Ocean Blue

by thegalrahobbitofplanetgalilfrey

Summary

Keith blinked at the pair of bright, inquisitive blue eyes that were peering at him. And the tail that followed. "I'm hallucinating."

Today, we do the never-before-done fan fiction and create a 100% platonic mermay/pirate fic for Voltron! Enjoy, and you can also find me on Tumblr, Wattpad and Quotev!

Chapter title names are from Imagine dragon's "Rise Up." I own nothing but my love for the song.

Notes

Quick note, I have started Nanowrimo for an original fiction, and what is being posted right now is what was pre-written.
Lance sped through the water, his powerful blue tail propelling him onward. Then his sixth sense of where things were in the water warned him of an approaching obstacle, and he changed direction, making a wide circle around the obstacle and coming to a halt in front of it.

He surfaced, surveying a bit of wreckage. Nothing more than a bunch of planks. But something was on them. A mermaid? But why didn’t he have a tail? Or- really- any mermaid features at all?

Lance realized with a start of horror and thrill that this was a human. He’d been told stories of mermaids who had lost their lives or freedoms to the tailless creatures. But still, he was curious. And the human looked rather floppy and limp. Lance splashed it with water, and it opened its eyes with a strangled yelp.

Keith blinked at his surroundings, and then at the pair of bright, inquisitive blue eyes that were peering at him. And the tail that followed. “I’m hallucinating,” he muttered, putting a hand to his forehead, “I’ve had too much sun, and I’m starving and dying of thirst.” But when he looked again, the mermaid was still there.

It poked a finger at him. “Are you alive?”

Great. It was also an auditory and tangible hallucination. “Are you real?” he countered.

The mermaid laughed. “Of course I am! Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because mermaids aren’t real.”

It gave its hands a bored look. “Good thing I’m a memman, then.” It grinned toothily at him, and Keith shuddered as he realized that its teeth were incredibly sharp. “You’re a human, right? Never seen one before.”

Lance cocked his head at the human. “You’re strange looking. Are all humans normally this red?”

“No. I’ve been sunburned. Are you going to eat me? Or drown me?”

Lance shoved himself backwards in shock. He turned his back and started to swim away.

“No! Wait!” the human sounded panicked now. “Don’t leave!”

Lance turned around, plopping his chin on the wood. “I have better things to do than talk to rude humans. Goodbye. Maybe I’ll be around again.” He flipped his tail, drenching the human. “Or maybe not.” He sped off into the water again.

He found the human again, completely on accident, two sunrises later. Then wreckage was miraculously still afloat, but the person on top of it wasn’t looking anywhere as good as the raft. Lance splashed it, trying to wake it up again, but it didn’t open its eyes.

Lance poked it tentatively with one finger. Was it dead? Why hadn’t it collapsed into sea foam? He sighed. Only one real way to find out if it was dead. Lance grabbed one of its fingers and chomped down on it, hard. The human gave a strangled yelp in its sleep, but didn’t wake up.

It wasn’t dead, then, but it was close to it, based on the birds circling overhead. Wait. Birds? That
meant that land was close by, because these were no albatrosses! Humans belonged on land, didn’t they? Despite their silly boat attempts to live on the sea. Lance grabbed ahold of the raft and started pushing it towards the source of the circling birds. He saw a busy port, and he let the raft go. That was as far as he was willing to go. He was not getting anywhere close to more humans, ones that had enough strength to kidnap him. The human was on its own, now.

He heard shouts from another boat, and saw the little raft get hauled in by a fishing boat. His human was pulled up, and Lance disappeared under the waves, feeling proud of himself. He’d probably just saved a life.

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Shiro volunteered to take the shipwreck survivor in. The other fishermen were perfectly happy to let him have the kid, and Shiro left early, taking him home. His house wasn’t much, but it was better than a raft, he thought.

The boy was delirious with heatstroke, and Shiro had to soothe sunburns that covered the kid’s neck, face, feet and hands, but he slowly nursed the castaway back to health.

“Keith.”

Shiro looked up in surprise. It was the first time that his charge had spoken. “What?”

The castaway looked at him with luminous purple eyes. “My name is Keith.”

“Oh. I’m Shiro. Mind telling me what happened?”

“Pirates,” Keith said hoarsely, “The captain blew the ship to bits and sent the cargo to the bottom of the ocean rather than let them get it. The explosion from the gunpowder took the pirate ship down too”

Shiro busied himself fixing a net. “Oh. Sounds like a brave man.”

“Or a stupid one.” Keith’s fist clenched on his blanket. “Why would he just doom us all like that?! The rest of the crew was killed, as far as I know, and I nearly was! He could’ve just handed over his cargo!”

A small smile played on Shiro’s lips. “Maybe he just refused to ever lose to pirates.”

“So he sank two shipfuls of people just for a sense of stubborn pride?!”

Shiro shrugged. “Or maybe he just wanted to be sure that those pirates couldn’t prey on anyone else ever again. Maybe he was protecting future ships.”

“It’s stupid. I spent nearly a week out on the ocean, starving and dying of thirst and heatstroke because of him.”

Shiro shook his head. “I get it, if it was the second option. Wanting to keep people safe. I was on a navy ship. Pirate attack. Whole crew- dead or captured. Cargo taken. Ship captured. I’m the only one who got away. If I could blow up that ship, sacrificing myself in the process, to save other ships from them? I would. I would for most pirate ships.”

“Oh.” Keith was silent for a moment. “Do you have a big pirate problem here?”

Shiro shrugged. “Occasionally one will show up, get drunk, reveal himself and get a rope around
his neck for his trouble. And who knows? We might get pirate ships in harbor, but we can’t tell, and as long as they behave, pay their fees and not get drunk, how are we going to catch them? But we don’t get raids, no.” He glanced at Keith, whose face had gone pale. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Is- is being a pirate immediately a hanging?”

Shiro shrugged. “I suppose so. They might get a trial, but I doubt it’s fair. The more of them at the gallows the better is the general town feeling.”

“Oh. Is- is that your feeling?”

Shiro’s steel-grey eyes met Keith’s purple ones. “If I found a pirate, I’d turn him in,” he said firmly, and Keith nodded. He looked a little… sad, Shiro thought. A little haunted. And a little scared. Shiro smiled at him.

“Let’s not talk about it, okay? You know how to mend nets?”

Keith nodded and took one, his hands working deftly. The hole in the net quickly disappeared. Shiro eyed it appreciatively.

“You did this kind of thing?”

Keith shrugged. “I was a swabbie. I did a lot of things.” His nose crinkled. “Typically the jobs no one else wanted to do.”

Shiro made a face. He knew how that was. “Navy for five years before we were sunk by pirates. It was decent pay. Relatively neat.”

Keith chuckled. “Merchant ships… not as much.”

There was a knocking on the door, and Shiro opened it to a young girl, in a nice purple and white dress but no shoes. She was holding a dainty pair of high-heeled boots in her hand, as if she’d taken them off to run. “Matt and Dad need your help today,” she told him breathlessly, “Dad’s back is giving him problems again.”

Shiro smiled at her. “Sure, Katie. I’ll be right there. How’s your job?”

“Oh, well, you know. Bit annoying. Don’t see why I have to dress like this in order to help out a lady. Gotta dash anyway, speaking of that job. Gonna be late if I don’t get moving.”

She ran back across the sand, picking up her skirts and sprinting towards town. Shiro gave Keith a small smile.

“I’ll be back. You just stick around the beach. I should be back around sunset-ish.”

Keith nodded. Shiro gave him another smile and left. Keith paced the cottage, restless, then went out onto the beach. He wandered along the coastline, looking into the ocean for any sign of- nah. That couldn’t have been real. The merman had been a figment of his imagination. Right?

“Hey! You!”

Keith turned around to see a man, waving frantically. “Yes?”

“You know how to get to the nearest town? We’re a bit lost.”

Keith nodded. “We?”
The man jammed his thumb up towards the cliffs. “My caravan. We’re a traveling circus, see. Best collection of oddities.”

“But no maps?”

The man let out a short laugh. “It appears not.”

“I can get you to town.”

“Good lad.”

Keith scrambled up the paths that led to the top of the cliffs, the man not far behind him. He brought them to the road, which wasn’t far, but was hard to see through the vegetation.

“There.”

“Thank you. I’d like to show you something. Come here, come here. Don’t be shy. You live by the sea, yes? You’ll find this interesting, then.”

Keith followed the man, his curiosity outweighing his caution. The man pulled a tarp off of a wagon, and Keith stepped back in shock. It hadn’t been a hallucination after all.

Mermaids- or mermen- were real.
“Anything happen while I was gone?”

Keith hesitated. He liked Shiro. He wanted to trust him. The question was, could he? “There was a
lost circus that passed through. I helped them get to the road.”

“Oh?”

“They had a mermaid. Merman. Whichever.”

Shiro snorted.

“What?”

“Mermaids aren’t real, Keith.”

“Then how do you explain the one in their fishtank?”

Shiro waved a hand. “There’s always a trick to it. Probably a person in a suit.”

“Underwater?”

“Double walled glass. They pour water in the crack in-between, and it looks like they’re
underwater.”

“He was swimming!”

“Sure. There’s a platform in the tank, also made of glass. It holds him up, he does some swimming
motions, and presto, you have a mermaid.”

Keith crossed his arms. “It was real.”

Shiro gave a little laugh. “Alright, then. Why are you so determined to believe in the mermaid?”

“When… when I was out on the ocean… floating on that bit of wreckage… I saw…” Keith
hesitated, unwilling to admit to what he’d been fighting himself on. “I saw a merman. At least… I
thought I did. I wasn’t sure. It was pretty far along, and- well, I might have been hallucinating,
but…”

“Sure. Okay. You saw a mermaid.”

“I think it’s the same one.”

“I think you’re reading too much into this.”

Keith smiled wanly at him. “Sure. You’re probably right.”

“Just forget about the mermaid. If you want, you can come out on the ocean with me tomorrow.”

“Sounds great.”

Shiro smiled. “Right, then. Get some sleep, okay? I’ll be waking you up at the crack of dawn.” He
yawned and stretched. “I’m beat. See you in the morning.”
“’Night.”

Keith waited until Shiro’s breathing turned to snores, then opened the door quietly, slipping out and latching it behind him. “I’m sorry, Shiro.”

He moved like a shadow across the beach, clambering up the cliff paths and slipping into town, silent as the wind. He snuck into the circus tent, quickly finding the fishtank and knocking on the glass.

The merman surfaced, resting his head and arms on the side of the tank. “What do you want?”

“I know you, don’t I.”

The merman flipped his tail casually. “I don’t know. Do you?”

“You were out on the ocean, and- it was you, I know it! You remember me?”

The merman gave him a bored look. “All of you humans look the same to me. Pudgy, pink, tailless freaks who kidnap innocent mermen just minding their own business and shove them in tanks.” He gave Keith a glare. “And then wake them up when they try and sleep in said tanks, which is hard in and of itself, thank you. You’re no different from the rest to me.”

“Fine. I’ll be leaving, then.” Keith wheeled around to go.

“No, wait, don’t leave!” the mermaid sounded a bit panicked now, “Come on! I pushed your stupid bit of wreckage to the port, you owe me one!”

Keith paused. “What?”

“Yeah, fine. You saw me out on the ocean. I found you a couple of days later and pushed your stupid raft to shore. Favor for favor. Get me back to the ocean, and we’ll call it even.”

“Don’t like it in the fishtank?”

“Don’t try and be funny,” the merman grumbled, “Just get me out of here.” He looked at Keith pleadingly, his eyes despairing, as if Keith were his last chance.

Keith glanced around. Could he haul a merman back through the town without being noticed?

*Probably not*, he thought wryly, but hauled the merman out of the tank anyway, hooking his arms under the merman’s and dragging him through the tent and into the streets.

“Ow! Watch my tail!”

“You are deceptively heavier than your skinny little torso implies,” Keith grunted, “What do mermen eat, rocks?”

“Fish. And sea plants.”

“Isn’t- eating- a fish- like- cannibalism?”

“Do you question when a shark eats a fish? Move faster.”

Keith looked around at the sound of a pebble skittering across the ground, and the girl who’d shown up at his house before (what had her name been, Katie?) gaped at him from a doorway. “Um. Hi. This isn’t what it looks like.”
“Looks like you’re stealing something from the circus.”

“Okay, it’s exactly what it looks like. Please don’t tell.”

“A mermaid,” Katie breathed, poking at Lance’s tail and gills, “Is it real?”

“Hey! I’m a merman! And stop messing with my tail! Ow!”

“Fascinating!”

“Pleasure talking, gotta go,” Keith yelped as shouts echoed from the circus tent. He moved faster, practically flying across the cobblestones.

“Ow! Watch it! My tail—”

“Your tail is going to end up back in that fishtank if I stop and go easy on it!”

Keith came to the cliffs and groaned. How was he supposed to get the merman down the cliffs?!

“This is gonna hurt,” he warned, starting to drag the merman down the stairs carved into the side of the cliff, “Hold on.”

“Ow. Ow. Ow. You could try being more gentle, you know!”

“And you could try being a little more quiet,” Keith hissed back, “They’re after us!”

The shouts had followed them, and light was flashing on the stairs above them. Keith glanced down. He’d made it a long way down the cliff. It wasn’t that far of a fall, right?

“Sorry,” he yelped, and heaved the merman over the side, sending him crashing into the sand of the beach, cursing Keith and screaming. The throw left him unbalanced, and he fell before he could jump off himself. He yelped as his wrist twisted awkwardly on landing, but he got right back up and kept dragging the merman out to the open ocean. The shouts got closer and closer as he waded out into the sea, dragging the merman behind him.

“Go!”

The merman didn’t need to be told twice. His muscular tail propelled him through the water, taking him out of reach as the circus ringmaster caught up to them, seizing Keith’s injured wrist.

“Gotcha, rat!”

Keith punched the man in the face, kicking salty water at him in an attempt to loosen his grip. The ringmaster let go of him, cursing, and Keith swam out into the ocean, trying to get past them and then circle back around.

A hand on his ankle dragged him backwards, and he went down in a swirl of bubbles as a strongman pulled him back, hoisting him up by his collar. Keith kicked and flailed, spitting out water.

“Let me go!” he snarled. His foot connected with the man’s nose, and he was dropped. The strongman, however, recovered quickly, and a massive fist careened into Keith’s eye. He staggered back, dizzy, and another one slammed into his jaw. He fell backwards, the water closing over his head, and the strongman grabbed him again, this time holding his arms tightly. The ringmaster, who was nursing a black eye, spat at him.
“You’re not escaping as easily as that mermaid, boy.”

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Keith sat handcuffed, still dripping wet, in front of the governor, who was holding her head as if she had a headache. “You claim that he stole your… mermaid?”

The ringmaster nodded viciously. “They’re hard to catch, too!”

“Alright. Fine. He stole your mermaid and, what, released it into the ocean?”

“He was practically human,” Keith burst out, “They shouldn’t have locked him up!”

The governor sighed, throwing her hands up. “He was nearly human. Next thing you’ll be suggesting that we free the slaves!”

Keith decided not to mention that he had helped runaways in the past. He settled for leaning back and glaring at Governor Sandas mutinously. “Well, he was,” he grumbled.

The door burst open, and Shiro strode through, a determined-faced Katie behind him. “Stop!”

“Shirogane, this is your… charge… correct?”

Shiro nodded fiercely. “He is. Let him go.”

“He’s been charged with thievery.”

“Katie has something to say.” Shiro nudged her forward. “Don’t you?”

“I saw them. I saw them escaping.”

Keith sighed. This was it. Damning evidence.

“When I saw them, my voice stopped working. I couldn’t call out.” Keith looked up at Katie, surprised. “That mermaid was bewitching him. It put a spell on him to make him let it out and take it back to the ocean. You can’t blame him for what happened. He’s a victim as much as the ringmaster is.”

The ringmaster’s jaw clenched. “Except that I’m the one missing a mermaid.”

Sandas waved a hand. “I’m deeming him innocent. Next time you find a mermaid, keep a better eye on it and don’t let it bewitch my citizens. Dismissed.”

Iverson, the captain of the guard, came forward and unlocked Keith, nudging him towards Shiro. “Off you go, then.”

Keith shot one last glare at the ringmaster and went outside with Shiro and Katie.

“Thank you, Katie,” Shiro told her calmly. She took the dismissal and gave Keith a rather-you-than-me look before flouncing off. “Care to explain what happened?” Shiro asked sarcastically.

Keith shrugged. “You heard her. I got mermaid-voodoo cast on me.”

“You and I both know that story was bull. What happened?”

Keith glared moodily at the ground. “The mermaid pulled a favor owed. Apparently he pushed me
to shore.”

Shiro chuckled as they started down the beach. “I think you just got shanghaied by a mermaid.”

“Thought you didn’t believe in mermaids.”

“Well, either there’s a mermaid, or you and the ringmaster shared a hallucination. I’m going to go with the first option, because hallucinations don’t leave tail marks in the sand.” He pushed the door to his house open. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Catch.” Shiro threw a small rock at him, and he instinctively put his right hand up to catch it, hissing as he jolted his wrist.

“Alright, what’s wrong.”

“I twisted my wrist a bit. It’s fine.”

Shiro reached for his arm. “Let me see.”

“No- it’s fine- Shiro- no—”

Shiro seized his arm, pulling his sleeve up. “Yeah, this is definitely sprained. Not just twisted, but definitely—” Shiro froze in shock, and Keith yanked his arm away, pulling his sleeve back down and holding his arm protectively to his chest.

“You’re a pirate!” Shiro grabbed his arm, dragging him towards the door. “Can’t believe it. You lied to me!”

“No, I didn’t! I said that my ship went down when the captain of a merchant ship blew his ship to smithereens, taking down the pirate ship with it! You just assumed that I was on the merchant ship!”

“I can’t believe this! You’re a pirate!”

“Shiro, no, I swear, it’s not what you think!”

Shiro released him, folding his arms. “Oh, yeah? What is it then, Keith?! What am I supposed to think when I see a ‘P’ branded on your forearm?! That’s the symbol for pirate, Keith!”

Keith let out a shaky breath. “My dad died in a fire when I was small. Our port, it… it had a bit of a pirate problem. There was a raid, and… and I was taken,” he burst out, looking at Shiro with pleading eyes, eyes that begged him to understand. “I was kidnapped, Shiro. I didn’t have a choice. I was only eleven,” he whispered, “I was just a kid. I never hurt anyone. I never joined in on raids. I was just a swabbie, that part was all true, I swear!”

Shiro hesitated.

“Shiro, please, you have to believe me! I never wanted to be a pirate. Life didn’t give me a choice.”

“I… I believe you.”

Keith nearly collapsed from relief. “Thank you, Shiro.”

Shiro sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I can’t believe I’m harboring a pirate. You do know
that if anyone else finds out, you won’t be given a chance to explain, right? It’ll be right to the
gallows. And I might get taken along with you.”

“I know, Shiro. And I’m sorry. But I’ll be careful. I won’t let anyone else find out, I promise!”

Shiro gave him a small smile. “Yeah. Okay. Let me see that wrist of yours.” He chuckled. “I guess
this puts a pin in my plans, huh?”
I've been Shaken' Wakin' in the Night Light

Keith swung his legs aimlessly, sitting on the edge of the docks. Shiro would be back soon. Probably, anyway. He never stayed out much later, not for the year that Keith had known him. But the sun was setting, and still, the boat that Shiro shared with Sam and Matt didn’t come in. Others began to go home for the night, and still Shiro wasn’t back.

Keith heaved a sigh of relief as he saw the small fishing boat on the horizon. He squinted at it. It didn’t seem to be moving very fast. Just kind of… meandering. Something was wrong. The sails didn’t even look tied down.

Keith yanked off his boots and shirt and jumped into the ocean, gasping as the cold shock hit him. He started swimming, pushing towards the boat. When he finally reached it, there was no laugh—no “what did you do that for?” from Shiro, no rope dangling from the side for him to grab hold of. He grabbed a net that was hanging awkwardly from the side of the boat and clambered aboard, shivering violently from the cold of the ocean. Shiro, Matt and Sam were nowhere on board.

Keith felt a chill that had nothing to do with the cold water. No. No, no, nonononono! He attempted to turn the boat around—surely they’d just been washed off by a sudden wave and would be right there?

But they were nowhere in sight. A sudden wind picked up the sails, sweeping the boat back towards the dock.

“No! No, no, no! Go back!”

The wind and sea didn’t care what he shouted. The boat was blown back to shore. Katie was waiting on the docks, swinging her legs idly as he had been doing not long ago. She waved.

“Hey! Are these your boots and shirt? Little late for a swim, don’t you think? Not to mention that someone could’ve stolen your clothes.”

“They’re gone,” he choked as the boat gently bumped against the docks, “They’re not here.”

Katie blinked. “Sorry?”

“Shiro- Matt- your dad- they’re not here. Their boat was drifting.”

Katie’s face shifted from happy to horrified. “What?! What do you mean?!”

“I mean- I’m sorry. They- they’re gone

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Keith shivered, walking down the beach to Shiro’s little house. Katie had left the docks immediately, running back towards the town with her skirts hiked up, tears running out of her eyes. He pushed open the door, tears welling up in his eyes as well. Shiro was gone. The one person who’d cared about him— the one person who had been willing to hear him out about his branding.

He curled up in Shiro’s bed. The smell of fish and the smell of the sea surrounded him, a comforting scent. Shiro had never taken him out on the boat. He’d shown him how to moor it and had taught him how to steer, raise the sail, furl the sail and how to cast a net. But they’d never gone out on open ocean.
Keith sighed. People left you, whether willingly or not. It was a fact of life, and not one that he could change.

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Captain Iverson shook his head. “Sorry, Keith, Miss Holt. No sign of them. We searched, but… nothing.”

“Pirates, then,” Keith suggested.

Iverson gave a short laugh. “There aren’t any pirates in the area, Keith. Haven’t been for a while.”

“But there are!”

“And how would you know that?”

“Because I washed ashore as a result of a pirate attack!”

“That was months ago,” Iverson said harshly, “They’ve likely moved on.”

Keith turned back towards Katie. “You agree with me, right?!”

Katie hesitated. “Keith- maybe- maybe nothing sinister happened.”

“I know that you idolized him, but people make mistakes. Accidents happen. People try and show off.”

Keith felt his hands curl into fists. Shiro was always the one at the tiller. “He wouldn’t. Shiro wouldn’t put them in danger!”

Iverson sighed. “I know that you idolized him, but people make mistakes. Accidents happen. People try and show off.”

“Shiro didn’t show off!”

“Evidently, he did.”

Keith’s clenched fists found Iverson’s eye, and he attacked the captain of the guard. Iverson peeled him off, throwing him into the wall.

“Don’t you try that again, whelp!”

Keith bounded back up, making another go at Iverson. “You take it back!”

Iverson backhanded him across the face. “Don’t talk to me like that!”

“Stop it! Both of you!” Both of them turned to see Katie’s eyes filled with tears. “Don’t you see? Matt and Dad and Shiro are missing, and all you do is argue and fight! Stop it! Just- stop!”

She ran from them, yanking her heeled shoes off and bolting through the streets. She came out on one of the cliffs overlooking the ocean and glanced down into the sea. She could jump. She couldn’t swim well in this dress, she knew. She’d be gone, just like Matt and Dad.

Katie peered over the edge. It gave her vertigo, and she stepped back. Yeah, definitely not the way she wanted to go, and definitely not right now. Her foot slipped on a patch of algae, and she thudded to the ground. She lunged for her shoes, which she’d dropped, overbalanced, and fell. She
screamed, tumbling into the waves below, facing the blackness of a hidden cave.

Katie’s prediction had been right. Her dress was quickly waterlogged and heavy. She struggled with the buttons on the back, trying to wriggle out of the confining dress. She heard a shout from shore.

Arms encircled her chest, dragging her through the water. “Don’t struggle, please! I’m saving your life!”

Katie went limp in her savior’s grasp, and she was hauled quickly to shallow water where she struggled to her feet.

“Hold on, I’ll get your shoes.”

Before she could see who had pulled her out of the water, they were gone again. On the shore was a darker-skinned boy, one she recognized as a servant from Governor Sandas’ house. He waved, jogging over.

“You scared me! I nearly had a heart attack!”

Katie’s shoes plunked to the shore next to her, and she turned to see- she gaped. “You!”

The merman grinned cheerfully. “Me. You’re the one who poked at my tail and gills, right? Name’s Lance. That’s Hunk. He saw you fall off of the cliff.”

Hunk came to a halt next to them. “Oh. You two know each other?”

“We met. Once. In the middle of a daring escape from a circus. Hey- what’s wrong? Why are you crying?”

Katie sat down with a whump in the sand. “I’m cold,” she wailed, “And I’m tired, and my family is missing, and- I don’t know what to do!”

Hunk sat down next to her. “Why don’t you tell us about it?”

She did, explaining in-between snifflies about the empty fishing boat and Captain Iverson’s final say. Lance fidgeted.

“Well. If you want, I could go out and look for them. In the ocean. I could at least… you know. Bring you closure, assuming I don’t find them alive.”

Katie looked up at him, eyes brimming with tears. “Would you?”

He shifted. “Sure. I’ll be back… uh… soonish. Won’t take long, I think. Assuming, y’know. They didn’t get picked up by another ship and are far away from here.”

She gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Thank you.”

He dove back into the ocean, gone in a flash, his purple-blue tail moving in a smooth pattern.

“You know, I’d really like to know how that tail works.”

Hunk gave her a grin. “I’m sure you would.”

Katie threw a handful of sand at him. “I didn’t mean it in that way, and you know it!” She sneezed.
Hunk gave her a worried look. “Uh-oh. We’d better get you back to town. You’re going to catch your death of cold.”

“Nah, I’ll be fine.” Katie sneezed three times in a row. “On second thought, maybe you’re right.”
Keith shoved through a crowd, trying to get to its center. It had been a week since he’d fought with Iverson, and he felt confident that Iverson had forgotten about the spat. “Hey, what’s going on?”

Someone glanced at him. “Nothing you’d be interested in, Foundling.”

Keith ignored the nickname that had followed him since Shiro had taken him in and pushed his way through the throng of people. When he got to the front, his stomach curled in revulsion. A slave market. Yeah, he definitely wasn’t interested in that. But somehow, he couldn’t tear his eyes away as a beautiful black girl with pure white- white!- hair and little pink tattoos under each eye was dragged forward. Her bearing was tall and regal, and she looked around at the buyers with contempt.

“How much for this beauty? A princess in her tribe, or so I’m told.”

The girl gave the man a look of absolute disgust, but was sold anyway to a man who- Keith shuddered. He knew what went on with that man’s female slaves. This regal girl didn’t deserve that, not that any of them did. Her new owner grabbed her chains, and she planted her feet, yanking hard on the chains. The man was actually dragged forward from the force of it. She spat at him, and then allowed herself to be dragged away, still graceful and queenly in her movements.

Keith made a noise of disgust and moved away. Someone jeered at him, and he swung around ready to throw a punch before deciding better of it. Then a barb about Shiro was made, and he turned around and decked the other boy, the two of them scuffling on the ground.

The fight was a bit one-sided; the other boy never landed a hit on Keith. He was dragged off of his opponent by Iverson, who sighed.

“Get out of my sight.”

Keith obliged, his feet taking him through the streets without any direction of his own conscious thinking. Night came fast, now that winter was dropping on him, and the sun was beginning to set.

He smelled something that made his stomach revolt against him, and he looked up. Hanging like laundry on a line were two men, strung up by their necks on the gallows. Their right sleeves were ripped open to reveal the damning “P” branded on their forearms. His own arm ached in sympathy, and he hurried away. He wouldn’t let that be his own fate.

Keith found himself in front of the home of the man who’d bought the regal girl. He peered around at the slave house, a horrible little house where the man kept his slaves until they broke. The door was closed, but a key hung on a peg outside. Keith blinked at it in disbelief. No. Nothing could be this easy. Nothing would ever be this easy.

But it appeared that the universe was doing him a favor. He glanced around. No one was here. Good. He vaulted the fence and snatched the key, unlocking the house. He ventured inside, glad that the man kept his door well-oiled.

He heard a rustling in the rafters, and he cursed. Rats. Nasty little beasts. He continued looking for the slave girl

Something dropped down behind him, and cold metal looped around his throat, yanking on his windpipe.
“Think that you can defile me,” a voice hissed in his ear, “Think that I’m some kind of plaything! I’ll change your mind quickly!”

“No,” Keith gasped, trying to suck breath in, “No- here- help—”

The slave girl scoffed. “Likely! Creep!”

“No- really—” Keith felt his body begin to shut down, the darkness of the room fading to a final black. “Key,” he choked desperately with the last of the air in his lungs.

The girl released him. “Key? Where?!”

Keith slumped to the ground, trying to suck air back into his lungs. Bruises were forming on his throat, and his head felt like it might fall off. He held up the key. “Came- free you—” he panted.

She snatched the key out of his hands, glaring at him suspiciously as she unlocked herself. “Why?”

“Wasn’t- wasn’t right.”

“What, slavery? I don’t know what you’re talking about. Plenty of nations own slaves. Tribes attack each other and take slaves- maybe it’s not the best thing to do, but it’s a fact of life, and we can’t help that.”

“No!” Keith argued vehemently, “It’s wrong!”

“I suppose I can’t argue with your convictions if they’ve gotten me out of here. Not that there’s anywhere for me to go.”

“Why?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I was kidnapped in a pirate raid.” Tears bloomed up in her big blue eyes. “I was the only one taken alive. My whole tribe- gone.” She sighed. “I don’t know how much point there is in the fact that you’ve unlocked me. There’s nowhere for me to run.”

An idea occurred to Keith, and the corners of his mouth lifted in what was almost a smile. “Actually, I have a plan.”

Xxx

“This won’t be easy.”

Keith glanced around a corner at the dock guards. “Yeah, maybe not. Can you swim?”

“A bit.”

“Okay. I’ll get on the boat, you swim around from outside the dock area into the docks and I’ll pick you up on the way out. Think that you can do that?”

She nodded determinedly, although her eyes held a trace of fear. “I can do it.”

“Great.” He started to leave, then came back. “I never caught your name. Mine’s Keith.” He held out a hand.

The girl looked at it like she’d never been offered a handshake before (which, considering her background, she probably hadn’t), but she took his hand slowly and gave it a quick shake before immediately releasing it. “Allura.”
Keith walked back out, trying to look casual, and getting the distinct impression that he’d failed. “Hi. I’m back.”

One of the guards sighed. “Give it a rest, Kogane. He’s gone.”

Keith ignored his comment and went right into the boatyard. He found Shiro’s boat and untied it, sailing it quietly out of the dock. A head of white hair that glowed in the moonlight approached the boat, and he threw a net over the side for Allura to grab hold of, bracing himself as she clambered aboard.

“This is… small,” she commented.

“Well, it’s a fishing boat, not a slaver or pirate ship.”

He heard a thump, and froze. Were there rats on his boat? He flipped up a storage compartment, reaching in and yanking out… a boy, a wide hat on his head, dressed in a vest, white shirt and trousers, a pair of glasses perched on his nose. Keith blinked. Wait.

“Katie?”

“No!” the boy told him aggressively, “My name is Pidge! I’m Katie’s cousin.” He caught sight of Allura. “Oh. Oh, boy. You are in trouble.”

Allura seized Pidge’s arm and threw him overboard. Keith yelped, running to the side. “Stars, Allura, you can’t just do that!”

“He saw me. We can’t have witnesses.”

Keith yanked off his boots and jumped overboard, swimming to the floundering Pidge, who was treading water while attempting to hold his hat on.

“Hold on! I’ve got you!” Keith hauled him back to the boat. The net wasn’t hanging off of the side anymore. “Allura! Throw the net back down!”

“Why? So you can let a rat who will betray us on board?”

“Allura!”

There was a sigh, and the net was thrown back over the side of the ship. Keith pushed Pidge on it before climbing up himself.

“You,” Pidge told him through chattering teeth, “have an awful taste in friends.”

“Why are you on my boat?!”

“Katie contacted me. She wants to find Matt. I asked around, found out about your excursions to look and decided that I’d join you. Hunk- he’s a friend- distracted the guards while I slipped in.”

“I still say that we kill him,” Allura grumbled, “He has a large mouth that tends to, how do you say, shoot off.”

“No,” Keith said firmly, “No one is killing anyone. Pidge…”

“Won’t tell. Cross my heart, hope to die and all of that.” Pidge glanced at Allura. “And I’m sure that she will make absolutely certain that I die if I squeal.”
“I will.”

Keith steered the boat out towards open ocean. “Right. We’re staying out here for a day or two, wait for them to stop busting down doors looking for Allura, and we’ll go back to shore.”

Pidge crossed his arms. “Hunk is expecting me back by tomorrow evening.”

Keith turned the boat to the side, going out where the average fisherman wouldn’t follow. “Hunk will have to be disappointed.”

Xxx

Keith glanced at his two companions, both restless. “You think it’s been long enough?”

“They’ll be suspicious of you,” Pidge warned, “You left the night that the slave went missing, and you showed up a few days later? They’ll search the boat.”

“Well, what do you suggest?!”

“There’s a cave. Down at the cliffs. Hard to get to. You’d either have to drop off of the cliffs to see it or navigate your boat through the rocks and get really close.”

“How do you know about it, then?”

“I dropped off of the cliffs,” Pidge said casually, as if such a thing happened every day, “It’ll be hard to get her there, but we could get Allura in, then sail into the docks as if nothing is wrong.”

“I’d have to be a madman to try and get through those rocks, though.”

Allura looked up at him. “You risked everything to save a slave. Is that normal behavior?”

Keith sighed. “Guess I’m a madman.”

Xxx

Keith eyed the rocks near the cliffs. “Alright, everyone hold on.”

“You’re going to hit that rock!” Pidge screamed, his voice unusually high.

Keith eyed the rock, watching it, watching it… He yanked on the tiller, and the force of it pulled one side of the boat up into the air, gliding safely over the rocks. He pulled the tiller to the other side, more gently to steer it around the upcoming rock. Water splashed into the boat, but he continued anyway, squinting through the salty spray.

Keith slid the tiller to one side then the other in quick succession, turning the boat one way to get around a rock and then another way to avoid hitting a second rock that was close. They slid in towards the cliffs, and he spotted the cave. He maneuvered the boat gently through the entrance, and it slid through the water, bumping up against the shore.

“All out for the cave.” His voice echoed in the darkness.

*Cave, cave, cave.*

Keith grinned. “Heh. Hello!”

*Lone, lone, lone.*
Keith shivered. Creepy. “Well- Allura, this is your stop. I’ll come by in a bit with food.”

“I traded one slavery for another,” Allura murmured.

Keith shook his head. “No- no, Allura, it’s just… it’s just until all of this calms down. Then we’ll bring you out and get you on the first ship out of here. You can go where you want. But for now, the whole town will be on alert for you.”

Allura sighed, sitting down and hugging her knees to her chest. “Hurry back,” she whispered as Keith got back on his boat.

*Back, back, back.*
Like a Prayer That Only Needs a Reason

The dock guard gave Keith a suspicious glance. “Those are some interesting bruises.”

Keith’s hand flew up to his neck. “Got caught in the ropes,” he lied.

“That so?”

“Yeah. Pidge helped me out.”

“There’s an escaped slave around. She disappeared the night you left. Sorry, but we have to search your boat.”

“Escaped slave?”

The guard sighed. “Yeah. Lot of hassle. Lot of pain. You’re prime suspect, since you helped that mermaid out.”

“Oh. Right.”

Keith held his breath, hoping that he wouldn’t find evidence—any of Allura’s unique white hair caught in-between the boards of the boat, perhaps. But the guard came off of the boat and waved.

“You’re fine.”

Keith and Pidge exited the boatyard, and Pidge slipped away. She ducked into an alleyway, yanking her hat off, her ponytail finally free. She also unbuttoned her confining vest that hid any feminine aspects of her body.

Hunk approached her. “How did it go?”

Katie sighed, running her fingers through her bangs. “I just got into something way over my head, and I have no clue how it happened. I was just minding my own business, stowing away to look for Lance, and he finds me, drags me out, and guess what?”

“What?”

“He’s got that escaped slave with him!”

“Oh, no.”

Katie nodded. “Yeah. And she just up and threw me overboard!”

“She what?!?”

“She threw me overboard! Keith got me back on, and made me swear not to tell—oops— and I ended up telling them where to hide her, because what else was I supposed to do?! And now—now what?!?”

“Are you going to tell the guard?”

Katie lifted her hands up. “I don’t know! I know that as a citizen, I should, but— I mean, come on. I lied to the court once to get Keith out of trouble, and it feels kind of… disloyal to Shiro to rat Keith out. Not to mention that Allura—that’s the slave—would probably find a way to kill me.” She sighed. “And— I don’t know. I’ve never really approved of slavery. So… maybe keeping my mouth
shut is the right thing to do.”

Hunk smiled at her. “I think you’re right.”

She briefly returned the smile. “Lance didn’t show up while I was gone, did he?”

Hunk shook his head. “Not a sign of him. I hope he’s okay.”

“Maybe he found them alive,” she said hopefully, “and he’s following them!”

Hunk patted her shoulder. “Maybe so.”

A clock chimed, and Katie paled. “I’m supposed to be at work in ten minutes!”

“Go, go, go!”

Xxx

Lance followed in the shadow of a ship, watching the humans bustle around on the deck. He held his breath, waiting… waiting… there! Katie’s brother, still alive and kicking! He watched the human stumble across the deck, legs and hands in chains.

One of the humans on board knocked him over with a jeer, and another human, this one with white bangs, slammed the cruel human over. He was knocked on the head for his trouble and left on the deck in the sun.

Lance dove down towards the bottom of the port harbor until he found a giant spur of a mast. He grinned and swam it up, jamming it into the bottom of the boat and dragging it along. There were yells and shouts from above as the boat started to sink.

Lance started swimming back in the direction of Katie’s port. Her brother’s ship wouldn’t be leaving this island for a while. He just hoped that he could get her out here before it did.
Like a Hunter Waiting for the Season

Hunk moved towards yet another massive room with his broom. He sighed. Why did Governor Sandas need so many rooms? She rarely had anyone in them! But somehow, dust and dirt still managed to get in them.

He started to push open the door, but stopped when he heard Sandas’ voice inside. She was talking to Iverson.

He should move on. He knew that he should move on. And yet… something compelled him to stay.

“They’re getting bolder. Getting closer. Taking sailors from so close.” Iverson’s growl.

“I know. But we cannot panic the people.” Sandas. What were they talking about?

“Ma’am, we can’t hide it for much longer. The foundling- Kogane- he already suspects the reason for his friend’s disappearance. We can’t keep it secret forever. He’ll find out.”

“Then get rid of him,” Sandas snapped, “Keep him out of town. If he starts convincing everyone that we have a pirate problem—”

Hunk took a step back. Pirates?! He’d thought that the port was safe!

“You can banish him from town, but he can still get to the docks. He takes his boat out almost every day.”

“The ocean is a dangerous place, Captain. Accidents… happen.”

Hunk gasped, and Admiral Sandas bolted upright. “Who’s there?!”

Hunk backed away as Iverson opened the door. “Uh- just- just came to clean,” he squeaked.

“Get him,” Sandas ordered.

Hunk bolted, sprinting away from Iverson. He crashed through the door, searching the streets- anyone, please- he spotted a short figure in a hat.

“Ka- Pidge!”

She looked up at him. “Hunk?”

“Gotta run,” he gasped, sprinting past her. Behind him, Iverson dashed through the streets.

Pidge ran next to him. “What happened?”

“Overheard them talking.” Hunk gasped, “Pirates are getting closer. Sandas planning to kill Keith.”

“Oh, boy.”

They barged past the dock guards, Iverson bellowing the whole way, and jumped onto Keith’s boat.

“Go, go, go!” Pidge shouted.
“What?” he sputtered, “What are you doing on my boat? Who’s that? What—?”

“Garret! Gunderson!” Iverson roared.

“Keith, go!”

Keith untied the boat, pushing off as Iverson shouted. He bewilderedly steered them out of the harbor, leaving Iverson bellowing behind them. “What is going on?!”

Hunk panted for breath. “Disappearing- was pirates. Sandas doesn’t want anyone to find out. Planned to get you killed on the ocean. Name’s Hunk, by the way.”

“They’re coming after us!” Pidge shouted.

“Hold on!” Keith shouted, steering for the cliffs.

Hunk paled. “Oh, no. No, no, no!”

Keith grabbed firmly on the lines of his boat, his other hand on the tiller. “Yup!”

He steered expertly through the rocks, soaking all of them thoroughly. He slid into the cave, the boats pursuing him giving up.

Allura stood up in shock. “What are you doing here so soon?”

“No time to explain. We need to go. It’s not safe here anymore.”

Allura clambered aboard, and Keith steered the boat back out. The boat barely made it out of the rocks, and Keith grinned at Hunk, Allura and Pidge’s terrified expressions. His sleeve slid down a bit, heavy from how much it was soaked, and he quickly pulled it back up before anyone could see his brand. His smile slid off of his face, and he turned towards the open ocean. They had a long way to go.

Xxx

Pidge patted Hunk’s back as he threw up over the side. “There, there, big guy. You’re okay.”

“I- hate- the ocean,” he groaned, “When are we going to see- urgh- land?”

Pidge looked questioningly at Keith.

“Three days. There’s an island. I’ve got food and water for four days, but only for one person. We’ll have to ration.”

“Are you going to steer the whole way?”

“Not like any of the rest of you can pilot a boat.”

Pidge cocked her head to the side. “What about eating?”

“I can steer with one hand.”

“Sleeping?”

“Three days isn’t that long.”

Night fell fast on them, and Pidge yawned. “You sure you want to stay up?”
“Positive.”

Pidge shrugged. “Suit yourself.” She found an old blanket and curled up in it, leaning on Hunk. Soon their snores filled the boat, the breeze joining them.

Allura was sitting at the front of the boat. “You want to go to bed too?” Keith called softly.

“No,” she replied thoughtfully, “I think I’ll stay up.” They sat in silence. Then, “How far can this boat take us?”

“She can take us short distances. She’s meant for fishing near a port, only staying a few days at sea. Not long ocean voyages.”

“What’s the plan, then? Beyond getting to this island?”

Keith shrugged. “The island has lots of food. We’ll stay until we can get on the nearest ship out of here.”

“And then what? What are you planning then? Where will we go? What will we do?”

Keith sighed. “I don’t know. Yesterday, I didn’t think beyond catching fish to eat or trade and looking for any sign of Shiro. Today I found out that the governor was planning to have me killed, pirates are getting closer and closer to our port, and I had to flee the port with an escaped slave, an islander servant and some boy I only met a few days ago. I haven’t given much thought to what I’m doing next. I’ve got to survive to the point where I can ponder that question before I try to think about it.”

Allura nodded. “I see.” She got up. “One last question. What is that?”

Keith squinted at what her finger was pointing at far away on the horizon. “That,” he said grimly, “is a winter storm. We need to avoid it. It looks pretty far away, though. We should be fine.”

Xxx

“You’re not tired at all?”

Keith shook his head at Pidge’s inquiry, stifling a yawn. “I can stay up.”

“You know, most fishermen are just that. Men. As in, more than one. So that sometimes they can sleep?”

“And I’m not fishing,” Keith snapped, “Go bother someone else!”

“Steering can’t possibly take that much attention.”

“Well it does, so——” Keith glanced at the sky. “Is it just me, or did it just get darker?”


“This is why you can’t distract me. We’re getting too close to the storm. Now, seriously. Go bother someone else.”

Keith gave the sky another glance as he sailed back into sunnier waters. The storm seemed to be getting closer to his island destination. This wasn’t good.

Xxx
Keith yawned, eyelids drooping. Last day. Last day of traveling, and then he could rest.

But he was tired now, and did he really need to stay awake? It wouldn’t take much to just fall asleep. Just let the tiller go. He shook himself. No. He had to stay awake.

“That’s enough,” Allura said firmly, facing him. Pidge and Hunk were both behind her, arms crossed. “You need sleep.”

“Sure,” he agreed, “After we get to the island.”

“No. Now. Before you drop dead on your feet.”

“I’m f-i-i-i-n-e,” he yawned.

“You are not! Working yourself to exhaustion isn’t healthy! You need sleep!” Allura pried his fingers off of the tiller, which they’d been clenched on. Keith hadn’t been sure that he could get his fingers off, even if he’d wanted to.

“Allura—”

“No, Keith. You are going to rest. You are going to sleep. You have been taking less rations than everyone else, getting no sleep, and doing all of the work.”

“None of you—”

“I’m sure that between the three of us, we can figure out how to drive the boat. And we’ve been sailing in the same direction for the past two days; we don’t need to change direction. Now. Go to sleep. You’re sunburned, hungry and exhausted, and you’re no use to us in your state anyway.”

“Allura—”

Hunk picked him up, setting him down near the front of the boat. “Stay,” he admonished, “We’ve got this.”

Keith leaned his head against the wood of the boat, rubbing his cramped fingers. The gentle rocking of the boat was soothing, and the sound of the waves put him to sleep.
“-eith!”

Keith felt something wet splashing his face, and his nose twitched. “Hrgh?”

“Keith, wake up! We have a problem!”

At “problem,” Keith’s eyes shot open. The gentle rocking and swaying of the boat had turned into rough ups-and-downs, and rain was beginning to spatter his face.

“Did you steer us into the storm?!”

“No,” Allura said quietly, “I steered us to the island. The storm was already there.”

Keith grabbed lengths of rope, tying Allura and Hunk to the mast. “Pidge, get into the storage space. You’re too small to stay on deck.”

He tied himself to the tiller, taking sails down; no use in them getting torn. He could do this. A blast of wind slammed into him, so hard that it knocked him into the tiller, pushing the breath right out of him. He pulled the tiller to the side as the boat threatened to capsize. Water pushed into his mouth as a wave crashed over the boat.

“We’re gonna die!” Hunk moaned.

Keith didn’t have the time to answer him. He was too busy keeping them from capsizing. Another wave pushed him back, nearly knocking him overboard. He stayed on the boat only because of the rope lashing his wrists to the tiller.

Keith spit out a bit of water, brushing his wet bangs off of his face. His wet hair and clothes were plastered to his skin, and he struggled to see through the rain that was now falling in sheets. He could barely make out the dark shape of the island ahead.

He heard a thumping noise and cursed. The storm had probably torn ships that had been caught in it to pieces, and it sounded like that wreckage was slamming into his boat.

Another giant wave washed over the boat, and a bit of sharp wreckage severed his tie with the ship. One more wave crashed over the boat before he could re-lash himself and swept him overboard.

A piece of wreckage slammed into his head, and he lost sense of where he was. The water woke him up again, and he struggled through the waves. Allura had untied herself, and was being clutched firmly by Hunk, who was still tied down. She threw the net out, and Keith grabbed onto it, letting her drag him back aboard. He panted, wishing that he could lie on the deck.

But he couldn’t. He struggled up, dragging himself back to the tiller. “Allura, tie yourself back down!”

He re-tied himself back to the tiller. The waves continued to overtake them, but the storm started to abate, and the little boat limped into harbor. Keith untied himself, exhausted, and managed to pull his cramped hands off of the tiller.

“We- we need to get the boat beached. We don’t want it to float away.”

He stumbled when he jumped out onto the shore and fell to his knees. Pidge jumped out after him
and crouched next to him.

“Are you okay?”

He nodded. “Just- tired.” He pushed himself back up, the back of his head where he’d been hit throbbing painfully. And why was the ground moving like the ocean? Oh- it was coming towards him now.

Allura approached Pidge as she lunged to catch Keith. Hunk was busy hauling the boat in, pulling on the lines with his massive strength. “Is he alright?”

“Just exhausted, I think. And he’s got a pretty good lump on the back of his head.”

Allura sighed. “I wish I could’ve let him sleep longer.”

Pidge hauled him away from the beach, struggling towards a copse of trees where she was sure there would be more shelter. Allura followed and pointed her out to a giant tree that had been hollowed out by lightning. “There. We can keep out of the rain, at least.”

Hunk came running in after them, and they curled up in the shelter of the tree. Hunk had managed to bring a few blankets from the boat, but they were all sopping wet. The three of them sat huddled together, silent except for the pattering of raindrops on the tree and Keith’s even breathing.

Pidge was the first to break the silence. “So,” she asked timidly, “what now?”

“We wait out the rain,” Allura replied, “We sit tight.”

“Then what?”

Allura sighed. “I don’t know. I can’t go home. You three can’t go back. I don’t know what we can do.”

“Oooh, that’s a shame. I came all this way, too.”

The three of them jumped, whirling to face the river nearby, where a face was grinning at them.

Hunk blinked. “Lance?”

“In the flesh!”

“You- you’re a water spirit,” Allura sputtered, “You- I thought that you were just stories!”

“A lot of people think that.” Lance squinted at Pidge. “Do I…”

“No.” she replied shortly. “You saw my cousin, Katie. I’m Pidge.”

“Okay. Humans look the same to me anyway. But. So. Hunk, what are you doing out here?”

“We’re… kind of on the run? Um- what are you doing here?”

Lance shrugged. “Well, normally I swim closer to the surface when I’m trying to get somewhere fast. There aren’t as many fish there, and they’re not as big. But the water was really choppy, so I swam up this river to wait it out and saw all of you ridiculous humans trying to drag your silly boat on shore. I saw Hunk and thought, hey!”

Allura swayed slightly. “How did you meet a water spirit?!”
Hunk shrugged. “I saw him swimming nearby and said hello.”

“Islanders from his particular island have a tendency to revere us, so I like talking to them. Nicer than the pale squishy blobs like Pidge and your fr- oh, I know him. What’s wrong with him?”

“He’s been awake for three days and nights,” Pidge said exasperatedly.

“Mmm. Not good.” Lance glanced around at the now-clear sky. “Well. Storm seems to have moved on. I’d better get moving to port. Have to find Katie Holt, seeing as how you guys can’t get in.”

“Wait!” Pidge sounded a bit panicked. “Katie moved!”

Lance blinked. “I’m sorry, what now?”

“She’s moved,” Pidge repeated, “I came to port because her mother wanted them to move. She told me about you. I was supposed to wait for you and continue looking for Matt.”

“Oh. Well. I found him. Her brother, I mean.”

Pidge sat bolt upright. “You did?! You found him?!”

Lance flipped his tail with a smug, satisfied look on his face. “Yep. On a boat, couple of days from here. I’ve been following them- that’s why it took so long. I slowed them down by damaging their ship, but I don’t know how long it will take to repair it. We should get moving as quickly as possible.”

Hunk bit his lip. “But- Keith’s the only one who knows how to drive the boat. Properly, I mean. We could steer it a bit, but none of us know how to get the sails up or anything. And- I’m sorry, but I don’t think that we should wake him up. Besides the fact that he needs the rest, he shouldn’t be sailing his boat in the state he’s in. It’s not healthy. For us or for him.”

“I could push it,” Lance offered, “It might not be the fastest method, not as fast as sailing it normally would be, but it would get us moving until he wakes up and he can sail. I might be a bit tired, though…”

“I’m willing to try,” Pidge said firmly, “Hunk help me get the boat ready. Allura, you get Keith. Lance… thank you.”

He flipped his tail again. “Not a problem.”

They made their way back to the beach, and Allura set Keith gently on the deck of his boat. He stirred slightly, nose twitching as if he could smell the sea, but didn’t wake up.

“That blow to the head really did a number on him,” Pidge remarked softly as they began to shove the boat back into the water. “He stayed up three nights in a row, but now he probably wouldn’t wake up if I dumped him in the ocean.”

“Let’s not test that theory,” Hunk commented wryly as Allura nearly turned the boat over, “Gently.”

The boat slid ever-so-slowly into the sea, watched by an impatient Lance, who continuously yelled at them to get it moving. Then, the tide started to suck it out. Pidge yelped a minor expletive and splashed out after it. Hunk picked her up by the collar and threw her in, swimming out after her. “Come on!”
Pidge threw a rope out to the floundering Allura and Hunk. They clambered aboard, dripping water everywhere, and Lance swam up behind the boat, pushing it forward with his muscular tail. For better or for worse, they were back on the ocean, nothing but blue ahead of them.
I Was There but I Was Always Leaving


His home, burning, burning, screaming until his throat was hoarse as his father called his name.

Ships in the harbor, with great, black cannons that fired on his childhood home until there was nothing but rubble. Strange men cutting people to pieces, women, children- it didn’t matter. Blood, filling the streets.

His father, running into another burning building as a child inside cried. Pushing the frightened child out of a window and into their mother’s open arms before the whole house collapsed in a fiery inferno of death.

Screaming as the strange men scooped him up, their faces grotesque, like monsters out of storybooks, growing horns as they went, teeth getting sharper, hands turning to claws as a white hot iron, brighter than the sun it seemed approached the bare skin of his forearm as the claws held him-

Keith woke up with a gasp, sitting bolt upright. His right arm ached, and he held it close to his chest. Just a dream. Not even an accurate one. Pirates were just humans. Horrible humans to be sure, but not monsters with horns and claws. And, he remembered with a twinge of pain, the iron had been red, not white.

Hunk glanced at him. “Are you okay?”

Keith shook himself. “Fine.” He glanced around, and bolted upright. “Why are we on the ocean?! And- oh, no, why is the boat moving?!”

Hunk glanced shiftily at Pidge and Allura, who were conversing at the tiller, as if he wished they would save him. “Well. You were dead tired. And we didn’t want to wake you. So we started without you. It’s only been about a day,” he promised, “We haven’t even gone far because Lance gets really tired pushing the boat and has to take breaks.”

“Who? What? Why did we leave the island?!”

“Well, Lance found Katie’s brother, and we had to leave before he moved.”

“Who’s Lance?”

“Wow, am I really that forgettable?”

Keith whirled around. Behind him, chin and arms resting on the side of his boat, glancing lazily at him, was the mermaid. “You!”

“Me,” the mermaid agreed, “Hello.”

Keith rubbed his head. “What are you doing here?”

“Taking Pidge to her cousin. What are you doing here?”

“It’s my boat!”
Lance shrugged. “In that case, you sail it. I’m tired of pushing it around everywhere.”

He disappeared back into the water, splashing his tail and reappearing at the front of the boat. “Are you coming or not?”

Keith took himself back to the tiller, putting the sails up and grabbing the lines. He kept the boat sailing steadily after the blue-and-purple tail. A massive ship loomed in front of them, and Lance yelped, ducking out of sight underwater.

“Lance?!” Keith cursed. “Where are we supposed to go?! He was our guide! Flighty fish!” He glanced up at the massive ship, and shivered. It gave him a nasty feeling.

“Um… guys?” Hunk raised a hand nervously. “I- I think that’s a pirate ship.”

Keith squinted up at the mast and cursed when he saw black and white on the flag. “We- we’re just a fishing boat. Maybe they’ll leave us alone.”

A shout sounded on deck the ship, and suddenly, the whole deck was a flurry of motion.

“Or maybe not. Hold on tight!”

Keith manipulated the boat close to the ship, trying to stay out of range of the cannons. Then hooks with ropes started attaching to the side, thunking into the wood.

“Cut those,” he shouted, throwing his knife to Allura. She nodded determinedly and started sawing through the ropes, but they were already being yanked upwards, and the boat swung dangerously. Allura doggedly continued to cut, and only a few remained.

“Wait!”

Keith grabbed the knife from her as the boat started to swing back and forth. When they reached the height of the arc, he cut through the already-straining ropes, and their boat was thrown forward, splashing into the water, nearly throwing everyone overboard. Keith was the first to recover and he jammed his knife back into its sheath, taking control of the tiller again.

Something hissed into the water next to their boat, and he heard a boom that he remembered well from his earlier years.

“They’re shooting cannons at us?” Pidge yelled, “What is wrong with these guys?!”

Keith spotted an island and started to sail towards it. Hopefully they could find shelter there. His ears picked up a whistling noise, and his heart sank.

“Brace yourselves,” he shouted, and a cannonball slammed right into his boat. Pidge was thrown overboard from the shock, and he dove in after him, dragging the petite boy back towards the boat, which was steadily sinking because of the massive hole in its hull. Keith hauled Pidge to a bit of wreckage, getting him floating before swimming back towards the others.

Lance was already there, pushing a plank that Allura was clinging to towards the shore. Keith pushed a bigger piece of wreckage towards Hunk and seized his own, a massive section of the hull. Keith choked back tears as the last thing he had of Shiro sank into the ocean. He couldn’t afford to cry. The world didn’t have a place for his tears. He’d learned that the hard way.

Keith started kicking in an attempt to propel himself to shore. The pirates appeared to have left, probably figuring that they were toast and giving up on them. Lance returned and started to propel
Pidge towards the island. Keith spit out water as a massive wave washed over him and grimly kept going.

Lance was swimming towards them again, slower than before. “Get Hunk first,” Keith shouted over the roar of the waves, “Before you’re too tired!”

Lance nodded, but his face was exhausted as he slowly began to swim Hunk away. Keith spit out more water, waves coming over his head in buckets. Minutes dragged by, and Lance still didn’t return. Keith’s grip on the planks began to loosen and his paddling slowed. Every wave set him back farther than he’d come in the time since the last wave.

Where was Lance?! He hadn’t taken this long for any of the others! Was he really that tired? 

Wouldn’t you be if you’d just hauled three people to shore? he thought scoldingly. But the island had never looked farther away, and his energy had gone. Another massive wave crashed into him, and he slipped off of the board, too tired to hold on. The water sucked him down, filling his mouth with water, which he tried desperately not to swallow. He clawed his way to the surface and gasped in air, only for another wave to shove him back under. He wasn’t prepared, and he sucked in a mouthful of water. His lungs screamed for air, air that he couldn’t provide, and spots were dancing in front of his eyes.

Something latched onto Keith’s wrist, and he struggled weakly, trying to detangle himself from whatever was holding onto him, but it didn’t let go and he was dragged to the surface, still struggling. A voice shouted, barely discernable over the crash of the waves.

“-idiot! Trying to save your life!” Lance continued swimming, struggling to support him. “Don’t fight me!”

Keith was too busy coughing up water and gasping air into his lungs to answer. Lance hauled him back to his plank.

“Try to actually hold on this time! It’s hard enough swimming people to shore! Poseidon only knows how hard it is trying to hold your head above the water at the same time!”

They moved slowly, agonizingly slowly towards the shore, and Keith nearly fell off of the plank a few times as waves continued to crash over his head, but managed to hold on. Eventually he felt sand beneath his feet and he stumbled out of the surf onto the beach, coughing up water.

Allura, Pidge and Hunk all splashed out to meet him.

“We were so worried!” Hunk exclaimed, brown eyes wide with concern.


Allura waded out to waist height next to Lance. “Thank you,” she said sincerely, “for saving all of our lives.”

He nodded. “Sure. Happy to help. You know, I’ve been told a lot of bad things about humans and how if I see one in the ocean I should just leave them to die, but rescuing people is actually… kind of gratifying.” He flipped his tail. “Well. This is the island where the ship was. I- I guess it’s gone. I’m sorry.”

Pidge’s eyes filled with tears. “No…”

Lance sighed. “It’s my fault. I should’ve damaged the ship more. I thought I’d gotten it stuck here,
but I was wrong."

“It- it’s not your fault,” Pidge told him quietly. “It’s mine. If I’d tried harder- or maybe—”

“No.”

Pidge looked up at Keith in surprise. “What?”

His fists clenched, even as he shivered. “If- If I had trusted you to take the tiller during our trip to the island- if I’d gotten rest- I wouldn’t have been asleep for so long and Lance wouldn’t have had to push the ship. We could’ve moved faster. It's my fault. Not yours. Not Lance’s. It's my fault.”

“You couldn’t have known,” Hunk told him softly, “You did what you thought was right. No one is to blame. No one except for the stupid, oceans-blasted pirates.” He noted Keith’s shivering. “Come on. We’ve made a fire. You need to get warm.”

Keith allowed himself to be dragged to the fire, sighing as the warmth toned his shivering down. Pidge and Allura joined them a couple of minutes later.

“Lance says that he’s tired and needs to go home,” Allura told them, “He’ll be back in a few days to check on us.”

Hunk shivered. “Does this island seem… creepy to anyone else?”

Pidge glanced around at the shadowy figures of the trees. “Yeah… it’s almost like… like we’re being watched.
I Believe That I Was Never Breathing

Keith woke up with sand in his face and hair, stuck in all of the folds of his clothing. He got up and shook himself, spitting some of the grains out of his mouth. Bleargh. He hated the sand. He needed to get it off before the grittiness drove him insane. He glanced at the ocean and shivered. No. Not the ocean. There had to be a river somewhere on the island, based on the lush growth. He just had to find it.

Keith drew a picture of a wavy line in the sand, hoping that the others would understand where he was. He swatted a massive leafy plant to the side as he tromped through the forest. Vines seemed to be determined to choke him, like nature’s noose, condemning him for the brand on his arm.

He heard the sound of burbling water and ran towards it, coming to a cave with a small spring bubbling outside of a cave. He grinned to himself. At least they’d have fresh water, and he didn’t doubt that there were plenty of edible plants in the jungle area.

Keith rinsed the sand off of his face, dunking his whole head into the spring and scrubbing furiously at his scalp to get all of the sand out of his hair. He glanced at the cave, shaking water out of his hair. That was… strange. A cave. In the middle of nowhere.

He looked cautiously inside. A glowing lichen was growing on one of the walls, and Keith grabbed a rock, smearing the lichen all over it to create a makeshift lantern. Holding his glowing rock in front of him, he ventured into the cave.

Keith’s feet tapped softly on the ground, and he hesitated as it made echoes ahead of him.

“Hello!”

ello…

ello…

llo…

lo..

o…

Help…

Keith froze. “Hello?” he called again, more cautiously this time.

The echoes bounced back to him, and then,

“Help!”

Keith ran towards the voice.

