a thread above them. Its many faces broken and gone now.

Crunched metal walls barely supported the weight above them, and the bridge was slowly bowing downwards as more weight piled on top of it.

Deadly blasts of heat and debris exploded from above, and the blocked entrance of the bridge made it impossible to go back the way they had come. The crumbling walls offered no passage through their network of wires and pipes. They were trapped.

“Pidge! I need a route out now!” he commanded, “Miume I need your team ready we will be coming in hot.”

“Sending now.” Pidge’s voice was distracted as a new map appeared across Keith’s visor. The only marked exit was well below them. Unknowing blocked by broken parts.

Setting his lips in a hard line Keith deactivated his bayard. Sheathing his blade and gingerly collecting Umi into his arms. Activating the full helmet function for her so that it closed around her head entirely he did a once over to check for breaks in her space suit. But there were none.

“What’s her status?” Miume’s voice came through, cool and collected.

“She’s unconscious, lots of blood.” Keith responded in a tense voice as he carefully peered over the edge of the unsteady bridge. The shadowed pit below making it impossible to see where exactly he needed to drop.

“It looks like the gravity is about to blow, move to the left side of the bridge and there is an air duct leading out under it. Jump when I tell you to.” Pidge’s instructed, the map across his visor refreshing.

“Roger.” Keith stepped over the chunks of metal and crystal as he moved into position. His heart pounding steadily in his chest now as his fingers tightened around Umi’s unconscious body.

“We have supplies ready for you.” Miume voice drifting in and out of focus as she directed her team.

“Keith, get ready to jump in three.” Pidge started to count down. Keith braced his knees, anticipating the jump as the room around them erupted in chaotic explosions, heat radiating from the core column of crystal as it started to collapse in on itself. The entire room losing its structural integrity as the last support beam crumbled. Sharp snaps of metal breaking cut through the domino effect of detonations. Debris bursting in every direction.

Launching himself from the edge of the platform Keith curled Umi as best he could into himself as they free-fell. Chunks of metal and stone blasted outwards before quickly being followed by another roaring spire of heat.

Squinting against the harsh light Keith used the boosters in his boots to avoid the larger scraps of material as they continued to fall. The shadowy hands of the pit stretching upwards with menacing
claws of unknown.

“Gravity kicking off in—” Pidge counted down again. Keith took another deep breath, willing his lion to hear him as his body slowed drastically as the gravity shut off.

The room instantly shifting into a slow motion tumble of chaos as plummeting ship parts lost the full force of their momentum. Their forms lazily bouncing off the remaining solid surfaces as the accumulated destroyed material at the bottom of the pit slowly rose upwards. Losing their weight and floating towards Keith and Umi.

Keith used the remaining downwards movement of their momentum for as long as possible before angling himself downwards and activating his jet pack. Carefully picking his way through the maze of debris and following the blinking arrow to his exit point.

As a clear opening came into view Keith breathed out in relief, maneuvering himself into the air duct.

“Red, I need you.” Keith mumbled to himself, pushing off the air duct platform and launching himself in the direction Pidge had sent him.

Warily Keith watched the quivering walls of the small duct. Their thin metal faces unequip to handle the amount of pressure that weighed down on them. Even with loss of gravity, their structural integrity had already been ruined.

“Just a little further.” Keith murmured to himself as he pushed down again on the bending meal. The marked location rapidly coming up, but Keith felt no significant change in himself to tell if he had contacted the red lion or not.

Slowly a heat crept up behind Keith, making him chance a glance backwards. His heart skipping he cursed.

A slow charging barrel of molten air and metal filled the air duct behind him. Its movement no doubt caused by another explosion as two large parts of ship connecting with each other.

“Come on.” Keith willed his lion to hear him as he kicked on his boosters again, trying to gain some distance from the avalanche of smoke and heat.

“Come on come on come on.” he repeated more desperately to himself as a final solid wall of metal faced him. The only exit to safety through it.

“Red!” Keith yelled, his voice hitching as the slow rolling storm swept closer.

He was just about at the exit wall when four taloned claws ripped through the final layer of metal. The red lions face coming into view as the small chamber repressurized as the vacuum of space rushed inwards.

“I knew you could do it girl!” Keith half smiled to himself as he quickly jetted out into space, his lion ready to intercept him.

“Miume we are headed your way!” he called while moving into the command chair, his fingers barely touching the controls before his lion was rocketing towards Miume’s position. As if knowing exactly where to go.

