# Read All About It

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# Read All About It

**by** [starlightment](http://archiveofourown.org/users/starlightment)

**Summary**

Keith is Altea High’s star athlete. And Lance, a wily reporter for the school newspaper, is crushing hard. The only problem? They’ve never actually met before. So when Lance decides to broadcast his long-hidden feelings in an explicitly romantic exposé, he ends up accidentally sparking a school-wide epidemic. Suddenly the entire student body is in on the drama, but are words truly enough to win over the school’s enigmatic heartthrob?

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First Period

Chapter Notes

For those of you who follow me on tumblr, you'll know that this has been a LONG TIME COMING LOL. I've been planning this fic since September, and it feels so good to finally start sharing!

So I'm not gonna postpone it any longer -- strap yourselves in for another trainwreck, boys and gals. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

... 

September twenty-fourth, freshman year.

It was the night of the Homecoming football game.

A rowdy affair in every sense of the word, and, apparently, unseasonably balmy for a gold-hued evening in late September. Lance remembers because of his jacket — an old shabby thing made of denim, soft and worn from years of use, with hand-stitched patches littering the back. His mother had insisted that he bring it along before he could bolt out the door, despite his protests, and, not even an hour later, he had the sleeves rolled up to his elbows while lost somewhere amongst the bleachers, sandwiched between droves of cheering classmates, sweltering in the bright stadium lights and collective body heat.

And maybe all the sweaty discomfort would have been acceptable — fine, even, in an unfortunate, rite-of-passage sort of way — had Lance been attending for any reason other than gathering coverage for the school newspaper. He was an underclassman, still trying to prove himself as a skilled reporter, yet still deemed unworthy to cover anything more provocative than the likes of sporting events and pep rallies. The more sought-after articles were reserved for upperclassmen, who had already served their miserable time doing grunt work — like changing the ink cartridges in the printer, and melting alive beneath what’s left of the afternoon sun, for example.

But it was quickly approaching halftime, and he still hadn’t accomplished much other than emptying a bucket of popcorn from the concession stand. Lance stared down at the sleek Nikon sitting in his lap, remembering how he’d spent all of his summer lawn-mowing money at the camera store, just to rent it out for the evening. His brow was furrowed. His jaw was set.

C’mon, McClain. This is your time to shine.

Lance’s lanky, beanpole-ish frame made it easy for him to maneuver through the masses, unobtrusively. He weaved between the sea of overheated bodies, hurried ‘scuse me’s and comin’ through’s falling lazily off his lips, until he reached the very bottom of the bleachers. He came to a halt at the chainlink fence, intended to separate the boisterous fans from the edge of the field. It was close, but not close enough.
A tanned hand gripped the metal barrier, and gave it a shake to test its stability because, in a
flickering moment of impulsivity, he decided to hop the fence, and venture farther into the fray.
Which he was fairly certain fell under the strictly off-limits category of game time etiquette, but
compelling journalism waits for no one.

At least that was what Lance told himself, quite cheekily, as he scurried toward the field, trying to
appear as inconspicuous as possible, camera poised and ready at eye level. The football players were
off to the side, tossing balls back and forth, running a few last-minute drills as Coach Kolivan yelled
in their sweaty faces. In their place, a formation of perky cheerleaders danced across the neatly
manicured grass to a bombastic marching band tune.

Thank god for the camera’s impressive zoom feature, Lance thought. Again, quite cheeky.

Smirking, Lance squinted into the camera lens, and watched as their mini skirts and long legs
focused into perfect clarity. He snapped some photos in rapid succession because what would the
evening be without a proper memento? Or six?

That’s when the crowd started to howl behind him, louder than before, and the thundering noise was
enough to distract Lance from his shot. He lowered the camera, glanced to the side, and gasped,
frozen into paralyzed stillness.

Because hurtling straight toward him was an errant football, cutting through the air, aimed right at his
face.

It was all happening so fast. Too fast, and there was nothing he could do. As he squeezed his eyes
shut, bracing for impact, Lance could practically hear the devastating crunch of his nose already.
And he could practically see the camera store owner’s face, red and wild with rage as he tries to
return the damaged Nikon. And he could practically feel the crippling shame of having to drag
himself into the newspaper office on Monday morning, woefully empty-handed, and ruining
whatever chance he had at earning his place. And —


No crunch, no rage, no shame.

Lance’s eyelids fluttered open tentatively, just a crack, to find the ball safely nestled in the palms of
what would have to’ve been some alarmingly dextrous hands. And then, looking past that, he
found himself nestled in the gaze of some alarmingly dark eyes.

Not dark like a bottomless pit, he thought offhandedly. They were deep blue like the ocean at
midnight, or the night sky without stars. They were perfect little galaxies, framed by a thick brow and
long lashes, and Lance would’ve been lying if he’d said he wasn’t already a little lost in their cosmic
orbit.

He was on the team. Number ten, according to his red emblazoned jersey. He looked different
without his helmet -- less like a barbaric brute and more like a real boy. Fair skin, swollen lips, black
fringe that clung to the dampness of his forehead.

“You should watch where you’re standing,” Number Ten said, deep and velvety.

Lance gawked, flustered. “Ungh.”

If moonstruck-teenager were a language, it would have included whatever noise Lance just croaked
in an attempt to respond to the football player’s comment. It sounded like half-grunt, half-Hungarian.
And, sadly, Lance didn’t know any Hungarian.

Number Ten was staring, and so Lance straightened up a bit, desperately trying to combat how self-conscious he felt under that intense gaze with something like good posture. Because he could totally be chill. He could be calm. He could be collected.

“Cool jacket,” said Number Ten.

And so Lance internally screamed.

Then, in the distance, a piercing whistle blew. The crowd erupted once again, the cheerleaders scattered, and the marching band picked up its lively tempo, but Lance noticed none of it. In fact, he missed just about everything except the way Number Ten’s thigh muscles flexed in those tight uniform pants as he turned, and started jogging back to his teammates.

Lance gripped the front of his jacket, and watched him go, ignoring the deafening roar, the wobbliness of his knees, the beads of sweat rolling down his back.

September twenty-fourth, freshman year.

It was the night of the Homecoming football game.

But it was also the night that Lance McClain thinks he sort-of-maybe fell a little bit in love.

Hunk gives three quick warning honks from the McClain’s driveway before he drops his forehead to the steering wheel with an enormous sigh.

“He always does this,” he mutters under his breath. “Why does he always do this?”

Beside him, slumped in the passenger seat, Pidge sits with her eyes closed, and her feet propped up on the dashboard, looking as if she might’ve already fallen back asleep if not for the way her nose scrunches in disapproval.

“Because Lance Standard Time is on a completely different plane of existence from the rest of human society,” she answers flatly.

Hunk sighs again when the clock on the outdated stereo system ticks forward another minute, blinking its little red numbers at him like he’s being mocked by time itself. Seven-fifteen, the clock sneers wickedly, and Hunk wiggles impatiently in his seat.

“School starts at 8am. It’s been that way for the past three years,” he blurts out, and then sneaks a sidelong glance at Pidge’s frown, searching for — affirmation? Commiseration? Any sign of life, really. “He actually knows that, right? ‘Cause I’m not convinced he does.”
“Since when has Lance ever convinced us that he knows anything?”

Another minute. Seven-sixteen. The old leather upholstery squelches in protest as Hunk leans back into the seat, thunking his skull against the headrest with a defeated, “Aw, man. If he doesn’t hurry up, we won’t have time to stop for coffee before first period.”

And that’s when Pidge’s eyes snap open, wide as saucers, panicked, and slightly horror-movie-esque.

She struggles against her seatbelt, limbs flailing a bit ridiculously, but somehow manages to lean over far enough to slam her palm down onto the horn, disrupting the quiet morning with a shrill, elongated honk as she wails out the open window, “LANCE! MOVE YOUR ASS!”

The front door of the house flies open not two seconds later, and Lance goes stumbling across the front lawn like some kind of gangly, floppy muppet. His shabby denim jacket is only halfway slipped on, the mouth of his backpack is unzipped and drooping from the weight of his books, and he’s got about two-thirds of a toaster waffle snatched between his teeth.

A typical morning, it would seem.

“Mmph!” he grunts cheerfully, mouth full of waffle, as he throws himself into the backseat of the beat-up minivan. Hunk wastes no time before careening out of the driveway, nearly back-ending the McClain’s mailbox in the process, and Pidge turns over her shoulder to glare with bitter yet sleepy resentment.

“Cutting it a little close there, dude,” Hunk says as the car putters loudly down the street.

“I was going for fashionably late,” Lance replies breezily.

“At school they call that detention,” grumbles Pidge.

“Semantics,” and he grins a bright, toothy grin, waving away the issue with a careless flick of his hand. “Now, what were you saying about my ass?”

“Just that you should stop wearing it as a hat.”

Lance dives forward to give Pidge’s arm a punishing pinch, but she squirms away — with impressively swift reflexes — and smacks what’s left of Lance’s waffle out of his mouth. It falls to his lap, then rolls onto the car’s rubber floor mat, and Lance rightly shrieks in dismay.

“Wimp,” she guffaws.

“Hey, hey, watch the crumbs!” Hunk warns desperately. “Mom’s car, remember? We’ll be walking to school next week if we leave this thing a mess.”

With a haughty huff, Lance plucks a piece of indiscernible dirt off his rescued breakfast, and deadpans, “Right, ‘cause that’s this car’s biggest problem. Crumbs.”

They end up stopping for coffee, anyway, much to Hunk’s anxiety. He adamantly advises against it, referencing the time, and sending Lance a squinty-eyed look in the rearview mirror. But then Pidge’s eyes glaze over with honest-to-god tears, and her bottom lip actually starts to wobble, and Hunk — sweet Hunk, darling Hunk, too-good-for-this-world Hunk — grumbles and begrudges his way through the Starbucks drive-thru.

“What good is senior year if you can’t take a little risk?” Lance smirks around the straw of his iced
caramel latte once they’re back on the road.

Pidge whirls around in her seat again to tap her double-shot americano against Lance’s drink in wholehearted agreement.

“Risk makes my stomach hurt,” mutters Hunk.

The parking lot is nearly full when they arrive, to no one’s surprise. They’re pushing seven-fifty by the time Hunk swerves into one of the last remaining open spots in the back row; a bit crooked but effective. Then the three of them are scurrying across the blacktop, weaving through parked cars as they make their way to the front quad, which is uncharacteristically sparse, with only a few wayward bodies still dawdling about, while the rest of the student population is most likely mobbing the hallways just beyond the front door.

‘Altea High School: Welcome back, students!’, reads the large, swooping banner that hangs overhead like some sort of grand archway. And when Lance catches sight of it, he comes to a jarring halt, sneakers screeching against the pavement, and whips his Nikon out of his bag in one practiced motion because — oh man, how could he forget.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait —” he alerts his friends, hoisting the camera to eye level. “— photo op!”

“Lance, c’mon,” Hunk gripes. “We don’t have time.”

“Go on without me, then,” he says dismissively. “But if I don’t get some halfway decent back-to-school photos shot, edited, proofed, and in Allura’s hands by the end of the day, she’ll literally maul me.”

Pidge’s lips break into a scrupulous smile as she nudges Hunk’s elbow. “At least then we wouldn’t always be running late anymore.”

Lance peeks out from behind his camera, and blows an unnecessarily loud raspberry, motor-like and wet.

“Away with you, mutinous miscreants! Away!”

“See you at lunch, buddy! Good luck not getting mauled!”

Their tromping footsteps grow fainter and fainter, followed by the heavy clunk of the front door as it swallows them up. Lance’s eyes flit back to the viewfinder, vision buoying between blurry and crystal-clear as he surveys the desolate quad. A few vacated benches and picnic tables, an overflowing trashcan, a large flowerbed that’s in desperate need of water. It doesn’t leave him with much to work with, but, fortunately, Lance has always had an uncanny knack for spinning straw into gold.

Exhibit A: sophomore year. He was a nosy, insufferably over-ambitious underclassman, who was sick and tired of being underestimated, and who couldn’t go a single day without invading the editor-in-chief’s email — always wondering if there were any stories to cover, or leads to follow, or anything at all that would get his name on the front page of that paper. And he was consistently batted away like a fly at the dinner table until — by some stroke of sheer, dumb luck — the campus’ main septic tank sprung a leak, and Lance somehow managed to turn a simple plumbing malfunction into the school’s biggest must-read of the month.

‘All that remains is a rolling river of refuse,’ he had dictated tastefully. ‘A tempestuous torrent of the digested, the discarded, and the dispelled now paints the earth wet with waste; a billowing bed of soiled soil that shimmers, and stinks, and steams.’
To this day, his friends still tease him for how he’d waxed three long paragraph’s worth of poetry on literal shit, but all Lance knows is that the very next day he was being asked to conduct an interview with the senior class president about possible themes for the upcoming prom, and well — that’s when he knew he’d finally made his mark.

And it led him to where he is now. A senior — still nosy, still insufferably over-ambitious — with an early-acceptance scholarship to Garrison College’s creative writing program, and with just enough clout to make himself recognizable in the halls.

(So what if it’s usually something along the lines of ‘that newspaper guy’ or ‘the kid with the camera”? Lance will take what he can get.)

And so will Allura, he adamantly decides as he snaps an arbitrary photo of that lopsided welcome banner. He’s about to take another, just for variety’s sake, when he catches movement in the corner of his viewfinder. A group of young girls whiz by — probably freshmen — and they’re chattering in fast, high-pitched voices, their eyes all wide and aglow with excitement.

Bingo.

“Hey!” Lance calls out to them with a big, beaming expression of his own. “Smile, ladies!”

The girls take one look at the camera, and then erupt into a chorus of piercing giggles. They huddle close together, faces bright, and open, and flushed.

And Lance — he watches it all from behind the lens with an expert’s eye, attune to every shift, angle, and burst of sunlight that filters through the nearby trees, bleeding through in shades of honey and bronze. He centers the girls just below the banner, auto-focus whirring into sharpness, and then —

Click. Click, click, click.

“All right!” Lance cheers, lowering the camera to reveal those jewel-blue eyes. “Keep looking this gorgeous and you just might find yourselves on the front page of next week’s paper.”

And then — simply because he can — he winks.

More giggling, more blushing. Lance continues to preen, clearly pleased with himself, as the girls scatter toward the front entrance like a flock of twittering finches, giddy and elated.

But their tinny chirping is promptly drowned out by a distant rumble, so low and guttural that Lance feels it all the way down to his core. It rattles, and shakes, and nearly knocks him over where he stands because — he knows that rumble. He knows it too well.

A black motorcycle pulls into the parking lot, all polished chrome and sharp lines. And Lance just gapes, moth to a flame, everything inside of him rippling in electric currents as the engine purrs like an elegant beast. Admittedly, he doesn’t know much about bikes, but he knows this one’s a gorgeous sight to behold. Almost as gorgeous as the person riding it.

Keith Kogane.

Keith “Number Ten” Kogane.

Fuck.

Keith cuts the engine. At least Lance thinks he does. The world kind of mutes itself for a moment,
deafeningly silent save for the bass-like *thrum, thrum, thrum* of his pulse in his ears. In fact, the whole damn world could be shrinking away, or tilting sideways, or collapsing into a pile of rubble and Lance would still be hopelessly transfixed because — *Keith*. He’s *right there*; all lean, and toned, and looking every bit as heart-achingly handsome as he does in all of Lance’s wildest daydreams. He removes his helmet, shaking loose a mane of disheveled hair, and Lance’s eyes follow the razor-edged jut of his collarbone, the bulge of his bicep, the flex of his thigh as he straddles his bike.

*Oh, Lance thinks reverently, that I were a seat upon that bike, that I might be between those thighs.*

Or something like that.

Because, y’know — *Shakespeare*.

If only he could say that it’s gotten easier — that he *doesn’t* go all weak in the knees and dry in the mouth and utterly braindead at the slightest glimpse of the school’s dreamy quarterback — but that would be a downright lie. It’s still the same hair-raising, temperature-climbing, gut-wrenching, life-ruining sensation. Three years and two significant growth spurts later, and Lance still finds himself regressing into the bumbling mess of a boy he was on that sweltering September night, at that fateful football game, when he sold his soul to a pair of those mesmerizingly moon-drenched eyes.

But, really — it shouldn’t come as such a shock. He’s *still* kind of a mess, and Keith is still *Keith*. And no amount of time can change the fact that Lance is completely invisible to a guy like him.

Then Lance’s hands start moving of their own accord, spurred on by how unfairly radiant Keith looks right now as he’s dismounting, lit by the way sunlight reflects off the bike’s surface, showering him in specks of glitter until he gleams. And what a *crime* it would be to let this glorious moment go undocumented. How shameful, how *disgraceful*. And before Lance can even stop himself —

*Click. Click, click, click.*

So maybe admiring a few unsolicited and *very* self-indulgent snapshots in the privacy of his own bedroom isn’t quite the same as actually mustering the courage to talk to him, but Lance figures it’s better than nothing. Straw into gold.

Exhibit B: his debilitating and tragically unrequited crush on —

“*Keith!*” a voice calls out. “*Over here!*”

A group of football players — James Griffin, Ryan Kinkade, and a few other teammates — are waving at Keith from the front door. Keith’s head snaps toward them, and Lance’s head snaps away even quicker, ducking his gaze, and shoving his camera behind his back, out of sight. In long, agile strides, Keith is sauntering forward, and Lance’s heart makes a mad dash for his throat, like it’s trying to claw its way out — like maybe his poor, weak heart can nudge the words out with enough brute force, if it clambers up fast enough.

‘*How was your summer?*’ is all he has to say. Or even a simple ‘*hey, man*’ would suffice, if only Lance would look up, look up, *look up*.

So he *looks*.

Jaw unhinging, limbs going numb, palms clammy and leaking with an obscene amount of sweat that has him cringing inwardly at his own disgusting bodily reactions. His breath hitches, stuttering and tangling inside his lungs until he fears he might choke to death, right here, right now, and then — Keith brushes right past without even a fleeting glance in his direction.
Lance is still a bit dazed and disoriented when he spins around to watch Keith meet up with his teammates. They offer some pats on the back, and Keith responds with some kind of muttered, lackluster greeting, and then they all disappear into the building.

Honestly, Lance doesn’t know what he was expecting to happen. A miracle? A glitch in the system, maybe? His stomach rolls with regret, feeling like he could split in two with the way his heart is throbbing against his breastbone. His tongue tingles behind his teeth, heavy with all the things he could’ve said — should’ve said — if only he weren’t so impossibly captivated, so dangerously spellbound, and so completely —

The bell rings, shrill and abrasive; punching in his ears, sinking in his gut.

— Invisible. To a guy like him.

Lunch time, Keith thinks, is the literal worst.

For starters, there’s the cafeteria — a noisy, over-crowded hotbed for rowdiness and raving teenaged hormones. Just a horde of restless bodies crammed into one poorly-ventilated room for an hour, with the stale stench of mystery meat and pubescent sweat clinging to the muggy air. How anyone manages to have an appetite in that sort of environment is beyond him. Then there’s the students themselves — a storm of pent-up energy that rages in one mighty swell before they must trudge back to class for the latter half of their day. They shriek, and laugh, and flirt, and gossip, and bicker in the most obnoxious ways possible.

And, in Keith’s case, they gawk.

Thing is, Keith doesn’t like being gawked at, and he certainly never asked for this kind of unwarranted ogling from his peers. But it’s a fate he’s been unduly saddled with ever since he first set foot on that football field. At the time, he was only a freshman, a few months shy of fifteen, and at least five inches smaller than the rest of the burly boys who had shown up for varsity try-outs. Keith remembers how they had snickered behind his back, and doled out all sorts of unoriginal insults under their breath in between drills.

Keith also remembers how they had stopped snickering and stopped insulting when he became the first freshman in over a decade’s worth of Altea High history to make the varsity team, beating out several upperclassmen for the spot. Coach Kolivan had deemed him a prodigy, and when everyone had gathered to witness a mysterious freshman making the game-winning throw at the big Homecoming game that year, the entire world kind of exploded. Well. Keith’s entire world, more like.

And the blow had been a devastating one, to be honest. Everything still trembles, aftershocks rolling in like waves, dust and debris refusing to settle over the wreckage. Suddenly, he’s a spectacle, a sensation, a fucking legend in the making. The main attraction in this horrifying, fishbowl-like vortex. He can’t even walk to his locker without feeling the unsettling prickle of eyes all over his back. He can’t look at that old graffitied brick wall behind the bleachers without finding his initials in the center of some sloppily-drawn heart. He can’t make it through a single goddamn day at this
school without hearing the dumb rumors, and the whispers, and the gasps, and the infatuated swoons. People stare at him as they pass like he’s some kind of messiah, holy and untouchable. People go around with his name on their lips, like they know him.

But they don’t know him. And Keith makes sure of it.

While his fellow teammates seem to enjoy taking advantage of their esteemed position on the social hierarchy, Keith couldn’t care less. He doesn’t attend post-game parties, or school dances, or weekend hangouts. He doesn’t participate in any extracurricular activities that require him to venture beyond the football field. He doesn’t even sit with his teammates at their usual lunch table, strategically positioned in the dead-center of the cafeteria, so that all eyes can easily be on him, like a freak on display.

So, yeah. Lunch time pretty much sucks.

At least, it used to.

But, for the past two years, Keith has spent his hour of freedom in Mr. Shirogane’s classroom, far away from the bulging stares and riotous clamor that makes up the cafeteria. He can’t quite explain it, but Keith knows he prefers the quiet, just like he prefers the classroom’s smell of fresh coffee and fresh paper. Sometimes they chat — about school, about football, a little bit about life. And sometimes Mr. S will put him to work; simple, mundane tasks like stapling study packets or clearing the blackboard. It’s a small price to pay for the pleasant company of his favorite teacher.

Today, however, is significantly less pleasant than usual — and it starts with an envelope. And it ends with one, too, actually. Keith scowls and stomps his way into the empty classroom shortly after the bell rings, and drops the damned thing onto Mr. S’s desk with very little ceremony.

Shiro is about halfway finished with his lunch, and halfway finished grading a hefty stack of papers when he glances up, slim wire-frame reading glasses slipping down the bridge of his nose. He manages to catch a glimpse of that patented moody gaze before Keith pivots on the tile floor, and plops himself heavily into one of the desks in the front row. He’s got his arms folded airtight over his chest, and he’s glaring intently as if Shiro is expected to know what all of this is about.

But the seconds creep by, and Shiro keeps blinking with dumbfounded curiosity, waiting for an explanation that sits trapped behind the downward line of Keith’s mouth, and so he swallows his bite of turkey sandwich, and asks, calmly:

“What’s this?”

“What do you think,” is Keith’s ominous reply.

Upon closer inspection, the envelope on Shiro’s desk is no ordinary envelope. The top appears to have already been ripped open eagerly — violently, maybe — and the front of it is embellished with a forest-green emblem that boasts ‘Daibazaal University’ in a neatly imposing font. Shiro’s eyebrows inch up to his white-peppered hairline as he pulls the letter from the envelope, and skims over those dreadfully telltale opening remarks. Keith Kogane, we regret to inform you...

Shiro heaves a sigh — a heavy, depressing sound that rattles around his lungs as he removes his glasses, allowing his fingers to rub away the tension settling into his brow. “Oh, Keith…”

“Don’t do the pity voice,” the boy grumbles, giving a single, twitchy jerk of his head.

“It’s not pity, it’s —” Another sigh, more dense and resigned than before. “— I’m sorry. I know it’s hard, but don’t let this discourage you.”
“I’m fine,” Keith snaps; too harsh, too not fine.

“You have so much going for you, Keith,” Shiro carries on, brightening his expression, and tossing the letter to the side. “You’re an amazingly talented athlete. I mean, you were the first freshman to play for the varsity team in, what — ten years?”

Keith shrugs. “Twelve.”

“Exactly,” says Shiro, chancing the beginnings of a grin, just a slight curl at the corner of his lips. “And you’re a really sharp kid. Your GPA is solid, your test scores are good, and —”

“And colleges still don’t want me,” Keith grinds out hotly.

That subtle grin quickly withers away. But Shiro still reminds him, “It’s only one college, Keith. That’s very normal. You applied to others, didn’t you?”

Reluctantly, Keith frees one of his hands, and lifts a finger for every name he lists off. “Besides DU… Galra Tech, Beta Traz, and Naxzela.”

“Right,” Shiro says, nodding slowly as he considers these options. All good schools, but with one very specific thing in common — they all happen to be nestled within the city of Daibazaal. And Shiro — intuitive as he is — doesn’t think this is some kind of coincidence.

As Keith stares a miserable hole into his lap, Shiro clasps his hands together, and lays them primly onto his desktop.

“Have you maybe considered any schools,” he ventures carefully, outside of Daibazaal?”

“No,” Keith answers, firmly and at once.

“I just think that maybe if your heart wasn’t so set — if you opened your mind to other possibilities —”

Keith finally looks up, eyes gone dark and blustery as he says, “I’m going to Daibazaal, Mr. S.”

And that’s that on that. It’s so stern, and final, and leaves such little room for debate that Shiro wisely decides not to press it. For now. He lets it linger, and land soundly in the space between their gazes.

“Alright. Well,” Shiro recovers, remarkably unruffled as he reaches for his discarded glasses. “There’s still time. I have faith in you.”

Then there’s a smile — that smile — so kind, and gentle, and supportive, and it makes Keith almost feel guilty for being so stubborn. Shiro bows his head, and goes back to grading his papers, and, for that, Keith is overwhelmingly grateful. Relieved. It makes him squirm restlessly in his seat, muscles clenching and unclenching, his face unfurling considerably — like he doesn’t quite know what to do with kindness like this, or how to process it — so he just mutters:

“Thanks.”

And Shiro understands, just like he always seems to. His eyes remain dutifully trained on his desk, until his mind wanders off in an interesting direction, and he glances up with a low rumble of, “Keith?”

Keith blinks. Waits.

“Have you told your dad yet?”
Oh.

“He doesn’t know I applied.”

A nod.

“You should talk to him.”

A shrug.

“Yeah. Maybe.”

And that’s that on that.

Time seems to resume, then. Shiro gets one more B+ scribbled onto the top of an essay before he hears the sound of a zipper. He looks over to find Keith rummaging through his backpack, and removing what appears to be an apple and a small plastic bottle of Coke Zero he’d gotten from the downstairs vending machine.

Shiro sets his pen down, brow quirking. “No lunch?”

“Forgot,” says Keith.

With one more sigh, Shiro stands from his desk. “I have to go make a couple copies for next period.”

Keith says nothing. He just takes an unhurried swig of his soda, but when he looks down again, there’s the other half of Shiro’s turkey sandwich sitting on his desk, neatly wrapped.

“Eat,” Shiro orders.

“Mr. S —”

But Shiro is already moving across the room with an uncompromising, “That better be gone by the time I get back.”

And when Keith hears the definitive click of the door, he decides he doesn’t have much of a choice. So he unwraps the sandwich, and takes a vigorous bite.

Mr. Coran is the kind of teacher who stands outside his classroom before the bell rings, and greets each and every student with a high-five as they file through the door. And Lance appreciates this about the guy — wacky as he is — and usually reciprocates the gesture with equal, if not more, enthusiasm. So when Lance comes barreling down the hall, and rounds the doorway a bit too sharply, nearly smacking his face into Mr. Coran’s waiting palm, it comes as a surprise to both of them.

“Ah! Lance!” Mr. Coran trills. “Nice to see you getting a head start in this class!”
He’s also the kind of teacher who makes terrible puns. Lance appreciates that a little less.

“Uh, my bad, Mr. C,” he mumbles distractedly. “I was just heading over from — I — dammit, now I’m doing it, too. Just one of those mornings. Senior year. Too much coffee. Y’know how it goes.”

“Well, in that case, you better simmer down there, sport,” Mr. Coran calls out to Lance’s retreating back as the boy goes shuffling into the classroom, making a beeline for his seat. “You’ll want to be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for this — it’s dissection day!”

Lance looks frighteningly dead to the world when he slides into his spot beside Pidge at their shared lab bench. His backpack slips off his shoulder, dropping to the floor with a thunk, and then his forehead meets the table’s surface with an even louder thunk.

Pidge offers him an arched brow in lieu of a greeting, and asks, “Did you just come from gym?”

“I just came from hell,” Lance corrects menacingly, a single blue orb peeking up through a fan of lashes. Even with his cheek smooshed against the tabletop like this, the downturned line of his mouth is still very pronounced. “Nope. Still there, actually. You’re here.”

Two tiny but powerful fingers flick at his ear. “Way to ditch us at lunch, dummy,” says Pidge.

“S’not like I wanted to ditch,” Lance counters, whimpering as he painstakingly peels himself off the table. “Allura sent me an email with all her editing notes for the front page article — and she wanted them done today.”

“Well, she is the editor-in-chief. So it’s kind of her job to keep your shit in check.”

“It was a six paragraph email, Pidge. Single-spaced!”

“Wow, your article must’ve really sucked, then.”

“Excuse,” Lance all but gasps, “but my article’s a masterpiece, alright? Riveting reportage at its finest. It’s gonna blow minds, rock worlds, make…” and then his voice peters out to a pause, eyelids drooping defeatedly as he flops forward again, draping himself dramatically over the desk. “… ugh, forget it. I just spent an hour thinking up different ways to talk about the ‘chess club funding crisis’ without sounding like a total dweeb, so like — my brain’s officially fried.”

Pidge blinks, thoughtful. “I didn’t know the chess club even had funds to crisis about.”

“Told ‘ya,” drawls Lance, muffled by the crook of his elbow. “Riveting stuff.”

“Right. So, uh… speaking of crises,” she goes on, suddenly a bit wary.

Lance pauses, waiting in suspense for the second half of that statement.

“Go on,” he finally prompts, equally as wary.

“Oh, it’s nothing, really,” says Pidge, and doesn’t even give Lance enough time to be suspicious before she’s tacking on quickly, “Except that Keith Kogane just walked through the door.”

“What?!”

As his outburst garners a few curious head turns and puzzled glances from nearby classmates, Lance shoots up like an arrow, and throws his attention over to the front door where Keith Kogane is, indeed, awkwardly tapping his palm against Mr. Coran’s. And the little crease between his brows is so adorably bewildered and — no. No, no, no, no…
“Fuck,” Lance whispers. And then, once more with feeling, “Fucking fuck.”

“People are staring. In case you couldn’t tell.”

“What is he doing here?” His gaze flicks to her, desperate, foundering, and utterly helpless. “Pidge, what is he doing here.”

“How should I know?” she hisses. “Maybe he got a schedule change. You know, like most people do during the first week of school.”

Mr. Coran is saying something to him now, gesticulating wildly toward one half of the classroom, and Keith looks rather overwhelmed by it all. He nods his head, leans side-to-side a couple times just to avoid getting thwacked by one of Mr. Coran’s flailing appendages, and then he mutters a quick ‘uh, thanks’ before he goes meandering across the room.

“Fuck,” Lance says again because Keith is walking toward him for the second time today, and so, frankly, to hell with eloquence.

When every muscle in Lance’s body appears to go alarmingly rigid, and Pidge genuinely starts wondering if he’s forgotten how to breathe, she elbows him in the side and tells him, “Just be normal.”

And he tries. He really, truly does. He really gives it his all. But then Keith slides himself into the open seat directly in front of them, and Lance responds by making a series of unattractive gurgling noises in the back of his throat, slithering down so far in his chair that he might as well be a puddle on the floor.

“What,” whispers Pidge, voice strained, “are you doing?”

“Just — bein’ normal.”

She gives his new position a skeptical once-over. “That looks painful.”

“Love is pain, dude,” Lance rasps. “Love is pain.”

The bell rings, and Lance hears it like he’s underwater, probably drowning. Mr. Coran bounces up to the front of the room, toting along a small metal push-cart, and launching into a lesson plan that Lance is only half listening to. The other half of him is distracted — rightfully so — by Keith’s overwhelming proximity, his utter and sudden nearness, and the way he starts stripping out of his red letterman jacket. It flops over the back of his chair, revealing a very plain, very thin black t-shirt that clings to the muscles of his back, and his — god, why are his shoulder blades so sexy? Since when are shoulder blades a sexy thing?

“Are you ever gonna sit up?” he hears Pidge ask. “Or am I gonna have to do all the work?”

“Think I’ll chill down here, thanks.”

“Well, at least put your goggles on.”


Keith is wearing his goggles. Keith looks good in his goggles. No one should be allowed to look that good in goggles. Keith’s lab partner is wearing her goggles, too, when she turns to say something, and Lance wishes he could hear what it is because it makes Keith nod, and say something back, and —
“—ance? Lance?”

Lance turns. Pidge is glowering in her goggles.

“Um,” he squeaks. “What?”

“Wow, you really are gonna make me do everything, huh,” she says, shaking her head. “Just pass me the scalpel.”

In front of him, on the lab bench, there’s a small tray of tools — scalpel, scissors, forceps — and Lance doesn’t remember how they got there. There’s another tray in front of Pidge, but hers has a freeze-dried frog on it, flat on its back, limbs spread, all sickly grey and reeking of formaldehyde. Ew.

“Ew,” Lance says out loud.

Pidge sighs noisily, and steals the scalpel out of his limp fingers. “Get a grip,” she mutters.

Lance gets a grip on the way Keith twirls his pen between his fingers, and how he taps the end of it against his cheek while he thinks, and how he bites down on his bottom lip as he scribbles something onto his lab sheet, and —


“Huh?”

“Scissors!”

“Oh, right, got it —”

Lance does not have it. He’s not even close to having it. He stares, wide-eyed and slack-jawed, as Pidge snips into the frog’s belly, and peels it open like a corn husk to unveil every single winding intestine and bulging organ. She prods curiously at the pink, swollen stomach, and the thing bounces like a goddamn water balloon, and Lance’s knuckles are turning white around the edge of the table before he even realizes he’s clinging to it for dear life.

“First one to locate their specimen’s conus arteriosus gets extra credit on Monday’s quiz!” Mr. Coran sings as he flits around the classroom.

“Jesus,” is all Lance mutters, but it goes ignored.

Keith and his lab partner are both huddled around their own tray, talking back and forth in low voices as they discuss — boring scientific things, probably. But they’re leaning so close, and their shoulders are almost touching, and Lance figures that science must be pretty fascinating under those conditions. He’s promptly steamrolled by the thought of Keith whispering anatomical vocabulary in his ear as if they were sweet nothings when Keith pulls away. His fingers drag through the thick of his hair, gathering it around his nape, securing it back with an elastic, and — oh yeah. Lance definitely caught a whiff of that. Forget that nasty frog juice because the all-consuming scent of Keith has Lance feeling profusely lightheaded, and slightly woozy, and kind of shivery, and weirdly nauseous, and now he’s starting to wonder if someone turned the heat on in here —

“A-ha!” Pidge whoops victoriously. “Found it!”

A small, slimy frog heart dangles between the prongs of her forceps, and Lance feels the entire room give a harrowing jerk, pulling him down with it.
“…Lance? Lance!”

It’s the last thing he vaguely hears before the world goes black.

“Hey, Kogane.”

Keith glances up from the shoelace he’d been tying, and finds James Griffin leaning coolly against the row of lockers. He’s wearing fresh clothes now, hair still mildly damp from a shower, with his gym bag slung over the left shoulder.

“Bunch of us are heading over to Lion’s Den to grab a bite. You in?”

He wonders how many more times he’ll get invited before they get the hint.

Keith flexes his ankles once, twice, and then hops to his feet. “I’m taking a few more laps.”

An eye roll doesn’t go unnoticed as Keith brushes past, making his way toward the back door that leads to the field.

“You realize we just had practice, right?” James calls after him, just a tinge of incredulousness.

But Keith’s earbuds are already stuffed into his ear, blasting at full volume to block out James’ voice, and the squeak of the door, and the whipping breeze, and the harsh pounding of his footsteps as he takes off around the track.

His muscles are still sore and weak, trembling from over-exertion, but he chases after that familiar burn. The air is a bit too crisp, pricking his skin and numbing his face, but he keeps charging through. His lungs ache, and his throat has gone raw, but it’s better, he thinks.

It’s better than being crammed into a plastic booth at some cheap, roadside diner with his self-entitled teammates, pretending to enjoy himself.

It’s better than going home, and staring at his dad across the dinner table, forcing conversation and pretending nothing’s wrong.

It’s better than the sound of his mother’s voicemail, and the sting of another rejection letter, and pretending he doesn’t care about any of it.

It’s not good.

But it’s better.
“Lance,” says Allura, with no preamble, and absolutely no nonsense in her crisply clipped tone. “A word, please.”

She’s a treacherous beauty, he thinks absentmindedly, though not quite absent enough to avoid noticing the way she looms over his desk, smile pulled tight and the bun on top of her head pulled even tighter, with a gripping stare that could frost over the fiery gates of hell. Treacherous, indeed.

It takes everything in Lance not to flinch as he lifts his head out of his laptop screen, and replies, perhaps too sweetly, “As many as you’d like, princess.”

Her smile twitches out of place, threatening to crack. “Lance.”

“Is that a new dress?” he tries again. “Cause it’s a winner, lemme tell ‘ya. Really brings out the murderous gleam in your eyes.”

“This had better be a joke.”

“Oh, I would never joke about homicide, ‘Lura,” Lance assures, hand to his heart, and severely testing his luck.

There are some unruly snort-like noises coming from behind him, and Lance figures it has to be Hunk and Pidge from a few rows back, fighting off laughter, because the way Allura takes a long, deliberate inhale suddenly reminds him of a sparkler nearing the end of its fuse.

“I asked you to deliver the photos for the back-to-school issue by eighth period today,” she says slowly, taking care to inflect in her tone just how unamused she is with his antics.

“Which I did,” he’s quick to remind. “By seventh period.”

“Then would you care to explain how these happened to find their way into my locker?”

Allura whips a small stack of glossy photo paper from her bag, lightning quick. And when she holds them up in front of her, Lance nearly gags on his own spit because staring back at him, right fucking there, is Keith dismounting his bike, and Keith adjusting his bag, and Keith running a hand through his hair, and Keith’s irresistible jawline, and Keith, Keith, Keith —

“Oh — my god,” Lance whimpers, slapping a palm to his beet-red face.

“Not gonna lie, dude,” says Hunk, “that’s pretty creepy.”

“You — you — weren’t supposed to see those!”

“That’s even creepier,” Pidge adds with a residual chortle.

And then Lance’s hands are scrabbling quickly to snatch the photos out of Allura’s grasp, slamming them face-down on his desk as if removing them from sight will somehow undo the damage that’s already been done — his fractured dignity, first and foremost.

“I… must’ve printed the wrong ones by mistake,” he mumbles. “Sorry, Allura, I —”

“I trust you have the real photos on hand?” she interrupts curtly.
Lance digs through his bag, and brandishes a small flash drive with a pitiful sigh.

“Wonderful,” says Allura as she takes the device, turns on her heel, and almost makes it all the way to the door before: “Oh, and Lance?”

He perks up warily.

“Adjust your shutter speed to one-sixth of a second,” she tells him matter-of-factly, bag hitched high on her back, posture impeccable. “Your exposure is a bit off.”

Something inside Lance tosses and tumbles, so he plasters on a smile that feels too tight around the edges. “I’ll keep that in mind next time I decide to make an ass of myself.”

“Very impressive work, otherwise,” and then Allura clears her throat, soft and polite. “I can tell you have a true passion for the, er — subject.”

More wheezy, snorty, obnoxious ruckus from his friends, and that thing inside Lance is thrashing so savagely that it just might kill him, and — mortification. It’s definitely that.

“Yeah, uh — big fan,” he somehow croaks by way of explanation. He pumps a timid, unenthusiastic fist into the air. “Go lions.”

Allura actually has the audacity to squeeze her lips together, twisting them around until they smooth into a neutral line like she, too, is struggling to suppress amusement. Then, fingertips to her mouth quite demurely, she nods once, and leaves the room in a crippling silence.

Nothing but the depressing creak, creak, creak of Lance’s chair as he sinks further into it, wondering how long it’ll take before the floor opens up and swallows him whole, and keeps him there.

“Aw, man, that was hard to watch,” Hunk eventually mutters. “I’m getting the secondhand embarrassment sweats.”

Then, a fervent whisper from Pidge: “See? I told you it was getting worse.”

“What?” Lance quickly flings himself around in his seat to glare at his murmuring friends, feeling the red-hot flickers of agitation flare to life. “What’s getting worse?”

Hunk makes a face — a sad, commiserating face. “Pidge said you fainted in AP Bio, dude.”

“Pidge who?” Lance sneers with intentional scorn. “I don’t know any Pidge.”

“She also said you caught one whiff of Keith Kogane’s hair and keeled over.”

“Slander and lies!” he blurs at once, scandalized. “I passed out because there was a huge plate of frog guts under my nose — not because I know what Keith’s hair smells like!”

Hunk scoots his elbows down the desktop, leaning in close with poorly-disguised intrigue. “So what does it smell like?”

“Sandalwood and eucalyptus, but that’s not the point.”

“Lance, as your best friends,” Pidge begins solemnly, “we’re concerned.”

“Oh, gimme a break,” he huffs, arms crossing into a furious knot in front of his chest. “I just have, like… an itty-bitty crush.”
“Yeah, an itty-bitty crush that’s been going on for years, and you still haven’t done anything about it.”

His response is a loud, indignant sniff. “I’d rather save myself the embarrassment, and live in agonizing anonymity, thank you very much.”

“But it’s senior year, man!” Hunk chimes in. He shimmies out of his chair, and slips himself into the empty desk on Lance’s right, imploring him with that big, boyish grin of his. “You said it yourself — what good is it if you don’t take risks? And in a couple months we’re all gonna be leaving so this is like… now or never.”

Slowly, Lance taps a finger to his chin, feigning deep contemplation until —

“I’m gonna stick with never.”

“You just have to talk to him,” tries Pidge, appearing in the desk to his left, and Lance can’t help feeling a lot like cornered prey.

“I don’t know what to say!” he whines.

And that prompts Pidge to scoff with a disbelieving, “Since when do you ever struggle with words?”

“Since Keith Kogane turned those big, gorgeous, window-to-the-soul eyes on me, and ruined my entire life, okay!” Lance hunkers down in his seat — leg bouncing, foot tapping, lip pouting — and becomes increasingly aware of the rising heat pooling at the base of his throat. “Look, it’s just… different with him. It’s like my brain short-circuits or something. I couldn’t get a single word out even if I tried.”

A second passes, maybe five, before Pidge’s voice comes out low and conspiratorial beside him.

“Then don’t say it,” she tells him. “Write it.”

“Ooh, you mean like a love letter?” Hunk’s excitement comes out in a gasp as he grips Lance’s shoulder, and gives his friend a little shake. “Oh my god, man, that’s peak romance right there.”

But Lance just frowns, thoroughly unconvinced. “A love letter? What is this, some kinda low-budget, made-for-Netflix teen rom-com?”

“You’re a reporter,” reminds Pidge, breaking into a smirk, and jostling her eyeglasses in a way that always makes her look like some kind of dangerous mastermind at work. And maybe she kind of is. “This is what you do best.”

Well, Lance allows with bitter reluctance. She’s not wrong. Because, sure — maybe the thought has crossed his mind before. Maybe he does occasionally indulge in the reverie of confessing his feelings in the only way he’s sure he knows how, pouring every bit of himself into the words until the page runs rampant with heartache and want, and the sheer power of prose alone is enough to stir something in Keith’s heart; something deep-rooted, and undeniable, and — dare he think it — reciprocating.

But the truth is that it’s just an immature, lovesick fantasy. And the truth is that Keith probably has at least a dozen hopeful love letters sitting at the bottom of his locker, untouched and unread, right this very moment. And the truth is that Lance could never — not in a million years —

“Okay, so I write the stupid thing, and then what?” he challenges. His arms unfurl like limp noodles,
and fall to his lap in a disheartening heap. “Even if I manage to get the words out… s’not like he’d even care. He’s the coolest guy in school, and I’m just… me.”

“Hey, hey, hey, whoa,” Hunk scolds, and Lance feels himself lurch forward when a rough hand thumps him on the back. “That’s my best bro you’re talking about, mister.”

Lance’s mouth flutters into a crooked grin — just slightly.

“C’mon, buddy, you’re awesome!” Hunk goes on. “Keith might be a cool guy, but you’re like…”

The ensuing pause is far too lengthy for anyone’s liking, and Lance watches the mental dilemma play across Hunk’s expression with a dubious pinch of his brow.

“… the newspaper guy!” Hunk exclaims proudly, with a definitive slap against the desktop to punctuate.

A mournful growl writhes its way out of Lance’s lungs.

“You know, Hunk’s kinda right, Lance,” says Pidge, astoundingly confident despite Hunk’s less-than-helpful contribution. “You have something that not many people at this school have.”

“Wit, charm, and devilishly good looks?” Lance guesses hopefully.

And Pidge just levels him with a steely glare that settles into her features far too easily. “Gross. No. I was gonna say a voice. One that a lot of people actually listen to.”

“So?”

Pidge, blithely — perhaps annoyingly so — stands from her desk, and flicks Lance squarely between the eyes before he can even attempt to ward her off. Her gaze shines, her grin grows unapologetically devious.

Dangerous mastermind, Lance’s brain echos a warning.

“So use it.”

Chapter End Notes

I’ve been blessed with lovely, TALENTED people in my life who’ve already made some art for this fic!!!!!!! Go check out @naolier's piece here, and @niccoarte's piece here!! They’re both amazing and wonderful and UGH.

Thank you so much for being patient with me while I churned out this first chapter. I hope you're as excited as I am to get the ball rolling!

TUMBLR
TWITTER
“Well, well, well. There he is!”

It comes out sounding more like a taunt than an actual greeting, Keith notes, but keeps it to himself. He manages to shove one of his cleats into his locker by the time his teammates stampede through the locker room doors, and crowd around him like a swarm of buzzing bees. Keith dutifully ignores them and their incessant twittering, stifling the urge to shoo them away like the pests they are, until he feels the weight of James’ arm being slung around his shoulders, and a crisp newspaper being thrust annoyingly close to his face.

“You mind autographing this for me, Romeo?” James’ voice sneers into his ear, sounding delighted and reeking of sweat from their morning practice.

“Careful, Griffin, don’t get too cozy with this stud,” comes Antok’s mirthful gibe. “Sounds like he’s already spoken for!”

Hearty laughter makes its way around the team, and Keith predictably bristles at the noise, taking a swift swat at the newspaper with such agitation that it dents the print.

“What are you talking about?” he snaps.

“Oh,” says James, with a sinister gleam in his eyes that, admittedly, makes him look significantly more snide than he does on a regular basis. “You haven’t seen it yet, have you?”

Keith frowns. “Seen what?”

The newspaper is brandished once again, but this time it’s being held at a much more respectable distance, with just enough space between the article and Keith’s nose for him to read — what? What the hell.

“Congrats, Kogane,” James pipes up at the first noticeable crinkle in Keith’s baffled brow. “You’re Altea High’s newest cover boy.”

That —

Wait —

What —

Keith’s entire brain stutters and stammers and fizzes out like a flame, eyes blinking furiously at the front page article, trying to clear away the invisible haze that must be clouding his vision, or convince himself that he must’ve taken a football to the head during practice, knocking him out cold, and conjuring up this ridiculous concussion-induced nightmare that’s staring back at him in blaring, immortalized text, but —

“This is a joke,” Keith mumbles. His voice sounds a million miles away, like it’s not even his own,
all dark and heavy with dread. “It has to be.”

“I dunno,” James shrugs coyly. “Seems pretty heartfelt to me.”

In one agile stride, James leaps onto the bench, grinning down at his audience of whooping teammates as he holds the paper at eye level, and recites straight from the page at his loudest and most condescending:

“— And, oh, how my fingers long to ensnare themselves in the soft, supple silk of his fragrant hair —”

The room practically screams with raucous amusement — sprinkled with intermittent wolf whistles, just to be extra obnoxious — and, for a startling moment, Keith fears he might actually cough up his own heart in a fit of profuse mortification. He can already feel it clawing around inside his throat, and an unwelcome heat sprinting up his spine at a breakneck pace, seeping into his nape like a branding iron set ablaze.

“Hey —”

“ — or fold into the hollows of his digits, where palms are pressed as delicately as flowers to the worn pages of an untold love story —”

“Knock it off!” Keith snarls, seizing James by the front of his jersey, and dragging him down from his perch. “It doesn’t say —”

Oh, but it does. Along with a litany of equally embarrassing prose that Keith can’t even bring himself to digest without going offensively red in the cheeks. As James stumbles for balance, Keith snatches the paper out of his hand, and gives it another hard look, as if the sheer steeliness of his glare will somehow reverse the damage that’s already been done.

“Who the hell is Lance McClain?” he demands at once, catching sight of the author’s name. It’s printed — brazen and utterly shameless — at the bottom of the article.

“Just one of those newspaper kids, right?” replies Thace.

“Isn’t he that guy who’s always running around with a camera?” someone else interjects.

A scathing snort: “Sounds like a wannabe to me.”

“Not terrible on the eyes, though, huh?”

“Eh. Scrawny and wordy’s not really my type.”

“You should go find this guy, Keith.”

“Yeah, you should meet up. And then, you know, hook up.”

You should, you should, you should, Keith mentally parrots. As if it were just that obvious. As if only the blind would be — well — blind to the right courses of action. He brings the paper closer to his face, dark eyes scanning the thick columns of text, reading and re-reading. And he waits — waits for that giddy feeling to blossom in his chest; the one that’s seemingly appropriate for someone to feel after being grandly and publicly flattered.

But the sensation doesn’t come. No fluttering pulse, no lightheaded reverie, no pooling warmth. Just a tumultuous churn of his gut, and a cloying sense of outrage that turns his blood thick and syrupy in
his veins.

“Looks like you got yourself a not-so-secret admirer, Kogane,” laughs James, and Keith gets the impression that he’s enjoying this far too much. “What’re you gonna do about it?”

Keith folds the paper shut, and stuffs it into his locker along with his dirty cleats — good riddance — even though he knows it’s pointless. It’s already out there. Circulating, infesting, brewing up a storm. His name, now a near constant echo through the halls.

And, fuck.

What is he going to do?

The classroom is silent — painfully so — save for the tap-tap-tapping of Lance’s fingertips as he drums out an impatient rhythm against the desktop, restless with anticipation, and watching with eye-bulging intensity as his friends skim through the school’s latest periodical.

Hunk’s grip tightens, crinkling the edges of the paper. Pidge squints down at the printed text, lips puckering.


Until —

“So?” Lance finally bursts, verging on desperate. “What d’you guys think?”

Pidge is the first to glance up, not even blinking behind the glare of her glasses. “I think Allura’s gonna murder you and make it look like an accident.”

His eyes go huge with an exaggerated eye roll. “I’m talking about my article, Pidge,” he growls. “This is probably the most crucial piece of journalism I’ll ever write in my entire academic career. So c’mon — I need feedback. Validation. Anything.”

“I still think Allura’s gonna murder you.”

Lance huffs, and swivels away. “Hunk, help me out here, buddy. You thought it was great, right?”

‘— and I find myself lost at sea in the sweetly swollen tides of his eyes’,” Hunk orates, all pomp and grandeur, with no shortage of dramatic flair, ‘so boundless with moonlight’s glimmer that I might sink my soul into them, forever shipwrecked by dizzying desire.’ ”

“God, that’s a sexy line,” Lance flashes a self-satisfied smirk. “I think I just turned myself on.”

“Don’t feel too proud of yourself,” grumbles Pidge. “It’s not that hard to do.”

Hunk’s gaze is still glued to the paper, mulling it over for what feels like the billionth time with a crooked tilt of his head. “Wow. You, uh — really put it all out there, huh.”

“You don’t suffer through a three year heart-boner for someone and not have a few things to say about it, dude,” Lance reasons, jabbing a self-righteous finger to the front page. “This is some Great Gatsby flavored literary perfection, right here.”
Hunk and Pidge share a sideways glance.

Lance just sniffs. *The fools.*

“Keith is my Daisy, and this article is *obviously* the green light at the end of my dock. C’mon, guys, keep up.”

“But doesn’t Gatsby, like, *die* in the end?”

“You’re missing the point!” he crows, planting his palms definitively, *triumphantly*, onto the desktop. “And the point is — I’m making big waves over here, you feel me? I’m taking risks, living senior year on the edge. I’m —”

“— in an *outrageous* amount of trouble.”

A pair of pristine heels click-clack their way across the tile floor; a dangerous tempo that can only belong to a semi-hysterical Allura, already percolating into a frothy rage. Her voice is razor-sharp and pithy, a missile en route to bullseye, and her gait is stiff with purpose as she swoops toward Lance’s desk like a falcon on the hunt, which startles Hunk so badly that he nearly topples out of his seat.

“Gee, it sure sucks when I’m right,” Pidge mutters under her breath, and then disappears behind her laptop screen.

“A-Allura — hey!” Lance stands his ground beneath the enormity of her looming glower — quite commendably, if he does say so himself. “Man, oh *man*. Is it just me or did the room get a little brighter now that you’re —”

“Now is *not* the time for flattery, Lance,” she hisses. Her hand is balled into a tight fist, gripping a copy of the newspaper, and hoisting it up like a tribal sacrifice. “What on *earth* have you done to my paper?”

Lance opens his mouth. Closes it. Tries again. “I… might’ve made a few last minute adjustments.”

“Without my permission,” Allura flings back, quick as a whip. “You *deliberately* went behind my back and *defiled* the front page article!”

“I didn’t *defile* it,” he argues. And then, with a cringe, “I just wrote a new one.”

Violently, the paper comes slamming down onto the desk, its pages fluttering to a close.

“We are a *newspaper*, Lance. Not some frivolous gossip magazine for you to broadcast your romantic escapades.”

He sighs noisily. “‘Lura, I was just —”

“And you know that we are on thin ice with the faculty as is. One foolish misdemeanor could put our already meager funds in jeopardy,” she adds, arms folding tightly over her chest. “How are we supposed to bolster our readership if we can’t be taken seriously as a trusted news source?”

“No offense, princess,” says Lance, “but I have it on really good authority that there’s *nothing* untrustworthy about this article.”

Something ferocious, almost bloodthirsty, twinkles behind the blues of Allura’s eyes. Every muscle in her body grows tense, as if readying herself to lunge over the desk and tackle Lance at any
moment, but, to everyone’s relief, she deflates, and then relents. A harmless growl purrs from her lips as she pivots away, pinching the bridge of her nose and bowing her head, hair falling like wavy curtains around her disgruntled face.

“I loathe having to do this, Lance, but you leave me no choice,” she says tersely. “You are hereby suspended from the newspaper staff until further notice.”

There’s an audible gasp. The leg of someone’s chair screeches sharply against the floor. And Hunk and Lance both shout “What!” in perfect, piercing unison.

“Allura — no. No, no, no, no,” Lance is on his feet in an instant, fumbling toward her, clumsy with shock. “That’s not fair! You can’t just do that!” And then he’s throwing a frantic look over to Hunk, a last-ditch effort for backup. “She can’t just do that, right?”

“I’m the editor-in-chief,” Allura reminds him. “I can do whatever needs to be done in order for this operation to run appropriately.”

Lance windmills his arms in an indignant flurry. “But I’m the best writer you have!”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have behaved so rashly!”

“So what if I’m rash! I still have rights —”

“Oh, for goodness sake —”

“— this is unjust! It’s — no, it’s tyrannical! Our forefathers didn’t dump a bunch of tea in the river just so my freedom of speech could be squandered by some —”

“You sound absolutely ridiculous right now —”

And then:

“Uh, guys?”

Lance and Allura, still red-faced and wild-eyed, whip their attention toward Pidge. Even Hunk, who had been busy ping-ponging his gaze back and forth between the arguing pair with an understandable amount of stress, turns around in his seat, grateful for the interruption.