This way, this way, the wind seemed to whistle, Hurry, this way! Keith hesitated at a fork, and the wind tugged him towards the left path.

“Hello? Are you still there?” the voice called, hopelessly.

“I’m coming!” Keith yelled back.
“No! Wait!” although the voice was distorted by the cave, the panic in it was clear. “Don’t come too fast! You’ll—”

A pit yawned at Keith’s feet and he backpedaled, waving his arms in an attempt to keep his balance. Pebbled skittered underneath his feet into the pit, clattering down.

“-fall into a giant pit,” the voice finished. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine!” Keith peered into the pit, holding his glowing rock in front of him. “This pit slopes a bit. Can’t you just get out?”

“Rushed in like you. But I fell in. I think- I think my ankle’s broken. And I can’t see anything except for the glow at the top of the pit.”

“Hold on, I’m coming down.”

Keith half-walked-half-slid down the slope to the injured person. “I’m just going to help you up, okay? Here—” He slid the other person’s arm over his shoulders, sticking his glowing rock in his mouth.

“Thank you,” the person murmured.

“Mm-hm,” Keith mumbled around the rock. He helped the person up the slope and they limped towards the daylight. Once they were back in the sun, Keith spit out the rock, running his tongue over his teeth and hoping that the cave lichen wasn’t poisonous.

“Keith?”

A chill ran down Keith’s spine, and he turned to take a good look at the person he’d rescued. His grip slackened, and the arm he’d been holding onto slid out of his grasp.

“Sh-Shiro?!”

Shiro let out a yelp of pain as he hit the ground, and Keith dropped down next to him.

“Shiro, I’m so sorry! Let me see your ankle- um- wait. How did you get here?!?”

“I- Well- I got kidnapped. By pirates.”

Keith closed his eyes. “I’m so sorry, Shiro. I- I’m sorry. It’s my fault. Me and my brand.”

Shiro chuckled mirthlessly. “No one could’ve known that I knew you, even if they knew about your brand. I don’t- I don’t completely know what happened. I was on the ship, and then- we were stuck. And- well- when they were getting ready to leave, I ran off and into the cave. They were chasing me, and I couldn’t see, and I fell right into the pit. Been there for about a day. Keith- they had claws! Claws, Keith! And sometimes horns and sharp teeth- I don’t know- it was like sometimes they were human and other times, they were like creatures out of a nightmare!”

Keith shivered. Shiro didn’t know about his nightmare. He couldn’t know. So how had he described them like they’d been in his dream?!

Shiro blinked, as if a sudden revelation had swept over him. “Hang on- how did you get here?”

A wave of guilt washed over Keith. “Um- well- we kind of wrecked your fishing boat.”

“What?”
“Well- Governor Sandas- she- she doesn’t want people knowing how close to port pirates are getting. And- she knew that I was getting close to the truth. Hunk heard her planning my unfortunate ‘disappearance’—”

“Who?”

“Uh- Well- I didn’t actually come alone.”

“Oh, no.”

Keith winced. “Hunk got caught listening and he and Pidge- Matt’s cousin, by the way, he looks a lot like Katie- they came to the docks and I had to bolt for it. Oh, and Allura came too, and we met Lance along the way.”

“Allura? Lance?”

Keith nodded. “Lance is the mermaid and Allura was a slave.”

“Was? Keith, did you assist a runaway?”

Keith crossed his arms. “So what if I did?” he asked defiantly.

“Nothing,” Shiro chuckled, “That’s perfectly alright.”

Keith looked at Shiro’s ankle helplessly. “I don’t know how to fix this.” He looked around and bit his lip. “I’m not completely sure I know how to get back to the beach, either.” He hauled Shiro up again, letting the older man use him as a crutch.

The wind tugged on his hair, and he followed the direction it took him.

This way, this way, this way.

“Um- Keith? Where are we going?”

“To the beach, I hope.”

“Why do you think it’s this way?”

This way, this way- no, you’re going the wrong way, turn this way.

Keith frowned. “Can’t- can’t you hear it?”

“Hear what?”

Just you, just you, this way!

Keith shook his head. “Never mind. It’s nothing. Look, there’s the beach.” The whispers died away as they left the jungle

They hobbled out onto the sand, Pidge running to greet them.

“Keith! Where have you been?! We’ve been looking for you!”

“Looking for me?”

“Yes! Looking for you! You just- Shiro?!”
Shiro blinked. “Katie?”

“No, I’m Pidge.”

“Katie.” Shiro said firmly, but his eyes were vaguely unfocused, as if his broken ankle were addling his mind and making thinking difficult.

Keith felt a surge of guilt for forgetting about his friend’s broken ankle. “Pidge, can you help me fix his ankle?”

Pidge shrugged. “No, but Allura probably can. C’mon, I’ll help you carry him the rest of the way.”

He took Shiro’s other arm and Shiro let himself be dragged to their beach fire where Allura and Hunk were waiting. Allura’s eyes narrowed.

“What. Is. That.” she spat, pointing at Shiro’s right forearm.

Shiro clutched the arm to his chest as if burned. Wait. Burned. Keith reached for his arm. “Shiro?”

Shiro let his arm be dragged out, and Keith hissed. The damning “P” burned on Shiro’s arm, a red inflamed scar. Shiro tugged it away.

“They told me that I’d never escape,” he said quietly.

“Fantastic,” Allura snapped, “We’re on an island with a convicted pirate!”

“No!” Keith argued hotly, “We’re not! He’s not a pirate!”

“Oh, really?” Allura asked sarcastically, “Then what, pray tell, is he doing with a blasted pirate mark blazing on his arm?!?”

“They do it to their prisoners!” Keith yelled, “It’s to keep them from running because if they’re caught with the mark, they’ll be hung! It’s not Shiro’s fault!”

“I have no sympathy for pirates,” Allura said coldly, “Nor for those who join them. Pirates killed my family and took me away to be a slave.” She glared at Shiro. “I’ll be damned if I help one.”

“Well, it’s a good thing that Shiro isn’t a pirate,” Hunk said cheerfully, “So you can help him!”

Allura tossed her head again, sticking her nose into the air. “I would rather die than live with that brand on my arm. Those who would do the opposite- I have nothing but contempt for them.”

Shiro flinched, but his voice was calm when he answered. “That’s your opinion. Have contempt for me if you want, but at least help me out as another human being.”


Keith flinched slightly, a motion that didn’t go unnoticed by Shiro. He glanced at Keith, his eyes full of an unasked question.

*You haven’t told her?*

Keith shot Shiro a look of his own.

*No. And heaven willing, she will never find out.*
Keith sighed when he slipped suddenly out of an uneasy sleep, stretching out. He glanced at Shiro’s spot, and sat up. Where was Shiro?! The older man wasn’t in his sleeping area, and Keith didn’t see him- until he spotted a small light on the horizon. He let out a sigh, and wandered towards it.

“Shi—” his voice died in his throat when he saw Pidge- no- the ever-present hat and pair of glasses were gone, leaving a ponytail and big brown eyes behind- this- this was Katie, he knew, had always been Katie but had been lying the whole time. Katie and Shiro, sitting around the smaller fire.

“I’m sorry, Katie,” Shiro was saying, “I couldn’t keep them safe. A ship came by and took Matt and Sam before we could escape. I’m sorry.”

And Katie was crying, and Keith moved away, ready to leave because he didn’t know how this worked, and what was he supposed to do because she was crying, and he couldn’t console her- how could he? He was the last person that should be comforting her, since he was hiding what he was.

His foot caught on a bit of driftwood, and he tripped, giving a little yelp as he pitched forward. Shiro and Katie- Pidge- what did she want him to call her?- looked towards him, and he froze, hoping that they wouldn’t notice him if he didn’t move.

No such luck. Shiro waved. “Keith! You gave us a heart attack!”

Keith walked cautiously to them, every muscle tensed to run. “I saw,” he said quietly to Pidge, who had tucked her hair back up in the hat and was wearing her glasses again, “You don’t have to hide, Katie.”

Pidge slowly pulled off the hat and glasses, and then, with a visible sigh of relief, unbuttoned her vest. Keith nodded to himself. So that had been how she was hiding her budding femininity.

“You won’t tell the others?” she asked anxiously, “Hunk knows, but Allura and Lance- neither of them are aware. And I’d prefer it to stay that way.”

“Why?”

Pidge toed the ground. “It’s just- I don’t know. When I was back there, wearing dresses and being ladies’ maid… that’s just so, so different from out here, on the ocean. Here is so much… freer.”

She fingered her vest with distaste. “I- I don’t like pretending to be a boy. But- well- it’s- I don’t know how to explain it- it just seems to me like Allura will be… harder on me. She just seems like- I don’t know. Like she’ll take it away from me somehow. The freedom. And Lance- well, I’m trying to leave the port behind. It wasn’t a good place for me, and it doesn’t hold the greatest of memories. That’s why I took the name Pidge. I wanted to just… separate from… all of that. And I don’t think that Lance will get that.” She looked up at him. “But- I think you do know what that’s like. Wanting to separate from your past.”

Keith clutched his right arm to his chest. Did she know? “Yeah,” he said softly in reply.

She glanced around. “And- I trusted Shiro because- I know that Shiro would know- uh- yeah.”

“You think that she was right?” Shiro asked startlingly, “Allura? Do you think that she was right? About- about the brand?”
“No!” Keith declared vehemently, “You didn’t have any choice, Shiro. It wasn’t your fault.” He tried to keep the desperation out of his voice- he didn’t want Shiro to know how badly he wanted it to be certifiably true. That it wasn’t his fault. That the six or seven years with pirates, watching them slaughter people, innocent people, weren’t his fault.

“Maybe you’re right. But- it’s- it’s a bad mark, Keith. I can’t just look at it and say, ‘well, this is okay because I didn’t want it’! It’s not something that I can just pretend doesn’t exist! It does exist, a damning mark on my arm that tells everyone that I’m the lowest form of life. It tells people that I deserve death. That I’m- that I’m not a part of society anymore.”

“No.”

Keith looked at Pidge, surprised that she had spoken up, surprised at how sharp her tone was.

Pidge’s small face was scrunched up, although Keith couldn’t be sure if it was from anger or suppressed tears.

“No,” she repeated, “I am not going to let that be a symbol of shame for you, Shiro. It will not be a mark that pushes you out. Matt and Dad probably have one too. It is not going to be something that people think is wrong.”

She reached down and pulled a stick out of the fire. Shiro started towards her. “Pidge, no, what are you—”

She gritted her teeth and pressed the burning stick to her right forearm, clearly holding back a scream as she traced a letter “P” on her arm. Then she threw the stick to the sand where it was extinguished with a hiss.

Shiro reached out towards her. “Katie, you shouldn’t have done that!”

She looked back at him, defiant, and arms crossed. “I don’t regret it! If Allura thinks that it’s shameful, she’ll just have to deal with two of us wearing it!” She whirled around to look at Keith with that same glare of defiance. “Don’t you reprimand me e- oh,” she finished in a small voice, “Okay.”

Keith had quietly pulled his shirtsleeve back to reveal the brand on his own arm. Once she’d seen it, he let his arm drop, and kept his gaze fixed firmly on the ground.

“Why?” Pidge whispered.

“Same situation as Shiro’s,” Keith said quietly, “Happened when I was young.”

“Oh.” Silence. Then, “Who all knows?”

“Everyone who knows is standing right here around this fire. And I’d like it to stay that way. I’ll keep your secret, but you have to keep mine.”

“Well,” Pidge replied firmly, “It’s not going to be a symbol of shame for you either.” She linked arms with the two of them, her newly branded skin hot against Keith’s. “No sir. You two aren’t going to bear this alone.”
I'm Bursting Like the 4th of July

Chapter Summary

Going to be updating on Mondays AND Thursdays now

“Pidge?” Hunk nudged Pidge’s bedroll. “Pidge?”

“Go away,” she grumbled, “My arm hurts.”

“Pidge, c’mon, wake up.”

“Regretting it?” Keith yawned sleepily from his own bedroll, where he was stretching and pulling on his boots.

“Nooooo,” she responded grumpily, “I don’t regret things. Regretting things is for the weaker minded and those with a less iron constitution than mine.” When Keith grinned and left, Pidge leaned in towards Hunk and whispered, “He knows.”

“He’d better,” Hunk whispered back, “I kicked him last night when you and Shiro went off on your own.”

Xxx

Keith wandered across the beach, letting the wind tug him idly towards Allura. She was quiet, letting the wind swirl around her with her eyes closed. “Are you okay?”

She opened her eyes, the wind dying down. “Oh! Hello! I was just-” she turned red.

Keith hesitated, then decided to go ahead. “Do- do you hear weird things in the wind sometimes?”

Yes, the wind howled in his ear.

Allura frowned. “Do you?”

Keith hesitated again. “I- I think so. I think- I think that the wind brought me to Shiro. And- and that it brought me back to the beach.”

Allura looked at him searchingly, then nodded. “Yes. I hear words in the wind.”

The wind picked up again. This way, this way.

Allura started to sprint, her long white hair flashing behind her. Surprised, Keith followed, although he fell behind his companion, who seemed to know exactly where she was going and never missed a step. He, in comparison, was tripped by nearly every root, and vines always seemed to curl around his neck.

“Wait up!”

Allura laughed wildly, not slowing in the slightest. She easily leaped a fallen tree that Keith had to climb over and then she disappeared from view.
“Allura? Allura?!”

Keith clambered over the log and sprinted forward. He didn’t see the moss-covered pit in front of him and fell straight in. He barely managed to let out a startled yelp before he splashed down in water. He floundered, trying to get some indication of his surroundings.

“Boo.”

Keith jumped, missing a stroke and swallowing some water. “Allura! Don’t do that!”

“There’s an underwater passage,” she told him, “It doesn’t look that long. Let’s see where it goes!”

Keith followed her, kicking through the tunnel. When he finally pushed through and was able to take a breath of air, he nearly sank in surprise. “That is… big,” he managed.

Allura nodded, swimming up to a massive shipwreck in awe and running a hand over it. “It’s… almost alive.”

Keith ducked down into the water to examine the damage. He surfaced soon, satisfied. “It’s not that bad. I bet we could fix it. Then maybe we could get off of this island.”

Allura laughed, the sound echoing oddly in the cavern. “Keith, it would take a huge crew to sail this thing. There are five of us, not including Lance.”

“We don’t need to get very far,” Keith argued, “We just need to get to civilization. Then it doesn’t matter.”

Allura looked around them. “Well. First we need to get out of this cave.”

Keith swam towards the opposite wall, and to his surprise, he slid right through into a little cove. He looked back. The wall he’d come through was a moss-covered rock. Or- no. Not a moss-covered rock. Just moss, hanging in a way that looked as though it simply covered a wall. Allura came out soon after, blinking as her eyes adjusted to the light.

“Do you really think that we could get away from here? And- do you really think that I could go anywhere?”

“Yes,” Keith answered firmly, “I do.”

Xxx

Shiro wiped a sheen of sweat from his forehead as he dragged a fallen tree towards the beach. Making boards to fit the hole in the shipwreck would be hard without tools, but not impossibly so. He grinned, watching Keith and Allura combined try to drag a tree of their own. Nearby, Pidge and Hunk were also teaming up, or, at least, Hunk was dragging it and Pidge was attempting to shove it from behind. At this rate, it would take several days just to get the fallen trees to the beach. His broken ankle wasn’t helping either.

He finished hauling his tree and lifted up the other end of Hunk’s tree. “Need some help?”

“How- are- you- so- strong?” Hunk panted, “You- just- did- a- whole- tree! By yourself!”

“Fishing and sailing will put muscles on you,” Keith remarked as they passed by, “That’s why all sailors are buff.”

Pidge wrinkled her nose. “Except you.”
“I’m stronger than your scrawny little frame!” Keith retorted.

“Less arguing, more tree hauling,” Allura puffed, “Or do you want to be stuck here?”

They finally got all of their trees down to the beach, but were all too tired (with the exception of Shiro) to do anything else with them. Shiro caught some fish, and they roasted them over a fire.

“Pidge?”

Pidge looked up at Allura. “Yes?”

“You’ve been holding your arm all day. Is it alright?”

Pidge nodded, eyes blazing as she dropped her arm to show Allura her self-inflicted brand. “It’s just fine.”

Allura stepped back. “Pidge! What is that?!”

“You know perfectly well what it is,” Pidge growled, “But it doesn’t mean what everyone thinks it means.”

“I can’t believe you! You branded a pirate mark on your arm!”

“I branded a mark that connects Shiro and I!” Pidge shot back hotly, “You might find it a symbol of shame, but I’m using it as a symbol of solidarity. And you can’t do anything about it!” She tossed her head, pulling her blanket over her head and ignoring Allura. She didn’t ignore the ex-slave’s conversation about her, though.

“Can you believe him?” Allura raged, “Branding a pirate mark on his arm?!”

“Yes,” Shiro said quietly but firmly, “I can.”

Sand skittered onto Pidge’s blanket as Allura whirled around. “You can’t take his side, can you, Keith?!”

“I can just fine. I’d had half a mind to do it myself.”

“Hunk?”

“Pidge will do what he wants. You can’t stop him, and I wouldn’t advise trying.”

“It was foolish.”

“It was brave,” Keith answered her, “And I wish I had the courage to do it.”

Pidge shook her head to herself. Keith did have the brand, but he wasn’t brave enough to face it. Maybe one day he would, but for now… for now she was the brave one. It was a new feeling, a nice one.

She heard the sound of a fire hissing out, and everyone crawling into their blankets. The wind howled, and Pidge shivered, pulling her blankets towards her. The wind on this island was strange. It almost seemed to have a personality sometimes.

Xxx

Keith blinked. “Okay, Shiro, is there something you’d like to tell us? Have you been hiding saws
and carpenter tools in your shirt or something?”

Shiro scratched his head, staring at the pile of neatly-stacked planks that had appeared overnight. “No. No, nope, no carpenter tools. Um- are these made from the trees we dragged out here?”

Keith shook his head. “This island is so weird.”

The rest of the day was spent dragging the planks into the caves and marking on them where they needed to be cut in order to patch up the holes.

Xxx

Hunk shuddered. “Okay, is anyone else feeling incredibly creeped out right now?”

Pidge nodded. “Yep. No, I’ve definitely got the creeps. That is not scientifically possible. Planks don’t just cut themselves into the exact shapes that we need. That’s- that’s not normal.” She glanced at Allura. “You’re not working some kind of magic, are you?”

Allura glared at her. “What is that supposed to mean?!”

Pidge held her hands up defensively. “I mean- I’ve known some slaves who- although I’ve also known some- ah- never mind.”

“You’ve known some very shady characters,” Hunk said curiously, “How do you—”

“Anyway,” Pidge interrupted, “We need to make some tar or something, right?”

xxx

Get up, get up.

Keith blinked blearily at his surroundings as the wind howled in his ears. “Huh?”

Up, up! I fixed it for you, but you need to leave now.

“Ngh- um- ‘m up- wha-?” All of Keith’s drowsiness disappeared and a profanity dropped from his lips when he saw a ship in the distance. “That’s not a friendly merchant ship, is it.” He nudged Shiro gently with one foot, and the older man was up in an instant. “We’ve got a problem.”

Shiro squinted at the distant ship. “Yeah, that’s the same one. What is it doing back here?”

“Didn’t know they hated us that much,” Keith grumbled, shaking Allura awake, “What did we do to them?”

“They’re pirates,” she hissed, moving to wake up Hunk, “They don’t need a reason.”

Hunk sighed. “I suppose we’re taking a midnight swim into the hidden cave?”

“Yeah,” Pidge yawned, quickly cramming her ponytail into her hat and buttoning her vest before Allura could see her, “Guess we are.”

“Ooo, I came to warn you, but looks like you’ve got it covered.”

Keith jumped as Lance’s voice came to him across the beach. “Where have you been?!”

“Uh.” Lance paused. “In the ocean? With my family? I’ve got one of those, you know. Brothers
and sisters and our self-proclaimed mother and father.”

“Self-proclaimed?” Pidge asked interestedly as she made her way across the beach towards the cove and the hidden cave.

“Well, yeah,” Lance answered, clearly swimming alongside their path, “I mean, we’re born out of sea foam, and my siblings and I are all from the same patch of sea foam. So, we’re related. But my parents- well, obviously they’re not my parents, because I was born from a patch of sea foam. But they were the ones who found us when we popped out of the sea foam, and they adopted us.”

“We are in the middle of a quiet evacuation,” Allura hissed at them.

“Right,” Pidge whispered, “We’ll talk about this later, I want to know everything.”

They were relatively quiet as they swam through moonlit water into the secret cave, the only sound a gentle splashing of flesh moving through water.

“Whoa,” Shiro said softly, his voice echoing in the cave, “What…”

Keith pushed through the mossy curtain and his eyes shot open. The ship was repaired. The hole was gone and the ship was floating. Sails, probably from a storage sector of the ship, were hung up on the mast. Written in golden letters that Keith hadn’t ever seen before was the name: Castle of Lions.

“How…” Pidge whispered, her words skipping back to her.

The wind swirled gently around them, ruffling their hair before going up to the sails and making them flutter. The five humans clambered up a rope hanging over the side, Lance waiting below in the water.

“This is- that’s not normal wind,” he called up to them, “Be careful.”

“He’s right. But I won’t hurt you.”

Keith whirled around. Standing behind them was a man. At least- he was a man at first glance. Then Keith realized that his body was made up of swirling wind, tightly constricted into a humanoid form.

“What…”

“He’s a spirit of the air,” Lance answered from below, “Attempting to get to heaven, if I’m not wrong. A princess of ours became one a while back, apparently. You know how she’s doing?”

“No idea, I’ve been trapped here for a while. We need to get moving. I fixed the ship and I stocked it up with what I could find.”

“Can’t we just wait the pirates out?” Hunk asked timidly.

Coran looked him right in the eye. “They’ll burn down the island to find you. It’s go or die. Do you want to die?”
Coran, as it turned out, could pilot the ship on his own. He could function as a full crew. Keith and the others, in the meantime, decided to explore, leaving Lance to swim in the wake of their ship.

Keith heard Pidge laugh. “Wow, it’s like this ship is a floating armory!”

He followed her voice and found her in a room with a heavy lock that was sitting on the floor. Inside was, as Pidge had stated, a floating armory. Something whizzed by his head, and a grappling hook embedded in the wall behind him. A startled Pidge was on the other end of the hook, which had shot out from a little device in her hand.

“You trying to kill me?”

“Sorry!” She pressed a button on the little device. “This should reel it i- eep!” The metal rope attached to the hook dragged her forward to the hook, and Keith flattened himself to avoid getting knocked over by her flying body.

“Watch it!”

“Sorry!” she yelped again, trying desperately to yank the hook out of the wall.

Across the room, Hunk was examining a crossbow that self-reloaded, playing with the mechanisms. Thankfully, no crossbow bolts joined Pidge in the wall.

Shiro slipped a pair of steel knuckles on his fists, and punched his right fist into a wooden post. There was a crunching noise, and when he removed his hand, the post was cracked. Shiro gave the steel knuckles a small, contented smile.

Keith regarded the knuckles curiously. “You’re not going to choose something a little more… I don’t know, weapon-y?”

Shiro shook his head. “I don’t want to kill anyone. I’m just a simple fisherman who doesn’t want to hurt anyone, just defend myself. I’ll take these. And what about you? Anything strike your fancy?”

Keith glanced around, instinctively drawn towards one corner, where dust was collecting.

“Uh, hate to break it to you Keith, but if there’s dust back there, there’s probably nothing useful.”

Keith ignored Shiro and picked up a sword. It wasn’t fancy- not like the jewel-encrusted cutlasses in other places. It was a simple steel broadsword, with the word instinct carved on the pommel. Keith blew dust off of the sheath and buckled it to his belt. Another small sheath hung off of the other side with a knife inside.

Shiro laughed. “You have enough weapons there?”

“You can never have enough weapons when it comes to pirates,” Keith said seriously.

Shiro gave him a smile that was tired, but understanding.

“I agree,” Allura said sharply from the door. She strode in, giving Keith’s sword an approving look. “The more pirates dead, the better.”

Keith and Shiro both shifted uncomfortably, and even Pidge looked a bit scared. Allura marched
across the room, picking up a wicked looking whip.

“I like this.” Her lip twisted in a smile. “Ironic, me wielding this whip, don’t you think?”

No one answered her. She looked scary, standing there with her whip. She seemed… unreal. Terrifying.

Coran flickered into being in front of them. “Oh! Hello! Well! We have a bit of a problem- ah-well- the pirates- they’ve tracked us down. I’m tied to this ship- I can’t make their ship blow away-and- well- they’re trying to get on board. Could use a little help.”

The five of them raced towards the deck, where grappling hooks were lodging into their ship. Keith started cutting them, frantically trying to remove the lines from the wood.

“Get down!” Shiro roared, pushing down on Keith’s shoulders as bullets hissed over their heads. “Be careful!”

Keith nodded, keeping the wooden railing in-between himself and the bullets, and reaching through to slice the ropes. There was a puff of smoke and a \textit{boom}, and Keith watched a cannonball race towards him. He braced himself, hoping it wouldn’t hurt much when he died.

But the cannonball never hit him. He opened his eyes to see it floating in front of him, held back by an extremely strong wind. Coran appeared as the wind disappeared and the cannonball dropped. “Keep cutting those lines!”

Keith did, but more just kept coming and he couldn’t cut them all. “Get back,” he shouted to the others, “Get ready to fight!”

Once he stopped cutting the lines, the ships were drawn closer and closer to each other, finally stopping within jumping distance. And jumping began, pirates swarming onto the \textit{Castle of Lions}, one of them brandishing his pistol and the rest with their hands on weapons.

“Surrender and—” the leader caught sight of Shiro. “You!” He looked around at all of them, his eyes alighting on Allura’s hair. “And you! We killed you! We sank your ship!”

“I lived,” Allura said grimly, “But I can tell you that if you don’t get back on your ship and leave, you won’t live.”

The pirate took a step back, but then seemed to remember that there were a lot more people on his side than on Allura’s.

“Keith, Pidge, cut the lines,” Shiro murmured, “We’ll take care of them, but we need to get the ship away and out of their cannon range.”

Keith nodded, and then Shiro gave a fierce war cry, and all of hell broke loose. Keith ran for the railing, sliding under sword strokes and wriggling through the railing. He clung to one of the ropes tying the two ships, cutting the rope behind him and quickly jumping to the next rope, knife in his teeth, to repeat the process.

A pirate was heaved overboard by Shiro, and he was quickly attacked in the water by Lance, who bit him with his scary, shark-like teeth and shoved him under his own ship. Keith shuddered and made a silent promise to himself never to make the merman mad.

The ship was straining against the ropes now, and Keith clambered back on board. Then he heard a scream from Pidge.
“Keith!”

He ran towards her, offering her his hands to pull her back on board, but she shook her head. “No, it’s Lance!”

Keith looked down into the water and saw a harpoon stuck in the mermaid’s tail, dragging him towards the pirate ship and staining the water red.

“I can’t save him, I’m too small!” Pidge yelped.

Keith put his knife back in-between his teeth, and grabbed one of the lines that had been cut, sliding down as close to the water as he could before letting go and splashing into the waves. He yelped, nearly dropping his knife, as the icy cold shock hit him. He recovered quickly, swimming towards Lance, who was thrashing like a fish on a line. He barely dodged a flail of Lance’s tail and removed his knife from his mouth. “Stop it! You’re going to drown me!”

Lance calmed down somewhat, but the harpoon was still dragging him, and Keith grabbed ahold of the metal and started sawing at the rope. It finally snapped, and they both splashed away.

“My tail,” Lance hissed, “The harpoon—”

“Don’t touch it,” Keith ordered, handing the mermaid his knife, “Here, hold this.” He looped one arm around Lance’s chest and swam backwards, trying awkwardly to move through the waves with only one arm. Waves crashed over his head, and he spit out water. Pidge was dangling a rope over the edge of the ship, and he tied it around Lance’s waist, tugging on it to let her know that the merman was secure. Moments later, another rope dropped down, and Keith spotted Allura, bracing herself and pulling him up. Shiro was fighting off the pirates on his own.

The final lines connecting the ships snapped, and they immediately began to sail away, Coran finally free to move the ship. Pidge, Hunk and Allura moved to help Shiro with the remaining pirates, and Keith started to follow them, pushing his wet bangs out of his face.

He hadn’t been paying attention to guns. Bullets had been flying, but the swaying of the ropes he’d been clinging to had made him a hard target to hit.

Someone punched him in the back, hard, and their fist must be on fire, or it wouldn’t be that hot. He fell to the ground, rolling over to see who had hit him. No one was there, and immediately hot pain blazed through his back.

I’ve been shot, he thought, insanely calmly, and then- I’ve been shot! He started to shake, and his lungs were tight- he couldn’t breathe, air wasn’t coming in, he was going to suffocate, and no one was noticing, couldn’t they see him crumpled on the deck, or was he invisible or maybe- maybe even already dead?!

His eyes moved frantically to each of his friends, but the only one who could see him was Lance, who was on his level, not able to move easily on the deck. Lance’s blue eyes locked onto his.

“Keith. Breathe,” he ordered.

Didn’t Lance understand that he couldn’t breathe, that breathing wasn’t happening and that was the problem?!

Lance dragged himself over on his arms, huffing and puffing. “I am bleeding,” he muttered, “and am in a lot of pain, and you are making me drag myself across a splinter-y deck. I swear I really hate you.”
He pressed down on Keith’s chest, and any air he had left whooshed out of him. He stared at Lance in shock and betrayal, and then his lungs finally took action for him and sucked in air. Which he then used to scream, because it hurt so much and why did it hurt so much, and it was like his whole back was on fire!

Shiro looked up when Keith screamed, running to his friend and leaving the few remaining pirates to Coran, who cheerfully dumped them overboard. “Keith, Keith, talk to me, buddy.”

Keith’s eyes locked onto Shiro’s face desperately. “Sh’ro,” he slurred, “Ngh- Sh’ro- h-hurts- Sh’ro-hurts—”

“I know, I know. Keith, can you tell me where you got shot?”

“In- back, I think—”

“Keith, I’m going to turn you over. It’s going to hurt,” Shiro warned. He quickly flipped his friend onto his stomach, wincing when he let out a strangled screaming noise.

“I can take out the bullet,” Allura volunteered, kneeling next to Shiro, “I’ve removed bullets before. I need his shirt off, though, it’ll just get in my way.”

Keith’s brand and his desire to keep it secret flashed through Shiro’s head, and he made a noise of disagreement, slicing the back of his friend’s shirt open. “No time, and it’ll just hurt him.”

Allura nodded, and a pair of tweezers as well as a small surgical knife clattered to the deck of the ship, carried there by Coran. “Hold him down,” Allura ordered, “He won’t like this.”

“Won’t like this” was an understatement. Keith screamed, swore, and struggled violently against Shiro’s grip, before eventually passing out. Allura finally managed to extract the bullet from his back, shaking blood off of her hands with a sigh and wrapping up Keith’s back with bandages.

“It’s all up to him, whether he survives,” she said softly, “I’ve done all I can.” She moved on to Lance, instructing Hunk to help her while she removed the harpoon.

“No going in the ocean,” she ordered him, “You’ll bleed out. You have to stay on the ship until your tail has healed.”

He sighed. “Fine. But I still have to stay wet, or I’ll dry out and maybe even turn into sea foam.”

“Allura?” Shiro questioned, “Um- Is this normal?” He was holding up the bullet, which was a strange red material. Allura had dismissed it as Keith’s blood staining the bullet, but on closer inspection…

“Is this… coral?”

She handed it to Lance, who threw it down to the deck with a curse. “Don’t touch that stuff! That’s coral, yeah. The poisonous kind.” He glanced at Allura, whose face had whitened. “Oh, it’ll just cause a bit of a rash if it touches your skin for too long. It’s when it gets into- into your bloodstream that it- that it becomes dangerous.”

“Such as when you get shot by it?” Pidge asked sarcastically, examining the area around Keith’s wound.

Lance winced. “Um. Yes. Perhaps. I mean. Maybe it won’t be bad? Sometimes people don’t react to it- we’ll just have to wait and see.” He gave Keith a worried look. “I- I’m sure he’ll be fine.”
Shiro glanced at Keith, who hadn’t moved since he’d put him in a bed. Shiro was getting worried; even when Keith had sprained his wrist he’d been lively and pugnacious. This silence and always sleeping, never seeming to get any better…

Shiro peeled off Keith’s shirt, keeping the brand hidden, just in case Allura or Hunk walked in, and undid the bandages around Keith’s back. He dropped his friend in shock. Bloodred lines, the same color as the coral, were spreading in Keith’s back, under the skin. Shiro prodded one gently, and it burst, spraying him with blood. He let out an oath and stumbled back, wiping blood off of his face. He steeled himself to look at the bandages and saw the fresh blotches of red from burst blood patches. Near the bullet wound itself, the blood blotches were turning black.

“Allura! I need you! And Lance!”

Allura came almost immediately, princess-carrying Lance. “What?!” she dropped Lance. “By the ancients- what’s that?!?”

“That’s the coral’s effect,” Lance told her grimly, “It makes its own veins, essentially, and they’re incredibly sensitive. They burst at the slightest provocation. And once the veins are made, the poison is sent through them. That’s the black stuff. It’ll kill him unless we get a certain plant.”

“What kind of plant?” Allura demanded.

“It only grows deep underwater,” Lance warned her, “It’s in really small caves, so we’d need someone small to get it.”

“That’d be me.”

Allura whirled around to face Pidge. “What?”

“If we can figure out a way to get me down there, I’ll get it.”

“Yes, but Lance said that it only grows deep underwater. You won’t be able to breathe! And the pressure will crush you!”

Lance sighed. “Oooo, boy, going to regret this. Okay, someone poke me in the harpoon wound.”

Allura gaped at him. “What?!”

Pidge immediately poked him right in the tail, and his eyes watered. “Ah! That stings!” he blinked out one tear, and it crystalized, turning into a pearl as it hit the deck. Lance winced. “Geeze…”

Pidge went to take the pearl, but Lance slapped his hand away. “No! Don’t touch that, not yet!”

He blinked at him. “Why not?”

Lance sighed. “Well, first of all, I’m not supposed to give those to humans. So, yeah, there’s that. But second- um- well- mermaid tears, when cried on land, they turn into pearls, yeah? And if a human picks one up- he or she temporarily gains mermaid powers. They get gills, except, uh, they’ll be different than mine. I have lungs for breathing on land, and then oxygen diffuses into my blood through my gills in the water. For you, though, the gills will be on your ribcage so that the oxygen can go right to your lungs, yeah? Uh- just try not to breathe in through your mouth too
much. You only get a tail once you’re in the water.”

Allura crossed her arms. “No. I refuse to let you go, Pidge. You’ll be eaten alive out there. I’ll go.”

“You won’t fit to get the plant,” Pidge argued, “I’m the most logical choice!”

“How about we poke Lance again and get another tear?” Shiro piped up, “Uh- only if you want to, Lance.”

Lance shook his head. “One mermaid can only have one ability-giving pearl at a time. It’s horribly selective.”

“Pidge isn’t going,” Allura said firmly, “and that’s final. He’s too small.”


“Take off the vest,” he ordered, “you need space to mutate.”

Pidge winced, and unbuttoned the vest. “Might as well,” he muttered, and pulled off his hat. A ponytail flowed out from it, and Lance gaped, glancing at Pidge’s body shape and then at the ponytail.

“You- you’re not a man,” he stuttered.

“Nope,” Pidge agreed with a wince, holding her ribs, “I’m sure not.”

“You *are* Katie!”

“Uh-huh,” she agreed dumbly, “Why does this *hurt so much*?!?”

“You’re getting a set of gills. Humans aren’t really… meant to have gills. It would be better if you were in the water, but…” Lance blushed a horrible red. “Um. That’s when the tail appears. And the other fins, it’s not just the tail, but that’s- that’s the main one.”

Pidge regarded him curiously. “So I get in the water. What’s the big deal?”

Lance coughed, still bright red. “Um. Well. It fuses your legs into a tail. So. Um. You can’t- you can’t be wearing… pants.”

Pidge snickered. “Coran?”

Coran appeared in a whirl of blue. “Yes?”

“Are there any skirts on board?”

“And! Of course! Come along, I’ll show you.”

Pidge followed Coran to a room with rich dresses and little skirts.

“When I was a young spirit of air, first tied to this ship, we had several women on board,” Coran chattered, “None of that ‘women on a ship are bad luck’ nonsense. Ah, those were good days. We were very close with the mermaids and men, and mermaid’s tears were common gifts, given so that friends could visit the underwater realms. And, of course, the mermaids could walk on land.”

“They could?”
“Mmm. Some. Their tails separated into legs when they were dry, and then turned back into tails when wet.” Coran chuckled. “I heard of a few escapades where a mermaid with legs would get caught in a rainstorm, and be unable to move. But why am I talking on? We need to get you the old mermaid-visit clothing.”

A long, billowy skirt settled next to Pidge, with a top that-

“This will barely cover my chest! It leaves most of my ribs uncovered!”

Coran nodded. “Yes.”

“But- But that’s- well, it’s indecent!”

Coran chuckled. “My dear girl, it’s not ‘indecent’ down in the ocean where you need those gills free. Most don’t even wear clothes down there. You’ll ditch the skirt once your tail forms so that your tail will be free. Excellent choice with the ponytail, though. It’ll keep your ears free to hear the whales and other creatures calls so you can stay out of their way. Many mermaids and men give up some of their hearing in favor of long, showy hair.”

“This is ridiculous,” Pidge grumbled, but changed into the outfit, lifting up the material of the skirt to keep from tripping over it.

Coran gave her a small necklace, a locket with a screw-off bottom. “This will hold the pearl. You don’t want to lose it, or you’ll only have a few hours before you are once again unable to breathe underwater and stand the pressure. Best of luck. I’ll keep an eye on the young man while you’re gone, never fear. But, ah, it would still be wise to hurry. That coral… it’s dangerous stuff. I’d just like to know how those pirates got their hands on it.”

“I don’t know. But I need to get moving, or Keith…” Pidge bit her lip, unwilling to finish the sentence. Keith would be fine. She just had to believe it. “Bye.”

She ran up deck, jumping overboard into the water. Almost instantly, it was like she couldn’t move her legs apart. They were stuck together, and something was happening to her feet- they were spreading out into fins, and little clown-fish-like extra flashy fins were growing quickly out of the tail.

“This isn’t possible. This is literally, scientifically impossible,” Pidge muttered, “How is this happening?!”

“Magic,” Lance called from the deck.

Pidge glanced down at herself, wriggling out of her skirt as little fins began to sprout behind her ears, and she felt an inner eyelid to protect her eyes from the water slide into place over her eyeball. Her tail was a beautiful, vibrant green. She gasped and laughed in delight, feeling it.

“Swim down deep,” Lance called, “The plant will be bloodred like the coral was, but a soft leaf. It’ll make you feel calm just touching it.”

Pidge nodded. “Got it! How will I find you again?”

“Coran will keep track of you,” Shiro called, “Just go!”

Pidge nodded and ducked underwater. She instinctively knew what to do, and her tail moved smoothly, the dorsal fin on the back of her tail directing her. The gills on her ribcage fluttered, and she didn’t feel the need to breathe.
As she got deeper, a school of colorful fish swirled around her, apparently unafraid. She touched one in wonder and the whole school flitted away. She gave chase, always going after those bright colors until they were out of sight.

As she sighed in disappointment, quickly spitting out water, something nudged her. She spun neatly in the water, and saw a dolphin. It nudged her again, and she began to swim away.

*Sorry,* she thought at it, *I’ve wasted enough time already. I need to get moving.*

*Come with me!*

Pidge blinked her outer eyelids in shock. Had that dolphin just… spoken to her?

*Yes.* *Come and play!*

*I can’t,* she thought regretfully, *I have to save my friend.*

*Friend?*

*No, different friend. Not you, I’m sorry.*

*Taras will help you!*

*Sorry? Who’s Taras?*

*Me! I will help you! Come, come, come.*

Pidge pictured the plant that she wanted. *I need this. Can you help me find it?*

*Yes, yes! Very delicious plant! I will share with you! And your friend! Is he also a strange mermaid like you?*

*No. Keith’s human.* Pidge felt tears well up in her eyes, and she let them seep pass her inner eyelid. *And he’s hurt, really bad.*

*Did a shark attack him?*

*No. Another human.*

*Strange.* *Come, come, I will find you a plant!*

Pidge swam after Taras, who was easily distracted and kept darting off to chase a fish, or to bring Pidge a shiny rock from the ocean floor. He darted off again, this time returning with a bag, proudly holding the strap in his mouth. Pidge grabbed it out of his mouth.

*Where did you find this?!*

*On the ocean floor. Do you like it?*

Pidge opened the bag with shaking hands and fingered the stitching inside. The thread formed two words: “*Matt Holt.*” *Yes. I do like it. Thank you, Taras.*

*Good, good! You can put your rocks in it!*

Pidge smiled and nodded, and then Taras was off again, flitting about. He chittered again for her to come, and she laughed, following him into a cave that she had to really squeeze herself to get
through. Her eyes started to glow faintly, and she gasped. The walls were alive with algae that was
grown in patterns, in pictures. There was a mermaid, there a whale, and then, a pod of dolphins.

*My pod*, Taras said sadly, *My friends. I was separated from them in a whale passing. But it’s okay! I have a new friend!* He nosed Pidge happily and kept swimming.

The emerged in another cave, and Pidge spotted the plant. *Yes!*

She swam towards it, not minding where she looked. Out of a cranny, two eels slid out, swimming
in circles around her.

*Uh-oh, Taras thought at her, Don’t move. Just stay still and you’ll be okay.*

Pidge froze, floating in place. The eels slid around her, eyes glinting eerily. One of them brushed
her, and she shuddered away reflexively. The eel lunged for her, snapping, but Taras grabbed it by
the tail, yanking it back.

*Get the plant!*

Pidge swam up. She was almost there! Maybe a minute away! Then a cry of pain came to her from
Taras, and she looked down, hesitating. More eels were coming out of nooks and crannies; she
doubted that she would be able to get back up here.

Another noise from Taras made her mind up for her. Keith would have to wait; he had time. Taras
did not. Pidge dove down, whacking the eels with her rock-filled bag. She grabbed Taras, wrapping
her arms around his two side fins and propelling them both forward with her tail. She pushed Taras
through the cave entrance and started to squeeze herself through after.

Halfway through, she got stuck. She tugged, feeling a thrill of panic and pain shoot through her as
an eel sank its little teeth into her tail, and she gave one last tug. Her tail pulled three, and she
bashed the eel against a rock. The eels shrieked, angry to be deprived of a meal, but Pidge was
faster than they were. Taras was bleeding, was bleeding badly, so she gradually brought him back
up, emerging onto a beach.

“Hold on,” she told him frantically out loud, “Just hold on!”

Pidge dove back into the ocean and snatched at seaweed, grabbing giant clumps of it and bringing
it back up, packing it tightly against Taras’ wounds. “You’re going to be okay. You’re going to be
fine, got it? You’re going to be- why are you glowing, what is *happening*?!?”

Taras was glowing nearly too bright to look at, and when the glow faded, he was a young man,
clothed in a grey shirt and pants. Pidge blinked.

“What. What the. How?!”

“I was cursed,” Taras said sadly, “Cursed to live out my life as a dolphin unless a human should
sacrifice something that they held dear in order to save me.”

“Sacrificed what now?”

“I’m sorry,” Taras told her, “I know you cared about your friend.”

“W-wait- what- what are you talking about?”

“You gave up your chance to save your friend when you saved me instead. That plant is rare; I
don’t think you can find it many places, and if I’ve turned human it means that you won’t have enough time to get any more.”

“Wh-what are you saying?”

Taras sighed, bowing his head. “I’m sorry, Pidge. Keith is going to die.”

(Quick note: s8 isn't going to affect this work, as the plot and ending are already determined, so there will be no spoilers. However, I'm planning on binge-watching the season tomorrow [and making a reaction video], so if you want to scream about it in the comments with me, feel free.)
“How is he?”

Shiro sighed, rubbing his forehead blearily. It had been three days since Pidge had left, and they hadn’t seen her since. “Not great,” he said in answer to Allura’s question, “He’s sprouted another blood vein today, and the poison is moving fast. It just seems like…”

“Like every time we pop a blood vein, two more show up,” Allura finished, “I know. Lance says that there’s nothing else we do- that he needs that plant, or he won’t survive. Destroying the blood veins only slows down the poison, not stop it completely.”

“How is Lance?”

“There’s good news there, at least. The harpoon wound is sealing up nicely. He’ll be able to swim again soon, but…”

“But not in time to save Keith.”

Allura nodded. “Exactly.” She looked down at Keith, who was getting paler every day. Her face hardened. “I knew that I should’ve gone! The ocean is dangerous- Pidge could be injured right now for all we know- even dead! And Keith—” her voice cracked. “Keith could follow soon.”

“What if- there might be another option. It’s not one that I like, but- sometimes, if someone gets bitten by a water snake while at sea, we have to cut out the venom. We might be able to do that.”

Allura sighed, looking bleakly down at Keith. “We’ll give Pidge two more days. Then- then we might have to.”

Xxx

“Pidge?”

Pidge didn’t answer Taras. She continued to sit, dangling her legs over the cliffside and staring out at the ocean.

T aras sighed and sat next to her. “Pidge, I’m sorry, but I don’t think that they can find you.”

“Coran said that he’d keep an eye on me,” Pidge said stubbornly, “They’ll come.”

“Pidge—”

“Don’t take that tone of voice with me! Keith is dying, maybe even already dead. I don’t want to talk to you.”

“I’m sorry, Pidge,” Taras sighed.

“For what?” she snapped.

“For this.”

T aras snatched the mermaid tear off of Pidge’s neck and tied it around his own. It was only then that she realized he was topless, and was only wearing a blanket wrapped around his waist.
“Taras—”

Taras dove into the ocean, his legs fusing into a storm-grey tail the instant he hit the water.

“TARAS, NO!” Pidge screamed, “YOU DON’T KNOW HOW LONG IT’LL LAST!”

“Hopefully long enough to save Keith,” Taras called gravely, and disappeared into the ocean.

Xxx

Shiro opened the door to Keith’s room. Allura was crying inside, and his heart stopped. “Is he—”

“His heart stopped for a second,” Allura sobbed, “His pulse just stopped and I thought- I thought- I can’t lose anyone else! I can’t!” She flung herself at him, sobbing, and he caught her, stroking her white hair gently.

“Shhh, it’s okay. It’s oookay.”

“I’m sorry,” Allura sobbed, “I’m sorry I was horrible to you! I’m sorry that I didn’t want to help you! You’re not a coward, and- please forgive me!”

“It’s okay,” Shiro soothed, “I don’t blame you. You’ve had it rough.”

“I’m just- I’m so, so worried! Keith was the only one who helped me when I was in trouble, and now that his life is in danger- I’m powerless to save him!”

Keith shifted on the bed. “’llura?”

Allura shot towards his side. “Keith?”

His eyes blearily opened. “don’t- cry,” he murmured stiltedly, “’s okay.” His fingers clumsily brushed a tear off of her cheek. “I’m fine.”

Shiro smiled, a strained smile. “This is- this is how he was when he was delirious from fever. But- it was also how he was when he was getting better. More openly caring. More willing to initiate contact. Maybe- maybe he’s fighting off the poison on his own.”

“Shiro?”

Shiro knelt next to Keith, tousling his hair gently. “I’m right here, bud. I’m right here.”

“Mm- Shiro- I had a weird dream. Katie was on a cliff, crying.”

“Yeah?”

Keith nodded, wincing as he did so. “There was a mermaid.” His brow crinkled. “Not Lance. He was fighting off eels.”

“Lance was fighting off eels?”

Keith frowned, his unfocused eyes squinting. “No, the other mermaid was. How can Lance fight off eels? His tail is hurt.”

Shiro smiled gently. “Right. Of course. Silly me.” He tousled Keith’s hair again. “You get some rest, okay? You need to save up your energy.”
“Yessir,” Keith slurred, eyes drifting back shut.

Shiro sighed, walking back up deck. “Lance? Keith is talking- he woke up and had a mostly-coherent conversation with us. That’s good, right?”

Lance’s face paled. “No. No, that’s not good. That’s very, very bad. That means- it means that the poison is almost done. He’ll wake up from his coma. He’ll be okay, he’ll engage in conversation or he’ll eat something. And then- then he’ll start convulsing. The poison will seep into his lungs. If he had gills, the poison would block them. His heart will go into overdrive once the poison reaches it, quickly using up whatever oxygen he has left in his bloodstream. And then- then he’ll die. He’ll choke on poison.”

“How long does he have?”

“At most? Five days. At least? Just one.”

Xxx

Taras paused outside of the cave, his gills fluttering anxiously. His tail ached, as if the eel bites from before had returned. A pair of glinting eyes stared at him from the cave, and he punched an eel in the snout before cramming his body through the hole and into the cave. Pidge’s friend might die because of him. He would do whatever it took to prevent that from happening.

Xxx

“SHIRO!”

Shiro bolted into Keith’s room at Hunk’s terrified shout. Keith was convulsing on the bed, gasping.

“No,” Shiro whispered, “no, no, no, no!”

Allura raced into the room, her white hair flying behind her. “Shiro, get up on deck quick, there’s a merman! He’s- he’s got Pidge’s necklace.”

Shiro hesitated, torn between the convulsing Keith and the news Allura had told him. “Don’t let him choke on his own tongue,” he finally ordered Hunk, “Allura and I will be right back.”

He dashed out on deck, where Lance was leaning over the railing. “I don’t know you,” Lance called, “And you’re wearing a mermaid tear! What happened to the girl who was wearing it?”

“Pidge is fine,” the other merman called back, “She’s safe.” He held something up. “I’ve got something she wanted to get to you!”

Lance squinted over the railing, then gasped. “Coran, get him up! Quick, quick, quick!”

The air spirit swirled around the merman, depositing him gently on deck. In the exhausted merman’s hand was a red plant. Lance seized it and tore it to shreds.

“Coran, I need you to boil water with this in it,” he ordered, holding up the plant, “Shiro, get a tub and put Keith in it. Allura, I need you to get a cup. Go, go, go!”

Coran swirled around a vortex of water with the plant inside, using hot air to heat the water. Allura returned, handed Lance the cup, and ran back down belowdecks to help Shiro. The other merman slumped to the deck, bleeding from multiple bite wounds.
“Coran, put some of the water in the cup. I need you to cool off the rest of it so that it’s hot, but not boiling. We don’t want to cook Keith. You’ll need to put the water into the tub.”

Shiro and Allura moved on deck, carrying the tub between them. Hunk followed carrying Keith, and he gently placed the convulsing boy in the wooden tub.

“He needs his wound to be exposed, or it won’t work,” Lance said irritably.

Shiro glanced at Allura, sighed, and forced Keith’s shirt over his head. Allura stiffened.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Shiro told her in a and-that’s-final tone.

Allura nodded, and Coran dumped the water he had into the tub. It filled fast, and Keith’s convulsions quieted a bit, the water around him slowly turning black as the poison was drawn out. Then Keith started to choke, and Lance’s face hardened.

“Right, then. Shiro, Allura, I need you to hold him down. This isn’t going to be pretty. It’s not going to be nice, and it’s going to look unnatural, but I need you to trust me.”

They both nodded and each gripped one of Keith’s arms. Lance took a deep breath and moved one hand up. The water in the cup moved with it. Lance directed it towards Keith’s face, where it covered his nose and mouth. Keith was frantically trying to suck in air, and inhaled the water. He convulsed, as if trying to expel the water, but was unable to as Lance moved his hands to force it down Keith’s windpipe.

“You’re going to drown him!” Allura shouted.

“I know what I’m doing, Allura! Please, trust me!”

Keith went unnaturally still, and Allura let out a sob. “You’ve killed him!”

“Wait a second,” Lance snapped, “The water is absorbing the poison in his lungs.” He flicked his wrist, and black water shot out of Keith’s mouth and nose, flying into the ocean. Lance slumped to the deck, exhausted, as Keith sat bolt upright, coughing and spluttering.

Hunk knelt next to Lance. “Is it done?”

“He needs to drink the rest of the tea, or the poison will respawn in his heart. Uh- he has a bit of a risk of pneumonia because he’s- y’know- human- but- yeah- that’s it.”

“You can control water!”

“Only a little bit. And it’s really, really tiring. I’m going to sleep now. Wake me up never.”

Hunk shook his head as Lance closed his eyes and moved towards the other merman. “Hey, are you okay?”

He winced. “Nothing that time won’t heal.”

“Um… I’m Hunk. What’s your name?”

“Taras. You are Pidge’s friend?”

“Yes. Is she okay?”

“She’s fine. She misses all of you, and I’ll be happy to lead you to her. I owed her a large debt, but
I think I’ve fulfilled it. A life for a life.”

Hunk nodded, and left him to go back to Keith, who Allura and Shiro were arguing about.

“You knew!” Allura shouted, “You knew that he was one of those- one of those *pirates*!”

“He’s not ‘one of them’,” Shiro shot back hotly, “He was kidnapped when he was a kid!”

“Oh, sure, so *he* says!”

“Allura! I thought that you owed Keith! I thought that you would at least understand!”

Allura’s nostrils flared. “Those *monsters*- killed everyone I loved and sold me into slavery! I am not going to have any sympathy for any of them!”

“At least wait until he wakes up,” Shiro pleaded, “Please- let him heal and let him explain himself. Save your judgement.”

“Fine,” Allura snarled, “I’ll wait. But don’t expect me to help him. From now on, concerning me? He’s on his own.”

Xxx

Pidge sat bolt upright on the cliff. Was that a ship?! She rushed down towards the lagoon area, hoping beyond hope- yes! Printed on the side of the ship, *Castle of Lions*. From up high, Taras was waving to her.

“He’s okay,” the now-human Taras called, “Keith is fine!”

xxx

Pidge sighed, happy to be back in her normal clothes. The first place she went after changing was Keith’s room. He was sleeping, but it was a normal kind of sleep. Not the coma that the coral had induced.

“Lance says that he’ll be really drained for a bit,” Shiro told her, closing the door behind him, “We need to wake him up to feed him, but Lance says that otherwise, let him sleep. No matter how much Allura wants to scream at him.”

Pidge flinched in sympathy. “She found out, then?”

“Couldn’t be avoided. She’s at least agreed to let him recover before she confronts him, but she- she was really angry.”

“I’m sorry.”

Shiro cocked his head. “Sorry for what?”

“For not getting here faster. For messing around in the ocean and chasing fish when I could’ve been finding the plant. But- oh!” Pidge dragged out the bag that Taras had given her while he was a dolphin. “Taras found this, and look! It’s got Matt’s name on it! That means that he was nearby, right? We’ve just got to find him!”

But Shiro was already shaking his head no. “The currents and tides can take things everywhere, not to mention that if Taras picked it up, other sea creatures might have as well. It could’ve come from anywhere. I’m sorry, Pidge.”
“You’re sure?”

Taras nodded. “I can’t stay here. Now that my curse is broken, I want to stay on land. I’m sorry, Pidge, but your life can’t be mine.”

Pidge nodded. “I thought- I thought that might be the case. So- I made you- uh- here.” She handed him a bracelet woven from rope, a vein of light brown running through it with a sparkling green rock from the bottom of the ocean tied through.

“I had Shiro help me get a hole through the rock,” Pidge explained anxiously, “It’s one of the ones you gave me in the ocean.”

“Oh,” Taras said simply, “It- it’s beautiful. What’s this?” he touched the vein of light brown.

Pidge blushed deeply. “Oh- that? It’s- uh- it’s a bit of my hair. See, I learned that from an islander-supposedly, if we have these and we go to sleep with them under our heads, we’ll meet each other in dreams. You’re supposed to give them to your close friends.”

“Close friends?”

“You saved Keith,” Pidge said seriously, “You saved me from the eels, and you showed up right when I needed you in the ocean to show me the way without a thought for yourself. So- yes. Friends.”

“Friends, then,” Taras said cheerfully. He fingered his own hair. “I did make- I made this little pouch.” He held out. “In case you find something on your journey that you want to keep. If you want- we could try the hair thing?”

Pidge smiled at him. “Sure. We can try it.”

Taras grimaced as he yanked out one of his own hairs. Pidge put it in the pouch. “I’ll work it into the lining of the pouch so that I won’t lose it.”

Taras nodded as they came into a port, the gangplank thudding to the ground. “I’ll be seeing you, then?”

Pidge nodded tearfully, giving him a goodbye hug. “See you,” she whispered.

He disappeared down the gangplank. “Even if it’s just in dreams, my friend,” she whispered.
The More I Stray the Less I Fear

Chapter Notes

Two quick notes of much importance:
1) I am taking a break for the holidays. This will be the last update until January (date undetermined). Do not look for updates. You will not find them.
2) The creatures introduced in this chapter, the Ilimu, are creatures from myths originating in the Kenya area. I have done the best that I can, but the Internet has very limited knowledge of them, so if anyone is actually from the Kenya area or has studied African myths, please, PLEASE give me more information in the comments. I want to be as accurate as possible, so any help would be appreciated.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“We need to talk.”

Keith flinched like those words had hit him physically. Shiro had warned him, in one of the few times when he was awake. He had expected Allura to confront him. He’d just hoped that it would be a little later. He’d hoped that maybe he could recover a little more.

“You’re a pirate.”

“Allura—”

“No, Keith! You lied to me! You never told me what was on your arm!”

“You never asked!”

“Why would you hide that from me?!”

Keith gestured between them. “This! This is why! You don’t get it! They didn’t want you! They sold you off! But when a bunch of strange men grab you when you’re twelve and shove a brand on your arm, there’s not anything that you can do! And if you spend the next six years of your life being hit and shoved and forced to clean up blood when they go raiding- you don’t get it, Allura! You don’t understand what it’s like! You don’t know what it was like seeing living nightmares every night and locking yourself in the hold so that they wouldn’t hurt you!”

Allura blinked. “Wait- living nightmares?”

Keith clammed up. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No- wait- you did say it, though? Living nightmares? At night?”

“Allura, I was twelve, I’m not going to account for—”

“No- Keith, seriously! Tell me. What were they like?”

“I don’t know- they had claws and fur and really sharp teeth- I don’t know. I stayed locked away. I saw them fully maybe once. And after that, it was routine to just… lock myself away.”
Allura sat back. “This isn’t good. This is very, very, very not good.”

“What?”

“Keith- I think I think that you saw one of the Ilimu. Or- they could’ve been werehyenas.”

Keith coughed. “I’m sorry?”

“Back in my home, with my tribe- we had legends. Of monsters that would kill you. Monsters that would become human during the day, but they would become nightmares at night. Horrible, hyena monsters, although the Ilimu could be lions or even crocodiles. They- if they got themselves on a ship, they definitely would be pirates- they live for killing.”

Keith shook his head. “Okay, but that’s just a legend, right? It’s just made up.”

“I thought so too; I thought that they were meant to scare children into behaving, but you saw them, or some creature like them!”

“Whoa. Back up. I thought that I saw them. Probably my tired, scared, thirteen-year-old brain didn’t want to cope, and I imagined monsters.”

“Why would they keep you alive is the question,” Allura mused, “They typically just kill. Of course, if they have the cunning that they are said to have, maybe they saw an ulterior motive to keep you alive… And what about Shiro? And I? Have they reverted so much towards the human side that they want to sell slaves and kidnap humans? Why didn’t they keep me? Why didn’t I end up with the brand?”

“Allura, stop. You’re overthinking this! They might just be horrible, horrible people! We don’t have to assume they’re some kind of voodoo creature.”

“Well, of course they’re not voodoo. That’s just ridiculous. They come from my home country, not yours. If they mobilized, then what do they want? Maybe they took over actual pirates, that would explain the ships. But what do they want?! Other than to kill things, of course. They could do plenty of that in Africa. Do they just want new killing grounds? Maybe.”

“Allura!” Keith finally had her attention. “Allura, please, stop. I don’t think that the pirates are Ilimu.”

“Ilimu,” Allura corrected.

“Right. Well, point is, I don’t think it’s true. It’s a legend, and nothing else.”

“What else could explain it?!?”

“Explain what?” Shiro questioned, sliding in.

“The pirates are Ilimu,” Allura cried.

“What?”

“Shapeshifting monsters,” Keith explained, “I told her- they’re not. I thought I saw monsters when I was young, but pirates are people. They’re not—”

Shiro froze. “Monsters? You’re sure that’s it? Change at night?”

“Uh- y-yeah.”
“It’s not just you, Keith. I saw, when I was on that ship—” Shiro shuddered. “They’re not human. I don’t know if they’re Ilimu, but whatever they are, it is definitely not human.”

“It’s the Ilimu,” Allura repeated firmly, “I know it. We have to know what they’re up to. It could be something that will put the whole world in danger if they’re banding together like this.”

There was a bump, and they pitched forward. Keith swung his legs out of bed. “What was that?”

Coran materialized in the room. “Ah! Yes! Hello! Um! We appeared to be running low on provisions, so I’ve stopped us on an island!”

Shiro snapped immediately into leader mode. “Inhabited?”

“I don’t think so. I’ve been eyeing this island for a while, and I haven’t seen any smoke. Most people need fire to get along, so I think the lack of smoke is promising.”

“You stay here,” Shiro ordered Keith, “You’re injured.”

“Shiro—”

“No. You stay here. I don’t want you getting hurt or simply aggravating your back wound even more.”

“But—”

“No, Keith.”

Keith watched the others leave and immediately got up out of bed. “Coran?”

There was no answer, so Keith got up and snuck off of the ship. He was going to go stir crazy if he stayed on this ship much longer. Besides, he told himself, the walk would be good for him. He would only benefit.