“Good kitty.” Keith praised, as they rapidly closed the distance between him and Miume.
He was vaguely aware of screaming voices echoing through the main cabin of his lion, bright lights reflecting off the lion's windows as his teammates continued to fight off the endless hoard of now motionless ships.

His attention was focused on the limp girl in his arms. Shallow, wheezing breaths leaving her lips as her chest barely rose and fell. The pulse in her neck weak, skin frosting over into unnatural tones of blue.

Squeezing her unconscious frame as gently as he could, he forced his gaze upwards, pushing the emotions back as the red lion curved around the small outlier set of space objects.

Setting his face into an unreadable mask of stone he quickly exited the pilot cabin and waited in her massive closed jaw.

His hands starting to tremble as he clutched Umi to him, breath catching uneasily in his chest the red lion opened her mouth to a visible medical ship.

“Keith!” Miume called, her space helmet linking to his as she pushed off the open platform of her ship towards the red lion. A white tether securing her to the ship as Keith stepped forward, his weight disappearing.

Kara’s thick tail wrapped around the edge of their ship, keeping her in place as she guided a white gourne into open space. A sterile clean room neatly organized with medical devices illuminated the space between them as Keith carefully moved into the ships opening. Reluctantly he loosened his hold on Umi so Miume could take her. Her hands moving Umi’s motionless form down expertly into the bed before instructing Kara to tie her down as she turned back to Keith to assess him for any physical injury.

“Keith.” Miumem looked the red paladin up and down quickly, seeing no immediate signs of injury. Holding up her pawport she quickly scanned him just to double check, his vitals were all within normal range. But he stood frozen in place, hands slightly outstretched, pupils dilated. Miume determined he was in shock.

“Keith, I need you to go back to your lion.” her bright red eyes connecting with his dark ones, “I will do everything I can for her, but I need you to get out so I can close this and actually look at the damage.”

Keith’s eyes hardened, lips pulling tightly as he swallowed, looking down shamefully, “I’m sorry she got hurt because I couldn’t protect her.” he almost whispered, hands clenching into fists.

“Keith.” Miume’s voice was even and cool, “you did everything you could. And Umi did everything she could. She tried her best and now it’s up to you and the rest of the team to finish Zarkon. I will do everything in my power to heal, but Umi and I need you out there doing your best to defeat this evil.” she squeezed his shoulders again.

A low growl rumbled in the back of Keith’s throat as he mentally wrestled with himself over Miume’s words before finally looking up to find Umi a final time. Uncertainty leaving his expression as he gazed at her, the usual fiery spark returning as he flicked his eyes back to Miume and nodded. Stepping back fully into the mouth of his lion he gave the medial ship a final glance
before turning and disappearing behind closed fangs. Miume watched the red lion blast off in the opposite direction before taking a deep breath and turning back to her ship quickly.

“Tug! Close the hanger now and repressurise, I need to get her armor off to see what I’m dealing with.” Miume swiftly commanded, “Kara get emergency material ready. Oli, get us back to the castle ASAP! Allura, we are headed your way quickly.”

Miume stepped forward, taking her helmet off as Tug repressurized the cabin. Kara moved with practiced speed, pulling a device over Umi’s restrained body and quickly scanning her for injury. A translucent blue light running up and down the full length of her body before blinking twice.

Pulling on a sterile set of gloves Miume moved to assess for visible injury, waiting for the body scan report to load.

“Vitals almost gone.” Kara informed in a monotone voice, moving so that Miume could see the vitals chart on the screen hovering over her hand.

Miume’s tails swished as she read over the numbers, a holographic image laying over Umi’s body and diverting her attention.

Her ears pulled back at the holograms display. A large chest wound just under Umi’s right upper chest, clavicle and first two ribs broken, punctured lung, and destroyed muscle. A significant amount of blood lose and still decreasing. And internal bleeding into the right lung.

“Kara get me the expanding gauze, we need to stop this bleeding now.” Miume instructed in a calm voice as she bent over Umi, eyes tracing over the lines of her space suit to find the best point of access before cracking it open with as little disturbance to the wound as possible.

“What?!” Pidge’s voice rang through Miume’s helmet set on the table next to her loud enough for Miume’s ears to twitch.

“Oli, cut out communication to Voltron when I say.” Miume started, working quickly with Kara to cut away Umi’s blood soaked space suit and stop the internal bleeding.