Pidge’s wide, bespectacled eyes peek out from behind her laptop like some sort of small, technologically-inclined meerkat. “I think,” she says slowly, “you might wanna take a look at this.”

It’s an eerie enough statement to postpone their bubbling rampage — for now. And so the three of them scurry closer, huddling around Pidge’s hunching shoulders to get a good view of her computer screen.

“What’s this?” Allura asks, bending forward at the waist.

“Obviously it’s the school paper’s twitter account,” answers Pidge.

Hunk knits his brow, and utters a quiet, “Didn’t even know we had one.”

“Jeez, that’s depressing,” Lance drawls. “Pretty sure my eight-year-old niece has more followers than we do.”

“Not for long,” Pidge says in that same ominous tone. “Look.”
They look.

And right before their very dumbstruck eyes, the screen surges to life with each consistent tap of the refresh button. Their newsfeed becomes a rapid, billowing torrent, threatening to overflow as the tweets keep pouring in. Update after update. Notification after notification. A bombardment of people are mentioning, and hash-tagging, and key-smashing, and caps-locking, faster than Pidge’s fingers can even scroll through them all.

@AlteaHighChronicle tbh lance mcclain is out here doing the lord’s work for us all #respect

@AlteaHighChronicle i’m actually tearing up and for once it has nothing to do with my calculus homework #TeamKlance

@AlteaHighChronicle PART 2 PART 2 PART 2 PART 2???

@AlteaHighChronicle riverdale who?? i only care about one ship now #KeithAndLance

And on, and on, and on, and —

“Wait,” Hunk murmurs when his head starts spinning from all the scrolling, and gawking, and mind-reeling. “People are actually reading the article.”

Allura’s delicate nose scrunches a bit reluctantly. “And they’re actually… enjoying it.”

Lance’s grin starts up a steady crawl, stretching the entire length of his face.

And when Allura sees it happening much too quickly, she scowls at him.

“Do not,” comes her swift warning.

But Lance does. By the time she levels him with even more heated disapproval, he’s already soaking in this magnificent moment, really beaming in the luster of all this unexpected success, chiming in with a downright cheerful — and only forty percent snarky, “Huh. Guess you’re right, ‘Lura. How are we ever gonna bolster our readership now?”

“Lance,” she scolds again. “No.”

“But we gotta give the people what they want,” he barrels on, incorrigible. “And there’s no denying that the people are craving some delicious Lance and Keith action.”

“Klance,” corrects Hunk, inspecting the most recent batch of enthusiastic tweets. “It’s ‘Klance’ now, apparently.”

“See?” Lance roars. “We already have a ship to sail — and a loyal, highly-invested crew, at your service.”

“Well, I’m not sure if —”

“C’mon, Allura,” and now Lance resorts to a softer tone — something pleading and breakable just below the surface — as he grips her shoulders, confronting her head-on. “If we don’t hitch a ride on this hype train — if we just let it crash and burn — then there won’t be anymore buzz. The paper
will tumble back down the social ladder, our budget will get cut, and the whole operation will cease to exist.”

She ducks her head, avoiding his gaze.

“Kinda makes me wonder,” he goes on, suddenly, and suspiciously pensive, “what the admissions panel at Oriande University will have to say about an editor-in-chief whose paper tanked due to a lack of interest.”

And then her head is springing back up, eyes round and incredulous. “How do you —”

“I’m a reporter, princess,” he tells her sagely. “I know everything.”

Allura sighs. Lance nibbles his bottom lip. Pidge taps the refresh button.

Again.

And again. And again. And again.

“Allright,” is what Allura eventually grinds out, with much effort.

Lance blinks. “Alright?”

“Yes. Alright.”

His jubilant howl ricochets off the ceiling. He wiggles, and shimmies, and twitches around in some absurd form of a victory dance, and meets Hunk and Pidge, who already have their palms out and waiting, for a joint high-five.

“But!” Allura intervenes, stabbing a stern finger so close to Lance’s nose that it has him leaning back. “I must approve everything that you intend to publish.”

He nods eagerly. “Got it.”

“And six hundred words. Maximum.”

“Allura, seriously, I got this,” he vows. “I’m not gonna let you down. This is gonna be the best follow-up article in the history of —”

“Hey.”

The doorway is suddenly far more occupied than it was about two seconds ago, and out of all the poignant words that are constantly taking up residence inside Lance’s brain, the only one he’s able to articulate in this extraordinary moment is a resounding, and very unhelpful, “Guh.”

Because standing there, more beautifully statuesque than any mere mortal has the right to be, is Keith.

And there, wrinkled in the clutches of his right hand, is a copy of the school newspaper.

Guh, Lance’s mind repeats, with vehemence.

Keith peers cautiously into the classroom, and asks, “Newspaper club, right?” And when the four of them wordlessly nod in response, he gestures to the paper in his grasp, pages rustling. “Then which one of you is responsible for this?”
Instinctively, Lance takes a step back, fully prepared to make a run for it and dive right out the second-story window, but then Hunk is pushing him forward with a nervous garble of, “This one right here, mister quarterback, sir.”

Then Keith’s eyes are all over him, burning like a flame that can’t be snuffed out.

Lance squirms, and fidgets, and manages, somehow, not to combust.

“Yes. Hi,” he squeaks, and — well — at least it’s better than guh.

It’s better than a lot of things, actually. It’s better than I meant every word, and you’re so nice to look at it makes my heart ache, and I really like your eyes, even when they’re trying to scrutinize me into oblivion — all of which come embarrassingly close to spilling out of Lance’s foolish lips before he can trap them behind the clench of his jaw.

“So you’re Lance McClain?”

Lance’s head bobbles like it sits loose on his neck.

“Yeah, I —” Then he pauses. Something snaps into place. Something awful. “ — wait. You mean you didn’t even know my name?”

A dubious brow creeps up to Keith’s hairline. “Was I supposed to?”

Lance’s entire chest heaves, an incredulous breath punching out of him with so much force that he nearly gags on his sputtered words. “Dude, we — we’ve gone to the same school for the past three years,” and he desperately flaps his arms for good measure. “We even have a class together!”

Keith’s brow inches impossibly higher.

“AP Bio? Fifth period? Ring any bells?”

The seconds tick by as tediously as whole lifetimes, and Lance is certain he’s going to boil in his own blood if Keith doesn’t say something soon. But he just continues to stand there — silent, still, stupidly handsome — as his expression twists into one of profound contemplation. He’s thinking. Processing. Remembering. And then —

“Oh,” says Keith, eyes pinched with curiosity, and his tone mottled with something frustratingly indecipherable. “Aren’t you that guy who fainted?”

It’s inevitable. Lance is definitely going to boil alive.

“Well, that — I mean — yeah, but —” he flounders, voice pitched a few octaves higher than he’d like because, apparently, his vocal chords want him to suffer now. “— but only ‘cause I skipped lunch that day and, y’know, low blood sugar is a very common and underrated epidemic, okay!”

Keith takes a large breath, and looks like he’s maybe counting to three very slowly inside his head.

“Just —” he snaps, catches himself, and then: “— can we talk?”

“May we,” Lance blurts out of nowhere.

“Yeah. I’m asking you.”

“No, I know, but — technically it’s may we talk, not —” and at the very first glimpse of Keith’s dreadfully unamused, flatlining expression, Lance’s stomach gives a panicked lurch, and he’s
backtracking, emphatically, “— oh my god, sorry. I-I’m not actually a grammar snob, I swear, I don’t know why I even —”

The babbling continues, a manic slipstream of incoherency that seems to ruffle Keith’s feathers with every passing millisecond, and so Keith grabs the boy’s arm with an impatient grunt, and drags him out of the classroom. Lance’s legs are jelly, his brain is mush — a human puppet at Keith’s whim — as they make a hairpin turn around the nearest corner. The cold, metallic press of his back against a row of lockers, and the jaw-like clamp of Keith’s hand still on his arm threaten to stir up some truly ill-timed thoughts, like how often he fantasizes about Keith manhandling him up against a wall, grip tight, gaze searing — but probably under more passionate, and slightly less aggressive circumstances, in an ideal scenario.

But this — is not so ideal.

“What do you want?” Keith is suddenly demanding.

Lance is busy struggling to remember how lungs works, so the best he can muster is a meek, “The short list or the long list?”

“Is this some kinda joke to you?” Keith is still snarling, still keeping him pinned like prey. His eyes are terrifying, fiercely gunmetal. “Some stupid ploy to get your fifteen minutes of fame?”

“What — no, I —”

“Fix it.”

“Fix what?”

A giggle, airy and kittenish, is what interrupts them. It circles Keith’s neck, trusses him like a noose as he peeks over his shoulder to find a small group of students loitering on the other side of the hall. They’re gathered close, and whispering low, but given the way they keep casting simpering smiles and knowing glances in their direction, it’s no secret what they must be discussing.

Keith looks away, lips straining into a frown. His hold on Lance’s arm begins to loosen, like he’s weakening, or maybe just trembling.

“Forget it,” he spits, all venom and bite.

He’s gone in the span of a ragged heartbeat, escaping down the hall at a clipped pace, but Lance can still feel his lingering touch, that phantom breath charring his skin to ash. His pulse thumps angrily behind his chest, hammering out a slew of reprimands. Because of course Keith is upset. He didn’t ask for this. He didn’t ask to be bothered by some nobody’s lovesick word vomit, or the pathetic birdsong of his too-big, too-silly heart. Just another naive, freshman fantasy. Just —

Just this once, Lance thinks he might prefer being invisible.
When Lance makes his way to AP Bio, the first thing he thinks is that he must’ve stumbled into the wrong classroom by mistake. Certainly that must be it. Because a perky redhead named Ezor is sitting in Pidge’s regular seat. And a cute blonde named Romelle is sitting in his regular seat. And it throws him for such a loop that he finds himself pausing mid-stride, as wide-eyed and helpless as a baby deer.

But then he distinctly remembers giving Mr. Coran a high-five when he waltzed through the door mere seconds ago. And he can distinctly see that Pidge is now sitting a few rows away with Rolo on her left. And it becomes distinctly obvious that the only available seat in the entire classroom is right next to Keith. And then Pidge is gunning him down with the sort of distinctly devious grin that goes straight to Lance’s flip-flopping gut.

_Traitorous little she-goblin_, is the second thing he thinks.

Pidge tilts her head toward the vacant seat, as if to ask, sans words: _Well_?

Lance pouts: _Nope_.

Then Pidge, with raised brows: _Go, idiot_.

And before Lance can respond with a very indelicate middle digit, the bell rings, and Mr. Coran is prancing to the front of the room, his mustache looking especially _twirly_. And Lance is left, dismally, with no alternative in sight.

With a weighted sigh, heavy enough to plummet to the bottom of his sneakers, he drags himself over to the lab bench, and mumbles, “This seat taken?”

Keith glances up from the notebook he’d been absorbed in, eyes going noticeably more dim when they zero in on Lance’s crestfallen face. Wow.

“Guess not,” he says, albeit begrudgingly.

“So, uh,” Lance twiddles his fingers together, “can I sit, then?”

“Don’t you mean _may_ you sit?”

There’s no trace of humor in that harsh, titanium-grade tone of his, but Lance bursts into a chuckle regardless, and ends up sounding more like a nervous hyena on uppers than a cool, self-possessed potential lab partner.

“Right, yeah,” Lance plops down into the empty seat as his laughter fizzles to an underwhelming end, ignoring the way Romelle whispers a fond ’_aww_’ behind their backs. “Nice catch.”

Mr. Coran makes quick work of explaining the assignment, and passing out an array of worksheets. Something about molecules, maybe? Lance knows he should be paying more attention now that he doesn’t have Pidge to cover for him, but the only thing his mind wants to cling to is his unfortunate
discussion with Keith this morning. And by discussion, he means squabble. A full-fledged hallway showdown, more like. It’s been hours since it happened, and yet he’s still haunted by the soul-shaking memory of it. The way Keith had seethed at him with such resentment, and stared at him with such disdain. The way Lance’s lungs had heaved, desperate to be filled, and the way his heart had throbbed like a bruise, desperate to be seen, or cradled, or something.

This isn’t how it’s supposed to go.

This isn’t how it’s supposed to end.

And so, when the silence finally pulls it out of him, Lance says, “Hey, man, I just wanna say… about earlier —”

“Look, I need to pass this class,” Keith cuts in, bulldozing right through, and sounding quite unsympathetic about it. “So if you’re really gonna sit here, don’t distract me, don’t faint, and just — do your half of the work. Okay?”

At that, Lance feels like he’s been struck so viciously that he nearly sees stars blotting his vision. Nearly splutters, and coughs, and chokes from the brutal whiplash of it all. But instead, he just leans back in his chair, brow furrowing into a knot, and wonders about this enormously heady thing crashing over him like a tidal wave, lighting him up like a torch.

Guilt? No.

Bitterness? Probably.

“Jeez, alright, chill,” he retorts, scoffing around an ugly lump in his throat. “I was gonna apologize for like — I dunno — offending you or whatever? But if you’re just gonna rip my head off —”

“I don’t want an apology,” spits Keith.

Lance puckers his face into a scowl. “Well, good, ‘cause you’re not getting one.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

Pettiness? Absolutely.

Keith goes back to scribbling on his worksheet in this annoyingly diligent way, and so Lance snatches up his own pencil, following suit, muttering backhandedly at his paper, “Man. You try being nice to a guy…”

“Nice?” Keith’s pencil hits the tabletop with a small thunk. “You call throwing me in the middle of your lame love letter soap opera nice?”

“First of all,” declares Lance, “it was an editorial, not a letter. Big difference, amigo.” Keith remains thoroughly unimpressed. Lance revs himself up again, leaning onto his elbows, almost accusatory when he says, “And second of all, don’t act like you’re not used to being the center of attention around here.”

Caught up in his tirade, he just about misses it; that minuscule glitch in Keith’s flint-like expression — as if it were something brittle, frail, easily undone — and Lance doesn’t quite know what to make of it.
And then Keith is mumbling, like a curse under his breath, “Doesn’t mean I wanna be.”

Lance almost feels the prickle of a laugh on his tongue. “But you’re so…” and he makes an odd, ambiguous gesture with his hands.

“What?”

“You.”

Keith wears a blank stare, maddeningly lifeless. “I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean.”

“Seriously?” This time, Lance does laugh. Just a short huff of breath past gently curled lips. He’s watching how stray strands of Keith’s hair dangle loose from his ponytail, and how he doesn’t even bother tucking them away from his dumb, attractive face. Lance would happily do it for him, if it wouldn’t be so absurdly inappropriate. “You don’t realize there are hundreds of other people at this school who have a thing for you? I’m just the only one crazy enough to make it public knowledge.”

There’s a tweak in the bridge of Keith’s nose, like he’s just tasted something particularly sour. “You didn’t have to make it — that public.”

“Well, s’not like I could just come up and talk to you,” says Lance. “You’re talking to me right now.”

“Not like this.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re you, okay?”

Admittedly, he doesn’t mean for it to slip out. At least, not like this — just a tiny tremor of sound instead of the big, brassy cacophony of a confession that’s been plaguing him, like a virus, for three goddamn years. But Keith manages to hear it, Lance is certain, because he’s also certain that Keith has never looked at him like this before. He would remember if he had. He remembers every other look.

In his wildest dreams, those looks are plentiful. They’re tender, soft as sunlight, only for him, and are usually accompanied by a longing touch. A thumb sweeping the crest of his cheekbone. A pair of lips, warm and slightly chapped, ghosting along the column of his neck. Or a splayed hand on the curve of his spine, keeping him close, pressing together until their bodies are fused like —

“And I’m just… me,” he tacks on quietly, staring back at a very real, very unimaginary version of Keith. “And I know you probably have no idea what it’s like to feel not good enough for someone — being an Altea High celebrity and all — but it really, really sucks. And I —”

Keith doesn’t move, and something about it is fatally unnerving.

“— whatever. It’s stupid, anyway, I guess,” Lance resorts to hunching over his paper, nose nearly scuffing the tabletop, brain scrambling to refocus on anything that isn’t that dark, hooded gaze, and all the unbecoming things it does to his insides. “Let’s just go back to breaking up some polymers. Or biomolecules, and… stuff.”

Yes, Lance thinks, strictly scientific stuff. Stuff that doesn’t strip him raw, and lay his heart open bare, free to be stomped upon.
“I’m sorry,” Keith says at once, almost too soft to hear. But Lance feels it more than he actually hears it. A rumble of thunder that vibrates into every crevice of his being. “For snapping at you.”

Lance peers up, just to make sure he really isn’t imagining things. He’s not. “I might’ve deserved it a little bit,” and then he shrugs, sheepish. “I mean, I usually do.”

Keith finally breaks his steady gaze, turning his head to give attention to the unfinished sentence scrawled across his worksheet, as his expression flickers out of place again. Lance snatches only a flash of it, his athletic reflexes too quick, but notices that the corner of Keith’s mouth has curled. His eyes have crinkled slightly around the edges. A grin. He’s grinning.

And, eventually, Lance is, too.

@AlteaHighChronicle lab partners or boyfriends?? HMMMMMMM #TeamKlance

@AlteaHighChronicle no offense but if someone cared enough to write an entire article about how pretty i am then i’d marry them immediately.

@AlteaHighChronicle it’s feeling pretty gay in this chili’s tonight #TeamKlance

“Go team! Go team!
Who do we mean?
We’ll say it loud,
Because we’re proud!”

Over on the grassy part of the quad, the cheerleaders are sashaying, and strutting, and shaking their pom-poms to and fro like pretty little wind-up toys. Passersby are streaked with face paint, proudly donning their red and white, and cheer them on with lively hoots and hollers. Because it’s the morning of the Homecoming football game, and, around here, school spirit is as contagious as the plague.

“Lion pride! Lion pride!
We’re stepping up, so step aside!”

Somehow, despite all the uproar, Keith hears the chime of his cell phone, and leans over to rummage through his backpack.

At his side, James scoffs loudly. “You’d think they’d come up with some new cheers already.”

The rest of the team chortles in agreement. Keith keeps rummaging.

“We’re the best, we’re here to win,
A short, simple text message is all that’s waiting for him: *Got your voicemail. Busy at work this week. We’ll talk soon. Mom.*

Keith would chuck the stupid thing clear across the quad if he didn’t think it might thwack one of those bubbly cheerleaders in the face.

*“Come on, Lions,*

*Show your spirit!*

*Lions roar so we can hear it!“*

“Quit texting your boyfriend,” goads James, smacking his palm over the phone screen. Keith yanks it away, and holds it close to his chest. “Can’t have you spacing out on game day, team leader.”

“Yeah, man,” says Antok, finishing off what appears to be a repulsively-colored protein shake. “I overheard Coach saying there’s gonna be some *scouts* checking us out tonight.”

Ryan chuffs in disbelief. “This early in the season? No way.”

“Yes way. You know that kid Sendak? Big dude? Quarterback at Kerberos High? My old man heard from his old man that he already got offered a full ride to Daibazaal University.”

“Bullshit!”

Now, Keith knows better than to listen to idle gossip — especially Antok’s idle gossip — but the news still sinks in his chest like a stone. His rejection letter still sits, crumpled, at the bottom of his backpack.

*Keith Kogane, we regret to inform you…*

*Busy at work this week. We’ll talk soon…*

He shoves his phone back into the front pocket of his bag, and tries to forget about it.

The pleasant September breeze carries the sound of applause as the cheerleaders’ routine finally comes to an end. And as the girls march past the football team’s picnic table, still in perfect formation, James stands from his seat, and fixes the cheer squad captain with a wicked grin.

“Hey, Nyma. That skirt small enough for you?”

Nyma, the tall, blonde goddess in a pleated red uniform skirt that just barely covers the entirety of her backside, turns over her shoulder, and shoots back, cold as ice, “I dunno, Griffin. That *dick* small enough for you?”

Blood rushes to James’ cheeks as he melts miserably back into his seat. His teammates howl with laughter while Nyma and the rest of her squad flip their ponytails, and leave.

“Aren’t you two dating?” Keith asks bluntly.

“We’re on a break,” James clarifies, and buries his face into the table’s wooden surface. Keith just rolls his eyes because, *honestly* — who can keep track anymore?

The team continues heckling their poor running back until Keith tunes them out like twisting a radio
knob to mute. By now, the cheerleaders are long gone, too, already inside prowling the halls like the graceful lionesses that they are, but there’s still a hint of residual commotion wafting from the far side of the quad. There’s always something, Keith thinks. If it’s not a breakup, a hookup, or someone getting busted for cheating on a pop quiz, then it’s some kid who decides to profess his love in an open statement to the entire student body.

Keith almost hates that he looks. That, despite his better judgement, he lets his eyes drift toward the thin smattering of students gathered by the edge of the parking lot. That his gaze — somehow, someway — toggles its way to Lance. That he stands there, surrounded by classmates, camera in hand, smile on his lips, and so hard to miss, like a human traffic cone, in his bright red jersey.

Lance, in his bright red jersey.

Lance, beaming like a beacon, in his bright red jersey. With the number ten decorating the front. And, on the back, in big white block letters: K-O-G-A-N-E —

Oh, fucking hell.

Keith doesn’t even realize he’s moving until he’s halfway across the quad, jaw set, footfalls heavy, catching Lance’s shoulder as he zips through the crowd. Lance squawks, blabbering something about the delicate camera in his grasp, but manages to match Keith’s quickened stride as he’s toted away.

“We’re talking,” grumbles Keith, approaching a deserted corner of the quad. “Now.”

Lance chuckles, breathless and easy. “Keep whisking me away like this and people are gonna assume there’s something scandalous going on between us, y’know.”

Out of earshot — but not quite far enough away to avoid curious glances — Keith tugs him to a stop. “They probably already do, thanks to — that,” and his hand makes a furious sweeping gesture at Lance’s shirt. God, it’s even more garish up close. “What the… Where did you even get that?”

“My buddies over at the EmbroiderMe kiosk in the mall gave me a pretty sweet deal that I just couldn’t refuse,” Lance chirps, smoothing out the front of the jersey with a reverent palm. In the daylight, his eyes blaze impossibly blue. “Why? You likey?”

Keith ignores that, and, instead, says, “I thought I made it clear that I don’t want to get involved in this.”


“Well you’re doing a shit job of it!”

Lance straightens himself up, and rolls his shoulders back, giving off the impression of a peacock flaunting its feathers. “Lemme tell you something, ye of little faith,” he begins with a smirk. “You might be a hotshot on the football field, but on my turf, in the newsroom, I know what I’m doing.”

Keith narrows his eyes to dark slits.

“And if there’s one thing I’ve learned from all my experience in journalism, it’s that people are fascinated by things they don’t understand. It’s the thrill of the chase, the mystique of the unknown… Like unicorns, or aliens, or the Loch Ness monster,” Lance rests a hand on Keith’s shoulder, almost solemn. “And you, my friend, are big, beautiful Nessie.”

“And you’re an idiot,” Keith mutters, shaking him off.
“Oh, am I?” Lance challenges with a quirk of his brow. “It’s basic sociology, dude. If you want everyone at this school to get off your back, you gotta play their game. Then they’ll get bored with you, and boom. On to the next shiny thing.”

Keith loathes how much it makes sense, given the gossip-hungry nature of their peers, with their goldfish-like attention spans. He folds his arms over his chest, calculating. “So you think the reason why people are talking about me, and this article, is because they don’t know anything about me.”

“Bingo,” says Lance, grinning so wide that some might even consider it charming. “Just hit ‘em so hard with it that they don’t even wanna hear your name anymore, man.”

“Okay, so what do you get out of all this?”

“Research.”

“Research,” Keith deadpans.

And unless the morning light is playing tricks on him, distorting his vision as it stipples through the low-hanging trees, he swears that Lance’s cheeks start blooming with color — pink, to be exact, aglow beneath his sun-kissed skin.

“Let me write a follow-up article about you in the next issue,” Lance says then.

Keith replies with a frown. “Haven’t you already written enough about me?”

“The real you,” comes Lance’s quiet clarification. “The one we’re all dying to meet.”

His words bring a shock of sudden clarity, so powerful that Keith remembers, all at once, where they are. The quad. The schoolyard. Tucked away beneath a canopy of branches as if they were a pair of — clandestine lovers. Keith shifts from foot to foot, rocking uneasily as the eager gazes from nearby students drill into his spine like a barrage of bullets.

“You really think this’ll work?” he asks.

“Trust me,” Lance nods. “This time next semester, Keith Kogane will be a distant whisper in the wind, and you’ll be free to live the unremarkable life of a hermit that you’ve always wanted.”

Keith breathes. The air is crisp. The stares are excruciating.

“Well?” Lance urges, and offers out a hand.

His eyes are still very, very blue.

“You better be right,” grunts Keith.

Their palms meet just as the bell rings.

Chapter End Notes

There's more fanart for this fic HERE and HERE and it's just???? sjhdfghr AMAZING. A+. MY MIND IS BLOWN.

Thank you for all the amazing feedback on the first chapter :__; I've been so excited
about this story for so long, and it means the world to me that you guys are right there with me. <3
Altea High ends up demolishing Balmera Prep, forty-three to eight, in what the school is already claiming to be a record-breaking win. It all happens so swiftly, so thoroughly, that Keith almost has trouble believing it had been his body, and his limbs, and his pounding heart buried somewhere inside that uniform, the centerpiece of a stadium filled with hundreds.

Call it dissociation. Call it selective memory. But whatever it is, Keith has gotten pretty good at it — the cancelling out of all the raucous cheering, chanting, and trash-talking, that is. He focuses on the things that matter. Forgets the things that don’t.

But he does remember refusing to pass the ball to their wide receiver, and taking an exceptionally nasty tackle from one of Balmera’s offensive linemen as punishment. He remembers halftime, when Coach Kolivan all but dragged him off the field by the front of his helmet, spitting and screaming at him to focus up and run the damn plays until the veins bulged angrily from his neck. He remembers looking up, squinting into the blinding glare of stadium lights, and wondering just how many eyes are watching him. How many of them will like what they see. How many of them actually matter. How many of them actually care.

The thought follows him all the way to the shower, where he stands beneath the spray until the pipes groan, and the water runs cool down his back. He waits for his teammates’ laughter to disappear, for the locker room to settle, quiet as a tomb. Then, and only then, does Keith get himself changed, and gather up his belongings.

He doesn’t even bother checking his phone. It gets shoved to the bottom of his bag, along with his sweaty socks.

“You played hard out there tonight, Kogane,” comes Kolivan’s low, monotonous drawl from somewhere beyond the door to his office.

It rightly catches Keith by surprise on his way out, just vaguely complimentary enough to have him backtracking a few steps, lingering in the doorway with a face full of bemusement. Even after three years, he still isn’t used to hearing this man’s voice when it’s not being flung at him, ordering him to run faster, throw farther, work harder.

“Thanks, Coach,” he replies.

“Be sure to ice that shoulder when you get home,” Kolivan continues. “You won’t survive the rest of the season if you insist on being reckless out there.”

“Yes, sir.”

With a definitive grunt, Kolivan goes back to sifting through papers on his desk, and Keith feels an awful lot like he’s being dismissed. Free to go mingle with his friends, or celebrate with his family, or any other likely alternative that Keith has no intention of actually doing.
He just loiters there, mind percolating, hands gripping the strap of his gym bag so tightly he feels it being engraved into his palm. It’s not supposed to come out. He wishes that it wouldn’t, but it does, and it’s —

“Uh, Coach?”

The man doesn’t even glance up, but a subtle lift of his brow tells Keith that he’s listening.

“Do you know if —” Well. Too late to back out now. Keith just takes a breath, and forces it out. “— Were there any scouts at the game?”

At that, Kolivan finally looks up, and there’s a crease in his forever-expressionless brow, and that’s when Keith knows it was a dumb thing to ask. A very dumb thing.

“Never mind,” he spits out before he can even curse himself for how desperate he must sound. “It’s probably too early for —”

“Are you still waiting to hear back?” asks Kolivan.

“Only from a few.”

“I’ll tell you what,” the man says in that no-nonsense way about him. “If you get us through playoffs, and win the championship game, then you’ll have scouts banging down your door. Any school you want. Mark my words.”

And Keith just nods. Just stands there in the doorway, and nods, with his bag gripped tight, and his eyes blazing like a wildfire because —

He can do that. He can absolutely do that.

Outside, the night is still alive and bright with residual fervor, and Keith can feel it the second he starts walking across the parking lot, like a twin pulse beating behind his breastbone.

There are droves of red-clad classmates flying across the asphalt, still hyped up on the heady thrill of adrenaline and school spirit, no doubt. There are band members trying to stuff a bunch of enormous brass instruments into the trunk of someone’s car. The rustle of pom-poms, a distant victory cry. Keith keeps his head bowed as he passes through, dodging the whispered “that’s him”’s and “no, you go talk to him”’s as if they were bullets. He’s got quick reflexes. It works out.

But not quick enough, apparently.

“Keith, hey!”

Up ahead, Lance comes sliding off the hood of some decrepit excuse for a minivan, and bounds forward. His camera is dangling from his neck, his smile is gigantic, and he’s still wearing that stupid fucking jersey with Keith’s name all over it as if they were… were — Keith bites back a groan. He kind of wants to burn the damned thing.

“Awesome game, man,” Lance is saying, close enough now for Keith to notice that he’s moving his arms a bit strangely, a bit twitchily. Like he can’t decide if he’s allowed to go in for a hug or not, and then abandons the idea midway through with an awkward shrivel of his limbs. He recovers with,
“You guys seriously crushed it out there.”

“Uh, thanks,” Keith answers a bit hazily. “I didn’t think you came to these things.”

“Believe it or not, the paper’s been known to report on the actual games,” and then his mouth starts fidgeting, too. Not quite a grin, not quite a grimace. Again, caught awkwardly in between. “Y’know. Not just the players.”

The humor might’ve landed better under very different circumstances.

“Right,” grumbles Keith.

Then, from a few feet away, someone clears their throat. Loudly.

“Oh,” Lance says with a start, whirling around to gesture at the car, where his two friends are seated and watching. “These are my buddies, by the way. Hunk and Pidge.”

Keith only just barely recognizes them from that morning at the newspaper club, which, in his defense, is a foggy memory at best, all mottled with simmering frustration. The big guy, Hunk, is smiling at him. The small one, Pidge, glares behind her glasses, slurping obnoxiously from a soda cup that appears to be at least twice the size of her head.

“Nice to meet you, Keith,” Hunk chirps. “I mean, like, officially.”


He manages to take one step before Lance fumbles over a hurried, “Wait, before you go —”

So Keith stops, and watches the way Lance chews his bottom lip, the way his pupils shrink to the size of pinpoints. He might be blushing, too, but with those thick lines of war paint streaking his cheeks, it’s hard to be sure. Still — is he nervous? He looks nervous.

“—Um,” Lance begins, “we were gonna go grab some fro-yo or something.”

Keith blinks. “Okay?”

“So I — I was just wondering if — totally up to you, but, y’know, maybe you might wanna —”

A rowdy chorus of whoops and cheers is what drowns out the rest of his scrambled speech, followed by a swarm of students scattering across the parking lot, fleeing to their cars.

“Victory party at my place!” he hears James’ voice announce over the excited clamor. “Be there or be lame!”

The responding cries are just as enthusiastic as Keith expects them to be. But as all those rumbling car engines start emptying out of the lot, Lance looks down and away, rocking back on his heels, schooling his mouth into something resembling a grin before it can morph into anything else too unbidden.

“— Right. Yeah. Guess you probably have a party to get to, then, huh?”

Keith watches another group of over-zealous teenagers rush by, laughing and chattering even as red face paint starts to melt right off their sweaty skin. “I’m not going,” he answers at once.

“Seriously?” Lance blurs. “But you just played — and won — your very last Homecoming game — ever.” And while Keith continues being unenthused, he tacks on, “Don’t you wanna celebrate?”
“No?”

A very suspicious twinkle shimmers around the corners of Lance’s narrowed eyes. “You sure about that, Nessie?”

They stare at each other, unrelenting, for less than a second, until:

“I’m not going,” Keith says again.

“C’mon, but you gotta!” Lance implores with an impassioned flap of his arms. “No more man of mystery, remember? Parties are, like, the holy ground of socialization. It’s where gossip is born and bred, dude. The perfect place to see and be seen. And being seen is key if you’re gonna —”

A sigh barges its way out of Keith’s downturned lips, grumbling, “If I go for an hour will you shut up?”

And Lance, with a completely and unnecessarily dramatic huff, responds, “An hour’s hardly enough time for us to make any progress, but I guess it’s better than —”

“Whoa, whoa —” sputters Keith. “— us?”

“Well, duh, I mean,” Lance throws a distinct look over his shoulder, back at his friends, “you can’t just roll up to a party without a posse.”

At that, Hunk’s eyes make a valiant effort to bulge out of their sockets, and Pidge’s incessant, god-awful slurping comes to an abrupt halt, sounding like the remains of her soda might’ve just gotten lodged in the back of her throat.

“I’m sorry,” she deadpans. “A what?”

Keith scowls. “You guys aren’t invited.”

“Then I guess it’s a good thing we’re tagging along with the team’s star quarterback,” Lance flings back, grinning, practically oozing, with insufferable charm. The bastard.

From behind him, Pidge pipes up again, with a bit more outrage: “I’m sorry — we’re what?”

“But Lance is already flitting away, corralling his friends into the minivan, ignoring their mumbled protests, and saying, with thinly veiled excitement, “Yeah, yeah, I hear ‘ya!”

“Tops,” Keith reminds again, sterner this time because — call him crazy — but he really doesn’t feel like it’s sinking in. “I’m serious, Lance. I’m gonna time it.”

The car starts backing away, headlights flashing, and the last thing Keith sees is Lance’s head leaning out the window, his grin a mile wide and counting.

“I’ll come pick you up at ten!”
“What the — wait. Hold up,” Lance screeches. It’s not the prettiest sound. “James Griffin lives here?”

But at least it’s warranted, because towering before them, in all its opulent glory, like the Palace of Versailles itself, is the biggest fucking mansion Lance has ever balked at. They’re walking up the driveway, and even that feels mildly disgraceful — like this luxurious slab of concrete doesn’t deserve to be traipsed upon by their poor, unworthy peasant feet.

“But like — for real, though? You sure he’s not just renting out an MTV crib for the evening? This is his actual, full-time home —”

“His family is loaded or something,” Keith explains, sounding uninterested.

“Something, alright,” says Lance, releasing a low whistle. Just for a moment, he thinks about James. The smug smirks, Ralph Lauren polos, and shiny BMW suddenly make a lot more sense.

“Let’s just get this over with, I guess,” mutters Pidge, forgoing the driveway entirely, and cutting across the pristine front lawn, which looks like it’s been copied and pasted straight out of a gardening magazine. Hunk follows suit, still a flurry of nerves and wary utterances about how he’ll never see daylight again if his mom ever finds out he’s breaking curfew for a party.

Laughter and music pours out of those lavish French-style windows, and Lance immediately starts counting every blessing that he had the good sense to freshen up at his house, and scrub the face paint off his cheeks, before swinging by Keith’s place in his brother’s car. But even so — he’s feeling overwhelmingly out of place and self-conscious in his ratty denim jacket and scuffed up sneakers. And he’d jumped out of the shower so fast that he’s certain his hair must be doing something drop-dead ridiculous right now, and —

“Hey.”

Lance blinks. Keith is still there. Looking so effortlessly handsome that it makes Lance’s brain glitch.

“You’re fine. Let’s go,” is all he says. That’s it. That’s literally it. He doesn’t even smile, and Lance still nearly falls all over himself as they walk the rest of the way to the front door. Maybe appearance should actually be the least of Lance’s concerns tonight.

Stepping into the home of James Griffin is a lot like what Lance imagines stepping into a gladiator arena might’ve been like — a sleek, spotless, exquisitely furnished gladiator arena, but whatever. It still feels like there’s an entire Roman civilization’s worth of eyes snapping in their direction all at the same time.

“Uh,” says Hunk. “Why’s everyone staring at us?”

“Three guesses,” comes Pidge’s reply, shamelessly unsubtle as she jabs a thumb in Keith’s direction. They all wince.

“No fucking way!”

Then come the lions.
James emerges from the throng, flanked on either side by Thace and Antok, maybe already a bit tipsy. He stops in front of Keith, clapping a hand on his shoulder. Keith doesn’t budge.

“Look who decided to grace us with his presence,” he sneers. “It must make me the luckiest guy in school to have such a household name at my party,” and when Keith still refuses to respond, gaze hardening to steel, James presses, “Right, Keith?”

“No need to repeat yourself, dude,” Lance interjects tartly. “He ignored you just fine the first time.”

James swivels his attention, like a rifle zeroing in on its target. “Oh, so you brought loverboy along!” he laughs, and his two cronies join in vigorously.

Lance stands a little straighter.

“When’s chapter two coming out?” James continues to heckle, grin twisting into something wicked. “Can’t wait to find out how this one ends.”

 Immediately, Hunk and Pidge both slide into James’ line of vision, crowding around Lance like two cold-blooded soldiers on the defense. Arms crossed. Shoulders squared.

“Not cool, man,” Hunk grumbles.

“Yeah, back off,” agrees Pidge.

“Don’t you have a computer to go program, nerd?”

“Don’t you have a village to get back to, idiot?”

The way Pidge has to crane her neck back just to look James directly in the eye might’ve been hilarious if there wasn’t such a terrifying storm brewing inside her small body. And James, somehow, must be able to sense it, this oncoming disaster, more keenly than he lets on. Because, just then, he scoffs, and recedes ever so slightly.

“Real nice crew you’re hanging with these days, Kogane,” he spits out, and then, with his sidekicks stomping at his heels, retreats.

“So they’re great,” Lance drawls after an uneasy beat.

“Yeah,” says Keith. “And drunk.”

Pidge is still a ball of fury, breathing like she can’t catch her breath. “I’m gonna dump all of his greasy-ass hair products down the drain. Every. Single. One. C’mon, Hunk.”

Then she charges up the stairs, which Lance figures is probably off-limits to partygoers, and Hunk tags along with a slow, heavy sigh.

“So,” says Lance, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

“So,” Keith says back. “What now?”

Lance just chuckles, kind and non-vicious.

“You’re at a party, my man,” and then he turns toward the room of staring eyes. “You mingle.”
Mingling, as it turns out, is not as easy as it looks.

Maybe that’s just because Lance has this uncanny ability to make it look so — well, easy. He lights up like a goddamn firework when people are near. He glows from the inside out, like the sun is trapped under his skin. Not that Keith is watching for it or anything. It’s just a fact. Something he notices whenever he happens to catch a glimpse through the crowd.

Because it’s distracting — that’s what it is — how loud he laughs, and how bright he smiles. It’s too hard not to notice.

Meanwhile, there’s Keith, who really, truly, fundamentally doesn’t get it. At least, not like Lance. He tries to hold a conversation with Nadia, a senior on the girls’ lacrosse team, but she can only seem to speak in one volume — ear-splitting — and keeps trying to coerce everyone within a twenty-foot radius to take jello shots with her. Then he’d been wrestled away by a few of his teammates for a game of beer pong, which he only makes it through half of before he gets approached by a frightfully presumptuous sophomore girl, who twirls her hair too much, and keeps finding excuses to touch Keith’s bicep.

So, on second thought, strike what he thought before.

Mingling, as it turns out, is actually a complete nightmare, and Keith is living it out in the waking world.

But thankfully, as the night rambles on, it seems that people have become gradually less enchanted by Keith’s mystifying presence. It could be the alcohol, he thinks. Or it could be that mingling really is a necessary evil if he ever wants to roam the halls in peace, and prove to his classmates that he isn’t some rare, mythical sea monster — or whatever Lance is always babbling about.

God, Keith hopes it’s the alcohol. Please let it be the alcohol.

He sequesters himself to a dimly lit corner of the living room, silent and inconspicuous, dissolving into the background. The floorboards rattle beneath his feet, in time with the pulsing bass that blasts out of James’ state-of-the-art stereo system. Bodies move across the room, ebbing and flowing like a human tidal wave, and Keith is infinitely glad that he’s no longer being washed away by its sweeping undertow. He prefers to swim against the waves.


He sidles up with an easy grin, leaning back against the wall in an imitation of Keith’s posture, shoulders almost touching. He’s still shimmering around the edges, Keith notices, left over from a busy night of socializing.

Keith takes a sip from his red solo cup. The contents smell bad, and taste even worse.

“Gotta hand it to you, though, buddy-o — you lasted longer than I thought you would,” Lance barrels on, and Keith idly wonders if this is how he makes it through these parties. Just keeps chattering away until people grow too weak to respond.

“Which is, y’know, pretty impressive and all. Except that you’re not really giving me anything juicy to work with here. I mean, I can basically see the headlines already —” He moves a hand out in front of him, as if the words are being typed mid-air as he speaks in his best, most clichéd announcer voice: “—’Altea High heartthrob goes from foreground to bore-ground’. Keith Kogane, please
enlighten the people — what’s it like being a chronic wallflower?”

Then he’s shoving a fist in front of Keith’s nose, pantomiming a microphone, and Keith is pushing it away without any hesitation.

“You’re the one who wants to write about the real me or whatever,” he snaps, gaze trained on a very specific spot on the far wall, and nothing else. “Well, this is it. Sorry it’s not juicy enough for you.”

“Dude, I —” Lance backpedals. He backpedals so fast. “—I was just messing around. You know I was just messing around, right? For real. I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to be a dick about it.”

Keith ignores him because, okay, maybe Lance was being a little bit of a dick about it.

But that’s just par for the course at this point, isn’t it? Lance finally works up the nerve to get his attention, after three long years of admiring from afar, and — big surprise — he only seems to mess things up. It’s like he’s hardwired to make a fool of himself. Destined to chew on his own foot for the rest of eternity. He steals a look at Keith’s face. In the shadows, his eyes have gone dark, almost black. But Lance secretly knows they’re not.

“Wanna know my favorite thing about parties?” he asks suddenly.

Keith’s chest deflates ever so slightly, like a noiseless sigh, and then finally — finally — replies, “Do I?”

“People watching,” Lance grins, all teeth.

“People watching?”

“Aw, yeah, it’s the best! Trust me, reality TV’s got nothing on this kind of quality entertainment.”

Slowly, Keith’s gaze wanders around the room. The dimmed lights overhead make it difficult to distinguish one face from the next, but there’s the ever-present stench of beer and body odor wafting through the air. He squints skeptically, and says, “So you actually like standing around to watch people do nothing but drink themselves stupid.”

“Seems that way, huh?” Lance retorts. “But you just gotta know what kinda stuff to look for,” and then he clarifies, with a waggle of his brow, “The good stuff.”

A moment passes. Maybe two. Keith’s eyes are still patrolling the space, like he’s trying to figure it all out for himself, until —

“Okay,” he says. “Like what?”

Lance wastes no time shuffling a little closer, enough to be heard over the blaring music. Enough for Keith to smell the alcohol on his breath when he leans in. “‘Kay, so, uh —” and then he’s pointing discreetly to the other end of the room. “—Take Jenny Shaybon, for instance.”

Somehow, the sea of blurry faces starts to sharpen right near the mouth of the kitchen, where a rosy-cheeked girl with bouncy brunette curls is standing, wine cooler in hand. She’s nodding at something that someone is saying, and tucking her hair behind her ears. There’s nothing particularly fascinating about her, Keith notes, but continues to observe, anyway.

“See how she’s fidgeting? It’s ‘cause she’s just barely keeping it together,” Lance narrates. “Rumor has it she’s fresh off a painful breakup with her community college ex-boyfriend. Four months and three-quarters of a v-card she’ll never get back.” And then, with a hand to his heart, “An age-old
Keith can’t help but snort behind the rim of his cup.

“And see that guy who’s been chatting her up for the past fifteen minutes just because he can sense her fragile emotional state?”

The scene expands another inch or so, bringing a messy-haired boy into frame. Keith doesn’t even recognize him. His jeans are stylishly distressed, and his teeth are way too white as he flashes them in Jenny’s direction, eyes roving all up and down her shapely body.

Lance hums thoughtfully around a knowing smirk. It comes out hot against the shell of Keith’s ear. “Chances are he’s gonna ask her to dance, but judging by the way he’s tapping his foot out of rhythm to the music, and the way he can’t seem to make it through a conversation without staring at her boobs, I’m thinking it’s gonna be a big, fat —”

Then, like clockwork, Jenny starts shaking her head, and Keith can make out the very obvious ‘no, thanks’ tripping off her lips right before the guy slogs his way back into the crowd, defeated.


Keith chuffs out a breath, barely a chuckle, as Lance joyfully seeks out his next victim.

“Which brings us to… a-ha. Everyone’s favorite happy couple.”

This time, Lance motions to James, who’s leaning suavely against the large banister that leads to the second floor. He’s got his mouth wrapped around the top of his beer bottle, but his eyes are narrowed, cutting clear across the room. Keith follows the direction of his gaze only to find Nyma staring back at him just as intensely, and the shock of it is nonexistent.

“Their eye-fucking has been getting less and less subtle with every drink,” Lance explains sagely, “but they’re holding out as long as they can. Y’know. Thrill of the chase and all that.”

Keith watches with raised eyebrows as Nyma excuses herself from the group she’d been chatting with, and begins strutting her way through the throng.

“Waiting for the right moment, ’til they’re both just drunk enough to — three, two, one…”

Nyma pulls James down by the front of his shirt when she reaches him, whispers something into his ear that makes him grin, and then he’s leading her up the spiraling staircase. Just like that.

“Touchdown. Another Lion victory,” concludes Lance, and then, with a smirk, “Except this one probably won’t last through the weekend.”

Keith blinks his owlish eyes, not even pretending to be unimpressed.

“How do you just — see all that?” he asks.

“It’s a reporter’s job to see what other people don’t. Or can’t,” replies Lance, smirk going crooked with mischief. “But I guess you could also call it my dark gift.”

Then, instantly, the party shifts back to normal; just sort of flickers back to the loud, messy, indistinguishable chaos that it is, and always has been. Keith is suddenly severely aware of how close Lance is standing, and Lance is aware that Keith is aware, and so they both take lumbering steps away from each other until their backs are against the wall again. Lance fake-coughs into his
hand. Keith gulps down more of his drink.

“So,” he says, forcing himself to swallow, “what else do you see?”

“I see…”

When Keith looks up — and really looks — Lance is staring at him, eyes the size of moons. And Keith feels it immediately, the weight of that stare, pressing down until his chest stutters from the force. He shouldn’t have said anything — maybe he shouldn’t even be here at all — but Lance’s heart is already bleeding all over the place, the same way he bled words onto that newspaper, and his gaze is all glitter and spark, filled to the brim with a whole lot of — something.

But whatever it is, Lance shakes it right out of his eyes the moment he blinks them, looking more than a little embarrassed.

“Uh, I see — that your cup is — almost empty,” he recovers quickly. “You’re supposed to be celebrating, right? We should go grab ourselves another round.”

His eyes dip down to the cup in Keith’s hand, then back up to his face. Down again. Up again. Keith wants to tell him to knock it off, that no one gave him the right to look at him like that, but it takes him a second to muscle his way out of that gaze, the one that still feels like it’s smattered all over his skin. He also wants to tell him that he actually hates the bitter taste of whatever he’s been sipping all night, but that, too, doesn’t make it past his lips before Lance is ducking his head, and scurrying off toward the kitchen.

Keith watches him go, watches him move through the wall of faceless bodies, until an odd tug in his gut makes him trail along behind.

One drink later, Lance starts giggling — a lot. Everything is suddenly super hilarious for no good reason, including the judgmental quirk to Keith’s brow as he watches Lance lift his cup to his mouth over and over again.

One more down, and at least two jello shots with Nadia, and Keith has to yank Lance back by his shirt just to keep him from walking face-first into the refrigerator.

“Who put that there,” he grumbles indignant at the appliance.

“Okay, you’re done,” Keith plucks the half-empty solo cup out of Lance’s grasp, and places it on the counter. “Give me your keys, Lance.”

“They’re my brother’s.”

“Give me your brother’s keys, then.”

“He’s gonna kill me.”

“Not if you’re already dead,” says Keith. “Keys.”

“Can’t tell me what to do.”

“Keys,” he demands again. “Now.”
Lance fishes the car keys from his back pocket, slaps them into Keith’s palm, says, “You’re cute when you’re bossy. Y’know that? ‘Cause you are—”

“Oh, Keith sighs. “We’re leaving.”

And they do. But not before finding Hunk and Pidge in the other room, to let them know. Keith explains the situation. At least, Lance thinks he does. He can see his lips moving, all quick and tense and kissable and soft-looking. Lance wonders if he exfoliates. He wonders if his mouth tastes like cherries. Probably not. That’d be weird.

“Just get him back safe,” says Pidge, and it almost sounds like a threat. Keith says something back to her, but Lance can’t hear it because he’s suddenly being scooped up and squeezed by two very large Hunk arms. He can feel his lungs getting pinched, making him cough a little bit, but still — man, this guy gives the best hugs.

Then they head for the door, and Lance doesn’t even think about what it might look like to anyone still sober enough to notice — the two of them, together, leaving the party with their arms around each other. As if they were… were —

“Keith.”

“Hm?”

“ ’m just gonna — real quick… just gonna —” he slurs, spinning away, and then promptly vomits on the Griffin’s immaculate front lawn.

“Great,” he hears Keith mutter above him, sounding tired, but then he feels a hand on his back, so maybe it’s not all so bad.

Keith drives his brother’s car out of James’ neighborhood, back onto the street. Lance rolls his window down just enough to have the late-night breeze swallow him whole, and cool his flushed skin. He sews his eyes shut, teetering on the brink of unconsciousness as the car rocks gently, but, even in this dozy state, he can still tell that they’ve been driving for far too long now.

“What’re you doing?” Lance asks when he feels them take a wrong turn.

And he’s glad — like, really fucking glad — that he decides to open his eyes right then. Because when he does, it’s to the sight of Keith sitting in the driver’s seat, one hand gripping the wheel while the other hangs out his open window, wind whipping against his palm. And there’s moonlight spilling down from the black sky; cascades of it, silversing Keith’s hair, burnishing his edges until he glistens and shines like he’s made of porcelain, or stardust. And he’s…

He’s —

“Sobering you up,” answers Keith, and then he very deliberately takes another wrong turn.

When they arrive at Lion’s Den, a charming little late-night diner down the block from school, Keith commands Lance to drink at least four full glasses of water before he’s even allowed to glance at the menu. And he obeys, so enthusiastically that he nearly chokes, water dribbling down his chin. Keith throws a handful of paper napkins at his face.
But then, a few minutes later, when their kind, elderly waitress drops a gorgeously golden grilled cheese sandwich on their table, Lance actually swoons. And Keith slinks further down in the plastic booth, grateful to be the only two patrons left in the entire restaurant.

“Ah, shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” Lance croons to his sandwich. “Thou art more delicious and more gooey. Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May!”

Because of course he can recite near-perfect Shakespeare even when he’s drunk. Of course he can.

“Damn,” he says, chewing on a mouthful of bread and cheese. “If there’s one thing we humans did right in this world, it’s the grilled cheese sandwich. Like, oh man, is there anything better?”

“Wouldn’t know,” answers Keith, stirring his black coffee with a spoon. “I’ve never had one.”

“You’ve never had a grilled cheese?” Lance asks with dizzying wonder, and even more dizzying devastation. And when Keith musters up a noncommittal shrug in response, he persists, “What do you eat, then?”

Keith makes a face, all contorted and perplexed. “Normal food.”

“No, no, no,” Lance swats the words away with a flick of his wrist. “I’m talking comfort food, m’dude. I’m talking, like — it’s been a rough day. All you wanna do is throw on some sweats, crash on the couch, and enjoy a good meal.” He gestures grandly to his half-eaten sandwich, like a magician getting ready to conjure up a dove from an empty box. “What’s on your plate?”

“I dunno,” huffs Keith. “Toast?”

Lance’s hand immediately goes limp, and falls onto the table with a depressing plop, like someone shot that dove straight out of the sky and killed it.

“Toast,” he repeats gravely.

Another shrug. “Yeah, I guess.”

“I’m giving you free range here. The sky’s the limit. A plethora of culinary masterpieces at your very fingertips… and you choose toast.”

“It’s the first thing I thought of,” Keith is quick to grumble as a lackluster explanation.

Then a muscle in Lance’s cheek flinches, and his left eye squints out of reflex; a tic that betrays both doubt and curiosity. A scrutinizing leer, for all intents and purposes.

“Is this some kinda magical toast?” he wonders a bit too earnestly. “Do you smear it with special jam that’s infused with — I dunno — diamond dust? Flakes of gold? The blood of your enemies?”

Keith purses his lips, and pushes them to the side. In turn, Lance’s pupils blow wide with dread, swallowing up the blue in one mighty gulp.

“Oh no,” he wheezes. “Don’t say it.”

But as Keith’s gaze darts almost shamefully toward the paint-chipped wall on the other side of the diner, he, somehow, ends up confirming all of Lance’s deepest, darkest suspicions.

“You eat it dry?!” he gasps, horrified. “You monster!”

“Look, if you don’t like it, then quit asking me all these dumb questions about food,” hisses Keith.
“I’m just telling you how it is.”

Lance gazes, solemn-eyed, at the rest of his sandwich. “Okay, you know what?” and then he’s pushing his plate across the table, and saying firmly, “Here.”

Keith frowns. “What’s that face for?”

“Keith. You have to try this. Right now.”

“What?”

“Cause it’s time to change your life, young grasshopper.”

Keith picks up the sandwich. Eyes a glob of melted cheese oozing out the side. Takes a bite. And —

“Mm.”

Lance’s entire face blossoms like a sunrise. “Yeah?”

“Oh my god,” says Keith, eyes widening, and fluttering in amazement, and — yeah, that’s pretty damn cute.

“Better than some crusty old toast, right?”

Keith chomps down on another huge bite.

“‘Scuse me, ma’am?” Lance practically shouts across the diner for their waitress, waving his arms high in the air. “Yeah, we’re gonna need, like, four more of these babies to-go.”

So many of his dreams begin just like this.

He’s in bed, and he feels weightless, like he could just drift forever. Like he could just lose himself, cradled in a warm, rolling surf. Like he could just float away with the stars.

And Keith is here.

In his dreams, sometimes they kiss, sometimes they don’t. Sometimes Lance just wants to look, and memorize the curve of his jaw, the slope of his nose, the bow of his lips. Sometimes that’s all he needs. Sometimes it’s enough.

But then, other times, it’s too much. Other times it ruins him. Other times it’s just so —

“—Stupid,” whispers Lance.

“What?” asks Keith.

“It’s stupid. I know it’s stupid,” and Lance feels his chest ache with something just as bright and startling as those flecks of moonlight still caught up in Keith’s devastating eyes. “And I know people say stupid things when they’re tired and drunk, but…”

The entire room shivers in the darkness. Or maybe just Lance does.
“You. That’s what I see,” and then again, softer: “I see you.”

If this were a dream, then here is the moment when he ought to wake up, blink back to a firm reality, but he just keeps shivering, aching, shivering, aching.

“Sometimes,” he goes on, unable to stop his thoughts from unspooling, “I think — you’re all I see.”

Keith is right here, and real, and close enough to touch, and he doesn’t say a single word.

So Lance drags his breath to the bottom of his lungs. Holds it there. “Sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing,” says Keith. His voice tumbles out of him, low and hoarse.

“I’m —” but Lance catches himself, and mutters instead, “It’s stupid,” because it is. It really is.

Eventually, Keith slips away, saying, “Go to sleep, Lance,” and then the world fades out, slowly, like a dream.

Chapter End Notes

THERE’S MORE FANART AND YOU GUYS SHOULD GO CHECK OUT/SUPPORT THESE TALENTED PEOPLE!!!!