Xxx

Shiro heard a rustling in the trees above him and froze. A bird? Or a big cat? He scanned the trees, searching for more movement, but he didn’t see anything. He shrugged and looked back forward, examining the tracks of wild deer.

In the moment he looked away, something slammed down on top of him from the trees. Everyone else yelled, yells that were immediately cut off. Shiro twisted underneath the weight of his assailant, but something sharp was pressed against his artery.

“Don’t move, or you’ll die.”

Shiro froze until he was forced to his feet. A group of women and men surrounded him, the men’s skin tones varying from as dark as Allura’s to the same shade as Lance’s, and the women’s varying all the way to white. Allura was screaming at them in her native language, all English abandoned.

A white woman with blonde hair stepped forward, speaking soothingly in- Shiro shivered- Allura’s language. Allura stopped shouting, her eyes wide in disbelief.

“How- how do you speak Altean?” she whispered.

The woman smiled. “My name is Romelle,” she said in answer, “I am a third generation of this island. My grandfather shares the tattoo, as do I.” She gestured to small tattoos on her cheeks, the
same as Allura’s although Romelle’s were a green-blue color.

“Please, let us go.”

Romelle shook her head. “That is not for me to decide. It is for the leaders of the village to know. I am sure that most of you will be released, although I am not sure about that one.” She gestured to Shiro.

“Wh-what? Why not?!”

“He has white skin,” Romelle said simply, and turned to walk away. Shiro and the others were marched along, and Shiro began to see a trail where none had been before; it was well hidden, but obviously there now that he was following it.

“Wait—Coran said that there was no smoke, and therefore no people,” Shiro announced, “How do you get by without fire?”

Romelle smiled mischievously. “When we see ships in the distance, we bank all fires and do not light them again until the ships are gone.”

“Romelle!” someone scolded, “Hush!”

Romelle rolled her eyes. “He’ll probably be dead soon; can’t share secrets if you’re dead.

The other person clicked their tongue disapprovingly, but kept moving. They emerged in a village, well-hidden and almost impossible to spot if you didn’t know where it was; it blended smoothly with the trees and bushes.

Whispers spread fast through the trees, and soon they were standing in front of a platform with three men and three women sitting sternly in chairs, backs rigid.

“Trespassers. Why are you here?”

“We just stopped to resupply,” Shiro told them, “We don’t mean any harm- we’re not here to hurt you.”

“Really?!?” one of the women thundered, “Then why did you have another of you waiting to ambush us?!”

Shiro blinked. “What? We didn’t—”

Another couple of people came forward, dragging a kicking, struggling Keith, who was fighting like an animal against his captors.

“Let me go,” he snarled, “Let go of me, or I’ll—” he caught sight of Shiro. “Oh, no.”

“Keith, no,” Shiro whispered.

Keith kicked one of the men holding him. “Let us go! We don’t want to steal your stupid island!”

Someone kicked the back of his knees, and his other captor kneed him in the back. Keith sagged in their grip with a groan. Shiro’s adrenaline surged.

“Don’t do that!” he protested, “He’s injured!”

One of the council members stepped back in shock. “You would have an injured child take on
armed people?!”

“No! He was supposed to stay on the ship!” Shiro wanted to glare pointedly at Keith, but when he looked down at his friend, his heart sank. He wasn’t in any shape to escape if it came to that.

“He would’ve been found either way. We are searching your ship.” The councilmember smiled at Allura, Hunk and Pidge. “Don’t worry. You are free.”

They looked at each other and then at the councilwoman. “What?”

“You don’t have to live under their tyranny anymore,” the woman proclaimed, pointing an accusing finger at Shiro and Keith, “Here on this island, we free those under the oppression of the white man.”

“Technically, I’m Asian,” Shiro muttered, and got a whack upside the head for his trouble.

“Women and men are equal and so are those of every skin color!”

“Ex- except for white men?” Keith wheezed from the ground.

He was ignored. Allura shook her head. “Shiro and Keith are our friends!” she protested, “They aren’t tyrants!”

“They can’t be your friends, dear.”

“Why?” Shiro challenged, “Because we’ve got pale skin? I’m sorry, ma’am, but where I come from, we call that unfair bias. Or, more commonly, bulls—”

Something cracked into his skull, and he fell, head spinning. He heard shouting, and then nothing at all.

Xxx

Allura caught Shiro before he hit the ground. “How dare you!” she screamed, and then broke into Altean, calling curses down on them and generally insulting them, their mothers and everyone involved with them.

Hunk was trying to reason with them- they didn’t have to kill Shiro and Keith, they could just put them back on their ship and give them enough provisions to get them to another island. Pidge was also screaming at them, while at the same time trying to support Keith, who looked like he had started bleeding again.

“EVERYBODY, STOP!”

Everybody turned towards a little river. Lance was sitting at the banks, arms crossed. The island-dwellers all gasped. The councilwoman’s eyes shot wide open.

“A- A water spirit!”

Lance grinned. “That’s right. I’m a water spirit.”

“Why are you here? What could be so important that you’d leave the ocean?”

Lance blinked, then glanced at Pidge, who mouthed something at him. “Um- The ocean is displeased with your injustices. Killing people based on their skin color is wrong, and, uh- don’t do it. Those two,” he continued, pointing to Shiro and Keith, “They’re okay. Let them go. Um- while
we’re at it, medical attention for them, okay?” He glanced at Pidge, who gave him a thumbs up. He nodded. “So, yeah.”

The councilwoman stuttered. “Uh- but- our wise man—”

“Who matters more,” Lance thundered, “A man, or a water spirit? I know what I’m talking about! Do you want me to bring the wrath of the ocean against you?!?”

“N-No, but—”

“Good, then! I’ll tell you what. You don’t kill them. Get them medical help and stock up their ship. Then, uh, send them up to your ‘wise man’. Let him decide, but tell him that if he decides on death, the ocean will not be pleased with him! At all!” Lance glanced around. “Uh- As so the Ocean has ordered it, so must it be! Forsooth!”

The councilwoman nodded frantically. “And- if the wise man decides on death? What about us?”

“Eh, all blame goes to your dumb wise man. Now shoo! Go take care of it!”

She nodded and scurried away. The other island-dwellers acted similarly quickly, getting away from Lance and the “wrath of the ocean” as fast as they could. Except for Romelle. She approached Lance with healthy caution, but not a large amount of fear.

“Are you really a water spirit?” she asked critically, “Or are you just a fake, trying to help these people out?”

Lance flipped his tail. “I’m as real as they come, baby.”

Romelle slapped him across the face. “Then what did the Ocean do with my brother?! Tell me what the Ocean wanted with him!”

Lance rubbed his face. “Ugh- ow! Hey! The ocean- what?! Who’s your brother?!”

“His name is Bandor! He has red hair with markings like mine, and the Ocean took him away! Where did it take him?!”

Lance blinked. “Hey. Wait. I don’t know anyone like that. What happened?”

Romelle’s big purple eyes filled with tears. “He went out to the beach one day, and- and he never came back! My grandparents- the told me that the Ocean must have taken him away!” She slugged Lance in the shoulder. “If you’re really so powerful and can bring the Ocean’s fury, then bring the Ocean’s mercy! Give me back my brother!”

“I’m sorry,” Lance told her, “The ocean doesn’t have your brother.”

“Wh- where is he, then?”

Lance shrugged. “I don’t know. But- you can’t just sit around crying for him. One of my friends- the short one? Her brother disappeared too. He was captured by pirates. And Pidge? She’s looking for him. She’s not just sitting around, hoping he’ll come back. She’s going to find him. And- you need to find your brother. You can’t sit here and wait.” He flipped his tail again, getting ready to dive back in the water. “It’s time you got up and started walking.”

Xxx

Shiro stared apprehensively at the path ahead of him. “Are you sure that we have to do this?”
Keith nodded. “It was the best Lance could do. You don’t have to come with us, though, Allura. Or you, Romelle.”

Romelle shook her head lightly. “I was sent to make sure that you come down and give us a truthful verdict. Not to mention, I have my own questions to ask. They’re right, though, Allura. You don’t have to be here. And it could be dangerous.”

Allura crossed her arms. “If we’re going up to see a man who supposedly knows everything, I’m not passing up the chance to ask about the pirates.”

“Okay.” Shiro took in a deep breath and released it. He opened his eyes with a smile. “Let’s do this. We’re going to be fine.”

They started down the path, the gravel crunching under their feet the only noise. Keith was the first to break the silence.

“So, they said there would be guardians, right?”

Allura nodded. “The first, they said, would represent power—”

As she said it, something swooped down from the trees, slamming into Keith’s back. He was knocked to the ground, screaming as his bullet wound sent fiery pain through his whole back. He curled into a ball on the ground, gasping.

The rest of them whirled around to face their attacker. She was a large, African woman, with muscles that put Shiro to shame. She grinned.

“I hope the rest of you put up a bit more of a challenge.”

Shiro ran at her, and she flung him to the side, then turning to catch Allura’s fist and twisting her away. Romelle backed away.

“Oh, uh, I’m just here to supervise. I’m not really here for- eep!” She let out a small scream and ducked away as the woman swung a fist at her.

“Ha! You’re a little weakling!” The woman shoved Shiro aside and into a tree when he tried to attack her and threw Allura into him as he attempted to get back up. Then she turned back on Romelle. “Here, little rabbit.”

Romelle ducked as the woman swung another fist at her, moving under her arm and popping up on the other side. She jabbed her fingers in the soft flesh behind the woman’s ear, and the colossal woman collapsed, unconscious. Romelle pumped a fist into the air.

“Yes!”

Allura and Shiro helped Keith up, rubbing their aching arms and ribs. “You okay?” Shiro asked with a wince.

Keith nodded, even though he was winded, and he was fairly certain that his bullet wound had reopened. “I’m fine. Romelle…”

Shiro laughed ruefully. “I always figured that if it came down to raw power, I’d be the one to win.”

Romelle grinned at him. “Nope! Sometimes power isn’t everything!”

Allura nodded. “Thank you, Romelle. I’m glad you came along.”
Romelle beamed. “So am I! I didn’t know that I could do that! Who’s the next guardian?”

“You should handle that,” Shiro decided, “You’re the most perceptive- you hear and see things that the rest of us don’t. You’ve got better hearing and sixth-sense- it’s kind of uncanny, actually. Like a wolf, or a cat.”


The trudged along the path, the land around them noisy with the sound of birds and other creatures rustling around in the bushes. Keith swung his head back and forth, trying to pinpoint each sound.

Something big rustled, and Keith looked towards it. A boar ran in front of him, squealing, and he frowned.

“What would scare—”

Something jumped out of nowhere and slammed into Shiro, knocking him out before disappearing again.

“Shiro!”

Romelle jumped forward, but something hit her back, slamming her head into a tree before disappearing again. Allura and Keith stood together, back to back, Keith scanning the trees for threats and listening closely; but there were so many sounds- so much noise, and bits of bright feathers flapping everywhere.

The whatever-it-was leapt out of nowhere, sucker-punching Keith in the stomach before disappearing. Keith doubled over with a wheeze, and Allura whirled around.

“Allura!”

Allura gently lowered Keith to the ground, still trying to get his breath back. “Take it easy. You tried.” The hairs on the back of her neck tingled, and she whirled around. The mysterious figure missed her by inches, disappearing almost instantly back into the trees.

Allura picked a rock up and threw it at a flock of birds. They flew away, startled, and their flapping shoved out someone who was running to not be attacked in their mad flight. Allura leapt at her, tackling her to the ground. Their attacker’s head hit a rock with a nasty crack, and she turned limp in Allura’s grasp. Allura blinked. Their attacker was… blind? Her eyes were clouded over, at the very least.

Allura felt a little guilty for hitting her so hard, but that guilt quickly disappeared as Romelle and Shiro got up, Romelle with a nasty bruise on her forehead. Keith staggered to his feet as well and stared in shock at the woman.

“How did she even know where we were?!”

Romelle shrugged. “I guess she’s more than meets the eye. It makes sense that the wise man would only want the best for his protection.”
“What does he need protection from?! There’s no one here!”

“Well… not ‘protection’ so much. I think that the guards are really more like a test. To make sure that anyone coming to see him is worthy.”

“Bull,” Keith snarled, “What a jerk. Why can’t he just dispense wisdom for free, like a normal person? Why all of the testing? Seems to me like he’s loaded with——”

“Ah, ah, ah!”

Keith whirled around clumsily to see a small Asian woman perched in a tree. Her hair was pulled back into a high ponytail. She wagged a finger at him.

“Don’t talk bad about the wise man, or I might have to take offense! After all, he saved me from people like you!”

“Agility,” Allura murmured, “Romelle, do you want to take this one? You proved yourself agile before.”

Romelle nodded. “I think I can take her.”

The woman in the tree laughed. “Aw, you think that you can take me? That’s so cute! You’re a funny little thing, you know.”

She leapt out of the tree, doing a little flip and landing right next to Romelle. With one quick jab, Romelle’s whole arm just drooped, like a limp noodle. Romelle quickly countered with a jab at the guard, but she blocked it with one arm, using the other to quickly take out Romelle’s remaining arm. She grinned brilliantly.

“Isn’t this fun?”

She jumped back as Keith lunged for her. “Aw, you’re cute too! Like a disgruntled cat! Oops, too slow,” she chided as Allura leapt for her, “Really, how on earth did you manage to get past——”

Shiro grabbed her by her arms. She struggled, kicking at him, but he held on tightly. “Give up?”

“No!”

Shiro squeezed her a little tighter. “Promise that you won’t bother us.”

“No! Ow!” She yelped as Shiro squeezed even tighter. “Okay! Okay, fine! I’ll leave you alone!”

“What did you do to Romelle?”

“It’ll wear off, I swear! It’s just temporary! Now let me go!” Shiro released her, and she rubbed her arms. “Geeze. Well, I hope that A crushes you with a boulder or something.”

She bounded off and disappeared, flipping through the trees. Keith blinked. “Who’s A?”

“Next guardian, probably,” Allura sighed, “The islanders told us she was strategic.”

“You should handle her, then,” Shiro suggested, “The way you handled the representative of stealth was pretty strategic.”

Allura gave a short nod. “Alright. How strategic could she be? She’s on an island in the middle of nowhere.”
“That’s the spirit. Look, I can see the cave from here; we’re so close.”

“And yet, so far,” a voice droned from the middle of nowhere, “I don’t know how you managed to get past the others, but…” A boulder crashed down next to Allura. “It’s not happening with me. Your lucky break is over.”

Allura ran to the side, but another boulder crashed down feet in front of her. She ran, but boulders always seemed like they were cutting her off, always landing where she was trying to run. Keith, Shiro and Romelle watched in horror.

“She shouldn’t be able to shoot them off that fast,” Romelle whispered, “Let alone aim them.”

Keith looked up, startled. Romelle was right. She shouldn’t be able to launch or aim the catapult that would be necessary to throw the boulders like that.

Allura yelped as one more boulder slid into place and completely penned her in. “I’m stuck!”

Shiro started forward, but Keith put one arm out. “No. Wait. I can handle this.”

Shiro hesitated. “Keith, are you sure? With your injury—”

“I can handle it,” Keith insisted. Shiro nodded and stepped back.

Keith eyed the path. No tactics. Dodging tactics were what had gotten Allura pinned in. No instinct, either. That was easy to predict. Plan? Do the most idiotic thing possible. Or, even better; no plan.

Keith started to race up the path. He heard the distinctive twang of a catapult unloading its payload, and he ignored it. He kept running. Screams from Romelle and shouts from Shiro to move, no, he was running right in the path of the boulder rang out from back along the path. Keith ignored them and kept running. He dove, rolling, and the boulder crashed down behind him.

“What are you doing, idiot?!” the guard screamed, “You’re going to get crushed!”

Keith popped back up to his feet almost immediately and kept running. Another boulder crashed down, just in front of him, and he barely skidded to a halt in time. He eyed the boulder, backed up, sprinted at it and jumped, launching himself onto the boulder. He scaled up it, ignoring the boulders crashing down that would have penned him in like Allura. His back burned and ached, but he gritted his teeth and kept going.

As he clambered over the edge, he spotted the catapult and the person behind them who was madly attempting to readjust the trajectory to pen him in. He leapt off of the rock and tackled her to the ground. She struggled against him, shoving him off of her, but he doggedly clung to her ankle in an attempt to keep her from moving. He yanked her to the ground and got up himself, grabbing her wrists when she attempted to get away.

“You predicted where Allura would run and set the catapults towards her.”

“Yeah, so?”

“How do we get her out?”

“You drop a rope to her I guess. I don’t give thought on how to get them out; that’s not my job.”

Keith seized the knife out of her sheath and sliced catapult strings until the weapons were
completely useless. “Just in case.” He ran back down the path, waving his arms. “Hey! I’m not dead!”

“That! Was! Stupid!” Romelle shouted at him, “Horribly, horribly stupid!”

“Which is why her tactics never saw it coming.”

Romelle opened her mouth and then abruptly shut it again. “Okay. Well. Shiro’s getting Allura out, so we should be okay. What happened? We thought you were going to get crushed!”

“She based her catapult on logical paths. So I just had to do the most illogical things.”

“You could’ve gotten crushed!”

“It was fine. Besides, why do you care? Don’t you want us dead?”

Romelle shook her head violently. “No! I don’t want anyone dead!”

Allura and Shiro slid down from the rock.

“This wise man had better be as good as he’s hyped up to be,” Shiro growled.

“They say that he can tell the future if it possesses him,” Romelle told them, starry-eyed, “Maybe he’ll give us a prophecy!”

They stood in silence.

“So.” Allura stared into the cave. “I suppose that we enter?”

Shiro nodded. “I suppose we do.”

No one moved. Then, Keith drew in a deep breath.

And entered the cave.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Holidays everyone!
“Welcome.”

Keith blinked at the white-haired young man in front of him. “Who are you? Are you the ‘wise man’?”

“Wise. Knowledgeable. People often confuse the two. I like to think that I am wise, though.”

Keith blinked again. “Okay. Fine. Are you the one we came here to find?”

One white eyebrow rose. “I don’t know. Am I?”

“Look, I don’t have time for this. The villagers told us that we had to come up here to find some kind of elusive wise-man that has apparently ordered them to kill all the whites. Is that you?”

“You are a touch impatient. I would advise slowing down. If you do everything in a rush, you might make a mistake.”

Keith growled, grabbing the man by his collar. “I did not fight through four warriors who were fond of punching me to deal with some smarmy white-haired cryptic who won’t even give me a straight answer! Are you the person that I was sent up here to find?!”

“Yes,” the man answered simply, “My apologies for Zethrid, Narti, Ezor and Axca; they’re quite protective of me. My name is Lotor. Now, release me, Keith.”

Keith let go in shock. “How did you—”

“I know many things.” A slight smile curled at the edge of Lotor’s lips. “And it’s not exactly hard to guess when you hear people screaming the name Keith all up the path. You seem like the kind who would constantly have people screaming at you.”

Behind him, Allura, Shiro and Romelle entered quietly. Lotor’s gaze slid over all of them, lingering on Allura. “Hello, Princess.”

Allura flushed a bright red. “Um- I’m not—”

“We’re all friends here, Princess. There’s no need to hide.”

Keith stared at her. “Whoa, wait, Princess?!”

“That’s not really the word,” Allura snapped, “It’s just- the best translation into your tongue.”

“And you were mad at me for hiding things? Allura—”

“It doesn’t matter, okay?” Allura yelled, “My people are dead, except for the few on this island! It
doesn’t matter who I was the princess of!

“Stop this,” Shiro said sharply to Lotor, “Stop dividing us.”

“You did that yourself, with secrecy and lies. I simply accelerated the rate. Now, why did you come here?”

“You have orders down in the village,” Romelle asserted, “You say to kill any man with pale skin.”

“No, I told them merely to protect themselves from those who would enslave and kill them. They chose the path of death.” A brief smile flitted across Lotor’s face. “Amazing, how the human mind twists towards violence. If there is a death sentence on your head, rest assured that I release you from it. But that’s not all you came for.”

It wasn’t a question, but Allura answered anyway. “No. We need to know about the pirates who are hunting us. Are they human?”

Lotor shook his head. “Far from it. They are what you call Ilimu, although they prefer to call themselves the Galra.”

“What do they want?”

“What they’ve always wanted. The ruin of the world as we know it. They are after a few things. Or, rather, their leaders are. First, they want an amulet.”

An image of an amulet appeared, a mass of loops with a glittering red gem in the center.

“This amulet has extreme power. It enhances strength and enables the user to clone themselves. No one knows for sure what other powers it might have, but they do know that it is a very dangerous artifact.”

Allura’s eyes glinted. “So we need to get it first. With that kind of power, we could easily defeat the Ilimu- Galra, whichever.”

“No. That thing isn’t safe; you have to bring it back here.”

“What? Why?”

“So that I can destroy it.”

Keith slid in-between Allura and Lotor. “Yeah, because we should immediately drop everything and trust you? I don’t think so.”

“I am the only one who knows how to destroy it. If you can’t do it, why not let me have a crack at it? Oh, and be very careful if you do find it not to touch it. Anyone who has touched the amulet can bring it back after it has been destroyed.”

Keith nodded. “Okay. So, they’re after this amulet thing. Anything else?”

Lotor nodded. “Three days of good sailing to the west of this island is another island. On it lives a thakathi. She is the one who has been creating the Galra. If you want to stop them, you have to stop her.”

Keith held up one hand. “Wait, hold it, what is a thakathi?”
Allura struggled for a minute. “It—there’s not really a word for it in your tongue. It’s a person who typically causes trouble out of spite. Secretively. More often than not with the help of spirits. Typically a woman, although I’ve heard tell of male thakathi.”

“Like a witch?”

“Almost. Not quite. It’s similar, but— it is not the same.”

“Alright,” Shiro broke in, “So, get the amulet, bring it here, don’t touch it and while we’re at it, kill a thakathi. Anything else?”

“That’s—” Lotor doubled over. “Ah…”

“What’s going on?!”

“He’s having a vision,” Romelle whispered, her eyes gleaming, “You’re going to receive a prophecy!”

Lotor straightened up, and his eyes were completely yellow, glowing with a faint light. “Of you three,” he rasped, pointing a shaking finger at Allura, Keith and Shiro, “this is said. One is a traitor. One will die. And one… is already dead.”

Lotor’s eyes faded to their normal color and closed, the white-haired man collapsing towards the ground. Romelle lunged forward and caught him, setting him back upright on his stool.

Allura put a hand to her mouth. “One— a traitor? One of us?”

Shiro shook his head. “Someone is going to die,” he whispered.

“How— how can someone already be dead?” Keith croaked, “That’s— that’s not possible.”

Lotor’s eyes flickered open, and Keith surged forward, seizing him by the shirt. “What were you talking about?! Who’s going to die?! Who is the traitor?!"

Lotor extracted himself from Keith’s grip. “I haven’t a clue as to what you’re talking about.”

“All I gave you was a prophecy.”

“Yeah, great, now decipher it!”

“I can’t,” Lotor replied simply, “I don’t understand them; I am only the mouthpiece that they flow through. It sounds like I gave you a warning; you know what is coming, so you must be prepared. Anyway, I think it’s time that you get moving. I believe that Romelle wants to speak to me alone.”

Keith’s head swiveled to Romelle, and she shrugged sheepishly. “I have a few questions to ask. Wait outside?”

Keith nodded, and he, Allura and Shiro emerged from the cave.

“What do you think is going to happen?” Allura whispered.

Shiro shrugged. “We can’t dwell on it. We’ll only go insane.” He cast an eye back at the cave. “I just wonder what Romelle would have to ask him.”
“Please- sir- can you tell me if my brother is alive?”

Lotor shook his head. “I cannot see your brother, Romelle. He is far from me, hidden by a veil.”

Romelle’s legs gave out, and she collapsed to her knees in front of Lotor. “Please- what should I do?! I’m so lost and scared, wise-one.” Tears started spilling from her eyes. “I need guidance. I need someone to tell me what to do!”

“I cannot tell you what to do,” Lotor told her gently, “What you do is up to you; it is your path, not mine. It is your choice of what to do next. Not mine. I can advise, but all I will advise you is this; do what you believe is right. If you can follow your desires no matter the cost, you will receive the reward you deserve. If that means that you stay, then so be it. But close your eyes, Romelle. Listen. What do you hear?”

Romelle shut her eyes, straining to hear. “I hear the ocean waves crashing on the beach,” she whispered, “I can hear the seagulls shrieking and the splashes of the tide pools.”

“Open your eyes.” When she did, she saw a smiling Lotor. “The ocean is calling you, Romelle. What will your answer be?”

Chapter End Notes

Hngh, I miss Lotor.
The Darkness Right in Front of Me

Shiro let out a sigh of relief as they sailed away from Lotor’s island. “Glad to get away from there.”

Keith nodded. “You can say that again.”

Everyone agreed but Allura. She was silent, staring at the island behind them.

Hunk approached her cautiously. “Allura?”

“Maybe we shouldn’t have left Romelle behind.”

Pidge sighed. “Allura, we discussed this. We’re going to be going through some rough stuff. It’s not safe, and we shouldn’t drag Romelle in with us. She’s safer on the island.”

“Yes, but she wanted to come with us! And she wanted to find her brother! Surely you of all people get that, Pidge!”

“Yeah, and I didn’t come on this journey because I wanted to find him! I didn’t even know that he was alive! Me coming along was a complete accident because I was being chased out of my hometown! Leaving Romelle behind was a good choice. She wouldn’t have been safe with us.”

Pidge cast her gaze back to the rapidly disappearing island. “She’s better off staying on the island.”

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Pidge cast her gaze back to the rapidly disappearing island. “She’s better off staying on the island.”

Xxx

“This won’t work.”

“It will!”

“It’s going to sink.”

“Luka, if you have another idea, why don’t you suggest it?!”

Luka crossed her arms. “Here’s an idea, Romelle. You stay here.Forget about traversing the dangerous ocean in a homemade boat.”

“I don’t have that option, Luka! My brother might be out there!”

“This is ridiculous, Romelle! Even you have to see that!” Luka wrinkled her nose. “Not to mention that you’re getting tar everywhere, and the stuff smells.”

Tavo poked his head out of the inside of the boat. “Do you have a problem with my tar?” he questioned.

Luka took a step back. “Tavo! You’re helping her with this- this ridiculous scheme?!”

Tavo shrugged. “It doesn’t seem that ridiculous to me. The Ocean is calling her. Why should she refuse?”

“Because it’s ridiculous!”

“Well, I think it’s a great idea,” another voice piped up from inside the boat. Luka jumped and peered inside.
“Merla?! You too?!”

“Well, yeah! Why not? The wise Lotor told her that the Ocean is calling. Tavo and I are helping. Who are you to refute the wise man?”

“Surely-surely you’re not planning on going with her?!”

“No, Romelle’s chances will be better if there aren’t three people eating her food.”

“That’s right,” Romelle agreed cheerfully, “I heard the angry one telling his friend about his journey. If he can survive on a little fishing boat with four people on board and only enough food for one person for four days, then how hard can it be for me to do it on my own with enough food to last me for months?”

“But there are storms!” Luka fretted, “Storms and sharks and pirates! You can’t honestly be doing this!”

Romelle lifted her chin. “I most certainly can, Luka, and you can’t stop me!”

“I’ll tell your grandfather,” Luka threatened.

“Grandpa will agree with me! He trusts in Lotor! Why can’t you?”

“I do trust in Lotor, I just don’t…” Luka bit her lip.

“What? You don’t trust in me?!”

“No! I don’t, alright?! You’ve never driven a boat before! I also heard the angry one, and I heard how they barely survived their trip! You’re not as experienced as he is! You don’t know how to survive a storm like he did!”

“We’re done,” Tavros called, “This ship is completely watertight. Want to give it a go?”

Romelle nodded excitedly, clambering aboard her boat. “Yes! Okay, push the boat out!”

Tavros and Merla jumped out and shoved with all of their might on the little boat, pushing it slowly but surely into the bay. Romelle pumped her fist, taking her sails down. A gentle breeze caught them, pushing the boat, and Romelle ran to the tiller, practicing her steering.

“This is amazing!” she called, “I love it!”

“Be careful!” Luka called back.

Romelle laughed, enjoying the wind whistling in her hair. She steered her boat back towards Luka, Merla and Tavo. There was an almighty bump when she hit the sandline which threw her forward, but she was up almost instantly.

“This boat is amazing! Now we just need to stock it up with rope, another set of sails, dried food, water and I think lime juice? The angry one said something about scurvy. I don’t know what that is, but it sounds horrible.”

“Wait,” Luka said in a resigned tone, “I have a tent. You should set it up on your ship so that you’ll have some cover from rain and sun.”

Romelle squealed and gave Luka a hug. “Thank you, Luka! Thank you so, so much! I won’t forget it!”
Luka smiled and nodded. “Bring Bandor back.”

Romelle nodded confidently. “This is going to be great!” she asserted.

Xxx

“This is not great!” Romelle moaned as her ship was whipped back and forth by the waves, “This is very, very not great! Oooo, I think I might throw up!”

A wave washed over her, soaking her hair and clothes. She screamed as another massive wave, this one taller than her whole boat, crashed over her boat, overturning everything.

Romelle struggled to the surface with a gasp, floundering in the water. She clung to the mast of her ship, spitting out water as the waves buffeted her around.

Eventually the storm calmed, and Romelle’s bit of mast was washed to a beach. Romelle let out a sigh of relief and let go, flopping on the sand.

“I am going to lie here forever,” she groaned, “I’m not going to move.”

Romelle’s eyes slid slowly shut, the gentle sound of the ocean lulling her to sleep.

Xxx

A pole in the ribs woke Romelle up and she scrambled away from the poke with a yelp. Someone made a strange grunt-click noise in her direction, and she blinked sleep and sand out of her eyes, trying to get a fix on the person.

Her eyes shot wide open when she did. A man, dressed in a green that would match the jungle and holding a spear in her direction.

“Oh! You speak- Okay- wait- hold on- if I’m not far- let’s see- which island would… I was sailing west, which means… Oh, no.”

The man smiled, poking her in the ribs with the butt of his spear again. “That’s right. What we find on the beach belongs to us. You’re my slave now, little one. Better get used to it.”

Xxx

“Where’s the water?”

“I’m fixing the roof,” Romelle replied tiredly, “I haven’t gotten it yet.”

Her master, the man who had found her on the beach, frowned at her. “Well, go get it! The roof is an extra chore! You do your everyday chores first, and then you fix the roof!”

“Sorry.”

Romelle grabbed the water bucket and went outside. Once she was out of sight of the village, she began to run. If she got to the river fast and ran back to the village when she was done, then she
would have time for her secret project.

She made it to the river, huffing and puffing, and filled her bucket. Then she set the bucket down and sprinted towards the beach. Pieces of her ship had been washing up, and she was planning to rebuild it. She knew the ship like the back of her hand; surely it wouldn’t be *that* hard.

Sure enough, on the beach was another piece of wreckage. Romelle ran down to get it and felt a twinge in her chest. Luka’s tent. But there were rips all in it that she’s have to fix. She didn’t have time today or tomorrow; she had to finish fixing the roof by tomorrow evening, and she wouldn’t have enough time if she wanted to get it done.

Romelle dragged the tent to her secret cave, where she was rebuilding her boat. She glanced at the sky and cursed. She needed to get back to the river and fast, before all of the other girls came to the river and questioned why she’d left her bucket at the river and where she’d been.

She sprinted back into the jungle, her legs a blur as she leapt over fallen logs and ducked under vines. She knew this path by heart and could find her way back even in the dark. She often had.

She stopped at the river, panting and grabbing her water bucket. If she sprinted, she would be back soon. But she’d have to be careful to not spill the water.

A low growl sounded behind her, and she turned slowly to see a female wild cat facing her.

“I don’t taste good,” she murmured in Altean, her voice wavering, “Leave, sister, and look elsewhere for your food.” She sang a tune, her voice still shaking, that had always worked to soothe the housecats of the village.

The wild cat leapt at her with a snarl, and she screamed, swinging her bucket at the creature. It yowled in pain as she clocked it in the face, but its claws still scored a line of cuts across her face.

Romelle backed away, her face dripping blood, and then turned and ran. The cat chased her, even as she heard screams from the other village girls as they came up the path and saw the cat.

*I have to get it away,* she thought dizzily, *I can fight at least a little bit- fighting Lotor’s guard proved that. But if it goes back for the village girls, it will be a slaughter fest.*

“This way!” she shouted at the cat, throwing a stone at it, “Hey! Over here!”

She tore along the path that she knew so well, the wildcat chasing after her. She was fast, but it was faster, and was gradually gaining on her. She spotted her cave and her heard lit up with hope. If she could just- get- to- the cave-

Romelle barged through the entrance, the cat just behind her. She grabbed Luka’s tent and flung it at the cat. The cat yowled and hissed, struggling to get out of the cloth, but only succeeded at tangling itself up more.

Romelle panted, holding one hand to her bleeding cheek. She needed to wrap this up. Hopefully she wouldn’t need stitches, because she wasn’t sure that she could stitch herself up. She wrapped a tattered piece of sail around her face, which was swelling from the force of the blow that she’d received.

The cat had stopped struggling, and she stopped next to it, her heart swelling with contempt.

“Huh. Not so big and bad are we now, huh?”
The cloth of Luka’s tent was steadily turning red, and Romelle frowned. Something wasn’t right. Was the cat… bleeding? But Romelle hadn’t harmed it!

Romelle cut away some of the fabric, saying a silent sorry to Luka. The wild cat’s side had a massive gash from a boar tusk in its side. Romelle touched it gently, drawing a hiss from the wild cat.

“I’m sorry,” Romelle whispered, “but I have to have a look at this. Hold on.”

Romelle took another strip of sailcloth and soaked it in water from the underground spring that bubbled in the back of the cave. She ran back to the cat and gently sponged away the blood.

“There. That gash isn’t as bad as it seems, is it? I’ll be right back; hold on.”

Romelle trotted back towards the village, intending to apologize to her master for her delay and her future disobedience, and then grab her sewing kit and run like the wind back to her cave.

“She led the cat away! It was amazing! It would’ve eaten us, but Romelle got it to chase her instead!”

Romelle stopped short, hiding behind a house. They were talking about her?

“I never knew that I’d caught such a brave girl.” That was her master’s voice. “I don’t suppose that there’s any chance that she survived?”

“Not without a miracle. That cat was almost on her.”

“Shame. That’s one heroic slave. She didn’t have to do that. She could’ve gotten away. If she were alive, I might have set her free.”

That was all Romelle needed to hear. She giggled, slipping away.

*If they think I’m a dead hero, then I see no need to inform them of otherwise.*

She slipped in and out of her master’s house, grabbing her sewing kit and a few tools that he’d allowed her to keep before she slipped out of the window. She felt a twinge of regret- her master had been a bit demanding, but all in all, he hadn’t been as bad as she’d heard that slave owners could be, simply needing a woman to help him out around his house, and he’d tried, in his own gruff way, to be kind- but she needed to leave. And he’d said himself that he might’ve set her free. As far as she was concerned, that meant that she *was* free.

She crept back to her cave where the cat was waiting and threaded a needle.

“This is going to hurt,” she warned the cat, and began stitching up the gash in its side. It yowled and struggled in the sailcloth, but it was too tangled to make any headway.

After Romelle finished, she went back to the spring, washing her hands and then soaking another piece of cloth and bringing it back to the wild cat, which licked at the water gratefully. Then, to Romelle’s surprise, it began to purr, nudging at her hand.

“Hm. You’re not so scary, are you? You’re just a big cat.”

The purring continued, and Romelle let out a sigh.

“Well, if you promise that you’ll behave yourself and not try to eat me, I suppose that I can let you out.”
Romelle untangled the cat, and it began to limp away. Romelle sighed. She wouldn’t have minded if it had stayed. She would want some company later as she waited for the tide to bring in the essential pieces to her boat that she would find difficult to create on her own.

The cat tugged on her sleeve, growling impatiently. Romelle followed it silently through the trees, curious to see where it would bring her. It limped through the forest, looking back every so often to see if its human companion was still behind it.

They stopped at a tree, and the wild cat ducked through its roots to a small cave. Romelle waited outside until the wild cat came back out, four older kits following her. Romelle gasped. All of them were like their mother- yellow and covered with spots- except for one, which was still a midnight black unusual for kits that old. The black kit had one crippled paw that was twisted wrong.

The mother nudged the black kit towards Romelle, looking at her with pleading eyes. Romelle swallowed. This confirmed what she’d thought since she’d stitched up the cat. It was dying. It had lost too much blood. It was asking Romelle to take care of its smallest and weakest kit.

Romelle nodded. “I’ll take care of him,” she whispered.

The mother cat inclined its head and sloped into the jungle. To die, Romelle supposed, out of sight from its kits. Romelle knelt down.

“Come here, little one,” she crooned to the black kit.

It stumbled towards her, hissing when its siblings attempted to help it walk and pushing them away. It continued towards her, its gait becoming more and more steady as it approached. It swished its tail and clambered into Romelle’s open arms.

“I will name you Quintisha,” she whispered to the kit, “In my language, it means black and proud.” She laughed. “You certainly seem to be both.” She got up to her feet, carrying the kit away. The other kits yelped and tried to catch up, but quickly gave up and returned to their cave, waiting for a mother who would never return.

Xxx

Romelle looked up from her boat as Quintisha growled. The kit had grown fast, and was capable of taking down boar when he wanted to. His crippled paw no longer affected him, every inch of his sleek black body pure muscle.

A crocodile had wandered into the cave. Romelle clicked her tongue, and Quintisha jumped up onto the boat with her.

“Maybe he’ll go away,” Romelle whispered, “Or he’ll just eat our food and leave.”

The crocodile looked directly at them, snapping its massive jaws at Romelle, who gulped.

“Or maybe not. You know the drill, little one. Ready? Go!”

Romelle leapt over the side of the boat with a shout, landing on the crocodile’s back. The creature snapped and roared at her, thrashing to knock her off.

And completely leaving its throat uncovered. Quintisha leapt forward, biting the crocodile on its exposed neck. The croc thrashed, but slowly stopped as it became unable to breathe. Romelle got off of the creature, panting, and Quintisha let go to begin cleaning his whiskers.
“What do you think?” Romelle questioned the feline, “Do we turn its hide into clothes like we did with that jaguar who attacked us? Or do we give it to the village as payment like we did with the boar?”

Romelle had started stealing things for her boat, leaving gifts behind as payment. Village girls’ thread would disappear, but they would find the water buckets full in the mornings for a week with clear, cold water that couldn’t have come from the river. After a few weeks, the villagers began referring to her as the “sailor ghost” and had started leaving boat-related objects in a clearing for her. They’d typically come back to find a gift, sometimes something small like a pouch of fruit, and sometimes larger gifts, such as a freshly dead wild boar.

Quintisha nudged her leg twice with his head.

“You’re right. Jaguar skin is perfectly comfortable. What would I do with alligator clothing? And a pile of boards along with a saw is a very generous gift from the village. C’mon, help me drag it there.”

Romelle labored to drag the massive crocodile to the clearing, but she managed to do it. It was later than she normally brought gifts, but she had been unsure of how to repay the person who had brought boards and a saw.

A man was outside of the clearing, waiting, and he dropped his spear in surprise, making a clatter that startled Romelle.

“You’re?”

Romelle drew back in shock. It was her old master. “Oh!”

“You’re the sailor ghost?! We all thought that you died!”

“Makes sense that I’m a ghost, then, right? Ooooorr, back away! I’ll use my ghost powers on you!”

“Ghost don’t carry crocodiles.”

Romelle dropped the crocodile with a thump.

“And I don’t think that they travel with live panthers either.”

“I’m sorry. I wanted to leave.”

“To look for your brother?”

Romelle jumped. “What- how-?”

“You talk in your sleep. And… it’s alright. You don’t have to be scared of me. One of the women that you saved was one who I planned to marry. I have married her now, and I’m happy. You’re the reason. So… thank you. You are free, and… I’d like to help you fix your boat.”

“Let me guess; I blabbed about that in my sleep too?”

“Yep. Please, Romelle, let me repay you for what you’ve done for me.”

Romelle grinned brightly. “Sure! I can use an extra hand! You were a fisherman, right? I need a little help with that, actually. I’m not… a very good sailor.”

Xxx
“Goodbye!”

Romelle waved as her boat sliced through the waves, away from her old master. As she turned to the sea, her expression hardened. Now that she was away from people, especially ones that she liked, her harsh nature took over. She became the panther-mother that had taught Quintisha how to hunt and climb and fight.

“I’m coming for you, Bandor. I won’t stop until I find you.”
Oh It's Calling out and I Won't Walk away

“Is this the island?”

Coran shook his head. “No. We’ve got a full day of sailing ahead. But it is always best to stop at ports and refill any empty water barrels. You never know when you might run out of water.”

Shiro frowned at the port. “Um… That port looks destroyed. And deserted.”

Keith raced to the deck. “No. Land there.”

“Keith…”

“Please. Just dock there. I need… I need to see.”

The instant the gangplank was gone, Keith was off, charging down to the port. The others followed less enthusiastically, wondering why Keith bounced from place to place as if he were expecting something.

“Anyone here?” he called, “Anyone alive?” There was no answer but silence, and Keith dropped dejectedly. “We’d better find a river and refill the water,” he said gloomily.

Shiro approached him cautiously. “Um- Keith? Are you okay?”

“This is where I lived. With my dad. On this island.” Keith sighed. “I hoped that… maybe someone would be left living. But I guess not. Let’s just get the water and go.”

He trudged towards a well in the center of a square, and the rest of them followed, no one talking. It didn’t seem right to talk, not after what Keith had just said.

“Yahhhhh!”

Someone leapt off of a rooftop, his spear aimed directly for Shiro’s heart. He was dark haired, and his lime-green eyes glowed eerily as he attacked. Keith sword was out, and Shiro didn’t even see him move, but his attacker’s spear was suddenly sliced in half and Keith was standing in front of him, fluidly grabbing the arm of Shiro’s attacker and swinging him around as he came down from his jump. Keith slammed him into the ground, then winced, shifting his shoulders.

“Ouch.”

The boy on the ground blinked. “Keith?! Is that you?!”

Keith froze. “Daxton? You’re alive?!”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know it was you- I thought that the pirates might have come back to finish me off. Wait- I thought you were taken by those filthy bastards!”

“I was. Their whole ship blew up, and I’m the only one left.”

“Good riddance,” Daxton growled, “They deserved it.”

“Wait- I’m sorry, Daxton, was it?” Allura questioned, “Could you tell us- has anyone else survived?”
Daxton’s eyes dropped to the ground. “A few did. At first. But the pirates kept coming back, and… I’m the only one left.”

“My dad?” Keith asked in a strangled whisper.

Daxton shook his head. “Dead in the first raid. I’m sorry, Keith.”


Shiro cleared his throat. Seeing a vulnerable Keith was not something that he was used to, and he wasn’t sure that he liked it. “Are you going to introduce us?”

Keith perked up. “Oh! Yeah! Sorry! Guys, this is Daxton. He and I were neighbors. Daxton, this is Shiro, Allura, Hunk and Pidge.” He pointed to each of them in turn. “There are two others back at the ship, Lance and Coran, but they couldn’t come along.”

“Why not?”

“Well, Coran is an air spirit bonded to the ship and Lance is a mermaid who can’t leave the water.”

“Keith!” Allura hissed, “Don’t reveal all of our secrets!”

Pidge laughed. “Relax, Allura. Who is he going to tell? He’s the only one on the island.”

Daxton shook his head. “How did you end up with this group? Seems a bit improbable.”

Keith shrugged. “It’s a long story.”

“So tell it! It’s got to be one hell of a story, and I’ve got nothing better to do!”

Keith glanced at Allura, who sighed. “I suppose that we can stay for the night. I’ll go tell Coran and Lance.”

“We should all go,” Daxton suggested, “We can camp out on the beach.”

Pidge turned to Allura with bright eyes. “Can we?”

Allura hesitated before nodding. But she glared at Daxton suspiciously. Keith hadn’t met this person in years. Both sides should be a little more suspicious of each other, especially Daxton, seeing as how he had last seen Keith being carried off by pirates, had suffered frequent raids from the same pirates, and considering Keith’s companionship… she knew that there was prejudice against people like her and Hunk. Considering the circumstances, Daxton seemed to be a little too willing to talk to them. Was he just starved for human company to the point where he didn’t care who it was? Was he just making an effort on the behalf of his old friend?

Or did Daxton have an ulterior motive that none of them could guess?

Xxx

“Pst. Hey, Pidge.”

Pidge blinked blearily at Daxton. They’d had a good day, restocking the ship and telling him their story. But they were sleeping now. They had to get out early tomorrow if they wanted to get to the witch’s island. “Wha-?”
“Pidge, there’s something I want to show you.”

“Huh?”

“It’s weird, but I figured that if there were anyone on this ship who would know what it was, it would be you. You seem like the most scientific and most knowledgeable one here.”

Pidge felt flattered, despite her grumpiness at being woken up. “Couldn’t you have shown me during the day?”

“No, because here’s the thing; it’s a bunch of monkeys. But wait, wait. Here’s the thing. They glow. In the dark. But they just look like regular monkeys during the day!”

Pidge blinked. “Are you serious?”

“Dead serious.”

Pidge kicked her blanket away. “Okay. Let’s go. Right now. Show me these things.”

He grinned. “I knew you’d want to see them! Come on, quietly; I don’t want to wake the others.”

She nodded and followed him carefully from the camp into the jungle. “Where are the monkeys?”

“This way, but be quiet! They get spooked really easily.”

Pidge held in her questions and followed Daxton’s steps exactly. Glowing monkeys? Why did they glow? And why had Keith never told her about them? Were they new? Maybe the constant pirate attacks had changed the wildlife.

Something tightened around her ankle, and she barely had time to call out a warning to Daxton before a noose yanked her up into the air, upside-down. Everything spun, and Pidge struggled to right herself.

“Stop! You’re just going to hurt yourself!” Daxton crashed back over and examined the trap. “I’m going to get the others; I don’t have my knife on me, and those knots look complicated. ‘I’ll be right back!”

Daxton crashed off, and Pidge sighed, letting herself go limp. “Please hurry,” she whispered to the empty jungle.

Xxx

“Everybody, wake up!”

Keith started awake in an instant as Daxton charged into their camp. “Huh- what- Daxton, what’s —”

“Where’s Pidge?” Hunk questioned.

“She and I went out into the jungle,” Daxton panted, “There was an old trap, set up by people a long time ago, and it caught her! I can’t get her down!”

Allura was up in an instant. “I knew that something like this would happen! Daxton, can you lead us to her?”

Daxton hesitated. “Uh… I’m not sure. I kind of… lost my way, coming through the jungle.”
“Great,” Allura muttered, “That’s just perfect.”

Shiro held a hand up. “Allura, now isn’t the time. Right now, we need to find Pidge, and before a wild animal gets her. We’re splitting up. Keith, you go with Daxton. He can try and bring you where he thinks Pidge might be. Allura, Hunk, you two search the rest of the jungle and I’ll head up the mountaintop, on the off chance that she freed herself and looked for a vantage point to find her way back. Lance, Coran, you two keep a lookout and watch the town in case she comes back. Everybody, try to stick with your partner and don’t get lost! Meet back here in an hour.”

They all nodded and split up, Keith trotting after Daxton, who pushed determinedly through the foliage.

“Why did you drag her out into the jungle?!”

“I needed her to explain an animal that I saw. It was scientific interest, and I knew that if we didn’t do it tonight, we wouldn’t get another chance.”

Daxton pushed through another tree and into a clearing. “Almost there,” he murmured, “I know this place- yeah. This is it. This is where the trap was.”

Keith whirled around in the clearing. “Are you kidding me?! There’s no one here! Not even the remains of a trap! Daxton—”

Daxton was gone.

Xxx

Pidge was getting dizzy, and she decided to ignore what Daxton had told her. If she stayed like this for long, she would lose her foot. She strained to pull herself up- her core had never been her strong point- and her fingers barely missed the rope. She tried again, and this time, she seized the rope, clambering up it and onto the tree branch. She examined the knot and the rope. The rope around her ankle would loosen, so long as it wasn’t taut. A simple slip knot. She rolled her eyes.

“Seriously, Daxton? This is too complicated for you? How did you survive the pirate raids?!”

Pidge slipped the rope off of her ankle, wincing and rolling her foot to get the blood circulating again. She slid down from the tree with an ungraceful thump, wincing again. She spotted a y-shaped branch and limped to it, putting it under one shoulder and using it as a crutch. When she saw Daxton again, hopefully soon, she was going to kill him.

Xxx

Shiro huffed as he scaled the mountainside. It had been easy walking at first, but now he was in an awkward stage of half-climbing, half-walking. He let out a rueful laugh, punctuated with heavy panting. He was a perfectly fit man, and he was having trouble; he doubted that a fifteen-year-old girl with a very slight frame and who hated exercise would be capable of climbing this mountain, especially in the dark, as Pidge would have had to. Still, he couldn’t rule out the possibility.

He finally made it to the top, and flopped over, panting. He was here. And Pidge was nowhere in sight. But he had a bird’s-eye view of the island; surely he could pinpoint where most major movement was happening from here.

“Hello, pirate prey,” a voice hissed, and before he could react, a dark blur slammed into him, nearly knocking him off of the mountain.
Allura and Hunk looked up as they heard a shout of surprise and maybe pain echo from the mountaintop. They looked at each other.

“Shiro,” they breathed at the same time.

“We should go up there,” Hunk voted immediately.

Allura shook her head. “Shiro gave us a mission. We should follow it through.”

“But for all we know, Keith and Daxton have already found Pidge,” Hunk argued. “She might be safe, whereas we almost know for certain that Shiro isn’t. We should go up there. Whatever is strong enough and fast enough to surprise and hurt Shiro…” Hunk trailed off. “Well, I don’t fancy meeting it. But I’d rather know where it is than know that it’s on the island somewhere, ready to kill us.”

Allura nodded. “You’re right. Pidge will just have to wait.” She glanced up at the massive mountain. “Let’s get climbing.”

“Daxton?!”

“He did say that it was a trap,” a deep voice growled, and... Keith couldn’t even begin to describe what he was. The only word that came to mind was monster. The monster was holding a skull in his grasp, a small skull, like that of a child.

“The real Daxton died years ago, in our first raid. His illusion, however, served us well. You never suspected for an instant. You were stupid. How could you believe that your next-door-neighbor who was only twelve at the time could escape the raid when your own father couldn’t?” The skull was crushed in massive fingers. “No one survived past the first raid, but still you hoped. Sad and childish. I expected more.”

Keith felt his blood begin to boil, and he charged towards the monster, sword out. The monster fluidly dodged his attack, somehow moving behind him. Keith’s eyes moved to follow before a massive fist slammed down onto his back, hitting him so hard that he bounced when he hit the ground. He rolled away and struggled to his feet, panting. The monster moved again, again practically appearing behind Keith, this time, a fist hitting him in the ribs and knocking him into a tree. But this time, Keith had seen how the monster moved.

“I see that you carry the sword of heroes. It won’t be enough to save you. It is only a tool, and with your mind behind it, it is practically worthless.”

Keith staggered back up, and lunged again with a roar. The monster started to move again, but Keith’s left hand was already moving, yanking the tiny knife on his sheath out and stabbing it out. His blade hit flesh, and the monster roared in pain.

Keith dove to the side before he was hit again and rolled into a lower, crouching position, facing the monster with a blade in each hand. The monster surveyed him analytically, glancing at its injured hand.

“Clever. You learn fast, for a human. Very good. But I am the most senior of the Galra, their warlord. I lead armies into battle, and slaughter thousands. Who are you to stand against me?”
In answer, Keith roared again, running at the warlord and throwing his knife at the beast before bringing his sword in a sweeping arc down on the creature’s head.

Then, the impossible happened. The warlord snatched the blade out of the air, holding the blade in his hand and slamming the hilt into Keith’s stomach, at the same time, grabbing his right arm and twisting it so that his sword clattered to the ground.

“Fast,” the warlord growled, holding Keith at eye level, “But not as fast as I.”

Keith wheezed something, the air knocked out of him, and the warlord leaned forward with an amused smile. “What was that?”

“Eat- this!” Keith yelled, and kicked the warlord right in-between the legs. The warlord released him with an uncharacteristically high yelp of pain, and he tumbled to the ground, rolling in a backwards somersault, coming up in ready position.

“YOU RETCH!” the emperor roared, “HOW DARE YOU!” He swung a massive fist, which Keith barely dodged. “YOU ARE GOING TO PAY!”

Xxx

Shiro dodged another blow from his attacker, a strange woman, and then was immediately struck from behind. He skidded to the edge of the mountain, panting, and the woman reappeared, grabbing him around the throat and lifting him into the air.

“You shouldn’t have escaped,” the woman hissed, “You should have been consumed!”

Shiro struggled and kicked. “I- don’t- know- what- you’re- talking about!”

“The mark on your arm!” she screamed, “You were slated to be consumed! How did you get away?!”

“C-Consumed? Mark?”

The woman reached over and ripped his sleeve, revealing his brand. “The mark of the doomed,” she hissed, “I will tell you of it.”

Xxx

Pidge ran- or, well, hobbled- towards the massive crashing sounds in the woods. Maybe it was wild animals, in which case, she needed to get out as soon as possible, but she had a sinking suspicion that it was one of her friends behind the noises. Which meant that she needed to get over there as quickly as possible and help out.

A very human shout urged her to move faster; if she wasn’t mistaken, that was Keith’s voice, and knowing him, he was in horrible trouble. She hobbled to a clearing and barely bit back a scream. What Keith was fighting… she’d never seen anything like it! It was huge, some kind of crocodile-human mix.

And it had Keith by the throat. Her friend was bleeding from a cut over one eye and looked badly bruised. Pidge held herself back from calling out. She needed surprise if she was going to rescue him, and she couldn’t alert the monster to her presence.

Xxx
Hunk fired his crossbow up the mountain, a sturdy line trailing from it. He yanked on it experimentally, tugging on it with his full body weight. “Okay, it should hold up. Allura?”

Allura began to scramble up the line like some kind of monkey. Another shout echoed from the top of the mountain, and Allura grimly began to climb faster.

_I’m coming, Shiro._

Xxx

Pidge took a deep breath, aiming at the monster. This was it. This was her shot. She couldn’t miss it, or Keith was going to be a grease mark on the clearing floor. She sighted her target.

And fired.

Xxx

Allura emerged over the edge of the mountain and immediately spotted a woman, dressed in familiar clothing from her very own village. She had her hand wrapped around Shiro’s throat, and was murmuring something to him. Shiro’s eyes widened.

“No! You’re lying!”

Allura had heard enough. She silently leapt forward, bringing her whip down on her enemy with a _crack._

The woman released Shiro and disappeared, confirming Allura’s suspicions. Allura whirled around, and a voice echoed around them.

“I don’t need anything else here. What I need is down in the jungles. You are all _worthless_ to me!”

Her voice echoed into nothingness, and Allura offered Shiro a hand up. “What was _that_ about?”

He was gasping in air, but his grey eyes were steely and determined. “Keith. We need to find Keith before she does.”
“I’m Bursting Like the 4th of July”

Hunk stopped in mid-run, holding everyone else back. “Hang on, what about Pidge?”

“What about her?” Allura asked.

“Well- um- she’s still out there, alone and scared and hurt. Also, our one-hour timeline has expired. Shouldn’t we go back to the beach? What if Keith and Daxton found Pidge and are at the beach right now, waiting for us? Shouldn’t we check?”

Shiro shook his head. “Daxton wasn’t ever really here, and Pidge was just bait. And we swallowed it, hook, line and sinker. Right now, our first priority is finding Keith. If we find Pidge along the way, great. If we don’t, we’ll find her later. She’s not in much danger, except from wild animals, and Pidge is smart. She can handle those. Right now, we need to get moving. I’d say that we should split up to cover more ground, but that proved to be a bad idea last time, and I don’t want to risk it again while that woman is out there.”

“A thakalthi,” Allura hissed.

“How do you know?”

“The way that she disappeared. And the way that she dressed. She’s from my tribe’s area, I know it. She’s probably the one that Lotor warned us of, the one making the Ilimu.”

“Galra,” Hunk automatically corrected.

“Whatever they are, they’re after something that was or is on this island,” Shiro informed them, “and they think that Keith knows where it is. So we need to get moving and find him before they do.” He started walking. “Let’s go.”

Allura trotted to keep up with him. “How do you know this?”

“The thakathi told me. Her name is Haggar, and she’s incredibly powerful; if this amulet thing is half as powerful as Lotor said that it was, then we’re all in trouble.”

“And, what, you believe her about what she said? She could be trying to trick us!”

“I know, but it’s the only information that we have, and we have to act on it before anything happens.”

“And- how are we finding Keith? Do you have a trail? Have you found something to indicate which way he went?”

“No,” Shiro replied shortly.

“Then how do you know that we’re going the right way?”

Shiro stopped, looking her dead in the eye. His grey eyes were like clouds before a storm; dangerous and brimming with power. “I don’t,” he answered quietly.

Xxx

Romelle steered her ship in silently up along a pirate ship. “Are you ready?” she whispered quietly to Quintisha. This was it. The moment she’d been waiting for. She had learned from an informant
a barman who had wanted to get a certain panther off of his chest before it bit through his throat) that a young, red-headed boy with markings like hers had been seen with pirates. A nasty lot. Ship name?

“Tweeling zwaarden,” Romelle breathed, reading the ship name. Dutch. Twin Swords. Apparently, the ship was co-captained by a pair of Dutch twins. She was close to finding her brother. She could feel it. She just… had to hope that this particular batch of pirates wasn’t Galra. Because if the stories that her grandfather had told her were true… she was no match for them, even with Quintisha.

“Quintisha, climb,” she ordered.

Quintisha scaled the side of the ship, a rope clenched in his teeth. Once he got to the top, he braced himself, holding the rope tightly. Romelle seized the end of the rope, tied it to her boat, and slowly made her way to the top of the ship, hand over hand up the rope. As she clambered over the railing, she slipped, toppling back over the side.

Quintisha’s teeth snapped onto her belt, keeping her from falling. The big cat slowly pulled Romelle back up, inch by inch. Once she was over, she let out a sigh of relief, patting Quintisha on the head.

“Thank you.”

Romelle tied her rope to the railing, making it almost impossible to see from the deck, and snuck towards the crew’s quarters, hoping that she would be able to find Bandor there. She held her breath when she entered as a disgusting smell, like a wet dog, assaulted her nose.

“Bandor?” she whispered, risking her voice in the air.

There was no answer, and she was steeling herself to walk further into the room when she heard a loud grunt from a massive sailor. He was still asleep.

“Bandor,” the sailor growled, “Idiot.”

“What happened?” Romelle whispered when the sailor stopped talking.

“Ran,” the sailor sighed in his sleep, “Jumped into the ocean when we got close to port and swam the rest of the way. Never saw him again.”

“What was the name of the port?” When the sailor didn’t answer, Romelle poked him gently.

“Hey. What’s the name of the port where Bandor ran?”

“Port Arborisssss,” the sailor hissed. Then his face crinkled. “Why don’t you know? Everyone knew when he ran.”

Romelle backed away, hoping that the sailor wouldn’t wake up.

“Hey! Where’d you go?! You’re not one of us! You’re an infiltrator!” The man sat up and spotted her. “Everybody, wake up! We have usss an intruder!”

As Romelle watched in horror, the man wriggled and changed, his arms fusing into his body, and his legs becoming one. He elongated, and his hair shrank back into him. She started to run as the man became a giant snake, hissing and chasing after her.

“Quintisha! We need to go!”
Quintisha growled, his eyes fixed on the giant snake behind Romelle. Romelle remembered the housecats on her island hunting snakes, but surely Quintisha couldn’t-

Quintisha leapt over Romelle, seizing the snake in his massive jaws. He shook his head, and Romelle heard a crack as the snake’s bones broke.

“Good boy, now come on! There’ll be way more!”

Quintisha growled, as if to imply that he could handle everything, but fine, for Romelle’s sake, he would come. He stalked across the deck, the dead snake trailing from his mouth. With a growl and a leap, he had landed in the water and, snake and all, climbed into the boat.

Romelle started her descent down the rope, but a heavy hand wrapped itself in her hair, and she yelped, yanking away. Her struggles gained nothing, and she shrieked in pain as the hand dragged her back towards the ship.

Gritting her teeth, she pulled out a knife and sawed through her hair. She fell back down the side of the ship, and she yelled again as she slammed into the ship and again as the rope came to a halt and nearly yanked her arm out of her socket.

“There it is,” Romelle murmured to Quintisha, “Port Arboris.” Her nose crinkled in amusement. “They say that the vast jungles here will swallow you up and you’ll never be seen again. They say that the trees were planted to protect a great treasure on the island. What do you think? Should we try to find it after we find Bandor?”

Quintisha purred, rubbing his head on Romelle’s leg. The big cat made for the gangway, waiting with an impatient growl for Romelle to tie up and then let him out.

“I’m sorry,” Romelle told him, “But you’ll have to stay here. I’m going to draw enough attention as it is; I don’t think that the townspeople will react well to a panther in their midst.”

Quintisha growled again, this time sadly, and stalked back to bask in a sunny patch on the ship.

“Atta boy,” Romelle whispered, “Thank you.”

Romelle let down the gangplank and edged down it, ignoring the odd looks that the townspeople were giving her. Okay, so maybe she should’ve changed before coming down. But really, they were acting like they’d never seen a leopard skin before!

“Excuse me,” she asked a sailor, “but do you know where I might find a small, red-haired boy? He would have markings on his cheek like mine.”
The sailor shook his head. “We only got to port this morning. But you could try the central square. That’s where most newcomers go.”

Romelle beamed at the sailor. “Thank you!”

“There’s a lady who does hair that sets up shop there, too. You might want to pay a visit. Not that there’s anything wrong with your hair! It’s just a little ragged.”