“Paladins of Voltron listen to me. I am doing everything I can to save your teammates. But in order to do that we need you to defeat Zarkon and focus solely on that. Umi took down the ship, now it’s your turn to take down Zarkon. We all have our roles to do and she finished hers now go do yours.” Miume spoke as encouragingly as she could but her mind was focused on the patient in front of her. “Go, and save the universe. Allura we will be there in one tick, get ready we need a healing pod stat. Oli cut communication now!” she finished, moving her hands over Umi.

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“Guys, Miume is right. We need to focus on taking Zarkon out. This is our fight. Umi did her part and now it’s up to us to finish this.” Shiro voice was hard as his lion took out another motionless fleet. Zarkon had no choice but to come out now. His ship, fleets, and robotic soldiers were immobile now. There was nothing else to do but to come out and fight.

“Uh guys, I think Zarkon got the message.” Hunk’s wavering voice came through as he pulled his lion to a stop.

“Looks like he’s finally come out to play.” Lance replied, giving a half smile in confidence.

“Paladins, form Voltron!” Shiro commanded as a monstrously sized illuminated robot rose from the rubble of Zarkons ship.
Dark plates of armored metal reflected the eerily glowing purple energy embedded into the suit as Zarkon ascended further. Menacing illuminated shards of metal curled around him like corrupt wings as a pure white jaded sword hung from its taloned claws.

Its massive structure reeked of power and lustful greed as Zarkon waited. Letting Voltron take in his intimidating frame, giving them one final chance to surrender the lions.

“Let’s go.” Keith’s hands tightening around his controls he tried to control the anger bubbling under his skin, its rage threatening to spill over.

“Hunk, form shoulder cannon. Let’s not give him any openings.” Shiro instructed as Voltron fused together. The lions energy syncing into a solid vibration as they moved with harmony.

“You got it!” Hunk called back in an unwavering voice as he shoved his bayard into the designated opening. His lion roaring in agreement as the large shoulder cannon formed onto Voltron, power surging upwards, charging the cannon.

“Fire!” Shiro yelled as he commanded Voltron forward, hundreds of white streams exploding from the cannon and rocketing towards Zarkon.

Zarkons machine head snapped upwards towards the new attack, purple eyes flashing with desire as he brought his colossal sword across his chest in a large sweeping motion. A wave of dark purple energy arching off the sword and hurtling towards the incoming threat.

A large row of brilliant explosions detonated soundlessly between Voltron and Zarkon. Their power canceling each other out with quaking force.

“What the heck was that?!” Lance called, watching the dying explosions with wide eyes.

“Pidge, shield!” Shiro called as Zarkon shot through the explosions fire, sword drawn high. Streaks of after material tracing after Zarkon as he rushed forward.

Pidge made a small squeaking sound as her shield formed across Voltron just as Zarkons sword swung down on them.

Its shattering force vibrating through Voltron, making their lions tremble as Shiro strained to keep their guard up.

“Keith, sword!” Shiro commanded through gritted teeth as they were thrown backwards, Zarkon whipping to the side for a quick counter attack. Lance and Hunk activated Voltrons thrusters to slow their pace and regain stability as Zarkon closed in on them once again.

“Come and get it!” Keith yelled, shoving his bayard into place Shiro pulled a sword around with barely enough time to counter Zarkon. The clash rocking through them as Voltron and Zarkon pushed against each other, fighting for dominance.

“Hold.” Shiro instructed calmed as each Paladon worked seamlessly together to fight off Zarkons impossibly strong attack.

Straining against the force until they could slide the sword up enough to throw Zarkon off balance. Keith saw his opening, crying out he slashed again, but Zarkon was faster. Moving through space in a blur he dodged, rounding around again to bring his sword through the space Voltron had just been as Shiro maneuvered them out of the way. They clashed swords again and again, neither gaining any ground or upper hand, their strength too evenly matched now.
“Come on guys!” Hunk encouraged, his hands squeezing the controls as he tried to keep Voltron from flipping over as Zarkon came at them from the side.

“We need more power!” Lance swung his controls to counterbalance them.

“We need to bond our lions into one even more than we are now.” Pidge clarified, bringing her lion around to shield them from another advance.

“And how do we do that?” Keith countered, his voice tense as he brought his sword upwards in response to Zarkon’s move.

“First we need some distance.” Shiro determined, moving them backwards a degree before rocketing away. Zarkon following them immediately, drawing his sword back before whipping it forward. The swords initial shape detaching from itself into elongated sections it swiftly flashed through the distance between them.