@niccoarte did another amazing piece of Lance in his denim jacket HERE!
@magicath808 drew a very adorable Lancey-Lance HERE!
@greenpixel captured poor Lance in the midst of a bi-crisis HERE!
@caelestee absolutely slayed me with a little comic of the fic’s opening scene HERE!

As always, a huge thank you to everyone for supporting this fic!!!! Your enthusiasm gives me life <3 LOVE YOU ALL!

TUMBLR
TWITTER
Here’s the thing: Lance has been hungover exactly two times before in his entire life. And at the ripe, young age of eighteen, it’s not something he’s particularly proud of. Looking back, he probably could’ve done just fine without the brain-splitting headaches, and spontaneous bouts of dry-heaving. Or maybe — just maybe — he could’ve gone the sensible route, and put the bottle down before the room started spinning like a record. Hindsight may be 20/20, but hindsight is also a raging bitch.

The first time had been last year with Hunk and Pidge, in Pidge’s basement, immediately following the SATs. A whole semester’s worth of studying and stress was grandly thwarted by the power of a Yuengling twelve-pack that Pidge’s brother had bought for them with a smirk and a well-intentioned ‘don’t do anything I wouldn’t do’. Well, Lance doesn’t really know what Matt Holt wouldn’t have done in that specific scenario, but he does know that he woke up in the bathtub a few hours later, with more than a few crude drawings sharpie’d across his face.

The second time happened over the summer at his cousin’s wedding in Havana — where the legal drinking age is sixteen, and the rum flows faster than water down the drain. And in Lance’s defense, he tried to behave himself, knowing full well that he’d be sandwiched between his parents on a plane ride home the next morning. But then his older brothers declared the mother of all shot contests, and Lance — stubborn and with everything to prove — took the bait.

So, yeah. Lance has definitely been hungover before.

But now, here’s the other thing — the all-consuming and slightly mind-blowing thing: Lance has never been hungover in another boy’s bed before.

And not just any boy.

The boy.

The one who is honestly, most sincerely, the most handsome boy he’s ever seen. The one who turns him completely inside out with nothing more than a fleeting glance in his direction. The one who Lance recalls foggily in sporadic flashes of memory from the night prior, all dark hair and starlit eyes.

So the facts are as follows: he’s here, and hungover for a third time, feeling pitiful, feeling heavy as lead. Meanwhile, the boy of his dreams sleeps soundly on the floor with a single pillow and a spare blanket.

Lance would probably flop over and die if he didn’t already feel like he was — well, dying.

He distracts himself by taking stock of his surroundings. Keith’s bedroom — which can best be described as chaotically tidy. Like there’s method to this madness, order to every mess. It’s sparsely decorated with a cluttered desk against the far wall, and an overfull laundry hamper in the corner, topped off with the red fabric of Keith’s letterman jacket, spilling over the side like a wilting weed. There’s a glass of water kindly waiting on the bedside table, leaking condensation and pooling around the bottom, which makes Lance’s chest ache in a way he can’t quite articulate. And, beside
that, there’s a framed picture, a bit murky and discolored from age, but still very obviously a family. A tall, muscular man with his arm around a striking, exotic-looking woman, and a toddler-sized Keith clinging to her knees, smiling wide and missing a tooth.

Lance suddenly wonders if the photo has been placed there — so perfectly and purposefully angled — so that it’s the first thing Keith sees when he wakes up.

The thought comes unbidden, and veers so sharply in a direction it probably shouldn’t. Something so private and intimate that it has guilt curling tight in Lance’s belly as he flips himself over, smothering his face into the pillow. It smells like Keith. Another unbidden thought. This one throttles him, washes over him like a flood, and has Lance breathing deep, inhaling the glorious scent of sandalwood and eucalyptus and —

“Are you… smelling my pillow?”

The gravel of Keith’s voice startles Lance so badly that he springs upright at once, vision spotting from the jolt of it. There, on the floor, Keith is sitting up in his makeshift bed, all squinty-eyed and adorably sleep-rumpled.

And maybe if Lance’s brain hadn’t been preoccupied with thoughts about Keith’s offensively attractive case of bedhead, and how nice it’d probably be to run his fingers through it, he probably would’ve been able to think of something better and more self-assured to say in this woefully awkward situation. But, instead, he just starts scrambling, “Pfft, no! No way. Nope. Nopity-nope. That’d be weird and, y’know — creepy. So.”

Lance is certain he might burst into flames, and Keith’s eyes, hot on his skin, aren’t doing any favors.

“What?” Lance prattles on, voice pitched slightly too high. “Can’t a guy appreciate another guy’s taste in pillowcases? I mean, what is this, some kinda silk blend or —”

“Lance.”


Keith stifles a yawn, rolls his shoulder a bit. Sleeping on the ground couldn’t have been very comfortable. “So, uh. How are you feeling?”

“Oh,” Lance snorts. “Well, aside from the crippling regret and shame that usually comes with getting certifiably white girl wasted in front of the whole school, I’m just peachy.”

“Sounds pretty accurate, actually,” says Keith.

Lance outright blanches at that. “You mean I really did get white girl wasted in front of the whole school?”

“It was more like half the school,” Keith replies with a shrug.

The pained noise that withers its way out of Lance’s mouth is decidedly inhuman. “‘Kay, so, just —” and then his fingers bury themselves into the thick of his hair, tugging at the bits that are already tangled, and matted, and sticking up in every wrong direction. “— give it to me straight, dude. Rip the bandaid for me. On a scale of one to ten, how epically did I embarrass myself last night? Like, what number are we in the general vicinity of here?”

“Eleven.” The answer is immediate.
“Elev—” squawks Lance, shrill and incredulous. “I said one to ten, Keith. Eleven’s not even an option!”

“You almost tried to fight a refrigerator,” Keith tells him flatly.

And Lance’s stomach starts to coil again. “Oh.”

“And you threw up in James’ front lawn.”

“Oh my god.”

“And then you tried to cram four grilled cheese sandwiches into your mouth at the same —”

“Okay! I get it! It’s a solid eleven!” Groaning, Lance falls back against the pillow with a cushioned thud, and grimaces up at the ceiling as dread pounds angrily between his eyes. “Jeez, no wonder you felt sorry enough to let me crash at your place.”

“I didn’t exactly have a choice,” he hears Keith say, and Lance swears there’s a slight tinge of amusement coloring his tone. “When we left the diner you, uh — kinda wouldn’t let go of my arm.”

Lance groans again, loudly, into his palms. “Oh. Oh, great. I’m sure that’s a good look on me. Yeah, I bet I’m real cute when I’m clingy.”

A chuckle, soft and husky with sleep, and then: “You are.”

And then— oh. Of all the things that Lance had kind of expected Keith to say in response, that is certainly not one of them. At all. Not even close. Keith doesn’t seem to be expecting it either because, now, he’s going completely rigid and pale with realization. It practically crashes into him, full-bodied.

“Clingy,” he hurries, the words desperate to get out, “I mean, you are — clingy.”

“Yeah,” agrees Lance, even though his ears are ringing, and his heart is going berserk inside his chest. The room falls unreasonably silent, just the rustle of Keith’s blanket as he stretches out his legs, one at a time, and stares at them.

“So do you want breakfast?” he asks a bit awkwardly. “I could make something.”

Lance whips his head to the side, peeling his gaze away from where it’d been trained on the ceiling, and all but gasps, “You mean — could it be?” Keith’s brow furrows with confusion, so he goes on, “Am I really about to have my world rocked by the infamous, highly-acclaimed Kogane toast I keep hearing about?”

“The infamous —” and Keith takes one look at Lance’s winning grin before he’s frowning in return, and flinging back, “Shut up. I eat things other than toast, okay.”

“Mhm, sure, hold that thought. Just gimme a sec here,” hums Lance, closing his eyes, starfishing his limbs atop the mattress, “I gotta mentally prepare myself for such a momentous —”

Keith wallops him with a pillow, and Lance takes it right to the stomach with a soft ‘oof’.

“You don’t even deserve my toast,” grumbles Keith.

Lance sniggers as he pulls himself up, sitting on the edge of the bed. “Y’know, say what you want
about drunk Lance, but at least he remembers the important stuff.”

“Do you,” asks Keith, expression tweaking oddly, “remember anything else?”

“Uh, I mean, it’s all pretty fuzzy in there, but…” is all Lance manages to get out until he’s noticing just how intense Keith’s gaze has gotten, and the way it’s piercing straight through him like an arrow. He scrunches his nose, wary. “…Why? Is there something else I should remember?”

Desperately, Lance racks his brain, searches to the far corners of every distorted memory that plays like static on a screen.

… Stupid…

… I see…

… Sorry, I’m sorry —

“No,” Keith says, tuning out the static, and the memories, and the distant pitter-patter of Lance’s heartbeat. “Nothing important.”

They do, in fact, end up having toast.

More so out of necessity, really, because the kitchen is depressingly bare. So Keith pops the last two slices into the toaster, and Lance makes a show of ooh-ing and aah-ing with intrigue while Keith just rolls his eyes, waiting for their bread to turn crispy. Out of spite, he takes a giant chomp out of his dry, boring piece of toast while Lance slathers his with layer upon layer of some strawberry jam he finds in the back of Keith’s fridge because — in his words — he’s not a total heathen.

Then Keith starts up the coffee maker as Lance takes a seat at the kitchen table. He’s chewing thoughtfully on a bite of crunchy-sweet goodness, glancing around the empty kitchen, and manages about thirty seconds of silence before he’s wondering aloud, “So where are your parents?”

“At work, probably,” Keith answers out of reflex.

Without even having to catch a glimpse of it, he can tell there’s already a frown tugging at Lance’s lips. “On a Saturday?”

“On a Saturday,” says Keith. His voice is even, almost robotic, hardly a single hitch of anything that might suggest disappointment — but that just comes with practice. “My dad’s on call at the fire station almost every day.”

“And your mom?”

Keith refuses to look up from the ceramic mug caught between his hands, which is a good thing because then Lance would be able to see the awfulness there, all over his face, like ink etched into his skin. “She’s a lawyer at a firm in Daibazaal,” he mutters. “I see her on Christmas, and sometimes my birthday, but she’s — not around much anymore.”
“Divorce?” Lance guesses.

A curt nod.

“Yeah, that’s… that really sucks, man,” he says softly, and means it. “I’m sorry.”

“All my parents ever did was fight, so it’s —” He knows this next part. He’s been hearing it since he was a kid. Doesn’t make it any easier to say, though. “— for the best, I guess.”

Another silence. And, this time, Lance only makes it through about fifteen seconds until he’s wondering again: “Do you ever get to go visit your mom? I mean, I’ve never been, but I’ve heard Daibazaal is supposed to be pretty fancy-shmancy.”

“She’s always busy at the firm, so there just hasn’t been a good time yet,” replies Keith, filling both their mugs with a generous pour of coffee. He watches the steam rise out of them, feels it in his gut, scalding to the core. “But all that’s gonna change next year when we’re living in the same city.”

“You’re gonna be in Daibazaal next year?”

“Those are the only schools I applied to, so yeah. That’s the plan.”

Lance blows out a breath, lips puckering. “Dude, that’s far.”

“1.5 thousand miles, give or take,” and that, too, sounds practiced. Keith carries the mugs over to the table, lowering into the chair next to Lance. “That’s the beauty of college. Gives everyone a reason to get outta this place.”

“Nah, not me. I’m stayin’ local,” Lance chirps, bringing his mug to his grinning lips with one hand, and finger-gunning with the other. “Garrison College, class of ’23, baby.”

Keith catches himself before his eyebrows can reach his hairline, smoothing his expression into something more neutral as he asks, “You already got in?”

“Sure did. Didn’t really have a life this summer while I was killing myself over writing samples and personal essays, but still — worth it,” and then he shrugs, an easy rise and fall of his shoulders. “I don’t think I’d survive being apart from my family, y’know?”

But that’s just it, though: Keith does knows. He knows how badly it stings to have two halves of himself split across the country. And how terrifying it is to realize that people can just up and leave, without any warning, even when you’re not done needing them yet. He knows, he knows, he knows.

“Hey, um,” Keith hears himself saying. Quiet. Like a secret. “All the stuff I just told you. You’re not gonna put any of it in your article, right?”

Lance, gone dumb with surprise, doesn’t even blink. “No, of course not, I —” Concern. Now he’s concerned. “— I wouldn’t — No way. That was completely off the record, okay, just between friends.”

“Yeah,” Keith mumbles. And then, decisively, “Okay.”

Here, Lance offers a smile. It’s small, a bit unsure of itself, but warmer than the morning sun as it streams through the window, lighting them up from behind in hues of gold. And Keith — he takes it. He takes it, and holds fast to it, and allows his own lips to curl at the corners as well. The gentleness of it all is what sings so strangely in his chest. Strange, he thinks, but not even remotely unpleasant.
And then, here, the door to the garage swings open wide, bringing in the clamor of heavy footsteps, and a deep, rumbling voice that Keith recognizes so well.

“Hey, kiddo.” The rustle of bags, the jangling of keys, the clink of metal fastenings as the man hangs up his leather jacket. “Any reason why there’s a blue car parked in our driveway?”

Then he’s rounding the corner, and stepping into the kitchen with two full bags of groceries in his massive arms. Lance flinches in his seat like he’s trying to leap out of his own skin, maybe slither under the chair, and hide there for an indeterminable amount of time. But all of that seems a little pointless as soon as Keith’s dad notices them, side by side, at the table.

“Oh,” he says, sounding blindsided. “ Didn’t know you were having company.”

“Dad, this is Lance,” Keith grunts, as if saying it faster will somehow make it less bizarre. “Lance, this is my dad.”

“Hiya, Mr. Kogane!” Lance bursts out. Keith wonders if he knows that he’s practically shouting over the distance of about five feet. “Sorry about the car. It’s mine. And it’s here ‘cause, y’know, I’m here, so — uh, you need a hand with those groceries?”

The man laughs, bemused, as he crosses the room. “I think I got it all under control. Nice of you to offer, though. Maybe you could try teaching Keith some of those good manners for me.”

“Sorry for taking after my old man,” Keith throws back, smirking, and his dad laughs again.

“But, hey, I wouldn’t mind if you went out there and moved your car so I could pull my truck into the garage.”

Discreetly, Keith slides his elbow off the table, and nudges Lance in the ribs with it. “Lance was just leaving, anyway,” he announces.

A whole lot of nothing happens in the moment that follows, and so Keith gives another jab — harder, this time.

“Yep! Leaving!” Lance half-yelps, his chair squeaking against the floor as he jumps out of it. “That’s a thing I was definitely doing.”

He chugs the rest of his coffee in a few large gulps, and then scuttles out of the room, nearly making it the entire way before he’s circling back, beelining toward Keith’s dad. It’s a comical comparison, how slight and wiry Lance appears beside such a strapping man, who could probably snap him like a twig if he were so inclined.

“Really nice meeting you, Mr. Kogane,” says Lance, saluting stiffly. “And thank you for, uh, your service and bravery and —”

“The door’s that way, Lance,” Keith drawls.

“Right!”

There’s a muffled curse as Lance finally stumbles his way out the front — most likely tripping over his own feet in his haste — and then a fatal silence following the slam of the door.

“Friend of yours?” his dad wonders after a beat that lingers slightly too long.

“I guess so,” grumbles Keith.
“Listen, just —” the man sighs, settling the bags on the kitchen counter. “—shoot me a text next time you have a… sleepover, alright?”

Keith, rather aggressively, chokes on air.

“Now, I’m not upset about it, but I —”

“Dad,” Keith wheezes desperately. Then again, with a bit more strain because jesus fucking christ — “Dad.”

“—I just think I ought to know what’s going on under my roof, is all,” his dad reasons. Authority has never sounded quite right in his voice, but his gaze is intensely paternal as it focuses on his son, who appears to be struggling with not combusting. “Deal?”

Keith’s forehead meets the table with a miserable plunk. “Right. Yeah. Deal,” he eventually mutters into the wood surface, and then promptly shoves this conversation away into the category of ‘things that shall never be discussed within the walls of this household ever again — like, ever’.

It’s a very legitimate and necessary category, in Keith’s humble opinion.

“So,” his dad segues mercifully, “go on and tell me all about the big game last night.”

“We won,” answers Keith. “Forty-three to eight.”

“A real ass whooping then, huh? That’s my boy,” his dad crows with delight, a spring in his step as he begins emptying the contents of the bags, and stowing items away to their proper places. “I had a good feeling about it — you know, I was telling the guys at the station last night that I just knew you’d —”

“If you had been there, you could’ve seen it for yourself.”

It lands swiftly and soundlessly, with the air of a bomb exploding beneath the water’s surface, rippling and rippling for miles out to sea. Listening to the falter in his father’s stride, and the shallow breath that escapes his lungs, Keith regrets it almost immediately.

“Oh,” is all the man says, but it cuts.

“I know.”

“Of course I would’ve loved to’ve been there, but I couldn’t —”

“Yeah,” Keith says, quieter now. “I know.”

The rustling in the kitchen slowly starts up again. His father’s steps are far less springy. Keith sighs into the silence, trying to shake it off, but it’s getting harder and harder to pretend like it hasn’t been tense between them lately. Growing pains, the school guidance counselor had called it at the end of last year during one of their bi-monthly meetings, when application season was at its peak, and things around the house were at their worst. Keith remembers sitting there on that squishy yellow sofa, feeling stupid, feeling crushingly small, while some school-regulated shrink tries to diagnosis his problems away like he suffers from the flu instead of a broken family. Not that he doesn’t wish it was something that could be bottled up and prescribed, but it’s just — it’s not. And it’s just —

“Pretty sure I saw some mail there for you,” his dad says, motioning to the pile of envelopes sitting on the counter.
Keith is out of his seat in record time, shuffling through the mail until he finds the only one addressed to him. He looks at it. Flips it over. Looks at it again. Then his stomach drops all the way to his knees.

“What’s this?” he demands.

“Hm?” His father barely even lifts his head out of the fridge. “Oh, that? Kinda looks like a pamphlet to me.”

Keith grits his teeth, holding back a snarl. “Yeah, for Altea State, but I never even applied there.”

And that’s when his dad makes a low humming noise, vibrating oddly behind his tight lips as he pushes a hand through his finely-trimmed hair. At least he has the decency to look mildly remorseful. “I might’ve reached out on your behalf, called my old buddy Blaytz over at admissions, and asked him to —”

“Fuck, dad,” Keith growls, slapping the pamphlet back onto the counter.

“Watch that language, kiddo,” the man frowns. “And, alright, I admit that I was overstepping, but just give them a chance, Keith. They’re affordable, they got a good football team, and they’re just an hour away from home.”

“Yeah. Exactly. I don’t wanna be just an hour away from home. I already told you — I wanna be in Daibazaal.”

“Keith,” his dad says, and it sounds well-worn. Like they’ve had this conversation a hundred times before. Maybe they have. Keith can’t be bothered to keep track.

“What?”

“Have you talked to your mother about this yet?”

“I — what does that have to do with —”

“Keith.”

“No, okay?” he snaps, but it’s the way his voice comes out tired and weak that really drives him mad. “I haven’t. She’s been busy, I guess, so we haven’t talked… in a while.”

It settles over the room, like a weight bearing down, and Keith can’t say that it makes the tension any better. It just makes it — different. A crack to the surface. A tug to the fraying edges.

“Those big schools out there are expensive, you know,” his dad reminds, apropos of nothing. “Not if I get recruited.”

“College scouts don’t just hand out scholarships left and right.”

“I’m the best player on the team,” Keith can hear himself getting petulant. “If anyone’s gonna get a scholarship, it’s me.”

With a sigh, his dad turns away from the pantry, brow drawn downward in distress. “I’m not saying you’re not good enough, kiddo,” comes his softened reply, but — like authority — comfort never seems to sit quite right either. He meets Keith over by the counter, brings a hand down on his shoulder. “I just don’t want you getting your hopes up too high. It’s smart to have options. A back-up plan.”
But Keith shrugs away the touch, feeling his muscles clench, his blood run hot. “I’m not going to Altea State,” is his final decree, pivoting swiftly on his heel.

“Hey, hey,” his dad catches him before he leaves. “Clear the table, you hear me?”

He pivots back around, swipes the empty plates off the table, all but hurls them into the sink so that they clatter and clang around, and then he’s stomping up the stairs as loudly as he can.

*But it’ll pass,* his mind taunts, an echo from the past, as he slams his bedroom door so roughly that it nearly rattles clean off its hinges. *It’s just growing pains.*

“Don’t look now,” Pidge mutters around the straw of her iced coffee, clamping the tip of it between her front teeth, “but I think we have a paparazzi situation at two ‘o clock.”

Lance and Hunk both swivel in their seats, craning their necks over their shoulders at the exact same time.

“I literally just said don’t look, weirdos!”

“They’re the ones creeping on us in the middle of a coffeeshop,” Lance argues, “and suddenly we’re the weird ones?”

Huh. *Weird.* Honestly, it’s not a bad way to describe pretty much everything about the situation. That being: the three of them seated in the local Starbucks after school, at their usual table, grumbling over history homework, pelting each other with crumpled up straw wrappers, and doing absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. And yet, somehow, there are eyes — a whole meddlesome pack of them — watching from afar. Their heads are leaning in close as they whisper, all atwitter, and simultaneously glance at their phone screens, almost as if they’re detectives cracking a case.

Strangely enough, Lance has grown somewhat accustomed to this flare-up of attention from his peers — in the halls, in the cafeteria line, even the boys’ restroom, of all places — but right here, in the wild, beyond the school’s gossip-hungry boundaries? It’s just — Well, maybe *weird* isn’t exactly the right word. Maybe it’s more —

Lance’s befuddled eyes single out one of the onlookers, a blonde girl with two braids. They blink back and forth, holding each other’s gazes for a long, deliberate beat, until Lance finally feels uncomfortable enough to offer a flimsy wave, which sends the girl into a tizzy; blushing, and squirming, and whirling around to consult her gang of giggling cohorts.

Okay, yeah, it’s weird. *Definitely* weird.

“Oh god,” Pidge mutters again, “it’s contagious.”

“What is?” asks Hunk.

“Stardom, obviously,” and then she narrows in on Lance, vaguely accusatory. “It’s like Keith’s rubbing off on you.”
“God, I wish he would rub off on me.”

“Dude.”

“Ever since you two were seen leaving that party together —” Here, Pidge provides air quotes. Just in case her mockery needs even more emphasis. “—hashtag-team-klance has been collectively losing their tiny teenaged minds.”

Lance gives a lazy scoff. “C’mon, Pidge, you’re exaggerating.”

“Why else would total strangers be staring at us?”

He drapes an arm around Hunk’s broad shoulders, pressing into his side. “Maybe ‘cause Hunkalicious over here is one sexy son-of-a-gun.”

It makes Hunk light up with the absolute fondest of grins. “Aww, thanks, buddy.”

“Besides, check out those uniforms,” Lance points out, nodding his head back toward the group of admirers. Their outfits are, indeed, identical, each one embellished with the Balmera Prep logo over the chest. “They don’t even go to our school.”

Then Pidge begins nibbling a bit more furiously on her straw, nose scrunching so tight that it makes her glasses fall crooked, saying, “Oh. Right. Kinda forgot to mention — you’ve gone viral.”

“I what?”

“Allura asked me to upload your article to the twitter account the other day,” she explains, and, by way of proof, places her phone in the middle of the table. Lance leans forward, Hunk shortly after, nearly knocking their temples together. With every bird-like ping from Pidge’s phone, the screen comes alive, flashing notifications until Lance feels close to dizzy. “And now every school in town is talking about it.”

Lance, like something blooming enormously from the root, starts to grin.

“So you mean…” he trills, his eyes practically bursting with stars, “I’m famous?”


“Holy shit, that’s — holy shit — d’you think we’ll get a retweet from Ellen?”

“Pidge,” warns Hunk, “you’ve created a monster.”

“No, he’s always been this lame.”

And then, coming up from behind: “Excuse me?”

It’s the girl with blonde braids. She’s standing right over Lance’s shoulder now, biting down on her pink-glossed lip and twiddling her thumbs. The rest of the girls are hovering nearby, like bees to a hive, huddled and simpering.

“Hi, sorry to bug you,” she goes on, “but you’re Lance McClain, right?”

“The one and only,” Lance purrs, flashing a dazzling canine at the crowd of ladies. “And before you ask — no, you’re not dreaming.”

Hunk groans in avid disapproval. Pidge pretends to gag on her coffee.
But the Balmera girls titter happily amongst themselves, absurdly starstruck. “We just had to come over and ask,” one of them steps forward, hands clasped to her chest, “is Keith just as dreamy up close as he looks in the pictures?”

Lance leans in, and tells them, voice low, “Even dreamier.”

“Oh my god,” they giggle and shriek, “that’s so adorable!”

Just like that, they scamper away, with the tiny bell above the door signaling their exit. But when they disperse, one girl is left dawdling behind. Carefully, she steps up to the table. Her dark hair is cut short around her ears, and she’s fiddling a bit timidly at the hem of her uniform sweater.

“Oh, hi,” she begins, soft and honeyed. “I just wanted to say… what you wrote about Keith, well — I thought it was really sweet. And really brave of you to confess your feelings so openly and honestly,” and then she ducks her head a bit, a blush rising to her tanned cheeks. “I know it sounds silly, but it gives me hope that one day I’ll find the love of my life, too.”

Lance blinks at her once, twice, and then manages, “Wow, I, uh — thanks.” The curve of his smile relaxes into something sincere. “I have no doubt you will, um…”

“Shay,” the girl supplies, smiling in return.

“Nice to meet you, Shay,” he says. “And good luck.”

“You too, Lance.”

The bell jingles again, and then Shay is gone, meeting up with her friends right outside the door. Primly, Lance reaches for Pidge’s coffee, and helps himself to a gratuitous slurp.

Pidge snatches it away the moment it touches his puckered lips. “Aren’t you forgetting to autograph their cleavage?” she sniffs.

“Mm,” hums Lance, prodding Hunk’s arm. “Sounds like someone’s a little jelly over there, don’tcha think, Hunk?”

But Hunk doesn’t respond. He doesn’t even move. He’s frozen solid, eyes blown wide, jaw slightly slack, staring at the front door like he’s under a spell.

“Um, Hunk?” says Pidge. “Are you okay?”

A few seconds later, Hunk gives his head a thorough shake, but it doesn’t seem to do much. “Huh? Me?” he stammers, still looking a bit awed and disoriented. “Oh yeah, I’m good, it’s all good —”

“Oh, wait, I get it,” Lance singsongs, being annoyingly childish about it. His brow wiggles knowingly as he follows the direction of Hunk’s gaze over to where the Balmera girls are still gathered outside. Then, with a smirk, “You like Shay, huh?”

“Hey, whooooa — I never said —”

“So you don’t think she’s super cute?”

Hunk’s face, red with heat, is already revealing enough. “I mean, she’s not…” A pause. His entire face twitches. “…not super cute, you know, like — definitely up there on the cuteness scale, like really up there, but —”

“Dude, go talk to her,” urges Lance. “Ask for her number! Something!”
“Noooo, no, no, I can’t —”

“Yes, you can! You’re a total catch!”

“I-I dunno —”

“Hunk. My buddy. My guy,” and Lance has him gripped by the shoulders now, despite Hunk’s best efforts to shrink in on himself. But that blazing blue gaze has him cornered with no hope of escape, somehow frightening him and building him up all at once. “It’s senior year. Now. Or. Never.”

Outside, the girls are chatting, smiling, finishing their coffees without a care.

Inside, Hunk is watching, suffering, drawing in a wavering breath, and then —

“You’re right. Okay? You’re right,” he croaks. “I’m gonna — I’m gonna go do it.”

Lance victory punches the air, practically shoves Hunk out of his seat. “Hell yeah you are, champ, go get ‘er!”

And the rest is like something straight out of a movie. Hunk, being the perfect gentleman, blushing, wringing his hands as he talks. Shay, being adorable, grinning, eyes glowing and besotted. Them, taking out their phones, exchanging information. Then Lance, beaming something smug, rocking so far back onto the hind-legs of his chair it’s a miracle he doesn’t tip backwards.

“You look pretty pleased with yourself,” Pidge calls him out, but smiles in spite of it.

“Course I am,” he says, and flicks the last straw wrapper at Pidge. It hits her squarely on the forehead. “Love is in the air, Pidge. Love is in the air.”

Keith almost doesn’t notice him all the way over there, off to the side, seated on the bottom row of bleachers.

He almost doesn’t. But then he does.

And he doesn’t want to think too much about why he does.

He’d rather chalk it up to the fact that it’s Lance, and he just has that intrinsically obnoxious way of making his presence known. And he’s over there in that shabby denim jacket he always wears. And he’s holding that camera he always carries around. And he’s the only one there in the whole goddamn stadium. And his eyes are vibrant and crystalline as they peek out from behind the camera, twinkling in every shade of blue. Two little orbs of color, mocking the impenetrable gloom of this grey autumn afternoon.

He’s just — there.

And Keith, caught up in all this noticing, almost doesn’t hear the sharp, vicious trill of Kolivan’s whistle, or the growl of his voice as he orders the team to take ten. And he almost falls flat on his
face when Ryan thumps him on the back with an enormously beefy arm, his legs practically liquified after completing an intense set of suicide drills.

He almost decides to ignore it. Almost decides to join his teammates on the sidelines, and guzzle down water with the rest of them.

He almost does. But then he doesn’t.

And, no, he doesn’t want to think too much about that, either.

“Lemme guess,” he says over the quiet crunch-crunch of neatly trimmed grass beneath his cleats. He parks himself a few feet in front of the bleachers, brow quirked, arms crossed. “Research?”

The lens of the camera stares back at him, dark and intimidating; a bottomless chasm he could just trip straight into. “Aw, don’t worry, hotshot,” Lance coos sweetly, “I promise I’m only getting your good side.”

Click, goes the camera.

It catches Keith mid-blink, and he, belatedly, lifts a hand to block his face from view. “Hey,” he tries, but it comes out decidedly whinier than he’d have liked. Through the narrow cracks of his fingers, he can see Lance’s grin spreading to the far corners of his cheeks, bursting right off his lips like it’s bigger than his whole body.

“He’s beauty, he’s grace,” Lance manages around the breathy sound of a chuckle.

“Shut up.”

But he doesn’t exactly mean it, if the subtle slant of his mouth is any indication. He’s smashing his lips together in an admirable attempt to keep them from wiggling out of place and betraying him entirely. Lance looks quite pleased with himself, regardless.

“So,” says Keith, dropping down onto the metal bench, right beside Lance, who’s curling happily over his lap, and skimming through the newest batch of photos, “what are you gonna do with those, anyway?”

“Haven’t decided yet. The possibilities are endless,” Lance hums in faux-consideration. “Frame them? Maybe pawn them off to the highest paying bidder?”

“Oh, hilarious.”

“What, you don’t think I could get some major coin for this if I really wanted to?” Lance taps his finger against the camera screen, zooming in on his fine handiwork. “An ultra-rare, first edition Keith Kogane in all his sweaty, game-faced glory?”

Keith frowns, and mutters a slightly sulky, “I’m not that sweaty.”

“There’s a market for this kinda thing, is all I’m saying.”

“Right.”

Then Lance lifts his head, switching tactics with a wily smirk. “You know that chick Acxa? Wears purple lipstick? Kinda looks like she knows how to kill a man twelve different ways with a hair scrunchie?”

“That’s —” Keith tilts his head, overwhelmed. “—really specific.”
“Well,” Lance says simply, “she keeps a picture of you in her locker.”

At that, Keith’s brow furrows violently, and there’s suddenly a very bitter taste dancing along his tongue, crawling into his throat, *choking*. “There is zero chance that that’s true.”

“I saw what I saw, dude.”

“Yeah, well, you saw wrong,” and then — maybe because this news has him feeling especially churlish — Keith punctuates with a pithy, “*dude.*”

Lance throws him a look. An expectant, mildly confounded look. “Man, you are one tough critic,” he mumbles, giving Keith’s twisted up expression another scrutinizing once-over. Searching for cracks and fissures to tear into, no doubt. “You’re not even, like, the *teeniest* bit flattered?”

Keith doesn’t even flinch under his gaze. “What’s supposed to be flattering about it?”

“I dunno, just —” Lance opens and closes his mouth, floundering and fish-like, for a solid five seconds before he’s saying, “It’s nice to be *liked* sometimes, isn’t it?”

“*Nice,*” Keith echoes, resoundingly deadpan. “Yeah, sure, it’s real *nice* having random people hoard pictures of you in their locker. And whisper about you behind your back. And —” Then he allows it to slip, even though it sounds mean. Even though it *is* mean. “—And write love letters to you in the school newspaper for everyone to read.”

The way Lance abruptly shifts in his peripheral, just tenses up, and crumple his shoulders like his ribs are collapsing inwards on themselves — Keith can’t even watch. He keeps his eyes forward, hooked on the horizon, where sunlight just barely tapers through the clouds, and gilds the field in dull light. He can hear Lance breathe. In slow, out slow. The sound of it opens up some indiscernible cavern in Keith’s gut.

“Okay. Ouch,” Lance says at long last. “I mean, *fair*, but also — *ouch.*”

When Keith finally braves a look at Lance, he expects to find something terrible and wounded there, but he doesn’t. It’s some kind of audacity, reaching up through him until it flashes out his eyes, gone hard with steel. There’s a set in his jaw that wasn’t there before, and a steadiness to his voice that Keith can feel down to the bone.

“So I guess we’re doing this,” Lance goes on, low, as if he’s trying to talk himself into it. Or maybe out of it. “We’re *really* gonna go there, huh?”

The hollows in Keith’s stomach stretch wider and wider. “Just forget I brought it up.”

“No, c’mon,” Lance insists, daring him with his blue-eyed gaze. “I got nothing to hide. I already laid it all out there, so if you *really* wanna get into the nitty-gritty —”

“I don’t wanna get into anything.”

“Why, because it makes you — uncomfortable?”

“Because you don’t even *know* me, Lance, so how the hell could you know how you *feel* about me?”

The words tumble out, just like that, in one disastrous rush, stealing the air right out of Keith’s lungs, and the mettle from Lance’s eyes.
“You just think you know. Just like everyone else at this school. The guy you wrote about in your article — he’s the star player. The team leader. Perfect student, perfect son, and — perfect boyfriend. *Apparently.*” A pause. A sigh. And then: “But I’m not — maybe I’m not what everyone wants me to be. Maybe I’m not —” He cuts himself off. Speaks soft, “—Doesn’t matter. People are gonna think what they wanna think. Because that’s all they care about. That’s all they can see.”

“No,” Lance breathes, even softer, “that’s all you *let* people see.”

Keith stares at him until he swears the earth shatters underfoot.

Lance says, feeling unsure, and then swallowing it back down, “I get it, but I mean — what d’you expect us to do, read your mind? Nobody’s ever gonna see *anything* if you don’t let anyone in.”

“If you don’t let anyone in, then you can’t be upset when they leave.”

“If,” Lance corrects him firmly, pointedly, all at once. “I think you mean — *if* they leave.”

The color blue holds Keith hostage, right there in the empty space between their gazes. And Keith feels so crowded by the brunt of it that he has to stubbornly fight the pulsing desire to look away, despite how it trembles through every inch of him like an inborn trait. A bad habit. Because he knows, unfortunately, what that dangerous *gaze* is capable of — how keenly it can pick things apart, bit by bit, down to the depths, and how attune it must be to every shudder of Keith’s expression. Valiantly, Keith tries to steady it, and struggles against the vulnerability aching behind his eyes, coming undone like a loose thread. It’s all right there, exposed and tender like a scar, and Lance could so easily just reach out and *grab* it if he —

A loud, metallic *clang* has the two of them recoiling, lightning-quick. To Keith’s left, a football bounces off the bleachers, and then rolls away into the grass.

Then, over by the edge of the field, James is giving them an unconcerned shrug. “Hand slipped,” he drawls. “My bad.”

Lance sighs irritably.

“Mind coming back to practice now, captain?” James calls out again. “Some of us have a championship to prepare for.”

Only then, in the fracture of that moment, does Keith become viscerally aware of how closely they’d been sitting. Bodies angled toward one another, kneecaps nearly brushing, gazes fixed and entwining. And it had happened without conscious effort, without any thought at all, which is maybe the most startling part about it.

And he still doesn’t want to think about *why*.

“Keith,” he thinks he hears Lance say. Thinks he feels the brush of fingertips reaching for his wrist. Thinks he pulls away, stands on his aching legs, and then heads for the field.
Lance trudges into AP Bio, places a small styrofoam to-go box quite delicately on top of the lab bench, and then slides wordlessly into his chair. *That’s it.*

Keith peeks up from his textbook, posture hunched like a wet cat. “What’s that?” he asks.

“For you,” Lance answers unhelpfully.

A crease forms in the center of Keith’s brow. Then, very hesitantly, he’s prodding the box with the butt of his pencil, lifting the lid as if it’s seconds away from clamping down, and snapping his writing utensil in two. A warm, heavenly aroma wafts from the opening. Keith withdraws his pencil. The lid falls back down.

“Is that a grilled cheese?”

“An *apology* grilled cheese.”

“You brought me —” Keith starts to say, but he can’t even finish it. Lance watches as his posture slowly unfurls. “What are you apologizing for?”

Lance huffs, lungs deflating. “For embarrassing you. For *assuming* things about you. For being, probably, the sloppiest version of myself *ever* last weekend, and making you sleep on the floor of your own bedroom,” he gets out in one breath. “Honestly, take your pick.”

Keith is eyeing the to-go box with a bit more concentration than seems absolutely necessary, and Lance can’t quite tell if he’s pondering something of great importance, or just really hungry.

“Basically, what I’m trying to get at here is that — you’re right. I don’t really know you. But I think, maybe, we could try to change that, to make sure that every word I write about you from this moment forward will be nothing but pure, unadulterated *realness,*” and then, as an afterthought, he tacks on, “I’ll also try to cut back on the number of times I compare your eyes to ‘limpid pools of starlight’, but there’re only so many things in the universe that *sparkle* like that, so y’know. I’ll have to get creative with that one.”

Lance can’t help but think he’s doing an awful lot of talking. Did someone forget to flip the off switch? Then he thinks, horrified: does his mouth even have an off switch?

Still, he’s rambling, and spewing, and saying, “And just to be clear — in the spirit of all this real talk — I’m not in this for the tweets. Or the likes. Or to — I dunno, bask in your secondhand popularity or whatever. That stuff’s pretty cool, I guess, but that’s — not what I’m in it for.”

Keith is looking at him now, his expression all open and bewildered, and framed by fallen hair strands, feathering out against the crest of his cheekbones. Lance stares a moment longer than he should, tracing and retracing those fine lines and angles until it’s like he’s drifting outside of himself with nothing but a map of Keith’s face to guide him back. Lance wonders if Keith knows, if he has any idea how hopelessly *hooked* he is. Can he read it off his face like a picture book?

“The truth? Off the record?” Lance can feel the pressure of it racing up his throat, nudging at his lips, coming out in a gust, “I just kinda want an excuse to spend more time with you.” And then, quickly, voice cracking: “For research.”

Dizzily, he revels in the way Keith is watching him, all attention, getting lost in the moment before Keith’s barely-there grin is breaking over him like the sea at high tide.

“I’m free this weekend,” says Keith. “For research.”
And then his eyes do something breathtaking, glinting at the corners, and glowing like — yeah, okay, there’s no way around it.

They’re goddamn starlight.

As the final bell of the week chimes ceremoniously overhead, students scatter out the door, and take to the hallway with gusto. Not much is left in the wake of their raging weekend fever — a few desks bumped askew, some abandoned papers fluttering to the floor as if they were tumbleweeds brushing the earth in a desolate wasteland.

“Keith,” Shiro calls from the front of the classroom, “you mind hanging back for a minute?”

With his bag hitched over his shoulder, and one foot already breaching the doorway, Keith turns, makes his way over, and asks, “What’s up?”

Shiro is standing there. Just standing there, hands behind his back, grinning — beaming, more like — maybe even brighter than the droves of teenagers currently frolicking through the halls in salvation. Keith takes it all in. Lifts a single brow. But before he can even think to question it, Shiro is announcing:

“I have something for you.”

Then he retreats back to his desk, and begins rummaging through a thick manila folder, one sheet of paper at a time. And the anticipation of it, every flick of his finger, is agonizing.

“Hopefully it’s an A on yesterday’s pop quiz,” says Keith, taking a tentative stride forward.

Shiro chuckles at this, which does absolutely nothing to stifle Keith’s curiosity, and tells him, “You’ll like this a little better, trust me.”

Keith waits, breath stagnant in his lungs, and decides to trust him.

“You said you applied to Galra Tech, right?” he hears Shiro ask, and Keith is already feeling the curiosity boil over into nerves, so he opens his mouth to speak, gives up, and simply nods instead. Then Shiro continues, “Well, I’ve been doing some research, and it looks like they still have a scholarship available.”

From the folder, Shiro brandishes a whole packet of papers, stapled at the corner, with an official-looking cover page and everything. Keith takes it into his hands, and reads off the front, “The Zarkon Foundation Scholars Program?”

“It’s for students who have shown outstanding academic achievement,” Shiro explains, taking a seat on the edge of his desk. “The heads of each department are only allowed to submit one applicant a year,” and his gaze is warm and steady as it settles on Keith. “And I’m submitting you.”

“Mr. S, I — I know I’m not your best student.”
“Maybe you don’t have the highest grades in the class, but you’re not far off, Keith,” says Shiro. “If you really apply yourself for the rest of the semester, then there’s no doubt in my mind you’ll be able to pull ahead.”

Keith keeps scanning over the printed text in front of him, again and again until it beats like a pulse. Until he’s sure he’ll see it emblazoned behind his lids when he falls asleep tonight.

“And I can’t think of anyone more deserving of a bright future than you.”

At that, Keith glances up, eyes wide. “Thank you,” spills out of his lips in a soft breath, fingers pinching the edges of the packet until they crease. “Thank you, thank you. I won’t let you down, Mr. S.”

“I know you won’t,” Shiro says without any hesitation. “You can do this.”

And right now, with his future in his hands, and a swell in his chest that dares to feel a lot like hope, Keith really, truly believes it.

Shiro calls out again when Keith reaches the doorway. “And Keith?”

He stops. Turns.

“You did get an A on that pop quiz,” Shiro grins. “Nice work.”

It’s going to be a fantastic weekend.

Chapter End Notes

Could it be? Are those OUR boys?? Making progress and positive strides toward building a trust-based relationship that could potentially lead to romance?????? Delicious.

This is the beginning of the "friendship arc", and I'm super excited for them to get into their typical shenanigans. :)

Thank you for reading, everyone!!! I know I say this every chapter, but I'm blown away by your kind words on a daily basis, and it really makes sharing this fic with you such a joy <3

TUMBLR
TWITTER
Saturday rolls around, and Keith finds himself one step — literally one step — away from fleeing his house undetected until that perpetually squeaky floorboard at the bottom of the stairs decides to be the very bane of his existence. It whines under the pressure of his foot in the most betraying way possible. He stops dead in his tracks, and holds his breath as he hopes to high heavens, and to every deity that seemingly has it out for him, not to see —

“Where you off to, kiddo?”

— his father looming in the doorway to the living room. Terrific. He’s there faster than Keith can wince, or empty his lungs, or scamper back up the stairs and risk trying his bedroom window instead, which, admittedly, does cross his mind for an impulsive moment. Because a twenty-foot plunge into a row of prickly hedges sounds infinitely better than facing his father after an entire week’s worth of stubborn cold-shouldering. It’s been a fairly easy feat — thanks to all the extra practices Kolivan has been scheduling lately, now that the team is officially en route to playoffs — but the odds were bound to work against him eventually. Case in point: right here, right now, with Keith looking caught and disgruntled at the base of the stairwell.

He sets his jaw, lowers his gaze. “Going out,” comes his curt response.

A skeptical brow crawls an inch up his father’s forehead.

“To a friend’s place,” Keith amends.

Two inches.

And then, begrudgingly, under his breath, “To Lance’s place.”

“Ahhh,” his father practically sings.

“Dad.”

But his grin just keeps inflating — bigger and bigger like it’s being pumped up with hot air. “Well, how about that.”

“Stop,” grunts Keith.

“He seems like a nice kid, if you ask me.”

“No one’s asking.”

With that, Keith starts toward the door again — squeaky floor be damned — and barely gets his hand on the knob by the time his dad is meeting him there, leaning up against the frame, subtly but effectively blocking his means of escape.

“Now don’t get all wound up about it. I’m only teasing,” the man tells him, chuckling quietly. “I
think it’s really great, you know.”

And that, unsurprisingly, earns a scowl from Keith.

“You won’t be in high school for much longer, so it’s about time you started enjoying it,” his dad
go on. “I’m glad to see you finally getting yourself out there, spending time off the football field for
a change. Just having some fun, making memories with your —” but then that annoyingly waggish
smile makes a comeback, and the pitch of his voice drops at least a full octave as he says,
“—friends.”

“I’m leaving now,” Keith declares at once, bristling by the second, and gives the doorknob a forceful
tug.

Just a sliver of late morning sunlight slips past the door before his father is shutting it again, saying,
“Well, hang on, before you go — you think you’ll be home for dinner?”

“Yeah, probably,” Keith lets his impatience bleed into his voice, and does very little to disguise it. As
if he even could. “Why?”

“It’s just that I got the night off tonight,” the man explains. His smile has settled, softer now. “I was
thinking we could stay in, order a pizza or something — like old times. What do you say, huh?”

Old times. More like ancient times, Keith thinks grimly. Extinct times. Times that, when he dares to
think back on them, don’t even feel completely real anymore. Pizza boxes, and rental movies, and
cans of sugary soda that Keith was usually never allowed to have past five ‘o clock. Those nights
when they’d fall asleep together on the couch, with Keith curled into his father’s broad chest,
television still whispering in the background and casting shadows on the wall, and his mother
coming home late — tired and spent after a long day at work — to a spectacular mess in the living
room. Or a crisp summer breeze prickling his skin as he clings to his father’s leather jacket on the
back of his chromed Ducati, feeling the rush of the entire world passing them by, and then coming
home only to be sent to his room while his mother yells ‘he’s too young to be riding that damn
thing’, and his father yells back ‘when are you gonna learn how to lighten up’.

“Sure,” Keith replies suddenly, or just thinks he does.

But his father looks pleased, and maybe that’s kind of worth it. “It’s a plan, then?”

“Yeah.” A beat. “Sounds good, Dad.”

He tries for the door again and, this time, his father steps aside, letting him pass. Keith is already
hopping on his bike, and pulling the clutch when he hears, from the doorway:

“See you tonight. And tell Lance I said hello.”

The McClain household is nestled at the end of a very small, very quaint cul-de-sac, with a brown
picket fence surrounding the yard, and a big swinging bench on the front porch. Little gnomes and
ceramic animals sit amongst the garden, and the mailbox at the end of the driveway looks like it had been hand-painted years and years ago with plenty of love and laughter.

Keith imagines, all of a sudden, that it’s the kind of house where people sit out on that front porch and sip lemonade. Or roll around the yard, chasing fireflies on sticky summer nights. A house that always smells like cookies or cinnamon, and sounds like wind chimes or a crackling fireplace.


But as Keith rings the doorbell, feet planted on a bright yellow welcome mat that reads ‘bienvenido a casa!’ , waiting for Lance to appear in the doorway, looking homeborn and outrageously happy — it all sort of hits him in a funny way. It twists in his gut, and stews in his blood. He stands there — feeling heavy, and out of place, like a disruption — and wonders, all of a sudden, if it’s possible to miss something he’s never really had.

Something like this: warm. Comfortable. Inviting.

All his wondering comes to an abrupt halt when the front door swings open, revealing the round, freckled face of a young boy. Keith’s gaze has to drop at least a full foot to make eye contact with him, and notices right away just how familiar those blue eyes are. And those freckles. And that slim, willowy build.

“Um,” says Keith, “hi.”

The boy squints at him, hard, and asks, “Who are you?”

“Keith.”

“I don’t know a Keith,” the boy replies simply, closing the door just a fraction of an inch. “I’m not allowed to let strangers into the house.”

Head tilting, and arms crossing, Keith tells him, maybe a bit too firmly, “I’m here to see Lance.” And then, after a few passing moments of nothing: “Is he — here?”

The boy’s gaze drags up and down Keith’s entire body, his head bobbing with the motion. “You’re really tall,” he decides at once.

Keith twitches awkwardly. “Thanks.”

“Do you go to high school?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you dating Lance?”

“Am I —” Keith chokes, and definitely does not squawk, “—what?”

“Is that why you’re here?” the boy presses, suspicious. “Do you wanna date him?”

“No, I’m just — we aren’t even —”

“You blink a lot when you’re nervous.”

Keith blinks — damn it — and then demands, again, “Is Lance here or not?”

“Uncle Lance!” the boy pivots around, back into the house, screeching with all the power in his tiny
lungs, “There’s a boy at the door who’s trying to date you!”

There isn’t much Keith can do except stand there and splutter helplessly — and blink some more, apparently — before he hears a distant thunk, a chorus of girlish giggles, and then a wild stampede of footsteps clobbering down the hall.

“Sylvie, what are you —”

And it’s then that Lance comes skidding around the corner in his sock-clad feet, eyes bulging, nearly sliding and smacking right into the wall when he sees none other than Keith idling in the entryway. With some sort of strangled yelp, he flails, catches himself on the banister, and clings there for dear life, all red-faced and disheveled, with a glittery hair clip pinning his bangs off his forehead.

“Keith!” he somehow manages not to scream. “Uh, hey! You’re here!”

Keith stares, taking it all in. Someone shrieks in the distance, and Lance’s nephew just keeps squinting at him, and Lance is still here, half-flopped over the banister like it’s a completely logical place to be hanging around, and Keith’s brain snags, and his mouth goes: “You did say Saturday, right?”

“Yes, I did, I — shit —” Belatedly, Lance slaps a palm over his face just as his nephew begins snickering uncontrollably. “—I mean, shoot, I — sorry, I totally forgot to text you. It’s been —”

Another unearthly shriek pierces the sound barrier. “—kind of a crazy morning.”

“Oh,” mutters Keith. “Well, I can —”

From somewhere in the house, there’s a jarring crash.

“Nads! Hula-hoops are an outside toy!” Lance shouts desperately over his shoulder. The reminder is met with even more commotion. He straightens up, sighs enormously. “Uh — sorry. Again. I gotta go see if she’s —”

“I’ll go check on her,” his nephew mumbles.

“You sure, bud?”

“Yeah, I don’t mind. You can stay here and talk to your boyf —”

“Ooookay!” Lance busts out laughing, sounding hysterical and maybe a little panicked, as he grabs the young boy by his scrawny shoulders, and shoos him along toward the hallway. “Time to go make sure your sister didn’t sever any limbs! Yay! So much fun!”

When his nephew shuffles out of the room, Lance whirls back around, rocking on his heels. “Kids these days, am I right?” he chokes out sheepishly. “Always saying the… craziest things.”

His sweater is rumpled, and his smile is lopsided, and his socks definitely don’t match, and that glittery clip is still tangled in the front of his hair. And, at the sight of it, Keith feels a pang of something in his chest. Something sharp and also, honestly, kind of lovely.

“You, uh,” he says, gesturing vaguely to his head, “got something…”

“Huh?” squeaks Lance.

In a single, loping stride, Keith is stitching up the distance between them — close enough to hear a fierce puff of breath hit the back of Lance’s throat, and stay caught there — hand moving slow, too
slow, as it inches upward. This close, he’s able to see every freckle, every fluttering lash, and the rush of pink that plumes across Lance’s cheeks like spilled paint at the exact moment when Keith’s fingers sift into his hair. It’s soft as silk, absurdly so, but Keith doesn’t allow himself to dwell on this arbitrary — and, admittedly, pleasant — revelation for too long before he’s plucking out the clip.

Gently, Lance sways on his feet, and Keith thinks about reaching out again to steady him. Instead he just hands over the hair accessory with a quick, “Here.”

“Oh,” breathes Lance, sounding like his lungs have inexplicably sprung a leak. He takes the hair clip between his fingers, awkwardly, like he’s momentarily forgotten how to use them. “Thanks. I was, uh — wondering where that went.”

“Look,” Keith begins, “if this is a bad time, I can —”

“No, no, it’s just —” But the words shrivel up on his tongue before they can slip past his lips. His nose crinkles a bit, and he scrubs a palm over his nape. “—I’m really sorry, man. My parents had to run some errands, and my sister, she’s — kinda going through some stuff. So she and her kids have been staying here while she, y’know, figures that stuff out. But she had to work today, so — that leaves me in charge of kid-wrangling duty.”

“Stuff,” parrots Keith. “Stuff like…”

“Oh,” Lance mutters, throwing a hasty glance at the hallway to make sure the coast is clear before he lowers his voice, and says, “divorce. It’s been pretty rough. Y’know. For the kids and all.”

Keith feels another pang in his chest. Still sharp, but not even mildly lovely. Then he just nods. “Yeah. I know.”

“Right. Yeah, of course you —” Lance chomps down on the inside of his cheek when Keith’s eyebrow quirks at him. “—Right.”

Neither of them really know what to say next. Or do, even though Keith’s options are fairly limited. It’s either say goodbye, leave Lance to his babysitting, and reschedule for another time. Or it’s continue standing here like an idiot, with nothing to say, while he pretends he can’t still feel the soft fluffiness of Lance’s hair brushing his fingertips. Keith isn’t particularly pleased with these options, if he’s being honest.

“Uncle Lance!”

The young boy scampers back into the room, bouncing around his uncle’s legs.

“What’s up, my dude?” Lance asks, morphing his expression into something cheerful. The perfect pokerface. “Did all our troops survive?”

His nephew draws in a massive breath, and says, “Addie put bubblegum in Nadia’s hair and now she’s trying to bite off Addie’s pigtails with her teeth. I tried to stop her, but then she bit my pinkie. See?”

Lance, carefully, bends over to see. He examines the wounded finger with a shake of his head. “Your sister is a terrifying little savage, did you know that?”

“Duh.”

Chuckling, Lance pulls himself up, and claps his hands together with a definitive, “Okay, looks like I gotta do some damage control here.” Then he’s swiveling back to Keith with a grand, swooping arm
“Uh, Sylvio, entertain our guest! Dazzle him with your charm and wit!”

The boy frowns. “Do I have to?”

“Yes,” says Lance. “‘Cause you have to listen to me.”

“Why?”

“‘Cause I’m an adult.”

“So?”

“So I’m wise and full of knowledge.”

At this, Sylvio rolls his eyes, and, at that, Lance ruffles the boy’s hair. Then he’s darting down the hallway, leaving nothing but stiff silence in his wake. Keith quietly clears his throat. Sylvio takes a seat on the bottom stair. The house creaks. It’s the polar opposite of entertaining and dazzling.

“Do you play sports?” asks Sylvio, eyes scoping out the trim of Keith’s letterman jacket.

“Uh, yeah,” Keith answers. “Football.”

“Oh.”

Sylvio plops his chin onto his knees, staring dismally at his small, wiggling toes, and so Keith tries, “Do you play?”

“I’m only allowed to be on swim team. Mom says football is too dangerous.” And then, almost too soft to hear, the boy grumbles, “But I bet Dad would’ve let me play.”

And, goddamn, if Keith doesn’t feel that like a sucker-punch to the gut. Like a splinter to his soul. Like every bad memory of sitting at the kitchen table and being told by his parents that they aren’t going to be a family anymore. He hadn’t really understood back then, and, at times, it’s like he understands it even less now. But, here, looking at Sylvio with his tiny fists balled up tight, and his lips downturned, and his eyes on the verge of going glossy, Keith thinks that — he understands something, at least.

“Do you know how to throw a football?”

His voice sounds strange and foreign in the lingering space between them, but it makes Sylvio look at him with those big blue eyes. Shake his head.

“I could teach you,” offers Keith, quiet, unassuming, “if you want.”