“I know,” Romelle said sincerely, “I had to saw it off with a knife to escape a pirate who grabbed me.”

The sailor blinked hard, looking a bit alarmed. “Ah. Okay, then. Well- best of luck finding that boy.”

“Thank you for your help.”

Romelle bounced down the street, managing to get directions from a few people that took her to the central square. She wrinkled her nose as she came in. A dog or something must have died recently, because the smell!

A scaffold caught her eye, and she nodded to herself. A hanging. Made sense for the smell. But why did they have to leave the bodies up for so long?! How could anyone work or even live with the stench?

Romelle glanced up, curious to see if anyone had cut the left hand off of any of the condemned- she heard that some did. Gross in her opinion, but-

Romelle let out a scream, collapsing to her knees. Up there, swinging from the gallows was a thatch of red hair. Her tattooed marks throbbed as she looked up at the ones hanging from the gallows.

“No,” she whispered, “No, no, no! I came all of this way- he can’t be- you can’t be—” she broke off as a sob forced its way up her throat. “No!”

Tears streamed down from her face, and thunder boomed overhead. The denizens of the town began to flee the fat raindrops that poured from the sky. Romelle sat there, on the ground that was slowly turning to mud, and cried. Bandor was dead. She’d been too late.

A light-hearted singing reached her ears, and a red-haired and bearded man emerged from the gloom, belting a happy tune about rain. His singing stopped abruptly when he spotted Romelle.

“Here, now, little miss, what are you doing sitting in the rain? You’ll catch your death of cold.”

“Good,” Romelle stated simply, voice thick.

“Hello, what’re you crying about, eh? Had a bad day? Did a boy break your heart?”

“My brother is dead,” Romelle sobbed, “He didn’t do anything wrong, but he was hanged like a common criminal! He never broke any rules!”

“Oh, the redhead? Now, well, he was a pirate. He had a mark on his arm.”

“He wasn’t! He got kidnapped, and he escaped, thinking that he was safe, and they- and they—” she broke off sobbing again.

The man put a hand on her shoulder. “You need to get out of the rain,” he said gently, “Come
Romelle let him help her out of the mud and lead her to his house, where he lit a fire and handed her a blanket.

“Come on, you must be a brave one, wearing a pelt like that. Did you kill it yourself?”

“No,” Romelle muttered thickly, “Quintisha did most of the work.”

“Quintisha? That your brother, then?”

“No, Quintisha is- oh, no! I left him on the boat! He’ll get soaked!”

“Now, now, I’m sure if Quintisha can beat a leopard, he’s smart enough to get out of the rain.”

“No, you don’t understand! Quintisha is a panther!”

The man blinked. “A panther.”

“Yes, he- oh, I suppose he knows how to get into Luka’s tent. He’ll be okay, then.”

“You have a pet panther.”

“He’s not a pet, really. More like a companion. I helped his mother out, and she gave him to me to take care of. He’s got a crippled paw, you see, and she worried about him.”

“Ah,” the man said lightly, “I see. Ah- I’m being rude. My name is Patrick. And you are?”

“Romelle.”

“Ah. That’s an unusual name. Then again, you don’t seem like your usual kind of girl.” Patrick gave her a slight smile. “Why don’t you tell me all about it?”

Romelle hadn’t ever planned on telling anyone her story, but looking at Patrick’s earnest face, she couldn’t help herself. She poured out the whole story, starting with Bandor’s appearance up until she came into port. Her voice hitched, and she left the story hanging.

Patrick nodded. “It seems like you’ve had a hard time of it.”

Romelle looked up at him. “You believe me?”

Patrick shrugged. “It’s a little difficult to wrap my head around, but I’m kind of the village believer. I’m typically the most likely to believe in ghost stories.”

Romelle sighed heavily. “I guess that I just go home now. I looked for my brother and found him dead. There’s no reason not to go back to the island and just… live.”

Luka’s smiling face came into memory. “Bring Bandor back.”

“But- I don’t think- I don’t think I could go home. Not after this. Not after the sacrifices my friends made to get me out here. Not after I- Not after I’ve failed!”

Patrick arched a single eyebrow. “Who’s to say that you’ve failed?”

Romelle looked up at him in shock. “My brother is dead,” she said flatly, “And my mission was to bring him back alive. I’ve failed.”
Patrick leaned forward. “Now, I may be going out on a limb, here. But when you were telling your story, I got to thinking. That amulet seems like an awfully powerful item. So who’s to say if it can’t bring back the dead?”

“But- But I can’t! It’s got to be destroyed! I can’t take it! Can I?” she whispered.

Patrick shrugged. “Seems to me like you should use it. You can give it back, you know. I’m not saying that you should keep it permanently. Just borrow it, test to see if you can bring your brother back, and then give it back. As long as you don’t let the Galra get their hands on it and as long as you don’t recreate it, you’ll be fine.”

Romelle’s eyes glinted. “Yes. Yes, I could! I know that the Ocean Blessed wouldn’t deny this! Even if they were worried about someone using me to recreate it, I could just stay on my island! The messenger of the Ocean himself told me to get up and find my brother, and so did Lotor, one of the wisest men ever!” Romelle jumped up and hugged Patrick. “Thank you!”

She dashed out, even though it was still raining, and ran for the docks. She missed Patrick’s next words as he shook his head.

“Don’t thank me. I might be sending you to your death.”
Shiro stopped suddenly. A trail of destruction was leading through the jungle. Not large destruction; just a person having trouble getting through the vegetation. Hunk was probably leaving a similar trail behind them, he thought wryly. Still, it was a clue.

Shiro moved along the trail, emerging in a clearing. Pidge was sitting on the ground, her knees curled to her chest, staring at a sword that was lying on the ground blankly.

“Pidge! Daxton told us—”

“That I was stuck in a trap? I got out. And- where the hell is Daxton?! If he wasn’t with Keith, and he wasn’t with you—”

“Wait, you saw Keith?!”

Pidge started to tremble. “Y-yes, and- I’m sorry, Shiro, but they got away, and I couldn’t stop them and I’m so sorry!”

“Pidge, calm down. Tell me what happened. Slowly.”

Pidge took in a shuddering breath. “I came to this clearing, and Keith and some- some giant crocodile thing were fighting. Keith was- well, he was getting his butt handed to him. And I was going to help him- I got into a tree, and I shot my clawshot into the monster’s head, and then I was kind of on his shoulders and trying to knock him out or get him to drop Keith, but then some lady just appeared out of nowhere and she touched the crocodile thing and then- then they just disappeared! And—” she let out a shuddering breath. “And Keith disappeared with them.”

It was all Shiro could do not to slam his fist into the nearest tree and scream. They had Keith. They had his best friend, the kid that he’d taken care of, the kid that he’d nursed back to health, the kid who had driven a small fishing boat out to sea and crashed it into the ocean trying to find him. The kid who had considered a bullet wound a minor inconvenience and charged out onto an island. The kid who casually struck up acquaintances with mermen and didn’t even think twice before helping slaves escape. That adorable, lovably impulsive, headstrong, instinct-following kid who had shaken Shiro’s life up and charged right ahead with him, there for every step of the way.

“Right, then,” Shiro remarked in a falsely casual tone, “We were planning on stopping at the thakalthi’s island tomorrow anyway. We just have a new objective. Rescue Keith.” His eyes hardened. “And turn that blasted witch into dust while we’re there.”

Keith yelled in surprise as he reappeared in a cage. The strange woman was outside of the cage, purring something to the warlord- he heard the name Zarkon. Keith’s legs wobbled, and he collapsed to the ground. All of the abuse that he’d taken during his fight with Zarkon came rushing back in a whirlwind of pain, and blackness threatened the edges of his vision.

No. I can’t pass out. Not here. Not now.

But still, breathing was difficult. His bruised windpipe protested loudly every time he inhaled, and something in his chest didn’t feel right- he was willing to bet that he’d cracked a rib and gained a bruise or two.
Or fifty, he amended as he moved ever so slightly, and his muscles cramped. He focused on his breathing, rubbing his throat where Zarkon had grabbed it. Okay. He had to take stock of his situation. His sword had been left behind. His knife was still in his belt. He had no idea where he was, and he was locked up. They were in a cave, and he was willing to bet that a creepy lady like this one lived in an outright maze of tunnels.

The woman approached his cage, looking down at him scornfully. “Rat,” she muttered.

Keith snarled and rammed against the bars of the cage, knowing it wouldn’t get him anywhere, but wanting to hurt the woman, or at the very least, startle her. She stared unflinchingly at him.

“Something was hidden on your island. Something that I need. Where is it?”

Keith glared back. “What?”

“The amulet! The key to the amulet was hidden on your island! We know it was, now where was it? We’ve searched the whole damned island, and all of the citizens were dead and couldn’t tell us! You’re the last one! Surely you know where it is!”

“Nope,” Keith said simply. He didn’t have a clue as to what she was talking about, and he was too tired and hurting to pretend otherwise.

It infuriated her. “YOU LYING BRAT!”

“Listen, I don’t know where I am. I don’t know who you are. But I do know with absolute certainty that whatever you are talking about- I don’t know what it is.”

She glared at him for a few moments, then whirled around. “We’ll see.” She laughed softly to herself. “We’ll see.”

Xxx

Shiro strode briskly onto the beach, and Lance gave a wave, a grin stretched across his face. “You found her!” He glanced around. “Hey, I knew that we were gonna leave Daxton behind, but I kind of figured that we were keeping Keith.” His grin slid off of his face at their serious expressions. “What? What happened?”

It took too long to explain. Far too long. But they needed Lance to know what was going on. He volunteered to go ahead and scout out the island, promising not to do anything reckless. Shiro watched Lance disappear into the dark waters, silently wishing him luck. He was going to need it.

Xxx

Keith was engrossed with trying to unscrew the hinges from his cage door with his knife. The latch, he had discovered, repelled any attempts to get near it. The hinges, however, did not. Hopefully, he could take the whole door off.

Footsteps tapped towards him, and he quickly shoved his knife back in its sheath. The strange woman came into view, still glaring at him. “Have you changed your answer?”

“I can’t change my answer!”

A hand shot through the bars of the cage, and he barely dodged to the side of it. There wasn’t much room in the cage to maneuver, and his attempt sent him crashing into the edge of the cage.
Immediately, a meaty arm snaked around his throat, coming in through one bar and going out through another one, pinning Keith by the neck to the bars of the cage. Zarkon. The pressure was light- it wasn’t choking him yet, but he knew what was coming if he didn’t give them the answer they wanted.

“One more time. Where is it?”

“Where is what?” Keith didn’t know where whatever the woman wanted was, but he didn’t particularly want to die of strangulation either. He could stall, but not for long.

“The clue!” the woman screamed. “The hint, the riddle- whatever it is that tells us where the amulet is!”

“What amulet?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, boy! I know you’ve been to see my good-for-nothing son! I know he’s probably told you everything about the amulet! He’s sent you to find it and destroy it! He wants you to get it before me and ruin everything like the meddling fool he is!”

So, Lotor was this crazy woman’s son. Keith filed that information away for later. “Why would I have a clue, though?”

“Because,” the woman spat through clenched teeth, “Lotor gave me a prophecy. I had to track him down and kill everyone on his island- I suppose he’s found a new one- to get to him. And then I had to hold him until the blasted prophecy spirit took hold of him.” She lifted her chin. “Priestess of earth, of air and flame, who answers wrongly to Haggar by name, the power of water is yours to tame, a clue to be found on an island of fame. One day’s sailing to the west of my home, there is your clue, never to roam.” She glared at him. “What. Is. The. Clue!”

Keith couldn’t stall any longer. “I don’t know.”

Immediately, the arm around his neck squeezed, tight enough to make breathing hard, but not cutting off his air completely, and Keith struggled to keep calm. Panicking would only lose him more air, and he didn’t have time for that. They couldn’t kill him; they legitimately thought that he knew where this clue was, and they didn’t have anyone left from his island.

Haggar leaned in closer. “Zarkon will squeeze the life out of you,” she hissed, “but if you tell me where the clue is, we’ll keep you alive.”

Keith pretended to consider for a moment. “Fine,” he spat, “It’s at the bottom of the cove, in an iron watertight box, anchored to the ocean floor.”

Haggar leaned back, and Keith waited for Zarkon’s arm to release him. Haggar’s eyes were glittering dangerously, though, and she had other plans. “Lies,” she snapped, and immediately, Keith’s air supply was cut off.

Keith gasped like a dying fish, clawing at Zarkon’s arm desperately. His fingernails scored bloody furrows on Zarkon’s arm, but he didn’t let go. Keith’s vision started getting spotty, and his lungs screamed at him to take in a breath, now, now, now, but he couldn’t.

_I’m sorry, Shiro_, he thought, _I’m sorry to everyone. I- I can’t._

His vision faded into black.

Xxx
Allura cautiously approached the figure standing at the prow of the ship. He’d been standing there ever since they started moving. “Shiro?” He didn’t answer, so she took that as permission to stand next to him, resting her elbows and forearms on the ship’s railing and leaning on them. “We’ll get him back,” she promised.

“What if we don’t? What if we can’t get to him? What if—” Shiro’s voice cracked. “What if he’s already dead?”

“He’s not.”

Shiro turned towards her, his face a display of desperate agony. “How can you know that?”

“Because he’s Keith,” Allura stated simply.

“Yes, but—”

“Shiro. Stop torturing yourself with what-ifs and maybes. We won’t find Keith if we doubt ourselves. Say it after me: Keith is fine. We’re going to find him.”

Shiro let out a shaky breath. “Keith is fine. We’re going to find him.”

He almost believed it.

Xxx

Haggar watched with cold, glittering eyes as Zarkon dropped the prisoner, who crumpled to the floor of the cage. “You didn’t overdo it?”

“I know my own power, thakalthi. He’s alive. For now.”

“Good,” Haggar said softly, stretching out her hand. A ball of dark energy formed, sending little tendrils of dark energy into her subject, who stiffened. “Very good.”

Xxx

“Shiro?”

Shiro looked up. Allura had stayed with him, and he had enjoyed the silent company. But it seemed like she wasn’t done with him yet. “Yes?”

“Why did the thakalthi come after you?”

Shiro lifted his arm, his shirtsleeve shifting down so that his forearm was bare and his brand was exposed, glowing in the moonlight. “This. This is the reason. The brand, it… it’s code. When the Galra raid a ship or port, they take prisoners. Some, the weaker, they sell as slaves. The stronger, they brand with the pirate mark.”

“New recruitments?”

Shiro shook his head. “Worse. Much worse. The brand… they mark the ones who are going to be eaten by another Galra so that the Galra can take human form. I escaped just in time.”

“So Keith…”

“Also slated for death.” Shiro stared grimly ahead. “There’s one thing I don’t understand, though. If Keith was on that ship for six to seven years…”
“…Then why hasn’t he already been consumed?” Allura finished.

Xxx

Keith was floating. Not awake, but not asleep. In an in-between phase. He didn’t want to wake up. He knew that when he did, it would hurt.

Something cold drifted into him, and he stiffened. The coldness invaded his mind, filling every nook and cranny of his consciousness. A voice as cold as the invasion sounded.

“Where is the clue to the amulet?”

Keith felt the tendrils of coldness force him to answer, making him say the answer that he would have given freely anyway.

“I don’t know.”

The tendrils of coldness seemed surprised. “How is this possible?!”

Keith once again felt the coldness invade and force him to answer. “I was taken from the island when I was young. If there was a secret that we were keeping, I was never told it.”

All of the coldness disappeared from him in a flash, and his eyes shot open with a gasp. He coughed, sucking air back into his tortured lungs, sweet air. He wanted to just lie there, breathing and enjoying consciousness- as much as his injuries would allow him to enjoy it, anyway.

Haggar had other plans. With superhuman speed, she yanked open the cage door and yanked Keith out, throwing him to the ground. “You have to know something,” she hissed.

Keith’s mind moved fast. This was it. This was his one shot. Faster than Haggar could blink, he whipped out his knife and brought it towards her throat.

A massive arm seized his wrist, twisting it behind him, a foot kicking the back of his knees to make him go down. The pressure on Keith’s arm kept him from getting up, and he glared at Zarkon, who was the one holding his arm.

“Drop the knife,” Zarkon growled.

“You wish,” Keith spat.

Zarkon twisted his arm harder and pulled on it more. “Drop it, or I’ll break your arm.”

“Drop dead,” Keith snarled. It might not have been the best response, but he wasn’t exactly known for giving the best of responses.

Zarkon twisted the arm tightly enough to make Keith shout, and then yanked it, hard. There was a crack, and Keith screamed as blinding agony shot up his arm and shoulders. He reflexively dropped the knife, and Zarkon released him, grabbing his hair to hold him upright. Keith barely registered the tug on his hair through the agony in his right arm. The world faded in and out of focus before finally reasserting itself. Haggar was only inches from him, and she put one hand on his forehead, her eyes glowing eerily.

“Keith! Just hold on!”

Keith staggered back. That was Pidge. But she wasn’t- he blinked. He was back in the clearing where he’d fought Zarkon, Pidge sitting on Zarkon’s shoulders and repeatedly bashing him over
the head, a limp body on the ground. Keith shook his head, backing up. That— that was him, crumpled on the ground.

“Not the right time,” Haggar’s voice hissed, and Keith’s memories started flashing by, just snatches of time flying beside him in an instant. They stopped and slowed around one memory, his dad singing him a lullaby when he was small, only six years old.

No, he thought in a daze, trying to push Haggar back, That’s private. He firmly closed down the image, and then a spike of pain shot through his head, sending him to his knees with a cry. The image reopened, and Haggar fixated on a single verse, Keith powerless to stop her.

“Red as the dawn,
Blue as the sea,
Gold in the darkness,
Green in the trees.
It’s far as can be,
As black as the night
Hidden by a princess
Away out of sight.

Power of water
Power of the sea
Untamable, unstoppable
The blue ocean’s own key.”

“What does the song mean, Dad?”

Keith’s father hesitated, before smiling at his son. “It’s just a silly nonsense song. It doesn’t mean anything.”

Keith was suddenly snapped back to the cave, and Zarkon was pulling on and twisting his dislocated arm to bring his forearm to light. He screamed as the movement sent fresh waves of pain shooting up and down his arm, but Zarkon ignored him, pointing to the brand on Keith’s arm. “Haggar…”

Her eyes glowed scarily when she looked at his arm, and she laughed. “It seems that he has more than one purpose.”

Xxx

“Look.” Allura directed Shiro’s direction towards an island that was glowing red in the light of the dawn. “Isn’t it beautiful?”
A slight smile crossed Shiro’s face. He’d seen the island before, once in the navy. “Sunrise island. They say that seeing the glow is good luck.”

“I’ve never heard of that. But I hope it’s true.”

“So do I,” Shiro said softly, “We’re going to need it.” He wished that any good luck he had received from seeing the island could transfer to Keith. If he thought that he needed good luck, Keith needed it twice as much.
Keith gritted his teeth, taking in deep breaths and attempting to relax. Tensing wouldn’t do anything for him. Slowly, he stretched his arm out to the side, wincing as movement sent little shocks of pain up and down his arm and shoulder. Equally slowly, he bent his elbow, reaching for the back of his neck as if trying to scratch his back.

Keith let out a shaky breath, and quickly reached for his opposite shoulder, arm still behind him. There was a pop, and the pain in his shoulder faded, replaced with a dull ache, a soreness that he was sure would be there for a while. Keith rolled his shoulder a few times. It hurt, but not like it had before- not like the blinding, excruciating pain from the dislocation.

“Oh, okay,” he said aloud, “Now, the knife,”

He stretched his leg out through the bars of the cage, reaching for the knife, which Haggar and Zarkon had left on the ground. The toe of his boot nudged the tip of the knife and he put his foot on top of it, dragging the blade towards him painstakingly slowly.

Come on. Almost there.

Xxx

“Report.”

Lance splashed his tail in the water. “The island looks deserted from out of the ocean. You can’t see anyone, or anywhere that a person might be.” He held up one finger. “But, underwater, there’s a series of caves that lead to tunnels. Obviously I can’t get out of the water, but I could hear voices and footsteps in the tunnels.”

Shiro nodded. “Right, then. So someone will have to go with you under the water. But- well, to be quite frank, I’m not sure that we’ll be able to. It’s a bit of a swim. I’m not sure how anyone would get in there.”

“Perfect hideout for a witch,” Pidge asserted, “If she can transport herself and others, then no one she doesn’t watch can get in, but she and those she invites can.”

“She’s not a witch, she’s a thakalthi,” Allura protested.

“That’s not important,” Pidge replied, “The important thing is that we get Keith out.”

Hunk raised a hand. “Um, how? We don’t know anything. We don’t know what shape he’s in and if he’ll be able to swim out. We don’t know if the witch is home. We don’t know where he is under there. We don’t even know if he’s in there, period!”

“Either way, we know that the thakalthi is in there or will be returning here,” Allura argued, “And Lotor told us to destroy her. So, whether Keith is in there or not, we have to go down there. Our primary purpose is to get Keith back if possible, but if we can’t find him, then we need the thakalthi, either to kill her or force her to tell us where Keith is.” She turned to Lance. “Lance, how long will it take you to swim me to the tunnels?”

Lance’s brow creased. “I don’t know. About a minute, I think.”

Allura nodded. “That’s just going to be a risk that I’ll have to take.”
Shiro held a hand up. “Wait- you can’t possibly be thinking of going down there!”

Allura nodded. “I can hold my breath for an extremely long time. I don’t know if it will be long enough, but I have to try.”

Shiro considered, and then nodded. “It’ll have to work. I don’t want to risk you unnecessarily, but we can’t delay for too long, or…” He faltered. He and Allura hadn’t told anyone about Haggar’s words. “Or we risk losing Keith,” he finished. Lance and Pidge nodded.

Hunk raised his arms in exasperation. “Seriously, did no one listen to me? Getting in like that may very well be fine for Allura, but you keep forgetting; what about Keith?! They’ve had him for about a day now, and according to Pidge, he wasn’t in the best of shape when they captured him! Even if Allura can hold her breath that long, I doubt that Keith can!”

“I’ll just have to improvise,” Allura stated.

Shiro nodded. “I don’t like going in without a plan, but we don’t have enough information to make one. We’ll have to wing it and hope for the best. But Allura, if you don’t have a clear chance to either rescue Keith or kill the thakalthi, just look around. Bring back information so that we can make a more solid plan.” He directed his next words at both Lance and Allura. “If we’re gone, don’t panic. We’ll use Golddigger’s island as rendezvous. It’s not far, but it’s far enough that we’ll be away from the thakalthi

Allura nodded. “I will.”

“Most importantly, Allura, be careful. We’ve already lost Keith. We can’t lose you too. Be safe.”

Allura nodded determinedly. “I will. Lance?”

“Ready when you are.”

Coran lowered Allura to the sea, and she clung to Lance’s shoulders. “Ready? On three. One. Two. Three!” She took a deep breath.

And was submerged in the blue ocean.

Xxx

Keith unscrewed the last screw from the hinges, pushing the door slowly out of its place, relieved that it didn’t squeak. He stretched his legs out, rubbing them as they cramped. He glanced around for the witch or her monster, but he hadn’t seen them since Haggar had forced a lullaby out of his head.

He slipped out of the cage, wincing as he jostled his ribs, and moved cautiously towards the tunnels before breaking into a painful run. He had to get out of here.

Xxx

Haggar and Zarkon watched through a magical image as their prisoner ran into the tunnels. Zarkon growled.

“Should I go after him?”

Haggar shook her head. “No. Let him go.” Her eyes glinted as she watched the image of Keith peering around a corner, one hand on the wall to steady himself. “I’ve got a plan in mind for him.”
Allura gasped in air when she and Lance emerged in a cave. That had been rough, and for the first time, she began to doubt her plan. Would she be able to get Keith out? Hunk might have been right on that one; even if Keith could hold his breath as long as she could normally, he might not be able to do it now. What would she do if he was unconscious?

“Princess? Are you okay?”

Allura nodded, pushing her wet hair from her face where it was plastered. “Quite alright. And please, Lance, don’t call me Princess. I’m not a princess anymore. I’m a refugee slave.”

Lance shrugged. “Alright. But Princess suits you.”

Allura gave him a brief smile. She actually rather liked it when Lance called her Princess. He didn’t say it as a title, more an affectionate nickname given to a friend. “Well- perhaps sometimes. Will you wait here for me?”

Lance nodded. “Of course.”

Allura started down the tunnels, keeping a mental map of them. Left, left, another left- but that one led down a dead end, so she went back and took a right.

A loud breathing, and the pattering of feet came down the tunnels, and Allura flattened herself to the corner wall, waiting with bated breath. Just one. She could take care of it.

The footsteps and breathing got closer and closer, and as the guard came around the tunnel, Allura lunged out, staying low and sweeping one leg out, knocking the guard over. He yelped in pain, and she jumped up, eyes widening in horror.

“Keith?!?”

Keith sat up with a wince, holding his ribs. “Ngh- Allura?!”

Allura was so happy she could have hugged him. “Keith, you’re okay!”

“Yeah- I’m okay—”

“I’m so sorry! If I’d known it was you, I never would have- please, forgive me!”

“It’s okay- I’m okay.”

Allura offered him a hand up, and he took it with his left, letting her haul him up. She beamed. “We were so worried- Shiro especially.” The conversation she’d had with Shiro bubbled into her mind, but she pushed the memory away. Whatever had happened on the pirate ship, this was Keith, and she knew him. A bubble of worry rose up in her chest. “Um- How long can you hold your breath?”

“Um- fairly long. Why?”

“We have to swim out.”

Keith’s face paled, but he nodded, his face determined. “Okay. Let’s go.”

Allura began the path back, worried about how Keith’s breath seemed to hitch in his chest. From the sound of his breathing, he probably had bruised, if not cracked ribs. He stopped for a minute,
panting and trying to catch his breath, and Allura glanced around nervously. She didn’t know why the thakalthi hadn’t come after them yet, but she didn’t want to wait around for her to show up. She grabbed Keith’s wrist, pulling him forward. “Come on! You can rest when we get out!”

He let out a strangled yelp when she pulled on his wrist, yanking his arm away from her with a grunt. Allura stopped.

“Are you alright? Is your arm hurt?” Inwardly, she berated herself. She should’ve checked him for injuries first! He wouldn’t tell her what was wrong until they were safely away and stopping wouldn’t put them in danger; she should have pressed him.

He shrugged, wincing. “It got dislocated earlier. I fixed it, it’s just a little sore.”

Based on the way that he was clutching his forearm, it wasn’t completely fixed, but Allura decided to let it go, or they’d never get out of here.

“Try to keep up. You can rest soon.”

Keith nodded and ran after her, flying through the tunnels until they came out at the water level. Lance splashed his tail nervously.

“Come on. We need to get moving.”

Keith nodded to Allura, his breath coming in short, gasping bursts that rattled in his ribcage. “You first.”

“No! We need to get you up as soon as possible!”

“Can’t,” he gasped, “Need to breathe.”

Lance nodded. “He won’t make it if he doesn’t slow down his breathing first. Come on, Allura.”

Allura nodded, taking a deep breath and plunging under. Lance pulled her away with astonishing speed, and they left the cave behind, and Keith along with it.

Xxx

Once Allura was gone, Keith knuckled his forehead. “Get- yourself- together,” he panted. His ribs were aching like they hadn’t ever before, and breathing felt like he was puncturing his lungs on his ribs, like his ribcage had shrunk.

Footsteps echoed down the hallway behind him with Zarkon’s bellow following. Keith glanced at the water, waiting for Lance to appear, but the merman was nowhere in sight. Zarkon’s footsteps got even louder, and Keith made his decision. He took a deep breath, gritting his teeth as his chest sent a spike of pain through him, and ducked underwater. He could make it. He just had to swim fast.

Xxx

Lance sped back towards the cave, unease settling in the pit of his stomach. Allura was safe, but Keith’s breathing had worried him. Normally, Keith could handle any exercise without breaking a sweat. But this time…

Lance spotted a figure in red struggling through the water, one arm too slow to keep stroking. He cursed. Keith couldn’t make it on his own! He swam faster, grabbing the back of Keith’s shirt and
starting the swim back. On the way, Keith’s shirt slipped out of his grip, so he grabbed Keith’s arm instead.

Keith’s mouth opened, and a rush of air came out as if he were trying to scream. He kicked out reflexively, somehow managing to hit Lance right in his tender harpoon wound. Lance let go in shock as a wave of pain swept up through his tail.

Lance cursed again and dove after Keith, this time grabbing his other arm and pulling. Bubbles had ceased to flow from Keith’s mouth, and he floated there, eyes closed.

Lance broke the surface of the water, struggling to keep Keith’s head above the water. “HELP,” he shouted, “CORAN, GET HIM UP!”

Xxx

Shiro paled as Coran gently set Keith on the deck. Keith wasn’t breathing, and his lips were blue. “Stand back,” he ordered, “I’m going to have to get the water out of his lungs.”

Hunk shook his head. “Wait, no! Coran, get Lance up here!”

Moments later, a very startled Lance was deposited on the deck. Hunk pointed to Keith. “Get it out!”

Lance took in a deep breath and flicked his wrist. Water shot out of Keith’s mouth, and he rolled over, coughing up more, gasping like a dying fish.

Shiro rolled Keith over, getting him in a position that would make it easier for him to breathe. “I’ve got you, buddy. I’ve got you.”

“Leaving the cave was a dumb move,” Lance stated. Shiro shot him a not now look, and Lance shot a no, this needs to be said look right back. “We told you to wait, and you didn’t. I would have been there in another few seconds, and look where jumping ahead got you. You nearly died. We won’t always be around to save you.”

Keith sat up quickly, responding to the criticism with his normal tenacity. “I didn’t need you to save- ugh.” A wave of worry shot over Shiro as Keith put a hand to his ribs, falling back onto Shiro. “Ow.”

“Keith?”

Keith let out a shaky breath. “I’m okay. Just- just a little tired.”

Keith was likely very tired if he was admitting to it, and Shiro’s worry only got worse. “Okay. You deserve a nap. Can you walk on your own?”

Keith nodded, his face pale, and pushed himself before swaying and falling down again. Shiro surged upwards to catch him before he fell to the deck. “You are definitely not okay.”

“I am,” Keith protested, “I’m okay, really! I just—”

Shiro slung Keith’s left arm around his shoulders. “It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

Keith glanced at Allura, Pidge, Hunk and Lance nervously, struggling weakly to escape Shiro. “I’m telling you, Shiro, I’m okay!”
“It’s okay,” Shiro repeated, quieter this time, “They won’t judge you.”

As if that assurance was all Keith needed (or if he was simply too tired to continue), he went limp in Shiro’s grasp, breathing shallowly.

By the time Shiro reached Keith’s room, Keith’s head was lolling on Shiro’s shoulder, and he was more asleep than awake. Shiro set him down gently on his bed. “Keith, we need to get those wet clothes off of you or you’ll catch a cold.”

“No now,” Keith murmured sleepily, “later. Too tired.”

Shiro debated fighting Keith on this one, but decided that it would be too much work. He left the room, shutting the door behind him. “Coran? Can you keep his room warm?”

“Certainly,” Coran’s cheerful voice told him.

“Thank you.” Shiro headed for the deck, telling himself that Keith would be fine. That he just needed rest.

Allura was waiting for him on the deck. “I’m worried about Keith,” she announced, “His breathing isn’t right, and I’m worried that he’s broken his ribs.”

Shiro shook his head, hoping it wasn’t true. “He nearly drowned; it makes sense that his breathing would be off.”

Allura put her hands on her hips. “No, you don’t understand, Shiro. His breathing was off back in the caves, and even a short run had him gasping for breath.”

Lance nodded. “Allura is right. And then there’s his arm…”

Shiro felt his heart drop to the pit of his stomach. “His arm?”

Allura nodded. “He dislocated it. He told me that he fixed it, but it seems to be bothering him beyond the normal soreness of a recently re-located arm. And either way, he shouldn’t be moving it until it’s entirely healed.”

Shiro hadn’t thought it possible to feel any more worried, but he somehow managed it. How badly had Keith been hurt? Would he be okay? “Allura, do you know—”

“I can take care of him,” Allura said firmly, “Since I seem to be our on-board doctor, he’ll be my responsibility. But Shiro, I’ll need you to back up any decision that I make. He won’t listen to me, but he might listen to you. So if I say that he needs to do something for recovery, I need you to enforce my word.”

Shiro nodded. “Whatever you say. Just make him better again.”
Um, so, guys, I made a bit of an error when I was posting chapters, so, well, you kind of missed a pretty important chapter. I've added it in now, so go back and read chapters 6-8. Thanks, and I'm sorry!
“Oh, Keith.”

Keith shrugged, hissing in pain as he did so. “It’s not- it’s not that bad.”

Allura poked him in the ribs, and he paled. “Tell that to me again. Keith, you can’t do this to yourself!”

She examined his right arm carefully, wincing at the damage. His whole arm was mottled with purple, blue, green and red bruises that started at his fingertips and marched up to the base of his neck. The shoulder itself was the worst, and was slightly deformed. Allura took ahold of the shoulder under the pretense of examining it and then quickly shoved it back into place.

Keith yelled, and his left fist came careening towards Allura. She caught it in her hand and guided it back to his side.

“Coran?”

A sling dropped down next to her, and she nestled Keith’s arm in it, tying it around his neck. He tugged at it distastefully. “What’s this for?”

“It’s so you won’t destroy your arm again. Leave it alone. You’re to wear it all of the time except in bed.

“What?!”

“You’re not to strain your arm. You’re not to fight, and you’re not to do anything strenuous.”

“But—”

“Shiro’s backing me up on this,” Allura cut in over him, “So don’t argue. Let’s take a look at your ribs.”

“You can already see them. They’re just bruised.”

“Mmm. Breathe in.”

“What? Why?”

“Just take a deep breath in!”

He did, or tried to, but stopped with a wince. “Good enough?”

“Can’t you breathe deeper than that?”

“No.”

“I think that you can.”

“Well, I can’t!”

“Okay. Twist your torso to the side.” Allura demonstrated. “Don’t ask questions, just do it.”

Keith started to twist to the side, then stopped, hissing. “How did you do that?”
“It’s easy, Keith. Try again.”

Keith tried again, and again he stopped with a hiss. “I can’t. How can you do it without getting hurt?!”

“I think that your ribs are broken.”

“What?! I don’t have time for broken ribs!”

“Well, you’ll have to make time. I’m assigning you one week of bed rest, and then you’ll have to take it easy for another five weeks. No physical exertion. That should do it for the shoulder, too.”

“Fine.”

“And Keith? If I catch you sneaking about doing strenuous activities? You’ll be on bed rest with a guard for five weeks.”

Keith grunted unhappily. “Fine. Did you get my sword?”

Allura nodded. “We did. But you aren’t getting it back until you’re rested and you’ve had time to heal.”

Another unhappy grunt.

Allura hesitated, and then sat down next to him on the bed. “I’m glad we got you back.”

“I am too.”

“Back there, Lance… he brought up a good point. You disobeyed orders, and it nearly got you killed.”

“I didn’t want to, Allura! I didn’t have a choice! Zarkon was coming down the hallway and—”

“Zarkon?! What do you mean, Zarkon was coming down the hallway?!”

“He- he’s a massive crocodile person. He’s the warlord of the Galra, I- how do you know about him?!”

Allura ran her hand through her white hair. “No. It’s impossible. He’s dead. Died centuries ago.”

“I hate to break it to you, but he’s still alive and present.”

“No. No, that’s- it can’t be. I know that he’s dead.”

“Allura, who is he? All I know is that he works with the thakalthi. Her name is Haggar, and I think that she’s in charge of him.”

“Haggar? I’ve never heard of a Haggar. But Zarkon… He lived nearby. His tribe was a… a mixed tribe. While we, the Alteans, remained through and through of our own blood, Zarkon’s tribe had a bit of a- a colonization problem. Zarkon was a half-breed. And so were many of his generation. They eventually ruled the tribe, and they… they were rather warlike. We kept peaceful relationships with them, but…”

One day, they just turned on us. Started killing us all. We asked where Zarkon was, and… they wouldn’t tell us. Just some- some mumbo jumbo about controlling the elements and mastering nature. A small party snuck into their village after the attacks died down, and…” Allura shuddered.
“The whole village was carnage. Wild animals, we supposed. They’d ravaged the whole village.”

“Galra,” Keith said softly.

“Must have been. Who knows. But it- it can’t be Zarkon. Not really him. It’s just an Ilimu that ate him.”

“Whatever the case, he’s here now. He’s big, he’s a good fighter, and he’s completely ready to kill all of us.”

Allura sat in silence for a moment, trying to process that Zarkon was out there- that his cunning and brute strength were out there, waiting to kill them all. “Keith?” she asked in a small voice, “Why you?”

“What?”

“Why did they target you? What did they want from you?”

“Information.”

“What? But you only know as much as the rest of us!”

“Apparently not.”

More silence.

“Keith? What did you tell them?”

“Nothing! I didn’t- I don’t know! I don’t even know why Haggar wanted it! It was just a stupid nonsense song that I’m pretty sure my dad made up! But I don’t- she was willing to half-strangle me and then force herself into my mind to get it, so it has to be important, right? But it’s just- it’s just- I don’t know, I think she’s insane!”

“Keith? What did you tell her?”

“I didn’t tell her anything. She- I don’t know. She was in my head, somehow, and just- she was just sifting through my memories, looking for this memory I’ve got. Well- I don’t know if she was looking for the memory specifically, but that’s what she fixated on.”

“Keith, what memory?”

“I don’t know. It was just- it was just my dad, singing some nonsense song.”

“How did it go?”

“Um- I’m not a singer, and I don’t really remember the tune, but the words—” Keith shuddered, and Allura could tell that the words were burned on his mind. “They were- um. Let’s see.

*Red as the dawn,*

*Blue as the sea,*

*Gold in the darkness,*

*Green in the trees.*
It’s far as can be,

As black as the night

Hidden by a princess

Away out of sight.

Power of water

Power of the sea

Untamable, unstoppable

The blue ocean’s own key.” He cleared his throat. “Anyway. It’s just a song. Haggar thought that they were a clue to the amulet, but she’s insane. It doesn’t mean anything.”

Allura shook her head slowly. “No, you’re wrong about that.” She looked up at him. “Keith, I think- I think that the song is a riddle. I think- I think it will lead us to pieces of a map.”

Xxx

“Lotor?”

Lotor looked up at Axca as she entered his cave. “Axca. What brings you inside? I thought you were repairing the catapults.”

“I was, but as I was repairing them, I started thinking.”

“Always a dangerous pastime. It’s gotten me into more than my fair share of trouble.”

“Yes, well, I was thinking… Lotor, why did you send those travelers after the amulet?! We’ve tried before, and it never works! It only ever ends in heartbreak, death and the amulet remaining lost!”

“I know. And undoubtedly, this time will not be much different. Likely they’ll meet death, and we’ll be back to square one.”

“Then why persist? Why, after all of this time, are you sending more to their deaths?”

“Because, Axca, the worst possible thing to happen would be for my mother to get her hands on that amulet. I stopped sending people after the amulet because the island of the keepers was massacred. I thought that no one was left alive. No one could give Haggar the information she wanted. I was wrong, though. One keeper was left alive.”

“And we had him! We had him right here! A keeper! The last one! The only one who could tell Haggar the song!”

“Yes. We did.”

“Lotor, I realize that you don’t want to kill, and this sounds insensitive, but why didn’t we just destroy him? He was the last one!”

“Because with him, he had an Altean princess. This group is different. They are new. They can get
the amulet. They will bring it to us, and all of this will finally end.”

“Then why did you send the girl after a brother you knew to be dead? She will only get in the way!”

Lotor laced his fingers together. “I sent no one. She left. I did not stop her. She will be a test. If they prove to be corrupt, I will leave the island. If they cave to her, then I will need to take the amulet from them by force.”

“But the keeper, what happened to him-!”

“I know.” Lotor leaned forward, resting his chin on his laced-together fingers. “It will be interesting to watch what happens next. I’m rather excited to see it. He smiled at a chessboard in the corner, forgotten for nearly seven years. “Your move, mother.”
I Would Always Open up the Door

Pidge paced the floor of Keith’s room. “Okay, great, we have a nursery rhyme, but what does it mean?! We’ve got a riddle, fantastic, but how do we solve it?”

“One of the pieces is in the ocean,” Lance supplied.

Pidge whirled to face him. “How do you know that?”

Lance shrugged. “Blue as the sea. It’s a clue, right? It probably means that it’s in the sea.”

“There is no way that it’s that simple. Riddles are complicated, complex—”

“Pidge, it was hidden in a lullaby. Lullabies are made to be simplistic. I rest my case.”

“Fine. One is in the ocean.”

Shiro nodded. “Lance, we’ll need you to look for that one. You’re the only one who can.”

“That’s a whole ocean to search, though,” Allura brought up, “That’s a lot of land- sorry, water to cover. What if we need him in the meantime?”

Shiro sighed. “I know. But that’s just a risk that we’ll have to be willing to take. Lance? How long do you think it will take?”

Lance bit his lip. “Honestly? It could take years. It all depends on when I find it. Where it is.”

Shiro nodded. “How long to search the area around here? About a ten-mile radius?”

“Two months.”

“Right. Search the ten mile radius, and then meet us back at Golddigger’s island in two months. If you’ve found it, then great. If not, we’ll make a new plan. In the meantime, we’ll figure out the rest of the riddle and try to get the rest of the pieces. Coran?”

Lance was swept out of the room by a current of air, and Pidge leaned forward. “So, the rest of the riddles. Anyone have an idea?”

Hunk shrugged. “Can you repeat the riddle?”

Pidge nodded. “Red as the dawn, Blue as the sea, Gold in the darkness, Green in the trees. It’s far as can be, As black as the night Hidden by a princess Away out of sight.”
“Alright. So, Blue as the sea is the ocean. We’ve got that. Red as the dawn? Is it at the end of the world, where the sun rises?”

Pidge laughed. “That’s a myth, Hunk. The world is round.”

Shiro held a hand up as Hunk opened his mouth. “We don’t have the time to argue that. I also doubt that’s where the riddle leads.”

“Sunrise island.” Allura shifted as everyone directed their attention to her. “It glows red in the dawn light. Red as the dawn.”

“Gold in the darkness,” Pidge piped up suddenly, “It’s Golddigger’s island. It’s just a bunch of gold mines, so… gold in the darkness.”

“What about the trees?” Keith asked, and Pidge jumped. She’d forgotten that he was there, honestly, with all of them talking, and him not saying anything. She’d honestly assumed that he was asleep. He seemed to spend a lot of time asleep after his capture, especially around midday. “Lots of islands have trees. ‘Green in the trees’ isn’t exactly much to go on.”

Shiro nodded. “Arboris island. It’s an island with jungles so dense that most people can’t get in or out. Makes sense. We’ll head there first; it’s the farthest, and we have to get there and back before any major storms occur. Once we get the piece of map there, we’ll circle back to Sunrise and then come to Golddigger’s to find the last piece and rendezvous with Lance. Coran? Set course for Arboris Island.”

Xxx

Pidge cursed as she pushed her way through the thickets of Arboris island. Just because she was small and could slip through most tight spots, that didn’t mean that she had any wilderness skills whatsoever!

“Stupid trees,” she cursed, “Stupid thorns, stupid tree roots that grow specifically to trip you up! I-hate- nature!”

She tripped over another tree root and thudded to the ground. “Well, this is just fantastic.” She pushed herself up, brushing dust off of her vest. Keith had volunteered to come with her- out of all of them, he was the closest to her size- but he’d been shot down immediately by Shiro and Allura. Pidge wished that he was here, though, with his sword.

“Stupid plants!”

There had to be a better way to do this. Traipsing through this god-forsaken forest could not be the only way. Pidge glanced up at the trees. The trees…

One self-pep-talk, two failed starts, three falls and approximately twelve-point-five bruises later, Pidge was up in a tree, looking at the next one and taking a deep breath in. “It’s okay. You can do this. This will work!”

She shot her clawshot at another tree branch, and it latched. Pidge took in another deep breath. “Yep, this will be a-okay. Nothing to worry about. Just have to… just have to jump.”

Three pep talks, two failed starts and an accidental overbalance that nearly made her fall out of the tree later, Pidge jumped. She hit the end of the chain, screaming, and swung towards the tree.

“I did not think this out!” she screamed.
There was a snapping noise, and the branch that she’d latched onto snapped, sending her plummeting towards the ground. Pidge screamed again, hitting the ground with a dull thud. The ground underneath her cracked, and she fell down, into a deep pit that had been hidden by the dirt.

Pidge lay on her back, blinking at the green canopy above her. Ow. That was going to leave a bruise. Or fifty. She sat up with a groan. Ow. Ow. Ow.

Pidge looked around. She was in some kind of underground tunnel. Cool. She jogged slowly towards one end of the tunnel. “I hope this is the right way.”

The tunnel split. “Well, it’s always the left!” She started to go down the left tunnel, and then stopped. “Wait, but if they were building it from the other way, then left would be right and right would be left! So which is it?”

She glanced between the two tunnels, and then a dull roar came from the left one. “Right tunnel it is!”

She bolted, the roar coming closer and closer. She saw a great big door at the end of the tunnel and shot inside the room, slamming the door and barring it. “Okay, okay, okay. Alright. It can’t get in.”

The door shuddered on its hinges, and Pidge shivered. “But it can sure try. Okay. Let’s see.”

The cave she’d landed in had a hole in the ceiling, and her eyes lit up. If she could just get out… the sides of the cave seemed to be made mostly of tree roots, so they probably wouldn’t be hard to climb. It was a bit high, but-

Pidge glanced at the center of the room, a pedestal on it. On the pedestal was a scrap of paper, and she grabbed it. It was a piece of the map!

“Thank you,” she shouted to the thing trying to get in. She glanced back at the ceiling. Okay. This wouldn’t take long, right? She opened her bag. Inside were extra steel tips for her clawshot. She rigged them up through the toes of her boots. They would dig into the tree roots and give her footholds. Her clawshot would give her handholds.

Above her, water trickled in, and Pidge cursed. The tunnel must have taken her back to the beach, but the tide was coming in, filling the room with water. The whole thing was a trap! If you got here, you couldn’t leave because of whatever was outside, and you had to get out before the tide came in.

Pidge would just have to hurry. She shot the clawshot as high as she could into the wall and zoomed upwards. Her toes jammed into the surface of the tree root, and she looked up towards the ceiling. She kept one hand on a tree root, and the other yanked out the clawshot. She shot it again, but this time it bounced off of the tree root’s slick surface and came back down. Pidge glanced nervously at the hole in the ceiling, which was letting in more and more water. She tried again with her clawshot, and this time managed to latch on. She wiggled her spiked feet out of the root and shot up, digging her spikes in again to repeat the process. Why did this cavern have to be so big?!

Water splashed in almost constantly now, and it was all Pidge could do to hang on. She was almost there. She could shoot the edge of the hole now, and did, flying up. Water splashed in her face and soaked her clothes, but she clung determinedly to her clawshot, hauling herself out of the pit with a gasp and wading out of the cave she’d emerged in before the tide could get any higher.

It was only a short while before she found the port again, and she came towards the forest from the town path, waving to her shipmates. “Hey! Over here! I’ve got it!”
They all whirled around in a satisfyingly startled way, blinking at her. Then they were all on her, congratulating her and hugging her in Hunk’s case. But the best moment of all was when Shiro leaned down and whispered in her ear,

“Well done, Pidge. I’m proud of you.”
Lance searched in a tight spiral, circling in widening circles around his current location. He’d said two months, and he’d make it two months. He might have exaggerated how fast he could search, though. And a ten-mile radius was nothing to sneeze at. It wasn’t going to be a swim in the coral gardens, that much was for certain.

A ray swam past him, and he slapped his forehead in disbelief. Certain fish and sea creatures were smarter than others, obviously, and rays were decently clever. Hey, Lance thought at it, do you have a sec?

You’re not from around here. We don’t see many mermaids.

No, I’m from a different part. Sorry. Can you help me?

The ray eyed him. What’s in it for me?

I’ll get you a lot of clams.

Clams?

I can go further up in the water than you can. I’ll get you clams from the sand. I just need you to get me a pod of whales.

How am I supposed to do that?

Tell them that a merman who sings the whalesong is asking for their help.

Fine. I’ll find some whales. You’d better have those clams!

Lance sighed, swimming towards the nearest island. He’d better start looking for clams.

Xxx

Lance heard a low humming noise and shot towards it. The ray had done its job! He heard the whalesong and answered in kind, emitting the same low noise as the pod of whales. He held out two big handfuls of clams, and the ray shot over his hands, the clams gone in an instant.

Hasta la later, merman! Thanks for the clams!

Lance swirled in the whalesong, connecting with the pod. He’d helped out a whale with a harpoon problem once, and whales took life debts very seriously. Life debts tended to extend… well, for life. Or at least as long as the one to whom the debt was owed remembered the song. All whales were bound by honor to answer the call of one who used the whalesong and to aid them however was necessary.

Lance finished the whalesong, exactly on time with the whales, and they shot off. Whales, like merpeople and most of the more intelligent creatures, used song and feeling to communicate, in place of words. Song was filled with magic and conveyed more meaning and feeling than words. And whalesong was a special kind of song that you could only learn through a whale teaching it; there was no way for a merperson to teach it. All merpeople learned to talk, of course, and how to use their mental voice to communicate with other sea creatures, but song…

Lance mourned the fact that he couldn’t communicate with his human friends through song. They
just didn’t understand melody without words. The whales, though, were more than happy to help, although they were confused as to why he would want a small scrap of paper.

A sudden note of distress came along Lance’s connection through whalesong from one of the younger whales, and Lance closed his eyes to see what the whale saw. Wooden ships, with great, white sails, a black-and-white flag rippling from the mast.

Pirates.

Lance gave a note of reassurance that was echoed by the other whales, and swam towards the whale in distress. She keened a thank you, and soon Lance was there, the other whales coming towards him at lightning speed. Together, they rammed the ship, shoving it away from their young, and all of them sped away from the nasty thing, which, surprisingly, didn’t follow them.

The whalesong nearly faltered and, Lance swam back to make sure that the young whale was okay. She was, but her song was reaching an urgent note, and Lance gasped in understanding. She’d heard a whalesong from deep within the ship. A mermaid had heard Lance’s whalesong as the young whale had passed, and had joined in the song. Lance, now connected to the pod, had an obligation to help.

The mermaid’s whalesong connection was growing fainter and fainter as they swam further away, and the whales looked to Lance for leadership. Their first obligation was to him, of course, as the first merperson to enter the whalesong, but if they kept this up, they would lose the mermaid, and their honor would be shattered if they couldn’t find her again.

Lance sang a note of agreement, a flash of memories coming across his mind. Mermaids and mermen laughing, singing, playing with their pets. The other mermaid came first. They could look for his piece of paper later.

The whole pod, Lance a complete part of it, turned in unison, swimming back for the ship. Lance’s note became higher and higher, and the pod jumped into the air, some bellyflopping onto the ship’s deck. Lance and the rest of the pod struck the bottom of the ship, trying to break the now-straining boards.

Lance wasn’t as strong or big as the rest of his pod, but through the whalesong, he could feel the raw power and force of a fully-grown whale charging through him at lightning speed. The ship splintered to pieces under their weight, and sank down.

Lance swam through the wreckage, searching for a sign of the mermaid who had joined the song. Her part in the song had ended, and he just hoped- he hoped-

A weak strain of whalesong reached him, and he breathed a sigh of relief. She was alive. He closed his eyes and saw her, looking at him, scared, from a plank of wood that she was chained to. He used her eyes and view of him to navigate to her, opening his eyes when he got close

He tugged on her restraints and then shook his head, moving his hands. Water pushed into the locks, forcing them open. A thrill of surprise shot through the whalesong. Not many merpeople could control water.

The mermaid connected freely with the whalesong and frowned at Lance’s request, tentatively offering a mental picture of a scrap of paper she’d seen shortly before being captured, one that glowed with a blue light and was jagged around the edges, as if it had been torn from a greater whole.
Lance could have hugged her, he was so happy, but they had some problems. Some serious problems.

Some of the pirates thrashed where they hit the water, writhing and changing, their faces elongating into snouts, gashes that Lance knew to be gills appearing on their necks, their arms turning grey and turning into triangles, a massive fin sprouting out of their backs. Others were growing more arms, or sprouting tentacles.

Within an instant, the pirates had turned into a motley of barracuda, sharks, octopi and box jellyfish. They swam towards Lance’s pod, the barracuda and sharks reaching first and tearing at the whales with razor-sharp teeth.

High, keening noises of distress and pain came across the pod, and Lance swam towards them, punching a shark in the gills. Gill-shots were considered dirty fouls in play-fights between merpeople, but Lance was perfectly willing to pull a few fouls in this fight if it meant saving his pod.

He got a barracuda the same way, and then a different one sank its jaws into Lance’s arm, another latching onto his tail. He thrashed, bashing their heads into a whale’s side. They let go, stunned, and Lance hissed, pressing one hand to his arm wound for a second.

One second was all it took. The box jellyfish, which had been meandering nearby, suddenly joined the fight, latching onto Lance’s arm. The jellyfish sent a paralyzing shock of pain through Lance, and he shrieked, his pain turning into bubbles and momentarily interrupting the whalesong. The other whales answered in like noises of distress, able to feel his pain through their song.

A hand came crashing down on the jellyfish’s top, and it was smashed. The mermaid was there, kelp wrapped around one hand. She yanked the tentacles off of Lance’s arm, and grabbed his uninjured arm, yanking him away from the fight.

The whales, Lance thought at her, the pain of the sting making it hard for him to continue the song, or even communicate through mersong. The mermaid, however, kept the song going, and Lance could see the whales fleeing from the sharks, barracuda and jellyfish, scattering and keeping up the song so that they could find each other later.

Good, he thought, letting the blackness at the edges of his vision flow over him, I hope someone—someone can get the map piece to the others…
“Sunrise island. It’s… beautiful.”

Shiro smiled at Allura’s awe. “It is. The question is, where would one hide something on it?”

Pidge pushed her glasses up her nose. “Probably at the summit of the mountain. Or in a cave hidden along the way. Somewhere that the sun touches, definitely, or there wouldn’t be a point to the riddle. Either way, we need to make for the mountain.” She shivered. “Does anyone else find the lack of trees… creepy?”

Hunk laughed. “You’ve spent too much time on Arboris island.”

“‘The ground here can’t grow anything,’” Shiro explained, “‘People have tried settling it, but all of their crops failed. Combined with the lack of running water on the island, it doesn’t make for a very settleable island. So… everyone just kind of regards it as a fancy curiosity with no practical use.’”

“Good place to hide something, if there’s no practical reason to land here.”

Shiro nodded. “Exactly.”

The four of them journeyed towards the top of the mountain. The incline wasn’t high, but Shiro still felt a pervading sense of danger. If they fell, it would hurt, but it wouldn’t kill. It might not even break a bone. So why did he feel like something was going to jump out at him?

“Yes, the lack of trees is definitely creepy,” Pidge stated, “I mean, while I was in the jungle I was wishing that there weren’t so many plants, but this—this is too open. Anyone could see us.”

“Yeah, but we can see them,” Hunk reminded her, “We’ll be okay.”

Shiro nodded, wishing that that sixth sense telling him to run would just go away. He was letting Keith get to him. Before they’d left, the injured swordsman had asked Shiro to please let him come. He had told Shiro that he had a bad feeling about Sunrise Island, and he wanted to make sure that there were enough of them to take down any opposition.

Shiro had gently pointed out that he was injured, and while he appreciated the offer, Allura would have both their heads if he let Keith come along. Keith had grumblingly accepted it and had stayed behind.

Now, though, Shiro wasn’t quite so sure that he should have turned Keith down. Sure, Keith was injured and sure, he was only one person, but whether or not Keith was on your side in a fight could make a difference that Shiro wouldn’t want to miss.

Shiro shook himself, telling himself that he was being paranoid. They weren’t going to get in a fight. They didn’t need Keith to make a difference, because there was no difference to make.

Hunk had his hands on his knees, his hair blowing slightly in the wind, when they reached the top. “Okay,” he panted, “it had better be up here, or I’m going to be very put out.”

Pidge frowned. “Uh, guys? We’ve got a problem.” She pointed to a pedestal at the dead center of the mountaintop. There was nothing on it. “I think someone moved it.”
Shiro cursed. “Haggar’s gotten to it first!”

A shot rang out from the bottom of the mountain, and Allura screamed, falling back. Pidge knelt by her side, pressing her hands to Allura’s shoulder. “Guys, she’s hit! We need to get out!”

Shiro whirled around. Lizard men were shimmering into being, all with guns and horrible grins. Shiro’s heart sank. Someone would get shot if they tried to resist. He saw where the next gun was aimed and swept his leg underneath Hunk’s, knocking him over as shots raced over his head.

Shiro looked Hunk dead in the eye. “Get back to the ship,” he ordered, “Tell Keith and Coran what’s happening. I’m sorry for what I’m about to do.”

He placed one boot on Hunk’s back and shoved, hard, rolling Hunk into a lizard man. As Shiro had hoped, the islander’s mass took down the lizard man and sent both of them rolling down the mountain, faster than the people with the guns could keep up. Pidge grinned, aware of what Shiro was doing, and ducked under hands that tried to grab her (and had already seized Shiro), running for Hunk’s crossbow, and scooping it up, throwing it as hard as she could down the mountain. Another shot rang out, and Shiro yanked against his captors, swearing at them as Pidge crumpled to the ground, moaning and holding her leg.

“She’s just a little girl!”

“She’s enough of a threat to arm our enemies,” one of the lizards hissed, holding Shiro tightly, “She’ll likely survive. Settle down.”

Shiro rammed his head into the nose of his captor, wrenching away. He came up in fighting position, but he was too late. The butt of a gun slammed into the back of his head, and he felt hands grab his arms to keep him upright as his vision flickered out.

It’s up to you, Keith, Hunk, he thought woozily, I’ve done all I can. I need to take care of Pidge and Allura. Please… hurry.

Xxx

“Coran?”

“Yes, Keith?”

“They’ve been gone an awfully long time, haven’t they.”

“Ah, well, they’ve got a whole island to search.”

Keith paced the deck. “I don’t like this. They should have been back by now.”

“Keith, I let you up on deck for fresh air, but you can’t overexert yourself.”

“I’m just walking, Coran. Wait- waitaminute, that’s Hunk! Coran! Get him up!”

Coran obliged, and Hunk was deposited on the deck, panting from running. He was covered in bruises and scrapes and Keith gave him a quizzical look.

“You look like you fell down a cliff.”

“Yeah, well, I kind of did.”

“What?!”
“Shiro kind of pushed me off.”

“WHAT?”

“Well, we got ambushed, and Shiro shoved me over the mountain to save me, but yeah, it kind of hurt, anyway, we need to see what’s happened to them! Allura got shot, and I heard Pidge, scream, so… Um… it’s probably not good.”

Coran thought for a moment. “How windy was it up there?”

“Pretty windy, I guess. Why?”

Coran brightened, and closed his eyes. Moments later, he opened them again. “There were air spirits up there. They say that Shiro, Allura and Pidge are suspended over water. Pidge has a wounded leg, and Allura a wounded shoulder. Shiro has a mild concussion, I think, but other than that, he should be okay. At high tide, the water will flood the cage, and they’ll have to swim up to avoid drowning.”

“But Allura and Pidge can’t! They’re hurt!”

“Shiro will take care of them,” Keith said confidently, more confidently than he felt, “And we’ll just have to rescue them.”

Coran shook his head. “No can do. The way into the tunnel is heavily fortified. The only part that isn’t swarming with guards is the underwater part.”

The underwater part.

“Lance. Lance can go through the water.”

“Keith? One problem. Lance isn’t here! He’s off god-knows-where in the ocean!”

“Well, we’ll just have to find him.”

“Um, hello? Underwater? You haven’t sprouted gills yet, have you?”

“If I had, I’d be going after them myself. No, but Lance has a tendency to show up unexpectedly.”

“Keith, why don’t we go to Golddigger’s Island? Wait. We’re supposed to rendezvous with him there.”

“We’ve still got another month before that rendezvous, Hunk! The others don’t have that kind of time! We need to find him now!”

“Gentlemen?” Coran held out a necklace with a mermaid tear hanging from it. “I’ve got a solution. Lance was homesick and didn’t realize I was nearby. I probably should have told him that I’d taken the tear, but…”

Keith made a grab for the necklace. “Great. We don’t even need Lance. I’ll just grab it and go!”

Coran pulled it out of his reach. “No. You’re still on bedrest. But Hunk won’t be able to get them out either. So, we’ll compromise. You get the tear, but you have to find Lance. You cannot go after them yourself; there’s no telling what’s underwater in those tunnels.”

“Fine!”
Hunk raised a hand. “Um, what about me? What do I do?”

“Go to Golddigger’s island,” Keith ordered, “Wait for Lance in case I can’t find him. And get the piece of map there while you’re at it.”

“I can do that.”

“Great. Coran?”

“Here.”

Keith slipped the tear over his neck, and felt a ripping, tearing sensation on his ribcage. He hugged his chest with a groan, and Coran made a ‘oops’ noise.

Keith looked up, gasping. “Oops!”

“Yes, well, I forgot about your broken ribs. Not sure this is such a good idea.”

“G-great.”

“Didn’t Lance say that this was easier in the water?”

Keith ran up the deck stairs, diving into the ocean. His legs fused, his feet turning into fins, and an inner eyelid sliding into place over his eyes. A fin sprouted on his back, and another pair sprouted behind his ears. He eyed his tail, which faded from a red to a sunset orange, little glimmers of golden scales scattered around.

“This seems a little too flashy.”

Coran whistled around overhead. “You’re a coral mermaid.”

“A what now?”