“Guys!” Lance yelled as the new attack wrapped around the blue lion, jerking them roughly to a halt before snapping them backwards, towards Zarkon.

“Shoulder cannon!” Shiro called, trying to rite them as they tumbled uncontrollably backwards. Zarkon’s gigantic frame closing in on them, sword held outwards to slice through them in its original state.

“On it!” Hunk replied, twisting his bayard into place as Shiro rounded them back into position, firing at Zarkon point blank.

“Haha take that!” Lance gave a victorious laugh, a crooked smile on his face.

“Not yet, here he comes again!” Pidge yelled forming the shield as Zarkon launched his sword at them again. Its solid form slithering outwards like a snake, striking Voltrons shield with enough force to split it in half.

Cursing Keith brought his sword upwards to defend Voltron, but the nimble sword was too fast. Constricting around them like a vice, Zarkons eyes flashed again. Dark purple volts of lightening jumping from the hilt of his weapon before a tidal wave of energy exploded outwards. Pluming away from the sword then quickly retracting inwards, deadly electricity surged upwards as it tore through the elastic sword.

“Incoming!” Hunk’s voice cracked in fear as snaps of bright color broke across the face of his helmet.

“Brace yourselves!” Shiro attempted to say before corrupt purple energy collided against them. Powerful waves of pulsing electricity rampaged through Voltron in chaotic madness.

Screams of tortured agony filled Aria castle as Voltron continued to be electrocuted. A tornado of lightening twisted around their constricted frame.

“Paladins!” Allura cried out, blue eyes widening in horror. “Coran, prepare the ion cannon!” she commanded, maneuvering the castle so that it hovered just above Zarkon. His attention too focused on seizing Voltron.

“Fire!” she yelled, hands tightening around the podiums as a brilliant neon blue ray detonated from the tip of their barrier shielded ship. Its light reflecting off the clean surfaces of the command room, illuminating their figures.
Bright blue cut through dark space, drawing Zarkon's attention away from the convulsing Paladins. His mechanical head tipping to the side a fraction before whipping Voltron away from him. His sword contracting back into a singular form before launching forwards again. Large volts of lightening crackling through the silent space as it lashed towards the castle.

“Allura!” Shiro cried, his jaw clenched from pain, Voltron spinning uncontrollably as residual pulses of power tore through them.

“Particle barrier!” Allura demanded, the semi-translucent blue shield barely flickering back to life as Zarkon's sword collided with it. Purple energy ricocheting off of its solid frame, creating a cascade of filtering hexagons as its power expanded outwards. Searching for any weakness to seep into.

“Now! While he’s distracted!” Shiro called, restabilizing Voltron and launching them towards Zarkon as he was rocketing towards the castle, twisting sword drawn back to strike again.

“Defensive lasers!” Allura’s voice cut through their helmets as she stood tensely at the command deck. The castle's barrier erupting into a barrage of hot blurs of light.

Zarkon's machine easily dodging them, its massive wings wrapping around its body and blocking any direct attack while he continued forward.

Voltron ignited its boosters, increasing their speed into a rocketing burst as they sailed forwards. Each Paladin silent in tense concentration. Waiting for Shiro’s next orders as they closed the distance between them and Zarkon.

“Everyone together now!” Shiro commanded, slamming his bayard into place an intense surge of power erupted from his hand. Spreading with blinding speed through his cockpit and expanded outwards. Its energy coursing through Voltron like a steady heartbeat. With each new activation from the Paladins bayard another rush of connective force filled them. Their energies melding into one greater source of unified power. Each Paladin becoming one with their lion and the others, unifying into a singular strength of purity.

“Lets go!” Lance challenged, tightening his grip on his controls as a refreshed sense of power flowed through him. His body fusing into his lion's immense reserve of energy.

“Let's take him down.” Keith growled, his lion's energy moving through him with broiling heat.

“Come on!” Shiro yelled, summoning the lions energies into their sword. A swell of power burst from its hilt, its singular blade erupting into a searing blaze. Its brilliant light illuminating the darkness around them as they charged forward.

Voltron's fiery sword reflected off the metal plates of Zarkons armor. Dazzling breaks of color refracting around him as his attention snapping back to Voltron’s rapidly approaching attack.

The metal machine roared in rage, its sword snapping back into one connected blade as he rocketed towards them at full tilt.