That’s all it takes for Sylvio to perk up, and nod his head so emphatically that it makes Keith light up with a smile.
At least an hour had to’ve passed by the time Lance finally gets the girls to settle down with a movie, and then, from the kitchen window, spots Keith in the backyard.

He’s out there with Sylvio, who looks so thrilled he might just burst every time he flings the football across the yard, and Keith catches it easily, like he was born to, sending it back with a grin and a shout of praise. Lance watches, feeling stupidly warm and tingly down to his toes, not even realizing how aggressively he’s gripping the edge of the counter until his knuckles start turning white because — Keith is in the backyard.

Keith is in his backyard.

It’s mind-boggling on multiple fronts, but the one that really sends Lance’s poor heart into a tailspin is that it’s a perfectly lovely Saturday afternoon, and Lance is stuck with a bunch of rambunctious children, and Keith could probably be anywhere he wants right now, but he’s here. Playing catch with Lance’s ten-year-old nephew, and being unfairly good-looking while he does it, might Lance add.

He slips out back without anyone noticing, crunching his way through grass and dead leaves, climbing into the old tire swing that hangs from a sturdy oak tree. In the bronze afternoon light, he catches himself smiling something dopey and lazy, so endeared that the rise of it threatens to spill over and onto his dangling legs. I’m a goner, Lance thinks it, and knows it, and feels it with every hitch of his breath, and flutter of his chest.

“Hey.”

Lance gets himself a bit distracted, but promptly snaps back to reality when Keith walks over, taking a seat against the trunk of the tree. Sylvio is still out in the middle of the yard, determined to make the football spin on the tip of his index finger like the pros on TV.

“Looks like you got some competition out there, hotshot,” says Lance.

And it makes Keith huff this gorgeous little chuckle in response. “He actually has a pretty good arm.”

“Thanks for staying,” Lance tells him. “I bet you probably weren’t expecting to get dragged into babysitting.”

“It’s fine. I don’t mind.”

“But seriously, y’know? I mean, feels like it’s been forever since I saw him in this good a mood.” His eyes find his nephew, still attempting tricks with that football. “After everything went down, he started getting kinda… distant. Makes sense, I guess, but none of us really know the best way to help him. This is all pretty much uncharted territory in the McClain family.”

Keith nods, just barely. And it makes Lance worry that maybe he’s gone and said something that tweaked some kind of nerve, but then Keith is replying calmly, “Just listen to him. Be there for him.” He pauses, only for a second, then adds, “And if he wants to play football, let him play football.”

“Yeah,” Lance says. It comes out like a whisper, and he doesn’t really know why. “I’ll let my sister know.”

“What’s with that look?” asks Keith.

Look? Lance hadn’t even been aware that he’s giving any sort of look. But he must be giving a look because now he can suddenly feel it melting over his expression like hot oil, just as dopey and starry-
eyed as before. Christ. Such a goner.

“Nothing,” he recovers quickly. “Just — thanks for staying.”

Something tugs at Keith’s lips, urging them faintly upwards. “You already said that,” he reminds.

“I know, but still. Thanks.”

Then, Keith smiles all the way, and Lance has to kick his dangling legs a little bit just to get rid of that pesky shivery sensation that goes shooting up his spine.

“Well?” he hears himself saying. “You just gonna sit there or are you gonna put those beefy quarterback arms to use and gimme a push?”

Another one of those gorgeous chuckles, and Keith starts getting on his feet. “I thought I was done babysitting for the day.”

“Oh, good one, funny guy.”

So, maybe Lance should’ve thought this one through some more because, all at once, it becomes very clear that he simply cannot handle the way Keith settles in behind him, one hand on the tire, one on the small of his back, and breathes against the nape of his neck to ask: “How high you wanna go?”

It’s a little bit husky, and, honestly, a little bit unreasonable how he makes every word out of his goddamn mouth sound so sexy.

“Surprise me,” Lance chokes.

And then he immediately regrets it when Keith sends him off with such an enormous shove that it feels as if the swing is about to fly right off the branch. Flustered and shrieking, he clings to the tire with all his might, buries his face into the crook of his elbow, legs flailing uselessly.

“Keith!” he squeals.

The response is laughter — the loud, bellowing, full-bodied kind. Lance’s stomach swoops for a completely different reason, now. Cool air hits his burning cheeks. The swing sways back, and Keith catches him by the waist, giving him another push.

“Keith, oh my god, stop!”

But he doesn’t sound like he wants Keith to stop. At all. Or ever.

__________________________________________

“Have you really read all of these?”

He sounds a bit incredulous — and justifiably so — because right there in front of him, against the far wall of Lance’s cluttered bedroom, is a massive floor-to-ceiling bookshelf, and it looks close to
bursting, meticulously packed to the brim with every possible title and author that Keith recognizes. And many that he doesn’t. Some books have more noticeable wear and tear than others, but each one appears to have been loved and cared for at one point, given how tenderly and cozily they’ve all been tucked away into their rightful place.

Behind him, Lance flops over onto his back, head hanging off the end of the bed as he fixes Keith with an upside-down glare. “First of all, the fact that you’re even trying to insult my literary cred with that tone is, frankly, sacrilege. What exactly do you take me for, huh? Some kinda fake fan?”

“Second of all,” says Keith, with an amused quiver of his lip, “I don’t have a tone.”

“Third of all, way to steal my second of all,” Lance sniffs haughtily. “And fourth of all, yes, I have. Every single one.”

Keith plucks one of the books off the shelf, examines the spine’s tattered joints, and accuses softly, lightheartedly, “Bookworm.”

“I prefer cultured and scholarly, thank you very much.”

Then, as Keith turns over his shoulder, another easy quip poised for flight on the tip of his tongue, he finds that Lance has rolled himself right-side up again, only his cheeks are still flushed and rosy from laying upside-down, and the curled edges of his grin are pushing against two tiny dimples that Keith is sure he’s never really noticed before, and it’s almost like he’s glowing blue, half-doused in the pale light of the lava lamp on his bedside table, and he just looks so very —

_Cultured and scholarly_, Keith’s mind interrupts itself with a hint of rabid urgency.

Yes. Right. _Exactly_ that.

So.

Anyway, moving on —

Somehow, Lance manages to tilt his head just so, and catch a glimpse of the book cover in Keith’s hands. _Catcher In the Rye_, by J.D. Salinger, with its spine cracked, pages wrinkled, and probably highlighted to smithereens on the inside.

“Should’ve seen that one coming,” Lance teases. “Holden Caulfield is like your spirit animal, dude. I could totally see you stomping around town in a hideous red hat, calling people phonies.”

Keith opens the book, skimming a page at random. There are messy handwritten notes crammed into the margins. “I’ve never read it,” he muses aloud.

“Wait, seriously? Then how’d you pass freshman English?” His entire expression drops, a flicker of momentary rage passing through him like a bullet. “If you say Sparknotes, so help me —”

“No, it —” Keith stops, mostly to cut himself off from saying whatever reckless thing he was about to let loose, but also to make his way over to the bed. He sits on the edge of it, turning the book over and over in his hands. “—that was right after my parents split up. Mr. S cut me a lot of slack that semester. Too much slack, probably.”

See, even just talking about it leaves him feeling dangerously exposed and _seen_, which are things he’s been feeling far too often lately, and with far too little power to keep it from happening. Like parts of him are being pinched, and plucked, and probed. But Lance, scooting himself a little closer across the mattress, has his gaze all steady and soft; not calculating or dissecting like Keith knows it
can be. He isn’t investigating or taking notes as if Keith’s issues were just another chapter in one of his novels where he can scribble evaluations in the margins until he runs out of room. No. Right now, Lance is listening, all heart.

“Well, you should read it some day,” Lance decides brightly. “It’s actually really good. Angst, loss, teenage rebellion. Y’know. All that fun stuff.”

“Yeah, sounds like a blast,” snorts Keith.

“But it could have a happy ending. Who knows.”

“Wouldn’t you know?”

“Nah,” Lance shrugs. “I didn’t finish it.”

Keith turns to give him a furrowed brow. “I thought you weren’t a fake fan.”

“Hey, that doesn’t count, okay?” he almost whines. “I never read the last chapter.”

“You mean — ever?”

Lance laughs a little, like maybe he gets this kind of reaction a lot, and he’s used to it now. “I don’t like endings,” he explains, so simply, so plainly. “I’m more of a ‘to be continued’ kinda guy.”

Keith is baffled. Truly baffled. “But don’t you wanna know how some of them end?”

“Maybe sometimes,” says Lance, considering. “But other times it’s more exciting to — I dunno — come up with your own version of the story.”


“Am not!”

Eventually, as the sun starts to set beyond the windows, and Lance’s lava lamp starts dancing in slow-motion, they find themselves sprawled out on Lance’s bed. They take turns choosing a book off the shelf, and Lance goes on and on about the characters he knows as well as family, the stories, and the romances, and the fantastical adventures that sound like visions out of a dream. And he speaks with such exuberance, such unbridled passion, that Keith can’t quite tell what’s real and what’s been spun from his own imagination. He’s so bright that it’s hard to look at him. But it’s even harder not to.

They carry on like this until the sound of Lance’s parents returning home startles them back to reality. The kids are bouncing around again, and Lance’s mother invites Keith to stay for dinner. He accepts without a second thought because everything about today feels so warm, and comfortable, and inviting. So he pulls out his phone to let his dad know he’ll be bailing on their plans.

Another time, then, is the text response he receives about a minute later.

Then, after that: Have fun.
Just for the record, Keith has absolutely zero desire to attend the Halloween bonfire.

 Mostly because — in his totally unbiased opinion — it’s one of Altea High’s lamer annual traditions, where students gather like herds of sheep to the local park, dressed in either their spookiest getup or something a little too inappropriate for normal school hours, and spend the evening carving pumpkins, gorging themselves on s’mores, and, well — that’s about it. Keith has never been, has only ever seen pictures the following morning on Facebook, but he thinks — again, unbiased — that the whole thing sounds pretty unappealing.

But then his phone starts buzzing, and Lance’s name lights up across his screen, big and blaring and boisterous, and all Keith can do is sigh.

Because that’s the thing about Lance — he happens to have a lot of desire to attend the Halloween bonfire.

With Keith.

Which is, y’know — shocker.

“Hey,” grunts Keith, holding his phone to his ear.

“Come to the bonfire tonight,” Lance says instead of a greeting.

“I can’t make it.”

“You already have plans?”

“No, I just don’t wanna go.”

“So what’re you gonna do instead, huh?” Lance’s disapproval is practically audible through the receiver. “Sit at home, alone, with too much candy, and watch the same dumb horror movie marathon that’s been replaying on TV all month?”

Keith glares at the lady screaming bloody murder on his television screen, then at the fun-sized Snickers bar in his hand, and answers, very defensively, “No.”

“I can hear the rustle of empty candy wrappers from here, Kogane.”

Suddenly, the doorbell rings, and Keith startles at the reminder. It’s Halloween night. The sun is one flicker of blood orange away from going down completely. He swipes the bowl of candy off the table, and makes his way to the front of the house.

“Look, Lance, just let it go,” he grumbles dismissively. “It’s not really my thing.”

“Okay, fair, but what if —”

“I’m hanging up on you now.”

“Rude!”

He can hear the outraged screech of Lance’s voice even as he yanks the phone away from his ear, and ends the call. In the same motion, he’s whipping open the front door, welcoming in a flurry of nighttime breeze, and extending the candy bowl out toward — Lance, Hunk, and Pidge.
“Trick-or-treat!” the three of them cheer in rowdy unison.

Keith flinches a little. Or maybe a lot. “What the hell.”

If Keith didn’t know them the way he’s already beginning to really know them, then he’d probably be more surprised to find them gathered here, unannounced, on his front porch. But, well, this is his actual life now, apparently. And just to add another level of absurdity to the whole situation, they’re dressed in matching costumes. Cat costumes. Homemade by the looks of it. Denim jeans, zip-up hoodies with voluminous fur trim sewn around the hoods to resemble what Keith assumes to be a lion’s mane. Then, to top it all off, the real kicker: three pairs of cat ear headbands — blue for Lance, yellow for Hunk, and green for Pidge.

“But mostly treat,” Lance chimes in, grinning, making the thin black lines on his cheeks go all squiggly and — oh. Whiskers. Those are definitely supposed to be whiskers. “‘Cause that’s what you’re in for tonight, my guy.”

“What the hell,” Keith mutters again because, honestly, there isn’t anything better to say.

“PayDays and Whoppers?” comes Pidge’s critical scoff as she digs furiously through Keith’s candy bowl. “What kind of evil hellspawn are you?”

With a huff, he pulls the bowl away from her grappling fingers. “These aren’t for you.”

“Damn right they aren’t. Good stuff’s inside, right?”

“You’re —”

But she’s already scuttling through the doorway, squeezing past Keith with ease, and navigating her way into the kitchen. Hunk does the same, only he pauses long enough to give Keith a friendly pat on the shoulder, and then calls out, “I will definitely eat those Whoppers if nobody else wants ’em.”

There’s some rummaging around, a lively “a-ha!” from Pidge, and that’s when Keith knows they’ve discovered his stash.

“I thought you guys were going to the bonfire,” he says.

“We are,” Lance steps inside, and closes the door behind him. “But y’know what they say — four cats are better than three.”

“I already told you I don’t wanna go.”

“Yeah, but you’re only saying that ‘cause you don’t realize how much fun you’ll be missing!”

“I don’t even have a costume.”

A mistake, a big one, because then Lance starts beaming so slyly that Keith feels a strong knee-jerk reaction to bolt. “I had a funny feeling that might be the case,” he chirps, swinging his bag off his shoulder, and rooting around in it. “Which is why Lancey-Lance, as usual, is coming in clutch.”

Keith’s eyes blow impossibly wide. “Whatever you’re about to do —”

“I know it’s in here somewhere…”

“—don’t.”

“Gotcha!” Lance cheers at the same time he reveals another pair of cat ears — fuzzy, red, and
ridiculous. His grin is all teeth, all danger. “Here, kitty, kitty.”

Horror burns like a flame behind Keith’s glare as he snarls, “No way. In hell.”

“Oh, c’mon!”

“No.”

“It’s Halloween!”

“That’s not my fault!”

Mouth full of candy, Hunk peeks out of the kitchen. “Y’know, dude, it’ll make everything, like, twenty times easier if you just go with it.”

“Yep,” agrees Pidge, appearing at Hunk’s left, licking something suspiciously caramel-y off her fingers, “and we’re the ones who’re gonna have to deal with his cranky ass if you blow him off. So choose wisely.”

It puts things in a slightly different perspective under those terms. Hunk is cool, but Pidge is genuinely a little scary, and probably shouldn’t be crossed when it comes to acts of vengeance. Keith growls under his breath, which Lance must take as some kind of confirmation because, next thing Keith knows, his wrist is being seized, and then dragged toward the staircase.

“All settled, then!” says Lance. “Hunk, Pidge — you guys keep munching while I take this one upstairs for an emergency Halloween glow-up.”

“Is that what the kids are calling it these days?” Pidge chortles.

“Oh, and don’t forget to do something about his face, Lance.”

Keith frowns a bit indignantly. “What’s wrong with my face?”


Upstairs, Lance leads Keith into the bathroom, where he then orders him to take a seat on the closed toilet lid, and put those blasted cat ears on his head to keep the hair away from his face. Keith’s heated scowl is quite the spectacular sight, as are his pink-tinged cheeks, which are now on full display, thanks to the headband smoothing his bangs out of place.

“‘Kay,” says Lance, with the air of a surgeon heading into the operation room. “Now close your eyes.”

“Why?” Keith snaps at once.

Concentration shattering, Lance flounders, “Because I — I dunno, I’m gonna be getting real close to your face, and — and it’ll be weird if you’re just staring at me! So close ‘em!”

“I’m keeping them open.”

“Whatever, man,” Lance huffs, and starts leaning in with what appears to be a small black pen in his hand. “Have fun ogling my pores.”

Keith jerks himself away like a startled animal. “What is that?”

“Eyeliner, pretty boy, chill. It’ll come off with soap.”
“Okay, look, maybe we should just —”

“Hey —” And it’s then, right then, when Lance takes the point of Keith’s chin between two gentle fingers, keeping him still, and — yeah, okay, Lance is right. He’s close. Real close. So close that Keith might go cross-eyed if he focuses on those blue eyes. So close that it’s a miracle their noses aren’t bumping. So close that he can see the sheen of saliva along Lance’s bottom lip from when he’d licked it glossy a while ago, and — hold up. Why is he staring at Lance’s mouth?

“Um,” Keith tries, throat dry.

“Breathe,” Lance tells him.

So Keith breathes. And, for a second, it sounds like it’s the only noise in the whole room, abrasive and staticky. That is, until Lance goes to work on his face, and then Keith can hear his breath, too. And the hitch in his throat as he swallows. And the quiet scratch-scratch of that eyeliner pen drawing on his skin. And the rhythmic drip-drip of the sink faucet. And Keith still hasn’t closed his eyes — maybe to prove a point, but maybe also because that subtle little juncture where Lance’s jaw becomes his neck is really nice to look at, for some reason.

Then Lance says something, and Keith completely misses it.

But before he can ask about it, Lance is leaning away, examining all of Keith’s face with a dazed expression, and muttering, “Huh.”

“What?” Keith frowns at him, feeling awkward and squirmy under his gaze.

“No, it’s nothing, it’s just, y’know —” He’s taking him in again, eyes roving slow, with a growing smirk that actually borders on sultry, and purrs, “—Meow.”

Keith blinks, unamused. “God.”

“Like — me-wow, know what I’m sayin’?”

“Lance,” is his warning, and then he shoves at his chest for good measure. Laughing, Lance fumbles backwards, the hand-drawn whiskers on his own cheeks perking up adorably.

“Okay, okay,” he relents. “Let’s get outta here, and get this party started.”

And the crazy part is that Keith does. Despite every grumpy complaint and bad-tempered protest along the way, he does.

Because that’s the other thing about Lance:

Keith, as it turns out, has a very hard time saying no to him.

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When they show up to the park, all crisp from autumn’s chill and warm-hued from the bonfire’s golden glow, it’s truly remarkable how many costumed classmates flock in Keith’s direction.
Hey, man, some greet him as they pass by.

Good to see you, others say with a smile.

Keith offers about as much as he can in response. Meaning, not a lot. Because this kind of attention — the friendly, casual, good-intentioned kind — is downright foreign to him. Nobody is whispering behind his back. Nobody is giggling amongst a gaggle of enamored freshmen. And, perhaps most fascinating of all, nobody is gawking at him.

So just to review: he’s sporting painted-on whiskers, and a pair of plushy red cat ears on the top of his head, and absolutely nobody is gawking.

Keith is mystified, to say the very least.

And it must be dreadfully apparent by his pinched up expression alone because, eventually, Lance leans a little too close, the breath of an airy chuckle tickling Keith’s jawbone, and he whispers, “This is what assimilation feels like, Nessie.”

It feels odd, and startling, and overwhelming, and — huh. Not completely terrible, he supposes.

That’s when a stunningly radiant girl emerges from the throng, heading straight toward them, with the silken fabric of her ivory gown floating around her knees. She has a pair of delicately crafted wings fluttering behind her, a silver halo perched atop her braided tresses, and so much pearlescent highlighter dappled along her cheeks that it’s like she’s been encrusted with moonlight, glistening and ethereal.

“Aw, didn’t you hear?” Lance tells her, pretending to swoon. “You were supposed to wear a costume tonight, ‘Lura.”

“Lance. Please,” she deadpans.

Her shimmering smile turns to Keith. “I don’t believe we’ve ever been properly introduced,” she says, and she’s right. They haven’t. But Keith still recognizes her from all those Student Government campaign posters covering the halls, and from pretty much every extracurricular organization that the school has to offer. “I’m Allura.”

“Keith,” he says.

“Of course,” is her immediate reply. “Our school’s most talked about romantic lead, it seems,” and before Keith can grumble out any sort of protest, she goes on, “It’s lovely to see you two finally getting along.”

“Yeah, well,” Lance begins with a pompous smirk, “turns out Keithy-boy here is a real sucker for my irresistible charisma. Which is understandable. He’s a guy of good taste, after all.”

“He wore me down,” explains Keith.

Allura giggles politely at the pair, gives a reassuring squeeze to Keith’s upper arm, and says, “Lance truly is the most talented reporter I’ve ever had the pleasure of working with. So please know that your story is in very capable hands.”

“My story,” Keith echoes in a strange, unsettling octave. “Right.”

By the time Allura excuses herself to go make her presidential rounds, Lance is already surveying the area in that way he does, all attentive and eagle-eyed. His gaze roams slowly, grazing over the
flickering flames of the bonfire, Romelle and Plaxum as they giggle and gossip, Rolo and a few of his buddies pulling flasks out of their jacket pockets to spike their apple cider, Nyma and James bickering in each other’s faces. Lance doesn’t miss a single thing. He sees it all.

*I see you*, Keith recalls in a flurry.

“Let’s go meet up with Hunk and Pidge, yeah?” Lance says, turning to Keith with his eyes all open, and blue, and alert.

And Keith stares at them until his own eyes feel sore, trying to see through them, as if they’re something transparent, made of glass.

But when he stares for a little too long, and Lance makes a face at him, it’s then that Keith gives up, and replies, “Yeah.”

*I see you*, Keith recalls again. And he wonders — because he has to — what it is that he really sees.

> “Alright, gentlemen,” Lance rasps in the lowest, most gravelly tone he can physically muster.

A throat clears.

“And Pidge,” he adds quickly.

She smiles primly at him, satisfied.

“I’d like to cordially welcome you all to —” Here, the glaring beam of Lance’s cell phone flashlight appears just beneath his chin, the natural contours of his face going shadowy and dark. “—*your worst nightmare*.”

Some dead leaves rustle unconcernedly on the ground. An owl hoots in the distance. Hunk yawns into his hands.

And then, Keith’s deadpan drawl: “What is that voice?”

Lance’s sinister grin immediately falls into a pout, lowering his phone in disappointment — most likely because his attempt to create some very tasteful dramatic lighting has been a total fail. “It’s my *spooky* voice,” he huffs in reply.

“Kinda just sounds like you have a cold,” Pidge chimes in.

“Oh,” says Hunk, “or like when you accidentally swallow a big piece of bubblegum before you’re done chewing it all the way, and it gets kinda stuck in your —”

“Off topic! We’re all off topic!”

“What *is* the topic, exactly?”
“I’m proposing a new Halloween tradition,” Lance announces, and then gestures to their right. The park’s nature trail has been temporarily repurposed into a haunted maze through the woods, complete with cotton-ball cobwebs dangling from the branches, and footprints of fake blood splattered along the dirt path. A wooden sign sits crooked by the entrance, and it ominously reads: beware. Lance goes on, genuinely enjoying the creepy ambiance of it all, “First one to make it out the other end wins.”

Hunk starts not-so-subtly biting his nails, ridden with anxiety. “Uh, okay, but what if we see a ghost?”

Pidge rolls her eyes, and mumbles, “Ghosts aren’t real, Hunk.”

“Bonus points for paranormal encounters!” Lance declares grandly.

“So when I win,” Keith interjects with a smirk, “what’s in it for me?”

The flashlight suddenly pops back on, and Lance shines it right at Keith’s face, making him wince. “All I know is that when I win —”

“Uh-huh.”

“— I expect to find a mountain of s’mores waiting for me over by that bonfire.”

Keith gives a confident little chuckle, his lips still curled as he says, “You’re on.”

“No, you’re on!” Lance crows, pocketing his phone, and then leaping into action. He takes off like a rocket toward the mouth of the trail, disappearing into the murky woods, but his voice still carries as he cries out, “See you on the other side, scaredy-cats!”

And Keith stands there. Just stands there, and watches him go, watches him until he’s entirely swarmed by darkness, and the sound of his footsteps fade into nothing, and he’s gone now, but the warmth of his presence still lingers, like a buzzing beneath Keith’s skin, an itch below the surface, and —

“Wow,” says Pidge. “That is one smitten kitten.”

Curiously, Keith glances left and right. Hunk and Pidge both raise their brows at him.

“Oh,” he eventually mutters, realizing. “You mean me.”

“What’re you waiting for?” she asks. “Go get your man.”

“He’s not my —”

“Yeah, but seriously, though,” Hunk cuts in gravely, and maybe a little concerned. “Someone really should go find him. Lance got us lost in a parking lot one time, so I don’t think he’s making it outta this thing.”

Keith glances hesitantly toward the woods, and all its spindly, gnarled branches. “And that’s supposed to be my job now?”

“Yes!” says Pidge, way too triumphantly. “Don’t worry, we’ll save you some s’mores,” and then she gives him an encouraging — persistent — shove before she and Hunk scurry back toward the bonfire like a pair of playful — well, kittens.

So Keith, sighing, steps forward to accept his fate.
And, okay — in all brutal honesty — he’s not the biggest fan of the whole spooks-and-spirits thing going on. He’s not scared. No. Make no mistake. It’s just that — he’d just prefer to be somewhere a bit more well-lit. Somewhere less spine-tingling and hair-raising. With fewer looming shadows climbing up tree trunks and random noises shuffling in the darkness. Glancing behind him, the flames of the bonfire are just a dim glow in the distance now, reminding him of how far he’s journeyed into this godforsaken place. Everything around him smells like damp earth, and brittle leaves, and — seriously? How has he not caught up to Lance by now?

From somewhere, a twig snaps, and Keith instantly checks under his foot to make sure it wasn’t him, and — nope. That was definitely — something else. Keith stops, his heart stops, his everything stops. In his eighteen years of experience, he’s seen enough poorly-scripted, clichéd horror movies to know that this is the part where he should probably run for it — cut his losses, quit while he’s ahead — instead of bravely trudging onward when he’s —

Okay, that was another twig. Another twig just snapped. And maybe he’s imagining things, but that one sounded even closer than —

“Boo!” comes a deep, scratchy voice from just behind his shoulder, and Keith absolutely does not yelp. He cries out — y’know, heroically — as he swings his arm back, forcefully jabbing his elbow right into —

Crunch.

—Lance’s nose.

“Well?” Lance prompts once they’re safely seated around the bonfire, swathed in half-lit gold. He’s fluttering his lashes at Keith, which can only be so effective when he also has two bloodied tissues stuffed up his nostrils at the same time. “Aren’t you gonna tell me I’m pretty?”

Keith looks away from the torched marshmallow on the end of his stick long enough to tell him, “Pretty terrifying.”


Then he attempts to scrunch up his nose, but it turns into more of a wince, really. Keith’s lips droop into frown. “Does it still hurt?”

“Oh, nah, you kidding? Growing up with four older siblings? It takes way more than an elbow to the face to do me in,” and then, to prove it, Lance is pinching those tissue nubs out of his nostrils. They’re a pretty nasty sight, but his nose, at least, has stopped oozing. Lance swipes a finger under it to make sure. Dry as a bone.

“I’m sorry,” says Keith. “Again.”

“Don’t even sweat it, my dude,” Lance grins. “I’d let you do it all over again, because that? That was one thousand percent worth it just to see you so —”
“For the last time —”

“Like, god, you should’ve seen your face —”

“I was not scared!”

“You freaked big time, Kogane!” Lance chirps. “I got you so good!”

Keith pouts, and his marshmallow basically turns to ash, crumbling off his stick.

“But you got me pretty good, too, so I guess the score’s even for now,” Lance prods curiously at the bridge of his nose, so tender and sore that doing so sends a shiver sprinting up his spine.

And Keith, watching sidelong, notices. “Cold?” he asks.

Carefully, Lance stretches out his legs, wiggles his toes inside his sneakers, the soles of his feet heating up fast. “Oh, uh, the fire helps. I put my sweatshirt in Hunk’s car ‘cause I didn’t wanna, y’know, get blood all over it or anything, so —”

In the amount of time it takes for Lance to practically choke over his next words, Keith’s letterman jacket is being gently draped over his shoulders, enveloping him, swallowing him whole, and — oh, yeah. Lance is really heating up now, only it shows in the flush of his cheeks, and nothing else.

“Y-You don’t —”

“It’s fine,” Keith cuts him off. “I usually run kinda warm, anyway.”

Oh, boy, and something about that concept has to go and kickstart some sort of crisis in Lance’s brain. As if he weren’t already feeling sufficiently daffy and punch-drunk off the mere fact that he’s wearing Keith’s actual jacket, now he has to deal with the knowledge that this is Keith’s warmth he’s feeling, too, and it’s all over his skin right now, sticking like honey or something equally as sweet. He slips into the sleeves, and wraps his arms around himself, fingers curling into the extra fabric that bunches around his knuckles.

Keith, in all his fireside handsomeness, drags his eyes over to Lance until their gazes snag, like something delicate drawn between them, and Lance thinks this would be a great opportunity to say something. Nothing mortifying like did you know that firelight makes your eyes dance? or I want to live in this jacket forever or I wish these were your arms wrapped around me. No, nothing like that.

But when Lance goes to open his mouth, all that comes out is: “I think your marshmallow disintegrated, dude.”

“Oh,” mumbles Keith, looking away so quick that the moment snaps. They both watch what remains of the marshmallow — if it can even still be called that — slough off the stick like flakes of dead skin. Gross.

And then Keith dares to pull the cutest little disappointed face, and Lance just has to laugh because, man, how is this guy even real? He snatches Keith’s stick, reaches for one of his own, tops them both with fresh marshmallows from their supply, then returns them to the flames.

“What the culinary master strikes again,” Lance chuckles, nudging Keith’s stick with his own.

“Shut up,” snorts Keith, doing the same.

Their half-melted marshmallows bump, sticking together, all gooey and goopy and gummy.
Gross, Lance thinks with a smile.

On Monday, practice sucks.
And Keith realizes it’s almost entirely his own fault, which is — not the best feeling in the world.

For starters, he makes the poor decision to stay up way too late the night before to work on his scholarship application. So he accidentally sleeps through the first three of his four alarms, and by the time he gathers all his things and zips away on his bike, he already has a hideous notion sinking in his gut, telling him that it’s going to be a hellish sort of day. And, of course, he’s right. Because then there’s a team of scowling faces ready to greet him at practice, followed by his coach’s red-faced, fire-eyed, hot-blooded rant about dedication, and discipline, and all the other important traits befitting of a team captain — the ones that, apparently, Keith is lacking. Then Kolivan benches him for the entire practice, and Keith is forced to sit and watch while his teammates sweat it out on the field without him. He ends up skipping first period to run a few laps around the track, just to calm himself down.

Freshly showered, Keith stops by his locker to grab a textbook, and makes, probably, his billionth poor decision of the day: he checks his phone. There, in his messages, he finds an unopened text from his mother, containing a thinly veiled excuse as to why she’s unable to call him back this week. And then, there, in his inbox, a rejection email from Naxzela University.

He takes a deep lungful of air. Tries to.

In. Out. In —

Fuck.

One more college down. Still no call from mom. That scholarship application is due in two weeks, and thirty-percent done, at best. The team is playing Arus High on Friday, and then, hopefully, the championship game in January. He has a calculus test this afternoon that he could’ve — should’ve — studied harder for, and he can’t let his grades slip. People are counting on him. People are expecting of him. And Keith can’t even fucking breathe.

So, all in all, it looks like things could be better.

Just then, the locker door slams shut right in front of Keith’s face, and James appears on his left, sneering, giving him a tight-lipped, “A minute of your time, captain?”

Yeah. Much better.

Keith glares, just glares at this guy because — no. Not today. “I’d rather not,” he grinds out, and then starts down the hallway at a clipped pace.

“Oh, right. Silly me,” James calls out after him, trailing just a few strides behind, weaving through the mass of migrating students, “I forgot you don’t have time for anything anymore that isn’t all
“What?” Keith demands. He stops, whirls around, and James meets him there, face to face.

“What a time to be Keith Kogane, right? You’re the coolest guy in school, and everyone wants you. Blah, blah. We get it.” His tone is nothing short of savage, brutal, and cuts like a knife. “And now you’ve even got your own personal lapdog basically falling all over you, bowing at your feet, writing you love poems.”

All at once, Keith is struck with something white-hot and furious, so severe that he’s left dizzy with it, pulsing with it, practically shaking with it.

“But if you don’t screw your head back on straight, we won’t last until the championship,” hisses James. “Don’t act like you’re the only one on this team who’s hoping to get recruited.”

“Don’t act like mommy and daddy aren’t already planning to pay your way into any school you want,” Keith flings back, merciless.

“That’s what parents are for,” James smirks something downright sinister. “Of course, you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you —”

Surging forward, Keith grips the front of James’ shirt, fingers twisting fiercely into the fabric, tight enough to grind bone, but James appears relatively unfazed, and his voice is annoyingly level as he taunts, “What’re you gonna do, Kogane? Hit me? Get yourself suspended? Colleges’ll really love you, then.”

Oh, but it’s a tempting offer. So tempting, so tempting, so tempting —

“Uh, hey?”

It’s Lance. Because of course it is. Lance is suddenly there — by some stroke of truly unfortunate timing — looking a bit wide-eyed as he glances back and forth between the two football players, and he’s got Keith’s letterman jacket all bundled up in his arms.

“Sorry to interrupt what I’m sure is a very intellectually stimulating conversation with this neanderthal,” he begins, nodding towards James, “but, um — just returning your jacket from the other night. I went ahead and threw it in the wash ‘cause, y’know, it was laundry day, anyway, so…”

Then James — the smug bastard — actually has the audacity to chuff a laugh, all bitter and razor-edged. He yanks himself free of Keith’s clutches, tosses out a, “I’ll leave you to it, then,” and makes sure he rams shoulders with Keith as he storms off.

Keith glowers at his retreating back, but he still feels something thrashing and churning inside of him. Something foul and decaying, like he’s been inhaling smoke, and it shimmies up his throat, already halfway to suffocating him.

“Still can’t get that stick out of his ass, huh?” he hears Lance sigh. “Guess I’m not really surprised, but — whoa, you okay?”

Not even close. “Yeah,” Keith grumbles instead, distracted. He snatches the article of clothing out of Lance’s arms. “Thanks for the — jacket.”

“Oh, no, no, no,” says Lance, chasing after Keith when he tries to make a break for it, because that was an unsatisfactory response if Lance ever heard one. “Dark gift, remember? I can see when
something’s not right. And something is so not right, it’s practically left, dude.”

“Don’t you have a class to get to?”

“Ooh, nice try, but I swiped a hall pass off Mrs. Haggar’s desk, so I’m free as a bird.”

“Then go chirp in someone else’s ear,” Keith drawls, and then veers around the corner so sharply that it leads him straight into the men’s restroom.

The sound of an awkward chuckle follows him inside. “As much as I appreciate a good metaphor, I really just wanna make sure you’re —”

“Lance, stop,” and the rumble of it seems to rattle like thunder, bouncing off all the porcelain and tile-covered surfaces. It brings Lance to a screeching halt, with Keith rounding on him frighteningly. “Seriously. I’m not in the mood. There’s too much on my mind, and too much at stake. I have applications, and football practice, and pretty much the whole school breathing down my neck, so I really don’t need you trying to pick me apart like I’m just one of your little writing projects.”

Lance, dumbly, blinks at him.

Keith blinks back.

Then the bathroom door swings open.

“Oh — ah,” some random guy stammers nervously, very obviously startled by the sight of Lance and Keith, mere inches apart, staring intensely into each other’s eyes. “Sorry, you two, didn’t mean to just — barge in on —”

Keith growls. “We weren’t —”

“Who even hooks up in a public bathroom, anyway?” barks Lance, incredulous. “That’s just a nasty bacterial infection waiting to happen!”

But the guy is already long gone, and the bathroom feels unbearably stifling in its emptiness — all that tension, gathering, congealing, layering thick on top of them.

“I didn’t mean to yell at you,” Keith eventually mumbles, eyes on the floor.

Lance, shockingly enough, has nothing to say.

So Keith slips on the jacket, keeps his head bowed, and pushes himself through the door.

His jacket, he notices, smells like Lance.

“—And to your left, make sure you take a moment to examine that diagram of *tremella mesenterica*, also known as ‘witch’s butter’—”
The next day, on a field trip to the Museum of Natural History, Mr. Coran Marches his AP Bio class around from room to room, exhibit to exhibit, like a springy, slightly-madcap ringleader on a mission.

“But remember, kids — you can’t spell fungi without fun!”

For the most part, the students are only half-listening to his loony antics, most of them either chatting away with friends or tapping away aimlessly at their phone screens. And Mr. Coran appears to be none the wiser, far too preoccupied with shiny replicas of colorful mushrooms and oddly-shaped parasites that catch his eye. And then, of course, there’s Keith.

Keith, who dawdles near the back of the line, feet dragging, head pounding. Keith, who still feels like he’s ripping at the seams, getting jerked in twelve different directions at once. Keith, who, very pointedly, did not make eye contact with Lance on the bus this morning, despite how he could feel blue all over his skin for the entire ride to the museum. Keith, who maybe, just maybe, feels really terrible about it. Keith, who lingers too long at a semi-disgusting display of black mold, and then feels himself getting tugged, hauled around the corner by this fast-moving force until he sees — 

Lance.

Lance, who is here, a little bit frazzled, a lot a bit lovely, and holding on to Keith’s wrist.

“Hi,” he says, breathless.


“I’m sorry,” Lance gets out quickly.

Keith shakes his head. “I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.”

“Well, I shouldn’t have gotten all in your business if you weren’t ready to talk about it.”

“It’s okay.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

The moment passes, but they both hold fast to it. They just stand there staring, kind of grinning, like a couple of idiots, until the sound of Mr. Coran’s delighted trill reminds them where they are, and breaks them of this trance they seem to’ve unknowingly stumbled into — this silly, moon-eyed trance that Keith decides to blame on his lack of sleep or something.

“So, anyway,” Lance is saying, “now that that’s all cleared up —” And then his fingers give Keith’s wrist a squeeze. “—can I steal you?”

Keith can’t resist. He grins a bit wider, and chuckles, “May you steal…”

Lance swats at him, swift and harmless. “Okay, I get it, I’m never living that one down.”

Without much difficulty, they manage to sneak away from the rest of the class. Lance, with his grip still tight on Keith, leads them through a maze of winding corridors filled with giant dinosaur bones that dangle from the ceiling like prehistoric chandeliers, and taxidermied animals in their natural habitats, and glass cases where visitors have gathered to admire sparkly jewels and polished clumps of minerals. Their footsteps slap against the marbled floor, happy and heavy, as they scamper through the hushed halls, and Keith feels alight with something peculiar. Adrenaline. Giddiness. That
very distinct floating sensation that comes right before you —

Fall?

Lance steps into one of the rooms with a sense of finality upon reaching their destination. Inside, it’s dim and dusky like twilight. There are models of telescopes, and maps of solar systems covering the walls as far as the eye can see, but when Keith steals a glimpse at Lance, he’s only looking up. Because there, right above their heads, scattered across the expanse of that pitch-black vaulted ceiling, is a near-perfect imitation of the entire glittering galaxy, with every star and constellation accounted for. A sea of shimmering beauty stretching for what feels like miles, all bright and effervescent against a backdrop of darkness.

“Wow,” Keith can hear himself whisper, breath tangling in his lungs.

Lance is looking at him, now. “Whenever things get real loud in here,” and he taps a finger against his skull, “I like to lay outside and watch the stars. It helps, y’know? Something about all that space makes my problems seem pretty small in comparison.”

Then, without any warning at all, he starts lowering himself to the floor until he’s laying flat on his back — right there in the dead center of the room.

“Uh,” mutters Keith. “What are you doing?”

“We,” Lance corrects, wiggling around to get comfortable, which seems like an impossible endeavor on this hard marble surface, “are going stargazing.”

Keith glances around at the handful of people milling about. Raises a brow at Lance, and wonders, “Here?”

“Oh, you are so not gonna ruin my relaxing zen time with skepticism, Keith. Now get your ass on the floor!”

He smacks an impatient palm against the empty space next to him, and then Keith, with a weighted sigh, gets his ass on the floor.

And, alright, maybe this is a pretty good idea. Because if Keith just tunes everything out, focuses on those shivering flecks of starlight, then it’s almost like he’s sinking into them. Like he could swim endlessly, warmed by their glow, guided by their light. He senses his breath returning to him, slowly but surely, and then all at once. Colors sharpen. Time suspends.

“Feeling better?” Lance asks him.

“Mhm.”

Then, the weight of Lance’s hand presses down on Keith’s, and, startling from the touch, Keith turns to look at him.

Lance is looking at him, too. Again.

“I wanna help,” he tells him, voice soft. “I know you’re stressed, and maybe there isn’t too much I can actually do about it, but — I wanna help. Any way I can.”

“It’s not your problem, Lance,” Keith says back, just as soft.

“But it matters to you.”
“Yeah, so?”

“So you matter — to me,” he admits, and, in the silence that follows, goes on, “It’s just — it matters, Keith. It does.”

Right now, as manufactured starlight rains down on Lance’s skin, speckling him like tiny bits of diamond, Keith thinks — oh, he thinks — there’s something about him. There’s just something about him.

“So just do me a solid here and — let me be there for you,” says Lance. “Okay?”

Keith wonders, suddenly, what would happen if they decided to stay here all day, like this. He wonders what would happen if he curled his fingers enough to lace between Lance’s, or reached out to brush stardust off of his freckles. He wonders, and wonders, and wonders —

Oh, no, warns his head.

Oh, yes, sings his heart.

“So okay,” Keith decides as the galaxy swirls overhead, bright and anew.

The bus ride back to school is quiet and slow. Even Mr. Coran seems to’ve wound down instead of encouraging the whole class to sing along to his bizarre lineup of roadtrip tunes.

Lance gazes out the window, watching the world pass by in splashes of splendid color. Keith, at his side, dozes off.

It’s like something settles just then, Lance thinks. Snaps together or nestles into place — a murmur inside his chest that says this is right, this is good.

The bus rocks and sways on its wheels, and Keith’s head jostles, falling over onto Lance’s shoulder.

This is right, this is good.

And Lance, his entire left arm going painfully numb, doesn’t dare move until they arrive.

Chapter End Notes

THERE’S EVEN MORE FANART!!!! Once again, I’m completely shook by how many talented folks out there are not only reading this fic, but also taking the time to create some magnificent pieces of artwork about it. Please go check out these artists and support their amazing work!
@dee-who drew the cutest darn boys I ever did see right over HERE!
@ceciledraws drew the scene where Keith barges into the newspaper club right HERE!
@avenxizz drew Keith and his twinkly eyes and Lance being all lovestruck and uGH!!
Check it out HERE!
@38sr created a light novel cover mockup for the fic that is.......... chef kiss......
DELICIOUS. Check that one out HERE!
@torchy0hooman drew some more of Keith's eyes because, honestly, is there ever too much content for that? Check it out HERE!

I know there was a bit of a longer wait for this chapter, so thank you for everyone's patience. I feel like the luckiest gal in the world because all of you have been not only supportive, but so, so considerate, and I'm extremely appreciative. I hope each and every one of you enjoys this chapter, and I'll see you around for the next one! Much love!!! <3
Sixth Period

Chapter Notes

We’re finally getting into the angsty bits!! This chapter is the worst of it, though, and then we’ll get right back to that fluffy upward climb, I promise :’)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

... 

“Ah, there she is!” comes that unfailingly chipper outburst, loud as a foghorn, blaring over the buzz of idle hallway prattle.

That’s when Lance appears, quite literally out of nowhere, squeezing his way through the swarms of wandering students until he’s at Allura’s side, falling into step with her purposeful, punctuated gait. His smile is huge — enormous, even — and nothing short of sugary-sweet.

“Just the lovely lady I was hoping to find,” Lance rambles on, drifting so close that their shoulders bump, “and in all her pristine glory, too, no less.”

Allura’s notebook nearly jostles right out of her grasp from the disturbance. “Good morning, Lance,” she sighs.

“Well, it is now, princess.”

“Why don’t you spare us both the unnecessary pleasantries, and just tell me what you want.”

Her glaringly blunt suggestion shocks and embarrasses him all at once, as though she’s catching him redhanded at the scene of a crime. Lance’s clumsy lips force out a series of incredulous splutters and stammers, which Allura finds mildly hilarious, given the way she pulls her own lips taut to prevent her triumphant grin from spreading too far.

“Want? Me?” Lance manages, with some effort. And then, expression twitching oddly out of shape: “What makes you think I want something?”

“Because,” says Allura, “I have it on good authority that your next class is on the complete opposite side of campus, making this… charming little encounter anything but serendipitous.”

Lance stands a bit straighter, taken aback, eyes blinking up a whirlwind. “Wow,” he breathes. “Beauty and brains. And they say perfection doesn’t exist.”

“I mean it, Lance,” she insists, picking up her pace, every click-clack of her pretty, heeled oxfords more impatient than the last. “I have a presentation due in AP Government next period, three meetings to attend during lunch, and a tutoring session after school, so I really should be —”

“Okay, okay. Talk faster. Got it.” He scurries along, and struggles to match her new tempo, feeling like he might get washed away in the crowd if he doesn’t keep up. Or maybe it has something to do with the massive knot of dread tangling low in his belly, heavy as a brick, that’s suddenly weighing
him down. “I just wanted to, uh, update you on my article.”

*Click-clack, click-clack.*

Allura arches an immaculate brow, prompting, eventually, “I’m listening.”

“Um, well, y’see,” Lance mutters, and then immediately reaches for the base of his neck, where heat is already kindling there like a fizzlespitting sparks. “I think — I mean, it’s possible that I might need... an extension.”

*Click-clack, click —*

Well, *that* certainly seems to wrestle Allura’s undivided attention into submission. She stops, right there in the middle of the bustling hall, so abruptly that Lance has to shuffle through an awkward sideways toddle just to avoid crashing into her.

“An extension,” she repeats, slowly and strangely, as if fumbling through the sounds of a foreign language. “Lance, in all the years we’ve worked together, you’ve never once missed a single writing deadline.”

“I know, and I’m sorry, but I’m —”

She cuts him off with a flick of her wrist. “Doesn’t matter, I suppose,” is what she grits out, but there’s still a ripple of frustration wrinkling her forehead — the kind that Lance has witnessed many a time before whenever things aren’t going her way, or whenever she’s genuinely contemplating murder. He mentally prays for the former. Then, narrowing her gaze like the scope of a sniper rifle, she demands, “When, exactly, are you planning to have it finished, then?”

Lance curses the way he can’t stop his entire expression from souring, his brain from blowing a fuse. It’s like someone goes and smacks the big red panic button inside his head, and then, sheepishly, he squeaks:

“...Never?”

There’s a pause — the kind that paralyzes. The kind that thumps behind Lance’s breastbone with each passing second, and makes him wonder why he had to go and get himself into this big, dumb mess in the first place. Another pause. Then another. And another. And —

*Click-clack-click-clack-click-clack.*

Furiously, the staccato rhythm of her feet resumes, but, this time, she has a stiff fistful of Lance’s jacket sleeve in her clutches as she drags him toward the row of lockers lining the wall. Allura — ever the model diplomat in times of crisis — holds every delicate muscle in her face remarkably still, but Lance knows better than to assume this means she isn’t internally seething. Up close, the crystalline sheen of her eyes has glazed over with a terrifying frost.

“Please tell me this is one of your ill-timed jokes, I am begging you,” she hisses fiercely at him.

“Look, Allura, here’s the thing —” mumbles Lance, a little desperately. “I can’t write this article.”

“Of course you can. You’re a reporter.”

“I mean, I can’t write it about Keith,” he clarifies. “Or me. *Us.* Our relationship —”

Her brow perks up again. “Relationship?”
“You know what I mean,” he says, slightly piqued by her obvious skepticism even though he has no right to be, really. Then, with a huff, he resorts to leaning up against the lockers when he no longer trusts his gelatin legs to do their job. “I’ve gotten to know him — like, really know him — and he’s kind of a low-key guy, y’know? Putting him on blast like that, after everything… it just doesn’t feel right.”

“The entire plan involves putting him on blast,” Allura replies sharply. “A plan that was — need I remind you — your idea from the very beginning.”

“But that was before —”

“Before what?”

“Before it turned into something else!” Lance erupts at once, causing several startled heads to swerve in their direction. Allura does her best to ward them off with a strained smile, feigning decorum, as Lance barrels on: “This whole thing was just supposed to be, like — I dunno — my big swan song to high school. Something crazy, and kinda mortifying, and weirdly liberating that we’d all cringe our way through, and then laugh about later at our ten year reunion. But now it’s… it’s —”

Big, his mind supplies, hushed and private, even as the bright, gripping warmth of it snakes under his skin, and forces the hair on his nape to stand on end.

“Nobody,” he admits softly, miserably, to the scuffed tile beneath their feet, “was supposed to really — care.”

“But they do,” Allura says, the hold on his arm going tender. It melts the scowl on her face into something past neutral, inching toward a sincerity that glows like candlelight. “Like it or not, Lance, your words have touched people. Your voice has inspired others to have courage, and take risks, and believe in love. Do you even realize how many emails I receive on a regular basis, all of them raving about your article? Wondering when this new one will be released? Or how much recognition we’ve gotten online?”

When Lance tries to glance away again, feeling overwhelmingly fragile and stripped bare, Allura snatches his attention back with a persistent tug to his sleeve.

“This is everything you’ve ever wanted, everything you’ve worked so hard for,” she reminds him gently. “This is the most anticipated issue of the school paper in — dare I say — all of Altea High history. And your name is going to be on the front page.”

“I know, but — I can’t have Keith thinking I’ve just been using him for some juicy story, okay? I can’t,” and he means it, unbending, completely impenetrable. “I’ve waited three years for this guy to even look at me, ‘Lura, and now it’s —”

“Please don’t say it,” she nearly whispers. “The entire school, and the entire town, is expecting this article, Lance. We’ve already announced it on every social media platform imaginable. We can’t back out now.”

Lance grimaces. He grimaces because he knows she’s right, and even though that’s nothing new, it still cuts deep, anyway. He falters, hesitates, swallows around the tightness closing up his throat, and finally murmurs, “I-I don’t —”

“It’s not just your reputation on the line. As editor-in-chief, it’s mine as well,” Allura says to him. Begs. “So I’m asking you — as a friend — please just… write something.”

He’s slow to respond. “Like what?”
“I don’t know,” she confesses honestly, quietly. Her eyes, for the first time, are glistening wholly, bleeding so much sympathy that Lance can feel it hurt in his own chest, and then she’s telling him, “But I have faith you’ll figure it out. You’ve never let me down before.”

Keith’s morning goes something like this: he wakes up early, too goddamn early, and goes to practice. He runs the drills, puts up with Kolivan’s shouting, and his teammates’ grumbling. Then, instead of taking an extra few laps around the track, Keith showers, and heads inside to the library, of all places. Lance is already there, waiting for him, hands full with his caramel latte, an iced americano for Keith, and the other half of a blueberry muffin that he picked up at the coffee shop. They spread their things out on one of the communal study tables in the back, and get to work.

Then, the following morning, it happens again.


And again the morning after that.

Again and again — until an entire week goes by, and Keith starts feeling the satisfying coil of a routine taking root. Sometimes Lance will proof-read Keith’s essays. Sometimes Keith will quiz Lance on Physics vocabulary. And sometimes, when Keith is concentrating too hard on a particularly tricky set of equations to even notice, he’ll let Lance doodle on his wrist with a ballpoint pen. Silly little squiggles, swirls, and smiley-faces peek out from under his sleeve, all the way up to his knuckles, but Keith doesn’t wash them off until he absolutely has to.

Because, whether he admits it or not, these mornings have quickly become his favorite part of the day.

Until Friday.

Friday is — different.

And, honestly, Keith can’t figure it out. Nothing is out of the ordinary. Everything goes according to routine. Homework. Coffee. Muffins. Lance.

— Lance.

Maybe… Maybe he’s grinning brighter than usual as he greets Keith with breakfast. Maybe his hair is a little fluffier, his eyes a little bluer, his freckles a little — frecklier. Maybe the tip of his nose is a little rosier, now that autumn is cooling into winter. Or maybe it’s the way he nibbles the butt of his pen as he skims over his papers, and Keith has just never noticed before. Because why would he? It’s a dumb thing, really. Lance’s mouth. Whatever. All pink, and nicely-shaped, and slick with chapstick, and moving around that pen so slowly, smoothly, softly and sweetly —

“—Keith?”

“Hm.”
“Buddy. You’re staring.”

*Oh.*

“Oh,” breathes Keith, the light behind his eyes looking about a billion miles away from where he sits right now.

Lance’s pen falls with a plop against his pile of papers, and he lifts the back of his hand to wipe quickly at his mouth. “Is there something on my face?” he wonders.

Keith kind of wants to smack him for being so naïve. Kind of wants to grab him by the collar of his shirt, and call him an idiot, and then kiss the non-existent muffin crumbs right off his mouth.

…Oh.

With a start, Keith leaps to his feet, nearly knocking his chair over with the force of it. “I’m going to the bathroom,” he announces stiffly, gathering his books and binders to his chest a bit haphazardly. Lance watches him scramble, eyes big and owlish.

“Oh, okay,” he says slowly. “You planning on being there a while? ‘Cause I don’t think you need to bring all that with you."

Keith stops. Blinks. Lance’s brow creases with bemusement. The tip of his tongue darts out, licking over his bottom lip, and — no. *Unfair.* Is he doing this on purpose?

“I’m outta here,” Keith announces again. “I’ll be back. *Maybe.*”

“Cool?”

Keith wants to smack him again. Wants to tower over him, and yank at his fluffy hair, and bite down on that bottom lip until it’s sore and red and pouty and —

He escapes with his study materials still bound up in his arms.

*Oh* —

——

“Mr. S, something’s wrong with me.”

It’s the very first thing that withers its way out of Keith’s unbearably dry throat upon stomping into Shiro’s classroom that afternoon during lunch. He almost resembles some kind of wounded beast as he hobbles over to his usual seat, slinking into it with his shoulders hunched, muscles heavy, and his face all crumpled up into more of a wince than a frown, really.

From his desk, Shiro glances up with concern. “You do look a little flushed,” he notes. “Are you feeling alright?”

Keith gives his head a shake, loosening his ponytail into even more of a disheveled mess than it
already is.

“Do you need to go to the nurse?”

Another shake. Another clump of hair falls free.

“Keith,” says Shiro, and it’s clear by the way he removes his reading glasses, dutifully setting them aside, that he means business. “Then what’s wrong?”

“I think I like Lance,” is what spills out in a miserable gush.

Shiro’s eyebrows inch higher and higher, but he says nothing, and the profound silence, somehow, starts chipping away at Keith’s patience, bit by bit, until he’s spiraling out completely, losing all control of his mouth as he blurs:

“I know I do. It’s — god, I know it. He’s just — And I feel it right here,” he practically croaks, clutching a hand to his stomach like he may bend over and vomit at a moment’s notice. His distressed expression, too, makes him look especially ill. “That’s where you’re supposed to feel it, right? Like an aneurysm or something?”

“Most people would call that butterflies,” corrects Shiro, impressively composed despite how amusement twinkles behind his eyes.

Keith, astoundingly ineloquent, groans loudly into his palms.

“So, just to clarify,” Shiro says calmly, clinically, “you think something’s wrong with you because — you have a crush.”

His words settle in the air like dust, sprinkling delicately over all the tension, and that’s when Shiro — the dirty, dirty traitor — bursts into sputtering laughter.

Keith glares at him, outraged. “Wha — stop laughing!”

“Sorry, I’m —” Wheeze. “I’m sorry, Keith, it’s not —”

“You’re a horrible teacher.”

“God,” the man sighs something wistful, and wipes the tears from the corner of his eyes with his thumb. “Sometimes I miss high school.”

“You’re too old to miss high school,” Keith snaps grumpily.

“Well, alright, since I’m so old, and clearly don’t get it,” says Shiro, still chuckling, “tell me why liking Lance is such an awful thing.”

A crinkle dips into the center of Keith’s brow, deep and menacing. “We’re graduating.”