“You’re a mermaid that lives in the coral reefs. Your tail helps you bled in there.”

“Great. Pidge and Lance get nice, sedate, ocean colors and I get bright red.”

Coran hummed. “Well, Pidge is a kelp mermaid, meant for the beds of seaweed and kelp. Her green tail would help her blend in there. And Lance is an ocean blue mermaid, meant to roam a bit, typically stay a bit closer to the surface, because his blue and purple tail will blend with the water around him.”

“Okay. Fine. Toss down my sword.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? Where will you strap it? If you strap it to your waist, you’ll restrict tail movement.”

“I’ll put it on my back, then. The back fin isn’t that important.”

Coran looked like he wanted to disagree, but threw down the sword. “Good luck!”

Keith nodded and dove into the ocean. He had to be fast.
Shiro glanced at the water level. It was rising. It would flood the cage soon.

“Allura? Pidge? How are you two doing?”

Allura whispered an assurance that she was alright, and Pidge nodded faintly. “I’m okay. How long before the water level rises and we drown?”

“We won’t drown, Pidge. We’ll be alright.”

“Don’t lie to us, Shiro.”

“Ten minutes. Then the water level will carry us to the top of the cage.”

Xxx

“This is it?”

“Yes, Hunk.”

“You’re sure.”

“Yes.”

“There are an awful lot of pirates hanging around.”

“There’s an awful lot of gold here. Just go and do your best.”

“Great. That’s your advice?”

“Sorry, I don’t have a fully written seminar on Golddigger’s island.”

Coran didn’t sound sarcastic, and Hunk wondered if he did have fully written seminars on other islands.

“Right. Okay. Here I go.”

Hunk walked down the gangplank slowly, trying his hardest to look small, insignificant and certainly not worthy of the pirates’ attention.

“Don’t mind me,” he whispered under his breath, “I’m just trying to steal something from this island that probably all of you are here to find and I came in a massive ship that is piloted by a wind spirit, and by the way, apparently two of my friends are slated for eating, but escaped from your ships, yeah, also one of them is some kind of knowledge holder that escaped for a second time from your leader but- oh, hello!” Hunk’s voice went up an octave or two as he bumped into a pirate.

“What are you muttering about, filthy islander? Get out of my way!”

Hunk breathed a sigh of relief as he obeyed and thanked his lucky stars that he wasn’t white. They might have actually given him a second glance if he were, and then he’d be in trouble. He scurried towards the mines, eying the guards carefully. He had to watch his step, here, or things could go very, very badly for him.
Shiro strained to stand on the bottom of the cage and keep his head above the water. Pidge was clinging to his back, and Allura was treading water next to them, being careful not to move her injured arm. Shiro swam up, latching Pidge onto the bars on top of the cage, then wrapped one arm around Allura and grabbed the bars of the top, straining to lift both of them a reasonable breathing distance above the water. He glanced at the rising water. He could hold this for now, sure. But could they hold it long enough for the tides to go in?

Hunk scurried through the mines under the watchful eye of various guards and pirates. He had to move fast, or-

There! Hunk moved to a carving on the wall. It was of some kind of necklace- this had to be it. He touched it gently, wondering what the clue was, and stepped back as it started to glow. He touched the wall again, and it shimmered under his touch, rippling like water.

Hunk took a deep breath, and pushed through the wall, emerging in a cavern with a pedestal. The wall completely disappeared once he walked through it. The cavern walls were made of gold, but Hunk ignored it. There was one thing that he wanted. And that was the scrap of paper on the pedestal.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?!”

Hunk started, quickly grabbing the paper and shoving it in his pocket before whirling around to face the pirate who had surprised him. “Me? Nothing. I just- I found this room, isn’t it cool? Um- I’m supposing that you want it, based on that large knife you’re pointing at me.”

“And you’re going to get out and give it to me before you lose an eye.”

“Yep. Okay. Leaving now. You have fun with all of this gold.”

“Stupid savage,” Hunk heard the pirate mutter under his breath as he exited.

Ignorant pirate, Hunk thought contemptuously back as he slid out, I’ve got the better end of the deal; you just don’t know that!

Hunk struggled not to run back to Coran and the Castle of Lions. If he did, it would look suspicious. But still, he couldn’t help but smile as the piece of paper pressed against him, hidden safely in his pocket. They were just that much closer.

Keith swam under the waves, wishing that his tail weren’t so bright and noticeable! Maybe he was suited for living in the coral, but there certainly wasn’t any here.

Watch it, merman, a ray grumbled as he bumped into it, Geeze, coral dwellers. Ruffians. So much less polite than the ocean blue merman.

Keith stopped in shock. Ocean blue merman? Hadn’t Coran said that Lance was an ocean blue merman?

You saw an ocean blue merman? My age? Blue and purple tail? Kind of annoyingly pushy?
Pfft. If it’s the same one, he’s not nearly as annoyingly pushy as you.

But you saw one?

The ray eyed him. What am I getting out of this?

Faster than the ray could see, Keith seized it in his left hand, yanking his sword out with his right and wincing as the movement jostled his shoulder painfully. You get to live. You saw an ocean blue merman. Where did he go?

Geeze. Simmer down, coral scum. He swam off with a pod of whales. I followed a bit, saw him get stung by a sea wasp. Nasty things. Anyway, his mermaid girlfriend dragged his dying corpse off to the mer-city. It’s about three days to the west. I wouldn’t bother, though. Sea wasps don’t generally leave things alive, and anyway, a mer-city in the ocean blue is no place for a coral dweller. If they let you in the city at all, you’re going to get stares, and besides, coral-dwelling scum like you have a rough time of it, especially in civilized waters. Just give up.

Not an option. Keith released the ray, which swam off, annoyed. He turned towards the setting sun. Mer-city, here I come, coral-dweller or not.

Xxx

Shiro dropped from the top of the cage, splashing into water that was shallow enough for both him and Pidge to stand in.

“Okay,” he called, and the petite girl dropped down to join him, cursing as the salt water got in her leg wound. Shiro’s muscles ached, and Allura sighed.

“I’m sorry, Shiro. I’m just a deadweight.”

“Allura, don’t say that!”

“Shiro, I am! You have to hold me up because I’m injured! I’m weighing you down, and eventually you won’t be able to hold both of us up! Because of me, you won’t even be able to hold your own head above the water! How long do you think that you can keep this up, Shiro?”

“As long as it takes,” Shiro said grimly, “I’m not losing either of you. Not here. Not like this. I’d die first.”
Flipping Through My Life Turning Pages

Lance woke to the sound of mersong. He looked around groggily, his right arm where the sea wasp had stung it completely numb. He blinked.

“Ow.”

A small fish darted in. *Blu went to get the paper,* it told him.

*Blu?*

*Yes, Blu.*

*Who’s Blu?*

*Blu!* The little fish swished its tail in irritation. *Mermaid. Friend.*

*I’m sorry, I don’t know who you’re talking about.* Lance sorely missed the whalesong, where he knew every single detail without all of these words and the trouble they brought.

*Blu! Sing! Whales!*

*Oh! Is Blu the one who brought me here?*

*Yes! Blu! She said to wait. She is getting your paper.*

*What do I do in the meantime?*

*Recover. Rest. Explore the city. Explain yourself to your parents.*

*My parents?!*

*Here. Frantic. Very angry.*

*Great. Well, this will be… interesting.*

Xxx

Keith swam up to the gate of the mer-city, joining the line of mostly-blue mermaids and mermen that were filing through. His tail got a few looks, and he curled it closer to him, conscientious now more than ever of his bright tail. It had been three days since he’d spoken to the ray, and he hadn’t stopped since. Not to sleep or eat, not that he was entirely sure how to sleep as a fish.

The ray had made it seem like being a coral mermaid was considered dirty, and based on the looks he was getting, that was a fairly accurate assertion. He seemed to get jostled and bumped more than he usually did in crowds, but he couldn’t catch whoever was doing it. The guards at the gate held out their spears to block him.

*No weapons inside of the city.*

Keith bristled. *But I just saw someone walk in with three daggers and a harpoon gun!* he protested, *Why didn’t you take his weapons?!!*

The guard shrugged. *Those were for cooking and hunting. That sword is obviously for fighting, and...*
we don’t want anyone hurt in the city limits.

So, what, if I stabbed the guy behind me right now, it’d be fine, but if I did it in the city limits, it would be illegal?!

The guy behind him looked considerably alarmed, but the guards just shook their heads. No weapons in the city limits, the first one repeated, Your property will be returned to you when you leave.

I call racist bull, Keith grumbled, but unbuckled his sword and let the guard take it. Behind him, the guards let a man with a spear enter.

Xxx

Lance’s mother’s anger vibrated towards him through their mersong, becoming a fully blown argument.

“KEEP LEAVING, NOT A CLUE AS TO WHERE YOU ARE, RUNNING OFF WITH HUMANS, NO LESS—”

“I’m not going to end up like her,” Lance protested, “Stars above, I’m not in love with any of them! They’re just my friends!”

“And why can’t you be friends with a nice, normal merperson?! Why do you have to be friends with a—” Lance’s mother shuddered. “A human.”

“More than one, technically.”

“Even worse!”

“Look, Mom, I’m sorry. I really am. I should keep contact with you, I know. But I just… haven’t had the time. We’ve had so many problems, what with kidnapping and—”

“Why did you have to go tearing about after a human raft?! That’s what started this whole thing!”

“To be fair, that was complete accident; I did not go looking for that.”

“To be fair, you shouldn’t have been up that close to the surface in the first place! You’re an ocean blue mermaid, Lance! Not some- some coral dweller! You need to remember that!”

Lance drooped. “Yes, ma’am.” He glanced out the window, hoping that his longing to be out again wasn’t being given out through the mersong. Please, Blu. Hurry.

Xxx

Keith drifted through the marketplace, which was eerily silent except for a humming noise that occasionally changed pitch in certain places. No one seemed to be talking, even mentally. He frowned, wondering why everyone seemed to know what their customers needed.

Excuse me, he thought at a mermaid clutching a scrap of paper, who startled like a frightened fish, the humming increasing. When Keith didn’t respond, a thought came at him.

What’s wrong with you?! Why don’t you use a mersong?! I’ve heard that the coral mermaids are barbarians, ruffians and uneducated, but you can’t possibly exist without mersong!

Um. Sorry? I- uh- I haven’t ever known any other mermaids. So… what’s mersong?
The mermaid circled around him, curious thoughts coming at him from her. *Mersong is how we communicate. It’s very efficient. Much more efficient than words. But you should know how to use it; most are born with it! How are your vocal cords not… hm. You’re very strange, did you know that? Your mersong isn’t unlocked! Hold on a minute, we need to get you to a doctor, right now! That’s a serious problem!*

Keith turned as red as his tail. *Um- I don’t- I don’t have anything to pay for a doctor.*

*Pay?! For a doctor?! The reefs really are backward places, aren’t they? You don’t have to pay for a doctor. What a thought. Come on. Whatever you have to do here, you won’t be able to do it if you’re not in on a mersong. The guards use words because of the emotional link that comes with mersong, but you need to get the ability before you do anything else, absolutely. Come on! Follow me!*

Keith followed her through the streets. *Um- aren’t you doing anything?*

*Hm? Oh, I can wait. It’s not urgent. I mean, it is a little, but he probably hasn’t even woken up, so- I’m Blu, by the way.*

*Keith.*

*Weird name, but okay.*

Keith looked around. There were plenty of blue tails around, with a sprinkling of white, black, green and yellow tails here and there, but he seemed to be the only coral mermaid around. Blu swam into a shop, humming what had to be a mersong, and calling out another blue mermaid, who caught sight of Keith and paled, his humming becoming a little more high-pitched. Blu’s became a little deeper, and the doctor sighed in relief. Blu grinned at Keith.

*He thought you were muscle and we were here to intimidate him into giving us money.*

The doctor examined Keith, squinting, and hummed at Blu. She frowned.

*He says that your mersong can only be unlocked by open-air mersong.*

*What?*

*Mermaids can’t sing underwater, Blu explained, when we do, we get water in our lungs, and we won’t ever be able to go on the surface, or we’ll die. Mersong is fifty-percent magic and fifty-percent the noises we can make through humming, clicks and occasionally whistles. So mersong is mostly humming. Open air mersong, though… that’s powerful stuff. Singing in the open air is strong music, and the magic is likewise strengthened. Apparently, open-air mersong is the only thing that can unlock your mersong. Also, he says that you need to sleep and eat because you look exhausted.*

*Okay. I’ll keep that in mind, but I have bigger issues right now. I’m looking for a merman- I’m sorry, but I can’t help you anymore. I’ve got something to give to someone, and I can’t delay any longer! Goodbye!*

*Wait- Keith sighed. She was gone. He’d have to find Lance by asking around. The doctor was giving him nervous looks again, and he sighed again. Easier said than done.*

*Xxx*
As Keith swam through the marketplace, looking for Lance, he heard a high-pitched giggle, and saw a pair of mermaids, giving him both admiring and disappointed glances. One of them swam up at a shove from the first, humming. Keith didn’t respond, and a tentative thought came at him.

*Hey, you’re, like, a coral mermaid, right?*

Yeah.

*So- um- I was wondering- like- can coral mermaids not sing? I thought it was a myth, but you didn’t respond when I tried to initiate mersong! Is it true?*

*Um. No. I’m just… different.*

*Oh. If you’re different, then do normal coral mermaids really have big shark teeth? And claws? And a venomous bite?*

*Um… no. They’re just mer-people.* Keith had no idea if that was true.

The mermaid hummed something at her friend, who swam up shyly. *Do you have a girlfriend?*

Keith jerked back, his face heating up to a bright cherry red. To her credit, the mermaid also blushed and swam off, her friend laughing and giving chase.

*See you later, coral mermaid!*

Keith felt a shove to his back that sent him into the wall. *Hey!*

Someone laughed mentally. *Finally, that sea-slug is getting what he deserves. Stupid coral mermen. What a bunch of barbarians. And he thinks he can take our women?! I hope the guards lock him up.***

Keith located the merman who had thought that and swam up to him. *Excuse me, but where I come from, shoving people into walls is rude. And you say that I’m the barbarian?! I don’t want to steal your women, she approached me, so maybe you should teach your girls to behave!***

The merman turned bright red and pushed Keith in the chest. *You don’t belong here, scum-sucker. Go back to the reefs.*

Keith turned and slammed his powerful tail into the other merman’s face with a growl. The other merman came at him, and Keith crossed his arms to absorb the blow, following quickly with an uppercut to his ribcage, forgetting that natural mermaids absorbed oxygen directly into their bloodstream.

The merman grunted, but didn’t seem to care much, bringing his tail towards Keith, who ducked under it and rammed his shoulder into the merman’s back, driving the heel of his hand into his nose.

The guards were coming at them now, and Keith decided not to stick around. He was tired and hungry from traveling, and he didn’t think he could take on trained guards in their home environment. He knew whose side they would be on. In a flash of red, he was gone, stroking through the currents, and swimming above other merpeople before ducking back into the crowd. He was given annoyed looks as he barged past, and he heard angry thoughts and what had to be slurs against coral mermaids.

A net tangled up in his tail, pinning the fan part together, Keith shook his tail, but the net was tight,
and swimming without it was like trying to walk without your feet. Possible, but very slow and clumsy.

The guards finally caught up to him, grabbing his arms and hauling him off, leaving the net tangled around his tail fins. Keith struggled, but couldn’t shake them. He finally went limp in their grasp, hoping that their grip would loosen. No such luck. He sighed, bubbles floating out of his mouth. He hoped that mermaid law wasn’t too harsh.

Xxx

There was an interrupting knock from outside, and Blu swam through the door. She gave a bow to Lance’s parents before handing Lance a scrap of paper. She hummed, and Lance hummed back. Her debt was complete, but they were connected still by whalesong. They had to end it if they wanted to separate.

Lance assented, and they both abruptly cut off the whalesong magic that was binding them. Then a guard burst through, humming, and Lance sighed. A coral mermaid who started fights in the streets. Of course one would appear here, now.

Lance followed his parents towards the courtrooms, hoping they could get this over with and clutching the precious scrap of paper in his hands. He had to get out of here. And fast.

Xxx

Keith glared sullenly at anyone and anything that looked at him, silently daring them to try their luck. The guards dragged him into a central courtroom, and two regal-looking mermaids swam in, their mersong joining the rest of the mersong in the room. Following behind them was a shifty-looking young mermaid who-

“Lance?!” Keith spoke the words out loud in shock, the air turning into bubbles and floating up. Keith quickly shut his mouth before any water could get in his lungs, instead thinking it.

Lance?

Lance looked up in a startled flash of blue. Keith?! How- why- of course you’d be a coral mermaid- okay, hold on. What is going on?!

One of the guards mentally thought the words Prince Coralance, and Keith’s eyes widened, the inner eyelid nearly opening.

Prince?! You didn’t tell us you were mermaid royalty!

You never asked. But that’s not important right now, because you can’t mersong! You’re human!

Can’t I just tell them what happened? Mentally?

No way! They’ll just think you’re lying! Through mersong, we can see your memories! They won’t believe anything else! But you can’t use mersong!

Lance started a humming, as if telling everyone a story. Eyes widened, and Lance’s humming increased as he made his way towards Keith, who stayed stock still, every muscle tensed to swim away.

When I say go, swim straight towards the skylight. Ready? Set? Go!
Keith launched himself upwards, and Lance grabbed a guard’s spear, throwing it at the skylight and shattering it before he launched himself towards Keith, swimming at a much faster rate than Keith was swimming. He caught up in no time, grabbing his empty sheath strap and yanking him along faster. Behind them, the skylight exploded with more guards, swarming out after them.

Where’s your sword?

Got taken away at the gate.

Yeah? Then what’s that?

Keith glanced to his left and saw a familiar silver shape darting towards him. What...

You’ve got a magic sword, man!

Okay, then…

Keith’s sword darted into his sheath, and he blinked. Okay. That happened. Do you know where we’re going?

Well, I’ve got my bit of map, so, uh, Golddigger’s island, right? And what are you doing in the ocean?

I’ll explain when we’re not running for our lives. But Prince Coralance?!

Well, my adopted parents are kind of royalty. So, yes. There’s that. Um. Yeah. It’s not important. Forget it.

Keith rolled his eyes, swimming towards Golddigger’s island. They had a long way to go.

Xxx

“Shiro, please. Just let me go.”

Shiro shook his head, even though doing so drained his energy. They hadn’t been fed, and they slept in shifts, Shiro insisting on taking the most watches so that the injured ones could rest.

“I’m not going to do that, Allura.”

“Shiro, please, listen! You’re exhausting yourself, and there’s no point in both of us dying! Just leave me to fend for myself, and save yourself!”

“That’s not happening, Allura. We’re all going to make it out, or none of us.”

“But Shiro, you’re tiring! You cannot keep this up!”

Shiro was drooping and his muscles were shaking from the effort of holding both himself and Allura up, but there was no way that he would let her know that. “I’ll be fine,” he lied, “We won’t have to hold on much longer. The others are coming. We just have to hold out.”

Please, he thought at water lapped at his feet, hurry.
“Coran! Coran, there they are!”

At Hunk’s shout, wind swirled around Keith and Lance, depositing them on the deck. Lance grinned.

“We’re back! What’s going on? Keith isn’t telling me!”

“Shiro, Pidge and Allura were captured,” Hunk told him, “They’re being kept kind of underwater? We need you to rescue them.”

“How? How am I supposed to get into the cage?”

“Unlock it with your water and swim them out!”

“Okay. Are they here?”

Keith’s shoulders drooped. “No. Sunrise island. The pirates got the piece of map. We failed.”

“Nah, we haven’t failed yet! We haven’t failed until Haggar has got the amulet! And, uh, she hasn’t! So we’re going to rescue the others, regroup, plan, and get that piece of map back. Then we’ll go get- um- do we know where the last map piece is?”

Keith shook his head. “No. Not a clue. We’ve got ‘black as the night’ and ‘hidden by a princess’, but there are a lot of princesses out there. Could be anyone.”

“Right. Well, we’ll sprint across and burn that bridge when we come to it. Right now, we’re going to Sunrise Island. I’ll swim down there—”

Keith nodded. “I’ll come with you.”

“No, you won’t. You’re not good in a fight underwater, even with that sword of yours.”

“Hey! I—”

“Lance is right,” Coran interjected, “and besides, Keith, you look exhausted. Not to mention your broken ribs- no. You’re staying on board.”

The wind swirled the mermaid tear off of Keith’s chest, and he immediately made the transformation back to human, yelping as his tail separated into legs, and the gills healed up. Lance rolled his eyes.

“You wore pants when you transformed?”

“Sure- I wasn’t going to wear a skirt.”

“No wonder you swam weird.”

“I did not!”

“Yes you did! I thought it was because you were a coral mermaid, and you were covering your back-fin, but geeze, you transformed with pants!”
Keith bristled, and Coran quickly dumped Lance in the ocean before Keith could snap back.

“That’s enough. Lance, you need to get moving, and Keith, you need to get back in bed, because when we rescue Allura, she’ll kill all three of us if she suspects that you’ve been traipsing about through the ocean.”

Keith opened his mouth to ask how Coran could just act as if they had dropped Allura off on an island and she would simply walk on board soon, but then he saw the hint of desperation in Coran’s eyes, and he snapped his mouth shut. Coran had to act as if everything were normal. If he didn’t, he would be admitting that they might not get the others back. And that was something that Coran couldn’t do.

Xxx

Lance splashed into the waters of Sunrise Island, diving down and looking for a way into the waters that Shiro, Allura and Pidge were suspended above. If the tides affected the water levels, then the water had to connect to the ocean somehow.

A yawning cave entrance loomed ahead of him, and he ducked underwater, keeping a mental clock of how long the swim was. He might be able to get in this way, but could the others get out?

Xxx

Keith glanced out of the window at the pirate ship that hovered out of reach, taunting them. Coran had put some kind of air-barrier around them that reflected light or something- Keith hadn’t bothered with the details, but he knew that they were invisible.

The pirates had the map piece. It was probably on this ship. And they were going to let it get away from them. He frowned. It wasn’t right. They were so close, and just about to let it go off into the ocean where they couldn’t find it.

Keith looked around. “Hunk?” he called, “Coran?”

There was no answer and Keith climbed out of his window, diving without a splash into the ocean. He gasped as the water hit him, bobbing to the surface with his dark hair plastered to his forehead and neck. His sight locked onto the ship and he slid through the water towards it, silent and sure. He only had one shot at this.

Xxx

Lance kept his eyes peeled, watching out for those underwater Galra- he didn’t intend on getting stung by a box jellyfish again anytime soon. A wall loomed ahead of him, and the tunnel sloped upwards. He swam through the waters, breaking surface inches from a massive cage.

Inside, Allura startled up. “Lance?!” She collapsed to her knees, tears flooding her eyes.

He reached through the bars, patting her on the arm. “It’s okay. You’re okay. I’ve got you now.” He glanced at two huddled shapes in the corner, and an icy hand gripped his heart. “Are Shiro and Pidge—”

“They’re alive. They’re resting. They need it more than I do.”

Lance noticed how gaunt and tired Allura looked, and he tugged on the water, pushing it into the lock. “Wake them up. We’re getting out of here.”
Allura shook Shiro and Pidge awake, and Lance succeeded at opening the lock. Shiro blinked at Lance, a tired smile spreading across his face.

“I knew you wouldn’t let us down.”

Lance swelled with pride. “Right, then. We have to swim out. Who’s going first?”

“Pidge,” Shiro and Allura said in unison.

Pidge protested sleepily, but was shoved towards Lance. He nodded. “Piggyback. Hold on tightly. I don’t want you to fall off. Deep breath.”

Pidge sucked in a massive breath of air, and Lance dove down, streaking for the tunnel exit. He didn’t know how Shiro and Allura had managed to keep from drowning when the tide came in, but he didn’t want them to have to try again.

He wasn’t sure that they’d make it.

Xxx

Keith clung to the anchor chain, ascending it slowly, hand over hand, shivering. The chain rubbed at his hands, and he nearly slipped with a curse. He spotted an open window and jumped for it, barely catching the side of the porthole. He hauled himself through, panting. So far, so good. Now he just had to find that map piece.

Xxx

Lance barely waited to see that Coran had taken Pidge back up safely before diving back in. He streaked through the tunnel, soaking Allura and Shiro as he burst out of the water.

Shiro gently pushed Allura towards Lance. “You next.”

“No!”

“Yes, Allura! Please! I need to see you get away!”

Allura hesitated, but then clasped her arms around Lance’s neck, taking in a deep breath. Lance re-submerged. He was so close. Just one more to go.

Xxx

Keith raced through the narrow hallways of the ship, ignoring the stabbing pains in his chest. He rounded a corner, and threw open a door, grinning. There it was. The scrap of parchment, sitting on an open table. Keith swiped it, shoving it in his pocket.

Behind him, the door slammed shut and locked. Keith whirled around, and Haggar appeared.

“Of course it’s you.”

Keith bared his teeth at her like a feral cat, whirling his knife towards her face. She disappeared, reappearing behind him, and putting one clawed hand on his neck and turning him to face her, putting one thumb on his forehead. She started to chant, her words resonating eerily.

Keith tried to move, but his muscles locked, not moving. Haggar’s hand started to glow, and a ringing started in Keith’s ears, getting louder and louder until it filled his head, enveloping every part of his being.
Keith woke up on the ground, flat on his back. He sat up with a groan, rubbing his head. His hand flew to his pocket, and he released a sigh of relief when he felt the paper.

“Hey! Who are you, and how did you get in here?!”

Keith scrambled to his feet as pirates filled the door. He glanced at the wall, and then drew his sword, the razor-sharp edge making a hole in the wall very quickly. The other pieces seemed to be waterproof. He just had to hope that this one was too.

Xxx

Lance slammed a shark’s head into the wall, shooting up into the cave. “Shiro, we’ve got to move fast! And you’ll have to help, okay? I need you to propel yourself. Do some kicking. I’ll speed you along.”

He grabbed Shiro’s arm and took off the instant Shiro had a breath. The shark was back, a few more also appearing, all of them out for Shiro and Lance’s blood.

Lance slammed his tail into one shark, shoving Shiro forward. Shiro took the hint and shot off, kicking through the water. Lance punched another shark right in the gills, and they growled, taking off after him. Lance smirked. Sharks. So slow, at least compared to him. It wouldn’t take long to lose them.

Xxx

Shiro surfaced, gasping in breath and stroking towards the Castle of Lions. He was so close. A flash of red in the water, steadily moving towards him, caught his eye, and he whirled awkwardly in the water, punching it.

“Ow!”

“Keith?!”

“Shiro! You’re out!”

“Keith, what are you doing out here?!”

“I- uh- I got the map piece.”

Shiro let out a jubilant laugh, punching one watery fist into the air. “Yes!” He grinned. “C’mon. We need to get back to the ship.”

Keith nodded, and they made quick strokes for the Castle of Lions. Coran saw them, and a gust of wind brought them to the deck, where Coran glowed an angry red.

“You were supposed to stay in your room,” he reminded Keith.

“I know. But…” Keith pulled the scrap of paper out of his pocket. “I had a chance that I had to take.”

Allura brightened from where Pidge was bandaging her shoulder. “You got it! Keith that’s excellent!” Her happy face faded into one of anger three seconds later. “I TOLD YOU NOT TO STRAIN YOURS- ugh.” She clutched her shoulder. “I’m angry with you,” she told Keith through gritted teeth, “but I need to take it carefully or else I would throw you overboard!”

Keith gulped, a little less proud of his accomplishment. “Haggar was on the ship.”
“What?! And you managed to get away?”

“Yeah, it was strange. She just… I think she knocked me out, but she didn’t try to kill me. She just… left.”

“Hey? Guys? You up there? Coran?”

Shiro raced to the edge of the deck, looking down at Lance. The water around him was slowly turning red. “Lance! Are you okay?!”

“Uh- a shark got my tail.” He let out a short, pained laugh, “He’s floating belly-up, but- um- I think I’m going to pass out now.”

Coran gently brought Lance to the deck, and Allura examined his tail. “Stitches,” she proclaimed, “Coran?”

Coran dumped the necessary supplies on the deck, and Allura threaded the needle, tapping Lance on the shoulder. “This is going to hurt,” she warned him.

Lance blearily opened his eyes, starting blankly at Allura. “P-Princess?”

Allura froze, thread half-way through the needle. “Princess,” she breathed.

Shiro put a cautious hand on her uninjured shoulder. “Allura? Are you okay?”

“I know where the last piece is,” she breathed, “How could I not have seen it earlier? It’s so, so simple!”

“Allura? What’s going on?”

“It’s far as can be, as black as the night, hidden by a princess, away out of sight. It’s so simple! I’ve even seen where it’s kept before!”

“Allura?”

She turned to Shiro, her eyes shining. “The last piece is in my homeland,” she told him, “We had legends- legends of a piece of hidden knowledge, stowed away by one of my ancestors, a princess. She hid it in a cave, apparently protected by guardians that represented some of the elements!”

“Great,” Keith grumbled, “Another set of guardians. Hadn’t had enough with the first round.”

Allura ignored him. She was too flushed with her success. “Of course! Altea is far from Keith’s island, and a cave would be dark! Pitch black! Coran?”

He saluted. “Yes, Princess?”

“Set a course for Altea
The Roman King, the Romulus

Chapter Summary

The paladins finally get a break. Here, have some fluff.

Chapter Notes

Chapter titles switched to "bullet in a gun".

Allura leaned forward against the railing, excited to see her homeland again, even if her people were gone. Finally, she knew why she was alive. Some spirit had seen that she was the key to the ocean’s power, and had kept her alive, while the rest of the tribe had perished.

A silent tear trickled down Allura’s cheek as she remembered all of the Alteans who had died. Some had gotten away, of course, or had been captured and sold off, but not enough to rebuild Altea.

Shiro joined her at the prow. “I’m going with you.”

Allura started to protest, but Shiro held a hand up. “We don’t know what’s out there, and if it was the Galra who attacked your tribe in the first place, I don’t want to send you in there without backup, especially while you’re injured.

“Shiro, it’s been two months! And we have another three to go!”

“Nonetheless, I don’t want you going out there alone. It’s dangerous, and we can’t lose you. I’m coming with you.”

“Fine. How are Pidge and Keith?”

“Pidge’s wound is healing nicely. The bullet stuck in bone, just like yours, and we had to perform surgery since you were out of commission after we got yours out, but she can get around on crutches. Keith’s breathing is completely back to normal, so he’s ready to go.

“Good.”

“Allura, I know we’ve got another three months, barring any tragic mishaps, but bullets to the shoulder aren’t something that you just walk away from, especially when fired at point-blank range like that. You and Pidge are lucky that your bones weren’t shattered.”

“I know, Shiro.”

“Right, well, point being, you need to take it easy.”

“Shiro, I don’t have time to take it easy!”
“Allura, we have three months!” Shiro sighed. “Listen, I backed you up on your prescription for Keith, and now you need to listen to my prescription. Take it slow. Being in that cage for as long as we were took a heavy toll on all of us. You don’t have to pretend that you’re perfectly fine. We’re all going through similar pain.”

Allura glanced at him and saw heavy shadows under his eyes that she hadn’t seen before. A wave of guilt flooded over her. Shiro was the only reason that she had gotten out of that cage alive; she never could’ve kept her head above the water without him. She owed him, and now that she had a chance to repay him in some way, she was arguing with him.

“All right. I’ll take it slower. Further prescription?”

“Don’t aggravate your shoulder.”

Allura looked over Shiro’s shoulder and saw Keith nearby, watching them with an expression of slight satisfaction. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you? Seeing me get the same treatment that I gave you?”

Keith kept a deadpan expression on his face. “Why would I delight in your pain?”

“Hmph.”

Shiro’s face softened when he watched the two of them, a slight smile crossing his face. Allura felt that smile infect her. Shiro cared for all of them like his own children, and she doubted that he liked watching them turn into hardened soldiers. It was moments like this that let them act their age- a bunch of somewhat rowdy, reckless teenagers who bickered over small things.

*It’s the small things that count,* she thought with a smile

Xxx

“No, you’ve got to use your back fin like a rudder! Come on, Keith! You’re falling behind!”

Allura laughed, watching from the deck as Lance tried to teach Keith how to act like a mermaid and tried to teach him how to use his tail properly.

“I am not!” Keith yelled, speeding towards them, “You go faster!”

“I *am*! Come on! You’d make a horrible merman!”

“That’s why I was born human, stupid! Because I can’t do merman things!”

“What if there’s a crisis that needs a merman and I’m doing something important? You can’t always take a three-day swim to find me! You might have to take immediate action!”

“Yeah, right! What crisis could we possibly be in that requires a merman right away?”

“If one of you starts drowning!”

“I can swim and grab them!”

“If the ship gets destroyed in the middle of the ocean!”

“We’ll wait for you to show up! I survived my ship getting blown up in the middle of the ocean! I can’t transform at will anyway, Lance! I’d have to always have a merman tear handy!”
“Well, maybe I’ll always leave you guys with a mermaid tear! And I’ll teach someone else to be a mer-person! The only reason that I’m not teaching anyone else is because everyone else is either injured or doesn’t have enough basic mer-person swimming down to keep up with the ship! Believe me, if I had anyone else to teach, I’d be teaching them! You think that I’d be teaching you if I didn’t have to?! You still transform with your pants on!”

Keith growled and caught up to the ship. “Coran!”

He was dumped on the deck, and removed the mermaid tear, his tail separating into his legs again. Pidge grinned.

“For what it’s worth, I don’t think that you make a very good merman either.”

Keith shook seawater off of himself and onto her, making her cringe and yelp.

“Shiro, Keith sprayed water on me!”

“She deserved it!”

Shiro squeezed his eyes shut. “Keith, don’t spray water on Pidge. Pidge, be nice to Keith.”

Coran swirled into being. “We’re coming up on another island! It’s the last one until Africa, so it’s important. We’ll have to stock up, and it’ll have to last us.”

Shiro nodded. “Do you mind if we stay on the island for a while? If it’s the last bit of land between here and Africa, I’d like to spend a little more time here.”

Coran nodded cheerfully. “One day won’t hurt! Just make sure that the ship is fully stocked first!”

They nodded and split up, each in a hurry to get their part done so that they could enjoy being on land.

Keith stalked through the brush, hunting a deer. It must have smelled him, though, because it ran off, bounding through the bushes. Keith swore.

There was a crack of a branch, and then something squishy splatted onto Keith. He whirled around, and Pidge laughed, backpedaling with her good leg and her crutches. Keith wiped the squishy remains off of the back of his head and saw that it was an overripe mango.

“Pidge!”

She swung herself away, and Keith heard a strangled yell that sounded like Shiro accompanied by a “Hunk!”

From a nearby bubbling stream, Lance laughed. Keith scowled, scooping the splattered mango off of himself and hurling it at the merman. Lance yelped in horror and dove back into the river. Keith stalked off to find Pidge.

Two more mangos splatted on his head, and Pidge crowed from up in a tree. Keith tilted his head up at her.

“How did you even get up there?!”

His distraction ended him- Hunk whirled around from behind the tree and hurled more mangos at him. Pidge took his confusion as an opportunity to attack him again, and he backed up, running right into Shiro, who laughed. The remains of a mango were caught in his white hair.
“They got you, too?”

“Yeah.”

Shiro grinned. “We can’t let them get away with that, now can we?”

Keith grinned back. “No, sir!”

Shiro held out his hands, and Keith put one foot on them, jumping to help Shiro launch him into the tree that Pidge was in. She shrieked, dropping her mangos.

“Hunk, catch me!”

He dropped his ammunition to catch her as she jumped out of the tree, and Shiro scooped them up, throwing both into their faces. Keith dropped two more on their heads, and Pidge held her hands up, Hunk setting her down to raise his as well.

“We surrender! Uncle!”

Keith slid down from the tree, grinning. “Teach you to throw mangos at us!”

Something hit Shiro from behind, and he yelped as another mango splattered on the back of his head. Another one bombed Keith, and both of them looked to Hunk and Pidge, who shrugged.

“It’s not us!”

As if to prove their point, a couple of other mangos hit them, and a bright laugh came from one of the trees, a flash of white moving through the trees.

“It’s Allura!” Hunk yelled.

Pidge held out her hand. “Put aside our differences to get her back?”

Keith glanced at Shiro and shook the offered hand. “Let’s get her.”

They scooped up whatever mangos were left and ran after her, Pidge lagging behind on her crutches. Naturally, she was Allura’s next target. Three mangos made a direct hit, and Keith threw his in retaliation, a shriek of laughter coming from Allura’s tree. She swung down, mango in her normally pristine white hair, and threw a one at him, taking a dirty shot at Shiro while she was at it. He spluttered.

“Oh, it’s on!”

They all stayed on the ground now, using trees for cover and throwing whatever overripe fruit, grasses or leaves that they could find at each other, Shiro and Keith working together against Hunk and Pidge and then Allura, who formed no team and still managed to dodge all of them.

“Oh, okay, stop!” Allura panted, barely able to get her words out through laughs. “We need to stop.”

Pidge, Shiro, Keith and Hunk looked at each other, all of them covered in sticky mango, dirt, leaves, twigs and grass. They all laughed, and Shiro wiped away a tear.

“Oh. We need to clean off. Everyone into the river.”

They grumbled, but slid in, scrubbing mango juice off of themselves. Keith dunked his head, and
when he came up again, Pidge wasn’t there.

“Guys?! Where’s Pidge?! Did she get dragged away by the current?!”

Hunk splashed around, looking for their small friend. “Pidge?! Pidge!”

Shiro also started calling, swimming for the bank to look for her. Then he stopped. “Hunk?! Where’d you go?!”

Keith whirled around, looking for Hunk, and when he’d made a full circle, Shiro had also disappeared. A wave of panic shot over him. “Shiro?! Hunk?! Pidge?!”

There was a ripple in the water, and then something huge splashed out of it, sharp teeth flashing, and slamming Keith underwater. He flailed, kicking away, and the creature continued to splash him, getting water in his face. He spat it out, swimming away, but was met with a sharp-toothed grin right in front of his face.

“Gotcha.”

“Lance! What the hell?!”

From the bank, Shiro, Hunk and Pidge moved out of the shadow of a tree, laughing. “You shouldn’t have thrown mango at him,” Pidge called.

Keith headlocked Lance and pushed him back underwater. The merman’s massive tail whacked into the back of Keith’s knees, and he yelped, crashing to the river bottom of the shallows. Lance sent one more wave of water into Keith’s face and swam away, laughing.

Keith sputtered his way out of the water, glaring out at the ocean where Lance had disappeared. “Someday I’m going to drag him onto land and leave him there. Or better yet, leave him in a tiny, cramped fish tank.”

Pidge yawned, wobbling on her feet, and Hunk picked her up, looking back towards the beach. “Hey, look, the sunset! It’s purple!”

Shiro squinted at it. “That’s weird. Must be because we’re on this side of the world. Y’know, because the sun sets in the west?”

Keith shrugged. “Probably it.”

Pidge yawned, mumbling something about how the earth turned in a circle, and that the sun didn’t set in the west, but she was too tired to lecture them further.

Keith looked into the purple sunset. It really was beautiful, in a strange, unreal way. The five of them made their way back to the ship, all of them falling onto their separate bunks, exhausted, but satisfied. The last map piece was still out there, and they didn’t know it’s exact location. But Keith knew that they would find it. He wasn’t normally an optimist, but still, he knew.

They were going to save the world.
Chapter Notes

Sorry that this update was a little later in the day! Heckuva day today!

“There it is!”

At Hunk’s shout, Allura leaned on the railing, excited to see her homeland. She glanced at Shiro. “Last chance to back out.”

He shook his head stubbornly. “I’m coming with you. Whether you like it or not.”

Allura was taken aback at how quiet her old village was. It was weathered, of course, as she had been gone for nearly a year, but the bodies that had littered the streets when she had last been here… she shuddered remembering it, but shook the image out of her head. The bodies were gone.

She ducked into her old home, waving Shiro back and then emerging in a long skirt and a top that she had worn before the attacks. She had also rescued a pair of bracelets given to her by her father that she had hidden when the attacks had first begun. Shiro smiled.

“Feel better?”

Allura shook herself, glad to finally be out of the raggedy pants and shirt that she’d been wearing ever since the slave markets. “Much better. The caves are nearby. Come on.”

She led him through her ghost town, towards the dark caves that she had been warned many times to stay away from. She’d snuck off once, when she was small, and entered the cave. Something had been hidden in the darkness, something with glowing eyes, and she’d run right back the way she’d come.

But not this time. Now she was older, wiser, braver. And it didn’t hurt that she had a 5’9 muscle-bound sailor with fists of iron with her. That never hurt anything. Keith was an excellent scraper, to be sure, but when it came down to it, Allura felt a bit safer with Shiro than she did with Keith; Keith was ten times more likely than Shiro to run off on his own tangent and leave the rest of them undefended.

She took in a deep breath when they entered the cave, her eyes taking time to adjust to the dark interior of the cave, lit only by some glowing algae.

A growl sounded in the back of the cave, and Shiro stepped lightly in front of Allura. “Who’s there?”

A massive wolf leapt out at him, snarling, and Allura screamed. How had a wolf gotten in here? Shiro knocked it aside, smacking it into the wall, and it cringed, yelping and running away with its tail between its legs.

“Lone wolf,” Shiro explained, “Probably hungry, or it wouldn’t have tried that.”

Allura nodded, her heart beating a frantic tempo. She kept close behind Shiro, directing them
through the caves- at least how the legends had made it sound.

They emerged in a room that was filled with light, a massive stone table in the middle. Shiro approached it. “It looks like we’re supposed to put the other map pieces on it.”

“Could be a trap.”

“Could be. But Haggar seems more like the kind of person who would just take the pieces by force if she knew where we were.”

“Yeah. I guess you’re right.”

Allura haltingly put the pieces that they had onto the pedestal, and there was a glowing and a humming noise. The pedestal flashed bright, like a miniature sun, and when the harsh light faded away, there was a completed map on the pedestal, the final centerpiece in place.

Outside, Shiro heard the sound of stamping feet, and he handed Allura the map. “Stay hidden until I come for you,” he breathed.

Allura nodded, her heart beating frantically in her chest. She backed into the shadows of a nook in the cavern walls, and Shiro slid off towards the cave entrance. Allura heard shouts, the sound of steel hitting flesh, and Shiro’s bold war cry. She waited, holding her breath, as the noises faded away to silence. Shiro came back into the cave, panting.

“Allura? It’s okay. There were some Galra lying in wait, but I took care of them. It’s safe now.”

Allura was about to come out of hiding, when another shout came towards her.

“Allura, no! It’s a—”

There was a thump, and a curse, and Shiro’s eyes narrowed. Allura didn’t move, and Shiro rippled and changed, turning into Haggar.

“I hope you enjoyed the purple sunset. Game’s up. Come out, princess, or I’ll have him killed. Surely that map isn’t worth your friend’s life?”

Allura stayed in place, map clutched to her chest. She felt a spark of energy run from it to her, and she could smell the ocean- no, that was the smell of the outside the night after it had rained- no, the smell of the gently bubbling river- no- it was the smell just before a storm. The smell of rain and lightning in the air.

“Make him scream,” Haggar ordered, and Allura heard a repressed silence before a scream broke out. Her skin raised in goosebumps. That was Shiro’s scream. They were hurting him, and would keep hurting him or kill him- unless she gave herself up. She had to. To save him.

The raging storm that seemed to be building in in her chest, no longer just a vague memory of a smell, but thunder and lightning rolling through her heart, seemed to disagree violently, but Allura ignored it. She stepped out of the shadows. “Stop it.” She held out the map. “Take it and leave us alone.”

Haggar glared at her, as if unsure that Allura was tricking her or not, but reached out and grabbed the map. But Allura didn’t let go. The storm inside her finally broke, and a scream- no- a roar- burst from her throat, like a crashing wave, like the boom of a thundercloud, like the sound a wave made just before it crashed into cliffs. Water could be gentle, but it was also a hurricane. The pattering of rain echoed in Allura’s ears.
A spark of lightning crackled in Allura’s eyes, and Haggar’s eyes widened. She disappeared just as a bolt of bright light, pure lightning energy, leapt from Allura and struck the ground where Haggar had just been. The lightning roared out of the cave, followed by an almighty boom. Allura heard screams, and she followed the lightning outside, where rainclouds poured water relentlessly down. The charred corpses of several Galra surrounded a bewildered Shiro, with several bloody knife cuts running down his right arm, the top joint of his pinkie finger missing. There were unconscious Galra all around, bruises blooming on their jaws where Shiro had punched them, and bolts of lightning were raining from the sky, hitting them all.

“Allura?”

Allura turned to him, her eyes glowing a bright white. “Safe?” she asked, her voice still booming like thunder.

Shiro laughed nervously. “Yeah. Can you stop this?”

“Why?”

“Well, you’ll sink our ship, for one thing.”

The glow from Allura’s eyes faded, and the wind died down, letting her hair drop gently back down. She blinked, and then keeled over, Shiro leaping forward to catch her. She blinked up at him.

“Sorry.”

“What was that?”

Allura shook her head, holding up the map. “If the amulet is so powerful that the map to it causes thunderstorms, it terrifies me to think what the amulet can do.”

Shiro shivered. “Wow. Are you okay?”

“Yes, I- that power- it was amazing! It was- wow.”

Shiro nodded, his grey eyes stormy. “May I see the map, Allura?”

Allura’s fingers tightened on it. “Why?”

“I want to test something.”

Allura reluctantly handed it over, unwilling to give up so much power. But the lightning still cackled through her, even without it, and Shiro frowned.

“I don’t feel any power. It’s… just a map.”

“What?! That’s not possible!”

“Do you… feel powerful now?”

“Yes. It- I feel so strong- like I have all of the power of water flowing through me.”

Shiro nodded, his eyes troubled. “The map doesn’t have power, Allura. You do.”

She laughed. “Me?! But that’s ridiculous! If I had this power all along, do you think that I would have let my people be destroyed?!?”
“I think the map may have unlocked it. But I believe that this power has always been in you. ‘Hidden by a princess,’ he quoted, ‘Maybe your family has some kind of... power. Or maybe just your people. Haggar certainly has power, and you implied that she might have been from Altea.’

“I am nothing like Haggar!”

“Of course not. I’m just saying that perhaps the powers are linked.”

Allura shook her head. “Please- can we not talk about it?”

“Alright,” Shiro said reluctantly, “Come on. We need to get back to the ship. Hopefully the storm didn’t affect it too much.”

He helped her to her feet, and she took his injured arm gently. “Let me take a look at this.”

“I’ll survive until we get back to the ship. It’s just a couple of cuts, and they won’t bleed out on the way back. That’s where all of the medical supplies are, anyway.”

“Okay.”

Allura led Shiro back towards the ship, numb. She could still feel the storm roiling inside of her, an endless reserve of power and energy, a hurricane waiting to burst over land. She looked around, seeing how everything was soaked, and shuddered. This power inside of her could destroy everything. She had to be careful- she had to learn how to tap into it properly. How was she supposed to learn? Who could teach her? Her father was dead- maybe he had known something of it.

Pidge was running towards them from the beach, and Shiro and Allura glanced at each other. Something had to be wrong.

Pidge skidded to a halt, panting and trying to get her breath at. “Ship- bad- something—”

“Slow down,” Shiro ordered, “Get your breath.”

Pidge blew out one long breath. “It’s Keith! Something’s wrong with him!”

Allura and Shiro glanced at each other and ran for the ship, leaving Pidge in the dust. They pounded up the gangway and down to Keith’s room. Shiro knocked.

“Keith? You in there, bud?”

“Shiro- oh- god- I don’t know what’s happening, Shiro!”

“Keith, open the door.”

“Shiro- I don’t- I can’t- Shiro, I’m scared!”

Shiro’s blood chilled. Keith had never, ever said that before. He had never told Shiro that he was scared, even when he had to be terrified. If he was telling Shiro that he was scared now...

“I don’t know what’s happening to me, Shiro!”

“Keith, open the door. Please. I have to see what’s wrong.”

There was pause, and then a click. The door opened, and Keith’s bloodshot eyes stared pleadingly at him, red from suppressing tears. Inside the room was dark.
“Keith? C’mon out.”

Keith edged out of his room into the light, and Shiro gasped.

Keith was turning purple.
The Final Days, the Last Appraise

Pidge paced the deck. “There’s got to be a reason for this. An explanation. At least a clue! Are you sick?”

Keith shifted uncomfortably, and Shiro noticed that he was positioned in a way that hid the most purple possible. “I don’t think so.”

“I hope you enjoyed the purple sunset,” Allura breathed, “Do you think this is Haggar’s magic?!”

Shiro frowned. “Could be. How do we reverse it?”

Hunk raised a hand. “Lotor knows a lot. Maybe we could ask him?”

Allura shook her head. “That’s a three-month journey! Does Keith have that kind of time?!”

“You make it sound like he’s dying,” Lance stated, “Relax. He’s just turning purple. It’s not going to kill him.”

Pidge shrugged. “You don’t know that, though. That’s the thing. We don’t know what this is. It might just turn his skin purple, or it might make him keel over and die one day. We just don’t know! It’s a risk to wait until we can get to Lotor’s island again, but it might be our only option.”

Shiro cleared his throat. “Lance? Is there anything you know of?”

“Well, sure, there’s plants underwater that will turn you purple- Keith, did you eat any weird plants while you were looking for me?”

“No.”

“Well, then.”

“And you didn’t see it earlier?” Pidge questioned.

“I mean- I think it started on my chest. But I just assumed it was bruising and didn’t really think anything of it until it started to spread.”

Pidge sighed. “Of course. Did anything happen earlier that you noticed?”

“I ran into Haggar that one time, but that’s it.”

Allura’s fists clenched. “That’s it. This is clearly Haggar’s work.”

“Right, so, Lotor?” Hunk suggested.

“Allura agreed, “And then, once he’s reversed whatever it is that Haggar has done, we’ll track her down and hit her with as much lightning as possible.”

Shiro held up the map. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“What? Oh, yes, we’ll find and destroy the amulet. Then we’ll find and destroy Haggar. Happy?”

“Yes.”

Pidge raised a hand. “Uh, guys? We’re still missing a key point! What if this is deadly?!” What if
we can’t make it to Lotor in time?!”

Keith paled, and the purple blotches turned a pale lavender. “That won’t happen,” he said confidently, more confidently than he felt, “If Haggar wanted me dead, she would’ve killed me while I was on her ship.” He eyed his purple-hued hands. “I think.”

Xxx

Shiro pulled Keith over after he refused dinner. “Keith? Are you okay?”

Keith winced. “My mouth is kind of sore, and my canines are kind of loose. I already lost them, though, Shiro. Am I just not eating right? I know that old people lose their teeth- am I just losing them sooner?”

Shiro frowned. “I don’t know.” He squinted at Keith’s head. “Um- it looks like you’ve got a couple of lumps on your head.”

Keith’s hand flew to his head. “Huh. Must have hit my head on something.”

Xxx

Keith bit into a fish that Shiro had caught. Hunk looked appalled. “You realize that you’re supposed to cook that, right?”

Keith shrugged and opened his jaws. His canines had come out into the fish. He yelped, putting his hand to his mouth as the gums began to bleed. He winced. “Sorry- I’ve just got this weird craving for raw fish.”

“Yeah, that’s weird, man. Also- um- you’ve got some weird lumps on your head.”

Keith touched the odd lumps that didn’t hurt and seemed to be getting bigger rather than shrinking. They were… fuzzy when he touched them. He shuddered. His ears had been flattening into his head, and he didn’t like it.

Hunk grabbed his hand. “Um… Keith… your nails…”

“I know. They’re growing at a ridiculous rate. I keep cutting them, but they grow back.”

“The purple… It’s covering an awful lot.”

Keith sighed, rubbing his nose, which was one of the few pale blotches of skin that were left on his face. “I know. And I- I don’t know, my eyesight- I can’t see very far, and the colors are getting dimmer.”

Hunk frowned. “Do you think that you need glasses?”

Keith shrugged. “Might be a side effect of whatever this is. I’m sure that we can fix it.” He squinted at the opposite side of the deck, where Shiro was a blur. “I hope so, anyway.”

Xxx

Keith felt over his newly growing canines with his tongue. They were sharp, like a carnivore’s teeth. The lumps on his head had grown into fully-functional ears that were covered in a purplish-black fur. There wasn’t a sector of his skin that wasn’t that purple color, and his craving for fish intensified.
“We’re here!”

Keith pulled a hood up to hide his face and ears. Everything got a little less distinct as his hearing was muffled, and he hissed. He didn’t like this. He went down the gangplank and all of them made their way towards Lotor’s cave. There were no guardians, and when they reached the cave, Keith realized why. All four guardians were eating lunch, Lotor with them.

“Ah. This is awkward.”

“You eat?!?”

“Of course. I am human.” His eyes fixed on Keith. “Although I sense that one of us here isn’t.”

Keith felt his hair rise. “I’m human! Haggar got me with some kind of- some kind of transformation spell!”

Lotor shook his head. “I’m afraid she hit you with a spell that reverts you to your natural state.”

“What are you talking about?!”

“You’re an Illimu, Keith.”

“I’m not! I’ve got a brand, but I’m not an Illimu! I’m human!”

Lotor shook his head. “I’m sorry, Keith. But you’re dead.”

“What-what?!”

Lotor’s eerie eyes locked onto him. “Keith Kogane was kidnapped by pirates at age twelve. He was branded with the pirate mark, a sign among the Illimu that he was to be consumed. One day he was consumed, and the animal that consumed him took on his shape and his memories, save the memory of the consumption. The animal lived in his shape, continuing on as if human without even knowing that it was all a lie. I’m sorry, Keith. But you died. Seven years ago. You’re not human. And you never will be.”
“No. I’m human. I’ve always been- I’m human!”

Lotor gestured towards him. “Look at yourself. Do you look human?” he inquired roughly, but not unkindly,

Keith shook his head. “That’s not- then why hasn’t this happened before?! Why do I remember being human all of my life?!”

Lotor shrugged. “Something must have gone wrong when Haggar turned you into an Illimu. You malfunctioned. Thought you were human. Edited the parts where you were eaten out of your mind.”

“Can you fix him?” Allura cut in, “Make him look human again?”

Lotor studied Keith curiously. “It seems that he’s simply transforming into his animal shape very, very slowly. I can change him all of the way into his animal form. He’ll have to stay in animal form for a week or two, but then he’ll be able to transform at will. He might even be able to stick to this half-form. And even in human form, he’ll still have the canines; those are permanent.”

Keith didn’t seem to be listening to any of this. He was sitting dazedly on a rock, staring at his purple hands.

Shiro shook his shoulder gently. “Hey, you hear that? Lotor can change you back into a human.”

Keith shook his head dully. “What does it matter? It’s just a lie.”

“Keith—”

“I hated them. The pirates. They were monsters. They ate people. They hurt people. But I…”

“But you haven’t hurt people or eaten anyone,” Shiro finished firmly.

“I ate Keith Kogane.”

Shiro put a hand on his shoulder. “You are Keith.”

“No, I’m not! I killed him! He’s dead! I don’t know who I was before that, and I don’t know who I am now, but I’m not Keith Kogane! Lotor said it! He died seven years ago!”

“Listen to me. I don’t know about the human Keith Kogane. But you are the Keith Kogane who I’ve known.”

“But I’m not—”

“The human Keith Kogane might have died. But you have been Keith ever since. Keith Kogane isn’t the human that died, Keith. He’s the person who lived. The dead one- yes. He was Keith Kogane. But he’s not anymore. And the fact that he died… it wasn’t your fault.”

“But it was! I killed him!”

“Keith, you were- well- I mean- you were some kind of animal. Haggar ripped you out of whatever place you lived, turned you into something you were not supposed to be and gave you a simple
Keith squared his shoulders and faced Lotor. “Okay. Do it.”

Lotor brought Keith into his cave, and Shiro waited anxiously outside with the others. Hunk nudged Pidge. “What animal do you think he’ll be?”

“Some kind of catlike creature, clearly. I’m guessing a panther based on the fur on his ears.”

“Cool. Do you think he’ll want to eat us when he’s a panther?”

“What?! Why would he want to eat us?!”

“I don’t know! Big cats are carnivores! It makes sense!”

There was a flash of bright light from Lotor’s cave, and he walked back out, looking rather pleased. Behind him stalked a housecat with purplish-black fur.

Pidge’s jaw dropped open. “What.”

Lotor shrugged. “Haggar wanted a spy. So she chose a child for a human form and a small, commonplace animal for the animal form.”

Hunk let out a nervous laugh. “He’s a cat!”

Keith hissed balefully at them, his tail lashing angrily, hair bristling.

“That’s Keith alright,” Allura said with a smile.

He ignored her and began to stalk back towards the ship. Then he shot back, his fur straight on end. He wheeled around and hissed at whatever it was on the path that had spooked him. A hiss that drowned out Keith’s came from down the path.

A massive black panther stalked towards them, and Keith bared his teeth, leaping at the panther, which knocked him aside easily, crouching and preparing to attack Keith.

“Quintisha! Down!”

Allura blinked. “Romelle?!”

Romell smiled at them as her panther stalked back to her sullenly, twining itself around her legs. Keith hissed balefully at the panther before planting himself firmly in-between the panther and his team.

“I’ve been trying to find you. I wanted to talk to you.”

“If this is about your brother—”

“I found him.” Romelle glanced at Lotor. “Can we go back to your ship? I want to discuss something… privately.”

Shiro glanced at the others. “Okay… but the panther stays behind.”
“What?!”

“I don’t think your panther gets along with Keith.”

Romelle’s eyes widened when she looked at the little cat. “That’s Keith? What happened to him?!”

“It’s a bit of a story. Come on. Let’s go. Do you have anything to say to Lotor? Anything to ask him before we go?”

To Shiro’s surprise, Romelle shot a glare in the direction of Lotor. “No. I have nothing to say to him.”

Shiro glanced at Lotor uneasily, but his face remained impassive, his blue eyes watching them with an unsettling gaze.

Shiro felt those eyes watching him all the way back to the ship.

Xxx

“Oh, Romelle, I’m so sorry.”

Romelle wiped away a tear. “It’s not your fault. He- I’m sorry.” She picked up Keith and started petting him reflexively as a comfort mechanism. He froze, looking at Shiro pleadingly. Shiro didn’t see it.

Shiro’s fists clenched, his pirate brand itching. “Romelle… if there’s anything we can do…”

“I- I know that you’re going after the amulet. I know that it needs to be destroyed. But- if you would just let me try to use it to bring him back before you destroy it- ow!”

Keith’s claws had come out, digging into her arm. He looked at her with horror in his purple-grey eyes, and she set him down on the deck.

“Don’t look at me like that! I would never use it for my own gain! I don’t rely on it as a source of power!” She looked at Allura. “I’ll be able to let it go. Will you?”

Allura frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Allura, you have power in you. I could feel it when I saw you. Do you not wonder where that power comes from?”

“I- I never thought…”

“When did you develop them?”

“When- when we got the map…”

“The map and the amulet are connected, so the contact unlocked your magic. You draw your power from the amulet. Once it is destroyed, that power will no longer be yours.”

“So?”

“So do you really want to destroy it?” She looked at all of them. “I’m not trying to besmirch anyone’s name. I’m just saying that Allura is a powerful being- perhaps powerful enough to end the Galra. So maybe don’t destroy the amulet until you have defeated them and have killed Haggar. And in the meantime… let me use it to just try to bring my brother back to life. If it doesn’t work,
I’ll give it back. I’ll never try to recreate it; I haven’t the foggiest idea how. I’ll live out my life here. I won’t make any trouble. Please… just let me try!”

“I’m sorry,” Allura said gently, “But we cannot do that.”

“Please! I’m begging you!”

“I’m sorry,” Allura said again.

Romelle’s face turned red, and tears streamed from her eyes. “Some princess of our people you are,” she spat, and whirled around, running down the gangplank and jumping onto her own boat. A gentle wind filled the sails, and they left the sobbing Romelle behind. Allura bit her lip.

“Do you think she’s right? About my power coming from the amulet?”

“Romelle doesn’t know everything,” Shiro assured her firmly, “She had a good argument, but that doesn’t necessarily make it true. We just have to hope for the best.”

“But prepare for the worst,” Allura finished too soft for Shiro to hear. Keith’s ears pricked up, and he padded towards her. She put a finger to her lips, and he gave her a cool, unconcerned look.

Allura frowned and picked Keith up, despite his struggles, and then carried him to her room. “You keep your mouth shut,” she hissed to him, “We will destroy that amulet. Just… maybe not immediately.”

He scratched his ear, feigning indifference.

Allura snatched his chin, forcing him to look into her eyes. “Don’t you play coy with me, Keith! Promise that you won’t tell Shiro!”

Keith hesitated, then wrenched his head away and nodded sullenly. Allura breathed a sigh of relief with a slight laugh, scratching his ears, to his annoyance.

“So, in the prophecy… you’re the one who was already dead.” Allura frowned. “That means that either I’m going to die… or Shiro is.”
“What are we looking at?”
Coran swirled into being. “The air spirits say very anti-pirate. And due to mishaps with the natives, they aren’t very accommodating of islanders.”

“What about slaves?”
Coran glanced at Allura. “What do you mean?”

“If I were to pretend that I were a slave on errand for the owners of this ship…”

“I see. I believe that is a possibility.”
Shiro nodded. “It seems that’s our only possibility. Allura, be careful.”

“We’ve faced far worse than a port, Shiro.”

“No, just… there are people who will kidnap another man’s slave and re-sell them to another if the master isn’t around. Be careful. Keep an eye out.”

Keith leapt onto the railing, meowing loudly and angling his head towards the port. Allura blinked.

“You want to come?”

He nodded and leapt down, padding towards the gangplank. Shiro nodded.

“It makes me feel better for you to have someone along. Even if he’s a cat.”