Each of the Paladins cried out as they collided with Zarkon. Their sword burying through the metal of his suit as it plunged inwards. Metal burst forward on impact. Its armor caving inwards, splinters of cracks rapidly breaking over Zarkons glowing chest before blasting outwards.

Zarkon's sword narrowly skimmed past Voltron's face as Pidge deflected the blow with her sword. Voltron's blade sinking deeper into their opponents chest until the hilt struck metal.
Each Paladin panted in adrenaline as the dreadful glowing eyes slowly flickered into empty sockets of black. The suit dying down as power seeped outwards to be lost in the endless universe.

“Is it over?” Pidge breathed, her body trembling as her fingers continued to clench the lions controls.

“I think so.” Hunk’s voice shook as they unsheathed their sword. Its blazing ferocity returning to normal as they pulled it completely free of the impaled robot floating in front of them.

“One more strike.” Keith’s voice was labored as he brought the sword up once more, his hands tightening around his controls as he glared at the motionless monster.

“Keith,” Shiro tried to stop the younger Paladin but Keith swiftly brought the sword down with crushing force. Its blade slamming into the top of Zarkon’s helmet, instantly cracking its shell before Keith followed through. Slicing through their opponent, robotic parts and metal bursting outwards before the entire being split into two identical halves.

A few beats of stunned silence passed before Shiro recollected himself.

“Keith,” Shiro commanded softly, “that’s enough.”

“I know.” Keith breathed, dark eyes glaring as the vile dictator floated lifelessly apart. “We need to get back to the castle.”

“Everyone, we need to regroup. Anti-Zarkon groups wormhole to these coordinates.” Allura instructed in a hard voice.

“Voltron disband and get back to the castle.” Shiro concluded, his eyes warily watching Keith on the holographic screen as they broke apart into singular lions.

Keith’s chest tighten as his lion disconnected from Voltron, the intense energy fading quickly as he jetted back to the castle. Each breath getting stuck in his throat as his heart hammered. Blood pounding adrenaline fading back and allowing clear emotions to take its place.

Watching each of the mostly intact anti-Zarkon ships open wormholes, the destruction became more apparent.

A massive graveyard of suspended unsalvageable scraps drifted aimlessly through space. Charred chunks of deformed metal floating around what used to be Zarkon’s ship. Its main core broken into a jigsaw of crumbled parts. It’s large connective towers barely clinging together through thin strands of wiring and pipes as its main columns were imploded inwards. Lifeless centuries scattered through the dismantled ship, its once unsettling lights now dead.

It was real. Zarkon and his ship were gone. The war was over.

Turning his head away from the destroyed war zone he focused his attention back on the ship. His lion barely touching down when Allura sent them through the wormhole. His hearing fading out to the unsteady thumps of his heartbeat as cheers of victory rang through his headpiece.

His lion bowed forward, letting her Paladin out before they had exited the wormhole, understanding his nervous emotions.

Keith’s boots pounded through the soundless corridor, their thundering steps barely reaching his ears as he sprinted towards the medical wing.
“How is she?” he demanded, rushing into the room with medical pods, his space boots sliding across the smooth floor. His breath uneven, eyes wide, muscles tense he focused on Miume’s small frame. Her ears twitched at the sound of his voice before she slowly turned to meet his gaze. Taking the time to carefully compose herself.

“She's stable. Thanks to these medical pods, I estimate at least a week in here.” she offered Keith a small smile before returning her gaze back to the monitor in her hand, scanning the numbers as it ran over vitals and brain wave functions. Her bright eyes hardening as the brain wave function barely registered. Its line scarcely moving or showing any indication of activity.

How could someone be physically fine, with no life support functions, yet have little to no brain activity?

Miume’s lips pulled into a thin line as she looked back up at Umi. She was missing something, she knew it. Like an important piece of a puzzle that only Umi had.

Keith let out a loud breath of relief, reaching a shaky hand out to steady himself on the door frame. An unusual crushing emotion running through him, crushing his chest as he tried to take a full breath. Leaning against the door frame for a moment more, Keith collected himself before making his way to the pod.

Umi was frozen in place, face relaxed as if she were sleeping but the usual color undertone of her cheeks was still absent. The blood had been cleaned from her face, but her lips remained colorless. A haunting hollowness resting over her features. The tinted glass creating an unsettling illusion of stillness around her. Like she was laying in a frozen casket instead of a healing pod. Slowly he placed a hand on the glass dome, closing his eyes he bowed his head. “I’m sorry.” he whispered to himself, squeezing his eyes shut.

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