“Okay. Is that all?”

“Yes, that’s —” he begins to grouse. “—that’s all. What else is there? He’s staying, I’m leaving. And I have a lot of shit to figure out before then, so there’s no time for —”

“Feelings?” guesses Shiro.

With a muted thunk, Keith collapses onto his desk in a loose-limbed heap, looking like he might be trying to fuse his entire face to the surface. “What if I screw it all up?” he mutters, followed by a
halfhearted slew of cranky and unintelligible expletives. Shiro just relaxes his smile, almost rueful.

“You know,” he tries again, “I had a boyfriend when I was about your age.”

Keith’s mumbling suddenly grows very quiet, and he turns his head, barely enough to offer a mere half-sliver of his gaze, asking, “You did?”

Shiro nods. “Adam,” he recalls rather fondly. “We met during our junior year. I remember pretending to flunk algebra just so he’d tutor me after class.” The look he gives Keith is a warning — a non-threatening one. “But as your teacher, I don’t recommend that strategy.”

Keith allows the smallest flutter of his lips, edging closer to a grin.

“Anyway, we ended up going to different colleges, on opposite sides of the country,” Shiro goes on, but there’s a slight waver in his tone, a flinch in his posture that doesn’t seem to settle well along the slope of his shoulders. “I’m not going to lie to you — it was really hard. Probably the hardest years of my life.”

“So what happened?” Keith is sitting up now, eyes steady and alert.

“We got through it,” answers Shiro. “We worked around each other’s schedules, made time for phone calls, planned our visits months in advance. Even when things got frustrating, or when we were missing each other like crazy — I just had a feeling it was all going to be worth it in the end.”

Then this small, unexpected ache behind Keith’s ribs presses into him like a bruise. “Was it?” he wonders.

And Shiro’s smile falls pleasantly crooked as he lifts a hand in response, flashing a peek of the gold band wrapped so snugly around his ring finger, and says, “I like to think so.”

Keith stares in awe. Just sits there, and stares until he doesn’t understand why he’s still staring, or why his eyes follow that glimpse of gold, mesmerized, even as Shiro moves his hands back to his desk. Or why the realization hits him with a pang, and spreads through him like light through stained glass, so warm and viscid that he dares to think it could be, might be, a little bit —

“Don’t let the future stop you from living in the present, Keith,” Shiro tells him, then, “or else you might miss out on something really wonderful.”

Wonderful, his mind chimes like a bell, and clings to the lovely sound of it.

And then Keith decides, with a soft kind of fervor: That’s it.

It could be a little bit wonderful.

Might be.

Or maybe — just maybe — it will be.
Keith scores the game-winning touchdown against Dalterion High.

He scores the game-winning touchdown that secures the team’s spot in the championship, and pulses with the deafening peals of victory cries that rattle behind his sternum. It’s a matching sensation to the way he had scrolled through his inbox only a week prior, balking at the sight of an email that would offer him that scholarship to Galra Tech. Lance, Hunk, and Pidge had made such a clamorous fuss in the middle of the quad upon hearing the news that Keith had tried shoving them all into the nearest snowbank, but the attempt backfired tremendously, resulting in a big, squishy group hug that Keith only pretended to find annoying. He felt that same sensation again on the morning of his dreaded Calculus midterm, when he discovered a blue sticky note pinned to his locker, covered in little doodles and words of encouragement, all in Lance’s telltale scrawl. Keith kept the note in his pocket throughout the entire exam. And he’s like eighty-percent sure he didn’t completely bomb it.

The dead of winter has never felt more warm or more promising. Because, over time, that pulse turns into an ache, which turns into a burst, which then blossoms into — something else entirely.

**Happiness**, Keith thinks a little dizzily. The word he’s looking for is happiness.

After the game, Keith doesn’t go straight home. He meets up with Lance, Hunk, and Pidge at Lion’s Den for some well-deserved hot chocolate. They occupy a big, circular booth near the back of the diner, scrounging their pockets for enough quarters to keep a constant stream of songs blasting from the 50s-style jukebox. They laugh so hard that hot chocolate and marshmallow goo almost sprays out of Hunk’s nose. They toast to the end of their penultimate semester as high schoolers, to all their successes, and discuss their plans for winter break.

Pidge is going to visit her brother at Olkarion University, where she’s already been accepted. Hunk will be meeting Shay’s parents on Christmas Eve, and he looks vaguely green in the face just from talking about it. The McClain’s are hosting a holiday party at the end of the week, a celebratory send-off the night before Lance and his family will be traveling to Cuba, where they’ll spend the entirety of winter break with his grandparents. And Keith —

Keith will have his mother.

The thought of it, the happiness of it, flip-flops around in his stomach all night. It burrows deep, and flutters anew when Lance leans into him, chin on his shoulder, breath on his ear, ankles hooking together beneath the table, and asks him, “Wanna split a grilled cheese?”

The thought of it, the happiness of it —

It blooms, even in the dead of winter.

And it’s with a pulse, and an ache, and a burst, and a smile already halfway to Keith’s lips when he answers, “Sure.”

The holiday party has been in full-swing for at least an hour by the time Lance pulls open the front door, only to be blasted by a gust of frosty air. The twilit sky is a foreboding shade of grey, and the
flowerbeds are frozen over with wintry residue. Even tiny icicles dangle from the edge of the roof, glinting overhead like shards of polished glass on a chandelier.

But absolutely nothing about Mother Nature’s fury manages to capture Lance’s attention for long when there’s Keith loitering on the porch. His usual letterman jacket has been swapped out for something leather, and a little more weather-appropriate. Beneath that, a maroon sweater, and a pair of thigh-hugging dark jeans that are, quite honestly, doing the Lord’s work right now. And, to top it all off, Keith — being the adorably oblivious scoundrel that he is — has the audacity to smile when he sees it’s Lance who has come to greet him, and it does something downright dazzling to his features, lighting up his eyes.

Lance suddenly realizes that he’s not so much holding the door handle as he is gripping it for all he’s worth, lest he — god forbid — fall flat on his face, and save his siblings the trouble of humiliating him later on.

“Hey, Lance,” says Keith, to which Lance opens his mouth, and incompetently replies, “Pants.”

Great. He can sense a fixation forming already.

Keith — still ever adorable and oblivious, bless his soul — furrows his brow, and scrunches his nose. “Uh, what?”

“Lance,” blurts Lance when some semblance of sanity returns to him. “I said — Lance. ‘Cause, y’know, that’s my name. Don’t wear it out,” and he adds an awkward finger-gun at the end, which — probably doesn’t help his cause very much.

“Right,” Keith snorts, stepping inside, sweeping a gaze over Lance’s flushed cheeks. “Looks like someone’s been hitting the eggnog a little early.”

“I — have not!”

“Hey, Keith! What’s up, man?”

By some stroke of luck, Hunk’s voice beckons Keith into the living room, where he, Shay, Pidge, Romelle, and Allura are gathered on the sofa, waving him over. Keith goes, and Lance definitely does not steal a glimpse of his ass as he walks away.

Sighing, he shuts the front door, revealing Veronica on the other side of it. She’s leaning against the wall, arms crossed, grin smug. Lance nearly shrieks at the sight of her.

“Jeez, Ronnie, try breathing through your mouth sometime, would ‘ya?”

She sagely ignores him, and says, “So, that went well for you.”

“Okay, in my defense,” he begins, “you don’t just show up to a guy’s place looking like that without giving him a little heads-up. I mean, that’s just — rude.”

“Yeah, you looked really offended,” she tells him sarcastically.

Lance pouts.

“Just be careful, Lancey,” Veronica warns, pinching her brother’s mouth at the corners, and squeezing them together. “You look like you’re about to fall in love.”

“Is that a bad thing?” he mumbles through tightly puckered lips.
“I know you,” is her response, with all her big sister wisdom. “Don’t be too quick to give yourself away, okay?”

Lance wiggles out of her grasp with a groan. “Ronnie.”

“I’m serious,” and she sort of looks it, too, eyebrow curving into a premature scold. “Real life isn’t as pretty as a love poem, you know.”

Oh, but if it were, then Keith would be — the most beautiful line of poetry that Lance has yet to write. All the sweet-sounding phrases that stay trapped behind his teeth whenever he thinks of stadium lights, and stargazing, and late-night grilled cheese sandwiches. And Lance starts to wonder if there are even enough words in existence that could ever come close to lyricizing something so dangerously enormous inside his chest.

A bark of laughter is what tugs his gaze back over to Keith. Lance spots him in the other room, squished between Hunk and the armrest of the sofa, surrounded by the rest of their friends. His head is thrown back in amusement as Pidge attempts to explain something to him with an excessive amount of hand gestures. And the string of Christmas lights hanging from the ceiling have him haloed in soft gold, and his eyes are crinkling at the corners. And when his head realigns, he’s looking past Pidge, over her shoulder, and catching Lance’s gaze like the snag of an opposite pole, still smiling in that heart-achingly handsome way. Lance’s brain kicks into high-gear, words scrambling around in a verbal ricochet.

‘These violent delights have violent ends, and in their triumph die, like fire and powder, which, as they kiss, consume…’ his subconscious seems to whisper on autopilot.

And, like, no offense to Shakespeare or anything, but Lance hadn’t really understood any of that when he first heard it. Mostly because it was during his seventh grade English class, and this girl — who he was definitely in love with for at least a full week — was sitting in front of him, and her hair smelled like sugar and shortbread, and when she recited those words aloud to the rest of the class, Lance had been so ridiculously smitten by how pretty they sounded falling off her lips, and so he’d highlighted that line in his book — over and over again — until it was, apparently, embedded in some long-forgotten realm of his mind.

But he understands it now — on a tragically personal level — in all its dramatic irony. And he understands it the most when he has Keith’s eyes all over him, burning through skin and bone.

His violent delight, and his violent end.

Veronica ruffles his hair before she leaves, but Lance barely even acknowledges it. Part of him thinks it’s sort of lovely that he can’t take his eyes off of Keith, but the other part worries about the twinge in his chest, so heavy and explosive. Like fire and gunpowder.

Which, as they kiss —

All at once, Lance whirls away, and stomps into the kitchen.

Still no offense or anything, he thinks, but Shakespeare can go fuck himself.
“There’s my favorite party animal.”

Lance finds him tucked away on the cushioned bench against the large bay window, a knee pulled into his chest as he gazes out into the darkened backyard. The party is settling down now that food has been served, with most of the guests still chatting drowsily in the dining room, or pouring the last of the champagne in the kitchen while his mother packs heaps of leftovers into plastic containers. A chuckle rumbles in Keith’s chest, low and content.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” he says.

“You kidding me?” Lance tosses himself bodily into the space beside him, beaming. “I saw you out there — you were glowing, dude, don’t deny it. Like, you basically put the Christmas tree to shame, and she’s supposed to be the star of the party here, so —”

“You were watching me?”

At that, Lance’s eyes go wide with surprise, and Keith’s lips rise into a pleased grin, almost as if he were — flirting, Lance wants to say, but the mere thought already has him breaking into a sweat, so he stutters out, “I was, uh — just keeping an eye on you.” Then he clears his throat, recovering. “Gotta make sure you don’t pull a Grinch and steal all our stuff, y’know? You broody lone-wolf types can’t be trusted.”

Quietly, Keith chuffs another small laugh. “Very funny.”


“Guess there’s a lot to be happy about right now,” Keith replies, glancing up through his naturally gorgeous fan of lashes. His gaze stays there, pinned on the blue of Lance’s eyes, and Lance feels the hypnotic pull of it all the way down to his gut.

“Yeah, like —” he rushes to add, suddenly breathless. “—like your mom coming to town, right?” Then he says, the corners of his mouth curling up genuinely, “That’s really awesome, man.”

Keith is already nodding, quick and a little bit eager. “I haven’t seen her in, like, a year. Since last Christmas, I guess,” he explains, with something so close to bursting at his seams. Every inch of him resonates with it, swelling like a bitten lip until it’s burning in his cheeks, boyish and bright. “And she’s staying for a whole week, so we’ll get to — talk. About everything. Like the big game, and Daibazaal, and my scholarship. It’s gonna be — what?”

Somewhere between all the unintentional rambling and poorly-disguised giddiness, Lance’s expression has, apparently, decided to betray him most unsubtly. It’s like it’s melting off his face, all gooey-eyed and enamored, completely and hopelessly bowled over by the way Keith blinks at him, curious and timid and, well — really fucking cute.

“Aww,” Lance coos, grin stretching as he reaches over to poke a finger into the center of Keith’s chest. “And they say that Keith’s wittle heart grew three sizes that day.”

Keith glares, but there’s still some mirth shining out his eyes, teasing at his lips as he mumbles, “Shut up.”

He leans away from Lance’s obnoxious jab, trying to deter him with distance, but he should know by now that Lance isn’t so easily thwarted in the face of a challenge. Lance moves with him, and yelps with laughter when Keith snatches his hand, curling his fingers over Lance’s balled up fist.
Then he just—doesn’t move. Doesn’t withdraw. Keeps his hand on Lance’s, a thumb slowly swiping over tanned knuckles, back and forth, until brushing becomes caressing, and the moment transitions from playful to affectionate so fast that it makes Lance’s head spin.

“Um—anyway,” he segues, slipping his hand out of Keith’s grasp a bit anxiously. “Speaking of me being an amazingly thoughtful and generous friend—”

“We weren’t, but okay.”

“I have something for you.”

Then, from behind his back, Lance offers up a small, rectangular package, encased with snowman-themed paper and a curly silver bow. The edges are crisp, smooth, and deliberately folded, suggesting that great care had been put into this simple but endearing presentation.

Keith stares at it, lips parting, eyes narrowing. “But I thought we said we weren’t doing gifts.”

“Whoa, now,” Lance scoffs, and his eyes glitter with hints of humor. “Who said anything about a gift? This little guy right here?” He gives the package a gentle shake. “This is all for the sake of your enrichment and enlightenment, m’dude.”

Smirking, Keith says, “So this holiday wrapping paper is just…”

“A total commitment to your education, okay, now just open it.”

Keith, eventually, does as he’s told. His fingers tug at the paper, tearing it carefully, almost regretfully, until he’s exposing what lies beneath: a clean, shiny book cover that reads *Catcher in the Rye*.

“Ta-dah!” cheers Lance.

“Is this—”

“Your very own copy, yeah,” and then Lance is arching a brow, letting Keith have what ends up being a badly-executed attempt at a threat. “But only on the condition that you don’t read the last chapter.”

The response is an incredulous snort. “Seriously?”

“Super seriously! This is non-negotiable, Keith,” says Lance, tapping his temple. “Use your imagination. Exercise the right side of your brain for a change.”

With very little resistance, Keith agrees, “Okay, fine, I will.” The book comes down into his lap, and he runs a palm over the cover for a beat or two before looking up to say, “Thanks for this, Lance.”

“Oh—’course, buddy. Anytime!” Lance’s heart beats like a caged hummingbird. “I mean, what’s Christmas without—”

“Mistletoe.”

“I, uh… was gonna say, y’know, ‘the joy of giving’ or something, but, sure, that’s—”

“Lance,” Keith repeats. And then, very soft, “Mistletoe.”

And, sure enough, suspended from the valance, right there above their heads, is a tiny sprig of mistletoe. It just dangles there, unassumingly in this very assuming way, innocently taunting. With his
head tipped all the way back, Lance can feel his jaw unhinging, his complexion going pale, and that
goddamn hummingbird inside his chest going thoroughly batshit crazy.

That’s when he feels it: Keith’s eyes taking him in, swallowing him like a black hole. The drastic
shift in temperature as he bends forward, hands hot on the tops of Lance’s thighs. Their knees are
touching, and their feet are all tangled up, and Lance doesn’t even know when that happened, but he
figures it had to’ve been at least ten heart palpitations ago. The world feels microscopic, all of a
sudden, like it’s closing in on him, and Keith, and the sigh of Keith’s breath as it hovers in the
shrinking space between their lips, and —

Lance falls.

Not into Keith, or against him.

Like — he literally falls right off the bench.

And the resounding thump of his weight hitting the floor has Keith reeling back, like snapping out of
a deep daydream. “Are — you okay?” he asks, startled.

“Fine! So fine!” Lance assures, sounding shrill and strained. “Like, the finest — I’ve never been
more fine, honestly.”

With that, he clambers to his feet, wobbling side to side, and meeting Keith’s dubious stare with a
winning smile as he bumps into the window frame.

“I just, uh — tripped,” he goes on to explain, visibly flustered. “A little bit.”

“You were sitting down,” Keith points out frankly.

“Yeah, well, we can’t all have the nimble coordination of a star quarterback, so I’m just gonna —
walk this off. Y’know, take a lap — or twelve —”

Keith’s hands linger a bit uselessly where Lance’s legs had been situated seconds before, floundering
and lost now that there’s nothing but air beneath them. “Lance?”

“It’s all good, dude!” he basically squawks in reply, pivoting unsteadily on his heel to hide a beet-red
face. Then he abandons whatever’s left of his dignity, and definitely does not sprint up the stairs.

Later that evening, when snow flurries start tumbling out of the sky and dust the earth in a pearl-like
luster, Keith decides it’s time to head home, knowing that the streets will likely be a treacherous thing
to navigate on that bike of his if he waits much longer. So he says his goodbyes to a room full of
flushed, happy faces, accepts Hunk’s insistent bear hug with minimal complaint, and then grabs his
jacket amongst all the others on the rack.

He’s zipping up the front of it, already halfway to the door by the time Lance meets him there,
pulling Keith back by the crook of his elbow.
“I’ll walk you out,” Lance says.

Keith hesitates. His skin itches hot where they’re tethered together.

“Okay,” he says.

Outside, there’s nothing but the dead quiet of nighttime and winter surrounding them, stark and frigid. Every crunching footstep down the driveway, every visible exhale of breath floating around their faces – it all sounds amplified, too loud in Keith’s ears against a soundtrack of vexing silence. Beside him, Lance walks close, keeping his head slightly bowed, turned away. Their knuckles brush occasionally, and Keith’s insides buzz with each accidental touch. Because it would be so easy – too easy, he thinks – to just reach for Lance’s hand. A simple chain of events finally brought to life: the press of their palms, warming away the stinging cold. The weave of their fingers fitting like a puzzle. Just them, together, right here and now.

But he doesn’t.

His hand remains empty and numb at his side.

Eventually, they slow to a stop next to Keith’s bike where it’s parked along the road.

“Thanks again for the book,” Keith says, eyelids fluttering as snowflakes fall onto his lashes.

Lance looks up at long last. He’s striking, of course. His hair is dappled with a thin sprinkling of white, and he’s swathed in a pale glow from the street lamp hanging overhead. “Sure,” he manages, somehow, without the single syllable cracking or dwindling away into nothing.

Neither of them make a move, even though, again, it would be so easy to. Keith would maybe sweep the snowflakes out of Lance’s hair, maybe let his fingers linger, briefly and delicately, before trailing them down to cradle Lance’s face, where his thumbs might trace a map of bronze freckles across his cheekbones almost reverently. Maybe then he would whisper I miss you already, because maybe it’s true, and maybe he wants Lance to know it, because Lance deserves to know it, and maybe –

“Um,” Lance croaks, clearing his throat. “Have a good break. And, uh – drive safe out there.”

For a stolen moment or two, Keith searches those blazing blue eyes for — something. Something that he doesn’t have a name for quite yet. All he knows is that he feels it flickering bright in his chest, and wonders if Lance feels it, too, just as strong.

“Yeah,” he relents. “Have a good break.”

Then Lance pads away through the powdery drizzle, the long shape of his back going murky around the edges beneath the fading light. All at once, Keith thrums with the desire to charge forward, to bring him back, but his feet are frozen to the ground, and his instincts flare angrily from the conflict of it all. I miss you already, his throat yearns to shout across the darkness until it’s rough and burning. Instead, a little belatedly, he calls out:

“Do you want me to kiss you?”

Lance nearly slips and goes down in a pile of slush. He wobbles, all weak-kneed like some kind of newborn animal, and then recovers at the last second by hugging the nearby lamppost.

“W-What?” he rasps, very carefully spinning himself around.

“Because I wanna kiss you,” Keith says, and it’s so earnest, so matter-of-fact, so – so very Keith-like
that it forces a tremble into Lance’s breath. Keith puckers his brow, mutters, “But earlier, inside, you _”

“Spazzed out? Like a raging lunatic?” Lance interrupts with a groan. He nudges the toe of his shoe against that stupid slush pile a bit pathetically. “Yeah, in hindsight, that was probably, uh, not one of my finer moments.”

Slowly, mechanically, Keith’s jaw clenches around nothing. His lips are pressed very thin. “I just think we should be on the same page with – that.”

“Oh,” Lance almost wheezes. “Yeah. Yes to – that. Uh, thing is, though... I haven’t even opened the book. I haven’t even made it to the freakin’ library yet. I mean –”

But then he clamps down on his tongue, wincing in a self-deprecating kind of way while his pulse throbs loud and fast against his skull. A flush of pink creeps up his neck, his cheeks, like a spider’s crawl, and it melts the bitter chill away with barely any effort. “’Cause I –” He pauses. Swallows dry. Speaks soft. “–I’ve never kissed anyone before.”

Somehow, Keith hears him. And Lance probably knows it just by looking at him, standing there all quiet and still, with the lingering remnants of a breath ghosting through him, billowing up, up, and away from his parted lips like a cloud of gunsmoke.

“Or been kissed before,” Lance babbles out quickly, desperate to fill the harrowing silence with something that isn’t the hysterical thump of his heartbeat. “Or, y’know, just – zero lip-on-lip action in general. On the whole. Overall.”

“Really?” says Keith, a little too ingenuously. Almost frustratingly so.

So Lance just nods, his entire body vibrating with the stiff motion of it. “Weird, right?” and then he tries for a laugh, something easy and light, but it dies an inglorious death on the tip of his tongue. Solemnly, he explains, “Guess I’ve just been waiting for the right person to come along. Someone who’s not gonna – take it and run.”

Keith blinks at him, his gaze all shadow and dusk in the half-light. “You didn’t answer my question,” reminds Keith, and the expression that washes over Lance’s features is one of pure wonder.

“All he wants to see.

With another soft crunch underfoot, he begins moving forward. Magnetized.

“You didn’t answer my question,” reminds Keith, and the expression that washes over Lance’s features is one of pure wonder.

“Hm?”
They’re facing each other now, fully, and rimmed with golden lamplight. Keith watches Lance’s pupils disappear into the blue as he takes him by the wrist, feeling his pulse dance to the same quick pitter-patter of his own.

Then he asks again, with the utmost seriousness: “Do you want me to kiss you?”

Lance’s pulse gives a startled kick beneath Keith’s fingertips. “Keith,” he whispers.

“T’m right here,” Keith whispers back, soft and firm like a vow. Steadily, he inches even closer until he can almost feel Lance shivering against him, nearly chest to chest. “I won’t run.”

And the timbre of his voice rumbles with such utter surety because Keith knows it like it’s written in the goddamn stars, or etched into his skin like a scar. He doesn’t want to run from this — not now — not when the possibility of something so wonderful is brimming and blooming right there behind Lance’s translucent gaze. Their fingers bend together, finding the spaces where they lace so nicely. Then Keith is leaning forward; foreheads touching, noses bumping, eyes sewing shut, hardly enough room left to breathe between them.

“Lance.”

Yes, it would be so easy to just —

“Kiss me,” Lance gasps, his free hand grabbing at the front of Keith’s jacket, and pulling tight.

“Please kiss me. Just — god, seriously, I’m gonna die if you don’t —”

Keith kisses him so suddenly that their teeth clack, in a way that should be painful, but it’s not — not even a little bit — because Lance’s lips are so soft, and taste kind of like snowflakes and something unidentifiably sweet, and Keith wants to dissolve into that softness and that sweetness until there’s nothing left of him, just quivering bones and a hammering heart, and —

Lance breaks away with a wet-sounding smack that makes him blush. “I think… I think I did it wrong.”

“You’re crazy,” Keith tells him fondly, an amused puff of breath feathering warm against Lance’s lips.

“No, I think —” His fist twists even firmer into the leather fabric. Eager. “—yeah, we definitely gotta try that again. Y’know. Just to make sure.”

Keith grins. “Yeah?”

“Mhm.”

Now, when they kiss a second time, it’s Lance — in all his endearing uncertainty — who reels Keith back in. It lands slightly off-center, and he’s unsure of the best way to tilt his head, or use his tongue. How much is too much? How much is not enough? How much longer can they keep this up until one of them inevitably needs to breathe? Nagging questions circle his brain, boiling into self-consciousness, but he just can’t bring himself to care. He doesn’t care because this — god, this — must be suffocation in it’s most poetic form. And Lance is a willing victim, gladly exchanging air for the overwhelming scent of Keith. The metal lamppost presses uncomfortably into Lance’s spine, maybe even enough to bruise, and that thought alone is wild enough to make Lance lose at least half his mind right then and there. Keith splays his palms over the small of Lance’s back, crowding into him until there’s no distinguishing where he ends, and Lance begins.

They part slowly this time, unwilling to drift too far out of each other’s orbits. They’re in their own
little universe, all heaving chests, and swollen lips, and half-lidded stares. “‘Kay,” Lance all but slurs, feeling intoxicated, “maybe one more —”

“That trick’s not gonna hold up in the long run, y’know.”

“Long run, huh?” Lance chuckles, or would have, had he any air left in his lungs. His smile slants, going coy in a hopeful sort of way, and his palm lays flat on Keith’s chest, right where his heart skips beats against him, with him, for him. “Kinda sounds like you plan on kissing me a lot, then.”

“As much as you’ll let me,” promises Keith.

Then he tucks a hand behind Lance’s neck, warm and secure, and draws him in again, savoring the taste of sweet snowfall on his lips.

Keith, eventually and reluctantly, lets Lance go. But, first, not without escorting him all the way back to the house, under the pretense of the driveway being perilous and icy — which, actually, isn’t entirely untrue — even if Keith only uses it as a thinly veiled excuse to keep Lance close, an arm around his waist, stealing as many precious moments of warmth and breathless whispers as he can get. He kisses Lance, slowly, against the front door; both hands in his hair, both hands on his waist, skimming along the arch of his back, the curve of his spine. And when Keith leans away, he’s gifted with the hazy image of those eyes, dancing and twinkling like fireflies in the soft porch light.

Then, with a little wave, Lance goes inside. Shadow paints the ground black where he’d been standing mere seconds ago, and Keith stares at the emptiness until the cold makes him shiver.

Next thing he knows, he’s in his garage, only vaguely cognizant of how he got there.

But he does remember the wind, glacial and relentless as it pricks his tingling skin. He remembers the out-of-rhythm beat of his heart, drumming louder than the roar of the bike’s engine. He remembers the ink-black sky overhead, and the shower of snow around him. The phantom press of Lance’s mouth still lingering on his own. The blue of his eyes, the pink of his cheeks. The electric thrum of his entire body as they plaster themselves together, in all the right places. Those adorable little mewls of pleasure and want that he eases out of Lance’s lips with every honeyed kiss, caress, nibble, bite —

So, yeah. Taking all of that into consideration, it’s basically a miracle that Keith makes it home in one piece.

Feeling winded and weightless, he kills the engine. His helmet comes off next, sending tufts of Keith’s hair flopping and fanning across his face. He pushes a hand through the front, and tugs. Then it’s a graceless dismount off his bike, and an awkward stumble over to the door where he catches himself, falling back against it. Because he’s still kind of reeling, still kind of swaying on his feet, and this is all he can do to keep from buckling over, he thinks. Or from floating straight off the ground in a heady stupor, rising, rising, rising.

That’s when his back pocket begins to vibrate, and something fizzes and sparks to life inside of him. In a good way. The best way.
Just as he expects, there’s a text from Lance waiting for him, lighting up his phone like a beacon.

*If there are any post-kiss rules about how long I have to wait before I text you, then I’m probably breaking all of them right now,* the message reads. *But I just wanted to say goodnight.*

Another one pops up, almost instantly: *So goodnight!*

A pause. Lance types. Stops. Types again.

*I’m really glad it was you,* is what finally appears on the screen.

Keith feels the timid beginnings of a smile tickling his lips. His face burns with the warmth of it.

*I miss you already,* he types out.

— And then promptly deletes.

His thumb hovers over the keyboard with indecision, maybe even nerves, but he doesn’t make much progress before something else pops up on his screen, so unexpectedly that Keith swears he must be imagining things because — it’s an incoming call.

From his mother.

The phone, suddenly, slams into his ear. “Mom?” he answers.

And for a split, torturous second, the line is dead. There’s a bit of static, the shallow swill of a breath, and then:

“Keith.” Her voice is a rich, rolling tide churning in his gut. “Hi.”

“Hi,” he forces out, more air than actual sound. Behind him, the press of his shoulder blades against that sturdy door is the only thing keeping him anchored to reality. “You — called.”

It registers as a downright idiotic thing to point out when his mother starts chuckling quietly. “And you answered,” she replies.

More static. More breathing. Funny — or, maybe, not at all — how there’s nothing and everything to say at the same time. Important things, trivial things. Things like: *tell me about work, tell me about the city, I hate that my own mother feels so much like a stranger.*

“Of course I did,” Keith says instead, voice gone weak.

Things like: *are you happy? Are you proud of me? Do you think about me as often as I think about you?*

“Keith, I —” she begins, and Keith thinks he hears low voices murmuring in the background. “—I already spoke with your father this evening, but I thought it’d be best if I called you myself.”

“Are you okay? Is everything okay?”

“I’m fine, yes, it’s alright,” she tells him. “But, unfortunately, I won’t be able to make it back for Christmas this year.”

His fingertips, numb as they are, slide along the door’s surface, grappling for purchase, because Keith suddenly fears he might melt right through it. “What?” he chokes out.
“I know this is last minute. It’s just not a good time, Keith, with work —”

“But it’s Christmas.”

“Yes, I know —”

“Can’t you just — what if you just came for one day? Just one — you don’t even have to stay for the whole —”

“I don’t think —”

“— What if I came to see you?” Keith hears himself tripping over the words in his haste to get them out. “I could get on a plane tomorrow, and —”

His mother sighs. “Oh, Keith.”

_Do you even care? Do you even want me there?_

He tips his head back, clenches his eyes shut until he sees blurs of lightless color mottling the darkness behind his lids. The drone of his mother’s voice fades into white-noise, and Keith feels sick to his stomach as it hums through him. Funny — or, again, not at all — how moments ago he’d been delirious with bliss, soaring so close to the clouds he could’ve lived happily amongst the stars for the rest of his days. And, now, how quickly he’s being hauled back down to earth, crash landing, leaving him broken and battered and bruised at the bottom —

“—Keith?” her worried tone filters back into his ears. “Are you still there?”

He isn’t sure. Not really. But he grinds out a broken, “Yeah,” and leaves it at that.

“I’m so sorry, Keith,” his mother says.

And he thinks it’s supposed to feel better now, isn’t it? Or, at least — less terrible.

“I got into college,” he spews at once, and he doesn’t know why it comes out that way. Like he’s trying to save something. Fix something. “It’s in Daibazaal, so we can see each other more.”

The response is static, followed by the distant tinkle of silverware, and someone’s muffled laughter. Then his mother, soft and rushed, says, “We’ll have to talk about it another time. It’s getting late.”

_Let me tell you about school. Let me tell you about football. Let me tell you about the boy I like. Let me —_

“Right,” mumbles Keith. “I love you.”

He waits, seconds slipping through the cracks of his fingers like finely-grained sand.

“I love you, too, Keith.”

The call ends, and he thinks it’s supposed to feel better now.

Isn’t it?
Lance texts him every day, after that night.

Sometimes it’s a picture of a beachside sunset, or a platter of his abuela’s freshly baked croquettes, or Sylvio sitting on Lance’s father’s shoulders, captured mid-giggle as he places ornaments on the very top of the Christmas tree. Sometimes it’s something silly, and sometimes it’s something sweet, and each one is accompanied by an immediate disclaimer — usually an apology for interrupting him while his mother is in town.

And Keith just doesn’t have the heart or the strength to correct him.

In fact, he doesn’t text him back at all.

But he almost does, every single night when it’s late, and he can’t sleep, and he wants to forget everything that isn’t Lance’s freckles, Lance’s eyes, Lance’s particularly kissable lips when he smiles at him, and the whole world kind of brightens like a sunrise.

But every night, without fail, Keith’s fingers stall too soon, and his chest stutters too fast, and he thinks I can’t, and the radio silence resumes.

It goes on like that for days. An entire week. Then, like a fleeting flicker of twilight grazing the horizon, Christmas arrives, and it’s just as unceremonious as Keith expects it to be. A majority of his day is spent in his room with the door locked. He stares at the ceiling. Counts snowflakes on his window. Leaves the book that Lance gave him untouched and unread on his bedside table, and feels so goddamn bad about it. His father, meanwhile, does his best to coax Keith from his depressing hideaway with invitations to go catch a movie, or pick up some food, or work on his truck in the garage together like they used to. Keith declines.

And it’s not until much later, as Keith is rummaging through the kitchen for food, that his father finally corners him. He stands there, a shade ghosting the wall, as his son diligently ignores his presence.

“I know you’re upset,” the man speaks up. “I get it, trust me.”

Keith responds by slamming one of the cabinet doors shut.

“But I have a present for you, and — well, who knows, it might cheer you up a little bit.”

Scowling, Keith turns over his shoulder to find his father offering a lopsided grin, and a plain, unmarked envelope in his outstretched hand. He just glares at it for a stubborn beat, torn between curiosity and the desire to swat it away in an, admittedly, immature act of defiance. But then, huffing, he snatches at the envelope. There’s a letter inside, neatly folded, neatly printed. And it flaunts the Altea State logo in the top right corner.

Keith Kogane — and that alone is enough to make his knuckles go as white as the paper — we are pleased to announce your admission to…

He grits his teeth, jaw throbbing with the force of it.

“What,” he snarls, “the fuck.”

“Listen, just —” his father tries to pacify, like he can already smell an impending rampage in the air.
“—you’ve been stressed about college, and I thought it might make you feel better knowing you have… somewhere to go.”

Keith spins away. Spins back. Away again. All the while, his blood is boiling. His stomach is thrashing with something as molten hot as bile, but he’s swallowing it down before it gets the chance to simmer in his throat, and choke him to death.

“Keith,” his father tries again, a little despairingly, but — no. Just no. Right now, there’s so much red pulsing behind Keith’s vision, in this bright and raging way, that he can hardly even see straight. And he thinks, almost absently, he can’t remember the last time he’s been this angry. Maybe it was years ago, when things fell apart. When his parents sat him down, and gutted him with these tragically solemn expressions, the lines and creases of their faces so deeply concaved that they both appeared older than they actually were. It’s the same face his father wears now, and Keith hates it just as much as he did back then. The embers catch, and flare back to life, feeling long overdue.

In one jerky motion, he’s ripping the acceptance letter right down the middle, letting the two halves see-saw to the floor like dying leaves. He stomps on them on his way out of the kitchen, just for good measure, because fuck maturity. Fuck college. And, most importantly, fuck all of this.

“Hey,” comes his father’s voice trailing behind him. “Where are you going?”

“The airport. I’m going to see mom.”

A strong hand grabs Keith by the shoulder. “No, you’re not.”

“Yes, I am,” he snaps back, loud — too loud — and yanks himself away. “I’m going. And you can’t stop me because I’m not a little kid anymore, dad. You can’t tell me what to do, or where to go, or how to live my life. So I’m going to Daibazaal to be with mom, and I’m gonna go to school there next year, ‘cause there’s no way in hell I’m getting stuck here with you.”

His father’s face hardens and twists. “Keith,” he’s saying. “We — we gotta talk.”

“No point in talking if you never listen to me.”

“Well, she and I, we —” Keith turns to watch his father scrub a hand over his face, exhaling long and deep. “—Look, we wanted to tell you together, but then she had to go and cancel on us, and —”

“Are you gonna tell me or not?” he demands.

“Keith, your mother — she met someone,” and it sits in the silence. Just sits there, and hisses, and rings, and resounds — “A guy, I guess. They got married last year, and they’ve been living together with his kids. He’s got a son, I think, and a couple daughters.”

The air thickens, going stale and heavy and blistering in Keith’s lungs. Like a puncture wound, the weight of it throbs, right at the point of contact where everything hits him all at once: the missed calls, the short conversations, the sound of his mother’s voicemail grating at his eardrums like nails
on a chalkboard.

“You,” says Keith, his voice a broken, shattered thing. “You’ve been — you’ve both been *lying* to me. For a whole year.”

“We were going to tell you, kiddo —”

“When?” he shouts, so abruptly that even his father — his father, who fights fire for a living — flinches. “*When* were you going to tell me? When I move to Daibazaal? When I show up at mom’s new house, with her new husband, and her new —” *son*. He whirls away, eyes stinging. “—*fuck*.”

“God, Keith, I…” His father’s words tremble. Keith has never heard his father tremble before. “…I’m so sorry.”

But Keith isn’t a little kid anymore, and he knows what it’s like to be cut open, so he growls, “*Don’t,*” and pushes past the ache. “Don’t just — think you can *apologize* like it makes anything better. Your apology is *shit*.”

Through the bleariness of his vision, Keith can see his father watching him, so distressed, and it’s still that same *look*, and Keith hates it, hates it, hates it so much that he’s livid, and shaking.

“Mom’s the one who left,” he’s yelling now, the force of it scraping his throat raw. “*She’s* the one who ditched us because we weren’t good enough. *She*’s the one who was supposed to let me down. Not you.”

His father breathes sharply, “Keith —”

But it’s too late. It’s just too late.

Keith is already charging out the front door, and not looking back.

---

He runs.

He runs through the snow, through the bitter cold, through the pain in his chest that reminds him he’s still breathing. He runs, and then he runs some more.

But it’s always been like that, with him. One more mile. One more lap, just to see where he’ll end up. Just to see if he can find something better, if he runs far enough away.

It’s always been like that. Like mother, like son.

He keeps going until the wind slows him down. He keeps going until his clothes are almost entirely soaked through. He keeps going until he spots a porch light in the distance, a holiday wreath decorating the front window. Goes and goes until the doorbell chimes, and the house opens up to —

Shiro — blinking and bewildered, wearing nice pants and a cozy-looking sweater, the line of his brow crinkled with concern as he stares right at —
“Keith?”

And then there’s Keith — wet, puffy-eyed, and out of breath, standing on the front porch like he’s been washed up by a violent tide.

“I,” he says, voice cracking, face dripping.

“Keith, what —” Shiro takes a step through the doorway. He’s in a pair of soft loafers that probably shouldn’t be worn outdoors, and he just looks so warm and comfortable and homelike. “—what are you — what’s going on? Are you okay?”

“I’m… I don’t —”

“Takashi,” comes a man’s voice from somewhere within the house. “Dinner’s almost ready.”

Shiro doesn’t move, unresponsive to the call, but it manages to shake something loose in Keith’s head, as if he were being startled awake from a dream. All at once, he registers the scent of something delicious wafting out the door, the gentle sounds of Christmas carols crooning from the radio. And, all at once, Keith knows he shouldn’t be here, unsolicited, on his teacher’s porch, looking a frightful mess, and feeling so incredibly stupid. He shouldn’t be here, worrying Shiro to death, and chasing after something that isn’t meant for him. His eyes burn. His gut roils with dread and regret, and it sinks to the depths, settling in like a second home.

“I’m — I’m sorry,” he mumbles, backing away. “I don’t know why I — it’s Christmas, and you’re — I didn’t —”

With that, he’s wiping his nose with a damp sleeve, and then heading back the way he came. But he barely makes it halfway before Shiro trudges out into the snow, completely ruining his loafers, and stops him.

“Keith, please wait.”

Keith turns, but he doesn’t look up, chin tucked into his chest.

“Would you like to stay for dinner?” Shiro asks, all of a sudden. His gaze, as always, is so gentle and so kind. “Adam and I, we’d love to have you.”

Behind them, the door is still cracked open, and there’s light pouring out of it like liquid gold, and music is still playing, and Shiro’s husband is waiting for him, because they’re a family, and Keith can’t think of anything more perfect.

“Okay,” he says, and Shiro places a hand on his shoulder, and leads him out of the cold.

It’s barely still New Year’s Eve when Keith tosses himself awake, blinks groggily into the darkness of his bedroom, and finds a voicemail on his phone.

The crackled sound of Lance’s voice fills his ears, going something like this:
“—ronica, I’m no, I’m not! Shut up! Go back inside! Hey, uh, sorry. That was just my sister. She’s... y’know. A lot. Probably shouldn’t’ve told her about you. Actually, uh — I kinda told everyone about you. Even Mildred, but she’s — a goat. My abuela has a goat, in case you were — wondering? Um, which you probably weren’t because that’d be... hah. So did I mention I’ve had some sangria tonight? I mean, not like — too much, but y’know. Enough to make this message... uh. Well, exactly what it is. So, um. Yeah. Goats, am I right?

“But, anyway. I didn’t call you just to talk about farm animals, believe it or not. Um. I-It’s just — I haven’t heard from you all break. Like, at all. And, I mean, I get it. Seriously. If you’re busy, you’re busy. This isn’t me, like... being all psycho and clingy and stuff, but — I guess I just — wish you were here. ‘Cause I can’t stop thinking about kissing you at midnight. And, uh — yeah. Man, my non-sangria brain is really gonna kick me for that one, um... Did that sound weird? Probably sounded a little weird. Cool. Guess I’ll — go, then. Just wanted to say hey.

“Happy New Year, Keith.”

He stares at his phone until the minutes tick by like heartbeats. 11:58. The television hums with excitement downstairs. Keith can hear it through the floorboards. 11:59.

I don’t know how to say it. I don’t know how to tell you I’m breaking. I know I’m bad at this. I’m sorry.

Midnight.

I can’t, he thinks.

Keith doesn’t press send.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: I gain ten years to my lifespan when someone blesses me with fanart
fdjhgifhtgif

@ladykaito96 drew 'lil baby Keef and his dad right over HERE!
@shaishinx drew two very handsome boys right over HERE!
@allthegay-shit drew such a beautiful interpretation of the stargazing scene right over HERE!
@avenxizz drew not one but TWO adorable scenes right over HERE!

I'm overwhelmed on a regular basis by how much I adore you all. <3 Thank you for reading, and for being patient with me. Can you believe we're more than halfway done?? Craziness!

TUMBLR
TWITTER
Lance calls Hunk on the last day of winter break.

He manages to slip away from where his family is waiting to board their plane, just to make sure they don’t see him cry — which Lance does, quietly, in the semi-privacy of an airport restroom. He tries not to — like, he really tries to keep it together — but then he opens his mouth to say hey, and what spills out instead is a depressing, half-coherent mess: he didn’t call, not even once, what did I do wrong, I really thought it was special, I really thought I meant something to him —

Lance calls Hunk because he knows he won’t judge him for falling apart over a boy. Or say told you so like he fears his sisters might. Or tell him he’s insane, and overthinking things, and working himself up over nothing.

Because Lance knows it’s not nothing. He doesn’t know what it is, exactly, but — he knows it’s definitely not nothing.

Over the phone, Hunk makes a low humming noise, and it’s not the least bit pitying. Hunk is always good like that. Lance sniffs wetly into a wad of toilet paper.

“Let it out, buddy,” Hunk tells him gently. “Maybe he lost his phone or something. Or maybe it broke, and he had to get a new one, with a new number, y’know?”

Yes, Hunk is always so good like that.

Then he promises to make a batch of Lance’s favorite caramel blondies when he gets home, and Lance is so touched and emotionally compromised that he garbles out a watery and overly heartfelt I love you, and Hunk’s comforting laughter is the last thing he hears before they end the call. Lance stays in the stall and stares at his sneakers for a solid minute after that, feeling a little overwhelmed, and, honestly, a little ashamed when he realizes that he forgot to ask Hunk about how his dinner with Shay’s parents went. There hadn’t been much time for that between all his blubbering and whining, Lance thinks miserably.

Eventually, he goes to the sink, and splashes a few handfuls of water onto his face, like it’ll actually help anything. In the mirror, his reflection glares back at him, all red-eyed, tired-eyed, slightly flushed. He runs a finger along his lips, expecting it to feel different, somehow, now that they’ve been kissed, but it doesn’t.

This isn’t the first time Lance has been heartbroken. But it’s the first time he’s been heartbroken, and felt it slam into him with all the seismic force of a landslide. The first time it’s made him feel sick in
the gut, dizzy in the head. The first time he’s felt it with his whole body; the burn of it, running rampant through flesh and bone alike. The first time it’s made him feel — well, furious.

Furious at Keith for leading him on like that, for going back on his word. Furious at himself for getting swept up in his fifteen-year-old fantasies, for allowing himself to believe that it could be something more than a teenaged fling. And for still wanting Keith, anyway, despite all of that.

And it’s that same sparkling fury that has him barging into the boys’ locker room the very next day, an hour before the championship game, with his shoulders squared, and his gaze a stormy blue; so laser-sharp that half-clothed bodies are practically leaping out of the way to avoid getting singed.

That is, until an arm reaches out from behind a row of lockers, blocking his path, bringing Lance to a screeching halt.

“Fancy running into you, loverboy,” sneers James, flashing an infuriatingly white canine as he smirks. “Here to give your precious quarterback a kiss for good luck?”

Lance’s jaw snaps shut, teeth grinding until they ache in the back of his mouth. “Okay, you know what — no. Nope. Really not in the mood for this.” There’s an edge to his voice — something brittle and iron-like — that makes him feel like he’s on fire. Then he demands, on a slow exhale of breath, “Just tell me where Keith is.”

“I’m surprised you actually let him out of your sight for more than —”

“I said,” Lance growls, low and fierce, “I’m not in the mood.”

In less than an instant, it becomes quite clear that he might’ve gravely underestimated just how satisfying it would be to watch James Griffin squirm. To watch him flare his nostrils, and swallow so thick that his entire throat bobs, and shrink a little bit under the heat of Lance’s glower. A very ugly, unscrupulous part of him practically swoons at the sight.

James’ eyes sweep Lance from head to toe, the drag of it like a weight, before he turns away, and calls over his shoulder, “Hey, Kogane. Your groupie is here to see you.”

And that’s when Keith rounds the corner, rubbing a towel through his shower-damp hair, wearing absolutely nothing but his uniform pants and a black tank top that clings to his torso like a second skin — which, Lance thinks petulantly, automatically puts him at an unfair disadvantage in the very serious confrontation he’s about to have.

When their gazes lock, Keith startles into stillness, looking pale and stricken where he stands. “Lance,” he barely gets out.

“Yeah,” Lance says with a stiff jut of his chin, eyes stinging. He’s already trembling, and he can’t stop. “Remember me?”

Teammates start tittering in the background at such a public display, but Keith doesn’t acknowledge them. Doesn’t speak. Doesn’t even move. Anger surges up into Lance’s throat, boiling over, rushing out of his mouth before he can think to regret it.

“Need a hint?” he goes on, harsh on the consonants. “Try checking all the unanswered texts on your phone, or the missed calls. That might clue you in on —”

“Lance —”

But his voice keeps rising, rough with emotion. His hands spasm into fists at his side,
fingers quivering restlessly like they need something to claw into, but he can’t stop, he can’t stop, he can’t —

“— Or maybe I’m just hard to recognize when my tongue’s not down your fucking throat —”

“Ladies,” comes James’ interjection, over the sound of errant sniggers and wolf-whistles. “You mind taking this lovers’ quarrel somewhere else —”

“Shut up!” Lance and Keith both hurl at him in startling unison. James lifts his hands in surrender, and, with a snort, backs away from the pair.

Keith swivels his gaze, like he’s suddenly, for the first time, realizing where they are. “Do we have to do this here?” he mutters low. “Right now?”

Lance just balks at that, and doesn’t even bother quieting his volume as he wails, spitefully, “Oh, right, sorry — is this an inconvenient time for you?”

“Well, you quit —” He flounders, flushed and flailing hysterically. “—standing around in that dumb shirt like you’re some kinda… I mean, seriously, man, how can you expect me to keep direct eye contact over here!”

“Oh my god,” says Keith, exasperated as he snatches his letterman jacket from his gym bag, and throws it on in one careless motion.

“Move out, team,” comes Kolivan’s booming command. “We leave for Kerberos in five.”

The room starts animating around them, alive with the sounds of slamming lockers and zipping bags and mottled conversation and footsteps filing out the door, but Keith doesn’t make to join his teammates. He surges forward, seizing Lance by the arm, and totes him in the opposite direction, into the nearest vacant row of lockers. And Lance — feeling something like a helpless idiot — follows after him, limbs rebelling against the white-hot resentment still dancing through his veins. Keith plants his feet and stares until the final slam of the back door leaves them in privacy. Up close, his eyes are nothing but pupil, bleeding black, devoid of life.

He tries, “Lance, listen —”

“No, you listen,” says Lance, and he wishes there was more strength behind it, but, right now, he can barely even catch his breath. Every inch of him rattles and shakes as his chest heaves. He says, quiet and heartrending, “Look, Keith, I just — I just want you to be honest with me, okay? Like, if you changed your mind or — or if — that night meant more to me than it did to you, then just… tell me. I mean — god, it’s gonna hurt like hell if you do, but literally anything is better than this. I’m like — I’m so cut up over you, Keith, so just put me outta my misery here, and — say it. Just say it.”

Keith holds himself impossibly still, poised against the cold line of lockers. “She didn’t come back,” is all he whispers.

“What?” Lance murmurs. “She — who?”

“My mom,” answers Keith, firmer now. And the hostility that ripples out in his own tone seems to startle him as he straightens his spine, retracting, looking everywhere but at Lance. “She didn’t come back for Christmas. She was with her other family. Her new family. She — she’s never coming back.”
“Oh,” whispers Lance. Then his brain catches up to speed, and he’s clapping a hand over the lower half of his face, horrified. “Oh — *god*, Keith —”

“Oh?” he grits out, eyes still blazing and bottomless and pitch black. “So can we drop it now?”

With that, he whirs on his feet, and starts stomping away. Lance is left feeling struck dumb by the harrowing revelation of it all, like a brutal blow to the gut, but the sound of Keith roughly gathering his belongings from a few rows away has him stumbling forward at a desperate clip.

“You — hold up,” Lance says, incredulous. “You’re gonna leave me with *that*, and then just walk away?”

Keith shoulders his bag in silence, and manages to take two long strides before Lance is gripping him by the cuff of his jacket. “Keith, *c’mon*, I mean —” Lance implores, “—*shit*, are you *okay*?”

“I’m fine,” says Keith, biting each word.

Abruptly, Lance is swamped by the horrendous impulse to laugh, or burst into sobs, or shout until he’s hoarse, or some mangled combination of the three. He doesn’t, but only because the air is trapped in his lungs, frozen and terrified. Instead, he swallows hard, tells him, “You’re definitely *not* fine.”

“Then why’d you ask?”

“Because I’m trying to get you to talk to me here, Keith!” Lance explodes. His eyes are wild and shining with unshed tears. “Or *scream*, if you need to scream. Hit something. Hit *me*, I don’t care, get it out, but don’t — don’t keep pushing me away.”

When Keith tries to remove his gaze, head turning, Lance brings him back with a yank to his sleeve. He says, in a voice so delicate that it could break, “You said you wouldn’t. *Please*, just — you said you wouldn’t … take it and run.”

The tears are spilling freely now, racing down his face to the point of his chin, and Lance bites back the embarrassment and the hurt behind a firm jaw because he’s already cried his heart out for this guy, so what’s a few more tears. And Keith just stares at him for a long moment, expression blank. Empty. His eyes are so dark that they’re hard to look at.

“Then maybe you shouldn’t’ve given it to me in the first place.”

Keith pulls his arm away, but Lance’s fingers are already recoiling, like he’s been stung. He turns back around, and Lance, through blurred vision, watches in paralyzing heartache as Keith pushes his way through the back door, and swiftly leaves.

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The chanting starts as soon as they walk onto the field.

This is it. They’re up against Kerberos High in the championship game. The stadium is jam-packed,
a roaring sea of red and white on one side, black and purple on the other. Adrenaline swells in the air; a heavy, undulating current that churns in Keith’s stomach until he’s seasick.

The rivaling school’s quarterback, Sendak — a certifiable human tank — growls, and snarls, and gnashes his teeth like a bloodthirsty beast when he meets Keith at the center line. They both crouch into position, face to face.

“Time to see if you can steal the ball as well as they say you can steal hearts, big shot,” the boy taunts.

Keith’s eyes flash dangerously.

The whistle blows.

Keith snaps the ball.

And then Sendak crashes into him, hard, at the thirty-yard line.

Breath punches out of Keith’s lungs when his back hits the cold earth, choking him, chest heaving. Antok offers out a hand, and helps him back to his feet. The crowd keeps howling.

Play after play, tackle after tackle.

Keith goes down with a thud.

At halftime, while the cheerleaders are prancing their way onto the field with rustling pom-poms and show-ready grins, Kolivan wrangles Keith off to the sidelines by the front of his jersey.

“Are you trying to get yourself killed?” he scowls.

Keith spits some blood out of his mouth, and doesn’t answer.

“The scouts have their eyes all over you, Kogane,” his coach threatens. “So quit fooling around, get your ass out there, and win.”

“No.”

It can’t possibly be his own voice. He doesn’t even recognize it. It can’t possibly —

But it is. And Keith realizes it the second Kolivan looks up from his clipboard, gaze as dark and ominous as a looming storm. In this moment, Keith swears he can feel his pulse down to his knees.

“Excuse me?” Kolivan growls.

“You heard me.”

Kolivan marches forward. Keith stands his ground, doesn’t flinch.

“Let me make myself clear,” his coach seethes, close enough for Keith to see the black chasm of his eyes, the sweat glistening above his upper lip. “If you don’t play, we have to forfeit.”

Slowly, Keith turns to glare into the thick, pulsing crowd. The roar is deafening, a distant buzz in his ears, but he figures they must be cheering for him. They’re always cheering for him. For as long as he’s been playing, they’ve been cheering. Because he’s their prodigy, their hero, their shining star. Because he rose the ranks as a freshman, and never stopped climbing. He trained the hardest, and ran the fastest, and threw the farthest. He endured all the whispers and rumors from his gossip-starved
classmates, and the swoons and sighs from starstruck admirers, who only know him as he is on the field, emblazoned with the number ten. He worked, and sweat, and bled for this team, just so he could apply to all the right schools, and —

— And for what?

For a mother who left him behind?

The clamoring noise settles back in, unmuting itself.

“I’m done,” says Keith.

Kolivan’s eyes bulge. “You’re what?"

“I’m done!” he shouts, tearing off his helmet, and letting it clatter to the ground. “I’m done. I’m not — I’m not doing this anymore.”

The referee can sense the commotion, casting a wary eye in their direction. A few teammates are glancing over, too, but none dare to approach.

“What the hell,” snarls Kolivan, “has gotten into you, Kogane?”

But Keith has already started running, down the field, through the gate, away from the chaos, until he can hardly hear the distant cries from his shocked teammates, his infuriated coach, the riotous throngs of fans. He’ll just run, he thinks, and leave everything behind.

*One more mile, one more lap.*

Like mother, like son.

Keith truly hates that — even in the wake of literally everything — he still finds himself coming back here, to the Altea High football field. It’s the masochistic pleasure of pressing down on a bruise just to feel the sting, or picking at a scab just to open up an old wound. He used to know this place like a second home, back when he was a freshman, chained to the top of some lofty pedestal, and had every reason in the world to believe that this godforsaken plot of land would turn him into the kind of son that a mother could be proud of. The kind of son that a mother could regret leaving behind.

But it all feels like centuries ago, now. And even though Keith has grown since then, filling out his uniform where it once hung loose around his pre-adolescent frame, he’s never felt smaller than he does right here, right now, drowning under the riptide of everything he’ll never have, everything he’ll never be. He’s usually better at this, the whole breathing underwater thing. The ache in his chest, the burn in his lungs. *One more mile, one more lap.*

But when it comes down to it, Keith has been strong his entire life, and eventually, he thinks, even steel turns to rust.