Keith hissed balefully, and Allura laughed, following him down the gangplank. He strode by her side, and everyone got out of the way. Allura winced.

“I forgot that black cats are supposed to be bad luck.”

Keith hissed again, and Allura rolled her eyes.

“I won’t be able to buy anything if shop-owners avoid me.”

Keith bristled unhappily, but slunk off, people either getting out of his way or throwing small rocks at him that he easily dodged.

Allura easily found the things they needed and haggled until she managed to buy them. On her way back to the ship, a tall man bumped into her, sending some of her packages flying. She winced, bending down, and the tall man scrambled to pick up her other packages.

“Sorry, Miss.”

There was a yowl, and a mass of black fur slammed into the tall man, making him stagger back. Keith hissed and spat, clawing at him.

The man drew back one foot and kicked him, sending him flying into the wall.

Allura dropped her packages, running towards the lump of fur that was staggering up. “Keith!” She scooped him up, checking him for injuries.
The tall man smoothed his hair. “Pardon. Is that your creature?”

“Yes! His name is Keith, and you shouldn’t have kicked him!” She gave Keith a dirty look. “Although he shouldn’t have attacked you.”

Keith hissed at the man, and Allura bopped him lightly on the nose. “Stop it! Behave yourself!”

He growled and struggled, but Allura held on before setting him down and giving him a slight shove. “Go on.”

He hissed again, but took a few steps back, watching the two of them with an unsettlingly-human gaze coming from his cat eyes.

The tall man smiled. “I can tell you’re not a slave.”

Allura froze.

“You’re a runaway, and you’ve been gone from your masters for quite some time or you wouldn’t have snapped at me like that; you would’ve been more subservient. That’s alright. I won’t tell.”

Allura relaxed. “Thank you.”

“You ought to be more careful. There are slave-snatchers about. And slave catchers.”

“Thank you for the warning.”

“Here, let me walk you back to your home. It’ll be safer for you.”

“Oh- I’m going to the docks- pardon, but what is your name?”

“Arch.”

“Ah. Well, I’m just heading back to my ship, Mr. Arch.”

“Your ship? Is it also full of runaways?”

“No, no, just a ship with you know, women. Islanders. The kind not normally allowed on ships. We’re just stopping by. I won’t take up any more of your time, I’ll just get going.”

A yowl caught Allura’s attention, and she saw a few men scooping Keith into a cage, despite his clawing and biting.

“Keith! Hey! Put him down!”

She was ignored, and she raced towards them, but they grabbed the cage and ran, pushing things into her path. She vaulted over most of them, but her foot caught on a basket, and she fell. Mr. Arch caught up to her as she shouted Keith’s name in frustration, unable to tell where the answering yowl came from.

“Excuse me—”

“They took Keith! They took him!”

“I’m sorry. I’m sure you were attached to your cat.”

“He was my friend!” Allura’s eyes welled up with tears. “What are they going to do with him?!”
“Well, they’ll either sell him to a witch on account of his fur color, or they’ll make a meat pie out of him.”

Allura let out a choked sob, and Mr. Arch put his hand on her shoulder. “There, now. You can find another cat.”

“No I can’t!”

Mr. Arch nodded to himself. “Alright then. Come along. I’ll help you find your cat.”

Allura looked up at him with big, tear-stained eyes. “Will you?”

“Yes, I will, if that ill-tempered creature really means so much to you.”

“He does.”

“Alright, then.” Mr. Arch offered her a hand up. “I know exactly where to start.”

Xxx

Keith hissed at the people around him, clawing at them every time they got close enough to the cage he was in. One of them yelped, examining the bloody furrows on his hand, and grabbed the handle of Keith’s cage, shaking it.

“Behave, cat.”

Keith hissed again, swiping at the hand, and his cage was thrown into the wall. It sprang open, and after Keith recovered from the blow, he scampered away, streaking out of the cave.

Keith knew Arch. He knew exactly what he was up to. And he didn’t intend on letting him get away with it.

Xxx

Allura frowned at the derelict little house that Mr. Arch had broken into while they looked for Keith. “Mr. Arch, why would they have taken Keith to this—”

Allura felt a push on the small of her back, and she tumbled into the house. The door locked behind her, and she threw herself at it. “Arch!”

“Sorry, dear, but the slave markets are down on their luck. You’re just what they need.”

“Aaaarch!”

“Your cat is fine, by the way. We kidnapped him only to get you. He’ll make a delicious meat pie, though, the nasty animal.”

“NO! Keith!”

“ Weird name for a cat,” Arch muttered as he walked away.

Allura pounded her fist against the door of the house, sobbing. Not Keith. He might be fierce, but he was small. They would overpower him.

Xxx
Keith slipped through the streets, hissing in surprise when a massive dog lunged for him, snapping and snarling. He scored a line of claw marks across the animal’s nose, and it backed away with a yelp. Keith hissed one more time for good measure and then leapt at a fence, scaling it easily. He sniffed, trying to sort out the smells of the city. Bread. Sewage. Fish. Other animals. And… the sea.

Keith followed the smell of the sea, and it led him to a small house. A thundercloud seemed to be forming above it, and he grinned to himself. That would be Allura.

Xxx

Allura sobbed, slamming her fist over and over into the door as thunder boomed outside. Something rubbed against her leg, and she heard, barely audible over the thunder, a soft meow. She looked down, and a pair of purple-grey eyes stared back up at her, black fur soft against her leg.

“Keith!”

She scooped him up, hugging him tightly. He let out a “whoosh” of air when she squeezed him, and she immediately released him.

“I’m sorry!”

He gasped in air and nodded, rubbing his head on her leg and then standing firmly between Allura and the door. When it opened, he launched himself, hissing and spitting, at Arch, clawing at his face. Arch yelped and staggered back, and Allura made a break for the door, Keith leaving Arch and bounding to follow at her heels.

The rain was pouring from the sky now, and Allura slid in a patch of mud, crashing to the ground. Arch immediately grabbed her arm, then yelled in agony as Keith bit down on his arm, hard, latching his claws into Arch to keep ahold.

Arch let go of Allura, who struggled to her feet as lightning crackled around her, her eyes wide and terrified. Arch ripped Keith off of him, shaking the cat by his neck and then throwing him with a crack into the wall.

Arch came back for Allura, who screamed. She couldn’t go back to being a slave! The lightning crackled louder, and she heard a hiss. Keith had staggered to his paws and come back in-between Allura and Arch, who growled, sounding like a feral animal himself.

“You’re a persistent little pest, aren’t you?!”

His foot connected with Keith.

And the storm-clouds above Allura broke.

A massive bolt of lightning arced from the sky and slammed into Arch, frying him instantly. Allura panted, the storm clouds above her beginning to dissipate. She half-ran, half-slid to Keith, picking up his mud-soaked limp form, his fur plastered to him.

“Please…”

Keith gave a broken purr that hitched in his chest, nudging Allura’s hand with his head. She set him down, and he took a few staggering steps before falling. Allura caught him before he hit the ground.
“Just let me help you.” She scooped him up, standing up and pulling her skirt out of the mud with a *squelch*. “Thank you,” she whispered to him, “Thank you for coming back for me.”

He gave a half-amused, half-offended purr that was clearly a ‘did you think I wouldn’t’ that abruptly broke off. Allura gave him a concerned look-over.

“Are you alright?!”

He nodded, and she sighed in relief, stroking his head gently. “Rest now.”

His eyes slowly slid closed, and she sighed again, making her way back to the ship, tired, dirty, but alive. Shiro met her on the gangplank.

“What *happened*?!”

“We ran into a slaver,” Allura murmured, handing the sleeping Keith to Shiro, “Keith saved me, but he got kicked around a bit in the process.”

“And the slaver?”

“Destroyed by lightning.”

Shiro looked up at the sky with a grim understanding. “I was wondering where the sudden rainstorm came from.”

“Um… yes. Sorry about that.”

“Is Keith… okay?”

Keith gave a sleepy mrow of assent and snuggled further into Shiro’s arms. Shiro smiled.

“You need to be more careful. You’re small now and easily crushed.”

Keith gave a weak hiss of disagreement, and Shiro laughed.

“Alright. Rest, now.” He put a gentle hand on Keith’s head. “You did good.”
Hold, Please

I'm taking a week off to get caught up on writing because I'm feeling a bit stressed trying to get out two a week because I'm quickly running out of chapters to post, so there won't be any updates next week and I catch up. I'll be back week after next! Thanks for reading!
Allura frowned at the map. “Can any of you read this?”

Keith leapt onto the table, stalking towards the map, and shook his head. Shiro also frowned.

“No. Too many words.”

Pidge sniggered. “It’s in Latin, guys. Don’t you know the difference between Latin and English?”

Keith hissed at her and jumped away, head high with disdain. Shiro smiled apologetically. “Keith can’t read. And neither can I. I’m assuming you can’t either, Allura?”

“Of course not,” she snapped, “Who would teach a slave to read English?”

Pidge blinked. “None of you… can read?”

“I can,” Hunk volunteered.

“I can’t,” Lance said gloomily from the tub that they were keeping him in, “We don’t need to under the ocean.”

Pidge sighed. “I can’t believe this.”

“Hey, there’s no reason for fishermen to learn to read,” Shiro protested, “Matt and your father were just the odd ones out!”

Pidge looked up sharply. “You leave them out of this.”

“Pidge?”

Pidge looked at Lance. “What?!”

Lance sighed. “I didn’t know this was important, Pidge. I swear I didn’t. But I was just thinking about it… y’know, because Keith’s got the brand on his arm, and Shiro says that means you’re going to be eaten…”

“What is it, Lance?”

“Pidge, I’m pretty sure that your brother had the mark on his arm when I saw him.”

“No. No, Lance, shut up.”

“But—”

“Shut up! Don’t talk about it. I’m going to find him. Alive. So just… shut up. We’re going to get the amulet. We’re going to find it. Then we’re going to find my brother. So I need to start
translating this map. Go away.”

Hunk blinked. “You know Latin?”

“A bit. Give me time. Coran, are there any Latin books on this raft?”

“A few. But I have memorized a Latin dictionary. You can simply ask me.”

“Great. You stay. Everyone else, scram.”

Three hours later, Pidge swore under her breath, shoving her chair back from her desk and slamming her head down on the table. “This is stupid. I can’t get any of this! Half of these aren’t even words! And the half that are are in the wrong declension!”

Coran shrugged. “Go take a walk and clear your head.”

Pidge walked outside, grumbling, and saw Hunk whittling something. “What’re you doing?”

He grinned. “I’m making a code-breaker! A letter corresponds to a number, and you can spin the wheels so you can see what each of the numbers makes and—”

“That’s it!”

“What?”

“Coding! Caesarian code! You move the alphabet three letters down! Makes sense, since it’s in Latin, right?!”

“Um… yeah. Sure.”

“Thanks, Hunk!”

Pidge raced back down to where Coran was waiting and erased her slate, moving each of the letters of the coding three Roman letters over. Now the words were making sense, and she flew through them.

“Fantastic! Great! Of course it can’t be easy, ever!”

Coran peered over her shoulder. “Well?”

“Another riddle! Why did everybody have to be so cryptic?! Something about the key we seek, yada, yada, yada, in the deep, etc. etc.”

“Hm.”

Pidge made her way to the deck with her results, waving them around. “We’ve got another riddle, folks! Coran, get Lance up here.”

Lance was dumped unceremoniously on the deck, and he sighed. “What ocean expertise do you need now?”

Pidge ignored his comment. “Alright, heads together. New riddle. This thing was in English and was translated into Latin, so we have to deal with cryptic rhymes, again. Hidden among the stars, this power of ours, found where blue fades to black, the key to attack, without this our key, you’ll be far from the sea.”
“This key is in the ocean,” Lance said immediately.

Pidge sighed. “What is it with you and the ocean?! Why does everything have to be about the ocean with you?!”

“Because I know the place it’s talking about!” Lance protested, “Look- the last lines, the key to attack, without this our key, you’ll be far from the sea- that’s all about the amulet. There’s a key to this amulet, which holds the power of the sea and apparently the power of storms based on Allura’s powers. But this place… it’s a place in the ocean. We call it the Blue to Black Trench because of how fast the light fades and the blue of the ocean fades to black!”

Pidge frowned. “But mer-people can see in the dark. Our eyes glow.”

“Okay, yeah, but… rrrrrgh. I’m going to tell you about the different kinds of mermaids, okay? You know about the ocean blue mermaids, and the coral mermaids, and the kelp mermaids. But there are other kinds. Storm mermaids, that ride storm-waves all of the time and subsist on shipwrecks. Their tails are grey, like the oncoming storm.”

“Allura sighed. “I don’t see the point of this.”

“Hold on. I’m getting to it. There are also Sandbar mermaids. They have golden tails, and, duh, live in the sandbars. Then there are the Arctic mermaids, which live in the lands of glaciers, where their white tails will help them blend in with the ice; they can stand really cold temperatures. There are the Freshwater mermaids, which live in rivers and whatnot, and they tend to look a little more horse-like and have greenish-blue tails.”

“Yeah, Keith yelped. “Kelpies!”

“Yeah, I think humans call them that. Anyway, there is a point to this, and it’s the Abyss mermaids. They have dark black tails that are sometimes speckled with other colors. They are really, really sturdy. The Abysses or the Trenches are hard to breathe in for normal mer-people, like being really high up is for humans. It’s also darker than the rest of the ocean, so Abyss mermaid’s eyes shine brighter. Their bones are stronger to withstand the pressure, and most of them are pretty muscular.”

“Get on with it,” Keith snapped.

“Hold your hippocampus, I’m getting to it! I’ve seen a few Abyss mermaids, and they came from the Blue to Black Trench. And they… well… some of them talked about how they guarded the stars, and how it was their duty as- what did they call themselves- paladins.”

“Hid in the stars,” Pidge breathed, “You think that the key is in the black to blue trench?”

“I know so,” Lance said confidently.

“Can you get it, then?”

“Whoa. Whoa, whoa, whoa! Were you not listening to a single word I said?! Ocean blue mermaids
can’t survive down there! Only Abyss mermaids can!”

“Oh, well, good thing we’ve got all of these Abyss mermaids with us, then,” Pidge shot back sarcastically, “I was wondering what we were going to do with them!”

“Hey, don’t get snappy! We can ask one to get whatever it is for us!”

“Oh, yeah, I’m sure we can just ask one to go and get the treasure that it is his duty to protect.”

Shiro entered the fray. “There’s another option.”

Both of them turned to him, their heads whipping around so fast he worried that they’d get whiplash. “What?”

“Each of us transforms into a merman. There’s a lot of us; one of us has got to be an abyss mermaid.”

Lance frowned thoughtfully. “That’s plausible, I guess. But I can only cry one tear at a time, and it’s awfully risky to pass tears around.”

“Isn’t there anything else you can do?” Allura inquired, “Some kind of mer-magic?”

“Well… I could try… maybe…”

“What?”

“There’s a magic that would turn you into a mermaid. But it would turn everyone here into a mermaid. And there’s a really solid chance that it will fail.”

“What’s the harm in trying?”

“Oh, nothing much, just everyone here potentially becoming some sort of weird fish hybrid,” Lance muttered under his breath so fast that no one quite had a chance to catch it, “No harm. Let’s try this!”

Lance took a deep breath, and started to sing. It was wordless- just a tune- but open-air mer-song might do the trick.

To his surprise, Pidge started to join along, and then Keith- which was strange, since he was still a cat, but Lance welcomed it. The more voices in a mer-song like this, the better.

Wind swirled around them, both lifting everyone up to set them in the ocean and amplifying their voices. Everyone started to glow, and Lance closed his eyes, finishing out the song. When he opened them again, he whooped in elation.

“It worked!”

Keith hissed, and through the mer-song now flowing between all of them, Lance caught a distinct dislike of the wet, as well as a thrill of surprise and annoyance.

Lance glanced at Keith and laughed. His bottom half had still turned into a fish, and he’d grown a back fin and ear fins, as well as gills. But…

Amusement chimed in from all corners of the mer-song at Keith’s cat half combined with his fish half. Keith hissed again, awkwardly attempting to swim.
A thrill of nervous excitement shot through the mer-song from Shiro’s end, and Lance whirled around. Shiro’s lower half was a dark, midnight black, his eyes glowing much brighter than anyone else’s. He was an abyss merman.

Lance splashed his tail, diving down into the ocean and setting a mental course for the Blue to Black Trench. He streamed towards it, circling the top of the trench. They’d be waiting for Shiro here- they couldn’t go down with him. Lance frantically tried to impart what plants and animals were safe to eat and what weren’t, and felt reassurance from Shiro. Shiro would be fine. They just had to trust him.

Lance backed off, and Shiro smiled, swimming down into the trench. Lance gulped as the darkness engulfed Shiro and broke off the mer-song. He didn’t want the others to know how terrified he was that Shiro would never come out of that darkness again.

Xxx

_Lance?_

Lance smiled at Allura. Her tail was a brilliant white that matched her hair, and light blue fins graced the space behind her ears. _Yes?_

_Am I an arctic mermaid?_

Lance looked her over. _Probably. Why?_

_I was just thinking that it’s strange. Living in Africa, and then being a mermaid suited for the arctic._

_Little strange, I suppose. But then, it can be based on personality, too. You’re used to surviving tough conditions, so you’re built for cold extremes. Keith is a bit of a loner, and a bit outside of a team, so he’s the kind of merman that is sort of… shunned by the other mermaid communities. Pidge… honestly, I think hers is about size because she can slip through kelp forests. Shiro… Shiro’s gone through some bad things. He’s even tougher than you. So he’s the most durable kind of merman._

_And what about Hunk?_

Lance glanced over at Hunk, who was creating gleams of light in the water with his golden tail that Keith chased after like a housecat._I think him being a Sandbar mermaid just means that he should be staying on land._

Allura smiled, swimming to the edge of the abyss. _I hope he’s okay._

_Yeah. Me too._
Shiro shot through the darkness, ducking behind a rock, his gills fluttering at a frantic rate to supply him with oxygen. He glanced back over the edge of the rock, looking for the creature chasing him.

There was a strange, whooshing noise, and something hit Shiro in the chest. Somehow the thing had gone over him without him noticing.

Shiro’s gills fluttered frantically, struggling to make up for the air loss from the blow, but something wasn’t right- the area of skin was *burning*, his gills itching and stinging.

Shiro’s head spun, and he realized that the thing chasing him was a giant jellyfish that had managed to sting him. He sank down as the toxin took ahold of his tail fin, and he saw the jellyfish looming towards him, opening its strange mouth-hole.

As Shiro’s vision faded to black, he heard the sound of singing and saw blurs of shadow in the edges of his vision. The shadows got bigger and bigger until all he could see was black.

Xxx

*Heal, heal, brave one, heal, strange newcomer, heal from your wounds, let them close up…*

Shiro forced open his eyes, and the strange memory-within-a-memory singing faded away. A merman with a black tail was swimming nearby, big glasses perched on his nose. He smiled at Shiro.

*Good morning My name is Axenus.*

*Uh… I’m Shiro?*

*Understandable reaction. The last thing that you remember was probably the giant jellyfish. The warriors took care of it.*

*Huh?*

*You’re not from around here, but I’ve never heard of an Abyss mermaid outside of our trench. Where are you from?*

*I’m not- I’m a human. I’m not a merman.*

Axenus jerked back in surprise. *Impossible! Even humans that turn into mermaids don’t turn into paladins!*

*Well, I did. I’m actually looking for something- some kind of key that’s hidden in the stars.*
Axenus’ face became guarded, and a wall separating his thoughts from Shiro’s sprang into being. *I don’t know what you’re talking about.*

*That’s not true. You’re lying.*

*I’m not. We don’t know anything that matches your description.*

*Surely somebody-*

*No, nobody. You’d better leave and go back to the surface.*

*How could you possibly know? You didn’t ask anyone! I can ask around- even if you haven’t heard of it, someone else may have-*

*NO! No, there’s a trench-wide mer-song that I tuned into. No one knows what you’re talking about. No keys. Nothing. Sorry. Axenus fidgeted nervously. Time for you to go.*

Shiro righted himself, but the instant he moved his tail, a bolt of pain shot through it, and he crumpled.

Axenus frowned, examining his tail. *That’s odd. Your tail- the jellyfish sting venom isn’t gone. You- I can’t believe this.*

Shiro looked up at him, face creased in pain. *What?*

*You’re having an allergic reaction.*

*What?!*

*You’re allergic to the venom. It makes the initial sting worse than it would be normally.*

*I don’t have time for this! I’ve got to find that k- ungh.* Shiro crumpled again as a surge of lightning-shock pain hit him.

*Whoa!* Axenus pushed Shiro back to the bed gently. *You need to rest and let the poison work its way out of your system.*

*You don’t understand! My friends and I need that key! Without it-*

*You’ll just have to wait. You’re no use to them right now. You won’t make it five feet.* Axenus put his thumb on Shiro’s forehead. *Sleep.*

*Xxx*

Allura chased after a Keith, who had spotted a fish and decided it looked delicious. *NO! Keith! Come back!*

Keith steadily ignored her, continuing to chase that fish. Allura’s hair got caught, and she yelped, bubbles rising to the surface. She yanked hard, and felt herself pull free, but also felt her hair getting ripped out in exchange. She yelped again and shook herself, continuing her chase after Keith. He rounded a rock formation, and she flew around it…

…running right into a net that Keith was also caught in. It started to be pulled up, and Keith wriggled out of a gap in the netting, biting and clawing at the strings and trying to break them. The net tightened, and started to pull up, pulling Allura up with it.
No! Keith, go get Lance- don't fight me on this, go get Lance. He can get me out. You’re too small. You’ll never cut the string!

Keith growled, but swam off, and a minute later, Lance was swimming up towards her as she reached the surface. She reached out, and he grasped her hand, swimming down as if trying to break the net. The net strained, but then started pulling up. Lance let go of Allura’s hand, instead grabbing onto the net and attempting to untie the knots holding it together.

Voices sounded from the ship. “We got one! Two, actually!”

“What color are they?”

“One’s white, and the other one’s blue!”

“Get rid of the blue one. But keep the white one.”

“Allura!”

“Allura, hold on! I’ll get you out of this! I swear that I’ll get you out! I’m not letting them take you!”

“Get that one off! When you said that we had two, I assumed that they were both in the net! Not one in the net and the other one clinging to the outside trying to get in!”

Allura heard a hiss, and a small black cat with a fish tail was clambering up Lance’s tail and snagging its little claws in the net.

“No, Keith, go back! Go back, Keith!”

“Whoa, now there’s a weird cat-fish thing!”

“I don’t care! Get the blue one off, get the white one up and who cares about the cat!”

There was a bang, and Lance ducked down, bullets whizzing over his head. Keith moved to sit on his head, and Lance gave him a brief smile.

“Thanks for the sentiment, but your tiny little body isn’t going to block very many bullets.”

Keith hissed, angling his head towards Allura, and Lance got back to undoing the ropes. Lance shifted at another shot, and Keith slid off of his head, stopping himself awkwardly halfway down Lance’s back with his claws. Lance winced.

“Ow! Just let go!”

There was the bang and hiss of a harpoon gun, and Allura screamed as the harpoon hurtled towards Lance. There was a loud thunk, and Lance tumbled from the net, a bleeding wound in his shoulder, his mouth an ‘O’ of surprise. Allura reached through the net and grabbed Keith, holding his small body close to her to keep him from falling even as he squirmed and hissed.

“Allura!” The waves had swallowed him up, and Allura lost sight of him. The net was hauled to a rough deck, and she was thrown unceremoniously to the floor. She tried to cushion Keith from the fall, and he gave her an annoyed glance, scooting out of her grasp to curl his fish tail around his legs and wait, poised to attack.

And attack he did, launching himself at their captors the instant they got too close, swiping and biting. He was scooped up by the scruff of his neck, and he hissed, swiping and missing.
“What the heck is this thing?”

“Let him go,” Allura cried, dragging herself forward using her arms, “Put him down!”

“Settle down, you.” The man glanced at Allura and then at Keith. “Oh. Oh-ho. This thing is yours.”

“He belongs to himself! Now let him go!”

“I don’t think so.” The man’s lips parted in what was clearly supposed to be a smile, but was more of a horrifying grimace. “Neither of you are going anywhere.”

Xxx

-asleep—
- you sure—
- very important—

Shiro woke up in a bed, and he could hear the thoughts of Axenus and a few others that he didn’t recognize.

Axenus, are you sure that he’s asleep?

I’m sure. I put the strongest sleep spell possible on him. He’s not waking up any time soon.

Alright. What is so absolutely important that you used an all-call?

He knows! He’s just a human, but he knows about the key and the stars! What are we going to do?! If one knows, then surely others do, and if they all come after us- I mean, we’re strong, and I trust all of you, but what if-

Axenus, calm down. Don’t panic, it makes you useless. You told him that you didn’t know where the key is, correct? And that no one here knew what he was talking about?

Y-yes.

Well, then. He’ll leave, and our lives will go on as before.

What if he finds it while the toxin wears off? He may be a human-turned-merman, but if he can survive down here, then that makes him a paladin, and all paladins are called to the key.

We can’t let him take it, of course. It’s forbidden. We have to guard it. If he finds it...Shiro’s blood chilled at the next few words. Then he’ll never leave.
To Wear the Crown, Rise up From the Ground

You look like you're doing better.

Shiro smiled at Axenus. I’m feeling better, thank you. How long do you think it’ll be before I can get back to my friends? If the key hidden in the stars isn’t here, then I’ll have to start looking other places.

Do you think you’re strong enough to swim?

Yeah. Yeah, I think so. Shiro pushed himself up, moving for the door, and then faked a tail spasm, crumpling down. Ah!

Axenus guided him back to the bed. Take it easy.

I’m sorry, Shiro told him with a false regret, I guess I’m not ready.

Axenus faked a smile. That’s alright. Just rest. I’m sure you’ll be swimming in no time. Excuse me, I have things to do.

Axenus couldn’t seem to get out fast enough, and Shiro was glad to see him go, inwardly sighing with relief. He didn’t want to lie to Axenus- the merman seemed friendly enough, and Shiro didn’t want to cause him trouble, but he needed to stay longer. And the jellyfish toxin did still hurt- not enough that he couldn’t swim, but enough that it would certainly hamper any escape attempts.

Shiro prowled around the house, looking through Axenus’ things for any indication of where they might be keeping stars. Axenus seemed to be the resident doctor, and there were mortars and pestles lying everywhere.

Stars, stars, where would he be keeping anything related to stars? Shiro looked up and saw constellations painted on the ceiling.

Now how would a merman living in this God-forsaken trench know what the stars looked like? Shiro swam up to the constellations, touching one gently before recoiling in surprise. The paintings or whatever they were made of were warm to the touch! Shiro traced them. As he got further away from the center of the constellations, they got colder.

Axenus, what are you hiding here?

You’re up. And about.

Shiro whirled around in the water, Axenus staring coldly at him from the door. My tail was feeling better, so I-

Save the lies. Shiro, I trusted you. And now you’re going behind my back? You’re leaving.

No, Axenus, I’m sorry, I-

I’ll take you to the top of the trench, but then you’re on your own. You can find your way back to your friends.

Axenus-

No arguing. Come on, or I’ll call the warriors to take you.
Shiro followed Axenus reluctantly, taking one last glance at the stars before the door was shut behind him.

*How do you know what stars looked like?*

Axenus barely spared him a glance. *I don’t. I didn’t put those there. The first Abyss doctor did. I’ve never seen the stars.*

*Shame. They’re very beautiful. Like sparkling diamonds in the sky.*

*What’s a diamond?*

*It this gemstone, and- never mind. Forget it. It’s not important.*

*The stars are beautiful, you say? Do they look anything like the pictures?*

*Well... it’s better if you see them.*

Axenus longingly glanced up, but then shook himself. *Abyss mermaids aren’t made for it. We have to stay in the Abyss.*

*Why?*

*That’s the way it’s always been. That’s the way it’ll always be. We don’t leave the trench, except when absolutely necessary. Come on. We’re almost there.*

Shiro realized with a start that the water had gotten increasingly lighter. *Oh.*

He heard a *whoosh* of water, and then something slammed him and Axenus apart. A giant barracuda was baring its teeth at Axenus, and it lunged for him, snapping at him. Axenus back-stroked out of its range, but it moved fast, sinking its deadly-sharp teeth into his tail. His mental connection shuddered, flickering into bursts of razor-sharp pain, and Shiro charged the barracuda, ripping it off of Axenus and throwing it away. The water slowed its flight, however, and it recovered quickly to charge him.

Shiro caught its jaws with a grunt, wrestling them away from him. It lunged again, clamping its teeth into his forearm, and he slammed his tail into its jaw, causing it to let go. A few teeth were left in his arm, but he ignored them, diving for a sharp rock to use as a weapon.

The barracuda had apparently decided that he was a bigger threat to be eliminated before chasing down the easy prey, and it snapped its jaws again, catching the delicate fins of Shiro’s tail in its mouth and tearing down, cutting long gashes that went right through his fin.

Shiro grunted, but slammed the sharp rock into the barracuda’s head. It didn’t pierce, and he got a set of teeth chomping down hard on the back of his neck for his trouble. The barracuda made an attempt to shake him, but he ripped it off, cutting more gashes in his neck that he ignored.

*Axenus! Get the warriors!* 

When the barracuda turned, distracted, Shiro slammed the sharp rock into its gills. Blood gushed out, and the barracuda, wheeled clumsily to face Shiro. Shiro was also losing blood, though, and it was only a matter of who passed out first.

Shiro dodged an attack, only for his side to be caught by the teeth and some of his gills to be ripped wide open. Immediately, his “breathing” became harder, and he knew that the fight would be over
Shiro dodged the next attack and drove his rock at the barracuda, cutting its head off cleanly. His
gills fluttered at a frantic rate, trying desperately to intake enough air to support his fight and his
ripped gills. Axenus swam towards him, eyes wide, but his form was getting blurrier.

_Shiro? Shiro, stay with me!_ Shiro!

Xxx

Allura surfaced from the wooden tub she was being kept in when she heard loud, angry voices.
Two of the pirates- because the men who had captured her were pirates- were dragging a woman
out on deck. Allura gasped. She had the Altean tattoos.

The woman spotted Allura, and her eyes widened.

“I’m sorry! I’m so, so sorry!”

She was cuffed upside the head. “Quiet, you! Now, where’s the key?!”

“In the icy waters- that’s all that I know! Let us go!”

“Not a chance. You’re coming just in case.”

“In case what?!”

“In case you’re lying!”

The pirates stormed off, and the woman slipped to Allura’s tub. “I’m sorry! I never meant for this
to happen!”

“What’s your name?”

“M-Merla.”

“How did you get here?”

“I- I was living peacefully on an island, but- they grabbed me while I was on the beach. I- I’m
sorry.”

“Why did they want me?”

“Th-There was a- it was a legend of some kind. It said that there were three amulets- they were
water, fire, and earth. Supposedly if you could get all three, you became the master of nature. The
water amulet could control storms, you see? And- the merpeople held the water amulet. The ocean
blue mermaids- they locked it away one day to keep it safe, with the help of some other mermaids.
There were two keys- the key of the stars, and the key of ice. The Arctic mermaids hid one key,
and the Abyss mermaids hid the other.”

“The paladins,” Allura breathed.

Merla nodded. “The Arctic mermaids- they gave up their mer-forms completely to protect their
key. They swam as far away as possible and came to land, permanently becoming human. The
key… it wasn’t something that could be physically grasped. It was a power that the Arctic
mermaids had. It manifested itself in glowing marks.” Merla touched her cheeks.
“They became the Alteans,” Allura breathed, “That explains why I can use the storm magic! Because we used to be mermaids!”

Merla nodded. “We tattoo our cheeks in memory of the brave key-holders that came to land. I didn’t think that they could ever find an Arctic mermaid- we were the remains of the Arctic mermaids, so I thought it no harm.”

“How come no one ever told me this?!”

“It was- It was a coming of age tale. You must have been taken from the island before it could be told to you.”

Allura frowned. “Wait, but if I find the key, but it’s not something that I can physically hold…”

“I’m sorry,” Merla choked, “I’ve doomed you to stay with these men until they can unlock the amulet.” Her next words sent chills down Allura’s spine. “Or until they kill you.”

Xxx

Shiro?

Shiro’s head was pounding, his eyelids seeming to stick closed. A harsh, rubbed-raw feeling remained around his gills, neck, arm and tail, and when he moved, he felt a sharp pain as he twisted the skin around the wounds.

Ow…

You’re alive!

Shiro opened his eyes to see Axenus hovering only a few inches away. AH!

Sorry, sorry! Axenus backed up. I wasn’t sure if you’d make it. You were bleeding a lot, and it took way too long to get back here-

Where?

My house. I know I kind of banished you, but you… you probably won’t be swimming much for a while. Axenus gestured helplessly towards Shiro’s tail. I’m sorry. I tried my hardest, but… it’s not going to be easy, swimming.

Shiro lifted his tail, and saw that his tail fins were practically shredded. Oh. Do you think this will affect me when I’m human?

I don’t know. I’m sorry. It’s my fault this happened!

No- it’s not. I lied to you. I’m the reason that we were out there.

I should’ve had the warriors escort you, or I should’ve helped in the fight!

Axenus. You’re a doctor; you would’ve just gotten in the way. Please. It wasn’t your fault. I fought the barracuda because I lied and betrayed you, and now I’m paying the price.

Shiro bit his lip, eying his tail. I’ll be fine.

Xxx
Allura cuddled a shivering Keith close to her chest. “Just hang on. You’ll be okay.” He’d reverted back to a full cat once he’d dried out, but the weather was getting colder, and no one was exactly making sure he was warm. Allura wasn’t putting him in the water, and her own skin was getting uncomfortably dry, but she didn’t dare go back in the water because she was scared of what would happen to Keith if she did- he wasn’t built for this weather, not like she was.

His lack of protest when she held him to her worried her. Normally, he’d be squirming and attempting to escape, but he just curled closer to her warmth, shivering violently. She wished that she could let Merla take care of him- she’d offered, but Allura had turned her down. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust Merla, but she didn’t trust the pirates not to hurt Keith, and she didn’t trust Keith not to light out after the pirates.

Although, she reflected, she probably could let Merla take care of him in this state- he wouldn’t be moving much. But she still had to worry about the pirates and what they would do to him.

“It’s okay,” she whispered to him, “We’ll get out of here.”

One of the pirates stormed on deck, and ripped Keith from her grasp. He gave a weak meow of protest and swiped half-heartedly at his captor, but he was ignored. Allura managed to haul herself halfway out of the tank. “Give him back!”

Keith was thrown to the deck, where he curled up into a ball. The pirate sneered. “We’re going to put you in the ocean. You’re going to find the key. Then you’ll come back, and we’ll use it to get the amulet.”

“No!”

“If you don’t come back, then who will keep your little creature warm? He’ll die in… I’d say three hours.”

Allura felt as though the world was shattering to pieces around her, and she was falling a long, long way. “No…”

“Three hours. We won’t do anything to him. But if you don’t come back in the next three hours, the cold will get him, and he’ll die.”

Allura felt numb as she was dragged out of the tub, and not from the cold. She was heaved over the side, and she barely managed to dive properly and hit the water without hurting herself.

*Three hours.*

*Or Keith dies.*
Axenus, I know that you’re not supposed to talk about it, but… I need answers. I heard you talking about the key. I know it’s here. I know that there’s something up with your ceiling and the constellations painted on them. I need to know what’s going on.

Axenus sighed, a line of bubbles rising from his mouth. I knew that you would ask that eventually. Axenus…

I shouldn’t tell you. I don’t want to tell you about it. But I’m going to. I owe you one. You could’ve swum off without me, but you didn’t. So I’m going to tell you stuff. We here… we are the only Abyss mermaids left in existence.

What happened to the others?

Dead. There was… a war. The Abyss mermaids and the Arctic mermaids banded together to fight a great evil. A spirit. It wanted the power of nature, so it seduced a young woman with promises of power. She became a thakalthi. And then… then in the war, she was killed. But the spirit wasn’t. We knew it would return one day, and it had already absorbed most of what was necessary to control nature. So… the ocean blue mermaids locked away the final piece. They entrusted the key to the piece to what was left of the Arctic mermaids and the Abyss mermaids. And… we’ve been guarding them ever since.

Shiro didn’t answer for a moment, his thoughts racing at a mile a minute. I think that the spirit you fought is back.

WHAT?!

I think that it has a new thakalthi. A witch called Haggar. Axenus, we need that key. We need to get the amulet before she does.

Um, no? How about we just leave it where it is, nice and safe, and no one gets their hands on it ever?

Axenus, we know someone who can destroy it! Why would you pass up that opportunity?! We can make sure that no one can get it and abuse it ever again!

Okay, but consider this: we leave it there, and when Haggar dies of old age, or someone finally puts a sharp object through her heart, then we get it and we destroy it. Much less risky.

Axenus, don’t you get it? If you don’t give me and my friends the key, Haggar will send her monsters down here, and they will take it from you.

Her monsters can’t get here. The only creatures that can get down to these depths are either harmless ones or Abyss mermaids.

Remember the jellyfish that stung me?

Axenus dismissed this. We can take care of a jellyfish.

But can you take care of hundreds of jellyfish? Thousands of jellyfish? When they all have human cunning and intelligence? Because Haggar won’t stop, you know! She’ll send as many as it takes
until all of you are dead or until you’ve given up that key!

Axenus took a stroke or two back at Shiro’s tone, his eyes blinking hard behind his big glasses. Shiro…

\textit{Axenus, this isn’t fun. This isn’t nice. This is war, and in war, we have to go against what we’ve been taught our whole lives.}

Axenus glanced around. I’m sorry, Shiro. I can’t give it to you.

Shiro internally sighed, all of his will to fight leaking out of him. He had thought that would work. In the end, his wounds were throbbing from staying upright for so long, and from the tension of his body.

\textit{Fine.}

I’m sorry, Shiro.

No, it’s fine.

Shiro…

I’m fine, Axenus. I’ll find another way.

Xxx

Allura streamed through the water, her hair and her tail nearly impossible to tell apart. Hot tears leaked through her inner eyelid, startlingly warm against the cold of the water. She didn’t know where she was going to find this key, but if she didn’t, Keith would die! She couldn’t live with that. He had saved her from the fate of slavery- which she’d repaid by attempting to strangle him, she remembered with a wince- and had risked everything for her. And he hadn’t even known her then. Now that she knew him, how could she let him die?

A strain of song reached her, and she brushed it away. She couldn’t join a mer-song. Not right now- wait. How was there mer-song?! Was there another mer-person out here?!

A blue tail flashed in the corner of her vision, and a gaunt face came towards it. She was on Lance in a flash, joining in the mer-song and letting his assurance and easy-going nature wash over her even as all of her anxiety, terror and sadness flowed towards him, relating how she felt more accurately than words ever could. And the calm acceptance and reassurance she had hoped for came to her, although now tinged with worry. It was more tired as well, and Allura looked at how gaunt and cold Lance was, his shoulder hastily wrapped up and very slowly oozing blood.

She pulled back, her concern showing bright and clear through all of the other emotions. Lance broke off the mer-song.

\textit{It’s not bad. Just hurts. Especially with the saltwater. But I’m okay. I followed the ship to find you.}

\textit{So Hunk…}

\textit{Probably freaking out and searching the ocean for us. He’ll go back to our meeting point where we were supposed to meet Shiro and hope that we show up.}

\textit{Keith is on the boat, and if I don’t come back with the key-}

\textit{I found the key when I was following the ship. You can get it.}
We can’t let **them** get it, though!

And we’re not. Lance grinned. It’s okay, Allura. I’ve got a plan.

Xxx

Axenus charged into the house. **Shiro, I’m going to give you the key!**

What?!

They’re attacking. They’re attacking as a bunch of jellyfish, and they want the key. I’m going to give you the key so that you can run with it. Get it away from here.

What about you?!

Axenus smiled sadly. I’m afraid that you’ll be the last of the paladins, Shiro. Our place is here, defending our home to the last.

NO!

Shiro, we’ve **been** dying out. We’re practically extinct. Because of our choice to never surface from the Abyss to protect the key, the sea foam no longer remembers the Abyss mermaids, and no more younglings with dark tails find their way to us. We are a dying race, and now is time for our end.

There has to be something—

There’s nothing you can do, Shiro, except take the key, protect it, and remember us. Perhaps if you return to the surface the sea foam will remember. Perhaps a new generation of Abyss mermaids will be born, and we will be resurrected. But for now, we can only hope. And we place our hope with you.

Axenus swam to the ceiling, tracing the constellations on the outer edges with one finger and moving towards the center in concentric circles. As his finger hit the constellation in the dead center of the ceiling, the whole roof began to glow.

Shiro, what’s your last name?

I- **Takeshi Shirogane is my full name.**

**Takeshi Shirogane, I now give you the name Takeshi Axenus Shirogane, because you come from dark waters, as your middle name says, bringing with you hope and the future. Let the power of our fathers flow into you.**

Axenus began a mersong, and outside, Shiro heard the rest of the tribe join in. He too joined the song, and the glowing transferred from the ceiling into a bright ball, as bright as the sun, and floated towards him. It illuminated Axenus’ face, and he smiled that sad smile again.

**See the stars for me, Takeshi Axenus Shirogane.**

The ball of light floated into Shiro’s chest and suddenly he could hear the sounds of every wave movement. The glowing faded, as did the sounds, but Shiro could still feel the warmth in his chest where the power to unlock the amulet was stored.

**Go.**

The word came from Axenus, but at the same time came from more- from the tribe, from the
creatures of the deep, from the waves themselves. A call to live, to run and live, to bring hope and to drive back the spirit which had killed off the other Abyss and Arctic mer-people.

Shiro swam out the window, moving towards the top of the Abyss as the jellyfish chased after him. But he was too fast for them to catch, streaking through the water like a piece of shadow.

Behind him, he saw the jellyfish close in on the mer-village, and a single hot tear made its way into the cold water.

Xxx

Allura swam as fast as her tail would go, pushing her way to the top of the water. She surfaced, waving her arms at the pirate ship.

“Hello! I have the key! Or- well- I am the key!”

Nets were lowered down, and she eyed them distastefully, but clambered in and was hauled to the deck. Keith was a shivering wreck on the deck, but once Allura was up, Merla scooped him into her arms. He protested weakly at the touch of a stranger, but then melted into her warmth.

A gunshot rang out, and Allura screamed. Keith let out a weak yowl of protest as his source of warmth was suddenly falling to the deck. Merla gaped in surprise at the bleeding bullet wound in her chest.

“We don’t need you anymore,” the pirate told her coldly. His counterpart scooped Allura up and dumped her in the tank. She scratched at him, leaving bloody furrows with her nails, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“YOU MONSTERS!”

“You want monsters? Because we can be monsters.”

Allura gasped as the pirates began to change, shifting in a few short moments into a pair of polar bears. One of them prowled towards Keith, growling dangerously. He hissed, all of his fur on end. The adrenaline must have been giving him warmth because he struggled to his feet, swiping at a polar bear nose before bolting with his tail straight up and running to Allura, making a leap up to sit on top of her head, curling into her hair to avoid the murderous claws. The polar bear roared, and Allura crossed her fingers.

Please, please, please …

There was a roar of water, and a massive whale came splashing out of the water, crashing down on the ship. On its back was a female mermaid with a blue tail, singing a strong melody. Timbers creaked, and the ship began to crack.

Keith jumped out of Allura’s hair, a shivering human as he hit the deck. He scooped Allura up, heaving her over the side of the ship with a splash. Allura’s mouth was an “O” of surprise. She hadn’t been expecting that.

“KEITH! JUMP!”

He hesitated, turning and closing Merla’s eyes. “I’m sorry,” he told her, his voice cracking, “You didn’t deserve this.”

He jumped over the side, transforming back into a mermaid when he hit the water, and a
triumphant Lance pumped one fist in the air, grinning wildly as he sang a strange melody that only the whale- no, whales Allura realized as one offered its back to Keith and to her- could understand. She clung onto the whale’s fin, and the other whale came off of the ship, the mermaid grinning.

Blu, Allura realized. That was the mermaid’s name. She had found the pod of whales and had brought them to Lance. Allura nodded to the mermaid, and she nodded back. Allura sensed a gratitude towards Lance- Lance had saved Blu from something, and she’d go to the ends of the earth for him.

Xxx

Lance grinned, wincing a little as he jostled his shoulder, but otherwise happy. Keith was back to a human. Allura was safe, and they had the key.

He didn’t see the polar bear shifting back into a human and raising his harpoon gun. He heard the hiss and release of the harpoon, and he turned, the deadly silver spear coming towards him at lightning speed.

There was a flash of blue, and a grunt. Lance’s eyes widened in shock as the harpoon struck Blu, who had thrown herself in the way.

Lance caught Blu as she crumpled. “NO!”

The whalesong faltered and failed, the whales going the way Blue had previously asked, all of them very confused, and Blu put one hand on Lance’s hand. He began a mer-song, attempting to send her calmness, but she pushed the song away, her own fear and pain roiling around inside of her like a wave.

“BLU!”

“G-go…”

“Blu, Blu, no!”

“It- It’s okay, Lance. Really, it’s okay.”

“No, Blu, it’s not- I’m- I got you—”

“Lance. Please. Don’t… don’t beat yourself up over this. It’s not your fault.”

“Blu…”

“It’s okay. Just… remember me.”

Blu smiled a pained smile, her body turning to sea foam and wisping away through the wind.

“BLU!”

The whales dragged them away, going under the waves, and Lance squeezed his eyes shut, holding tightly onto the fin. He didn’t want to cry.

Xxx

Shiro shot out of the Abyss, startling Hunk. Hunk!

Shiro! You’re alive!
Um- Where are the others?

Hunk launched into a long explanation- something involving fish?- but was cut off by two massive whales overhead. Off of them dropped three mermaids, all considerably subdued.

Hunk’s eyes filled with tears. Allura! Lance! Keith! Wait- Keith’s human again?!

Lance began a mer-song, and all of the events flowed between them within moments, saving them the trouble of explaining. Likewise, Shiro’s time in the Abyss was spread

Keith shook, breaking off his connection to the mer-song. It’s my fault. It’s my fault that Blu’s dead. It’s my fault that Merla is dead.

Shiro blinked. What?!

If I hadn’t gone chasing after that fish-

Then we wouldn’t have even known that there was a second key, Allura broke in smoothly, We would’ve gone under-prepared.

But Blu and Merla-

We can’t dwell on that, Keith. We have to move on, or their sacrifice is pointless.

Let’s go back to the ship, Shiro interjected gently, We should let Coran know that we’re alright. And Lance needs to reverse whatever he did to turn us into mermaids.

Lance flipped his tail, although with less of his usual bravado. It self-reverses. You turn into a human when you dry off and then back into a mer-person when you’re covered in water.

I don’t want to turn into a mermaid if I decide to take a bath, Shiro said firmly, You’re reversing it.

They swam for the surface, Coran swirling them up onto the deck the instant he saw them. Lance began a mer-song, and they all joined in, their tails separating back into legs and the gills fading back into their necks.

“Well, then,” Pidge asked grimly, “What do we do now?”
“Hey, Shiro. Come here.”

Shiro frowned, walking over to Pidge, who was examining the map. She’d been poking at it for three days now, but hadn’t been able to find any difference, or any indication of where the amulet might be. “What is it?”

“It glows when you get near it. Oh! some writing just popped up. Blah, blah, blah, another riddle, blah, blah, blah. It’s just talking about the other key. Which we took a shortcut to find, of course. Can you find Allura for me? I want to see if anything new shows up when she comes near it.”

Shiro wandered down belowdecks and pushed open a door, startling Allura and Keith.

“Oh. Hey, Shiro.” Keith didn’t seem particularly fazed, and Shiro surmised that there was nothing going on between them. Not that this fact made it acceptable for him to be skulking around alone with ladies, but Keith didn’t ever seem to see anyone as different— not black people, not islanders, not women—none of the groups most people saw as inferior. Being a cat might have something to do with that.

“We were talking about Lotor’s prophecy,” Allura filled in. She seemed vaguely aware that she was doing something she shouldn’t, but didn’t seem particularly bothered by this fact. “We think that Keith was the one who was already dead— you know, since the human Keith Kogane was— um—yes. But we were just wondering…”

“Who the traitor would be?”

Allura flinched guiltily. “Um. Yes.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Shiro told her firmly. “Worrying about it will only make us distrust each other. I’m not planning on selling us out to Haggar anytime soon. Are you?”

Allura shook her head in shock. “No! I would never!”

“Right, then. Don’t worry about it.”

“But what if—”

“Allura, we can’t focus on the what-if’s right now. We have to focus on the present. Speaking of the present, Pidge wants to talk to you.”

Allura nodded, and slipped out of the room. Shiro turned to Keith. “Keith…”

Keith crossed his arms, retreating back into himself. “What?”

“How are you feeling?”

Keith blinked, clearly expecting a reprimand. “Oh. Fine.”

“Can you…”

Keith shrank and turned into a cat, stretched, and turned back into a human, sticking a couple of moments in his halfway form with the ears, claws and purple skin on his otherwise human body. “It’s weird, I know,” he muttered, switching back to completely human, “I’m just kind of weird
now.”

Shiro ruffled his hair, shoving his head down playfully. “You’re not weird.”

Keith pushed at his hand, having a miniature wrestling match with Shiro’s arm. “Yeah I am! How many people do you know who can turn into a cat?!”

“Fine, fine, fine, it if means so much to you, you’re weird.”

Keith made a face at him, but a shriek of excitement came from the deck, and they ran up topside to see an excited Pidge showing Coran the map.

“It worked?” Shiro asked Allura.

“What was your first clue? Pidge screaming, or the fact that we’re changing course? It’s very far so we’ll need to stop and stock up, but we know where it is, and that’s all we needed.”

Shiro grinned. “Good. Where are we stopping?”

“Nearby island. No unfriendly feelings towards pirates who don’t cause trouble, no bad feelings towards islanders or women and no unfriendly feelings for me. Paradise, basically.”

Shiro snorted. “Any place that doesn’t hang pirates on sight is either riddled with pirates or just a lawless place in general.”

“Well, you’re rather gloomy, aren’t you? You should be glad that they won’t be sending people after us.”

“And I am. I’m just saying, maybe keep an eye on your wallet and watch out for slave traders. Remember the last person who didn’t seem too unfriendly towards you?”

Allura winced. “I see. That won’t happen this time, though. This time we’ll have you along, and people tend to leave me alone when you’re with me.”

Shiro grunted in amusement. “People only make fun of fishermen behind their backs because they don’t want to get punched in the face.”

“I’m coming too,” Keith piped up.

“We’re all going,” Shiro told them, “We need to split up. Stay in groups, though. One group of two and one group of three. I don’t want anyone getting attacked.”

“I’m going with Hunk,” Pidge said immediately, tugging on his arm and dragging him towards town.

“Guess that leaves us,” Shiro said to Keith and Allura, “We’d better get moving.”

The walked down the gangplank, and Keith squinted at another ship. “That one looks familiar…”

Shiro frowned. “Is that a panther on the deck?”

“Romelle,” Keith and Allura said in unison. Allura sighed. “What’s she doing here?”

“Stocking up,” Romelle said from behind them, “I’m going out on the ocean.”

They jumped. “Ah!”
Romelle laughed. “Relax. I’m not going to hurt you. I’m leaving to find a pirate ship, so I’ll be out away for a while and don’t want to run out of food and water.”

“Why? I mean, why are you after the pirates, not why don’t you want to run out of food and water.”

Romelle’s eyes narrowed. “Because I’m killing every one of those bastards I come across and selling their things.”

Allura nodded in approval. “I see.”

Keith frowned. “Just you?”

“Well, Quintisha helps a bit too. A lot, actually. There’s a lot of profit in it, you know.”

Shiro frowned. “And you’re doing this… why?”

“Revenge,” Romelle said casually, “If I can’t bring Bandor back to life, then, well… I’ll just have to kill every last one of them so that it can’t happen to another kid like him ever again.”

“Oh.” Shiro blinked. “Okay, then. Um. Have you been on this island long?”

“Yeah. Few days. Do you need a guide?”

“Where would we get meat?”

Romelle sucked in a breath. “Well, meat is really expensive here because something keeps stealing livestock, and a lot of the people who go into the jungle to hunt… they don’t come back. But, well, I was in there yesterday, and nothing bothered me, so I’d say it’s probably just local lore to up the meat prices. Probably fine.” She gave them a bright smile. “Happy hunting.”

She strode back towards her ship, and Keith turned to Shiro. “Creepy jungle?”

“Creepy jungle,” Shiro affirmed.

Xxx

Keith stalked through the treetops as a cat, tasting the air for prey. He might not be a hunting dog, but- he froze, crouched and ready to pounce. His haunches wiggled, and he sprang, landing right on his prey and knocking both of them out of the tree. He bit through its neck and offered it to Shiro.

“Thanks, Keith, but I’m not sure how useful a squirrel will be.”

Keith shifted into a human for a few moments. “I figured we could eat it tonight so we wouldn’t have to eat the bigger things that we need to preserve for the journey.” He shifted back into a cat, scampering back into a tree.

Shiro grinned. “Good thinking. Thanks.” Allura shushed them both

Keith gave him a nod and frowned. There was a strange smell around- a predator. In fact a-

“Guys, look out!” he yelled, shifting as he jumped out of the tree and in his halfway form when he hit the ground.

He was too late. Shiro and Allura were swept up in a net, and the bushes were suddenly teeming
with Galra, some in a halfway form and others completely animal. They surrounded the net where Shiro and Allura struggled, cutting Keith off.

“Keith, run!” Shiro ordered.

Keith’s ears flattened against his head, and he growled, long and low, at the Galra. Zarkon stepped out of the trees, his eyes glittering coldly. “Care for a rematch?”

That had been the smell. The smell of a crocodile. He hissed. “Let’s go. I win, you let them go. You win… you get to take me too.”

Shiro strained against the net. “Keith, no! You can’t beat him!”

Allura started to glow, and the clouds above them crackled with lightning, but one of the Galra clubbed her over the head, and the sky turned back to normal.

Zarkon considered him for a moment. “I agree. Not that it matters. I will win, and your side of the bargain won’t matter because you’ll be too injured to resist us.”

Keith rolled his neck and then jumped at Zarkon, raking his claws against the warlord’s skin. He yelped as they reverberated off of hard scales and leapt backwards, shaking his hands. He forgot how fast Zarkon was.

A huge fist sledge-hammered its way into Keith’s ribs, and he went flying backwards into a tree, which he hit with a nasty crack. Keith just shook himself and got back up, only for another fist to pound into him. He grabbed it with one hand, yanking out his knife with his open hand and stabbing the fist.

Zarkon roared in pain and shoved one massive arm against Keith’s chest, pushing him into the tree, continuing to press until Keith’s chest felt like it might burst.

Keith clawed at Zarkon’s arm uselessly as spots danced in front of his eyes. Zarkon leaned forward.

“I’m going to squash you like the insect you are,” he growled.

Keith drew his head back and slammed it into Zarkon’s nose. Zarkon recoiled in pain, and Keith dropped to the ground, gasping in air and rubbing his throbbing head.

Zarkon didn’t give him time to recover. A massive boot kicked Keith’s head, and his vision blurred out, righting itself in time for Zarkon to pick him up and throw him into a tree. He slid down it with a groan.

Shiro watched in horror as Keith slumped to the ground. Zarkon leaned in closer. “Give up yet? Surrender?”

Say yes. Please, Keith. Please say yes.

Keith spat something out, staggering to his feet, and Shiro’s heart sank as Zarkon kneed him in the gut and slammed his fist down on Keith’s back. Keith let out a harsh, whimpering scream, and an icy hand clutched Shiro’s heart.

Stars, not- not Keith.

“Give up yet, whelp?”

Keith coughed, a wet, nasty sound that squelched in his chest. “N-no.”

Zarkon lifted him by his throat, squeezing. Shiro tore frantically, uselessly, at the net that contained him as Keith kicked and struggled, his face turning blue.

“KEITH!” he screamed, “STAND DOWN!”

Zarkon threw Keith into another tree, and he fell face-down on the ground, not getting back up. Zarkon turned to go, but stopped abruptly, looking down to see Keith clutching desperately to his ankle.

“Well, you’re a determined little fellow, aren’t you?” Zarkon kicked backward, and Keith let out another strangled scream that turned into choking when blood from his now-broken nose got into his mouth. But he still didn’t let go. Zarkon kicked again and again, and Shiro felt each kick as much as if it were his face that was getting smashed in.

Zarkon gave one last kick and Keith’s hands dropped away. Zarkon moved away, satisfied, but one of his soldiers gasped in warning, and Zarkon turned to see Keith staggering to his feet. Zarkon didn’t seem to concerned and watched in contempt as Keith took a couple of staggering steps towards him before collapsing in the mud. He didn’t get back up.

“Should we take him with us, sir?”

“Leave him,” Zarkon said dismissively, “He’ll be dead in an hour.”

Shiro struggled against the net even as it was dragged away. “Keith!”

“Shut up,” someone growled at him, and the fight dropped out of Shiro as Keith became nothing more than a huddled shape in the distance. *He’ll be dead in an hour.*

“Keith,” he whispered.

Xxx

Pidge glanced at their shopping list. “We’re done. We should be getting back.”

Hunk frowned. “Don’t you think it’s a little odd that we haven’t run into Keith, Allura and Shiro at all?”

Pidge’s eyes narrowed. “Yeah. Little strange. Hey- wait- is that Romelle?!” She waved frantically, and Romelle strode over.

“Hello.”

“Hey. Romelle, have you seen Shiro, Keith or Allura?”

Romelle shook her head. “They went off to the forest to hunt and I haven’t seen them since.” She frowned. “Do you think something’s happened to them?”

“Those three?” Hunk remarked sarcastically as Pidge started running for the forest, “Nah, they’re model citizens all of the time.” He shoved his armload of supplies into Romelle’s arms. “Sorry to run, but we’ve got to find them. Could you tell Lance and Coran what’s going on? Thanks!” He dashed after Pidge.
“Wait!” she called, “What am I supposed to do with… this,” she finished as he ran out of sight. “Alright, then.” She leaned down to pick up a fallen item only for three more things to come down. “Great.”

Xxx

Pidge cupped her hands around her mouth. Her hat had fallen off somewhere along the way, but she didn’t care. “Keith! Shiro! Allura!”

Behind her, Hunk also bellowed their names, although his voice was significantly louder than hers. Pidge wished she were a tracker. Hunk caught up to her, panting. “They’ve got to be around here somewhere.

There was a rustle in the trees, and someone dropped down on top of Hunk, knocking him to the ground. He bellowed in confusion and fear, one of his flailing fists connecting with his hooded attacker, who grunted.

“Stay back, Miss!” Hunk’s assailant ordered Pidge, “I can handle him!”

Pidge ignored him and grabbed a fistful of the attacker’s cloak. “Get off, you great big brute!”

“Step back, ma’am, I won’t let him hurt you!”

“You idiot, get off of him, he’s my friend! Get! Off!”

Pidge was pushed away, Hunk continuing to flail underneath the mysterious man. Pidge glanced around and snatched up a big stick. She started hitting Hunk’s attacker with it repeatedly, whacking him around the shoulders and back, even getting a few blows in on his head. “Get! Off! Of! Hunk!”

He paused for a moment. “Katie?”

She swung one last hit in on him, putting all of her strength into it and cracking him upside the head. He fell off of Hunk, who blinked in bewilderment.

“Did he just… call you Katie?”

Katie shifted uneasily. “I don’t know. Let’s see who he is.” She yanked off the hood and choked as a familiar face lolled beneath the hood. “Matt?!”
How Many Artists Fear the Light

Shiro pushed Allura behind him as the door to their holding cell opened. She’d been sedated while they were both in the net, but Shiro would be damned before he’d let them do anything to her.

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Matt groaned and opened his eyes. “Ow. What happened?”

Pidge flew into him. “You’re here,” she sang, “You’re here and you’re alive!”

“Yeah- you’ve got a good arm, Pidgeon.”

“Oh! Sorry about that! But you weren’t listening to me, and you were attacking Hunk.”

“Hunk?”

“He’s an islander from back home. He was helping me try to find you but then he heard Governor Sandas planning to kill Keith- you remember Keith, right? Anyway, Hunk ran off to warn Keith and I came with him and we all had to make a run for it! Also we helped a slave escape- well, that was mostly Keith- and she travels with us now, along with a mermaid and an air spirit! And Shiro and- oh- no! I forgot about Allura and Keith and Shiro! We’ve got to find them!”

She grabbed Matt’s arm and tugged him through the jungle, trying to find Hunk, who had continued the search while she waited for Matt to wake up. He crashed behind her in confusion, rubbing his head.

“Whoa! Slow down!”

Pidge halted abruptly. “Wait! What about Dad?!?”

Matt bit his lip, bowing his head. “Dad… didn’t make it. Katie, the pirates that captured us- I know it’s hard to believe, but—”

“They’re shape-shifting monsters who eat people and take their form,” Pidge finished, “I know. We’ve encountered them.”

Matt blinked. “Oh. Well, then. What exactly is going on?”

“Shiro, Allura- that’s the escaped slave- and Keith disappeared in here a bit ago. We’re trying to find them.”

Matt looked at the ground and then at the trees, frowning. “There aren’t any tracks, but there are little claw marks in the trees- like a cat’s claws.”
“That’d be Keith.”

“What?!”

“Oh, yeah. Keith can turn into a cat.”

Matt blinked, then apparently decided it wasn’t any stranger than what he’d already gone through and followed the claw marks through the trees. He waved his hand. “I found Keith.”

Pidge rushed towards him, and let out a cry of fear and horror. Keith was lying on the ground, not moving.

“He’s alive,” Matt assured her, “If barely.”