It’s some time later when he hears the metallic clang of footsteps climbing up the bleachers. And
without even having to glance over, Keith knows that it’s Lance. He just knows. And he tries not to wonder about how Lance managed to track him down — or why. Maybe he’s more predictable than he thinks he is. Or maybe he’s just as transparent as Lance somehow always makes him feel. Both options rattle him.

Keith swipes at the sweat dappling his hairline, grabs one of the many footballs he stole out of the musty-smelling equipment room, and punts it toward the goal. The damned thing veers to the right, dropping a few feet inside the end zone. He’s long since abandoned his cleats, along with all of his padding, making his bare toes throb from the impact. But he just reaches for another ball. Goes again.

About three kicks after that, Lance can’t take it anymore.

“Keep that up and you’re bound to break something, y’know.”

He sounds — tired, maybe. But Keith still isn’t looking at him, so he tells himself he can’t be sure.

“Who cares,” he grunts, sending another ball flying. “Season’s over.”

“Yeah,” Lance says after a tense beat. “I heard you bailed.”

Stiffly, Keith positions another ball on the center line.

“That’s what your dad said, anyway.”

Then he halts mid-stride, and finally throws his eyes toward the bleachers. Lance is sitting there, center field, one row back. Still as a statue. Behind him, the sun burns orange over the cusp of the horizon, glinting his edges in fiery gold.

Keith grumbles, squinting into the brightness, “You talked to my dad?”

Lance shrugs heavily. “Coach Kolivan called him, and then he called me — it was a whole thing,” he explains, and then pins him with a gritty glare that hits Keith like an electric shock. “Y’know, for someone who prefers flying under the radar, you sure do know how to cause a scene.”

It’s enough to make Keith turn away again, muscles constricting beneath the weight of his skin, facing the field where he goes and kicks a ball cleanly through the goal posts.

“I don’t get it, Keith,” says Lance, softer now, but it still resounds in the vastness of the empty stadium. “I’ve been trying to figure it out, but I really don’t… Why didn’t you just tell me?”

Thump. Another ball takes off.

“Why didn’t you say — anything?”

Thump.

“I could’ve —”

“What?” Keith demands cruelly, whirling around, flinging his arms out to either side. “You could’ve what?”

With that, Lance leaps to his feet, and grips the metal railing in front of him. He shouts, “Been there for you, you idiot!”

“Well, I didn’t want you to be!” Keith shouts back. Heat rises up through his body, pools at the base of this throat, bitter on his tongue. “Okay, Lance? I didn’t — I didn’t wanna call you because I didn’t
know how to say it. Didn’t know how to say that I needed you. Didn’t know how to say — that it hurts.”

They both ignore the way his voice shatters and cracks on the last syllable. Something in Lance’s hardened expression collapses, like stone falling to rubble. They ignore that, too.

Keith pushes on, unraveling fast, “Because you were there with your family who loves you, and would never lie to you, and actually wants to see you on Christmas, and I didn’t wanna be — just the last fucking chapter of your story, okay? Just another headline that people can gossip about in the halls.” His eyes burn, smoldering and violent, as he chokes out a dry-sounding scoff. “You wanna write about the real me, right, Lance? Well, you got your fucking wish. Here he is — the perfect star quarterback, the coolest guy in school. So go ahead. Let them read all about it. Tell everyone how great it is to be me. To work your ass off for four fucking years only to find out that you’re still not even good enough for your own mother. To think you actually have a shot at being a part of her life again when it turns out that she doesn’t want you there anymore. She doesn’t want me anymore —”

And then his voice gives out, mouth and mind stuttering to a stop with a tiny, breathless murmur of — Lance.

Because, suddenly, he’s there. Suddenly and entirely, Lance is right there; against him, around him, anchoring him, all over him. He’s pulling Keith into his chest, and Keith melts so desperately, arms winding tight, fingers clutching at the back of Lance’s jacket. It’s all he can do to keep from losing himself completely. He clings to Lance like maybe it’s the only real and solid and good thing he has left.

“Do you seriously think that’s what I see when I look at you?” Lance whispers into the crook of Keith’s neck, a warm tickle on his skin. “Just another headline?”

Keith bites down on his lip until it goes white, tries to press himself even closer, but then Lance is peeling him away, leaning their foreheads together.

“I see… fire,” says Lance, wiping a tear at the corner of Keith’s eye. “You’ve got fire in you, Keith, and it makes you fearless. You’re so — I mean, god, life should’ve knocked you down a long time ago, but it didn’t, Keith, because that’s not you. You’re unstoppable, and you have a bigger heart than you let on, and you can do anything you put your mind to, and like… if that’s not good enough for someone, then that’s their problem, alright? Not yours.”

That’s when Keith really starts to cry, eager tears rolling hot and soundless down his cheeks.

“You deserve — so much more,” Lance tells him, quiet and unflinching. His eyes have never burned more blue. “Because you matter. You matter so much, Keith Kogane, you don’t even know.”

And before the entire world can tilt off its axis, bringing both of them down with it, Keith kisses him. Kisses him fully, with his whole bleeding heart, because he has to — in a way that terrifies him, consumes him, and makes him wonder if this is what it’s supposed to feel like; to strip himself down to his rawest, barest form, to expose the most dangerous, most vulnerable parts of him, to let someone see those parts, and to have someone want him for it, anyway, scars and all. Keith’s face is damp, his lips trembling like vellum, and Lance is holding him steady and snug around the waist until that warm touch is all he knows.

“I’m sorry, Lance,” he gasps into the sliver of space between their mouths. “I’m —”

“Hey, hey,” Lance sighs softly, inching back to seek out Keith’s gaze. He smooths the hair away from his eyes to find them all glossy and wide. “You just gotta let me in a little bit. That’s how this
thing works now, okay? You lean on me, and I lean on you. And don’t you dare hold back or
anything, ‘cause I’m way sturdier than I look, y’know.”

Keith breathes a soft, choking sort of sound that could maybe pass as a chuckle. “I’m not always
good at — saying how I feel. I guess I’m not good with words,” he explains. “Not like you.”

“Well, guess what, hotshot?” Lance grins. “It just so happens that I’m good enough for the both of
us. We’ll figure it out together. Starting right now.”

“But —”

“Uh-uh,” says Lance, giving a fondly admonishing pinch to Keith’s side. “Feelings now, excuses
later. We’re doing this. Period.”

Carefully, he lowers them onto the grass, right there on the field where the sun’s pink light paints
over them in warm, languid strokes. They sit close, elbows brushing, and Keith marvels at how he
can feel his heartbeat all the way in his abdomen.

“Nothing’s off-limits,” Lance reminds him, stretching out his legs to get comfortable. “And
everything’s off the record.”

Then he reaches for Keith’s hand, kisses the back of it, and that, at least, manages to quell some of
the anxiety that Keith feels. He can do this. He can break down some walls, he thinks, for Lance.
He’d do almost anything, he thinks again, for Lance.

“Off the record?” Keith says. He licks over his lips. Inhales slow. “I don’t even really like football
that much.”

The words scrape raw and hoarse from his throat in this oddly refreshing way, like dead weight
sliding off his shoulders. Like a cage door swinging open wide.

“I only started playing because I was good at it, and I thought it’d help me get into a good school,
near my mom, but now —” He can feel the ache returning, beating against his brow. “—I don’t
know what to do. Football’s the only thing I’ve ever done. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do if
— I’ve never done anything else.”

When he falls silent, Lance squeezes his hand. “Keith —”

But Keith bristles restlessly, and pulls his gaze away, acutely aware of how Lance is staring at him
with those big, wounded heart eyes. He wipes at his tear stains with the sleeve of his jacket, and
mutes, quickly, “Your turn.”

Lance pauses, considering.

“Off the record?” he says, his voice a shallow breath. “I’ve had a crush on you since the night we
met.”

At that, Keith shifts to look at him, grass rustling under his weight. “What do you mean?” he asks,
but Lance doesn’t make a sound. With his attention now trained on the sky, Lance is grinning
something soft. Something private. Something that Keith can barely even see beneath the rose-gold
shadow of dusk.

“You really don’t remember, huh?” He squints into the horizon, eyes half-lidded and wistful. Then
he reveals, slowly, “It was the freshman homecoming game, and you stopped the ball from nailing
me right between the eyes. Told me my jacket was cool. And I know it probably sounds dumb, or
 pathetic, or whatever, but — I just couldn’t get it out of my head. Couldn’t get you out of my head. It was like — you didn’t have to do that, y’know? I-I was just some nobody, and you could’ve just — you didn’t have to save me. But you did.” His lips quiver, then, with a silent chuckle as he murmurs, “My knight in shining… shoulder pads.”

“You liked me for that long,” whispers Keith, and the sound of it is a revelation, bursting bright and warm in the center of his chest. “And I had no idea.”

Lance finally turns, giving Keith all of his gaze, glittered and burnished in the dying light of the setting sun. A faint dimple pushes into his left cheek, and his smile falls endearingly askew.

And when he reaches out a hand to press it to Keith’s face, his thumb rubbing a gentle pattern along the crest of his cheekbone, Keith’s breath catches in his throat, and Lance tells him with a quiet kind of certainty, “You’re so worth the wait, pretty boy.”

Keith’s heart thrums, wild and off-tempo, as he leans into the touch.

He says, “I’m so stupid for not noticing you sooner.”

And Lance shakes his head, just slightly. “Well, in your defense, I wasn’t exactly doing a great job of making myself very noticeable back then.”

“And now you have the whole school hanging on your every word.”

“Yeah, but the only attention I ever wanted was yours.”

Here, beneath a sky full of radiant color, is where it dawns on Keith. All at once. One breath, one blink, one pluck of a battered heartstring, and, suddenly, he can’t get a grip on anything because he’s too caught up in pondering — how. How did he miss this?

“Lance,” he whispers, winded and aching with wonder. “I should’ve seen you.”

“You see me now,” Lance says. His fingers thread through the hair around Keith’s face, tucking it behind his ear as he asks, “Right?”

*How? How did he miss someone like him?*

“But the only attention I ever wanted was yours.”

Then, with a tender sense of longing, Lance sways closer until they’re kissing again. Until they’re breathing in sync, the final flickers of the sun’s amber glow folding in around them. Keith takes him by the waist, rolls them over into the grass, and never wants to let go.

When Lance allows himself to harken back to the simpler, slightly-less-confusing days of freshman year, he remembers thinking he knew precisely how the next four years were going to play out. He remembers bursting through those front doors on his very first day, smiling bright, all teeth — because he’d finally gotten his braces removed over the summer, and the world was going to
appreciate his pain and suffering, goddammit — struggling with his locker combination, and watching the upperclassmen stroll by with this effortless kind of confidence that blew Lance’s little fifteen-year-old mind.

By the time he’s a senior, Lance remembers thinking, everyone is going to know his name. Teachers will adore him, students will admire him, and the entire school is going to praise him for his many writing-related accolades. He’ll grow at least another two inches, and he won’t be as scrawny. He’ll figure out how to talk to girls without his voice squeaking all over the place. Maybe he’ll even date a girl, or get to at least second base with a girl. And he’ll have a part-time job on the weekends — somewhere cool like the arcade, or the local coffee shop — so he can finally afford his very own Nikon instead of wasting his monthly allowance money on rentals.

So, all in all, fifteen-year-old Lance kind of had the right idea.

Because now, Lance really is a senior, and one semester away from graduation. He bought his Nikon, and the whole school really does know his name — though maybe not for the exact reasons he would’ve hoped. He’s not just two, but three inches taller, and he isn’t as scrawny, his voice only squeaks occasionally, and he’s still working on the second base thing.

But, then again, he’s also heading toward his locker at present, where Keith is waiting for him, leaning up against it like — oh, Lance doesn’t know — the most attractive human being on the face of the planet, maybe. And that — well.

That is something that Lance’s past self absolutely did not see coming.

It feels surreal, and it takes him an embarrassing second or two to sort himself out, to register that this isn’t a dream, that this is really happening, and that he had, in fact, spent the better half of yesterday evening making out with Keith freakin’ Kogane in the middle of a football field, and — oh, if only fifteen-year-old Lance could see himself now.

Keith perks up when he notices Lance ambling down the hall, all wobbly-kneed and disgustingly starry-eyed.

“Hey,” he hears Keith say, and the sound of it breaks over him like morning. Lance stumbles, falling toward him, led by the two fingers that Keith hooks through the button holes of Lance’s denim jacket, and then pulls him in until the space between them disappears. Keith’s eyes are crinkled fond at the corners with the brightening touches of a smile as he murmurs, “Cool jacket.”

“Oh, y’think so?” Lance replies, amused. “My boyfriend says he likes it, too.”

“Your boyfriend sounds like he has good taste.”

With a not-so-innocent tilt of his head, Lance goes to loop his arms around Keith’s neck, and asks, “In guys or jackets?”

“Both,” answers Keith, right before he gets his lips on Lance, breathing in the melodic lilt of his laughter, kissing him slow and open-mouthed for everyone to see.

But the inevitable stares from their prying classmates’ eyes are a faint tickle against Lance’s skin, barely-there and easy to ignore while he’s busy being rendered dumb by the power of Keith’s mouth. The first warning bell chiming overhead is the only thing that manages to stir them a few inches apart.

“First period?” asks Lance.
“Calculus with Professor Lubos,” Keith says, breathless. “You?”

“History. Ryner. Ugh.”

“That’s on my way.”

Lance snorts in disagreement. “Only if you’re trying to take a nice scenic stroll all the way around the Language Arts hall.”

“I can cut through the cafeteria.”

“Just to walk me to class?”

“Yes,” Keith replies, determined, almost stubbornly so.

It makes Lance’s eyes light up, dancing with something both a little curious and a little giddy. “Mm. That must make you pretty crazy about me, huh? It’s my enchanting personality, isn’t it? My devilishly good-looks?”

“Yes, yes,” says Keith, “and yes.”

Lance hums, satisfied, and trills, “Are you gonna carry my books for me, too?”

“Do you want me to carry your books?”

Dizzily and all at once, Lance snaps out of his playful reverie, startled by the utter sincerity of the question. “I-I dunno,” he stammers. “I honestly wasn’t expecting that to work as well as it did.”

A laugh rumbles deep in Keith’s chest as Lance scrabbles with his combination lock. He tries and fails to appear anything other than flustered, gathers his necessary materials, and then swings his locker shut with a huff.

And before Lance can crow in protest, Keith is grabbing Lance’s armful of books with one hand, and linking their fingers together with the other. The easy intimacy of it has Lance mesmerized, totally blindsided, and blinking like a fool.

Keith blinks back. Just blinks, and then slants his lips into a grin, saying, “C’mon. That enchanting personality of yours is gonna make us late.”

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Ms. Sanda, the elderly woman who oversees the guidance counseling office at school, clears her throat a bit louder than necessary.

But it effectively captures Keith’s attention as he glances up from the brochure stand he’s been hunching over for the past ten minutes, a collection of various pamphlets and flyers practically bulging out of his hands. Ms. Sanda has a pair of stern, deep-set eyes, and a perpetual grimace on her wrinkled face — which, ironically, doesn’t seem all that inviting for students wishing to seek any sort of guidance. Keith has never particularly cared for her, and he assumes the feeling is mutual, given
how distastefully she had *tsked* under her breath when Keith stomped through her door this afternoon without even so much as a polite acknowledgement, in his ripped jeans and leather jacket, gaze focused and intense.

She glares at Keith from behind the front desk.

Keith glares back.

“Did you make an appointment, dear?” she wonders, her voice gruff and unpleasant.

“Nope,” Keith replies before snatching up at least three more pamphlets, and fleeing the office.

He skims through his selection as he saunters down the hall. He reads the words in big, colorful block letters printed across the front. Sees groups of well-dressed kids about his age with pristine smiles plastered on their candid-but-not expressions. Real people don’t look like that, Keith thinks, all posed in mint-condition like perfect little glass figurines. Untarnished. Unbothered. *Unbroken* —

Just then, a frighteningly agile palm comes crashing down, smacking the stack of papers right out of Keith’s grasp, and sending them scattered across the floor around his feet.

“*Hey* —” Keith snaps out of impulse, irritation hot on the tip of his tongue. He whirls around to find a gaggle of his ex-teammates being ringleadered by none other than James and his obnoxiously snide smirk. The raucous sound of their guffawing laughter carries them around the corner, and out of sight.

Fuming, Keith takes two trampling strides in their direction, and would’ve easily made it farther had someone not been hauling him back by the strap of his backpack.

“Bad idea,” warns a voice. It’s Shiro, Keith finds out when he checks over his shoulder. The man is standing there in his best business casual, with that masterfully calm, almost apologetic look on his face. “Tempting, I know. But *bad*.”

With a huff, Keith drops to the floor, reaching for his fallen papers. “They’re just pissed because I threw the big game,” he grumbles. “*Assholes*.”

“They’ll grow out of it one day,” says Shiro, bending down to help. “Or, worse — *into* it.”

Keith smirks, in spite of himself.

They manage to gather the mess into a haphazard pile. But then Keith watches with a held breath and a pinched brow as Shiro’s hand lingers over one of the pamphlets — one in particular that says ‘*what to do if college isn’t for you*’ very clearly across the front. Shiro scoops it up, along with a few similarly titled ones, and rises to his feet. “Looks like you have some important reading to do,” he comments inoffensively.

“I’m just,” mutters Keith, scrambling off the floor, “weighing all my options.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Shiro says, and, god, if it doesn’t make Keith feel even *worse*. Guilt bangs around in his belly, heavy and loud.

“I feel like I’m letting you down,” comes out without Keith really expecting it to.

And Shiro doesn’t expect it either, his expression going rigid with concern. “What are you talking about?”
“I’m not taking the Galra Tech scholarship, Mr. S,” he admits, and ducks his head downward and away. “I know you were taking a big chance by nominating me, and I —”

“Don’t discredit yourself like that —”

“You’ve just done so much for me —”

“Keith, listen,” Shiro is finally able to interject, “this is your future, not mine. You have to do what’s right for you.”

Keith looks up at him, overwhelmed.

“I nominated you because I knew you would rise to the occasion. You worked hard for it, you earned it, whether you end up accepting their offer or not. So if you take anything away from this experience, let it be that you are capable of so much greatness, Keith.”

With that, he smiles, small and subdued, and holds out the stack of pamphlets. “Just don’t give up before giving yourself a fighting chance, alright?”

Keith nods, still overwhelmed, too overwhelmed for words. He takes the pamphlets, and stands there dumbly until Shiro disappears down the hall. Those faces are gawking at him — those fake, spotless, mannequin-like faces, grinning up at him from the paper. Keith stares right back at them, as if he’s waiting for something to change in their polished expressions, but nothing does.

So he stuffs them all into the nearest trash bin, and continues to class.

A few weeks later, on Valentines Day, when Lance breathes coyly against the shell of Keith’s ear, and whispers instructions to meet him behind the bleachers during their shared AP Bio class, Keith is fairly confident he knows exactly what he’s getting himself into.

Or, he thought he knew.

That is, until he shows up a few minutes past the bell only to discover that Lance is already there waiting for him, tucked away beneath the scaffolding, swathed in its shade, with a blinding grin stretching for miles across his lips, and — what really strikes Keith as odd — a can of spray paint in each hand.

“For you, my valentine,” he greets suavely, offering one of the cans with a theatrical kind of flourish.

Keith stares for a puzzled beat, brow profoundly scrunched, before he takes it, and says, “You shouldn’t have?”

“Oh, okay, lemme guess,” chuckles Lance, flinging his arms around Keith’s middle in an attempt to woo. “You thought I was luring you away for an illicit tryst like the horrible influence that I am, just so I could throw you up against this wall, and have my wicked way with you.”
“Hm,” Keith muses, sufficiently wooed, “so why aren’t you doing that?”

“Because, sugar plum —” Lance beams. Keith pulls a face. “—we have some very official business to take care of first.”

Then he’s gesturing ceremoniously to the very wall in question. It’s old, and a bit weather-worn, with overgrown weeds sprouting up around its base in unruly tufts of shrubbery. But despite its unassuming appearance, it’s considered somewhat of a landmark amongst the student population. Nearly every dilapidated inch of that brick surface is decorated in splashes of color — graffitied hearts, large and small, with pairs of initials painted boldly in their centers. Anonymous declarations of love and lust. Some romances have been dated all the way back to the 70’s, and those are the ones a bit duller in hue, softly discolored with age. Others are brighter, newer, their edges drying sloppily with reckless passion.

“Ah,” Keith finally grunts in understanding, gaze falling off the embellished wall and down to the paint can still trapped in his palm.

“Don’t look too excited,” Lance snorts dryly. “It’s just our legacy we’re talking about here. Our big, glossy, semi-permanent legacy. Us — for everyone to see, for generations to come. We’ll go down in Altea High history, sweet-pea.”

Wincing, Keith gives him a sidelong glance, and asks, “Okay, what’s with all the names?”

Lance flaps an unconcerned hand in his face. “I’m just giving our options a trial run. But, anyway, as I was saying —” and then he’s motioning back to the wall, arms windmilling in grand swoops. “— us? Legacy? An illustrious romance for the ages? Whaddaya think?”

“I think,” Keith says, his eyes tracing a tangled motif of airbrushed hearts, around and around in seemingly endless circles, “there isn’t enough room left for us.”

“Yeah, all thanks to a certain hunky heartthrob,” teases Lance, and Keith’s mouth promptly twists into a frown because —

— Well, because he’s right. And it’s downright impossible to ignore how often Keith’s initials have been splattered upon this wall; each one in a different color, a different handwriting, a different sized heart. Each one paired with so many different combinations of initials that he can’t even begin to decipher them all. It tosses strangely in his stomach, pricks a shivery sort of discomfort along his skin, as he stands face to face with all the unknown hearts he doesn’t even realize he’s stolen.

“Right,” he mutters, shoulders sagging, cheeks going slightly pink.

“What?” Lance says when he catches sight of his boyfriend’s deflated posture. “The wall doesn’t lie, my guy. And, right now, the wall is clearly saying that you have a monopoly on everyone’s romantic pipe dreams around here. I mean — jeez — I always knew you were unfairly hot, but this is like… Like, I’m just wondering how you even go out in public without people jumping you. It’s probably the resting bitch face.”

Keith’s frown deepens, inadvertently — and a bit adorably — proving the point right then and there.

So adorably, in fact, that Lance can’t resist stepping forward to frame Keith’s sulky face with both his hands, kissing the tip of his nose, and telling him sweetly, “Definitely the resting bitch face.”

“It doesn’t mean anything,” Keith is insisting, then. “It’s just a dumb tradition.”
“Try telling that to all your adoring fans,” says Lance. Slowly, he circles back to the wall, close enough to press a palm against the rugged surface, fingertips sloughing off a patch of chipped paint. He remarks, pensive, “Four years at this place, and I don’t see anyone smearing my initials onto a wall.”

Something about it sends Keith’s heart skipping in a way he doesn’t completely understand, but he feels it, drum-like and enormous, behind his ribs. Not quite anger, he thinks, though it bubbles and simmers through his veins almost identically; this blunt, immutable ache. Keith doesn’t need to pin it down with a name to know that he can’t stand it, the possibility that Lance could think himself anything less than what he is, or too unimportant to be wanted in that way, this way, all the ways. And Keith could say it, scream it, hum it against Lance’s honey-brown skin until they’re both flayed alive by the resulting warmth of it.

Instead, he silently reaches into his backpack, swapping out the spray can for a ballpoint pen.

“C’mere,” he says softly as he comes up on Lance’s left, catching his wrist. It goes pliant in Keith’s grasp, and Lance watches as if dazed, spellbound by the careful ministrations of that pen brushing featherlight over his lifeline.


“I want you — I want us — whether I paint it on some wall or not,” Keith tells him firmly. “You already know how I feel. That’s all that counts to me.”

For a moment, Lance seems incapable of speech. Only his eyes move, flicking back and forth between Keith’s unwavering gaze and his wrist, admiring the mark on his skin like it isn’t just some insignificant scribble, but, rather, the most lovely gift he’s ever received. “Well, damn,” he blows out a breath, expression gentling. “Where’d you learn to talk like that, huh, stud muffin?”

Keith can’t swallow his smile fast enough. He sputters helplessly, which then escalates into full-out laughter, and Lance promptly joins in, delighted by the sound.

“I kinda thought that one was gonna land better,” he admits.

“Just forget the nicknames, Lance.”

“Fine.” Then he’s tangling their fingers, lazy and unhurried. “Then maybe we should revisit that whole throwing you up against the wall thing instead. ‘Cause that sounded more, y’know — doable.”

And Keith is already leaning back against the painted brick, tugging Lance into him, as he says, “Yeah, good plan.”

TO: [Lance]
FROM: [Allura]
DATE: Today at 3:34pm
SUBJECT: Article Deadline — PLEASE RESPOND ASAP!!

Lance,

I know for a fact that you have been deliberately deleting my emails, and then claiming not to have received them, for the past month. And don’t bother arguing with me. I already had Pidge infiltrate your account so I could take screenshots of the evidence, which I have attached to the email below. Next time you wish to deceitfully neglect your responsibilities, I recommend emptying your trash folder.

(And, in light of recent events, I also recommend changing your password.)

I need your final draft — or any draft, at this point — by Monday morning, at the absolute latest. We simply cannot postpone it any longer. Our readers have been tweeting us non-stop ever since the championship game fiasco, and I’m running out of excuses. Please, Lance. I’m counting on you.

Oh, and have a happy Valentines Day.

Tell Keith I say hello.

Allura

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That night, Lance and Keith have plans to go on a double date with Hunk and Shay.

Keith looks unbearably handsome in his black-and-grey striped sweater and bomber jacket, and he holds Lance’s hand during the movie, and he insists on paying for Lance’s ice cream afterwards. And later, Keith takes him home, and catches Lance around the waist when he nearly trips getting off Keith’s bike, and Lance squawks about it until he’s blushing, and Keith thinks it’s cute, and they both laugh so loud they worry they’ll wake the whole neighborhood.

“Tonight was great,” Keith tells him at the front door, when the world goes quiet, and it’s time for them to part, but neither wants to be the first to let go.

*I like you so much I might explode*, Lance thinks.

But he kisses him instead, and he tastes the mint chocolate chip on Keith’s lips, and he feels his entire body heat up from the inside-out, and he thinks — *oh, I like you, I like you, I like you too much.*

Then, like a flash of moonlight, Keith’s bike is rumbling away down the quiet street. Lance watches him go from his bedroom window, the shape of him all dreamy and soft through the frosted glass. The drawing still inked into Lance’s wrist burns like glowing embers.
He’s extra delicate about scrubbing his skin in the shower that night. He doesn’t want Keith’s heart to fade.

On Sunday evening, Lance stares at his computer screen, eyes red-rimmed and half-mast with exhaustion.

He types with one hand, chugs his third Red Bull with the other.

The clock ticks by.

His phone dings. A frenzied text from Allura. Lance mutes all incoming notifications, and buries the device under a pile of pillows on his bed, just for good measure. Surely he’ll be bearing the brunt of Allura’s vicious temper come morning, but that’s a problem for future Lance. Present Lance has his own shit to deal with.

Hence, right now.

More typing, more Red Bull.

He thinks about Keith.

Keith drenched in porch light. Keith wearing warm sweaters. Keith walking him to class, Keith looking at the stars, and Keith kissing him in the snow.

He thinks: I like you so much.

He keeps typing.

Time keeps passing, and the sun starts rising, a glimpse of bronze in the horizon.

The skin on his wrist tingles with the phantom press of a pen.

I like you too much.

At six-thirty in the morning, Lance’s alarm clock screams at him. He rubs at his eyes. He hasn’t slept.

But he has an article.

Allura makes the official announcement on the Altea High Chronicle twitter account that afternoon.
And a week later, a solid hour before first period, there’s a line of buzzing students waiting outside the school’s newspaper office that extends the entire length of the hallway.

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@AlteaHighChronicle HELLO GOOD MORNING HAPPY #KLANCE DAY

@AlteaHighChronicle not to be dramatic or anything but this is the only reason i came to school today #TeamKlance

@AlteaHighChronicle I’M SICK AT HOME WITH THE FLU PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE POST THE #KLANCE ARTICLE SOON!

@AlteaHighChronicle FINALLYKJFHDGXHRVNJDFG!!!!!!!!!!! #klance

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Dear readers,

I’m not really one for formalities, so let’s kick things off by breaking down some of that fourth-wall bullshit, yeah? I mean, be honest. Who are we trying to kid here? You know me, I know you, and we all know why you’re reading this article. And it’s sad to say, but it probably has nothing to do with my god-given gift for journalism, or my syntactic genius — which is a little bit of a knock to the ‘ol self esteem, not going to lie. It’s just my life’s work getting egregiously downplayed here. No biggie or anything. But you know what? I think I’ll let it slide.

Because, after all, this article isn’t just about me.

Oh, yeah.

I bet you know exactly who I’m talking about.

(You’re not that subtle, reader.)

Look, I already told you — I know why you’re here. I know what you’re expecting to find within these long-anticipated pages. The thrilling aftermath, right? The inevitable consequences that come from a lovesick and underratedly-attractive fool’s decision to dangle his heart on the line like last week’s laundry. You want a classic underdog tale filled with love, longing, and — well, an abundance of teenaged hormones. A big resolution. A cinema-worthy climax. The epic conclusion to this unlikely and star-crossed romance. Cue the fireworks, roll the credits, close the curtain. Etcetera.
But here’s the thing —

I don’t like endings.

So I’m not going to write you one.

(My article, my rules. Them’s the breaks, reader.)

Go ahead — raise your fists in rebellion, rage against this terrible injustice, do what you gotta do to recover from the devastating blow of disappointment. But while you’re all busy sharpening your pitchforks, just know that I am not without sympathy. As repentance, I, your generous author, will offer you the next best thing: a beginning.

You see, it all started about three years ago, when I first laid eyes on this guy at the homecoming football game. That’s how these things always start, right? There’s always a guy, and he’s always just so conveniently out of reach. I used to be a real snob when it comes to those types of clichés, but that was before my life was in danger of becoming one. And, boy, did it ever. Like, no-holds-barred cliché, you feel me? I ogled, I daydreamed, I swooned — god, did I swoon — I doodled his name in the margins of my notebooks. I took the long way to class just to stroll by his locker intermittently throughout the day, on the off-chance he’d be there, and finally spot me through the crowd, and our gazes would lock, and choirs of angels would sing of our everlasting devotion. It was all super romantic inside my head, trust me.

And then, one day, the craziest thing happened.

He actually noticed me.

But, hey, I’m not about to give him all the credit here. I’m the one who went rogue and basically spilled my mushy guts all over the front page of the paper for the entire school to feast upon like a pack of wolves. Not the most strategic move in the playbook, I’ll admit, but can you really blame me? I repeat: three years. And let me tell you something, reader — that’s a long-ass time to pine in tragic anonymity. I had to do something before graduation rolled around, before I let this guy slip right through my fingers. Probably forever.

Now let me tell you something else, since we’re on the subject — he’s not the kind of guy you want to let go of.

He’s the guy you wait three long, agonizing, soul-crushing years for.

Five, if you had to.

Ten.

Probably forever.

In case it’s not already painfully obvious, I’m pretty hung up on this guy. Like, a full-on hopeless case. And it’s not just because I spent the majority of my adolescent years mooning over him, fantasizing about him, never taking my goddamn eyes off of him.

It’s because, even after all this time, I still can’t look away.

I can’t. I won’t.

And what I see now is so much better than any fantasy I could’ve ever dreamed up.
This is the part where you’re probably expecting me to wax lyrical about his adorable laugh, or his dazzling smile, or the sound of his voice when he whispers my name all rough and husky against my ear. About all the truth I’ve managed to uncover behind those mystifyingly dreamy eyes. Oh, right — because you’re probably expecting some of that stuff, too, huh? The juicy secrets? The classified scoop on our resident glory boy? Maybe even a steamy, PG-13 anecdote thrown in there, just for gratuity’s sake?

Well, no offense, reader — but those aren’t stories I’ll be sharing with you anytime soon. I may be a reporter (and a damn good one, if I do say so myself), but I like to think I’ve learned a thing or two about the power of the press. Some chapters are better left up to your imaginations. So my advice? Go find another sappy romance plot to stick your noses in. This one’s all mine.

So, yeah.

I know this probably isn’t the grand finale you’ve been waiting to read. I know you were probably hoping to glean something a little more scandalous from this whole debacle. I know you’re still probably wondering about what really went down between the quarterback and his not-so-secret admirer. I know you probably have a lot of burning questions to ask. And, honestly? I still have some questions burning myself.

Well —

Just one question, actually.

Keith Kogane —
Will you go to prom with me?

Chapter End Notes

Please go support these lovely people who are kind enough to be supporting me <3

@anothergrxce drew Lancey-Lance's super dramatic entrance at the beginning of this chapter right HERE!
@tropicalklance over on twitter was amazing enough to make a Read All About It spotify playlist and, can confirm, the whole thing is a BOP!! Go check it out HERE!
@twulo drew these two boys in their kitty costumes right HERE!
@magicath808 is at it again and drew so many amazing scenes from the last chapter right HERE!

Just wanted to remind everyone that my tumblr is NOT 100% spoiler free! I post chapter previews/snippets and tease little tidbits about upcoming chapters sometimes, so if you're someone who prefers to go into a chapter completely blind -- be warned! I do, however, tag my fic spoilers now with "raai spoiler". So if you want to block that tag, you won't have to worry about missing out on all the other non-fic-related fun! I love you all so much. As always, thank you for everything :)

TUMBLR
TWITTER
“So,” says Lance, long and drawling.

Hunk and Pidge both glance up from where they’re camped out on the quad. By some stroke of a miracle, they’ve been fortunate enough to snag one of the nicer, more centrally-located picnic tables on this pleasantly mild morning, surrounded by glaring sunlight and bustling students.

Lance, however, doesn’t appear to be nearly as contented by this as he should, his lips all puckered and disgruntled as he pushes them to one side of his face. Then the other. He puts his phone down, curtly, and addresses the table, “Does it strike anyone as — I dunno — weird that Keith and I have been texting all weekend, and he still hasn’t mentioned…”

“The article?” guesses Hunk.

“Yeah.”

“The promposal?” adds Pidge.

“Yeah.”

“Well,” she says with a lifted brow, “did you ask him about it?”
Lance scoffs so loud that it almost startles the granola bar right out of Hunk’s hand. “I’m not gonna ask my own boyfriend to please respond to my promposal, Pidge,” he huffs. “He should just know to do it!”

“Maybe he hasn’t seen the article yet,” Hunk offers helpfully.

“Bzzt,” Lance interrupts, mimicking the obnoxious shriek of a gameshow buzzer. He dismisses the notion at once, flicking his wrist with great dignity, and declares, “Impossible. Next.”

Then Pidge slides her bony elbows onto the table, slow and conspiratorial. “Maybe he thinks prom is lame, and just doesn’t wanna go.”

“No way, that’s —” he’s already beginning to bellow at top volume, until a sudden pang of dread lands like a bass drop in his gut, widening his eyes, gripping his spine.

Pidge nibbles apologetically on her bottom lip. Hunk avoids eye contact, and shoves his entire granola bar into his mouth.

“—N-No!” Lance gives a flustered, indignant yelp. “Wrong! Wrong answer! Those are both wrong answers!”

His friends have already clammed up, though, sneaking skittish glances at each other like Lance can’t see them trying to tip-toe around his fractured pride, which is — whatever. It’s not like he’s fishing for pity or anything. It’s just — he’d like some right answers, that’s all. Like, what does Keith have against prom, anyway? Lance would make a good prom date. Dare he say a stellar prom date. He’s fun, and romantic, and always down to dance the night away. Plus he looks fantastic in a tux, might he add. And there’s going to be music, and mingling, and plenty of opportunities for stolen kisses under the twinkling colored lights. But surely Keith knows this, right? Surely there’s a reasonable explanation as to why he’s so obviously uninterested in what is easily supposed to be the most magical night of their teenaged lives —

“Uh-oh,” he hears Hunk fret over the clamor of his spiraling mind. “Now he’s overthinking it.”

“Am not,” Lance fires back much too quickly, and much too defensively. “I’m thinking exactly the right amount, thank you.”

“Look, what’s the issue if you two just skip prom this year?” says Pidge. “Tickets are way too expensive, anyway,” and then she’s clearing her throat expectantly, prompting, “Right, Hunk?”

He nods emphatically. “Yeah, totally, man. It’s just gonna be a bunch of people, like — y’know, dancing. And there’s probably not even gonna be a buffet table or anything. Just that gross-looking fruit punch.”

“I like dancing,” Lance whines, crestfallen. “I like fruit punch!”

“But maybe Keith doesn’t,” is what Pidge accidentally mutters, followed by a swift jab from Hunk. She frowns, and half-whispers, “What?”

The look on Lance’s face is nothing short of devastated. Crushed. Chewed up, and spit back out. Turns out it never even occurred to him that maybe Keith doesn’t want to be asked to prom. But now that he’s sinking, knee-deep in the throes of bitter realization, it sort of makes sense. Keith, who loathes the attention from his many adoring fans. Keith, who had never even attended a house party before this year. Keith, who is pretty much an anti-socialite, and the human embodiment of doing things ass-backwards by popular kid standards.
So is it seriously possible that Lance has gone and thoroughly humiliated himself in the public eye — again?

His impending meltdown is put on hold when he notices a swarm of students sprinting by, squawking and scattering like a flock of seagulls. Nearly the entire quad has been emptied out by the time Lance turns toward the parking lot, where all the commotion is happening.

“What’s going on?” Pidge wonders aloud, but Lance doesn’t even hear it because, suddenly, the air is shivering in his ears. Every nerve tweaks, every hair stands on end, and every single one of his heartstrings begins to sing, resonating with the sheer intensity of — — that very familiar rumble.

Through the gathering throng, Lance can see Keith removing his helmet, dismounting his bike, and the agile sight of it — even now — never fails to disintegrate him on the spot. Keith appears to be doing his damnedest to ignore the twittering onlookers standing along the sidelines of the lot, refusing to smile, or glance, or show any signs of acknowledgement whatsoever. He remains stoic, stubbornly unperturbed, staring intently into the bottom of his backpack as he throws his keys inside. Like his mind is elsewhere entirely.

But even in this standoffish state, he’s still handsome beyond belief, his hair tied into a haphazard knot against the back of his neck. He’s got his trusty letterman jacket buttoned all the way up to his neck, Lance notices, which is kind of a strange look, if he’s being honest. But, y’know, leave it to Keith to legitimately rock a fashion faux pas.

Then, after taking a long, meticulous swill of breath, he shoulders his bag, and breaks through the crowd.

Keith marches across the quad the same way he moves across a football field — athletic, fierce, determined. And when Lance comes to the conclusion that he’s headed straight toward him, his subconscious starts wildly whiplashing between the present, and all those freshman year memories he keeps safely tucked away. It almost feels like deja vu, in a watered-down sense, how Keith is advancing with such physical prowess, marked by the number ten, and strangling him with that bottomless gaze, and climbing onto the table, and — — Wait. What?

That part is real. Without even disrupting his stride, Keith leaps onto the picnic table’s wooden surface, his shadow looming over Lance while the sun backlights him in amber and gold. Lance looks up at him as if hypnotized, as if shell-shocked, as if nearly asphyxiating to death, here and now. He’s only half-aware of the mob currently encircling them, all the hushed murmurs of excitement, and the multitude of phone cameras aimed right in their direction.

And god, Lance thinks, this must be everything that Keith despises so much — the gawking, the gossiping, and being in the center of it all — but no one would ever be able to tell just by looking at him. Right here, he holds himself tall, still as marble, his face a perfectly chiseled blank canvas, fully absorbed in the blues of Lance’s dumbstruck eyes. What the hell are you doing, Lance wants to yell at him, but he doesn’t trust himself to open his mouth without his whole damn heart falling out of it. He can already feel the frenzied beating behind his molars, pulsing like a time-bomb, and the suspense of it is downright excruciating.

Especially as Keith begins reaching for the front of his jacket, gripping tight with both hands, and then — hesitates.
Lance chokes on his own spit so violently he thinks he might puke.

In slow-motion, Keith’s fingers pull the fabric apart, clasps popping open one by one, and the entire galaxy shrinks smaller and smaller with each piercing snap.

The rest goes something like this: the jacket slips off his shoulders, and drops to his feet. Someone in the audience gasps, and then everyone begins howling, and cameras are flashing and clicking and tweeting in rapid succession, and Lance is pretty sure he dissociates for a solid minute because —

Right here — looking like an ethereal god under the sun’s glare, or some sort of celestial fantasy come to fucking life — Keith is wearing a bright red jersey. A bright red jersey with big white block letters stitched onto the front. Big white block letters that spell out:

‘KEITH SAID YES’.

_Holy mother of_ —

Lance’s eyes blow impossibly wide, aching inside their sockets, and he has to clap both hands over the lower half of his face just to keep his jaw from unhinging to the ground. He must look positively batshit crazy right now, all red-faced and frazzled in a way that’s going to make him cringe later when he watches the inevitable line-up of social media posts bombarding his timeline, but that’s, well — something of a _secondary_ priority right now, honestly.

“Guh,” he garbles into his palms.

Maybe the first priority should be remembering how to _speak_.

Then Keith curls his lips, small and crooked and seemingly pleased by the miserable attempt at speech. He extends a hand, steady and fearless, waiting for Lance to take it.

“Let’s do prom, loverboy,” he says, and a deafening screech ripples through the crowd.

Lance forgets to move, only managing to budge when Hunk gives his shoulder an encouraging push. Then he’s floating out of his seat, soaring up, up, up like his soul is ascending, until he’s joining Keith on the tabletop, feet planted but woozy. Up close, Keith’s eyes are glowing with mirth, and Lance is fairly certain that at least half of it is at his expense, but who cares. _Certainly_ not Lance. He croaks out a short, incredulous chuckle.

“Way to steal my thunder, Kogane.”

That’s when a warm pair of hands find his waist, the dip of his tailbone. Keith leans in so close that Lance can feel his entire spine bending backwards just to avoid smacking their foreheads together.

“Try to keep up, McClain,” Keith purrs. And it’s decided — _that’s_ what does Lance in, once and for all.

They kiss softly, at first. Then again, and again, and again, until the sound of cheers and cries rise up around them like dusty debris. They kiss — more and more and _more_ — with an unwavering tenderness, and honey-sweet breaths on their lips, and a wonderful fullness in Lance’s chest that his him wondering what he was ever so worried about in the first place.
To the surprise of literally no one, #KeithSaidYes is trending by lunchtime.

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**Allura Alfor** posted in the group **Altea High School Class of 2019**:  
March 19th, 2019 - 10:08am

Attention, classmates — As the head of our Senior Prom Committee, I am very pleased to announce this year’s nominees for prom court! Thank you to everyone who submitted a nomination. We certainly received an overwhelming amount of enthusiasm.

**Nominees for Prom Queen:**

- Allura Alfor
- Nyma Beezer
- Plaxum Mer

**Nominees for Prom King:**

- Keith Kogane
- Lance McClain
- James Griffin

Don’t forget to cast your official vote for King and Queen on prom night! Hope to see everyone there!

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Lance heaves a massive sigh — one of these god-awful noises he’s been huffing all afternoon, which
can best be described as an agonized whale call.

And yet totally justified, in his humble opinion, because Keith doesn’t even acknowledge the sound, or the way Lance suggestively extends his legs across the couch to wiggle his sock-clad feet in Keith’s lap. He just keeps scribbling away in his notebook, dutiful and desensitized like the little killjoy he is.

“Siiiiiiigh,” Lance tries again, louder and longer and whinier than before.

And then — score. Keith, rightly confounded, looks up from his work with a crease in his brow. His eyes blink, and then settle on Lance, who is lounging flat on his back at the other end of the couch, a biology textbook laying face-down and forgotten atop his stomach.

“Did you just say sigh?” asks Keith. “Out loud?”

“Yes,” Lance sniffs, sounding entirely put-upon. “Because you’re distracting me.”

“I’m just sitting here.”

“Exactly. Just sitting there. Distractingly.”

Endearingly enough, Keith throws a curious glance down at his very plain t-shirt and very plain jeans, as if his clothes might actually be the issue here, and not him, himself, and every single cell inside his distractingly good-looking body. Sometimes his cluelessness truly knows no bounds.

“Our book report’s due tomorrow, you know,” Keith reminds him, returning to his notes.

“But we’re seniors. And spring break is in two freaking days. Homework shouldn’t even be legal anymore.”

“Lance,” comes his firm reply.

When their gazes meet a second time, Lance is sitting up just enough to try summoning his boyfriend closer with two shameless grabby-hands stretched out in front of him. “I wanna kiss,” he pouts spectacularly.

“Lance.”

“Just one teensy little smacker, Keith, and then we can go back to staring at gross diagrams of amoebas or whatever,” Lance offers as a compromise. Even though it’s mildly wounding, to say the least, having to haggle for kisses, but — a guy’s gotta do what a guy’s gotta do.

And his efforts seem to pay off, with interest, unless Lance is simply imagining the subtly devious smirk that crosses Keith’s face all of a sudden, and the way he pushes Lance’s feet aside, and starts crawling across the couch cushion toward — oh, okay, yes, yes. So this is definitely happening now, thank god —

Lance waits for the proper moment to strike. Waits until Keith is hovering above him, flashing those dark eyes like he knows exactly how to play this game. Which makes it all the more satisfying when Lance twists his grip into Keith’s shirt, and roughly yanks him down. All he manages to catch is a second’s worth of shock overcoming Keith’s expression before their ribcages collide with a soft thump, but it’s more than enough to give Lance a sense of well-earned advantage. He grins, reveling in it, wrapping his legs around Keith’s lower half to encase him like a cocoon.

“Hah,” he gloats. “You fool. Falling right into my ingenious trap.”
There’s humor tugging at Keith’s mouth; a glimmer of unbridled fondness as he drones, “Oh, no. What am I gonna do now?”

“You tell me, gorgeous,” says Lance. “Anything you want.”

The sultry quirk of Keith’s brow suggests that he’s up to no good, and Lance is absolutely fine with that. Keith angles his head just right, allowing a slow, decadent exhale to feather out against Lance’s earlobe. “I want…” he whispers, so gruff and guttural that it makes Lance squirm beneath him. “…to see your notes from chapter six.”

“Oh, get off me!” Lance groans at once, shoving at his boyfriend’s shoulders, which are now shaking with deep, husky laughter. “That was low — even for you!”

Keith rolls off and away, still sniggering into the couch cushion while Lance frowns haughtily, and fishes through the mess of papers they’ve spilled onto the coffee table. He snatches what he thinks are his notes from class, but realizes quite suddenly that he’s grabbed something else entirely. Something — like a letter. Something addressed to Keith.

“Hey —” Lance begins, less than a second before his scouring eyes land on the Marmora University insignia stamped across the paper. “—wait, what’s this?”

The sound of Keith’s laughter dissolves into thin air. “Uh, that’s —”

“You got in?” He’s reading the letter with rapt attention now, expression lifting with every word. “Oh my god, you got in!”

“It’s not a big deal or anything.”

“It’s a huge deal, Keith,” Lance insists. And then, after a thoughtful beat: “Why didn’t you say something?”

Keith shrugs. “I’m not gonna go, so I didn’t see the point.”

Lance’s brain, it seems, has some trouble mulling that over, so he asks, “You’re not? You sure?” His eyes find the letter again, still not comprehending. “But Marmora’s supposed to be, like, a really good school.”

“It’s also really far,” mutters Keith.

“I thought you said that was the beauty of college, right?” Lance reminds him sagely as he settles back onto the couch.

“Well — I changed my mind.” He hurries to get it out, tone brusque and clipped and just a little bit sulky. “So. Yeah. Not going. Can we just get back to the book report now?”

Lance hums, feigning profound consideration. “Or… y’know, we could get back to that other thing we were just doing…”

The way Keith immediately throws himself into action and gets his hands on Lance’s hips would actually be pretty hilarious if Lance were, y’know — dumber. But he’s so not dumb. And he definitely knows an attempt to change the subject when he sees one. So he figures they’ll just have to table this college discussion for later, when the heat of Keith’s mouth isn’t being nearly so persuasive.

Keith is leaning in, crowding over him, and kissing him — the really good, hot, trying his damnedest
to swallow Lance’s tonsils kind of kissing — until Lance can feel nothing but his heart throbbing in his throat, and the stiff edge of the armrest jabbing into his spine. A surprised little grunt tails off into a groan, fingers grappling clumsily for the hair at Keith’s nape to keep him from melting away. To keep him right here, in the warmth, in the moment.

His head spins like a kaleidoscope, his lungs crumble away like ash, and his back aches like a total bitch, and — yeah. So maybe this position is less than ideal — and maybe Lance is fairly certain he’s just located the previously misplaced TV remote with his ass — but he’s not about to start complaining about insignificant details while he’s all wrapped up in an armful of gorgeous boy. His basic motor functions might be mildly impaired by those sinfully talented lips, but Lance, thankfully, still has his priorities in order.

Heat kindles like a sparkling flame beneath Keith’s touch as his palm glides soundly along the line of Lance’s thigh, over his hip, and up to his waist where shirt fabric has been bunched and rumpled enough to reveal a sliver of bronzed skin. Gone. Lance is gone. Thoroughly and disastrously gone. So gone that he goes dizzy from something bursting by the trillion inside his chest, wild and vibrant like fireworks. A spasm of his muscles, restless and vibrating, and a bone-deep pulse that beats like a rhythmless chant: I want, I want, I want —

So gone, in fact, that it takes him a delayed beat to process the telltale sound of keys jingling, or the door creaking open, or footsteps tromping down the hall, or the bellowing voice of Keith’s father calling out, “Hey, I’m back —”

Homework and notebooks go flying in every direction as Keith scrambles away from Lance at top speed, their mouths pulling apart with a wet-sounding pop. And by the time his dad shows up in the doorway, the two boys are squished up against opposite ends of the sofa, breathing heavy, faces flushed, staring wide-eyed at the television screen in front of them. Which, Lance realizes in a flurry of mortification, isn’t even on.

The man’s gaze sweeps the room, taking in the sight of papers strewn haphazardly across the floor. “Uh, what happened in here?” he asks.

“I sneezed,” Keith says at the exact same time Lance squeaks breathlessly, “Earthquake.”

They share a glance, cringing together at their truly pathetic excuses, while Keith’s father just stares. And stares. And — okay, call Lance paranoid, but he gets the peculiar sense that something feels off about the man. He’s taut as a wire, eyes unsure, as if he’s the one who deserves to feel nervous in this situation, somehow. Slowly, his lips part, preparing to speak until they all hear another pair of footsteps rounding the corner — softer, gentler — followed by a tall woman appearing in the doorway.

Just like that, the tension in the room cuts like a blade.

Her skin is mocha-brown and flawless, her features sharp and feminine. Neatly styled hair, short and edgy. An industrial piercing in her left ear. A long, faded scar on one side of her face, extending down the length of her lean neck. She’s stunning.

“Ah,” his father says quietly, shoving his hands into the pockets of his trousers. “Boys, this is Krolia — a friend of mine from the station.”

But Lance is far too good at this sort of thing, and so he can see it, clear as day, clinging like a second layer to their skin. Because Keith’s father is standing there in a nice sports jacket, and Krolia is wearing an attractive black dress, and they’re both lingering in each other’s orbits, so close that their shoulders brush with an easy kind of familiarity. The realization pieces itself together in one
fatal click.

“Krolia, this is my son, Keith, and his boyfriend, Lance.”

“Hello, Lance,” says Krolia, silken and silvery and divine. Then, with a polite grin, she shifts her gaze. “Hello, Keith. It’s great to finally meet you. Your father has told me so much about —”

“Keith,” Lance breathes quickly, nearly choking on it, because he knows what’s coming before it even happens; the inevitable bend and break of everything that’s been swarming in Keith’s gut. Lance reaches for his hand a split second too late, swiping at nothing as Keith springs up from the couch, and rushes out of the room with his fists balled at his sides.

Lance hurries after him, legs moving on autopilot, and taking the stairs two at a time until he makes it to the bedroom.

The door has been left open, precariously so, and Keith is already inside, sitting on the edge of his bed. And the sight of him, all hunched and hurting, has Lance feeling the need to tread lightly on his feet. Like one wrong move would have him stomping out the last remaining shards of Keith’s composure, if he were to be so reckless.

As he lowers himself down next to Keith, the mattress dips beneath his weight. Keith remains treacherously still.

“Keith.”

“Stop,” he snaps, and then immediately deflates from the sting of his own jagged tone. In the same hollow breath, he’s sewing his eyes shut, expression contorting with the struggle not to grimace. “Sorry, Lance, but I don’t —”

“— wanna go there right now,” finishes Lance, understanding. “I get it.”

So they sit in silence for a while, but it’s the comfortable kind, at least. It doesn’t lurk over them like a shadow, or gnaw their bones raw. It just hangs weightlessly around their shoulders, blanketing them, bringing them nearer and nearer until they’re leaning fully against each other. And Lance takes Keith’s hand, massaging with his thumb in soothing circles, until all the delicate muscles of Keith’s knuckles go limp and relaxed. Because Lance wants to be gentle with Keith, the way he deserves, the way nothing has ever been gentle with him before. He wants, he wants.

“Hey,” says Lance, softly and eventually. “Wanna run away with me for a little bit?”

“Yeah.” No hesitation.

It makes Lance’s eyes glitter like gems. And he goes, slightly beguiled and in awe, “Really? Man, I had a whole sales pitch prepared and everything, but — wow. That easy, huh?”

Keith looks at him — the kind of look that could pull stars and moons straight down from the cosmos itself — and then tells him, like it’s simple, like it’s fated and real and unshakeable:

“That easy.”
So, after two days of strategizing, and just a little bit of creative white-lying for the sake of appeasing their parents — because, at eighteen-years-old, voting and enlisting in the military is fair game, but an unsupervised getaway with your boyfriend is cause for alarm, apparently — they find themselves pulling over at one of those roadside gas stations on the outskirts of town. The kind that’s both quaint and dingy, run down with rustic charm. The kind meant for travelers, and wanderers, and sightseers alike.

And even though they don’t cleanly fit into one of those categories, the undeniable thrill of it still buzzes around Keith’s brain like a rush of static. His skin itches with a rabid tingle just below the surface, and his lungs feel as enormous, as broad and unfurled, as a bird stretching its wings for the first time. It’s like he’s a little kid again, all ornery and scrappy with a flair for childlike dramatics, threatening to leave and never return. Or like something siphoned right off the pages of all those books sitting on Lance’s love-worn bookshelf in his bedroom; where they’re a pair of wild-hearted renegades, or partners in crime, running away from the troubles and injustices of this lawless land in the name of valor, and freedom, and —

Before Keith can wrangle his mutinously whimsical thoughts into submission — which he one hundred percent blames on Lance’s influence, by the way — the gas pump clicks to a halt, effectively dragging him back to this particular reality; the one where they’re just a couple of teenagers on spring break, living off borrowed time and whatever measly scraps of pocket money they were able to scrounge together on such short notice.

The gas price blinks across the screen in tiny digitalized numbers, and Keith winces at it.

Well, that sucks.

Keith is resentfully rooting through his wallet when he spots Lance galloping out of the gas station convenience store with a bulging bag of snacks swinging from his arm, and some sort of jumbo-sized frozen drink sweating in his grasp.

“You know we’re only gonna be on the road for two days, right?” Keith reminds him, a bit incredulous.

The only response is the sound of Lance’s rubber flip-flops slapping noisily against the pavement as he bounces into his boyfriend’s personal space, allowing Keith to catch a delightful whiff of coconut-scented sunscreen over the otherwise foul stench of gasoline and sweat. Lance shoves his monstrous drink into Keith’s face without any preamble, nudging the straw against his mouth, but Keith flinches away from it.