“Sh-Shiro,” Keith muttered deliriously, “Allura- No- don’t- don’t take them- No—”

“Hunk!” Pidge screamed. He came crashing through the trees towards her, eyes questioning. “You need to get him back to the ship! I think Allura and Shiro have been kidnapped!”

“What about you?”

“Matt and I are going to keep looking for them. But Keith needs someone to take care of him and you’re better than I am at that.”

Hunk nodded and scooped Keith up. Keith let out a harsh cry of pain, and Pidge’s heart was torn in two as Hunk quietly apologized to him. She turned away, now able to see a path of destruction through the jungle.

“Matt, come on. We’ve got to catch them.”

Hunk set Keith down gently in his bed, wincing as Keith let out another of those harsh, choking cries. Romelle hovered behind him.

“Is he going to be okay?”

“I don’t know,” Hunk said miserably, “He doesn’t look good at all. I don’t even know where to start.”

“There’s a doctor in town. Should I—”

“No. No, if they knew about his brand…”

“I see.” Romelle strode out of the room and came back with water and a cloth. “We should at least get the blood off.”

Hunk nodded mutely, gently dabbing at the blood around Keith’s face. He didn’t seem to have any major cuts- it was like he’d been bludgeoned. Hunk also saw fingerprints- massive ones- on Keith’s throat.

Romelle shuddered. “His face is a mess- look, he’s split his lip.”

Hunk barely contained his stomach. “Coran?”

“I’m sorry, Hunk,” the air spirit told him, “This is beyond what I can help with. He’s hurt and hurt
badly. His brain’s been damaged- I don’t know if we can fix this. I don’t even know if he’ll wake up.”

Xxx

Pidge looked up at the sky as it began to rain. Thunder cracked overhead, and she grinned.

“Allura.”
Allura felt the storms come back to her, crackling around her, and she laughed wildly. They couldn’t contain her.

A guard stormed down, his face a mask of anger and fear. “Stop it! You’ll kill us all!”

“That’s the plan,” Allura hissed.

“No, you’ll kill yourself, too, and your friend! We’re on open ocean!”

Allura released her hold on the storm. If she could still turn into a mermaid, this would be fine. But as it was, she didn’t dare do anything rash.

“What are you going to do with us?”

“We’re going to sail to the island of the amulet. You and your buddy are going to open the way for us.”

“No! We would never! We’d die first!”

“Really? I think you’re quite mistaken.”

“Wh-what?”

A scream echoed from somewhere deep in the ship. Shiro’s scream. The hairs on the back of Allura’s neck rose. “What are you doing to him?!”

The guard tilted his head. “Ah. He lasted a long while, didn’t he? Normally they’re consumed much more quickly.”

“Wh-What?”


Xxx

Matt and Pidge sped across the waves in a small rowboat with a canopy. “This isn’t meant for long journeys, and we didn’t pack for a long trip,” Matt shouted, “Aren’t we going to go back?”

Pidge shook her head. “Lance will take care of us,” she shouted back, “He’ll bring us food and refill the water.”

“I still can’t believe that you’re friends with a mermaid!”

The boat stopped abruptly, and Lance’s head poked up. “It’s merman. I’m hauling you across the ocean; the least you could do is call me by my proper species.”

Matt coughed. “Right. Sorry. I can’t believe that you’re friends with a merman.”

The boat started moving again, and Pidge grinned. “Isn’t this great? The wind, the sea? Just skimming along the top of the waves in a boat going faster than anyone could imagine?”
“Looking for two of your friends who have been kidnapped while the third is badly injured,” Matt muttered.

Pidge’s good mood dampened. “I know. Matt… I want to know something. If you’d known about Keith helping Allura escape, would you have turned them in?”

Matt was quiet for a minute. “I don’t know. I think… I think that while I wouldn’t have felt good about it, I would’ve turned them in. We have slaves for a reason, Pidge. They’re like horses- we should treat them well, but they’re not human.”

Pidge recoiled from her brother in shock. “You’ll change your mind when you meet Allura. She’s as human as they come- and what about Keith?! He’s not really human either; would you sell him as a slave?”

Matt’s face turned ugly. “If it were anyone other than Keith, I’d kill him like the traitor he is.”

Pidge shoved herself away. “Matt! How could you say that?! He’s on our side! He can’t help how he is!”

Matt sighed. “I’m sorry, Pidge. I’m sure you’re right.”

“Of course I am,” Pidge said firmly, “I’m always right.”

Xxx

Hunk glanced at Keith. He hadn’t woken up, and Hunk had barely left his side, only ever leaving to sleep for a few hours while Romelle watched him. He was getting worse, too. Hunk was certain that he had a fever, but he couldn’t do anything other than try to keep him warm and keep his head cool.

“Shiro,” Keith murmured restlessly, his split lip and swollen face garbling some of his words, “Allura- have to help- have to save- no- no- Shiro!”

Xxx

Pidge looked up at the massive ship that Lance had brought her to. “You’re sure?”

“It’s definitely one of theirs- I scouted it out and what do you know, there were box jellyfish all over the place. Anyway, I can’t get any closer because of the nasty things, so you’ll have to row. Check for Allura and Shiro and if they’re not there, see if you can blow this thing to kingdom come.”

Pidge grinned wickedly. “I’m sure they have gunpowder.”

Matt began to row them softly towards the boat, and once there, Pidge clambered up the side of the anchor, hand over slippery hand. Once she was on deck, she prowled cautiously by the night watch and down into the depths of the ship, searching for the brig. Nothing.

She crept through the ship silently, checking every room for Shiro and Allura. They were nowhere to be found. She found the powder room and grinned, grabbing a heavy keg of gunpowder and scooping out a healthy amount. She mixed it with water from the ship’s stores until she made a paste and then she pulled out a spool of thread and doused a massive length of thread in the paste, getting it covered properly and laying it out along a path to dry, sticking one end in the keg of gunpowder she’d opened earlier. She opened every keg of gunpowder in the room, just in case the explosion from the first didn’t burn through the barrels, and ran back to the other end.
Pidge grinned wickedly and struck a match, lighting the fuse and sliding down the anchor chain as it hissed.

“Go, go, go!” she hissed at Matt, and they rowed silently away. Once they reached Lance, he tied the harness and swam away from the ship as fast as possible. Behind them, there was a *boom*, and the ship began to burn.

Matt watched the ship burn. “What if they weren’t so bad?”

“What?”

“What if- maybe- what if they were renegades? What if they didn’t want to serve Haggar and Zarkon?”

Pidge stared at her brother in disbelief. “Matt, you were just talking about how if Keith weren’t Keith you’d kill him for being a traitor!”

“Well, yeah. I guess. I just… you just killed a shipful of people in cold blood, no questions asked.”

“Matt, this is war. I can’t afford to be soft.”

“Yeah,” Matt said softly, watching the burning ship, “No softness.”

Xxx

Pidge stood and stretched as the boat skimmed along towards another boat in the distance. Storm clouds were hovering ominously over the ship, while the rest of the sky was clear.

“Allura.”

Matt glanced at her quizzically. “What?”

“Allura can control storms,” Pidge explained, “That’s got to be her!”

Xxx

Allura stared sadly at the massive beast pacing back and forth in the cage opposite hers. “Come on, Shiro. I know you’re in there. Please, come back to us.”

His animal form shuddered, and fur started shrinking back, four legs turning into two legs and a pair of arms. Shiro stood up, his eyes wide. “Allura? What happened?”

“It’s going to be okay,” Allura promised, her voice wavering, “You’ll be okay. It’s- it’s just like Keith. You just have to remember Shiro and- and cling to that.”

“Allura, what’s happening to me?!”

“You’ve been consumed,” Allura told him shakily, “I’m sorry, Shiro, you’re… you’re not Shiro anymore.”

Xxx

Pidge glanced at the storm clouds above. They were getting darker and thicker, swirling around in a maelstrom of potential death. “Allura must be getting upset. We’ve got to hurry.”

Lance doubled his speed. “We’ll get there,” he promised.
Hunk glanced at the restless Keith, who seemed to be wasting away—Hunk had tried to feed him, but he was unresponsive.

“Shiro,” Keith muttered, “Shiro, no.” He murmured something about the approaching storm, and Hunk glanced outside. It was a perfectly clear day, and no animal outside was acting like there was a storm about to hit.

“Oh, Keith,” Hunk sighed, his voice cracking slightly.

In the corner, unnoticed by Hunk, Keith’s sword began to glow.
Shiro started pacing again, so reminiscent of the beast he’d been only a few moments ago. “No. No, that’s not right. I’m not- I’m not a Galran. I’m human.”

“I’m sorry,” Allura whispered, “I’m sorry, Shiro.”

Shiro rubbed his temples. “No. I- I can’t believe- I escaped only for…”

“It’s not your fault, Shiro!”

“I- I’m not Shiro anymore, Allura.”

Allura hid her tears behind a wall of anger. “Shiro, don’t say that!”

“But Allura—”

“Shiro, you told Keith that it didn’t matter! That all that mattered was that he was Keith now! That the choices he made when he was in control of himself were all that counted! Are you telling me that all of that was a lie?!”

“No, I—”

“Then believe it, Shiro! Believe it about yourself! I believe it about you- you’re more than what you’re made of!” Allura felt the tears come back, and she didn’t try to fight them anymore. “Please, Shiro.”

Xxx

“Please,” Keith murmured, “Please, Shiro.”

Hunk glanced at him, the circles under his eyes so dark that they matched the bruises around Keith’s eyes. “Keith, please,” he murmured, his voice cracking, “Wake up, please.”

In the corner, despite the heavy rug that Hunk had thrown over it, Keith’s sword glowed as brightly as the sun.

Xxx

Pidge clambered up the anchor chain, peeking in the brig through the port hole. Allura was there, locked in a separate cell from Shiro. Pidge knocked on the window to get her attention and gave her a thumbs-up.

“We’ve got an escape boat! Blow this thing to hell,” she shouted, hoping that Allura could at least read her lips. She dropped into the ocean, swimming back for their rowboat.

Lightning arced from the sky and struck the ship, and the heavens let loose with torrents of rain, wind and lightning, thunder clapping so loudly that Pidge had to stuff her fingers in her ears to keep from going deaf.

“Where did this come from?!?” Matt shouted.

“Allura,” Pidge shouted back with a grin.
Matt stared in awe as the ship burst open from another crack of lightning, and Allura burst out, her eyes glowing with crackling electricity. The wind held her aloft and Shiro was floated gently over to the rowboat. Allura, however, showed no signs of wanting to stop now that they were free, and the ocean shook with her power.

Matt nodded to himself. “Alright then. Time to fulfill my mission.”

Pidge barely noticed his words. She did notice when Matt turned into an albatross and flew up towards Allura, tearing at her with his sharp beak. She screamed and batted him away with a gust of wind, and Pidge grabbed him by the feet.

“Matt?!”

He snapped at her, tearing at her arms with his beak.

“Let him go, Pidge,” Lance told her, struggling in the choppy waves, “He’s been consumed, and he’s not acting like your brother anymore!”

Pidge felt her eyes fill with tears that joined the raindrops on her cheeks. “NO! No, he’ll turn back-like with Keith, he’ll be on our side, he—”

“Pidge, he tried to kill Allura, and he’ll kill you! Let go of him!”

“No! We can save him!”

“Pidge, we don’t know what happened to him in the jungle, or on the ship- Keith was a confused and stubborn kid who no one ever told what was going on, but I don’t think that Matt can resist it-he’s been in their power for two or three years now, and they’ve given him a mission- to kill us! So let him go!”

“I can’t! He’s my brother!”

“Look at him, Pidge! Is he acting like your brother?!”

Pidge looked down at the snapping, snarling creature that was attempting to tear apart her arms. “We can fix him! He’s confused!”

“Look at him, Pidge! He’s not confused! Look at his eyes!”

Pidge forced herself to look at the snapping bird’s eyes, and saw that Lance was right. Though he thrashed like a wild animal, his eyes were cold, calculating, and, Pidge realized with a sinking feeling in the bottom of her stomach, completely in control. Matt knew exactly what he was doing. This was why he’d called Keith a traitor; because to someone working with the Galra, Keith was a traitor.

Pidge let go of Matt’s legs, and he snapped at her neck. Shiro swatted him away, and Pidge could’ve sworn that Shiro had claws for an instant, but they were gone in an instant, and Pidge put it up as a trick of the rain pouring down, or of the tears blurring her eyes.

The albatross lurched drunkenly through the sky to snap at Allura, succeeding at tearing some of the skin from her arm. She screamed in pain and a bolt of lightning ripped through the sky towards the albatross, who barely dodged before making another pass at the floating Allura.

Allura seemed to be collecting lightning, more and more of it attracting to her. It zipped around her, making her whole body crackle like some kind of energy ball. Matt snapped at her again, but when
he hit the electricity barrier, he dropped from the sky like a deadweight, stunned.

Pidge screamed as a bolt of lightning hit him, finally striking a killing blow home. The wind whipped up to a tempest, and the waves became too much for even Lance to struggle against- it became all he could do to not slam into the sides of the ship.

“Allura!” he shouted, “You’ve got to stop this! You’ve got to calm down!”

Allura was beyond reach now, nothing more than a whirlwind of lightning now, glowing and crackling with power. She wasn’t coming down.

Xxx

“Allura,” Keith murmured in his sleep, “Allura, come back.”

Xxx

Pidge pointed across the waves with one hand, clinging tightly to the boat with her other hand. “What is that?!”

Coming across the waves towards them was a ghostly red shape, floating above the stormy waters. None of the raging elements around it seemed to bother it, and it floated up towards the glowing Allura.

Shiro blinked in astonishment. “Is that… Keith?!”

Xxx

Allura laughed wildly, so much energy at her fingertips. The storm was calling her, calling her to be one with it forever. They would be unstoppable, able to rip apart anything that stood in their way.

“Allura,” a faint voice called, and they pushed it away. Allura had been the old her. Now she- it- they were- a powerful being, cloaked in lightning. They were the oncoming storm.

“Allura,” the voice called again, and they glanced down in irritation to see a small, glowing red figure floating towards them. It- he- held out a hand. “Come down. We need you.”

He got closer and closer and despite themselves, Storm-Allura reached for it.

“Keith?” she- it- she whispered.

Xxx

Pidge watched as the glowing Keith-ghost floated up to the ball of energy that was Allura. There was a clap of thunder that almost sounded like “Keith”, and then they met and the harsh glowing faded until it was just Allura, slowly descending towards the boat. She settled onto it, and her eyes rolled up in her head.

Although the storm tamed, Allura hadn’t calmed it completely, and rain was still pouring down so fast that Pidge had to scoop it out.

Lance surfaced, dizzy from all of the waves. “Which way? I don’t know where the ship is.”

Pidge glanced around at the expanse of ocean before them, every feature indistinguishable from the next because of the pouring rain. “I- I don’t know.”
The red ghost appeared again, and Pidge could see that it was indeed Keith. He beckoned them towards him, not saying anything, just turning around and floating away.

“Follow him,” Pidge ordered Lance, continuing to scoop water out of the boat, “He’ll lead us home.”

Xxx

All at once, Keith gave a sigh, and his fever broke. The shining in the corner faded to a dull glow, Hunk snorted awake, cursing himself for falling asleep.

He didn’t need to worry. Romelle was there, grinning at him. “I think he’s going to get better!”

Xxx

An exhausted Lance pushed the boat to the harbor, sliding under the waves and murmuring something about taking a nap for the next three weeks. The ghost Keith floated to the ship and disappeared. Pidge waved a hand, and the little boat was raised up to the deck by a beaming Coran.

“You did it!”

The still-unconscious Allura was floated gently away to her room by Coran, and Pidge and Shiro followed after, dead on their feet.

“We- we should check on Keith,” Pidge murmured, pushing towards his room. Her legs wobbled, and she collapsed to her knees. “Urgh. So tired.”

Xxx

Hunk’s head was nodding, and then he heard a quiet and raspy voice say his name, and he snapped awake. Keith’s swollen eyes were open, watching him with glittering curiosity.

It took a couple of moments to register in Hunk’s tired brain before he realized what he was seeing, and then he shouted in elation, hugging Keith.

“You’re awake!”

Keith croaked in pain, and Hunk immediately released him. “Sorry!”

“’S okay,” he murmured, wincing when he moved his lips, “Shro?” he slurred, clearly attempting to say Shiro’s name, “’llura?”

Coran materialized in the room. “Pidge is back,” he said crisply, “She appears to have lost Matt somewhere along the way, but she brought Allura and Shiro back. All of them are very tired, so—” he caught sight of the now-awake Keith and did a double-take. “You’re awake!”

Keith blinked in confusion. “M-Matt? When…”

“It’s a long story,” Hunk told him, “You missed a lot while you were out.”

“Even more than you know, according to Pidge,” Coran told them, “I’ll get the others- they’ll want to know that you’re alright.”

He disappeared, but a pale Allura poked her head in the room. “Keith?”

“’llura?”
She crossed the room in three graceful strides. “You’re okay?”

“’m okay. You okay?”

“Fine. Thanks to you. You- you saved me from becoming the storm.”

A brief look of confusion flitted across his face. “’k…”

“How did you do it?”

Keith’s brow creased briefly. “What?”

“You appeared- well, not you like this, but some sort of spirit thing.”

Keith frowned, struggling to remember. “I- I don’t…”

The door burst open, and Pidge and Shiro tumbled in.

“Keith! You’re okay! You’re awake!” Pidge stumbled to him. “What happened?! We just found you in the jungle, all beat up, and—”

Hunk grinned. “Let him breathe, Pidge.”

Quintisha slunk in, nudging Keith’s hand with a purr. Romelle whistled sharply and the panther stalked towards her, leaving Keith alone. He blinked in confusion.

“’selle? What-?”

“I came to help Hunk. I- I sent you three into the woods, and I feel… responsible. I had Quintisha to help me in the jungle, and I didn’t consider that it would be harder for you.”

“’s okay. Shiro—”

Pidge looked at Shiro, wondering why he’d been so silent and she took a step back, unsheathing her knife. Shiro was changing, shifting, his face elongating into a snout, grey fur sprouting all over his body. Quintisha bristled with a growl, arching his back as Shiro gave a howl and collapsed to all fours.

Shiro had transformed into a massive wolf.
Quintisha leapt at wolf-Shiro with a yowl, but Shiro ducked and slammed his side into the big cat, sending him flying into the wall. Allura held a hand out.

“Shiro, it’s okay. Calm down. Transform back.”

Shiro snarled, and his eyes were crazy, wild, trapped. He bounded out of the room and onto the deck, howling furiously. Everyone gave chase, closing the door to Keith’s room even as he protested weakly.

Shiro was pacing the deck, growling at anyone who dared to get close. He stalked towards Hunk, leaping and knocking him backwards. Quintisha raced on deck, and the two leapt at each other, each trying to tear the other’s throat out. Romelle pleaded for Quintisha to come back, that this wasn’t a Galra that he needed to kill, but the big cat refused to listen.

The cat and the wolf separated, circling each other warily, both bleeding from wounds. Romelle called again, and Quintisha gave her a glance, but ignored her, continuing to size up Shiro. Coran tried desperately to separate them, but they fought through his winds and continued to rip and tear at each other.

Shiro broke away from Quintisha and ran at Romelle with a snarl, as if killing her would stop the attacks of the big cat. Romelle screamed, ducking to the floor, but it wasn’t her dodge that made Shiro stop.

“Sh-Shiro.”

Wolf Shiro stopped, glancing hesitantly at Keith, who was leaning against the wall, panting heavily, his breath hitching in his chest. He stalked slowly towards Keith, growling ever so slightly.

“Shiro,” Keith said again, “Please. I know- I know you’re not like this. Please- please, come back to us. Please—” Pidge was surprised to see tears in Keith’s eyes.

Shiro jumped on him with a growl, and the others leapt forward to stop him, but Keith waved them off.

“I know you’re in there, Shiro,” he whispered, “Please, come back to us. Please…” his eyes slid shut as the strain overcame him. “Please…”

Shiro’s snarled snout relaxed, smoothed, and turned to an expression of horror. He got off of Keith, pushing at his hand with his snout, whining. A gentle paw stroked Keith’s hair, and Shiro backed away, transforming back into a human.

“Stars… what have I done to Keith…”

“It’s okay,” Pidge assured him in a low voice as Coran hustled Keith away back to his room, “It- It wasn’t all you- idiot shouldn’t have been wandering around, but you know how Keith is. Stubborn. Headstrong.” She wiped at her eyes. “He’ll be okay. He’s tough.”

“Coran didn’t even think he’d make it,” Hunk supplied, “But look at him! Wandering about, facing down wolves- he’ll be okay. It’ll take more than Zarkonto make Keith go down.”
“I’m a monster…”

“No, you’re not,” Pidge said firmly, “We are what we do, not what’s in our blood. You’re not a monster.”

“Really?! I’ve been an Illimu for a few days, and what have I done? I’ve attacked Keith, attempted to hurt you—”

Pidge waved a hand. “You weren’t yourself. You were hurting. Confused. You’ll be okay, as long as you don’t lose sight of yourself.”

Shiro sighed, rubbing his forehead. “I should just leave. You can’t risk me staying here.”

“We can risk anything we damn well want to,” Allura snapped, “I’m essentially a walking time-bomb: I think we can handle having a wolf on board.”

“Besides,” Romelle added, “You’re the key to the amulet. We’re not going to make you leave just because you screwed up once.”

Shiro raised an eyebrow. “We?”

Romelle nodded firmly. “Quintisha and I are coming with you guys. We owe you one for… kind of accidentally getting you captured. Plus, we want to blow up some pirates, isn’t that right, Quintisha?”

Shiro looked to Allura, who shrugged. “I don’t see why not. It wouldn’t hurt to have a panther on board.”

Her failure to mention that Romelle might be a valuable asset didn’t go by Shiro, nor apparently Romelle, whose eyes narrowed. But both of them kept their mouths shut.

“Heya, guys,” a cheerful voice called from the water, “Whatcha talking about?”

Lance was peering up at them from the harbor. He had missed the entire wolf escapade. For some reason, Shiro found this incredibly amusing, and he started to laugh, deep down from his belly. Pidge and Hunk glanced at each other, and they started laughing too. Romelle let out a small giggle, and then suddenly both she and Allura were both also laughing uproariously. Lance swam back and forth in confusion.

“What? What did I miss?”

They all just laughed harder.

“Seriously, what happened??”

xxx

Shiro knocked hesitantly on the door to Keith’s room before pushing it open. Keith was awake, if barely, and he managed a pained grin.

“Hey.”

“Hey yourself,” Shiro joked, his chest tight. “Look- Keith- earlier—”

Keith assumed the face of a caged animal, his body tensed. “Shiro—”
“No, Keith, let me finish. Earlier, I attacked you. I jumped on top of you and probably would’ve bitten your throat and killed you.”

“Shiro, really, please, it’s okay, don’t—”

“No, Keith! It’s not okay! I could’ve hurt you really badly, maybe even killed you!”

“Shiro- really- it wasn’t your fault. I don’t—”

Shiro took in a deep breath. “Keith, let me finish. What I did wasn’t okay. And I have to control the wolf inside. I went crazy back there and let it get out of hand. And you… you brought me back.”

Shiro looked up at Keith. “I wanted to say thank you. And I’m sorry.”

Shiro crossed the room in a few quick strides and squeezed Keith’s shoulder, avoiding hugging so he wouldn’t hurt his friend’s ribs. Keith blinked.

“Oh,” he said in a small voice, “Um. You’re welcome.”

“I’m really glad that I decided to take you home with me.”

Keith laughed, a laugh that ended in a cough. “You get kidnapped by pirates, break your ankle, get dragged into a war you never signed up for, get shot at, get the tip of your pinkie sliced off, get kidnapped more times and even get eaten, becoming a wolf-person, and you’re glad about it?”

“I wouldn’t trade a second of it,” Shiro said firmly, “I got kidnapped by pirates, met a mermaid, saw a girl summon lightning from the sky, traveled the sea, met some amazing people and had fun with my best friend. I’d say it was a pretty good time.”

Keith gave an incredulous laugh. “If you say so.”

“I do. I do say so.” Shiro hesitated. “Keith, when we were out on the ocean… we found Matt.”

“You did?!”

“Yeah.”

“Where is he?”

Shiro took in a deep breath. “Dead. Allura killed him.”

Keith coughed. “I’m sorry, you said, that—”

“Allura killed him,” Shiro affirmed, “He was eaten by an albatross and the Illimu left behind tried to kill Allura. She killed him.”

“Stars… Matt… and Sam?”

Shiro shrugged helplessly. “Pidge thinks he’s dead. But then, the Illimu Matt was a liar, obviously, so maybe… I just… I don’t want to give Pidge false hope that he might be alive.”

“Yeah.” Keith leaned back, closing his eyes. “I’m sorry… I’ve been really tired.”

“Yeah. Makes sense. Keith…”

“Yeah?”
“What you did back there with Zarkon… that was not okay.”

“What do you mean? I stabbed him, didn’t I?”

“Keith, he could’ve killed you. As it is- you’re out of commission, bud. For a while.”

“What?!?”

“Keith, you can barely move! Going out into a fight of any kind would be suicide, and I’m not going to allow it. You’ll stay right here, in bed and not move.”

Keith drooped. “Yes, sir.”

Shiro gave him a brief smile. “It’s okay. It’ll take us a couple of months to reach the island where the amulet is. You’ll have plenty of time to heal up and recover.”

“So, are you… still the key?”

Shiro nodded. “I can still feel the power that Axenus gave me.” He looked down at his hand. “It’s like… I don’t know, it’s like a have a connection to the ocean.” He chuckled at Keith’s wary look. “Not like Allura’s connection, I promise. It’s more like… okay, I think that there’s two aspects to the ocean, you know? Sometimes it’s calm and placid, and good for fishing…”

“And other times it takes all you’ve got to keep your boat from capsizing,” Keith finished for him, “Allura’s the storm, and you’re the calm.”

Shiro nodded. “Exactly! And, I mean, it’s not like that makes me better than her- it’s just a different kind of power.”

“Yeah. Got it. Both are powerful, both have their pros and cons. Okay. So. Are you going to break out any cool superpowers? Are you going to make the ocean calm for us?”

Shiro laughed. “I wish. I think all it does is make the ocean like me.”

“Is it too much to ask for that I get one clear day?”

“Sorry, if anything went our way, the universe would collapse from the paradox of it.”

Keith laughed, and Shiro’s face turned serious again.

“Keith, I want you to promise me something.”

“What?”

“I want you to promise to never get in a situation like the one with Zarkon ever again. Don’t make challenges or promises like that to people that you don’t know if you can beat.”

Keith’s violet eyes locked on Shiro’s. “I can beat Zarkon,” he told Shiro, confidently, but not in a bragging way. “Give me a fair fight with my sword and he’s dead.”
“Keith?”

Keith looked up at Pidge as she came in his room. “Hey.”

“I want to ask you something. Do you remember coming out over the ocean to us? As a little red ghost?”

Keith blinked slowly, his head throbbing in an elusive way as he tried to grasp at memories. “I- I don’t know. After the fight with Zarkon, everything was just a blur. I remember a storm, but…”

“There were no storms at the port! You did astral project across the ocean! How did you do it?!”

“I- I think it was my sword.”

Pidge crossed the room and picked up his blade, examining it with scientific curiosity. “Your sword?”

Keith nodded, wincing as his head throbbed in protest. “Zarkon, he- he called it the sword of heroes. It comes to me, sometimes, when I need it. I think- I think it knew that Allura needed help. So…”

“It sent you,” Pidge said softly, looking the sword up and down, “Amazing. I can’t believe it was just lying around in Coran’s ship for so long!”

Keith gave the sword a curious look. “You know, I’m not sure that it was.”

“Huh?”

“I was…” Keith searched for the right word. “…called to the corner where it was. I think that- I think it might have appeared because it knew that I needed it.”

“You talk about it like it has a personality.”

“Yeah, I… I don’t think it has a personality, per se, but… it’s like it has preferences. A kind of person that it prefers to be wielded by.”

Pidge nodded thoughtfully, putting her hand on the handle and pulling the sword out of its sheath. She yelped, dropping it.

“It zapped me!” she yelped, face shocked and indignant, “It zapped me with a jolt of electricity!”

Keith shook his head. “It probably just gave you a static shock.”

Pidge put her hands on her hips. “I know the difference between a static shock and a bolt of electricity! It definitely attempted to hit me with electricity.”

“… Okay… That’s a little weird.”

“Yeah, no kidding! Why did it do that?”

Keith shrugged with a wince. “Magic.”
“Seriously? That’s your only explanation?!!”

Keith shrugged again. “What do you want me to say? I don’t know why the sword does anything anymore than you do.”

Outside, a cannon boomed. Pidge sat bolt upright. “What-?”

She sprinted for the door. “You stay in here!” she ordered, “Don’t come out on deck!”

Pidge emerged on deck and joined Shiro, Hunk, Allura and Coran. “What’s going on?”

“Pirates,” Allura said grimly, “They… They’re flying the symbol of Zarkon’s village.”

Pidge swore as Zarkon strode on deck at a safe distance, out of range of Hunk’s crossbow.

“What do you want?” Shiro called.

Zarkon’s lip curled. “You and the Altean princess. Complete surrender. Promise not to run. If you agree, then the rest of your crew will be spared so long as they promise not to attempt a rescue.”

“Never!” Allura burst out.

“Then your companions will be killed, and you will be taken by force,” Zarkon said dismissively, “Fire,” he ordered his men.

The cannonballs were stopped by Coran’s swirling barrier of wind. The ship’s cannons fired back in response, tearing into Zarkon’s ship. They didn’t seem to be doing much damage. Coran appeared, his face strained.

“I can’t hold off the cannonballs for much longer!”

“They’re going to board us,” Hunk shouted.

“Not if I board them first,” Pidge yelled back, “I’ll take care of the cannons! You guys keep them from overtaking the ship.”

“Pidge, wait,” Allura called, but Pidge was already gone, shooting her grappling hook towards the other ship. It latched right next to a cannon hole and Pidge swung towards it, flattening herself to the side of the ship as the cannon fired with a blast that slammed on her ears.

Pidge slid in through the cannon hole, wincing as she touched the hot cannon barrel.

“Hey! Someone’s got in!”

Pidge kicked the one who had shouted in the face and kicked gunpowder into the eyes of another, spinning to hit one and throwing a knife at the third. The others came towards her, and she grabbed an unlit torch, lighting it and holding it over a barrel of gunpowder.

“Don’t get any closer or I’ll drop it!”

They all stopped. “You’re insane!”

Pidge laughed softly. “I know how to survive the blast. Do you?”

They hesitated, looking at each other and at Pidge. She held her breath, hoping that they would fall for her bluff. “Put your weapons down and go outside,” she ordered. They glanced at her again and
obeyed. Pidge locked the door behind them, looking at the cannons. “Let’s see… how best to get rid of a bunch of cannons…”

Pidge picked up a barrel of gunpowder and poured the barrel of a cannon full of it, ramming it down and twining extra fuse around the one already there. There was a pounding at the door, and she worked faster, filling the other cannons and tying all of their fuses together to make one long fuse. The battering continued, and Pidge lit the last fuse, wriggling out of the cannon shutter and jumping down.

Behind her, there was a loud boom and screams as the first cannon exploded from the excess of explosive powder. The explosion must have lit the other fuses, because a massive fireball exploded from the ship, blasting parts of the Castle of Lions off with it and creating a shockwave that resonated through the water. A piece of wreckage slammed into Pidge, and she lost sense of where she was.

A pair of arms wrapped themselves around her, dragging her to the surface of the water. She coughed and gasped in air.

“T’ve got you,” Lance murmured in her ear, “Just relax. I’m getting you to a nearby island- they’ll help you.”

“H-Help me?” Pidge whispered.

“You got hit pretty bad,” Lance told her, “If you can’t feel it… that’s probably a good thing.”

“…Huh?”

“Hold on,” Lance murmured quietly, “I’ve got you. Just let me take care of it.”

Xxx

Shiro panted, spinning in a circle and punching yet another pirate. Next to him, several fell dead with crossbow bolts embedded in their chests. Hunk waved from the upper deck. “I’ve got you, Shiro!”

Nearby, Allura’s whip cracked again and again, yanking pirates down or into each other or making them drop their guns. At Romelle’s orders, Quintisha darted about and killed pirates with impunity.

There was a boom, and then a bigger one, and the side of Zarkon’s ship exploded into flames, roaring and cackling. Shiro shot Allura a worried glance, and she nodded.

“Pidge will be perfectly fine. It’ll take more than that to get her; I know she escaped it.”

“Would you mind a little lightning?”

Allura nodded, and she began to float, glowing. Lightning rained down from the sky, striking the pirates with perfect precision and killing them where they stood. Shiro stood back, watching her work. No bullets could reach her through her barrier of wind, and the sky overhead cackled ominously with more lightning.

A sharp whistle caught both Shiro and Allura’s attention, and they looked to see a pirate grasping a struggling Hunk, a knife to his throat. “Stop. Or he dies.”

Romelle called Quintisha to her, stopping his bloody rampage. Shiro dropped his steel knuckles and Allura sank slowly back down to the deck, the storm overhead dispersing and the waves
calming as Shiro’s inner key balanced Allura’s power when she was no longer outwardly using it.

Zarkon grinned. “Good. Tie them up.”

The remaining pirates tied thick cords around Allura, Romelle and Shiro’s wrists, tight enough to cut off blood circulation. All four of Quintisha’s legs were tied together.

A weak cough sounded, and Shiro’s heart sank down to his feet as Keith moved out from below decks, his eyes burning brightly with his sword in hand.

“I never surrendered,” he said quietly to Zarkon.

“You’re still alive? Impressive. But you won’t stay that way for long.”

Zarkon jumped across the deck towards Keith, but was deflected by the sword, which dropped to the deck as Keith transformed into a cat and ran in-between Zarkon’s legs, turning back into a human on the other side and summoning his sword to him, stabbing Zarkon in the back. The hard scales covering Zarkon saved him from the worst, but he still roared in pain and fury, wheeling around.

“You want to play with animals, boy? So be it!”

Zarkon’s face elongated and his body stretched out, a massive scaly tail growing from him. A massive saltwater crocodile roared at Keith, lunging for him with snapping jaws. Keith leapt back, wincing and crumpling to the ground when he landed.

The crocodile advanced on him and lunged again, jaws wide open. Keith pushed his sword in-between the huge jaws, and Zarkon choked and gagged, trying to spit it out. The sword zoomed back into Keith’s hand, cutting a jagged gash in the inside of Zarkon’s mouth. The crocodile roared, and Keith grinned, pushing himself up.

“What, are you too slow?”

He had been so busy watching Zarkon’s snapping jaws that he didn’t notice the massive tail whipping through the air until it connected with his chest, sending him flying into the mast. He slid down it with a moan, holding his ribs and coughing. Zarkon stomped victoriously towards him, his booted foot pressed down on his back, shoving him back down to the deck.

“Who’s too slow now?” Zarkon growled, “Time for you to die. This time for good!” he turned into a crocodile and lunged down at Keith. Keith closed his eyes, and braced his shoulders, waiting for the powerful jaws to snap his head off.

Instead he heard a howl, and Zarkon’s massive, crushing weight was pushed off of Keith. A pair of jaws clamped gently on the back of Keith’s shirt, throwing him away from Zarkon. Coran cushioned his fall, and Keith scooted to the wall, leaning against it with a gasp and holding his ribs. Across the deck, his sword glowed feebly, as if struggling to return to him.

Shiro and Zarkon were circling each other, both in their animal forms. Shiro was bristled in anger, and he snarled and snapped, his steel-grey eyes cold and hard. Keith had never seen him like this before, so angry.

Shiro darted in and bit down on Zarkon’s leg, dancing away before Zarkon could snap back. He jumped, landing on Zarkon’s back and snapping at the back of his neck and head. Zarkon roared
and shook himself, sending Shiro flying. While Shiro was in the air, Zarkon’s massive tail slammed into him, sending him flying across the deck. Zarkon strode across the deck in human form, his glittering eyes cold and cruel.

“You are nothing. Just a lone wolf with no pack. A solitary monster. We made you! You should be glad to join us. We are your pack, we creatures like you. Why do you fight so hard?”

Wolf Shiro struggled to his paws, and a growling half-wolf half-human voice came out of his mouth.

“You’re wrong,” Shiro panted, “I do have a pack, my own pack that I chose, not one that you say is mine. And you! Don’t! Hurt! My! PACK!” He lunged forward, closing his jaws around Zarkon’s throat, Zarkon turning into a crocodile as he bit down, keeping the blow from killing.

His pack? Keith’s throat constricted. We’re his pack. Allura, Pidge, Hunk, Lance, Romelle... and me. We’re his pack.

Keith turned into a cat and hobbled across the deck, clambering a quarter of the way up the mast. Below him, Zarkon lashed his massive claws across Shiro’s side, a stunning blow that forced him to let go and sent him sprawling across the deck. Zarkon snapped his jaws, coming towards Shiro, who was lying limp where he had fallen, directly below Keith.

Keith leapt off of the mast, turning into a human and calling his sword to him as he fell. It zoomed into his hand, and he held it so that it would be the first thing to hit the ground.

The point of his sword met Zarkon’s back, just in-between his shoulder blades and the force of the fall shoved the sword through the hard scales and deep into Zarkon’s flesh. The massive crocodile roared in agony, and Keith jumped off of his back as he thrashed in dying throes.

But he didn’t die. He wobbled towards Keith, who took a staggering step back, the adrenaline beginning to fade. Zarkon rushed towards him with a horrible roar, but a flash of grey saw Shiro with his jaws fastened on Zarkon’s throat, biting so hard he penetrated the armor-like scales and crunched down on Zarkon’s windpipe. Shiro let go and leapt away as Zarkon gasped in his last few breaths and died.

The pirate holding Hunk backed up, still holding a knife to Hunk’s throat. He looked at them and then dragged the islander overboard with him. Allura screamed, running to the edge. Shiro and Keith joined her, both human, in time to see the pirate scream as something wicked fast attacked him with sharp teeth, over and over. The ocean turned red with blood as splashes indicating the attack foamed the waves. The pirate went down with a gurgle, and Lance emerged with a hiss, his sharp teeth stained red.

“Don’t you hurt my friends,” he shouted at the dead or dying pirate, and waved to the ship. “Hey! Hunk’s okay! And I got Pidge to a doctor!”

Shiro and Keith looked at each other, and both started to laugh, a little bit hysterically. Then, in unison, their eyes rolled up in their heads and they passed out. Allura lunged to catch Keith, and Romelle made it in time to keep Shiro from hurting herself.

“Of course,” Romelle quipped, “All of the men pass out or are thrown overboard, and we’re left behind to deal with their mess.”

Coran swirled into being. “Not quite. I’ll take Keith- I don’t think he needs any immediate attention, and I’ll find a needle and thread for Shiro- Allura, you’d better take care of that. Oh, yes,
that’s right.”

A dripping-wet Hunk was deposited on the deck, and Coran swirled away with Keith. “Pidge’s little fireworks show blew a few holes in our ship, too, so we’ll have to get that fixed in port, but otherwise, we’ll be right as rain.”

Xxx

Pidge groaned, her eyelids seeming to stick together. And what was the cause of that horrible headache?! She forced her eyes open and felt for her head. It was wrapped in bandages.

“You took quite the knock on the head,” a midwife told her cheerily, “I wasn’t sure you’d make it, but your merman friend assured me that you’d be fine.”

“You saw Lance?!”

“Ah, you mean Prince Coralance? Not to worry, I’ve known his family for some time. It’s quite alright. Your friends are in the harbor- would you like to go to them?”

“They’re okay?!”

“Fine, I believe. At least the large one is, and the two girls. I didn’t see anyone else.”

Pidge breathed a sigh of relief. “I’d like to go to the harbor, then.”

The midwife helped her the whole way, and Pidge’s eyes filled with tears when she saw Hunk, waving at her from the deck.

“Hey!” he called, “Welcome home!”

Pidge sniffled and wiped at her eyes. Lance blinked at her from the water. “Hey, why are you crying?!!”

“It’s fine,” she sobbed, smiling. “I- I’m just glad that you’re all safe!”

She scrubbed the tears from her face, smiling up at the Castle of Lions. Home. I’m home.
I'm High, Then I'm Low

Shiro grinned at Keith. “How are you doing?”

“Better. Head doesn’t hurt as much, and I can breathe more easily. You?”

Shiro shrugged, his hang going to his side. “I’ve been better. But I’ve been worse, too, so…” he shrugged. “We’ll call it a truce. Listen, we need to talk. You promised not to do anything stupid or reckless like that!”

“I never promised. I said that I could beat Zarkon, and I did.”

“Barely, and he would’ve killed you if I hadn’t stepped in when I did!”

“Well, what would you prefer?! Would you like me to sit by and do nothing as you and Allura are carted away, and Hunk and Pidge were slaughtered?!”

“That could’ve happened anyway! We were lucky, with Hunk! If that pirate hadn’t been so occupied watching the fight, he could’ve killed Hunk in an instant! We’re lucky that he decided to jump and that Lance was back in time to save him! Keith, you could’ve gotten yourself and Hunk killed and for what?!”

“I know, and I get that! But revealing yourself like that was a bad move! If you’d waited—”

“Where would Zarkon have gone?! Pidge basically demolished his ship and sent it to Davy Jones! He would’ve taken over our ship and searched it. I’d rather take him by surprise than have him take me by surprise.”

Shiro considered for a moment. “Alright. I’ll give you that. But… it was still reckless.”

Keith gave him a crooked grin. “I specialize in reckless. You of all people should know that by now, Shiro. Come on.”

“Keith, you need to be more careful. Promise.”

Keith sighed. “Yeah, okay. I promise. I’ll be more careful.”

Pidge shoved the door open with a bang. “If you two are done with your heart-to-heart, there’s a whole pod of dolphins outside! Come on! It’s so cool- they’re chittering at us like they can talk!”

Keith and Shiro followed Pidge out on the deck and she led them to the railing where a pod of dolphins kept pace with a ship. Lance was grinning, and Keith heard mersong between him and the pod. The water formed a fake dolphin that leapt in time with the others, and Lance’s grin grew wider as the dolphin jumped into the air and exploded into water droplets that faded quickly behind the ship.

“I’ve been practicing my water control,” he called up to the amazed humans, “It’s been getting pretty good, I think!”
“It’s amazing!” Romelle called, “How can you do that?!?”

“Mer-magic,” Lance answered with a wink, “Allura can probably tell you a bit about it.”

Romelle’s head whipped towards Allura, who shrugged. “All Alteans used to be mermaids. I guess… I guess my storm powers come from that.”

*An astute guess,* a voice hissed. The dolphins scattered in terror as a chill descended on the waves. The wind died, and Coran materialized in a disarray. “The wind! It- it’s gone! I can’t- it’s like it’s being controlled by something else! I’ve never felt anything like—”

*Enough out of you.*

Coran disappeared, and there was a puff of flame. Haggar stepped out of it, her eyes glowing fiercely.

“You’ve killed Zarkon, and for that you’ll pay unless you listen to me. My treacherous son will come later, but for now… Well, you can say goodbye to your wind spirit: he won’t be helping you; not while I’m here. The amulet of wind is far too strong for a mere spirit of the air.”

“Priestess of earth, of wind and of flame,” Keith whispered, “She’s got the other amulets…”

Haggar glared at him. “I do, and I’ll have the fourth, soon. I’ll get what I want- and my spirit will get what he wants.”

Shiro stepped forward. “You won’t get what you want, Haggar! He’s tricking you, lying to you- he’s done it before, and he’ll do it again. He picked you because you’re Altean, and he thought you could get the key!”

Haggar crackled dangerously with flames. “He knew I couldn’t get the key! I cannot transform without a mermaid tear, and the ones I captured would rather have died than give me a key. And they did.” She gave Keith a sharp-toothed grin that made him shiver. “Coral mermaids are made of strong material, but even the best of them will fall.”


“I come with a proposition: come with me peacefully, and I’ll let you all live. Just let me get the amulet. But if you don’t, and continue to defy us…” Haggar smiled that smile again. “I’ll take the amulet from you when I get it, and your deaths will be painful. Last chance. You defeated Zarkon, but your princess of the storms is not powerful enough to fight me. This is a fight that you cannot win: surrender, and it’ll be easier for you.” Her eyes glittered dangerously. “What is your answer?”

Lightning cackled around Allura, the clouds above them darkening dangerously. “You want an answer? It will be the same as the answer we gave Zarkon. We will *not* surrender to you, no matter the cost! I would rather die!”

“So be it,” Haggar hissed, and she exploded into flames that leapt up and took hold of the mast. “I *will* get the amulet, even if I have to take your heads with it!”

The sky above burst with rain that easily put out the fire. Allura snorted.

“If fire is her biggest trick, I can’t wait to fight her. I’ll put her out.”

“Don’t get too cocky,” Shiro warned, “If Lotor’s prophecy about her is what it sounds like, then
she also has control of the air and of the ground. There was no ground out here, and I think that her air powers may have been used to subdue Coran, but I don’t doubt that she can use them to attack.”

“I can fly, Shiro, and I control the storms.”

Shiro shook his head. “But she controls the wind, Allura.”

“It’s true,” Coran chimed in quietly, materializing on deck. The boat began to move again. “I- I was powerless. She had complete control over me.”

Allura frowned. “If she has control of the air, then why are we still here? Why didn’t she just steal the breath from our lungs and leave?”

“She needs you and I alive,” Shiro reminded her, “like she said, she hasn’t been able to get any mermaid tears, and I doubt that she managed to get one to sing for her. Plus, I- I think that you need the Abyss mermaids and- and they were wiped out.”

Keith looked up at them, his violet eyes stormy. “How many? How many mermaids do you think died for her? Coral mermaids, Abyss mermaids- How many do you think died while she tried to get this amulet?!”

“That’s why we need to get it to Lotor so that he can destroy it,” Allura said firmly, “So that all of this can stop.”

“Will it stop, though? Or will Haggar keep going? The amulet can be recreated. Won’t she just create it again?”

“She can only do that if she touches it,” Allura said with an air of finality, “And we’re not going to let that happen.”

“What are we going to do?” Everyone looked at Hunk, who shifted uncomfortably. “Once we’ve destroyed the amulet. What do we do? That’s been… kind of the purpose of our whole trip. We came out here- well, we came out here because we were on the run, but besides that- Pidge and I came to find Matt and her dad. But… we found them. Kind of. Keith came out every day, looking for Shiro- and he found him. Allura just wanted to get away from slavery, which she has. And after that… we’ve just been kind of running around trying to do what Lotor asked us to do. So… what do we do after? We already completed what we came out here for, so what do we do once we destroy the amulet?”

“We can do… whatever we want,” Pidge whispered, “We don’t have any limits. It’s… terrifying.”

Allura blinked. ‘I- I don’t know. I never thought much beyond getting the amulet. I suppose we could find and destroy the rest of the Galra…”

“I’d help you with that,” Romelle supplied, “Quintisha, too.”

“They were getting closer and closer to our port,” Shiro said quietly, “We should warn them. No one listened to Keith, but- but I was supposed to be dead. I might be able to convince them that what Keith said was the truth.”

Keith rocked back on his heels. “Nothing to do… I never thought that far ahead.”

Pidge frowned. “Do you suppose that Lance will just… go back to his family?”

Keith snorted. “Well, they didn’t exactly separate on friendly terms last time…”
“They’re still family,” Pidge said quietly, “But I think Shiro’s right. Sandas may be an exceptionally horrible person, but the whole port doesn’t deserve the death penalty because of her. We should go back, after we’re done. Get them ready to fight the pirates.”

“Go… back…” Hunk whispered in a daze, “Can we really do that? Just go back home?”

Keith’s next words were barely audible. “Where is home?”
Shiro let out a deep breath. “This is it.”

Keith stared at the island they’d come to. “I can’t believe it. It’s been so long since we left the port…”

“Two years,” Pidge said hoarsely, “Two years, and we’re finally at this point. We’re so close to finishing this forever.”

“Keep your eyes peeled,” Shiro ordered, “If Haggar is going to try anything, it’s going to be now.”

Coran shook his head. “I don’t think that she can.” He pointed to a glowing seal surrounding the island. “Shiro, it’s up to you.”

The ship came right to the glowing seal, which was made of a raging, flowing water. Shiro touched the seal gently, and the water calmed, dropping away to allow passage to the island. A massive cave loomed up in front of them, half of it submerged in water.

“I can’t fit in there,” Coran said quietly.

Shiro nodded. “Alright then. We’ll swim. Everyone okay with that?”

They all nodded and Coran set all of them gently in the water, Romelle riding on Quintisha’s back, a spear now strapped over her own back. They were mostly quiet, with a few splashes and curses. Lance came up towards them, ferrying them one by one to the dry land in the cave.

“Any pirate ships?” Allura questioned.

Lance swam back out, returning in a few minutes. “No pirate ships. We’re clear so far. This is where you’ve got to leave me.”

“Thank you,” Shiro whispered.

The click of a pistol cocking echoed in the cave, and they all whirled to face Romelle, who had a gun pointed at Keith’s head. “Allura, you’re going to get the key for me.”

“Romelle, what—?”

“I asked if you’d let me use the amulet. You refused. Now I’m taking it by force. Allura, you’re going to go and get the amulet. If you try any funny business, I’ll shoot down your good buddy, here. And you don’t want to risk that, do you?”

“Romelle, please, reconsider- I know you’re upset that your brother—”

Romelle’s face contorted in an ugly, angry sneer. “UPSET? UPSET DOESN’T EVEN BEGIN TO COVER HOW I FELT! And I’m not going to feel it anymore. No. No, Allura, you’re going to get me the amulet, and I’m going to bring Bandor back. And if it all works out, I’ll give you the amulet and you can take it right to Lotor. It’ll all work out in everyone’s favor. But only if you listen to me. If not… Keith will be first. Then Shiro. Then Pidge. Then Hunk. I don’t want to kill the water spirit, not with the bad luck that will bring, but I may have no choice.”
Quintisha growled in agreement. Keith took in a deep breath and turned into a cat, streaking across the floor like a piece of shadow and turning into a human to bring the top of his head into Romelle’s chin. He grabbed her pistol and threw it into the water. Lance grabbed it and was gone in a flash.

“Allura, Pidge, Hunk, go. Shiro and I have got this.”

Shiro nodded in agreement, growling as he made the transformation into a wolf. “It’s time for a rematch,” he growled at Quintisha. The two leapt at each other, even as Keith and Romelle drew their weapons.

“GO!” Keith shouted.

Allura, Hunk and Pidge all ran further in the cave, and Keith turned his attention to Romelle, who whipped her spear off of her back.

“All I want,” she shouted, “is to see my brother again! Is that so wrong?! Why can’t you people allow me that?!”

“Romelle, if you touch that thing, Haggar can use you to recreate it! It’s too risky for you to touch it, because if you do, she will hunt you down to the ends of the earth! Listen to me!”

“I don’t need to listen to you! It’s creatures like you that killed my brother! I might have had trouble killing Allura or Hunk or Pidge. But you? You I will kill without even the smallest hint of hesitation.”

Keith drew his sword. “I’m harder to kill than you might think.”

Romelle thrust her spear at him, but he dodged fluidly, moving to the side and batting her spear to the side with his sword. Across the room, Quintisha grappled with Shiro in his wolf form, both of them snarling, snapping, clawing, biting, ripping, tearing.

The instant Keith was distracted by Shiro’s fight, Romelle thrust her spear again, this time nicking Keith’s side. He hissed as blood welled up from the cut but ignored her, using her moment of off-balance from the spear cutting through the air to take a cut at her. She brought her spear up to block him, and he kicked her in the stomach, sending her backwards. He pushed her closer to a corner, and she turned and ran from him.

Keith gave chase, moving closer to the corner, and she ran up the wall, flipping over him. He barely managed to hold his sword up to block another thrust. He turned into a cat and dashed between her legs, summoning his sword to him on the other side and flicking it out. The blade cut a line across Romelle’s arm, and she hissed, looking at the bright red blood before turning back to Keith.

“You’re going to pay for that. I’ve never lost to a pirate. And I don’t intend to start now!”

xxx

Allura, Pidge and Hunk sprinted through the cave system. The lure of the water called Allura, and she flew effortlessly through the tunnels, Hunk and Pidge puffing behind her.

Hello, Princess.

Allura slammed herself to a halt as fire bloomed in the halls ahead of her.
I told you that I’d be getting the key.

Xxx

Keith let out a whoosh of air as Romelle hit him in the chest with the blunt end of her spear. He backed up a couple of steps, gasping in breath. Across the room, Shiro and Quintisha circled each other, jumping at each other again with howls and screeches.

Keith felt his ears begin to change, and his fingers grow to claws. His ears twitched, alerting him to Romelle’s every movement even before she even made it. He dodged and spun gracefully, Romelle’s muscle movement and breathing making her strikes apparent to him.

He ducked under a thrust and raked his claws across Romelle’s arm, causing her to drop her spear with a scream. Keith lunged, ramming his shoulder into Romelle’s gut and driving her into the cave wall. One hand pushed against her throat, cutting off her air supply. Keith bared his teeth in a triumphant snarl. His irises and pupils had shrunk, and the whites of his eyes started to turn a glowing yellow. Finally, he was winning, was able to protect his friends, was able to rip out the throat of the one who had hurt them.

Romelle’s eyes flashed with fear, and Keith blinked, his eyes turning back to normal, and he dropped Romelle like a hot potato, backing away.

“No. I’m not going to kill you. We don’t have to do this, Romelle. I get it. Someone you loved died. My dad died in a pirate raid, you know. But he’s dead. And I’ve moved on. You need to move on too. You can’t bring him back. Please, Romelle. We don’t have to fight.”

Romelle dropped to her knees. “I- I’m sorry, Keith. I’m sorry.”

“Hey. It’s okay. Just… call off your panther.”

“No. That’s not what I’m sorry for.”

Romelle lunged forward, driving a knife that she’d been hiding somewhere into Keith’s side. He screamed, stumbling backwards and falling to the ground.

“You’re right. I know you are. But I’m not willing to give up Bandor so easily.”

Across the room, Shiro fell, covered in bloody wounds. Quintisha limped towards Romelle with a whine, and pushed his massive head into her hand. She scratched him gently behind the ears, taking his big head in her lap.

“You did wonderfully, little one,” she whispered, her voice cracking, tears filling her eyes, “You were perfect. I- I’m glad you’ve been here. You’re my only friend, Quintisha.” She pressed her forehead to the panther’s as he let out another whine. “It’s okay,” she told him, her voice cracking again, “It’s okay.”

Quintisha sighed, the life leaving his massive body. Romelle let out a scream, and she scooped up her spear, stalking towards Shiro. “You’ll die for this!”

“No,” a quiet voice said from the water, “He won’t.”

Lance was sitting on a rock, and he raised his arms. A massive wall of water raised itself behind him and came crashing towards Romelle, parting to go around Keith and Shiro. Romelle was swept away with a scream, the water crushing and drowning her, sweeping her body out to sea, as well as that of her panther.
Lance closed his eyes. “May your death be more peaceful than your life was, and may your body return to your home.” He looked at Shiro and Keith. “I’ve been practicing. S-sorry, guys, I—” He toppled off of the rock, his eyes rolling back in his head. He landed with a splash in the water, which gently lapped over him, his gills fluttering.

Keith leaned back against the wall, one hand to his side. “Please, Allura,” he murmured, “hurry.”

Allura leapt to the side as a bolt of flame narrowly missed her. Hunk and Pidge had retreated down the hallway a ways to let her fight Haggar unimpeded. Occasionally, when Haggar showed her face, a crossbow bolt would come clattering down the hallway and scare her away. Allura was grateful for the cover Hunk provided, but she worried that Haggar would go after him.

*Not so powerful when you’re not outside and can summon a stormcloud, hm?*

Allura pinpointed the voice, and a bolt of cackling energy formed in-between her hands.

*Ha. You’ll be drained if you keep this up. You don’t have the power that I do- my spirit and I can defeat you any day.*

Allura sent an arc of electricity out of her crackling bolt in the direction of the voice. Haggar hissed in pain, and then appeared over Allura’s head, her hands blossoming with fire. Allura surrounded herself with a cackling field of energy, and Haggar shrieked as she landed on it, falling through to Allura’s feet, shuddering from the electricity.

“Help- me,” she croaked.

Something flowed away from her, an inky black puddle that formed into a monstrous creature.

“Sorry,” it told Haggar, “You aren’t powerful enough. Tricked, and so badly, too. No, I need someone stronger, faster, better.” He turned towards Allura. “I need someone like her.”

“YOU TRAITOR!” Haggar screeched, “WE MADE AN AGREEMENT!”

“And I’m breaking it.” The spirit turned to Allura. “I see which side I should join. Yours is the winning one. Come, let us retrieve the amulet. Together, with my power and yours, as well as that of the amulet, we can destroy anything that opposes us! We can wipe out the whole Galra fleet that’s outside, waiting to kill your friends. We can protect the world together, you and I.”

Allura hesitated as the shadow creature held a hand out towards her.

“Come,” it crooned, “We can bring your people back.”

“It was you that helped destroy them in the *first place!*” Haggar screeched, “I was Honerva, then- a soothsayer, a mouthpiece of the gods! You lured me away, promising to return me to the sea, where I belonged! To help me return to the form of a mermaid! Our people had lost that ability, and you promised that getting the amulets would get me back!”

“Don’t listen to her,” the spirit advised, “She wants you to reject me so that she can attempt to reclaim my power.”

“I was an outcast! Thrown out because my father had a pale face! You promised that in the ocean, I’d be free from all of that! I could live my own life, away from the tribe that had scorned me! But you had me destroy my tribe! I created an *army* for you, killing even the one I loved, who had
given me a son, just so that I could create a strong leader! You are the reason that my son left, hating me! He was right- I am a monster. Because of you!”

Haggar began to chant, and the spirit’s eyes widened. “What are you doing?”

“I’m sending you back where you belong! I can get the amulets on my own, thank you, and then my son and I can live together under the waves! I can’t get Zarkon back, but it’s not too late for Lotor.”

“No! Wait! Stop!”

Allura watched, transfixed, as the spirit began to shrink. Pidge and Hunk came running down the hallway towards her.

“We’ve got to go,” Pidge told her, “Now, while she’s distracted!”

Allura shook herself out of her daze and continued her trek through the hallways. Behind her, there was a horrible screech, and she knew that the spirit was gone. A chill settled over her, as if Haggar were watching. She shivered, and kept moving.

She was met with another room that had water on the bottom of the floor. “This… this is it.” Her voice echoed in the cavern, flat and disappointed.

Pidge waded out into the water. “This is it? But what are you supposed to do? There’s not any- any glowing water or anything.”

“Maybe she’s supposed to make the water glow,” Hunk suggested.

Allura’s eyes lit up. “Get out of the water, Pidge.”

Pidge obeyed, and Allura began to cackle with lightning, building up in a storm around her. It arced out over the water, striking in the dead center of the room. The electricity crackled around the surface of the water, the whole thing glowing eerily with white light. The whole room began to glow, becoming brighter and brighter from the lightning, and when the glowing faded, a necklace that consisted of loops over loops with a blue gemstone in the middle had appeared.

“That’s it,” Allura murmured “After all of this, it’s just… there. For us to take.”

“Make sure you don’t touch it directly,” Pidge warned.

“I know.”

Allura approached the amulet cautiously, pulling out a bag to put it in.

“Are you sure you want to do that?”

Allura whirled around to see Haggar. “You!”

“If you don’t hand it over… I’ve got a fleet outside. You’ll be dead before you can leave the island. Do you really want that?”

“Keith, Shiro and Coran will stop them,” Allura said confidently, “We’ve beaten your ships before- we can do it again.”

“Are you sure about that?” A glowing image appeared between Haggar’s hands, of Keith leaning against a wall, breathing shallowly and bleeding, a massive wolf in the background panting, gashes
in his side and bites covering him.

“Your friends won’t make it if you and these two go to destroy the fleet. But your ship won’t make it out if you go for your friends, and you’ll be trapped here, like rats.”

Allura glanced at the amulet.

“We can figure this out,” Pidge assured Allura, “Don’t do anything rash.”

Allura reached out and snatched up the amulet, slipping it over her head. Immediately, an influx of power flooded through her, and she could see every drop of moisture in the air, feel the storm outside.

“No!” Pidge screamed.

“I’m sorry,” Allura said, and her voice was like thunder, “I have to do this. You take care of Keith and Shiro. I’ll take care of the fleet.”

“You traitor! And after what we said to Romelle—”

Me. I’m the traitor.

Makes sense. Keith was already dead. Shiro died when he was eaten. I was the only one left. Allura ran her hands through her hair. I’m the traitor. But I have to do this.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, and lightning arced from the sky outside, breaking through the ceiling. She floated out, turning her now-glowing eyes on the fleet.

“I’m coming for you,” the thunder boomed.
“Keith! Shiro!” Pidge ran towards her friends, Keith pale, and Shiro barely breathing. “Hunk, you take Shiro- I'll get Keith.” She took one of his arms and slung it over her shoulders, struggling to haul him along.

Keith’s unfocused eyes stared at her blankly. “M-Matt?”

“No, it’s Pidge, remember?”

“P-Pidge?”

“Katie,” Pidge told him, her voice cracking, “Remember? Matt’s sister?”

“K-Katie. Thanks- thanks for covering for me. The mermaid…”

Pidge’s throat clogged up, “I didn’t do it for you, you big lug,” she joked, her voice cracking, “Shiro told me to do it.”

“K-Katie- it hurts- why does it hurt, oh- stars- Katie, am I dying?!”

“No,” she said firmly, “You’re not dying. You’re going to be A-Okay. Lance!” she called, “Lance, where are you?! We need to get them to the ship!”

“I’m here.” Lance emerged from the water, his eyes drooping. “Sorry, I…” he trailed off looking at Keith and Shiro. “That’s not good.”

“What happened to Romelle? And her panther?”

Lance rubbed at his eyes. “Floating belly up towards their island. Keith tried to convince her not to do anything, but…”

“She wouldn’t listen?”

“No.”

Thunder cracked outside, and Pidge scowled. “Speaking of not listening, guess who betrayed all of us to snatch up the amulet and go power-crazy?”

“No…”

“That’s right! The one! The only! Allura!”

“Guys, we don’t have time to talk about that right now,” Hunk pleaded, “Keith and Shiro might not make it!”

Lance nodded. “Right. Okay. You need to staunch the bleeding first- if you get them in the water right now, they’ll bleed out.” He glanced out of the cave as thunder boomed outside. “Hurry.”

Xxx

Allura laughed wildly as wind, lightning and rain whipped around her. Underneath her, the sea roiled, and waves as tall as houses washed over ships. Masts cracked and timbers creaked, and all the time, Allura glowed brighter and brighter, surging with power but without the previous desire
to join permanently with the storm.

The control of the wind was suddenly whipped away from her, and she fell like a shooting star, glowing bright, towards the ocean. The waves leapt up to catch her safely and then pushed her up with pressure swirling around her to hold her up.

“That amulet is going to be mine!” Haggar screeched.

“It doesn’t belong to you!” Allura yelled back, still glowing. Haggar lit up with fire, and Allura countered with a wave that washed over her. Lightning arced from the sky, striking everywhere, but Haggar disappeared in puffs of air and reappeared elsewhere, leaving her ships to be hit repeatedly by the deadly fire from the sky.

“Come out and fight me, you coward!”

Haggar appeared again, her hands swirling with fire. The island of the amulet cracked and opened, parts of it tumbling into the sea in massive chunks. The stones rose up and hurled themselves towards Allura, who countered with a swirling wall of water that pushed the rocks away.

Haggar screamed in frustration, and a dark rift opened, shadow oozing out. “Bind yourself once more with me,” she hissed, “We will get that amulet.”

The shadow moved towards Haggar, and they swirled together. “I’ve got you now,” they hissed, and surged towards Allura.

The fire that Haggar shot towards Allura evaporated the wall of water and crackled towards her. Lance waved his hands at her from the water. “Drop!”

Allura let herself fall towards Lance, and she splashed in the water, the fire whooshing over her head. Lance swam her away. “That was a dumb thing for you to do, taking the amulet.”

“We’ll figure it out later! For now…” Allura pulled the amulet over her head and slipped it around Lance’s neck. “Get it out of here! I’ll hold her off!”

“What?! Hey—”

Allura pushed off of him and charged back into the air, literally charging as lightning arced down towards her and supported her flight. Haggar and her spirit swirled towards her again in a maelstrom of fire.

“Give me the amulet!”

“Never!”

Allura threw a bolt of lightning, shouting in defiance, and her opponent disappeared.

“Wait,” they hissed, “She no longer has the amulet.”

They looked around, then spotted Lance. The water flew up, constricted by a tight barrier of air that kept Lance contained in the sphere of water. He snatched the amulet off of his neck, shouting something and throwing it.

Pidge’s grappling hook snaked out through the air and hooked on the necklace. She reeled it back in and grabbed the amulet, running across the deck and shouting for Coran. The wind swirled towards her, but she lobbed it towards Hunk, who caught it as the winds swept her up. She was
dropped like a hot potato, and fire bloomed in Haggar’s hands, flying towards Hunk.

A small black cat leapt towards him and snatched the amulet in its teeth, drawing the fire away from Hunk and towards Keith. At last second, Shiro, pale, and shaky, took the amulet from Keith and jumped into the water, extinguishing the fire.

“No!” the Haggar-spirit screamed.

Allura realized with a start, that the Haggar-spirit wasn’t paying any attention to her. Lightning started to crackle in her hands, and she aimed carefully towards Haggar. She’d only get one shot at this.

The lightning bolt shot across the waves, zigzagging a little in a brilliant flash of white until it struck home, slamming into Haggar’s back. She screamed, and the spirit fell away from her.

“NO!” it screeched, “Not this close!”

But despite its protests, it disappeared, falling back into the void that it had come from. Haggar plummeted to the waves until a giant bird, probably a Galra, snatched her up and flew away. The remainders of the Galra fleet sailed away and the storms slowly faded as Allura stopped conjuring them. She sank slowly to the deck of her ship, where her dripping-wet companions waited for her.

“We won!”

“Yes, but at what cost?” Pidge questioned quietly, “All of us touched the amulet. Even if it’s destroyed, Haggar can still use any of us to bring it back. And you…”

“I had to! We all would’ve died if I hadn’t!”

“You betrayed our trust, Allura,” Hunk said quietly, “We told Romelle that she couldn’t use the amulet, only for you to turn around and use it. You’ve made us hypocrites.”

“I did what was necessary,” Allura said stiffly, and strode belowdecks. “We don’t have the time for this. I need to take care of Shiro and Keith, and we need to get moving back to Lotor’s island. We have to get it to him as swiftly as possible. Coran?”

“Yes. Of course, Allura. We’ll get moving.”

Wind filled the sails, and the ship limped away, the sail soaked from the storms and part of the stern missing from one of Haggar’s attacks.

“Well, what do we do?” Pidge asked quietly, “We’ve got the amulet. Now what?”

“We bring it to Lotor,” Hunk said quietly, “Then… I guess that we go home.”

Pidge’s eyes teared up. “What am I going to tell my mom? Both Matt and Dad are dead!”

“I think… I think that she’ll just be happy that you’re alive.”

“Well, sure, but… next what? I go back to my old job? I work for that woman? What will you do? They might not recognize me if I’m back in my dresses, but what about you? We didn’t exactly leave on friendly terms. They might not take you back.”

“I guess… I guess I could stay with my family. And what about Shiro and Keith? They’re not even human!”
“Keith never was, but he still got on pretty well.”

“I guess so. But Allura? She’s a runaway, and she’s pretty distinctive. What are we going to do about her?”

“Well, there are still Galra out there who I’m sure she’ll be happy to get rid of.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, until Pidge burst out.

“I don’t think I could go back to a normal life after this!”

“Oh, good, you too?”

“It’s all been so exciting and adventurous! I can’t go back to working as a lady’s maid after all of this!”

“I don’t think that I could go back either. But…”

“Our families,” Pidge finished, “And- I don’t want the port to be hurt. If the pirates really are getting closer.”

“They snatched Shiro up while he was fishing. I’m sure they’re close. And we can’t just let them attack!”

“Right. But… what if Governor Sandas and Iverson try to kill Keith? They were planning on it. What if when we take him back…”

“It’ll be different this time,” Hunk promised, “We’ve got Shiro, and Shiro has proof.”

Pidge rubbed her right arm. “I’m worried about something else, though…”

“You Shiro and Keith all have pirate brands,” Hunk realized, “It was one thing for Keith to keep his hidden all of the time, but for all three of you…”

“It’ll be hard.”

“Understatement of the year, Pidge.”

“I think we can do it.”

“It’s not a question of can, Pidge, it’s a question of should. I don’t think that you three should have to do it. It’s not fair. You didn’t even get it from actual pirates.”

“That’s the thing, Hunk. It’s less fair for Keith and Shiro, who didn’t want it. I chose to get the brand.”

“Stupid decision.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Right, well, you wouldn’t, now would you?”

Pidge swatted Hunk’s arm. “I’m serious. Do you… Do you want to stay out here? On the ocean? Or- or do you want to go home?”

“I want to go home,” Hunk said firmly. “But- in a way- this has become home. Traveling with you
guys. Fighting pirates. Being on open ocean.” He sighed deeply. “If only I could convince my family to come out here with us. Then maybe…”

“Maybe,” Pidge agreed. “Sometimes maybe is all you’ve got.”
Allura strode up the trail briskly, holding the amulet. “Lotor!”

His guards met them. “You touched it,” Zethrid growled.

“You weren’t supposed to do that,” Ezor admonished.

“Yeah, we know,” Axca said at their surprised faces, “Did you think that Lotor wouldn’t find out?” Narti nodded firmly in affirmation.

“We’ll take it from here,” Zethrid told them, holding her hand out for the amulet.

Allura lifted her chin. “No. We went through a lot to get here. We’re going to hand it to Lotor ourselves.”

“What happened to the little blonde one?” Ezor questioned, “The one who lived here- Romelle?”

Allura permitted a smirk to cross her face. “Can’t Lotor find out?”

They all glanced at each other and stepped aside. “He’s waiting for you,” Axca said quietly, “But don’t expect him to be happy with you. You broke one of his most important instructions.”

Allura gulped, but went inside the cave, the others not far behind her. “Lotor?”

A voice came from the darker part of the cave. “Two simple instructions. Get the amulet, and don’t touch it.”

“You knew it would happen, though, didn’t you?” Allura challenged, “You knew what I would do! You prophesied it! You said that one of us would be a traitor!”

Lotor emerged from the darkness, torchlight flickering on his face. “Traitors do many things, Allura. I knew that one of you would betray the other’s trust. I didn’t know who, and I didn’t know how. Do not mistake the ability to make simple predictions as the ability to know and see all. I have limits to my knowledge, and a clear future is one of them.”

“Did you know what would happen to Romelle?! Did you know what she would do?!”

Lotor began to pace a circle around Allura, cutting her off from the others. “I knew that Romelle would test you, make you question your mission. I’d hoped that you’d be stronger than what she suggested, but my hopes were misplaced. You failed, Allura.”

“But I brought the amulet here for destruction!”

“That may be, but you also ensured the possibility of the thakalthi Haggar recreating it after I destroy it. So, you failed. Own your mistakes and failures, Allura.”

“I used it for the greater good!” Allura snapped.

“Oh, yes. Many tyrants have said that."

“It was to save my friends!”

Lotor continued his steady pace. “Even better. You would destroy the world to save a few
individuals.”

“You don’t know everything!”

Lotor stopped his pacing directly in front of Allura, and held out a gloved hand. “Give me the amulet, Allura.”

Allura hesitated, her hand clutching the amulet tightly. “Maybe I should hold onto it until Haggar and the rest of the Galra are destroyed. If they’re dead, then you can destroy it and no one will be able to recreate it.”

Lotor’s eyebrows drew together in a knot. “Allura, let it go.”

Allura held out her hand, shaking, the amulet dangling just above Lotor’s palm. After a few moments of hesitation, she let it go. Lotor’s fingers snapped shut over the amulet.

“Well done. You have passed the first hurdle.”

“The first hurdle? I thought that all we had to do was get the amulet to you!”

“No, your journey is far from over. The Galra and the thakalthi draw ever nearer to your companions’ home for the purpose of destroying it.”

“The port?” Shiro questioned.

“My mom,” Pidge whispered.

“My family,” Hunk murmured, “Everyone at the port…”

“I say let it be destroyed,” Allura growled, “They would take me as a slave!”

“Allura, come on,” Keith pleaded.

“No! How can you support them?! They planned to have you killed!”

“That was just Iverson and Sandas. The whole port doesn’t deserve death because of them.”

“The whole place is corrupt! The support slavery! They would have anyone with a pirate brand killed, whether they received the brand willingly or not! And they treat the islanders like a lower race!”

“You weren’t so different when we first met,” Keith argued, “Remember? You said that slavery was fine, and you were willing to let Shiro die or even kill him yourself when you saw his brand!”

“Yes, but I’ve changed! Traveling with you has changed my mind!”

“Give them a chance to change, then!” Keith told her, “They should have the same chance that you did- the chance to meet us and change their minds. Maybe they’ll become different. But we won’t know if we let them be destroyed. We’ve got to save them, Allura, so that they can change and be better.”

Allura glared, staring Keith directly in the eye. He didn’t back down, and she sighed. “Fine. We’ll save your port.”

Shiro, Pidge and Hunk all brightened visibly. “Really?!”
“Yes, really.”

“Great! Come on, we’ve got to go tell Coran!”

They all left the cave, heading back down the path. Axca, Zethrid, Ezor and Narti stood aside to let them through.

“Good,” Lotor murmured quietly, too quietly for the little band to hear, “You have passed the second hurdle. I only hope that you can pass the others.”

Xxx

Keith padded softly towards Shiro, who was standing at the front of the ship, facing the ocean.

“Are you okay?”

“So much has changed,” Shiro murmured, “I’m not even human anymore. I wonder if the port has changed?”

Keith looked out over the open ocean. “I doubt it. It’s weird, huh? How we got pulled into all of this? Imagine if we hadn’t ever stopped on Lotor’s island. We wouldn’t be in this spot. I’d still think I was human. You’d still be human.”

“I think this would’ve found us anyway. I mean, Haggar still would’ve needed you. We still would’ve ended up in this fight, even if it were only to rescue her from you.”

“Maybe not. I wouldn’t have had a clue why she wanted the lullaby. We wouldn’t have been sailing towards her island anyway, so she might never have caught me.”

“Maybe not.” Shiro watched the waves crash against the port. “Do you ever think…”

“What?”

“Do you ever think that maybe Lotor’s been manipulating us this whole time and that he has his own motives that we don’t know?”

“Definitely,” Keith said immediately, “He’s definitely had control of the situation the whole time. He’s Haggar’s son, so… I think that maybe he might have wanted us to get rid of his mother. And his father.”

“His father?”

“Zarkon.”

Shiro shuddered. “Really?”

“I don’t think that he got along with his parents. I think he’s wanted us to destroy the Galra completely since the beginning. Honestly, right now, do you know what I think? I think that we’re playing right into his hands.”

Shiro’s stormy grey eyes surveyed the ocean in front of them. “I don’t see that we have much choice. We can’t let them destroy our port. Or any port, but everybody we know is either on this ship or at our port.”

“Or on Lotor’s island,” Keith reminded him.

“Right. Point being, even if we are doing exactly what Lotor wants, we still have to do it. If we
don’t, everyone we know will die.”

“I know.” They stood in silence for a few moments, and then Keith piped up, “Just one cannonball on Governor Sandas’ mansion—”

“No.”

“She would’ve—”

“I know, but we’re not firing on the governor’s house. Case closed.”

“Fine.” Keith settled back down. “But if a pirate cannon happened to aim at Governor Sandas’ mansion—”

“We’d stop it.”

“Would we have to, though?”

“Yes. It’s not just Governor Sandas who would suffer if her mansion was fired on. It would affect those who work there, the animals—”

“I bet the carpenters and stone masons would be happy.”

“We’re not letting anyone fire on Governor Sandas’ mansion.”

“Fine.”

Xxx

“There it is,” Shiro said quietly, “Port Terra.”

“We’re not the first to get there,” Allura said grimly, “Look.” She pointed one finger out over the foggy ocean.

Shiro followed her finger to spot a fleet of pirate ships. “Right, then. Coran?”

Their ship cruised towards a straggler ship, and Coran created a sound barrier that cushioned the noise of the cannons as they fired on the straggler, picking it off before they even knew they were being attacked. They moved like a silent assassin, slicing through the waves towards their next target.

The fifth ship, however, sounded an alarm, and the rest of the ships turned their attention on the tiny Castle of Lions.

Shiro nodded to himself. “Pidge?”

Coran picked Pidge up and threw her towards a ship. She disappeared inside, using her grappling hook to latch onto the ships. Moments later, the ship was exploding, and Pidge was in the water, waving for Coran to pick her up. Lance quickly took care of the floundering pirates, and cannonballs hovered in midair, dropping safely into the water after being stopped by Coran’s air cushion. Return fire from the Castle echoed back, slamming into ships with frightening speed.

Pidge handed Keith a small package. “Throw it into a torch and jump out of a window as fast as possible. Lance will get you.”

“What does it do?”
“Eh… Try not to think about it. Just do it, okay?”

Keith turned into a cat, holding the package in his mouth, and was launched through the air. Pidge was thrown to a different ship, but Keith didn’t pay attention to that. He slipped in a cannonhole, unnoticed by the powder monkeys, and moved through until he found a torch, outside of the room, of course. He dropped the package in the torch and sprinted from the area, jumping out of the porthole and splashing into the ocean. Lance grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and sped away from the ship. Keith struggled in his grasp, swallowing water. He turned into a full human and pushed Lance away.

“You’re going to drown me!”

“Fine, flounder on your own, then!”

“I will!” Keith stroked towards the ship and Coran pulled him up as the ship exploded. On deck, one pirate ship had managed to board, and a growling Shiro fended them off, in full wolf form. Crossbow bolts would appear in chests, and Keith knew that Hunk was watching from the crow’s nest.

A dripping-wet Pidge was deposited on the deck, and she waved towards Allura. “Your time to shine!” she shouted, “But don’t go overboard!”

Allura nodded and rose into the air, the clouds above darkening ominously. Thunder boomed, and rain poured from the sky in torrents.

“I don’t think that she has a midpoint between calm and raging hurricane!” Pidge yelled.

Keith grinned and shook his head, turning into a cat to avoid a sword swinging at his neck. He ran through the pirate’s legs and turned back into a human.

“Surprise,” he said grimly, and stabbed the man. The rain was really pouring now, like tiny bullets on his skin, and his shirt and hair were plastered to his skin.

“Could you try to not drown us while you’re at it?” he shouted up at Allura.

The rain abated a bit, but lightning arced from the sky, striking pirate ships with impugnity. It wasn’t long before all of them were burning and sinking to the bottom of the ocean.

“Why don’t we just whip her out every time instead of risking life and limb to blow up some of the ships first?” Pidge questioned.

“Because we don’t want to risk losing her to the storm,” Shiro scolded, “Allura!” he called, “Come down!”

She began to descend, but a bolt of fire came streaming across the waves and struck her as Haggar rose out of the wreckage of a ship, her arms blossoming with fire.

Shiro bounded across the deck as a wolf, cushioning Allura’s fall. He let out a whoof as she plowed into him, but she quickly rose up again, a vortex of water supporting her now that Haggar had regained control of the wind. The thakalthi threw blast after blast at Allura, and it was all she could do to stay up.

Keith glanced around and then ran for one of the cannons, ramming powder and hay into its barrel. “Coran?! Where are you?”
“I apologize,” Coran whispered weakly, “I’m running a bit low on energy right now, and the thakalthi is suppressing me.”

“Right then.” Keith struggled to lift up a cannonball that was easily a third or more of his weight. “Holy cow, how much do these things weigh?!”

He managed to haul the cannonball into the barrel of the cannon, and he turned to his half-form for the strength to wrench the cannon to face Haggar. It still took all of his strength to move it, but the instant he had it facing the correct way, he lit the fuse and fired the cannon, sending the black ball of iron turtling towards Haggar.

She blocked it with a cushion of air, and then suddenly, a massive pressure forced Keith down, as well as everyone else on the ship. Haggar floated towards them, her face twisted in rage, and Keith felt the air leave his lungs, leaving him gasping on the deck. But the pressure didn’t allow for breathing, and spots danced in his vision.

_Can’t breathe, can’t breathe- this is it, this is the end- I’m… going… to die…_

Keith’s vision faded to black as he heard the roaring of a waved.

XXX

Allura looked up as she realized that Haggar was no longer throwing attacks at her. She’d heard a cannon, but surely they hadn’t managed to fire it without Coran!

Haggar was at the Castle of Lions now, and Allura could see all of her friends lying crumpled on the deck. She rose up into the air, silently calling the ocean to her. She roared towards Haggar and the Castle, her massive wave crashing over everything on board but leaving her friends on board.

Haggar, however, was swept away by the sudden forced, and Allura created a bubble of water around her head. The thakalthi’s eyes widened in terror, and she clawed at her throat as her face turned blue. Allura didn’t let up her attack, and she watched with cold detachment as Haggar drowned. She shook her head, letting the body drop.

“You didn’t have to do this,” she told the thakalthi’s lifeless body, “It didn’t have to be this way. But I suppose that you’re one with the ocean now. Just like you wanted.”

XXX

Keith gasped air into his lungs, his eyes opening. Allura was right over him, looking into his face with a smile.

“Good morning.”

Keith coughed, his hand flying to his throat. “Haggar—”

“Six feet under,” Allura assured him, her eyes shining, “We did it! We defeated the Galra! They’re all gone, and so is the one who was making them! We- we’re free! Completely free! You don’t have to worry about them, Shiro doesn’t have to worry about them- it’s over!”

“Over,” Keith murmured faintly, “Done. I mean- there are still pirates out there, but... we’re free. No more worry. No more people trying to kill us. Just... us”

XXX
Lotor nodded to himself, watching the image floating above his hand of the ocean-blessed celebrating their victory.

“Good,” he said quietly, “You’ve cleared the third and last hurdle. Now all that remains is the sprint to the finish.”
Iverson approached the Castle of Lions as it came into the dock, holding a white flag. “The governor wishes to- you!”

“Captain,” Keith said coolly.

“I’m alive,” Shiro said helpfully, “Also, as you can see, the pirates were close to our port. They won’t be the last, I’m sure. We want to talk to Sandas.”

Iverson’s eyes swept over all of them. “What are you doing with a runaway slave?”

“She is a loyal friend and companion,” Shiro said in a ‘and that’s final’ tone, “You will treat her as such. She played a pivotal role in defeating the pirates, and came with us in good faith, at personal risk. If you want to recapture her, you’ll have to go through us first. And her name is Allura.”

Coran materialized to shoot Iverson a glare, and he stumbled back.

“A demon!”

“Not quite.”

Iverson hesitated. “We can arrange a meeting. You’ll come unarmed. And we won’t come on your haunted ship, nor will your ghost come to the meeting. Meet us outside of the town, on the hill.”

“Accepted,” Shiro said, “Provided that we have your word that we’ll be given safe passage.”

Iverson inclined his head. “You have my word. I promise on my honor that you won’t be harmed. Midday. The governor will be there.”

Xxx

“Why are we here?” Pidge whispered as Shiro walked up a hill, alone, to meet Sandas and Iverson.

“We just saved them. We’re entitled to make a few demands, as well as let the public know what happened,” Hunk whispered back.

Keith shifted uncomfortably, his hand going to where his sword was normally be and, of course, finding nothing. “I don’t like this. Why do we have to come unarmed, but they get to bring their guns? Why couldn’t we hold this meeting on the Castle? With Coran? Do you think they know that he’s bound to the ship?”

“I don’t see that they could.”

Shiro reached the top of the hill, and Governor Sandas leaned forward, Iverson rigid at her side. They exchanged a few unhearable words, and Shiro nodded gravely.

Then came the gunshot.

A single bullet whizzed through the air and struck Shiro in the chest. He seemed to fall in slow motion, his mouth an “o” of surprise. The others just stared in shock at Shiro’s fallen body. Iverson looked just as startled, turning to Governor Sandas with his face a mask of betrayal, shouting something at her.
Keith didn’t hear the words through the rush of blood in his head. His eyes glowed fiercely, and he screamed, his ears morphing, and claws coming out on his hands. He heard frightened shouts, but he ignored them, running up the hill where Shiro lay, and Sandas watched with a smirk as thunder and lightning boomed overhead.

“What the hell is that thing?!”

“Is that Keith?!”

“Has he been able to do that the whole time?!”

“Don’t kill it,” Sandas ordered as Keith ran towards her, and he felt a stinging, blinding pain in his right side, like a hot knife had stabbed him. Still, he pushed on. Something hit him in the leg, and it was knocked out from underneath him. He scrabbled his way towards Sandas, managing a few more feet before falling to his stomach, his vision hazing in and out. His ears had returned to normal, his claws sinking back in and his skin fading to a pale color.

“Sh-Shiro- no- Shiro…”

“No use, creature. He’s dead.”

Iverson growled at his supervisor. “I promised them safe passage!”

“A promise that you had no right to give.”

Thunder cracked overhead, Allura’s eyes glowing. Sandas put the tip of a sword to Keith’s back. “Try it and he’s dead.”

Allura sank slowly back down, and she and the others were rounded up by the guards. One of them exposed Pidge’s forearm. “Pirate, Ma’am.”

Sandas glanced down at Keith and rolled him over with her foot, pushing up his sleeve with the tip of her sword. “This one, too.”

“Shiro had it,” one of the guardsmen called softly.

“These two don’t,” someone else supplied, nudging Hunk and Allura.

“Fine, then. Give the order.”

One soldier fired a flare into the air, and another one answered from the harbor. Cannons boomed, and the Castle of Lions made a cracking noise as the attack took Coran off guard. Allura screamed, but she could only watch in horror as the Castle sank under the barrage of the cannons.

“C-Coran,” Keith whispered, “N-no…”

Sandas pointed her sword at Hunk. “You’re banished. Don’t show your face around here again. If I see you in my city, there’ll be a bullet right in-between your eyes, you hear?”

The guards released Hunk, and he glanced uneasily at his captive friends. Pidge nodded with a watery smile.

“Go on, Hunk. Don’t worry about us, we’ll be alright. We’ll meet up later, okay?”

Hunk nodded and backed away. “Bye,” he said, his voice cracking, “I- I’ll meet up with you later.”
A group of guards came towards them, dragging something in a net.

Allura’s eyes widened. “NO!”

Lance thrashed against his bonds, but the guards kept a tight hold on the net, dragging him along the ground. They saluted Sandas.

“That’s all of them.”

Sandas nodded. “Good. Put the mermaid in my fountain for now until we can find a more permanent solution. Put the two pirates in the prison, and the runaway… lock her in the slave shack until she’s willing to serve.”

Keith’s vision blacked out as someone hauled him to his feet, and he sagged in their grip. They dragged him towards the town, and through flickering bouts of vision, he could see the others being marched with him.

Keith’s head sagged down to his chest, and his vision faded out completely. Shiro…

Xxx

“Keith? Keith, are you with me? Keith?”

Keith groaned, his side and leg throbbing painfully. Someone touched his shoulder gently.

“Don’t die, please, Keith, wake up!”

Slowly, but surely, Keith’s eyes opened, and Pidge’s face smiled down at him. “Hey! Nice to see you conscious again!”

“What?”

“We’re in jail,” Pidge supplied helpfully.

“Shiro…”

“Dead,” another voice said, choked up. Allura was on the other side of the bars, her white hair filthy and the clothes she’d taken from Altea replaced once again with slave rags. “I- I went back to check, and—” Allura choked out a sob. “He’s gone. I’m sorry, Keith, I- I’m so sorry!”

“Shiro… No… he can’t be dead!”

“I’m sorry, Keith. I’m sorry.”

“Wait, how…”

Allura offered a watery smile. “I agreed to behave so I could see you guys.” Her voice cracked. “Lance says to hang on. He’s absolutely certain that he can drown someone if they get too close to his tank.”

“And Hunk?”

“I- I haven’t seen him, but I can tell he’s nearby.”

“How long…”
“You’ve been out for two days,” Pidge told him.

Allura burst out sobbing. “Keith- they’ve- they’ve—”

“What?!”

“I’ve been sentenced to death,” Pidge said quietly, “Because of my horrible crime of being a pirate. I pled my swollen belly, but it’s only a matter of time before they figure out that I’m not pregnant and I get the rope.”

“What?! They can’t do that! You’re not a pirate!”

“I’ve got the brand, and that’s enough. They’re not planning on killing you, though. I think Sandas wants to figure out why you can turn into the halfway form.”

“No…”

“Whatsoever you do, Keith, don’t tell her! Once she knows, it’ll be the gallows for you, too. You have to hold up.”

“Pidge, I—”

“I’m working on getting you out,” Allura said firmly, “You two will just have to hold on, okay? I’m working on it, please. Just… don’t die.”

Xxx

Sandas opened the jail cell, and a guard held Pidge back as she approached Keith. “Time to talk, creature. Who are you, really? Where did you come from? And what demonic power gives you the ability to shapeshift?”

Keith’s eyes looked directly into hers, a cold, hard violet.

“My name is Keith Kogane,” he said in a steely tone, “I lived with my father at a port three weeks sail away. My port was attacked by pirates when I was young, and my father was killed. I was taken captive and only managed to escape a couple of years ago when the ship was destroyed. I washed up here.”

Sandas glared at him. “Lies. Tell me the truth.”

“My name is Keith Kogane,” Keith repeated, “I lived with my father at a port three weeks sail away. My port was attacked by pirates when I was young, and my father was killed. I was taken captive and only managed to escape a couple of years ago when the ship was destroyed. I washed up here.”

“You’re lying!” Sandas struck him across the face, rocking his whole body with the force of the blow. “Tell me the truth, creature! What are you?!”

“My name is Keith Kogane,” Keith began, but before he could get any further, Sandas kicked him in the side, right where he’d been hit with the bullet. His vision flickered out, and he fell, his side blazing with pain.

Xxx

Lance surfaced in his tank as Allura came nearby. “Allura?”
“They’re both alive,” she said tiredly, “Keith’s injured, of course, but I think he’ll be alright.”

“And you?”

“Fine, Lance.”

Lance reached a hand out for Allura to take, and she grasped it firmly, tears blooming in her blue eyes. He smiled at her. “We’ll make it out, I swear, Allura.”

“I just- I’m worried about Keith, because of his injuries. And I’m worried about you. If Keith wasn’t injured, we could get you out of that tank and carry you away. But with Keith in the state he is… I don’t know how we’re going to pull it off!”

“We’ll think of something,” Lance promised, “We’re pretty good at improvisation, you know. It’s our biggest asset.”

Allura sighed. “I don’t even know where we’ll go. We don’t have any boats, so we’re basically stuck on this island. And there are very few places here that have a place to hide, like a jungle. I’m worried that even if we can get Pidge and Keith away, we’ll just end up with our backs against a wall. Or a cliff.”

Xxx

“STOP IT,” Pidge screamed, wrenching against her captor, “STOP IT!”

“I’ll stop it just as soon as he tells the truth,” Sandas said calmly. She nudged Keith with one foot. “I’ll ask again. Who are you?”


Sandas kicked him again, this time in the leg, and Keith screamed, a heart-wrenching scream that pierced Pidge’s heart like a sword.

“Stop it,” she half-pleaded, half-sobbed, “Please, you’re going to kill him!”

Sandas didn’t stop. She kicked Keith in the side again, and Pidge screamed with him, fat tears rolling down her cheeks. “NO! No, stop it, stop it, please!”

“P-Pidge,” Keith choked, “D-don’t cry. Please don’t cry.”

Sandas looked at Pidge, her eyes glittering with curiosity and malice. “We’re done here.” She waved a hand. “Let’s get out of this hole.”

Her lapdog guard threw Pidge to the ground and followed Sandas out, locking the door behind him. Pidge crawled towards Keith, her hands fluttering around his reopened side and leg wounds. “Keith- Keith, answer me, Keith.”

He didn’t respond, and a tear rolled down her face, splattering onto his. His eyes opened a crack, and he wrinkled his nose at her. “I told you not to cry,” he told her irritably, “You can’t let them have the satisfaction, okay? You’ve got to hold it together to shove it in their faces, do you hear me?”

“I hear you,” Pidge whispered, “I hear you. Keith- why don’t you just turn into a cat? I bet you could fit through the bars. You could come back and rescue us!”

“I can’t,” Keith said hoarsely, “It hurts when I try, and my side starts burning, and I nearly pass
“You tried?”

Keith nodded with a wince. “Last night, after Allura left and you went to sleep, I tried to transform five different times. Nothing happened, except that on the fifth time I passed out.”

“Can you try again?”

Keith nodded. “I can try.” He closed his eyes, and Pidge saw a flush of purple on his face. “You’re doing it! You’re turning purple!”

Keith’s eyes shot open, and Pidge could see the irises growing and shrinking as if his animal and human sides were struggling for dominance. He gritted his teeth, his hands clawing at the floor, and then his eyes turned back to their normal size.

“I’m sorry, Pidge.

“What?! No, you were so close!”

“I’ll try again in a couple of seconds. I just—” Keith’s face creased in pain, and his hand went to his side. A wave of guilt washed over Pidge. He was injured, badly, and she was trying to push him harder than he could go.

“Take your time,” Pidge ordered, “Don’t hurt yourself.” She glanced around the cell. “There’s got to be more than one way out of this cell.”
Keith looked up as Sandas and her goon came back into the cell, bracing himself for the questions and beating that would follow. But another man came in behind them, seizing Keith’s arms and holding him tightly.

“Really?” he choked scornfully at Sandas, “Do you need a guard to hold me still while you hit me?”

In answer, Sandas sucker-punched Pidge in the stomach as the other goon pinned her arms behind her back. Keith’s eyes widened. “Leave her alone!”

“I will. Just as soon as you tell me the truth.”

“But- you- dare,” Pidge panted, “Keith- I swear- if you tell her—”

“Pidge—”

“Don’t you tell them- not for me!”

“Quiet, you,” Sandas ordered, backhanding Pidge across the face. Keith pulled against the man holding him, snarling at the governor. The guard holding him kicked him in the leg.

“Settle down,” he barked.

“Ha,” Pidge spat, “I’ve been hit- worse- on accident- by Lance’s stupid tail!”

Sandas’ gaze came level with Keith’s eyes. “Will you tell me what I want to know?”

“I’d never betray him,” Pidge spat.

“You know the secret too, don’t you? You know how he can transform?”

“I’d never betray him,” Pidge spat.

“Really?” Sandas stepped down on Keith’s bullet wound, ignoring his harsh scream. “Not even to save him?”

Pidge shut her eyes tight as Keith screamed again, a scream that faded to a harsh sob. Can’t tell her. If you tell her, it’ll get Keith killed. Don’t tell her. Don’t tell her. Don’t-tell-her-don’t-tell-her-don’t-tell-her don’ttellherdon’ttellher. Another scream rang out, and she squeezed her eyes shut even further as tears leaked out, wishing that she could cover her ears and block out that horrible sound forever.

But she couldn’t.

Keith’s scream stopped, and Pidge opened her eyes to see that he’d mercifully passed out. Sandas
sighed in disappointment.

“These pirates are a hard-hearted lot,” she told her goons, snapping her fingers to signal them to release Pidge. “Perhaps they just need extra… incentive.”

Xxx

“Keith?”

A harsh groan was her only reply.

Pidge crawled over to him. “Keith? Are you awake?”

“How… ow…” Keith’s unfocused eyes trained themselves on her face. “You’re hurt…” his hand brushed her bruised face. “You okay?”

Pidge clutched the hand tightly. “I’m okay, Keith, stars! Think of yourself for once! Look at you!”

“Rather glad that I can’t,” he murmured dizzily, his eyes drifting shut. “Sorry- it’s my turn for watch, right?”

“Nah,” Pidge said lightly, although the effect was ruined by her voice crack, “It’s definitely my turn for watch. You had yours already.” He must think that they were back on the Castle. A lump rose in her throat as she thought about Coran and the Castle, both beneath the sea, now.

“You sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“I thought it was my turn…” Keith started to push himself up. “I’ll go ask Shiro.”

Pidge pushed him back down, tears welling up in her eyes. “Shiro’s asleep right now. Tell you what. You let me take the watch for now, and if it turns out that it was your turn, then you can take my next watch, okay?”

Keith went limp. “Okay… Thanks Pidge. You sure you’ll be okay?”

“Completely sure. You rest up, now, or Allura will have both of our heads.”

“Yeah… she will, won’t she?”

“Yep. You go to sleep.”

“Kay…”

Keith drifted off, his face finally relaxing as sleep overtook him. His face creased occasionally in pain and Pidge buried her face in her arms, crying quietly so that she wouldn’t wake him up.

“Oh, Shiro…” she whispered, “I wish you were here. You’d know what to do- you always knew what to do.” She glanced out the windows at the gallows. “We’re running out of time, Shiro,” she murmured, “They’ll find out that I’m not pregnant any day, now. But it’s up to Allura, isn’t it? Hunk will be shot on sight, Lance is stuck in a tank, and Keith can’t transform. She’s our last shot.” She glanced out the window again. “Whatever you’re going to do,” she murmured to Allura, wherever she was, “do it fast.” Tears threatened to spill over once again. “Or else I might not make it out of here alive.”
Keith heard shouts and screams of excitement, and he yawned, stretching with a wince. “Pidge, what’s…”

“She’s not here.”

Keith snapped to full attention, his eyes fixed on Governor Sandas. “What have you done with Pidge?!”

“We have a law.” Admiral Sandas pointed to the window.

Keith raced to the window, staring out it. Pidge was standing on the gallows, her sleeve ripped to show the brand on her harm.

“NO!”

“I can save her. All it would take is a single word from me to stop this. All you have to do is tell me how you transform, and I’ll let her go.”

Keith frowned. He’d heard a little stutter from Sandas’ heart from it speeding up momentarily before returning to her normal beat as she said that she’d let Pidge go. “You’ll let her go if I tell you?”

“Yes.”

There it was again. That little stutter. “You promise?”

“I promise. If you tell me, I’ll let both of you go.”

The stutter again. She was lying. I’m sorry, Pidge. “I’ve told you the truth.”

“That’s your final answer?”

Keith nodded, not trusting himself to speak. Sandas shrugged.

“I suppose I have an execution to watch.”

She swept outside, and Keith put his hands over his ears, unwilling to hear what he knew was coming next, but it didn’t help. The snap of her neck came to him across the jail cell, echoing in his ears as loudly as Allura’s thunder.

Keith closed his eyes, tears leaking out of the corners. Dead. Pidge was… dead. Gone. Pidge. Shiro. Coran. How many? How many more would die?! Had they survived the Galra and Haggar only for Governor Sanda to destroy them?! And he couldn’t do anything about it, he realized with a sinking horror, he would be stuck in this cell, and Governor Sandas would kill all of them to get to him.

And he would. Next time, he would crack. If she threatened Allura, or Lance, or Hunk, wherever he was… he would crack. He’d break. He’d tell her everything. They were safe, for now, because of their lack of a brand. But they wouldn’t stay safe. Not if Sandas had her way.

Xxx
Citizens stayed in their homes that night, locking their doors firmly as a wail echoed through the streets. They shuttered the windows as the wail faded to a song, a high, lilting melody without any words. But they could tell that it was a dirge.

If any of them looked out the window that night, they’d see a glimmer of white, and they’d squint to see if a patch of moonlight had descended to the ground. They’d shudder, and if they’d keep looking, they’d have seen a slave girl, with hair of silver, singing the melody, her head held high to the moonlight.

They’d whisper that Sandas’ new slave girl was really a witch, and they’d see her go to the gallows. Then, all of a sudden, the melody stopped. The braver few poked their heads out of the window. They saw nothing, unless their home lined the square with the gallows. Those few both brave enough to peer outside and fortunate enough to live in those houses saw her. The slave girl, cutting down the pirate girl. They’d whispered before, of course. They’d known Katie. They’d remarked about what a shame it was and how she’d always seemed like such a good girl. But no one had done anything to stop it. And now they did nothing to stop the slave girl from cutting the body down.

She gave a scream of despair when the body came into her arms and pressed her forehead to the dead girl’s, singing her song again, this time her voice cracking a few times. She got up and walked away, glaring fiercely at the road with eyes full of tears.

No one came to stop her. Barely anyone saw her at all.

No one but a solitary islander, who broke down into tears when he saw the body.

No one but a solitary prisoner, staring at the moonlit gallows and wondering if he’d be next.

No one but the soft moon, watching impassively.

Xxx

Lotor watched his image, nodding to himself. “Three have run to the finish,” he said quietly, “The question is, will the others? Or will they back out while they still can?” A small smile crossed his lips. “We’ll have to see.”
Blood, Sweat and Tears to be the One

Allura jangled prison cell keys at Keith. “Come on. We’re getting you out of here.”

“How did you—?”

“Iverson.” Allura gulped, and Keith saw barely suppressed tears in her eyes. “Pidge- it hit him hard. He didn’t agree with Sandas firing on us, you saw that. He hated it. Anyway, we’re getting you out, and then I’ll see about Lance.”

“You’re staying?”

“I have to. I can’t leave Lance here by himself.”

“They won’t hurt him. A mermaid is too much of a novelty. They won’t risk losing him. But you— they won’t have a problem hurting or even killing you to get to me, or just to punish you. Please, Allura, you’ve got to come with me.”

Allura hesitated, glancing at the door. “Lance…”

“Allura, do you think that I want to leave anyone behind? We’ll come back for him, I promise, but for now, he’ll have to wait. Getting you out is a higher priority- every day that you’re in that house, you’re at risk. He’ll be okay for now.”

Allura looked back one more time and then nodded. “You’re right. Okay. Come on.” She unlocked the door, and helped Keith to his feet, slinging one arm around her shoulders to support his injured leg.

Together, they limped out of the jail, Keith swearing softly as his side and leg both burned in unison, his breath coming in short bursts and darkness flickering in front of his eyes.

“Use that breath for moving, not swearing,” Allura told him sharply, “You can’t waste your breath.”

She was half carrying him now, supporting most of his weight as his vision periodically wavered out completely and he would snap back to awareness to find himself a few feet displaced and his feet dragging completely on the ground.

“Hey!”

Allura swore worse than Keith and upped her pace as a guard spotted them. Keith tried to help her and stumble along, but he kept falling, his injured leg giving out randomly and leaving him to attempt to hop on one foot.

“Stop moving,” Allura told him, “You’ll only make it worse.”

He obligingly went limp, letting her drag him along. And suddenly, bullets were flying everywhere, barely missing them. Citizens were dodging back into their homes to avoid the bullets and complete strangers took cover with one another, wondering why the people that were supposed to be protecting them were firing randomly just to hit two teenagers.

Keith saw it, instants before it happened. A sniper, up on a roof with a rifle. A single shot, winging through the air.
“Allura!”

Too late. The bullet pierced just below her breastbone, and her mouth became an “o” of surprise as they both tumbled to the ground.

“ALLURA!”


“No— no, not you too—”

“Run,” she whispered again, and the light faded from her eyes.

Keith stared numbly at her dead body as the guards caught up to them, seizing his arms and hauling up. He was helpless. Useless. Insignificant next to the fact that all of his friends were dying in front of him, and there was nothing that he could do.

“Where is home?”

He’d asked that question, and now, too late, the answer was coming to him. Shiro had called them his pack. His pack was home, but his home was disappearing as he watched. Without his pack, he felt small, insignificant.

Suddenly, he was small and insignificant, a little black cat thudding to the ground, dazed and confused, his side and leg screaming at him in pain.

“Catch it!”

Keith’s instincts kicked in, and he scrambled away, balance a little easier now that he had three working legs instead of one. A glancing kick hit him in the ribs, and he tumbled to the side. He got up and bolted, limping away as fast as he could on his three working paws. He looked back at Allura’s dead body and a hard coldness settled on his heart. He was a survivor. He always had been. He would survive, no matter what. He owed that to Shiro, who had been the first to fall. To Coran, who had never known what had hit him. To Pidge, who had died rather than betray him. He owed it to Allura, who had died trying to make sure that he lived.

Keith darted down into an alleyway, limping towards the fence. He jumped up, but his injured leg threw the jump off and he crashed into the fence, falling dazed to the ground. Footsteps pounded past, and he lay there, unable to get up. No one found him, and the shouts faded to silence.

“Hey, look, it’s a dead cat!”

“Cool!”

Something seized Keith by the tail, hauling him up, and he yowled, writhing.

“It’s alive!”

“Don’t get it near me, that’s a black cat! I don’t want any bad luck!”

“What do I do?!”

“Throw it away!”

Suddenly, Keith was airborne, soaring over the fence that he’d just crashed off of and landing in a
heap in a vegetable garden He struggled to get up, but just fell, a dizzying wave of fatigue sweeping over him. He closed his eyes.

A little girl’s voice rang out above him. “Jiji, look, it’s a cat! A black cat!”

Keith braced himself for someone to kick him or step on him before he could cross their path, but instead, gentle hands picked him up. “Jiji, he’s hurt real bad! He’s bleeding!”

A gruff, older man’s voice answered the little girl from somewhere nearby. “Bring him inside, then. We’ll fix him up.”

Keith felt himself moving, and then he was somewhere blissfully warm, being set down on a table. “Do you think he’ll bring us good luck?”

“Of course. I’d like to have a word with whoever did this to him… and maybe a fight…”

“Jiji, you’re too old to fight!”

“It’s ridiculous, hurting a creature because they think it’s bad luck.”

“Jiji, hurry, he’s going to die!”

“He won’t die, child.”

Someone with gentle, callused hands washed Keith’s leg and side and wrapped them up. Keith’s ears flicked, and he stretched his nose towards the source of warmth, a crackling fire from the sound of it.

“Look, he’s moving! Is he going to be okay?”

“He’ll be alright,” the man’s voice replied, “He just needs to rest. And eat. He’s nothing but skin and bones.”

“Poor cat.” A small, gentle hand stroked Keith’s head gently. “He’s soft.”

Keith arced his head towards the stroke and felt a vibration in the back of his throat that came out as a rumbling sound. The girl giggled.

“He’s purring! He likes me!”

“Leave him alone now, Sayuri.”

No, Keith thought, don’t.

But Sayuri obeyed her grandfather, and Keith was left alone. Images that he’d been holding back flooded through his mind.

Shiro, his face a mask of shock and betrayal as he tumbled to the ground.

The Castle of Lions, falling under a barrage of cannonballs, taken by surprise and betrayal.

Pidge, swinging from the gallows like forgotten laundry, her hat trampled on the ground and her sleeve ripped open.

Allura, her eyes dead and lifeless, staring at the sky that she would never make crack with thunder again.
Allura had been right. They \textit{never} should have come here. It hadn’t brought the anything except death. Hunk was banished. Lance was trapped in a fishtank. And here he was, completely at the mercy of total strangers who could throw him out into the street to die at any time.

Someone walked over and stroked Keith’s head gently. “You’ll be alright.”

Keith made an effort to open his eyes and managed to lift his eyelids a little, staring directly into a pair of grey eyes.

\textit{Shiro}?!
Keith’s eyes shot open in shock, and he immediately saw that the man was not Shiro, despite the similar eyes. It was at that moment that Keith realized they’d been speaking Japanese and not English the whole time. He’d understood because before his ship had been taken by pirates, Shiro had taught him some of the language- and immediately disapproved when Keith used his new skill to insult people without their knowledge.

The old man smiled a little. “You’re awake, then. I thought you might be. You’ve been through quite a lot, I’d say. Wish you could tell me. I’d bet that you’ve seen a lot in your life.

*Like you wouldn’t believe,* Keith thought grimly. He tried to stagger to his paws, but fell with a weak mrow of pain. His vision danced in front of him again, and the old men set a gentle hand on his head.

“You rest, little one. There’s plenty of time to get where you’re going later.”

Keith closed his eyes, the sleep coming easily and dreamlessly.

Xxx

“Jiji, did he die in the night?!?”

Keith opened his eyes at the high, worried voice, and gave a small meow to reassure the girl-Sayuri- that he was alive. She grinned brightly.

“You’re good luck,” she told him energetically, “Why were you in our garden?”

“Maybe he’s here to help you get a suitor,” the old man said with a laugh from the corner.

Sayuri wrinkled her nose. “Yuck!”

“Or maybe he’s a pirate cat,” the old man continued, “Maybe he walked off of a ship so that it would sink. If they stay *on* a pirate ship, it’s good luck for the pirates, you know. But if they get off…”

Keith shivered. Was he the reason that the *Castle of Lions* had been destroyed? Because he’d walked off of the ship?

“Will he bring *us* good luck, though, Jiji?”

“I’m sure he will, Sayuri. Go water the plants.”

Sayuri bounced out, her feet bare. Keith pushed himself up to his feet, limping across the table and hopping down to the floor, careful not to land on his injured leg.

“You want out, eh? Fresh air?”

There was a scream from Sayuri, and both of them bolted towards the door. The old man ripped open the door and then froze. “Sayuri, don’t move. Stay very, *very* still.” He reached for a gun, and Keith peered outside. There was a snake, hissing at Sayuri, coiled up and ready to bite.

Keith bolted across the lawn, intercepting the snake just as it lunged. His jaws closed down on its back, and he shook his head violently, breaking its spine and neck. He dropped the limp creature
and nudged it with one paw to make sure it was dead. It was.

“You saved me! You are good luck!”

Sayuri picked him up and squeezed him gently, planting a kiss on the top of his head.

“Thank you. I’m going to call you Fuku. It means luck, you know.”

Keith squirmed uncomfortably, and she let him down. Sayuri’s grandfather examined the snake, prodding it with the barrel of his gun.

“He got it.” His face broke into a grin. “I guess you really are a good-luck-bringing cat.”

Keith felt his pride in killing the snake take a blow at those words. He wasn’t good luck. Everyone close to him died. He didn’t bring good luck- he brought death. His dad. Shiro. Coran. Pidge. Allura. They would’ve been safe if he’d never arrived in port. If Lance had never pushed his wreckage towards Shiro, none of this would have happened. If he’d died out on the ocean… everyone else would be alive. Haggar never would have been able to find the amulet because the only one who knew the nursery rhyme would have been dead.

Keith felt a wave of exhaustion sweep over him as the adrenaline of seeing the snake faded, and he fell down, his side and leg burning.

The old man picked him up carefully. “You’re not ready to be running around yet,” he scolded, “you’re going to reopen your wounds.”

Keith went limp and let himself be carried away. Sayuri’s grandfather was right. He couldn’t even kill a snake without falling over. If he was going to rescue Lance and get out of here with Hunk, he needed to be at full strength.

He chuckled bitterly to himself. Allura and Shiro had always been making him rest and not overexert himself against his will. And now, finally, he was doing it willingly. On his own. Was that really what it took? It took the deaths of nearly everyone that he loved to get him to listen?

I’m sorry, Shiro, Allura. I should have listened to you more.

Xxx

“How are you doing there, little one?”

Keith leapt lightly down from the table and gave a purr. His leg and side were mostly healed— a little stiff, but otherwise okay. There was a thump on the door, and the old man opened it. On the doorstep was Keith’s sword. Keith blinked. How had it gotten here? Had he summoned it? It had been on the bottom of the port ocean- could it really have come to him from that far?

The old man blinked. “Now, then, what’s this?”

Keith concentrated, focusing on his human form. He felt himself grow and shift, his fur shrinking back into his body except on his head, where it grew longer.

“It’s mine,” he said quietly in Japanese.

The old man whirled around, clutching at his chest. “Who are you?! Where did you come from?!”

“I… I was the cat.”
“A shapeshifter,” the old man breathed.

Sayuri bounced into the room from the outside. “Jiji, I—” She gave a short shriek. “Who is he?!”

“I’ve… been here. I was- I was a cat.”

Sayuri’s eyes widened. “Fuku?! You can turn into a human?!?”

“Yes. My name is Keith.”

“It’s not Fuku?”

“No.”

“Well, you’re still my good luck.”

Keith gave her a small, sad smile. “I wouldn’t be so sure.”

The old man gave him a knowing look. “You’re leaving?”

“Yeah. There are things I have to do. Someone I have to rescue. A friend to find. Goodbyes to say.” Keith strapped his sword to his waist. “Thank you for all you’ve done for me. I won’t forget.”

The old man nodded. “Be careful out there. It’s a dangerous world.”

“I know,” Keith said quietly.

Xxx

Lance swam around his small tank, his mind frantic with worry. Allura hadn’t been around for three weeks, now, and she normally came to talk to him every other night. Had something happened to her? Had she been sold?

He heard a couple of thumps and cries from Sandas’ guards that were outside of the garden wall. A small black cat stalked out of the bushes, ears flat against his head, and Lance grinned, surfacing. He smacked his tail on the surface of the water, creating a loud splash that got the cat’s attention. He crept across the lawn towards the tank, and Lance looked down at it, his arms folded across the edge of the tank. “Well, hello, there. Here, kitty, kitty!”

The cat shifted into Keith, who gave him a baleful glare. “I’m not a housecat.”

Lance looked behind him. “Where’s Allura?”

Keith looked at the ground. “Allura… didn’t make it,” he choked, “They shot her.”

Lance splashed back into the water in shock, the grin on his face sliding off. He resurfaced, blinking back tears. “Allura’s… dead?”

Keith nodded, tears in the corners of his eyes. “You, Hunk and I are the only ones left.”

“Stars…”

“We need to get out of here. We can mourn later.”

Keith’s sword zoomed into his hand, and he brought it crashing down on the tank, bursting it wide open. He pulled Lance out of the water and glass shards, hauling him clear before letting his tail
drop back down to the ground with a *thump* as the weight became too much. Lance felt some semblance of a smile creep onto his face.

“This is familiar.”

“Shut up,” Keith grunted, his leg buckling slightly as he took Lance’s weight.

“Where are we going?”

“There’s a cliff. It’s not too high above the water. I’m going to throw you off. Then you swim like all of hell is behind you because it probably is.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll sneak off. If necessary, I’ll jump off after you.”

“Ow, watch the tail,” Lance hissed as they bumped over a rock.

“You’re not going to have a tail if we don’t move fast!”

Keith’s leg crumpled beneath him, and they both tumbled to the ground. “Ow. Okay, that’s worse than I thought.” He rubbed his leg with a wince and got back up, continuing his steady tread towards the cliffs.

“Keith?”

“What?”

“What’s wrong with your leg?”

“I got shot. It’s mostly healed, I’ll be okay. Why?”

“Because you might have to be doing some running around now.”

Keith glanced behind them and saw guards coming after them. His mouth silently formed a curse, and he started moving faster, wincing when he put weight on his throbbing leg. “We’re almost there! We’re going to make it!”

He flung Lance over the cliff, and the merman twisted in a graceful dive, hardly making a splash as he knifed into the water. Keith glanced at the guards, who were getting closer. Here he was, backed up against a cliff. He might have a sword, but they had guns.

*Stars, I better not hit any rocks*, he thought, and dove over the cliff after Lance. He made a lot more of a splash, and he yelped when the saltwater burned against his wounded leg and side.

The guards must have heard him, because they were suddenly a lot closer. “Over here!”

*No, no, no!*

Keith stroked away from the cliff, slicing through the waves and gasping in breath when he could. Then he heard the first gunshots.

Xxx

Lance was well away from the shore when the gunshots started. *Stars, Keith, what have you gotten yourself into now?!* He started back towards the shore, and then he saw them. Barracudas, honing
in on the cliff. A few seconds later, he could smell what they must be smelling and hear what they must be hearing.

Blood in the water. And a flailing, injured creature that was perfect prey.
Lance shot across the water, gunshots still echoing from the cliffs. He zoomed past the barracuda, and towards the bleeding creature. Keith. Splashing around and making himself a big, fat target. Lance heard gunshot followed by a shout of pain, and then Keith went under. Lance grabbed his shirt collar and lifted him to the surface. Shouts came from the top of the cliff.

“It’s the mermaid! Don’t hit it!”

Lance propelled himself back away from the cliff, still hanging onto Keith. He spared a glance at his friend, and his heart jumped to his throat. Keith was pale, and there was a hole right through his stomach, another one in his shoulder. Lance did a flip in the water, heading back towards shore.

It took him a long time with Keith’s weight, far too long for Lance’s tastes, but he pushed Keith up on the shore. Keith’s sword was glowing brightly, as Hunk had told him it had when Keith had been badly injured by Zarkon.

“Hey! We’re down here!”

The guards came running towards them, and Lance swam back, out of their reach. “Get him a doctor, and I’ll come with you!”

One of the guards shone a lantern on Keith. “We can try, but he’s not going to make it.”

“What?!” Lance swam closer. Keith’s breathing was rough and ragged, and Lance gulped. “Keith?” There was no answer, only that rough breathing. “Keith?!”

“They’re… right…”

Lance swam closer to shore. “What?!”

“Not… going… to make it…”

“No, nope, not an option, you’re going to make it, you just have to hold on, and you’ll be okay—”

“Lance… shut up. Get out of here. Find Hunk—” Keith broke off, his eyes glassy. “Go.” He let out a sigh, and his chest didn’t rise again. The glowing of the sword stopped abruptly, leaving the night dark and cold. Lance’s heart stopped with it.

“Keith?! Keith, no, talk to me, Keith!”

One of the guards reached down to feel for a pulse, and shook his head. “He’s gone.”

“NO!” Lance stared in shock. It hadn’t seemed real, the idea that Allura was gone. The idea that Pidge and Shiro were gone. But this was horribly, painfully real, undeniable proof in front of him that Keith was dead. He wasn’t breathing. He didn’t have a pulse. His body was lying there, in front of Lance, still leaking blood into the water.

Go.

Lance turned tail and swam away, making a break for the open ocean.
He didn’t make it.

Xxx

Hunk crept onto the moonlit beach, his eyes wide in horror and scenes of violence flashing across his mind. He ran across to Keith’s body, tears filling his eyes and dripping down his face.

“No… no, not you too, not Keith, you were supposed to survive!” Hunk closed his eyes. “You weren’t- you weren’t supposed to—” He couldn’t finish. He closed Keith’s eyes and picked him up, not even minding the blood. He took him away, bringing him to the spot where he and Allura had buried Shiro and Pidge. And where Allura herself was now buried. He worked tirelessly, digging a new grave while tears streamed down his cheeks.

“You’ll be together, at least,” he choked, as he laid Keith’s body in the grave.

When he came up, a gun pressed itself to his head, Sandas cold and hard behind it. “You’ve broken your banishment, islander.”

Hunk closed his eyes. “We’ll all be together,” he whispered.

A gunshot echoed through the air, destroying the silent night.

Xxx

“Ma’am?”

Sandas looked up at her head caretaker. “What?”

“Your mermaid is- it’s not doing so well. It won’t eat. It just sits in the water, not even swimming. It’s wasting away.”

Sandas’ eyebrows shot up in surprise. “I suppose that it has human feelings after all.”

Another caretaker ran up, whispering to the head caretaker. He bit his lip nervously. “Ma’am?”

“What?”

“Your mermaid- it’s dissolving into sea foam!”

Xxx

Lance watched his fingers slowly dissolve in front of him, turning to sea foam as he looked on. It didn’t hurt, as he thought it would. It was simply his body dissolving, from his fingertips and his tail, moving closer towards his chest and head. He was a mermaid, and therefore didn’t have a soul. He wouldn’t go wherever his friends had gone. But that didn’t matter. He’d rather be consigned to the void than live life without them. He grinned a haunted, hungry smile as Governor Sandas came across the lawn towards him.

“Looks like you can’t keep me,” he whispered as the last of him dissolved, “You lose.” Lance felt himself rising up. “What?! What’s going on?!”

“You have become a spirit of the air,” the wind whispered to him, and its voice was eerily familiar, “Like Coran. Like me. Mermaids do not have souls, and neither do spirits of the air. But we can gain one if we do good for three-hundred years. Coran has gained one, and he has gone to the beyond, with your other friends.”
“I can see them again?”

“Yes, Coralance.”

Lance’s blood chilled. “Veronica?!”

His sister, who had fallen in love with a human and dissolved into sea foam after her end of a bargain with a witch failed, whispered happily. “It’s me, Lance.”

“You- you’re here!”

“I’m here, Lance. I won’t leave again.”

Xxx

Lotor closed the image of Lance turning to sea foam. “The race is nearly finished. There is only one runner left.” He glanced at the four amulets in his bare hand. He had retrieved the other three from Haggar’s cave after she had died.

His four guardians stood behind him, waiting. He turned to face them.

“Acxa. Take care of the island. Lead them in my absence.”

“Are you sure that you have to do this?”

Lotor nodded. “There is no other way. If I were to survive, someone could recreate the amulet. That is why they had to die. This is why I must do this. Farewell, my friends.”

His guardians nodded and exited the cave, standing guard outside for one last time. Lotor turned to the amulets, and all four rose into the air, supported by the power of air. The other elements bloomed into being, and Lotor drove them into the gems of each amulet. The gems shattered, and raging spirits burst out of the gems.

We will find a host and return to our home.

Lotor nodded. “Spirits, you have spoken me from your prisons. You have given me prophecies to find you. I will be your host.”

A blue one looked at him. A child of water, a mermaid once. You will be my host. It zoomed into his chest, and Lotor coughed, trying to hold its energy.

One that was a swirling white also turned its attention on him. You who now live upon the air, you will be my host. It entered Lotor’s mouth, and he staggered back with a gasp.

One that flickered like flames looked at him as well. Creature of heat, of fiery passion, you are mine. It hit him, and Lotor fell to his knees, gasping.

The last one, a dark brown and grey, regarded him. You shall not be my host. You are not of the earth. The ground itself shall be mine.

Lotor’s eyes widened, even as he attempted to hold the energy that threatened to consume and destroy his body. “No! You can’t! You’ll destroy the whole island!”

Nevertheless, I shall make this land my host.

The spirit sank into the ground.
“NO!”

The whole island started to rumble, and Lotor heard screams outside coming from the village. “NO! It wasn’t supposed to go like this! I was supposed to be the only one!”

*Be at peace. You have three of us. Is that not enough for you?”*

“It doesn’t matter if I have three of you, if he is left free! He’ll destroy the whole island!”

*Did you not sacrifice a whole group of righteous people for this mission of yours, simply for the small possibility that they might be used to re-ensnare us? What is one small island to you if it sends us home?*

The energy burst through Lotor, and he screamed as it consumed his whole body. *It wasn’t-supposed- to go like this… I was supposed to be different from my mother… She wanted power… I only wanted to free you…*

*And you have, the spirits whispered, you have returned balance. We will return to our home. And for that, we thank you. Thank you, Lotor. We will not forget your sacrifice.*

Xxx

Lotor’s island of refugees was collapsing. If there had been any ships nearby, they would have seen the whole island shaking and breaking apart. They would have seen the whole island begin to sink. But there were no ships. There were no ships to see the whole island crumble into the sea. There was nothing nearby to watch it collapse, the whole thing falling into the waves. The island and the people on it were lost to salty brine without anyone’s knowledge, leaving nothing behind for future sailors to find.

Nothing but Ocean Blue.

Chapter End Notes

Dear everyone who said "you can't kill Keith" back when I shot Keith with a poisoned Bullet: Ha.

Anyway, if you want me, I'll be in my underground bunker, hiding. Surrender any weapons before entering.

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