“What’re —”

“Trust and sip, m’dude,” Lance says, incredibly solemn, which is just ridiculous enough to have Keith relenting out of curiosity, and carefully taking the tip of the straw between his lips.

Sugary sweetness bursts along his tongue, nostrils stinging from the chill. “What the hell did I just drink?” he asks, recoiling.

“Every single flavor at the slushy machine.”

“Ugh,” garbles Keith. But then, upon licking his lips a second time, he reconsiders, “Why does it taste good?”

Lance’s grin is wide and blinding and infectious. “A true mastermind never reveals his secrets,” he
replies, sliding his blue-tinted sunglasses down the bridge of his nose to peer furtively over their thick rim.

Keith’s attempt to pin his boyfriend with a withering glance is halfhearted, at best. The gentle curl of his mouth is more coy than anything else, distracted by the sight of Lance right here, like this, aglow in the blistering morning light, with his tie-dye muscle tee hanging loose from his shoulders, and a pair of jeans that’ve been chopped off at the knee, raw edges fraying against his brown skin. He’s never looked golder, or brighter, or more like summer personified. He looks like he’s been born from sunshine, and warm ocean mist.

The buzzing in Keith’s head makes a persistent comeback.

“I can take the next shift, if you want,” he blurts out, maybe to change the subject before he gets too carried away; to remind himself that he can’t — or, rather, shouldn’t — jump his very attractive boyfriend in the middle of a public gas station. He motions noncommittally to where their car is parked and waiting with a full tank.

But Lance, shaking his head, says, “No can do, mister second-in-command. I’m gonna need you reporting back to shotgun, pronto.”


“Cause you don’t know where we’re going.”

“Oh,” mumbles Keith, struck by the realization. He can’t even recall if they ever discussed a destination. In all fairness, Keith heard the words road trip and just the two of us mashed together in the same lovely sentence, and then kind of tuned out the rest. Sue him. “Where are we going?”

That’s when Lance starts humming. Loudly. And very out of tune. With that, he swivels innocently on his heel, purposefully rolling his gaze to the sky instead of at Keith’s eyes, and ambles aimlessly to the other side of the car like he hadn’t heard the question at all.

Keith watches, suspicious.

“Hope you’re cool with nacho cheese doritos,” Lance pipes up, unnervingly chipper as he rummages through the bag of snacks, “cause they were all out of —”

“Lance,” Keith warns. “Do you even know where we’re going?”

The pure skepticism in his tone has Lance abandoning his poorly-disguised ruse in favor of chuffing out this short, affronted-sounding snort. He reels back, wailing, “Oh, thanks for that winning vote of confidence,” and then flails his arms so exasperatedly that his sunglasses get jostled askew. “Of course I do.”

“Okay,” says Keith, firing a glare at him over the roof of the car, letting it land and linger there like a challenge. “So tell me.”

Lance huffs, “Remember that little thing called trust we were just talking about?”

“This has nothing to do with your weird slushy, Lance.”

A strangled gasp. “My weird slushy takes absolute offense to that!”

“It’s a slushy.”
“Yeah, and it’s very sensitive about its flavor profile, I’ll have you know.”

“That’s —” Keith splutters, ready to combat, until he’s remembering what a stupid conversation this is. “—I’m not gonna argue with you about slushies!”

“Then don’t bring them into it in the first place!” Lance flings back.

“I was trying to make a point.”

“Well, I’m just trying to surprise you,” is what tumbles out of Lance’s mouth next, like a geyser, all rushed and turbulent and heated. Keith goes rigid from the sound of it, feeling singed. “Y’know, a surprise? Like, I make some special plans without you knowing, for no other reason than just wanting to see the way your dumb face lights up because I am so freaking crazy about you?”

Keith stares, the lines of his face softening immediately, deflating with chagrin. “Oh,” he mutters.

“Yeah, oh,” and Lance sighs like he’s just run a marathon. “You’re as oblivious as they come, Keith Kogane, y’know that? Cute, but oblivious. Planning your birthday’s gonna be a chore. And anniversaries? Forget about it. I’m already exhausted just imagining it.”

“Hey, Lance,” says Keith, soft but heard over the rambled slew of laments. He waits until he has Lance’s gaze, has his attention, and then tells him with a grin, “I’m crazy about you, too.”

Lance goes red, from his ears to his neck, and the resulting twitch of his own smile has Keith’s heart doing an absurd little flutter inside his chest.

“Oh, you’re crazy, alright. A real nutjob,” says Lance, so fond that it’s hardly even insulting. “Now let’s get this show on the road, pumpkin pie.”

They both clamber into the car, and Keith is barely in his seat before he starts reaching for the food, ripping into the bag of doritos like a barbarian, saying, “Fine. But I call first dibs on the snacks.”

“I already called first dibs on you,” Lance shoots back with a wink.

Keith looks at him sidelong, hand freezing where he’s already wrist-deep in the bag.

“Get it?” prompts Lance, delighted and insufferable. “‘Cause, boy, you’re looking like a sn—”

A chip is then stuffed directly into Lance’s mouth, making him yelp with laughter, spraying crumbs of nacho cheese all over the dashboard.

“Just drive,” Keith commands, as deadpan as he can muster with amusement blooming wild and free in his throat.

“Surprise!”

Five hours later they’re driving under a large, stone archway, all stately and weathered with age.
There are people milling about on the sidewalks, on the lawn, with bags strapped to their backs, and hustle in their strides, and books in their arms. Keith stares at them through the passenger window, looking very much like he’s just stumbled his way into a different dimension.

Which, in retrospect, kind of seems like a bad omen.

They roll past a sign — also large, also stone — that reads, in engraved letters: *Marmora University, home of excellence, established 1821*. At Lance’s side, Keith stiffens. The air in the car stiffens. Pretty much everything around them constricts and shrivels, making each passing beat of silence even more unbearable than the last.

“Where are we,” Keith mutters darkly, for no other reason than to verbalize just how *unenthused* he is. In case Lance couldn’t already tell by the disgruntled scowl twisting up his mouth.

“…Surprise?”

“Lance.”

As the car slowly crawls into the first available spot in the visitor parking lot, Lance practically withers into nothing but a pile of useless bones, melting in his seat like waste down the storm drain. Shit. Alright. This is fine. This isn’t *ideal*, but — it’s fine. Maybe. *Shit*.

He braces a peripheral glance, and Keith is still glowering, which Lance doesn’t even have the right to be shocked by because — *well* — this is *Keith*. Lance hadn’t been expecting tears of joy, or a Boyfriend of the Year award with his name on it, or anything like that. But, in his mind’s eye, he imagined it being… less catastrophic. With a lot less gnashing of teeth on Keith’s part.

“This is the surprise? *Seriously*?” Keith spits, like he still can’t believe it, despite the blatant truth of the matter literally surrounding him. “This is where you decided to take us —”

“Look, just gimme a second to —”

“ —after I already said I’m not *interested* in —”

“But how do you know for sure if you’ve never *been* here before?” Lance bursts out.

“I *told* you,” says Keith, stern and stiff-lipped, “it’s *far*.”

“Far from what?” Lance volleys right back, without skipping a beat. “From *me*?”

Keith stops dead, the strain in his expression wiped clean off his face. Instead, it falls into something rather startled. Caught, even.

*Yes. Caught.*

Then, in the tempered silence, Lance shifts awkwardly in the confines of his seat, and reaches over the center console for Keith’s hands. Part of him expects to be rejected or batted away, but their fingers lace the moment they meet, Keith’s digits unfurling like twine.

Lance begins softly. “Keith, I… you know I don’t wanna see you go.” He’s sitting taller now. Newly steeled. But there’s still a tiny twinge in his heart, reminding him that it hurts, just a little. And he says, “But I don’t wanna hold you back, either. Maybe this place is right for you, or maybe it’s not. And, y’know what? That’s fair. But I think it’s something you deserve to find out for yourself.”

The words ache between them, brittle with the vulnerability that Lance tries to stave off with an air of
resolve, futile as it may be. If he’s not even fooling himself, then there’s no way he’s fooling Keith. The weave of their fingers is loose, and Lance thinks about how badly he wants to tighten it up, and squeeze with a white-hot desperation to keep Keith here, but — he can’t. He’d rather turn himself inside-out than bury Keith under the vast weight of his need, dragging him under ’til he drowns.

He just can’t.

And Keith, as if responding to all of Lance’s dizzying thoughts, eventually nods.

They do absolutely everything that afternoon.

They take a guided tour around campus, admiring all its brownstone buildings and ivied walls. They stroll down winding walkways, passing pleasant-looking students on their way to class, or the dorms, or the campus coffee shop. They sample every single meal option that the dining hall has to offer, and decide, unanimously, that pizza is the best way to go. They sit together on the quad to watch the old clocktower cast its shadow over the freshly trimmed grass, and Keith —

— Well, he likes it. A lot. There isn’t much not to like about it, he supposes.

It’s when Keith is bounding down the front steps of the library that he thinks to stop, and turn. He finds Lance a few feet back, paused on the top step with his arms folded loosely over his chest, grinning something so outrageously smitten that he practically glows with it in the late afternoon sun.

“What?” asks Keith, genuinely bemused.

Lance just shrugs. “You.”

“…Me.”

“Yeah, you.” And Lance’s gaze doesn’t waver as he tells him, “You look good.”

The stunned look that crosses Keith’s face has Lance barking out a laugh, his smile widening at the corners.

“I mean, you look good here. Like, with all this going on,” Lance clarifies with a sweep of his arm that gestures to the sprawling campus laid out before them. “Gotta say — you make a pretty hot college guy.”

“Of course you have a thing for higher education,” Keith smirks.

“Hell yeah, baby, flash me that degree in four years and I’ll be so weak in the knees.”

If Keith allows himself to look long and hard enough, everything bleeds out in front of him like shades of a watercolor painting. Keith, walking to class. Keith, studying in his dorm. Keith, maybe joining an intramural sports team just for fun. Keith, in the future. Keith, many miles away from home. It’s so real and visceral that he could just reach out, grab it, make it his. Because it’s logical. It makes sense. But —
— there’s still something missing here.

Lance, standing at the top of the stairs, with sunlight in his hair, and dimples on his cheeks.

*Oh*, he thinks quickly, resoundingly.

There’s just *something* missing here.

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It’s already getting late by the time they roll into the motel parking lot, slow and unceremonious, as it were, until the crunching gravel beneath their tires comes to a halt. Lance peers out his window, gazing up at the neon vacancy sign that flashes and sizzles like it’s only one tiny flicker away from blowing out completely, and then over toward a line of vending machines where a group of shadowy men have gathered; the looming shapes of them going murky in the lightless evening and thick clouds of cigarette smoke. He hears someone’s television set in the distance, just barely muffled behind paper-thin walls, and two strained voices screaming at each other in an angry-sounding language that Lance doesn’t even recognize.

“Huh,” he mumbles dryly. “Looks nice and cozy.”

Keith cuts the engine with a huff, but the wary slant of his brow suggests he shares a similar sentiment. “It’s cheap,” he says, like it’s almost a proper explanation.

“Y’know what else is cheap? Park benches. Sewer tunnels. The trunk of this car. All of which are *totally valid* alternatives to —”

“We’ll be out first thing in the morning.”

“Aw, so no continental breakfast, I’m guessing?”

Keith unsuccessfully bites back a grin, and then plants a fleeting kiss against Lance’s temple as he leans over his lap to push open the passenger door.

A small, tinny bell rattles above the doorway when Keith strides over to the front counter. Lance eventually shuffles up from behind, close enough to snake his lazy arms around Keith’s middle, and drop his chin to his boyfriend’s shoulder with a worn-out sigh. The miserly old man on the other side of the counter squints down at Keith’s ID, then back up again, examining the entwined pair with a look that showcases as much of his disapproval as it does his utter lack of enthusiasm.

“We only got one bed left,” the man tells them after an uncomfortable pause. He’s still squinting, hard. “That gonna be alright for you boys?”

Given how close they’re pressed together, Keith can feel Lance perk up almost immediately, head lifting, posture straightening.

“Oh,” says Lance, snatching the keys off the counter, and flashing a smile in that ridiculously charming way of his. “*Somehow* we’ll manage.”
Then it’s down the hall and to the left to find their room, which is just about as underwhelming as the rest of the motel. It’s stuffy, reeking of mothballs and stale corn chips, and when Lance tosses his overnight bag onto the bed, it sends the whole thing wobbling on its legs like they’re made of jelly instead of wood.

But, together, they make the most of it.

Keith starts by opening their window, just a crack, allowing the springtime breeze to flutter through their threadbare curtains, and Lance gathers up all that’s left of their snack supply from the car. On an indulgent whim, they decide to splurge on a truly pitiful pay-per-view movie about a zombie apocalypse, and the very first spurt of amateur-grade fake blood has them both choking on their gummy worms, practically rolling off the mattress in a fit of sniggers. They attempt to watch a slightly-better-quality zombie movie on Lance’s phone, but the miserable wifi connection, unfortunately, shoots that idea straight to shit. So, instead, they kick the wrinkled sheets off the bed, and snuggle themselves close, limbs tangling like vines. Keith reads *Catcher in the Rye* while Lance reads — and *re-reads* — all the college brochures they collected during the tour, prattling on excitedly about everything from dorm amenities to course syllabi until he’s yawning more than talking. He falls asleep some time later, nose smooshed into the dip of Keith’s clavicle, fingers still clutching at a campus map, the tips of his hair streaked with pale moonlight. And Keith holds him like this, all warm and loose and glistening, lost in the wonder of it all — how they could stop the whole universe, if they wanted to.

They could suspend here, light as air, and nothing would ever have to change. Graduation, college, fathers with new maybe-girlfriends — all of it could wait. They could do it, if they wanted. They could steal time — tons of it — for now, for the future, and for *always*.

Because the thing about his future is that Keith has never thought much of it, other than the leaving part. He’d move away, and he’d play football, and he’d be with his mother, and that’s it. That’s all he knew. And the rest, he thought, wouldn’t really matter much as long as he was running, miles and miles away from this place he calls home — this place that’s never really felt much like *his*. He’s never felt the urge to plant his feet. He’s never wanted to keep anything as badly as he wants to keep *this*, safe and infinite. He’s never had a reason to stay before.

Until now. Until *this*.

Until —

“Lance.”

He hears a sleepy grunt, flittering against his skin.

“I miss you already,” Keith finally says, even though he doesn’t entirely mean to. Even though the sound of his own voice trickles out of him, softer than the breeze.

“Don’t,” whispers Lance. “Don’t do that.”

He pulls away, just enough to reveal his eyes. They gleam in the darkness like moon-polished orbs, half-hidden beneath tired lids, but so arresting that they knock the wind out of Keith’s lungs.

“We’re good, you and me.” Blindly, Lance reaches for him. His fingertips catch the angle of his jaw, stroking down his face, slowly, like he wants to memorize as he goes. “No matter what.”

Keith covers Lance’s hand with his own, pressing down to keep him solid and steady and *here*. One blink, he fears, and this will all go away. One blink and the sun will rise, and time will just keep
ticking along.

And Lance, voice fragile with fatigue and a rough snarl of emotion, tells him, “I don’t wanna read our last chapter, ‘kay?”

“Neither do I,” says Keith.

“Then don’t,” Lance slurs, his eyes slipping shut once again. “Just don’t.”

The sun barely peeks past the clouds the following morning. It’s the breeze that eventually wakes them, smelling strongly of dew and damp earth as it drifts through the window and cools their heated skin.

Lance is the first to stir. He wiggles around in the cozy circle of Keith’s arms, and stretches himself out like a luxurious cat until Keith is tugging him back in, clinging snugly and shamelessly.

“You cuddle in your sleep,” Lance informs him, sighing happily against his boyfriend’s neck.

“You drool in yours,” Keith mumbles.

“Moment ruiner,” hisses Lance. He’s slightly too delirious in this moment to do anything other than nip at Keith’s skin with the blunt edges of his teeth, so that’s exactly what he does, in this groggy sort of state.

And Keith reacts with a sexy little growl before he’s flipping them over, pressing Lance into the creaking mattress, and kissing the taste of laughter right off his lips, morning breath be damned.

Getting out of bed: take two.

It proves to be more successful than their previous attempt.

With kiss-bitten lips and their fair share of reluctance, they unravel themselves from the bed and each other because — after a fleeting glance at the clock — it’s already well past the original check-out time. They gather up their phone chargers and leftover snack wrappers, and then take turns using the shower. They make the bed together ’til it looks good as new, wrinkled sheets and all. And while Lance is carrying their bags to the car, Keith stops by the front desk to return the room key. He grins awkwardly at the old man, who looks like he hasn’t even tried moving a muscle since last night, only now he’s clutching a steaming cup of coffee right below his raggedy mustache. The sweet, alluring smell of it doesn’t seem to be improving that nasty grimace still loitering on his face, though.

Lance is waiting by the car when Keith finds him out there, leaning against the trunk with his eyes closed. His head is tipped back toward the dreary clouds, which have just opened up to a warm drizzle, falling gently onto his cheeks. Keith takes one look at him — remembering how beautiful he had looked last night, lying against him, his eyes burning in the dark — and feels a lump knotting in his throat.

Crunch, crunch, crunch goes the gravel beneath Keith’s weighted footfalls. He takes Lance’s hand,
coaxing those blue eyes out of hiding, and Lance is brought back to life from the touch alone. His half-smile is small and so very kissable.

They could do it, Keith thinks, just then, with startling clarity. Like the rain has washed away a haze, cleared out his brain like his muddled thoughts are merely cobwebs. They could go back to bed or something. Sleep the whole day away. The whole week, even. Grow accustomed to being in each other’s arms, until the sensation of it is a softly worn thing.

*They could, they could, they could.*

“Ready?” Lance asks.

*No. “Yeah.”*

Everything falls very still and quiet, then, save for the low hum of the car engine, the soft drone of the radio, and the dainty pitter-patter of rain against the windshield, all lulling Keith back into that nebulous space between sleep and reality. Outside, the world has gone depressingly ashen and dull. Like it’s been stripped of color, blurring into one giant mass of grey as they roll down the highway.

Neither of them speak.

But neither of them have to. The words from last night are still there, somewhere, thick on their tongues like syrup, only more bittersweet.

Keith wishes he could swallow them back down in a single gulp, but his throat prickles and burns. He wishes he could spit them all out, or press them into that delicate spot where Lance’s neck becomes his jaw, right where he can feel his pulse jump madly beneath his touch, and murmur them again, over and over, like a psalm: *I miss you already.*

“Hey, Keith.”

His drowsy eyes blink back into focus.

And when he looks, Lance is staring out at the seemingly endless stretch of road before them, grip tight on the wheel as he asks, “Left or right?”

Up ahead, just beyond the rain-speckled glass, the road splits into two very distinct paths. A flickering glance at the sign overhead tells him that the right-most lane will take them straight home, as planned. And the left-most lane will take them —

“Left,” Keith says at once.

And when he looks again, Lance is beginning to grin; a slow, steady crawl up the sides of his mouth until it’s shining out his eyes in the most dazzling shade of blue. Keith’s chest aches in a startling way, bright and lovely and full.

Lance says, “That’s *exactly* what I was thinking.”

Then he’s gunning it, engine whirring to life, and he swerves so abruptly that their tires screech, and the car behind them blares its horn in annoyance, and Lance is howling with the loudest kind of laughter, and that aching feeling starts trying to burst right through Keith’s skin, and, together, they just keep going, and going, and *going.*
“Mind if I ask you something?” Lance is saying to him over the sound of the swelling shoreline. Water licks at his ankles, crisp and fleeting, as they stroll through the shallow surf of the beach they’ve found. It’s small and pristine, and completely uninhabited by virtue of the gloomy sky overhead, scaring most vacationers away with the threat of another drizzle. “Off the record?”

Keith’s eyes go tragically soft, swinging their clasped hands back and forth like a lazy pendulum. “Anything,” he replies.

Then Lance prattles on, “‘Kay, well, so — I’ve just been wondering — now that I’ve confessed to you and the entire town and probably an internet full of randos that I’ve been carrying, like, the world’s biggest torch for you ever since — well, y’know. The big Moment, capital M. Basically the most transformative night of my young existence. My Keith-sexual awakening, if you will.”

“This doesn’t sound like a question.”

“That’s ‘cause I’m building up to it, jeez!” Lance squawks, riled and a bit snobbish. “I’m a writer, Keith, I can’t just drop the dramatic climax bomb without some exposition on the — what?”

“I didn’t say anything,” says Keith, which is technically true. But he’s doing that thing — that distinctly Keith thing — where his mouth trembles at the corners with unvoiced amusement, and silent laughter flares behind his eyes like a laser point, which is, frankly, deeply unsubtle and so very rude.

And also exceptionally cute, goddammit.

“Ugh. You’re the worst,” Lance tries to sneer, but, somehow, it comes out as sweet-sounding as pillow talk. He nudges Keith with his hip, making them both sway as they walk. “I just wanna know when you had your Moment.”

“My moment,” Keith echos.

“No, your Moment — capital M,” Lance corrects with a growing sense of urgency. “Like, when did you finally start noticing that I’m awesome, and dashing, and definitely not just some lovesick loser who writes free verse poetry about you in my spare time?”

“I never thought you were a loser,” says Keith.

It’s so wholehearted and honest — bless his soul — but also so completely absurd that Lance has to fix his boyfriend with a pointed stare, and remind him, grimly, “Not even when I passed out over a plate of frog guts? Or wore a handmade jersey with your name on it in front of the whole school?”

“That house party after the Homecoming game.”

“Oh, god. That, too.”

“No, I mean —” Keith’s tone, all of a sudden, takes up a quieter octave, and his eyes narrow at the ground as he watches their footprints line up side by side in the wet sand. “—that was my Moment.”
“Ah,” Lance sighs, only half-humorously. “So hot mess is more your type, then, huh?”

But Keith just swallows, working to string his words together, slowly and deliberately, while he recalls, “It happened after the party. After I hauled you back to my place. I was finally getting you to lay down, and you just… looked at me. You looked right at me, Lance. Not like I was a quarterback or some prodigy. You saw me. And that’s what you told me. And I believed you. But I didn’t want to believe you because it was —”

“Scary,” Lance whispers, just a breathless afterthought that he mutters into the pause.

“Terrifying,” Keith admits. “I didn’t know what you wanted from me. I thought you were just like everyone else, but…”

Lance’s chest seizes with a sharp ache, with affection, with anticipation. He squeezes Keith’s hand, two little pulses, and urges, “But?”

“But nobody had ever looked at me like that before.”

Even as another wave crashes around their stilled feet, Lance can hear Keith’s voice ringing brightly in his ears. And even in the shade of this sunless afternoon, Keith’s eyes flood with light, like twin shimmering beacons, so brilliantly and unfairly that Lance has to curl his toes into the rich sand just to avoid getting washed away by the ocean’s current. A smile blossoms as full and vibrant as springtime across his face, warmth frothing low in his belly.

“You big softie,” he hums, falling forward until they’re flush, heart to heart, face to face. “I should’ve totally exposed you as the sap you are back when I had the chance.”

Keith, a little dazed, turns his head to hide a flickering grin.

And it only seems to entertain Lance even more because, suddenly, he’s swooning, “My boyfriend, the human marshmallow.” At the sound of Keith’s scoff, he leans in to rub their noses together, being extra obnoxious about it. “My tough, cool, broody beefcake —”

“Cut it out.”

“— all squishy and adorable and — hey! Keith!”

In a single effortless swoop, Lance is hoisted right off the ground, and draped pliantly over his boyfriend’s shoulder — because Keith is all muscle and freaky inhuman reflexes like that. And if he weren’t so dead-set on being a defiant little shit about it, then Lance would probably think it’s hot, the way Keith can just throw him around like a — well, who is he kidding. Lance still thinks it’s hot. As in, crazy hot. He makes a mental note to revisit these thoughts later, when he’s not in the midst of being one-upped by a dastardly, pretty-eyed fiend.

“Sorry,” Keith chuckles, not sounding even remotely sorry about anything. He’s not even struggling against all of Lance’s wiggling, the smug bastard. “You were saying?”


“I thought I was a marshmallow.”

“Keeeeeith!”

“Nope,” he’s saying, settling his open palm on the curve of Lance’s backside. Miraculously, Lance
snuffs out the embarrassing impulse to whimper when he hears Keith mutter, “Mine now.”

With his face tingling red where it’s currently buried between Keith’s shoulder blades, Lance manages to retort, “I can be yours on the ground, too, y’know.”

Then, while Keith is snickering and sufficiently distracted, Lance’s fingers make a mad dash for the guy’s waist, tugging at shirt fabric, and poking at his flank. Keith’s hold starts to loosen as he combats those flailing arms with equal, if not more, determination. They grunt, and laugh, and holler, and pinch, and prod in the most foolish-looking fashion until the earth is tilting, tilting, tilting out from underneath them —

Their playful scuffle sends them frightfully off-balance, toppling and tumbling together to the silken ground in a fit of breathless giggles and writhing limbs. Sand sifts beneath Lance’s back, all buttery-soft as it clings to the windswept tufts of his hair and seeps past the hem of his shirt, but Lance barely has time to process any of that before Keith comes down on top of him. He catches himself on all fours, hovering just above the pulse of Lance’s heaving ribcage, looking flushed and bright and gorgeous, as if he fell straight from the sky somehow.

And — simply because he can — Lance allows a few self-indulgent moments to bask in the glory of it, feeling stuffed to the brim with giddiness and all things Keith. The world around them, he swears, blurs out of existence, leaving nothing in its wake but them, and this, and the millions of glittering stars dancing between their snagged gazes.

He breathes it all in, and feels Keith breathing against him. With him.

“Alright, whatever. Dominance acknowledged,” Lance surrenders at last. With a simpering grin, he trails his fingertips over Keith’s wrist, past the elbow, all the way to his toned bicep. “And kind of appreciated,” he adds boldly.

Keith levels him with a pleased smirk and a lifted brow. “Kind of?”

“Hmph,” pouts Lance. “Too much talking, not enough kissing.”

“Bossy.”

“Try opportunistic. I mean, look, you’ve got a very cute boy laying here under you, and a very empty beach all to ourselves. Pretty much every romantic cue in the world is telling us to get our smooch on right now.”

In response to that, the dark, unending blues of Keith’s eyes glint with something both delighted and dangerous. Then he’s lowering himself down; torturously slow, and still infuriatingly out of reach, but close enough to make Lance’s heart pound, and his skin to quiver around every desirous inch of him. Close enough to feel the delicately bowed outline of Keith’s lips just barely brushing against his own, and close enough for him to be driven absolutely insane by it.

Keith, voice low and rumbling in his throat, tells him, “Well, nothing’s stopping you.”

Lance wants to kiss him. Oh, he wants to kiss him, deep and bruising and never-ending. Simple as that. Only, maybe it’s not that simple, and maybe there is something stopping him. And maybe Lance can’t even hope to explain what that something is without his brain scrambling to nonsensical bits. The weight of it crushes him, pins him down flat. He thinks about soft, yearning goodbye kisses on his front porch. He thinks about his favorite lines of poetry, and Shakespeare, and all those violent delights and violent ends. He thinks about surging forward in this very instant, and sealing up the minuscule distance left between them, dragging gentle murmurs and quiet gasps right out of Keith’s
mouth like he so wants to. He thinks, and thinks, until all he can do is close his eyes, and swallow a
greedy lungful of sandalwood and eucalyptus and salt-scented skin. His hand finds purchase against
the side of Keith’s face, holding him there, feeling overwhelmed and thrumming from the inside-out
and probably on the brink of disaster, and all he can whisper is, “Keith.”

“What’s wrong?” Keith asks. He can see it, just like Lance can see him back.

“Nothing,” Lance answers, and means it so sincerely that his whole body shivers. “Literally nothing.
That’s the crazy thing, y’know? This feels… it’s just, like —”

— but he runs out of air before he can finish.

Because the words are too enormous to utter in the span of a single breath. Words that taste like
promises on his tongue, and mean things — mind-shattering things — like forever, and always, and
in every lifetime. The kind of words that someone so young has no business speaking, or feeling, or
knowing anything about, so they say. And Lance knows that that’s a load of bullshit because he’s
here, aching, with every fibre of his being, for a boy who makes him feel so ridiculously close to
perfect that it frightens him sometimes. But he can’t tell him this quite yet, breath still too frail inside
his lungs.

So, instead, he kisses him.

Lance finally lifts up to bring their lips together, and Keith kisses him back in earnest. Like he, too,
has been gradually nearing his breaking point, splitting open like a dam at the first heat-heavy touch.

When they slowly drift apart, Keith is muttering, “Hey, um — thank you.”

“For what?” Lance says. “This trip was all you, Keith. I’m just along for the ride. And to pay half the
gas price, probably.”

Keith shakes his head. “No, for this. For everything. For bringing me all this way, and just…” he
pauses for less than a heartbeat, and then decides, “for knowing how to make me happy.”

“Newsflash, babe. I’d go anywhere you want me to go if I knew it’d make you happy,” says Lance,
pushing strands of hair away from his boyfriend’s forehead to reveal those starlit eyes, set aglow with
adoration. He smiles, lopsided, before continuing, “And I’d even pay the full gas price myself, too.”

Keith snorts out loud. “Such a gentleman.”

“Chivalry ain’t dead yet, Kogane.”

Sighing with utter content, Keith ducks his face into the side of Lance’s neck, nuzzling against the
underside of his ear, while every inch of him goes boneless and calm. “Let’s stay here a little longer,”
he says softly.

They breathe together some more, hearts drumming in tandem, measured and lilting like a poem:
one-two, one-two, one-two.

“Yeah,” Lance agrees as he folds his arms around Keith’s waist. “We’ve got time.”

And they do.

They really, really do.
There’s a handwritten note sitting on the kitchen counter when Keith gets home. It’s been scribbled onto the back of an old receipt, and it says: *Leftovers in the fridge. Help yourself.*

Keith, weary and starving, wastes no time. The fridge pours light into the pitch-dark kitchen as he reaches for a container of Chinese take-out, shoves two humongous pieces of orange chicken into his mouth with his bare hands, and then puts it back. The rest, he decides, will be breakfast, which doesn’t even gross him out as much as it probably should because the only thing his sleep-addled brain can worry about right now is flopping face-first into his bed as soon as possible.

And he *almost* does — until the faint murmur of the television beckons him to the living room.

There, fast asleep on the couch, is his father. Feet propped up on the coffee table, head drooping sideways onto his shoulder while the laugh track of some 90’s sitcom re-run rumbles in the background. And if Keith were about ten years younger, he’d be there, too, curling into his father’s side, mumbling drowsily — *Dad, I had a nightmare. Dad, when is mom coming home?* — until he’s carried upstairs to his bed. It’s an old, familiar memory; one that shouldn’t rattle him like this, but it does. It rattles him a lot, honestly.

Maybe it’s because Keith has spent more time thinking about his future over the last day and a half than he has in the last four years, and it’s overwhelming. Maybe it’s because things are shifting, like a rug being pulled out beneath him, and he’s never really realized how deeply he wants to keep them all in place until they started slipping away.

*Maybe.*

Quietly, Keith shuffles closer, taking the folded afghan blanket from the back of the sofa to drape it carefully over the man’s slumping shoulders. Then he’s gathering up his father’s dinner plate, his used silverware, and dropping it off in the sink before climbing the stairs to his room. Every step feels like he’s swimming against a tide. Feels like a thump in his gut, and a bruise on his skin.

Feels like growing pains, he thinks.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for being patient with me, everyone! Had some hiccups with this particular chapter, but I’m happy with the way it turned out. The latter half of senior year is always so complicated, and things start changing so drastically -- good thing these boys have each other to lean on! :'}
The talent in this fandom is OFF THE CHARTS, and it blows my mind every single time one of you chooses to put that talent towards this fic. Thank you so much, now and always, to all the artists who send me fanart. It's always the highlight of my week <3

@cosmic-canvas did not one, but TWO amazing pieces from this fic right HERE and HERE!
@phiaxz on instagram drew the boys being their cute selves right over HERE!
@magicath808 drew a scene from the last chapter literally HOURS after it was released and I'm still shook by that tbh. Check it out over HERE!
@shaishinx drew the boys "trying" to study together (lol) right over HERE!
@redfox-san drew The Kiss Scene and it's so ridiculously pretty!! Check it out over HERE!
@cheeriosnuggles drew a comic, also of the kiss scene, but is there ever too much kl kiss content?? Check it out over HERE!
@faeriehime on twitter actually posted a cosplay picture that was inspired by this fic, which literally made me gasp out loud! They look so good, you guys, check it out HERE!
@Nighty_Knights on twitter did a cute little doodle that made me swoon right over HERE!

Stay tuned for the next chapter. Y'all know what's gonna happen............ prom prom prom!!!
The boutique that Allura ultimately drags everyone into turns out to be every bit as ridiculously chic as Lance expects her taste in formalwear to be, which, at first, is entertaining to no end. They take turns escorting Allura around the shop, talking grandly in laughable imitations of her accent, and presenting her with an assortment of colorful garments as the sales associates snicker from afar, endeared by their antics.

Even the dressing room is exceedingly posh, complete with stacks upon stacks of complimentary magazines, and a big, puffy sofa to lounge on while Allura models her selections. She comes pirouetting out of the fitting room, looking like every young girl’s favorite dress-up doll come to life, and each promising option is met with an enthusiastic chorus of ooh’s or ahh’s or hmm’s.

But then a handful of dresses turns into a dozen, which turns into — well, honestly, Lance has lost count. Morale takes a treacherous nosedive straight into the carpet. The ooh-ing and ahh-ing wanes in enthusiasm. And Lance can almost guarantee that the luxurious, crushed velvet upholstery of this big, puffy sofa is going to be dented with a profound imprint of his ass for months to come.

And the light at the end of this flouncy, frilly tunnel is still nowhere to be seen.

“I think I can smell the food court from here,” Hunk laments aloud, followed by a truly pitiful-sounding sigh. He’s slumping so far down in his seat that he’s nearly horizontal. “Do you even know what I’d do for a soft pretzel right now? Do you?”

None of his fellow shopping companions have the energy to respond.

So Hunk grunts to no one in particular, “Well, I don’t know either — but it wouldn’t be pretty!” Then his hand begins a dramatic ascent toward the ceiling, reaching for whatever delectable hallucination is supposedly being dangled from above. “All that buttery, doughy goodness… I think this is a sign. This is totally a sign, you guys. The all-powerful retail gods are telling us to take a lunch break.”

“If retail gods were actually a thing, then they should’ve been smiting us down and putting us out of our misery, like, two whole hours ago,” Pidge retorts, tap-tap-tapping away at her phone screen as she demolishes her latest high score.

“M’dudes, gimme the truth —” Lance’s furrowed expression suddenly peeks out from behind an outdated issue of Vogue. “—am I a spring or a summer?”

When Hunk cranes forward to inspect him with genuine intrigue, Lance tilts his face just so, offering
his most attractive angle, a sharp jut of his chin, and a demure flutter of lashes as though he has two twinkly sapphires for eyes.

“Definitely getting summer vibes,” Hunk decides.

“Definitely getting doofus vibes,” says Pidge.

“Spoken like a true winter,” Lance snipes back with an indignant sniff. “Cold, dry, and everybody wants you to be over.”

Just then, as the dressing room door flies open on its squeaky hinge, Allura emerges in a graceful flurry of sparkly beads and baby-blue tulle. She steps up to the full-length mirror, and gives a slow half-swirl to the left, a slow half-twirl to the right, sending all those layers of billowing fabric swirling and whooshing around her legs. Her head cocks to one side. Her lips pucker. Her eyes narrow into scrutinizing slits at her own glittering reflection until —

“I’m just not sure,” she announces solemnly.

And it sparks a collective fit of epic proportions from her exasperated audience.

“What!” Lance screeches in outrage.

“I’m never gonna get that soft pretzel, am I,” Hunk gripes under his breath.

“Oh, here we go,” mutters Pidge.

But Allura just heaves a melancholy sigh, scurrying away with flushed cheeks, and a quiet murmur of, “Maybe I should try the lavender one again.”

“Lura, come on,” says Lance, vaulting upright, and seizing her wrist before she can escape. “This is crazy, okay? You look gorgeous. And you looked gorgeous in the last fifteen dresses, too. Know why? ‘Cause you’re a gorgeous person, and so — by default — anything you put on your gorgeous person body is gonna be —”

“Gorgeous?” Pidge drawls.

Lance whirls around to meet Pidge’s waiting hand for a high-five, and cheers, “Bingo.”

“I just want to make sure I look —” Allura pauses. Considers. “— the best I can.”

“So you can go out there and break even more hearts?” Lance asks her, quirking a brow. “Admit it — how many poor, hopeful suitors did you have to turn down this week?”

She huffs. “Only three, but —”

“Only, she says!”

“— it’s because I’m already attending prom with someone else.” The words spill out in a hasty rush, ripping-the-bandaid style. And before she can lose her courage somewhere amongst the anticipatory silence, she adds: “With Romelle.”

At that, her audience detonates once again, this time with a triumphant whoop from Lance, a despairing groan from Pidge, and a wide-mouthed gasp from Hunk.

“Oh my god.”
“Ugh.”

“Oh my god!”

“Oh!”

Allura’s startled gaze bounces between the three of them, wondering, “You mean you don’t find it strange?”

“Strange? Girl, I don’t care what it is, ‘cause you just made me twenty bucks richer,” Lance smirks, and then wiggles an insufferable hand in front of Pidge’s death glare. “Pay up, twerp.”

Still groaning all the while, Pidge fishes a bill out of her wallet, and slaps it into Lance’s expectant palm. Allura watches the exchange with pure, jolting shock. “You already knew?” she demands.

“Chyeah.”

“But how?”

“Dark gift,” Hunk and Pidge answer at the same time, in matching monotone, while Lance puffs up like a peacock.

Feeling the warm sting of another blush coming on, Allura hikes up her dress, pivots on her heel, and retreats back into the fitting room where she can pout to her own discretion. Lance aims his boisterous voice right at her closed door, practically oozing with mirth.

“Aw, don’t be shy, ‘Lura! It’s not like your relationship is the one making twitter headlines around here.” He guffaws, proudly, and then tosses out, “Right, babe?”

Silence.

“Uh… Keith?”

More silence.

“Oh, man, the retail gods really did smite him down,” whispers Hunk.

“Sneaky bastard. I bet he escaped through the air ducts or something,” Pidge says.

“Why didn’t we think of that?”

Lance ignores their titters of suspicion, cups his hands around his mouth, and tries again, “How goes it, sunshine?”

Then, with a scary-good sense of theatrical timing, the other fitting room door is flung open so aggressively that the three of them jump. Keith is looming there, grudgingly basking in his not-so-grand reveal with dark, pitiless murder eyes. He sends them each a personalized glower, no doubt aspiring to intimidate his onlookers into submission, but it’s a wasted effort thanks to his ensemble — this red, gaudy blazer that had looked sort of avant-garde on the rack. But right now, wrapped two sizes too small around his frame, it just looks… well —

“Which way to the discotheque, David Bowie?” is what Pidge just barely manages to wheeze as they all crumble into a boneless heap of cackling fools.

Keith, to his credit, does not tackle her off the ottoman. Instead, he fumes, and warns pointedly, “Don’t —”
“Dude, I had no idea you were also an amateur magician!”

“I said —”

“Why, yes, the six of spades was my card, how ever did you —”

“Okay, you know what, forget this —”

“Wait wait wait, Keith, baby, nooo —”

Lance throws himself in front of the door before it can shut in his face, which crinkles dotingly the second he sees how adorably affronted Keith looks. It makes him want to kiss the pout right off his lips, despite that cursed eyesore of a blazer. With a bit of elbow grease, Lance totes his stubborn boyfriend back into the fray, shoving at Keith’s resistant shoulders as if he were moving a mountain.

“Guys,” Lance announces to the room, “can we please tell this handsome stud that he’s an absolute vision in red?”

Hunk and Pidge smother the rest of their chortles in time to watch Keith squirm uncomfortably inside his prison of fabric, with the posture of a cat who has just been dunked in water.

“I’m a tomato,” he grumbles resentfully.

“Mm,” Lance purrs against his neck. “Juicy.”

“Um, gross, hi,” says Pidge — loudly. “We’re literally right here.”

“Plus,” Lance goes on, with incorrigible gusto, as he loops an arm through Keith’s, “isn’t he gonna look so pretty on my arm while I wave to all my loyal subjects?”

Hunk delicately scrunches his nose. “You mean prom king? People haven’t even voted yet, Lance.”

“That’s ‘His Royal Majesty’ to you.”

“Good luck getting the crown to fit on that giant head of yours,” sasses Pidge.

“Oh, go rot in the dungeon, you mutinous pleb!”

With a soft, incredulous snort, Keith says, “Isn’t prom king just a stupid popularity contest, anyway?”

“Exactly,” and that’s when Lance turns to him, hands flailing into big expressive gestures, gaze all aglitter with genuine determination like he can already hear the sweet toll of victory bells. “Which is why I have to win. This is my last shot to leave my mark at this school. To finally prove, once and for all, that my time here has actually amounted to something — gee, I dunno — worthwhile. Being crowned prom king is, like… the pinnacle of social prestige in cheap Party City plastic form. It’s a VIP pass to school-wide validation. It’s —”

“It’s perfect!”

Out comes Allura, breathless and grinning for miles and looking downright resplendent in an exquisite gown that makes all the other alternatives look like ruffly monstrosities. It’s pink and tastefully bedazzled with an elaborate floral design that reflects tiny sprinkles of light across the wall as she twirls to and fro.

“Allura, yes!”
“That’s it! That’s the one!”

“Does this mean we can go get food now?”

“That would be lovely. I’m actually starving,” Allura admits, and then allows her eyes to sweep the room, landing on each of her friends in turn. “Thank you, all of you, for being so patient with me. I really do appreciate your support more than anything.”

In all their years of friendship, and of working under her editorial rule, Lance knows Allura to be nothing but polished and succinct. No nonsense, and isn’t one for flowery sentiments unless otherwise rightfully earned. And so when her tone takes up a gentler quality, something unfeigned and almost heartrending at its core, he gets the feeling that she isn’t necessarily referring to dress shopping anymore.

Lance gives her a wink. “Anytime, princess.”

Then Allura’s gaze makes its way over to Keith, lingering there, and she looks adequately repulsed.

“What in god’s name,” she sneers, “are you wearing?”

Keith has never ducked into a fitting room faster in his life.

When the following weekend arrives, Keith’s entire Saturday afternoon seems to disappear in a haze of restless preparation. He dawdles in the bathroom. He brushes his teeth twice over. He sneaks into his father’s bathroom to contemplate over a bottle of Axe body spray for entirely longer than necessary, gives himself an experimental spritz, coughs violently, and then shoves it back into the medicine cabinet.

Then it’s back to his bedroom where he wrestles with his tie for upwards of fifteen minutes. Soft blue silk that he knows for a fact matches Lance’s eyes phenomenally. He gathers up his hair with an elastic. Shakes it out. Tries again, slower this time, forming a neat little knot against the back of his neck. It’s all so foreign to him — dressing to impress rather than dressing for practicality. He stares into his mirror and decides, with a huff, that his tie is probably as close to un-crooked as it’ll ever be.

Freshly groomed and heading out the front door, he spots Krolia walking up the driveway. His muscles flare with the impulse to about-face and tromp back into the house, but it’s way too late for that because —

“Oh, Keith,” she says as their gazes meet hesitantly. “Hello.”

He flinches, stuck between a swift exit and what already feels like a doomed interaction. “Hi,” comes his uninspired greeting. “Um. My dad’s inside.”

“Yes. Thank you.” But she doesn’t go right away. She takes a moment to look him over with a shy, almost private slant to her lips, and guesses, “Off to prom?”

Keith forces a nod.
“On that?”

She’s glancing toward the chromed motorcycle parked at the top of the driveway with something like polite disapproval in her tone. It puts a frown on Keith’s face, petulant.

“Yeah?”

“Why don’t you let me drive you instead?”

Keith balks at that. “But what about —”

“Your dad can wait,” she assures him. “Besides, I’m sure Lance would prefer for his date to arrive looking like he didn’t get swallowed up by a wind tunnel.”

His frown grows ever more pronounced until he catches himself accidentally considering her offer, if only because the thought of redoing his hair one more time actually makes him want to rage.

Which is how Keith finds himself buckled into the passenger seat of his father’s girlfriend’s glossy-black Mercedes, feeling trapped and misplaced as they coast down the street en route to Lance’s house.

Krolia, he quickly learns, is a very quiet person. She drives with the radio off, both hands on the wheel, and both eyes trained dutifully on the road ahead. This seems to suit Keith just fine — he doesn’t have an awful lot to say right now, either — although he could do without the stiff, crippling tension prodding at his insides. It tries to goad him into conjuring up some trite, cordial niceties to fill the silent void, but Keith focuses instead on the blurry scenery just beyond his window.

“I realize that we might’ve gotten off on the wrong foot,” says Krolia, voice low yet resonant in the cramped confines of this too-quiet car. “I don’t want to upset you, Keith. And I don’t want to cause any trouble between you and your father. And I certainly don’t want you to feel like I’m —”

“Then what do you want?” he asks brusquely, and even he’ll admit it’s pricklier than intended. He isn’t sure he should’ve asked. He isn’t sure he wants to listen to an answer.

But Krolia, gaze still fixed forward, tells him, “Well, I’d like to try being your friend.”

A sharp pang vibrates between his ribs because even though Keith doesn’t know what he’d been expecting, it definitely isn’t that. He pinches his brow, feeling blindsided.

“Maybe we can start there, hm?” she says.

As they pull up to the McClain residence, right beside their bright hand-painted mailbox, Keith looks over to find her toying with that same vague smile from earlier. Like it’s an offer, or an olive branch of sorts. Gentle, unassuming, and entirely on his terms.

So he nods. “Okay.”

Krolia nods, too. “Okay.”

And, yeah. It’s a start.
“Keith is here! Keith is here!” comes Sylvio’s exuberant cry over the chime of the doorbell. He hurls himself at Keith’s legs like a miniature battering ram, bouncing and babbling on about the football camp he’ll be attending this summer. A tooth has gone missing since the last time Keith saw him, and he boasts the gap proudly with a thousand-watt grin.

Mrs. McClain outright shrieks when she spots him in the doorway. Her hug is warm and rib-crushing, and she goes on to make such an enormous fuss over how dashing he looks that Keith feels an actual, bonafide blush crawl up to his cheeks. He shakes hands with Lance’s tall, square-jawed father, who wishes him luck, and genuinely means it, right as Lance’s squawking sisters parade into the room with Addie and Nadia in tow.

The family swarms and chatters around him, everyone vying for his attention with their loud voices, and smiling faces, and Keith is pretty sure this whole thing is supposed to be dreadfully overwhelming, but it just — isn’t.

It feels very nice, he thinks, to be a part of something.

More specifically — something like this.

All the lively commotion is what summons the sound of stomping feet to the stairwell. Behind Rachel’s bushy ponytail, Lance comes racing down, faltering on the bottom step when Keith looks over at his wonderfully blue eyes, the bridge of his nose all splattered with freckles like tiny bronze stars.

Oh, gasps the little voice in the back of Keith’s brain, soft but vehement.

Because Lance, right here, is all clean-cut lines and effortless class, like something out of a storybook. His tuxedo jacket is unbuttoned to reveal the deep cherry crimson of his tie and waistcoat, wrapped snug around his narrow torso, fitted to perfection. And his hair — the way its been tousled with meticulous care — looks so breathtakingly touchable that Keith imagines lugging him back up the stairs, sinking his fingers into those fluffy locks, and kissing every inch of him within reach until he makes a proper mess of them both.

But he doesn’t.

For obvious reasons.

The main one being Lance’s mother, and the camera she seems to materialize out of thin air. Then she’s corralling the boys in front of the fireplace, a bit weepy and emotional even as she barks orders at them to say cheese and look at the camera and hold that pose. Time ticks by in slow, torturous increments, leaving Keith with a sore jaw, and jittery legs before too long.

Eventually, even Lance — who, up until now, has appeared just as comfortable in front of a camera as he is behind one — starts bemoaning with impatience.

“Ma,” he groans hugely. “C’mon! We get the picture — literally!”

“You don’t get to go to prom every day, cariño,” his mother insists, squinting into the viewfinder.

“Yeah, and we won’t ever get to go if you don’t wrap it up!”
She sets off like a ticking bomb, unleashing what can only be a rapid-fire tirade of motherly admonishments. Keith doesn’t even need to understand any Spanish to figure that out.

“Jeez, sorry,” Lance turns to mutter against Keith’s ear. “I kinda just assumed you already knew my family has zero chill, but I still probably should’ve warned —”

“You look really beautiful,” Keith says at once, like he has to, like the thought will eat him alive if he doesn’t get it out of him, and then, just like that, all the lingering threads of distress visibly unspool right off Lance’s face. It makes Keith almost wish he could savor that gooey-eyed expression for just a little longer, but he simply can’t — and won’t — allow those lopsided lips to be left tragically un- kissed for another second.

So he inches forward, and Lance meets him halfway, and neither of them really seem to notice the continual click, click, click of the camera after that.

Save for the sadly inescapable stench of rubber and old sneakers permeating the air, the school gymnasium has been completely transformed into a festive, gleaming wonderland. Oversized paper-maché lanterns, golden and glitzy, dangle from the ceiling, right beside a row of hologram projectors that shine swirling star-shaped patterns across the congested dance floor. Every remaining inch of viable surface area, it seems, has been adorned with a copious amount of fairy lights; coiled around decorative pillars, and dripping down the walls like shimmering, crystallized teardrops.

The room is jam-packed, and all abuzz with an electrifying pulse by the time they arrive. Music rips through the speakers, bumping to an undeniably catchy bass line — the kind that rouses bones down to the marrow. The kind that ignites like a flame, and coerces everyone into a fast-paced dance.

Everyone except Keith, that is.

Despite all of Lance’s best attempts at smooth-talking and arm-twisting and lip-pouting, his boyfriend remains an unmovable fixture at the edge of the dance floor, where he glares out at the sea of undulating bodies with a distinctly broody look on his face until their friends decide to take pity on the bickering pair. Allura and Romelle haul Lance into the crowd, and Keith hangs back with Pidge, who also seems resolutely averse to most prom-related traditions — proven by the way she had strutted through the gymnasium doors rocking a polka-dotted bowtie and satin coat-tailed blazer, which Lance thinks is probably one of the most badass things he’s ever witnessed.

He, Allura, and Romelle weave their way to the center of the starlit floor, and easily fall into sync with the rest of their well-dressed classmates. Sweat clings to Lance’s nape, to the knots of his spine, as one song bleeds into another, and another, and another. Only when the tempo gradually fades into something slower does the mob start to thin out. Clusters disperse around them, pairing off into couples, and Lance intends to give the ladies some privacy until Romelle is insisting he stay so she can go fetch some water. Away she scurries, and the music continues its soft croon.

“Thank you, Lance,” Allura grins as he guides them both into a gentle sway.

“Yeah, yeah, I get it,” comes his playful reply. “I’m a way better dance partner than Romelle, but
don’t worry — secret’s safe with me.”

She swats at him, inoffensive. “You’re impossible.”

“All jokes aside, though,” Lance goes on, “I should be the one thanking you for letting me third-wheel your date tonight.”

“Well, this date might’ve never happened in the first place if not for you.”

Confusion nips at his brow, and tweaks his voice a half-octave higher as he balks, “Me?”

His reaction amuses her, chuckling so daintily under her breath that Lance might’ve missed it if they weren’t pressed so close. “You’ve inspired more people than you know, Lance. Myself included,” says Allura. “Writing that article, and publicizing your feelings so wholeheartedly like that… I suppose you could say it encouraged me to take some risks of my own.”

Her gaze flits subtly over Lance’s shoulder, looking past him to where Romelle is likely mingling and sipping her refreshment in the distance. Here, beneath the multicolored lights, Allura sparkles with affection. It warms something in her eyes and stipples her cheeks with an iridescent blush.

“It was very brave of you.” Then, with a mildly accusing lift of her impeccably groomed brow, “Terribly stupid. But very brave.”

“I —” says Lance, sounding dazzled and dizzied by her words, and looking it to match. “—I guess I had no idea.”

Allura nods, tiny tendrils bouncing around her lovely face. “So, thank you,” she tells him again.

“I’m just happy it worked out for you.” He goes to tuck those curly strands behind her ear. “You deserve it, y’know.”

“You’re a good friend, Lance.”

“Still gonna be saying that in, like, ten seconds when I ditch you to go find my boyfriend?”

Her eyes roll to the ceiling. “Go on,” she dismisses. “I’m sure he misses you.”

“Who wouldn’t!”

Hunk, that crazy genius, was totally right about the fruit punch, by the way. It is pretty gross-looking, and kind of tastes like a melted Starburst candy, and, for some godforsaken reason, has specks of glitter floating around in it.

But that doesn’t stop Lance from ladling two plastic cup’s worth of the stuff, and taking them over to one of the circular banquet tables where Keith is sitting alone. His suit jacket hangs off the back of his chair, the sleeves of his dress shirt rolled up to his elbows. Jeez, he’s not even trying to be irresistible.
“What’s good, handsome stranger?” Lance trills, coming up from behind, surprising him with a drink and a peck on the cheek. “Besides making eyes at your boyfriend while he gets groovy on the dance floor without you.”

Keith turns just as Lance lowers into the seat beside him. The warm candlelight from the table’s centerpiece casts its spell, limning his features in a rosy romantic glow. “People-watching,” he grins.

Lance tosses an arm around Keith’s shoulders, huddling in mischievously. “Ahh, and so the student becomes the master…”

“Dork.”

For a while, they make a little game out of trying to out-do one another by picking out the most fascinating or eye-catching specimen in the room, and Lance has to admit that Keith has become quite the worthy opponent since that trainwreck post-game party. There’s Shiro, off to the side, who appears to’ve been not only roped into chaperoning tonight’s event, but also into a very one-sided conversation with Mr. Coran and his wildly gesticulating appendages. To their right, they spot Hunk and Shay, looking positively smitten as they smile and spin to the music. And to their left, they share mutual disgust over the sight of James and Nyma, who aren’t dancing so much as they’re devouring each other’s faces on the dance floor.

There isn’t a single person Lance doesn’t recognize. That guy who started a food fight in the cafeteria on the last day of junior year. That short blonde girl who sits behind Lance in study hall, and always shares her chewing gum with him. All the people who were lined up outside the newspaper office, an hour before first period, just to read his article. All the people who’ve tweeted, and emailed, and stopped him in the halls.

Him. Lance McClain. That scrappy, gossip-hungry freshman who wanted, more than anything, to make a name for himself.

And maybe he has. Maybe he’s reached some readers. Maybe he’s touched some hearts. And —

He sees Allura and Romelle, holding each other close as they sway.

— maybe he’s even changed some lives.

“So I think I owe you an apology,” says Lance, out of nowhere, watching the star-shaped patterns on the floor fade from gold into a deep turquoise.

Keith frowns. “For what?”

“Well, I promised you that if you let me write an article about you, then everyone at school would finally get off your back.” Motioning to the scene before them with such a flourish that it nearly sloshes his drink right out of the cup, Lance goes on, “But here we are, just a few weeks shy of graduation, and any minute now you’ll be ascending to your rightful rank at the top of the adolescent hierarchy.”

“Huh?”

“Prom king. Duuh.”

“Oh,” Keith mumbles, expression flatlining as he stares down into his lukewarm punch. “I haven’t ascended anything.”

Lance levels him with a withering glance, and Keith, at least, has the decency to look slightly
chagrined. “Look, being a reporter has pretty much made me an expert when it comes to the inner workings of how our classmates operate, is all I’m saying. So I can tell you right now that the chances of the football team captain walking out of here without a crown are slim to none.”

Keith meets his gaze, dubious, like he’s scouring the deep blue waters of his eyes for a punchline, or a hint of sarcasm, but nothing surfaces. He ventures, softly, “What happened to leaving your mark?”

“I think I already did,” Lance shrugs. “Not exactly the mark I always imagined I’d leave, but hey. Two front page articles? Sparking off a full-blown twitter riot? Snagging the guy of my dreams?” Then he’s flashing a grin, so big and radiant that it puts even the twinkliest of lights in the room to absolute shame. “Not too shabby for that kid with the camera, huh?”

Keith, with a yank to Lance’s tie that brings them nose to nose, says, “Not at all,” and then kisses him hard and full on the mouth.

It’s some time later when the music cuts off with an abrupt screech, replaced by the shrill ring of microphone feedback.

“Ladies and gentlemen.” Principal Iverson’s deep growl of a voice crackles through the speakers from the front of the makeshift stage. A beam of blinding spotlight hits him square in the face, wrinkling his mouth into more of a painful-looking grimace than a smile. “All candidates for prom king and queen are to report onto the stage — immediately.”

A hushed murmur settles over the gymnasium as the nominees pick their way through the gathering crowd, and climb the stage. Lance can practically feel the discomfort radiating off Keith in waves once they’re all lined up and waiting, so he tangles their fingers together without a second thought, and James Griffin actually has the nerve to snort when he spies the two of them from his peripheral. It takes everything in Lance to keep his eyes forward, to not slaughter him with a patented ice-glare.

“Now, the moment you’ve all been waiting for,” announces Iverson, his meaty fingers struggling to unfurl the small piece of paper in his grasp. “This year’s senior prom queen is… Allura Alfor.”

Applause ripples through the air — including a few whoop-whoop’s and errant fist pumps from Hunk and Pidge — as Allura, pink-cheeked and overjoyed, steps forward to accept her crown. With the tackily bejeweled headpiece now nestled in her hair, she gives the audience a quick curtsy before falling back in line with a grinning Plaxum, and Nyma, who looks so gravely insulted that it’s almost comical.

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“Aand finally, our senior prom king is —”

Another paper fumbles around in Iverson’s grip, and Keith bristles at the sound, bracing himself, while Lance swipes the pad of his thumb over his knuckles.

Everything seems to play out in slow-motion for the few harrowing seconds leading up to the moment when Iverson says, “— Keith Kogane.”
There goes the crowd, roaring with their most ear-splitting cheers, and adoring cries yet. But Keith doesn’t move, just shoots a thousand-yard stare straight ahead until Lance has no choice but to usher him forward. He lurches, stunned, and is so very tempted to duck as the crown is placed on his head.

Iverson clears his throat, barely even heard over the commotion. “Make way on the floor for our newly inducted prom king and queen as they share their first dance.”

Music floods through the sound system again, and the crowd begins splitting down the center, and Lance seems to’ve forgotten about this part. He’s — not jealous. Nor does he have any right to be after spending the first half of the evening twirling across the floor with Allura. He just has a very sudden urge to go chug down three more cups of that questionable fruit punch, and not watch his boyfriend dance with a pretty girl in front of the entire class because he’s human, and has limits, okay —

He’s definitely not sulking his way off the stage when someone grabs his wrist. An abrupt swivel of his neck confirms it’s Allura, grinning fondly and extending her crown out to him.

“Uh?” says Lance, speechless.

“You deserve this far more than I do,” she tells him plainly.

“But!” he says again, still speechless.

“Lance, please,” and then she’s setting the crown atop his head, allowing it to droop askew, complementing the perplexed slope of his lips. “I owe my own date more than a few dances, anyway.”

A few beats flitter by like hummingbird wings inside his chest, and when he’s finally able to get a hold of himself, he insists on smacking a wet, obnoxious kiss on the back of Allura’s hand. “You’re still a queen to me, princess,” he croons.

“Oh, for goodness sake,” she grumbles, wrenching her hand away, “just turn around!”

So he does, and very nearly lets loose a humiliating squeak in the process.

Because his poor, helpless heart only has a split second to beat, to warn the rest of his body before Keith comes into view, technicolor light unfolding on his face as he stands in the middle of the floor, surrounded by flashing stars and a simpering audience of his peers. And Lance feels speechless again, feels fifteen years old and flustered again, feels like his ears are out of commission, filled with nothing but tinny white noise and the husk of Keith’s voice when he smirks and says: “Can I have this dance?”

Lance can’t stop himself from blurting, “It’s may I —”

“Yeah,” Keith chuckles low in his belly, tugging him close. “I know.”

And then, from behind:

“Didn’t realize they were crowning two queens this year.”

It’s punctuated by the grating sound of scornful laughter, so purposefully fired in their direction. Lance can see the exact moment it plummets in Keith’s gut like a stone, the exact moment his eyes go as sharp and steely as gunmetal, and the exact moment he cracks, marching to the edge of the crowd where James is poised and leering and ready to bite back.
“You say something, Griffin?” Keith snarls, halting only when they’re one spiteful breath away from collision.

“As a matter of fact, captain, I did,” James refuses to flinch, feet planted like roots. “This whole thing? Is a fucking joke.”

“Grow up.” The crown is removed, snapped in half, and then chucked furiously at James’ shoes. It startles a few scandalized gasps out of the nearby spectators. “It’s just a chunk of plastic.”

But just as Keith tries to pivot, he’s hauled back around by a rough hand on his shoulder, bringing him eye to eye with the menacing brunt of James’ scowl. “You don’t get it, Kogane,” he says, teeth grinding, voice rising. “You screwed over every single one of your teammates when you walked out on that championship game, and the idiots at this school are still fawning all over you like you’re some kind of saint.”

Lance strides forward at once, wedging himself between their bone-chilling glares. “Yeah, dude, real hard to believe it’s not that charming personality of yours winning over the masses.”

An abrasive scoff, right in his face. “Looks like you forgot to put a muzzle on your bitch, Kogane.”

Keith lunges, ferocious and beast-like, so dangerously close to sinking in his claws before Lance is grabbing him by the shirt collar, thrusting him backwards, warning him, “Whoa, whoa — c’mon, Keith, he’s an asshole. Old news. Let it go.”

They’ve amassed some attention, now. The crowd is growing denser, narrowing the circle around them, eager for some action, but Lance hardly notices their nosy presence. His eyes are glued to Keith’s, which have gone black and abysmal, like Lance is trying to lure him back to a calmer reality with the steadiness of his gaze alone.

“Just gonna walk away like last time, right, captain?” James keeps needling.

His continuing taunts are a lit match hovering above the gasoline, one wrong word away from igniting something explosive and deadly. Pressure boils to such a violent temperature that Lance can feel it in his own veins — pounding, pounding, pounding — the same way it makes Keith’s chest heave, and his entire right arm tremble with all the exerted strength it takes to prevent himself from forming fists, charging forward like a force of nature, taking this guy out in one clobbering swing, and just —

“I guess it must run in the family. So glad to see you learned something from mommy dearest before she bailed on —”

A fist goes flying through the air.

But it’s not Keith’s.

It’s Lance’s.

And it lands like a sledgehammer. Heavy. Brutal. With a nauseating crunch.

That’s when the entire room breaks into chaos. Because how could it not?

There’s shrieking, and shouting, and hordes of swarming students flooding the area like a dam bursting. There’s Shiro, muscling his way through, dragging Lance out of the wreckage by his shoulders. Then there’s James, collapsed on the ground, hand to his nose, blood on his shirt. Rushing, struggling, panicking, shoving, and then Iverson’s booming voice piercing the clamor with
The tiny bell tinkles a warm greeting above the doorway as they trudge inside, mocking them with cheer.

“Evenin’, boys, welcome to Lion’s Den —” the young waitress trills, eyes bright, and then startling when she takes a good look at the two of them, the dismal picture they make, dressed in what barely passes as formalwear at this point — jackets removed, shirts untucked, ties undone and hanging limp around their necks. They slide into one of the booths near the back with very little ceremony, the squelch of cracked vinyl disrupting some clichéd 80’s pop tune droning in the background.

Not long after they’re seated does Keith feel himself drooping forward, bones vaporizing to dust, stuffing his face into the crook of his elbow with a miserable sigh. He tries to relieve some of the tension in his fatigue-beaten brow, but every time he closes his eyes, all he can see is Lance — the look on his face when he’d finally emerged from the sinister bowels of Iverson’s office, so pale and withdrawn and borderline catatonic that Keith’s first instinct had been to check Lance’s pupils for signs of life. Even now, the mental encore of it has Keith’s stomach doing flips — though he has valid reason to believe that the unsavory stench of greasy diner food isn’t doing him any favors, either.

Three more rounds of the jukebox pass before Keith even considers rerouting his gaze. But it’s with an infinitesimal crane of his neck that he eventually peers up to find Lance sitting across the table, all hollowed out, blue eyes dulling despite the harsh fluorescents as they narrow at a pair of swollen knuckles resting on the formica surface. His expression remains a perfect blank, not even the faintest smear of a curve on his lips.

Keith itches with the urge to take Lance’s hand, but an unsightly glimpse of that tender bruise, already blooming purple beneath the skin, has him thinking better of it. “Are you hungry?” he asks instead.

Lance is silent, wiped clean and running empty.

“Do you — can I get you a drink?”

This time, Lance pulls a sorrowful wince.

Keith tries again, desperation plucking roughly at his vocal chords, “Lance, just — what can I do? Just tell me what you need me to —”

He stops short when Lance flies out of his seat, and barges out the door faster than a blustery breeze, blowing past the front counter where their waitress continues sending them all sorts of wary glances. Keith ignores them all, and her bewildered little ‘have a good night?’ as he, too, darts across the diner. The tiny bell screams angrily overhead at the disturbance.
Outside, the evening has gone offensively moist with muggy heat; the kind that thickens the air into something almost palpable. Keith is all but bulldozed by the thrill of it as soon as he slams through the doors, grimacing at how it instantly dapples his hairline, and turns his skin clammy, and sticks to the lining of his lungs like a gooey sludge until he can scarcely breathe —

But the uneasy pitter-patter of footfalls is what brings his focus to the far end of the deserted parking lot where Lance’s lone, murky figure is stomping around in the quiet gloom. He’s pacing. Double-time. Back and forth, ‘round and ‘round in aimless circles until Keith expects he’ll pound nonsensical patterns into the asphalt if he keeps on like this. And the closer he approaches the more he starts to notice how mangled and contorted Lance’s features have become, the angle of his frown so unmistakably troubled; a blot of ink marring a pristine canvas.

“Lance,” says Keith, and his boyfriend lifts his head with a start, like he’s being interrupted, or woken up from a nightmare. “It’s gonna be okay —”

“That’s some bullshit,” Lance snaps, pithy and mean. His stride falters, his voice pinches with panic. “Which part, huh? Which part is okay? Which part of any of this makes you think it’s gonna be okay?”

At that, Keith just hesitates, reassurances trapped in a parched throat. He’s staring so intensely that his vision begins adjusting to the surrounding darkness, and then — for better or for worse — he’s able to make out Lance’s finer details a bit more clearly now: his face, cut in shadow, viciously flushed along the sharp peaks of his cheekbones. His eyes, blown open wide, shining with unshed tears. His hair, unkempt, sticking up in unruly clumps where he’s been dragging his fingers through it. Again, Keith’s gut stirs around like choppy seawater, stricken by the terrible sight, because it suddenly dawns on him that he’s never seen Lance quite like this before. So wrecked, so strung out, so dangerously close to self-destructing.

“God, I am so dead.” The pacing resumes, fast and frantic to match the way words are fumbling off his lips. “I’m dead — and grounded, holy shit, I’m eternally grounded, like — like, dude, I’m not even kidding, my parents are gonna straight up barricade me in my room after they find out about —”

“I’ll talk to them,” Keith offers automatically.

Lance splutters with such disbelief that he nearly chokes on the ugly sound of it — something like a grating scoff, or a scathing guffaw, or a stifled sob. He gives Keith an impassioned glare, and flings back, “Yeah, and say what exactly? Bruised knuckles and two-week suspensions pretty much speak for themselves, y’know.”

Despite his restraint, Lance’s eyes begin to glitter like varnished jewels; just a momentary warning before they spill over completely, and empty down the contours of his face in hot, unbroken streams. But his hands are trembling badly enough that he can’t even scrub the wetness away, can’t even save himself from the humiliation of standing here, defenseless, so unapologetically vulnerable.

“D’you know what happens when you get suspended from school?” He doesn’t bother waiting for an answer, carrying on in the same shallow breath: “It goes on your permanent fucking record, Keith. And guess what happens when something like that goes on your permanent record — I’ll tell you. Upstanding colleges, like Garrison, take away hard-earned scholarships from kids, like me, who have majorly fucked up lapses in self-control and go around punching their classmates on school property!”

He hadn’t meant to start yelling, but now his chest is heaving, and his tongue is weighed down by the ripping aftershocks of his own outburst, and the look it puts on his face is just — awful. Like he
hasn’t decided if he’s going to be sick or collapse. It’s the latter, mostly, when he plants himself on the curb, too drained to stand any longer, and buries the reddiness of his face into his hands, fat translucent tears falling through the cracks of his fingers.

“I can’t — I cannot, Keith — I cannot lose my scholarship, okay, my family can’t afford for me to go without my scholarship. Going to this writing program is, like, the one thing I had going for me — the one thing I knew I couldn’t screw up — and if I don’t get to go, then I won’t —”

Keith doesn’t recall exactly when he bolts forward, or crouches down to the pavement; just that he does, and he is, and now he’s here, coaxing Lance out of hiding with a voice so ragged, but meant to be soothing, “Hey, look at me… Lance, sweetheart, just look at me.”

Lance snivels something into his palms that sounds like a protest.

“You’re going to the program,” says Keith.

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do.”

It’s not a wound, but it lands like one, unyielding in its firmness. In any other instance, Keith would regret making his boyfriend flinch under the severity of his tone, but, right now, he has to make him understand. He has to. When Lance tries to bat him away, Keith snatches both his wrists — not strong enough to grind bone, but the intent is there — and it forces their gazes to collide head-on. A brief, tender moment suspending between them: Lance, all watery-eyed and dumbstruck. Keith, desperate, huddled so close that he swears he can taste the salt of Lance’s tears.

“Because you never read the last chapter, Lance, and I’m not gonna let you start now,” is what Keith tells him, fervent with conviction. “This is not your ending. It’s not.”

Just as Lance’s snifflle threatens to dwindle into a mournful whimper, Keith bends forward until their foreheads are bumping, their noses nuzzling. He stiffens into a sturdy pillar of support against Lance’s dissolving weight, trussing him like a crutch as he over-emphasizes the even flow of his breath, encouraging Lance’s own quivering inhales to do the same.

“M’sorry for ruining prom,” Lance shudders out after a while, and Keith immediately releases one of his wrists in favor of cupping Lance’s damp jaw, wiping a glistening glob of tears away with his thumb.

“You didn’t ruin anything,” he whispers fiercely.

“I ruined James Griffin’s face.”

“Yeah.” His voice is very audibly nuanced with a smirk. “It was actually kinda hot.”

“Oh my god,” Lance sputters out a chuckle. “You would find that hot, you freak.”

It’s a feeble sound, that chuckle, but it makes Keith’s heart keen inside his ribcage, the same way it does whenever they kiss, or hold hands under the desk in AP Bio, or spend Sunday afternoons at Lance’s favorite used bookshop, where Keith gets to watch him smile into the pages of novels and anthologies. He wonders if his heart has always beat like this. He wonders if it’s always been this urgent and overwhelming. He wonders if it’s only for Lance, and if it’ll always be only for Lance, and if Lance will always be his always.

“Dance with me,” Lance is saying, eventually, so soft that it sounds like a plea. “We might be
missing out on prom, but we are not missing out on our dance.”

When they part, Keith is helplessly leashed by Lance’s gaze, and how he lifts them both to their feet as if floating weightless through the atmosphere. “I’m not… really good at this,” he tells him.

“If you have the coordination to charge head-first across a field of stampeding jocks, then you can definitely handle swaying in a circle for, like, three minutes.”

And he’s right. Turns out Keith can manage a lot more than he thinks he can when he’s in Lance’s arms, feet moving slow, a hand on the small of his back. Finding their rhythm is a bit odd for a few seconds as they adjust to the lack of music, lights, and shimmering dance floor to lead the way. It’s just them, Keith realizes, and the measured upswing of their pulses guiding them to unison. Guiding them here, to each other, to this time-stopping moment. *Always.*

A warm puff of air hits the spot just below Keith’s ear, short and incredulous.

“What?” He pauses, realizing. “I told you I’m not good —”

“No, it’s just —” says Lance, pressing himself closer, lips grazing skin, “— it’s just I can’t believe it took me so long to tell you I love you.”

Keith’s thrumming heart reacts before his mouth can. It gains momentum, full-throttle, bruising his sternum in the sweetest way.

Then he whispers, short-winded, “*Lance.*”

“I’ve loved you for years, Keith, I — god — I’ve loved you from the moment I saw you.” It’s so much. It’s suddenly *so much.* Keith feels the entire universe swaying around them, threatening to capsize, plunging them into its beautiful, bottomless depths. Lance tightens his grip, voice shivering, “And every day since then, I… I’ve just loved you even more.”

Something swells, and blooms, and burns in Keith’s chest like a wildfire. Something so raw that it stings. Something so wonderfully enormous that it makes his soul ache, with wonder and warmth and — *love.*

An unconditional kind of love. A gale-force kind of love. An always kind of love.

A love that doesn’t care about the number on his jersey, or how many touchdowns he scores. A love that stays, and doesn’t leave him behind. A love that sees him, all of him, even when he doesn’t want to be seen. A love that’s been here the whole time, right in front of his face, waiting for him to open his damn eyes and —

“I love you, too,” says Keith, a low, yearning rumble that doesn’t even sound like him. He threads his fingers into tufts of hair at the base of Lance’s skull, like his life depends on it, like he’ll lose himself if he doesn’t. “Lance. I love you.”

It’s as the words are overflowing from his mouth — honeyed on his lips, light on his tongue — that he realizes how long they’ve been there, bursting at his seams, undoing him from the inside-out. And now that he’s gotten a taste, he knows he’s ruined, so thoroughly and perfectly ruined, with a craving that’ll never be satisfied. He never wants to stop feeling this achingly sweet. He never wants to stop saying it, in this moment, and in every moment that comes after.

So he whispers it some more, a prayer against Lance’s skin, and time keeps passing them by, and they just keep dancing.
They don’t stumble through the door as much as they plow straight into it, a whirlwind of pawing hands, and hungry lips, and strained gasps. It’s almost hilarious, in a tragic sort of way, how Lance has always imagined his very first R-rated make out session involving a lot more flirty banter, and finesse. Maybe even a strategically compiled playlist of sensual slow jams because, y’know — *romance*.

But, instead, it’s… *well*.

Not that Lance is complaining about his current situation. Like, *at all*. He’s really loving the way Keith is helping himself to a handful of his ass, manhandling him toward the bed with those hunky star quarterback muscles. And the way they’re tripping over each other’s feet a little bit, chuckling into kisses, is actually a sufficient distraction from there being a giant knot corkscrewing in Lance’s stomach. And so much adrenaline pumping through his blood that it might light him on fire. And, of course, the stark, glaring, unavoidable fact that they’ve never done this before.

They’ve done other things, though. Fully-clothed things, hands-above-the-belt things. Things that can easily be stopped dead in its tracks if an unassuming sibling or nibling were to peek in through the parentally-enforced door gap. Things like that one time when there’d been just too much friction between his jeans and Keith’s knee, ripping one almighty moan out of Lance’s throat like a lion’s roar. The two of them froze and stared for a solid five minutes after that, red-faced and horrified that someone in the house might’ve heard. Nobody had, but Lance still couldn’t look anyone in the eye at the dinner table that evening.

All of that seems lightyears away from where he is now: back against the mattress, blinking up at the pitch blackness of Keith’s bedroom ceiling, trying not to do anything mortifying while Keith, above him, alternates between kissing and murmuring throaty *I love you*’s right in his ear. This feels new, and intoxicating, and completely out of control.

But the truth is? Lance has thought about this — like, *extensively*, and, at times, quite explicitly — pretty much ever since he learned exactly what *this* is. Partly because he’s a teenaged boy, and that’s just how a large portion of his lizard brain has been biologically hardwired, but also because he knows — truly, fully, *seriously* — that it’s something he wants. He wants *this*. He wants more. He wants so much, and too much, and everything all at once. He wants Keith over him, and under him, and all around him. He wants Keith, *full stop*.

The knot in Lance’s belly coils tighter as Keith hums the sweetest sound into the underside of his unhinged jaw, and that — oh, yeah, *that* — Lance wants *that*, too, honestly. He wants the warm weight of Keith’s body pressing down on him, crushingly good, his lungs near to bursting. He wants to be the one bringing Keith well beyond his breaking point, coming undone in his arms, all swollen-lipped and gorgeously debauched. And Lance wants to tell him this — no, has to tell him this, right now, before he gags on his own thumping heart. He wants to whisper it ardently against all of Keith’s most delicate spots. Wants to catch his low-lidded gaze when he pulls away, and stare into his face with his eyes like lit embers, and say —

“I have condoms.”
— literally anything but that.

Because that? It’s a spineless croak, at best, his voice cracking in all the worst ways — nothing at all like the smooth, sultry purr he’s been rehearsing over and over in his rose-colored reveries.

“You what —” Keith chokes, so thoroughly caught off-guard that his elbows snap like twigs, and he comes piling down on top of Lance, their foreheads thwacking together with a dense plunk.

So, the moment? Most likely ruined.

Self-confidence? Dead and gone.

And his poor skull? Throbbing.

Keith topples onto his side, palm to his forehead, a few clipped expletives muttered behind clenched teeth. Meanwhile, Lance decides to take the not-so-dignified route, and uses the comforter to disguise himself as a bulky, cotton-blend burrito. Maybe if he’s lucky he’ll get a gnarly concussion from this, and pass out before Keith gets the chance to find his bearings. Oh, wouldn’t that be such a blessing.

Instead, there’s a hushed rumble of his name coming from the other side of the bed, and Lance responds with a despairing grunt as he burrows even deeper into the bedding.

“Nope. Goodbye. We’re done here,” he practically yelps.

Bed sheets rustle, the mattress dips beside him, and then two persistent hands are trying to pry him out of his blanketed cocoon. “Lance, hey, c’mon.”

“Can’t a guy suffer his untimely demise in peace?” Lance whines dramatically.

“I heard what you said, y’know.”

“Hence,” he hisses, “the suffering.”

“Why are you being like this?” Keith sighs, yanking the comforter down to the other boy’s shoulders to reveal a mussed nest of hair and a spectacularly grumpy frown. Keith is frowning back, just a confusing little quirk of his lips, and Lance thinks there must be something inherently pathetic about how much of an affect it has on his heart rate.

“Obviously because I wasn’t supposed to just — blurt it out like that. Like a weirdo.” Attempting to duck back into the safety of the comforter, he realizes there’s simply no avoiding the inevitable. Like it or not, this conversation is happening, currently, and it’s just as horrifyingly cringe-worthy as Lance expected it to be. And Keith, looming over him, is only adding to all the unpleasantness — albeit unwittingly — with that assessing gaze of his, whittling Lance down to a cellular level. “It wasn’t — ugh — it wasn’t even — Look, I only bought them to be, y’know, safe. And prepared. Just in case we… But it’s like — it’s whatever, okay? This isn’t me, like, trying to pressure you or anything, I’m so not that guy, but I was just —”

Then Keith raises a single brow, and asks him, “Do you want to?”, like it’s not a completely soul-stirring thing to wonder aloud.

Lance freezes up. His ears are suddenly wailing like sirens. Maybe he is concussed after all. “I mean — yes? Do you?”

A small nod. “Yeah.”
After that, it falls so eerily silent that Lance can practically hear the muted pop of his jaw as he struggles to close it, every phantom creak in the floorboards of this empty house, and the grinding gears inside his head, stuttering to a complete standstill. Can Keith hear it, too? The way heat fizzes high in his cheeks, simmering like a furnace? The way his heart thrashes hysterically behind his ribs? The bombardment of imaginary confetti canons firing like errant missiles through the sky because, sweet mother of god, Keith is actually down to —

_Nice_, his lizard brain rejoices.

Except that he says it out loud, too, before he can stop himself. Keith goes a bit pink at the indiscreet remark, which might’ve given Lance some sense of enjoyment if he didn’t feel himself flaunting a very similar shade of embarrassment at present. Hurrying to recover, he stammers out, “So, that’s — _cool_. Cool, cool. Um… yeah, then lemme just —”

His wiry limbs can’t seem to wiggle fast enough as he shimmies out of the comforter, and then half-stumbles, half-sprints over to where he discarded his bag earlier, sagging against Keith’s laundry hamper in the corner. “Wasn’t sure what kind to get, so I sorta winged it,” he explains, unprompted, hoping to just ramble his way through the bubbling anxiety while Keith is none the wiser. He swallows, words wringing his throat bone-dry. “They don’t exactly cover the whole spectrum of, uh… _brands_ in sex ed, if y’know what I mean.”

In his haste, he discovers that his fingers are even clumsier than his subconscious because it takes a few excruciating seconds of fruitless grappling before he manages to fish out a sleek black box from the bottom of his bag. He sends it catapulting over his shoulder, and it makes a soundless landing on the mattress behind him, right where Keith is sitting in the middle of the bed, legs criss-crossed and posture hunched, regarding the back of the box with profound scrutiny as if he were checking the nutritional facts on a can of soup at the supermarket. But his eyes are far too saucer-like, and his whole self is far too bristled, giving off the impression of a spooked woodland animal caught in the headlights.

Which Lance can’t really blame him for — not even in the slightest — considering that he’s entirely certain that’s exactly what he looked like on the day he decided to bite the bullet and just buy the damn things; when he awkwardly lumbered into the local drugstore with his hood lowered suspiciously over his beet-red face, only to proceed having a full-fledged mental breakdown, right there in the family planning aisle, from skittishly scanning over all those intimidating little boxes labeled ‘ultra ribbed’ and ‘climax control lubricant’, like his poor virginal sensibilities are supposed to know how to make heads or tails of all that.

He’s still feeling strangely disoriented by the time he all but crawls back to the bed, plopping himself down next to Keith, ensuring they snuggle close enough for their shoulders to meet, for Lance to rest a hand on Keith’s knee, for Keith to lean into him out of need for something solid and familiar against him. “Are they, ah… Did I get the right ones?” asks Lance.

Keith heaves a helpless shrug, muttering, “I guess?”

“What d’you think _polyisoprene_ is supposed to be, anyway?” Lance squints at the box.

“Sounds,” and Keith makes a face, “fancy.”

“Man, you should’ve seen the glow-in-the-dark ones. Talk about high-brow.”

A laugh, or something intended to be, weakly ghosts past Keith’s lips, and then slithers back into his throat. He’s nervous as hell, he _must_ be — even if, relatively speaking, he appears to be better at containing it than Lance, who can feel the contents of his stomach beginning to froth up like foam.
It’s a war zone of nerves in there, and he’s definitely losing the battle.

“Right,” he says. Or squeaks. “So… this. We’re doing this, huh?”

“We are,” answers Keith, and then licks over his lips until they turn glossy.

Lance can’t stop ogling them. Blatantly.

“So, should we —”

“Uh.”

“—Hm.”

Something jostles loose in Lance’s head — his very last brain cell, probably — scattering around like a pinball. His hand, he distantly realizes, is still right where he left it, settled on Keith’s leg, and so he waits for it to do something other than lay there numb and petrified. He waits for all those deep-seated carnal instincts to kick in, to spur him into action, but — fuck. Why, oh why did he ever think it would be that easy?

“Maybe,” he slurs, thick and slow as molasses, “we should just keep kissing?”

Keith nods in emphatic agreement. “Yeah.”

“And then, like — take our shirts off and stuff.”

“And stuff.”

“Yeah, y’know.” Lance’s lips glide into a dopey, affectionately punch-drunk grin. “Sexy stuff.”

Another breathy chuckle, more genuine than the last, as Keith angles toward him. In the lamp’s dim glow, Lance glimpses a flash of Keith’s eyes — how the light illuminates them with amber and gold even under the heavy line of his brow — before surging forward to eagerly kill the distance between them. He really throws himself into it, bodily, every slick slide of their lips thawing out some of the tension curdling in his gut because this — this part he knows. By rote, by heart, by memory. And, right here, swerving down a trail they’ve never blazed before, he graciously clings to it, to Keith, to the comfort of his kisses, like it’s the only thing keeping him from drowning in his fears and all those self-inflicted expectations.

So, feeling brave under that familiar touch, Lance grips the front of his shirt, unfastening the top button with a sharp tug.

“Wait, I —” Keith recoils quick, eyes intense, labored puffs of breath warming Lance’s spit-shiny lips. “—I wanna do it.”

Lance outwardly gapes for a prolonged beat while his mind scrabbles to translate those words into something he can understand, even though there’s absolutely nothing complicated about — “Sure, um,” he rasps, overwhelmed, hands flopping into his lap, “knock yourself out.”

And Keith does. Gradually. Reverently. Gentle in a way Lance never imagined those athletic hands could be. He gives diligent, undivided attention to each button, one by one, working his way down, until the fabric is peeled off and away, cool air stinging Lance’s gooseflesh skin from the waist up, and —

Okay. So. Keith is definitely staring. Basically devouring him with his gaze, but that’s — okay,
Lance thinks, heart flittering into a deranged frenzy. He’s supposed to be staring. That’s the whole point. Right? It’s good that he’s staring. This is a good kind of stare, isn’t it?

“Freckles,” whispers Keith.

Lance blinks a bit dumbly. “Yeah, uh. Is that just, like… a casual observation or are you going somewhere with —”

“Like, everywhere.” Keith kind of sounds like he’s being squeezed. And the dark pools of his eyes are glazed over with… well. Whatever it is, Lance is utterly unprepared for it, and how it whips up this hot, insistent pressure in the lower part of his —

“Oh. Thanks,” he wheezes, which is not the proper reply to that, like, at all, but whatever. He motions to Keith’s fully-clothed body, fidgeting impatiently. “So are you gonna let me…?”

Like a switch being flipped, Keith snaps back to himself, as if he had momentarily forgotten where he is, what he was doing, and what his own name is, probably. “Yeah. Okay,” he mumbles distractedly.

Then Lance dives right in, brow knitting at his woefully incompetent motor skills as he fumbles and flounders and flubs and — jeez, it’s not rocket science, it’s literally some buttons. He huffs, head bowed to conceal his mounting frustration, trying not to obsess too much about Keith’s hands, and how they had been steadier than his, had done far less shaking, had been better at this. Insecurity beats against his skull like a war drum. Maybe, Lance thinks, if he can just take a minute to get his ever-loving shit together, then he might be able to stop himself from distorting this into some twisted kind of competition. Or stop stressing over all the stupid, insignificant reasons why he doesn’t quite measure up. That’d be excellent, he thinks. Really fucking superb.

But the road to hell, and all that crap, right? And, in this case, Lance’s fiery downfall comes in the form of Keith Kogane, strapping and shirtless and perched before him with all the jaw-dropping beauty of chiseled marble. God, he’s — unreal. Lance nearly suffocates on an airless gasp, the throb of his own heart pounding him into a pulp the longer he looks.

And looks, and looks, and looks.

Lance drinks him in, feeling indulgent, and not the least bit guilty about it. All of those razor-cut edges, and sculpted abs, and toned biceps that’ve been so rigorously handcrafted for lifting, throwing, tackling — not even his most scandalous daydreams have done Keith any justice. And now, hindsight makes him realize how naïve he’d been in thinking they ever could.

Lamplight pours pale ochre over Keith’s skin, softening his silhouette and drawing particular attention to a jagged gash of discoloration on his right shoulder, extending down to his collarbone. Lance’s gaze snags when he sees it. A flaw. A chink in his armor. Something raw and unpretty that stirs Lance into motion, struck with inexplicable desire. And when his fingertips brush along its textured ridges — tender, as if he were handling porcelain — it’s all he can do to keep his bones from rattling, and his breath from hitching because — oh, he is real. He’s firm and concrete and doesn’t dissipate under Lance’s touch like a plume of smoke. Keith, in the flesh, disheveled and hazy-eyed and all his for the taking.

And, damn, does he want to take.

He wants to take time seeking out the rest of Keith’s scars and blemishes, cherishing them, and lavishing them in featherlight kisses until his lips have left not even the smallest bit of him unloved. To map his skin’s coordinates as if they were constellations, and commit them to memory, learn them
like verses of poetry. Because he wants to learn Keith, in all the intimate ways he hasn’t yet. All the
lovely, imperfect things there are to learn about another person — every wound, every secret —
crackling in his veins like static, so deeply embedded in his genetic code that he’ll never get it out for
as long as he lives.

He wants that. He wants more. He wants everything. He wants —

Lips, crashing and aching and urgent. His back hitting the mattress, his head missing the pillow by a
mile, his entire body buried beneath a landslide of muscle and heat. Breath, strangled and scalding
and starved in their lungs. And then hands — Keith’s hands — flat-palmed and roving with abandon,
wandering wherever they damn well please as he mouths at all those smattered freckles he’s still so
hung up on, descending lower and lower to Lance’s navel, burning rich like a shot of whiskey.

“O-Oh — Oh my god, oh my god, why is this so hot,” Lance babbles, voice sounding rusted. He
drapes an arm over his face in an attempt to shield as much of his reddened complexion as possible,
while the other hand clutches at the rumpled comforter, nails digging in like talons. “Seriously, your
tongue should not be this hot…”

“I can stop,” Keith says in that husky timbre of his, sinfully nestled in the spread of Lance’s thighs.
Removing his arm and clambering onto his elbows, Lance peers down, delirious, right into a pair of
smoldering eyes that threaten to slay him on the spot with their shadowy luster.

“Don’t,” he growls desperately, “you fucking dare.”

Right on cue, Keith’s lips return with a vengeance, luring all sorts of incoherent noises from the pit of
Lance’s chest: mewls and gasps and tiny, imploring little mm’s of belly-boiling pleasure. It kindles
within him like a rising flame, incandescent. It’s exhilarating, verging on hazardous, especially when
Keith steers his efforts toward sucking a delicious bruise into the jutting v of Lance’s hips, right
where it’s so plain to see the full extent of his growing — excitement. But Keith refuses to let up,
currently absorbed in his tantalizing ministrations, and seemingly oblivious to all his latent boner-
inducing powers. His hands are everywhere, feathering smooth and heavy over the taut planes of
Lance’s stomach and — holy hell, if this is how it feels when Keith touches him, then how in the
world is Lance ever going to keep his cool when Keith actually, like… touches him —

“Lance,” he hears Keith whisper. “You’re shaking.”

Lance reels from the sudden loss of contact, feeling chilled to the bone where Keith’s ravenous
mouth just was. “Heh. Yeah. Maybe,” he mutters absently.

“You are.”

Heat sweeps up Lance’s neck, and colors everything in its path.

“Okay, then I am!” he barks, defensive. “Sue me!”

Before Lance can shrivel up in the molten-hot fever of his own embarrassment, Keith is crawling up
the bed to join him, ungenerous with the amount of space he allows between them. Taking Lance by
the waist, he leads him onto his side until they’re facing one another, until there isn’t anywhere left to
hide. His lashes are distractingly long, Lance decides on a whim. He feel the overwhelming urge to
simultaneously kiss him silly and disappear under the covers.

Then Keith is saying, like a balm to Lance’s restlessness, “Tell me why you’re scared.”

A knee-jerk swell of rebuttal dies a swift death inside Lance’s throat before it can ever see the light of
day. Denial is useless when he knows for a fact that his heart is already bleeding all over his sleeve.
So he murmurs, “I love you,” splintered with emotion, “and I wanna be good at this. For you.”

Keith studies him solemnly, the way his blue eyes dance with uncertainty.

“And I dunno if you’ve seen yourself lately, but I’m ninety-nine-percent sure you could, like, grate cheese on those abs,” Lance ramps up, like the floodgates of his mind are splitting open wide, and all he can hope to do is run himself dry. “You’re amazing, and basically everything I’ve ever wanted, and I’m just —”

“Amazing,” Keith cuts him off, his voice so sure and full that it pierces the stagnant air around them. “And everything I’ve ever wanted.”

Just like that, warmth settles and spreads, rich as honey, flushing out the last remaining dregs of self-doubt from Lance’s system in one cascading undertow. He breathes it in, lets it drag out, lets it fill him to capacity until he feels too big for his own skin.

Keith reaches out, fingers sifting through the wispy tufts of half-curls framing Lance’s forehead like he’s just discovered something precious. “Listen. We don’t have to do anything,” he says, just as earnest and unwavering as his gilded gaze. “You know that, right? Whatever we decide to do tonight, it’s fine with me. I need you to know that, okay?”

A tingly thrill goes zipping up Lance’s spine with such lightning-speed that it gives him a head rush. He tries not to swoon. He really does. He tries not to melt into a gross, sappy puddle and make an absolute fool of himself — as if it’d be the first or the last time of the evening — but the way Keith is looking at him, with that pretty little half-smile sitting crooked on his face, is seriously putting him at a disadvantage here. It’s downright inexcusable. Unjust, even. And that’s why Lance simply cannot be held responsible for his actions when he flings himself at Keith, and smashes their lips together so suddenly that it knocks the wind out of them both. Keith’s reciprocating touch is silvery and perfect against Lance’s sweltering skin, exploring the far reaches of his back, and all the well-defined muscles that ripple beneath.

“But, um —” Lance pipes up, gasping in between flurrying kisses, “— y’know, just for argument’s sake —” Kiss, kiss, kiss. “— those condoms were actually way more —” Kiss, kiss. “— expensive than I thought they’d be. And it’d be really… mmph… financially irresponsible of me if I didn’t try to get the most bang for my buck.” He withdraws, looking more delighted than he’s ever been in his entire life. “Pun so intended.”

Groaning, Keith presses his deadpan expression into his boyfriend’s shoulder.

Then Lance, emboldened by the reaction, adds, “Also, you being all considerate and respectful of my boundaries is, like, honestly? Really getting me in the mood right now.”

“Oh, yeah?” Keith glances up, a smirk already curled and waiting on his lips.

“Mhm,” Lance hums, and then covers that smirk with his own, tasting salt and heat on the tip of his tongue. In that moment, all that seems important is getting as close to Keith as humanly possible, despite all the scintillating skin-on-skin action they’ve already got going on right now. But it’s not enough. He’s greedy for more. So maybe if he just —

With all the elegance of a newborn deer with toothpick legs, Lance rolls over to straddle Keith’s hips. He only ends up wobbling a little bit, and then Keith is grabbing his thighs to keep him balanced. Lance can’t resist looking down, completely enamored by the gorgeous sight he makes, splayed beneath him with those infinite eyes, almost all pupil; hair wild and liquid black against the sheets. Lips plush, and begging to be bitten.
“Just so we’re on the same page here,” Lance says with a rough gulp, “I have no idea what I’m doing right now.”

“You’re half-naked and on top of me, so you’re already doing way more than you think you are,” Keith points out.

It’s the specific phrasing of that comment that strikes Lance a certain way, sprouting curiosity, and prompting him to wonder, “So, is that — I mean… How d’you wanna —” He makes an absurd and vaguely obscene hand gesture when words continue to fail him.

“Don’t care,” says Keith, followed by, “I just wanna be able to look at you,” which is shamelessly honest in the sexiest way, if also a little uncalled for, because now Lance is dealing with a gratuitous outpouring of mental images, all of them starring his blissed-out boyfriend, worked up and writhing, eyes lidded and dusky.

“God, you can’t just — say things like that,” whines Lance, enduring a flustered tickle in his cheeks as they flood with color. “At least not while my pants are still on.”

Keith’s palms slowly roam up those lithe legs, like he owns them. “You could always take them off.”

Gaze narrowing, and perhaps stalling for time, Lance challenges, “You first.”

“You brought it up,” Keith takes the bait at once, which is just so predictable of him that it entices a fond dimple to the corner of Lance’s mouth.

“Count of three?”

“Lance, it’s — we’re not launching a spaceship, okay, just —”

“One-two-three-go.”

And this is another thing Lance wants: the lilting cadence of their laughter, ringing in bell-like harmony as they race to undress. The raw, brazen desire that burns behind Keith’s eyes like pure star-shine when he looks at him — seeing him, and only him — always pulling him apart faster than Lance can put himself back together. The clash of their heated breath as Keith lowers him to the mattress. The hook of their ankles. The sheen of sweat misting Keith’s temples, and the musky-sweet smell of it. The mismatched thrum of their pulses, echoing for and against each other.

He’s dizzy with it, this want. It rips open a fresh ache in his stomach, and grows there with the breadth of an entire sunrise, brilliant and bright and consuming.

“Your heart’s going like crazy,” says Lance, awed.

“Yours, too.” Keith’s expression softens in the dawn-colored light, his voice even softer. “You okay?”

Lance nods, feels every molecule vibrate with the vigor of it. “I’m great. Really great,” and then, after a fragile pause, he confesses, “But I think… I’m just a little —”

“I know,” Keith assures him, and the staccato rhythm of his palpitating chest is proof of that. Cradled somewhere in the wrinkled sheets, he finds Lance’s hand, and covers it with his own, palms flush. “But it’s just me,” he promises, seals it with a kiss to the center of his brow. “Just us.”

And Lance, slowly lacing their fingers, repeats, “Just us.”
Lance wakes up in a snarl of bedsheets, crumpled and gathered around his waist, with a divine ache in his muscles and about half of himself spilled over Keith’s very naked torso, and he thinks, blearily—
god-fucking-damn.

Daylight timidly peeks through the blinds, painting over Keith’s face in warm, narrow slants. He looks so beautiful here. So gentle and at peace and angelic to a criminal degree, doused in morning’s hazy glow. Lance smooths a palm over the broad landscape of Keith’s chest, just to feel him, and that metered kick vibrating against his hand, all the way down to his gut where adoration flutters like wind chimes in the breeze. He shivers to his core, feeling so ticklish and giddy that it sends his brain into a lovesick tizzy. It’s all atwitter with the kind of mushy stuff he likes to read about in poems. Like the sweetest melody, singing right off the well-worn pages: *adoring the sound of someone’s heartbeat, the softness of someone’s breath.*

A giggle simmers behind his upturned lips. An honest-to-god giggle.

Last night, Lance dreamt of blaring stadium lights, a roaring crowd, and a cloying September heat—which isn’t too uncommon, for him. Sometimes he can feel the memories of that fateful night still clinging to his skin, hot and sticky and permanently ingrained. He remembers the jolt of it; how quickly his heart had skyrocketed right out of his chest, exploding in booms and flashes. How swiftly the ground had opened up beneath his feet, ruptured by the mighty quake of Lance’s entire world shattering. And how suddenly Lance had fallen, head-over-heels, for that boy on the football team.

The very same boy who is here, right now, snug in the cage of his arms. The same boy he fell for, all over again, over grilled cheese sandwiches, and kisses in the snow, and dances in the middle of empty diner parking lots.

And, god-fucking-damn, how lucky must that make him?

Outrageously lucky, Lance thinks, Lance knows, because he got to fall in love with Keith twice. And now he gets to keep falling in love — slowly and instantly, softly and loudly, forwards and backwards, day after day — for as long as Keith will have him.

Which is maybe, possibly, hopefully forever? Lance wants forever. He wants an absolutely earthshattering forever with Keith.

He also really wants to kiss him right now, if he’s being honest. Preferably without disturbing his restful slumber. Lance tilts in, tapping his lips so lightly against Keith’s loose and pliant ones, and waits for signs of — nothing. So he goes in for another, just as delicate, and then feels a hand tuck behind his neck when he tries to pull away.

“Come back here,” Keith mumbles, voice gravelled, eyes still shut as he drags Lance on top of him.

The tempo they set is lazy and unhurried, like the easy ebb and flow of an ocean tide, but the way Keith eventually starts licking into his mouth has Lance staggering through syrupy-warm thoughts of all the other incredible, unmentionable things Keith has done with that tongue. Happiness sparkles bright in his chest, like tiny stars waiting to erupt between his ribs. Then, with an almost lewd-
sounding pop, Lance separates, and Keith tries to chase after his mouth for more — except by the
time his eyes flutter open, Lance is already working a trail of wet, chaste kisses over Keith’s jawline,
down his throat, along the faded scar on his shoulder.

“You’re only teasing me so I’ll keep you in bed all day, and you won’t have to go face your
parents,” Keith accuses with a sated grin.

“Or maybe I just have a deep appreciation for your super sexy shoulders,” says Lance, and it’s half-
smothered by the caress of his effusive lips. “Ever think of that?”

A quiet groan punches out of Keith’s lungs, equal parts exasperated and turned on. “We should
shower,” he suggests after a pause.

“Hmph.”

“Together,” he amends.

“Oh, now who’s the tease, huh?”

Lance preens, a bit pleased with himself as well as the breathless chuckle he feels rumbling behind
Keith’s ribcage. But no sooner does he allow his tongue a cheeky little flick against his boyfriend’s
salty-sweet skin than Keith bundles him up in his arms, and pushes him over into the sun-drenched
sheets. Peals of vibrant laughter tumble out of him in a heady rush as Keith nuzzles his face into the
crook of his neck, smacking his lips against his galloping pulse. And Lance — he falls in love, more
and more and more, with each silken kiss.

Again.

I love you.

And again.

I love you, I love you, I love you.

They get a little — sidetracked in the shower.

Lance, of course, will blame it on the ten-minute spiel about the importance of exfoliation he spews
out upon finding nothing in Keith’s shower but a generic bar of soap and some two-in-one shampoo.
Keith, on the other hand, will blame it on having to kiss Lance senseless against the slippery tile, just
to counteract muffled lectures praising micro-beads and sugar scrubs until his boyfriend inevitably
sags against him and accepts defeat.

But when it comes down to it, there’s enough blame to share.

Keith’s hair is still dripping down the length of his spine by the time he grabs a shirt from his dresser,
and then pivots around to find Lance — just standing there, long and lean, with his broad shoulders
narrowing down to a whipcord waist — wearing nothing but a disarming smile, some boxer-briefs,
and the letterman jacket he must’ve snatched out of Keith’s laundry hamper all of three seconds ago.

Unfortunately, Keith doesn’t even have the wherewithal to notice how he rocks off-kilter until he’s already bumping right into the edge of the dresser, rattling its drawers a bit. He promptly straightens. Refocuses. Clears his throat, even though it still feels like his heart is lodged up in there somewhere.

“Um, what’re you —”

“Shh,” Lance quickly interrupts. “Just gimme a minute to bask in the glory of all my wildest dreams coming true…”

With that, he plants a very purposeful hand on his hip, the other resting behind his skull, all playful charm and boyish bravado — a ridiculous pose if Keith has ever seen one. Which, again? So unfortunate. Because it also happens to be a good look on him. 

Like — a very good look.

“Are you trying to seduce me?” asks Keith, sounding short of breath.

It earns him another grin, returning in full force. “You say that like it’s not working.”

In one breakneck pounce, Keith gets his hands in Lance’s shower-damp hair, and his tongue inside his mouth. Entwined, they collapse onto the bed again — still wrinkled and warm from earlier — easing back into each other so effortlessly. The first perfectly-aligned roll of their hips has Lance feverishly shrugging out of the letterman jacket. It slips about halfway down his shoulders before Keith grabs his wrists, pinning them gently to the mattress.

“Leave it on,” he pants hoarsely against Lance’s lips, and then feels a responding hum of amusement ripple through him, sweet and light.

And so they get a little sidetracked. Again.

The entire morning gingerly drifts by them, as does the rest of the world, until the incessant dinging of Lance’s phone reminds him that he never made it home last night, and now has an onslaught of missed calls and worried voicemails from his mother just waiting to berate him into oblivion. The two of them are finally scampering down the stairs at the same time they hear someone entering from the garage.

“Hey, boys,” Keith’s father calls out, setting two cardboard boxes onto the kitchen table. “Picked up some doughnuts, if you’re hungry.”

“Thanks, Mr. Kogane,” Lance chirps as he barrels into the kitchen, pausing just long enough to snatch a doughnut hole from one of the containers. He shoves the whole thing in, and then continues hurrying along with a full-mouthed garble of, “Bye, Mr. Kogane!”

Keith is already waiting by the front door when Lance goes to wrench it open. “Forgetting something?” he asks.

Lance abruptly turns, cheeks bulging with half-chewed dough, watching as Keith taps an expectant finger to the center of his fondly slanted lips.

And so Lance takes the hint, sways forward, and kisses him there once, twice, three times. He tastes like sugar and cinnamon, Keith thinks muzzily, and smells like eucalyptus shampoo.

“I love you,” he whispers softly, like a secret.
“Love you, too,” Lance whispers back. “Call you later, ‘kay? Assuming I won’t be completely exiled from society after talking to my parents.”

Keith breathes a sympathetic sigh. “Good luck.”

“You, too,” is what Lance leaves him with, but not before allowing an exaggerated gaze to bounce knowingly towards the kitchen, and then back again.

The sound of the door shutting behind him twists something into Keith’s gut — something ugly that’s been gnawing away at him for longer than he’d care to admit. When he heads back into the kitchen, the sight of his father seated at the table, still in his uniform, makes him pause in the doorway, clearing his throat. The man lifts his head, eyes tired and heavy in a way that Keith doesn’t recognize. In a way that startles him. Has it really been that long since they’ve looked each other in the eye?

“I, uh,” Keith begins awkwardly, “forgot to text you last night. About Lance —”

“It’s alright. Like you said before, you’re not a little kid anymore. So it’s about time I stopped treating you like one.”

The ugly thing in Keith’s stomach gives a sickening lurch.

“Why don’t you have a seat,” his father says, nodding toward the empty chair beside him.

Warily, Keith sits, feeling like he should probably be saying something — and fast — to assuage all the guilt ripening on his tongue, but that’s never been his strong suit. Finding the right words. Laying them out before they wither up into brittle nothingness on his lips. Up close, he can see all the lines of his father’s face, the grey peppering his hairline, his mouth thinning into a hard seam. The man looks almost as conflicted as Keith does.

And then, very carefully, he says, “We never really talked about your mother after she left.”

“Dad.”

“And that’s because —” His father clenches the fist he has resting in his lap. Unclenches it. Nervous habit. Keith knows it well. “—because it broke my heart a little bit. And I know it broke yours, too.”

Keith glances down and away, denying nothing.

“From then on… you know, it was just the two of us. Just you and me, kiddo. And I swore to myself that I wouldn’t let anything ever hurt you like that again,” his dad swallows so thick that Keith can hear it working in his throat. He rasps, impossibly low, “But I did. I let you down, Keith, and I’ll be sorry about it for the rest of my life.”

The weight of it smashes a hole squarely through Keith’s chest, breaking open like glass. He slams his eyes shut as they blaze something fierce behind his lids.

“I probably don’t say this as often as I should, but,” his father says firmly, gaze alert and zeroed in, “I’m really proud of you, Keith. I’m proud of everything about you. I’m proud to call you my son. Makes me feel like… well, like I actually got something right for a change.” A pause. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, kiddo, and the thought of losing you, too, it — it damn near kills me.”

“You’re not gonna lose me,” Keith tells him at once, willing his voice not to give out.
“I know, I know,” the man mutters as he pushes a hand through his finely-trimmed hair, recovering with what appears to be a very rickety grin. “No matter where you end up, you’ll be coming back for holidays and summer break, but… god, I sure am gonna miss having you around all the time, kid.”

Only a single, traitorous tear makes it past Keith’s waterline, and forces him to swipe it away with the back of his wrist, desperate not to cry, desperate not to feel the same ache he felt when his family got ripped in half. He doesn’t want to keep tugging on the frayed edges of that wound. Through the blurriness of his vision, Keith sees his father rising from his chair, resolute despite there being tears in his eyes, too, red-rimmed and misty.

“C’mere,” is all the man says, soft and broken, but that’s all he needs to say before Keith is also springing out of his chair, so quick that it almost topples over, and crashing into his father’s rock-solid chest.

He heaves a massive breath — one that his lungs have been craving for so long, maybe years — as he clings to his father like a lifeline, remembering a time when the top of his head barely reached the man’s belt buckle. He’d scurry to the door, tiny feet bounding clumsily down the stairs, and his father would be there waiting to scoop him up in those bulky arms, smelling burnt and earthy like a campfire. Always protecting, always doing his best.

Keith trembles with the memory, and with remorse. When had he decided that his best wasn’t good enough anymore?

“Look at us,” his father comments, chuffing a wet, self-deprecating sigh into his son’s crown. “Couple ‘a babies.”

Pulling himself together with a long, hard sniff, Keith steps away. Neither of them seem too keen on eye contact at the moment because they both know they’re bound to find a rampage of emotion mirroring back at them, which will undoubtedly jumpstart their sniveling all over again. And god forbid they further tarnish the sanctity of their manly constitutions.

“Alright. Well.” His father scuffs at the floor, hands stuffed deep into his pockets. “I don’t want to keep you from your weekend or anything.”

Keith hurries to the doorway, and then hesitates. “Hey, um,” he mutters, spinning around, “Maybe we could catch a movie tonight.”

His father’s smile is a small, hopeful thing. “I’d really like that.”

And that’s when Keith realizes, with another insatiable lungful of long-awaited breath, that he’d really like that, too.

“Mr. S?”

Keith stands in the very familiar doorway of that very familiar classroom, gently rapping his knuckles against the jamb. It’s silly to think he still needs permission to enter after all this time, but he waits for
Shiro to look up from the clutter of papers on his desk, anyway.

“Oh, hey, Keith,” he says pleasantly, removing his reading glasses, setting them aside along with his red grading pen, “Come on in.”

Keith walks the well-traveled path over to the seat across from his teacher, and everything about it — right down to the smell of coffee and freshly printed paper, all the meaningful little trinkets and framed photos that line the front of the desk — feels like a homecoming of sorts. And then there’s Shiro himself, who never fails to let Keith in, even on his worst days when conversation doesn’t amount to much more than noncommittal grunts on Keith’s end, and kind, patient smiles on Shiro’s. Sometimes Keith honestly wonders how this saint of a man has managed to put up with him for the past four years.

As Keith sinks into his chair, bag sliding off his shoulder, Shiro’s gaze bores into him in a courteously probing fashion. “How’re you doing?” he asks.

“Fine.”

“How’s Lance?”

“Grounded.”

“Well, I think we all saw that one coming.”

Keith’s brow creases, disrupting his entire expression, warping it into something sour. “He thinks he’s gonna lose his scholarship when Garrison finds out about what happened,” he admits gravely. “And I want — I need to do something, Mr. S, but I don’t know how to fix it.”

“You don’t have to do anything,” is all Shiro tells him, so calmly, and with such surety that Keith can do nothing but blink several times at him, hard. So, eventually, he clarifies, “I already had a talk with Iverson.”

But comprehension is still lost on Keith, who simply blinks some more, even harder, and mutters, “What?”

“I couldn’t get him to lift the suspension, unfortunately,” Shiro explains, “but it won’t go on his permanent record.” Then, a reassuring grin. “Lance isn’t a bad kid — even Iverson knows that.”

It wells up in Keith’s chest, subtle as a torrential downpour, all the immeasurable gratitude that’s been stockpiling ever since he was a sulking, seething freshman, still trying to claw his way through the rubble of his parents’ failed marriage. Although he’d been far less prone to expressing it back then, too busy being mad at the world to feel anything that wasn’t white-hot and venomous, it never prevented him from returning, time and time again, to seek solace from the one person he felt was really listening.

“Thank you,” leaves him in a breathless gust when the strength of it finally overcomes him.

Shiro nods, understanding. Because he always understands.

“I also happened to bring it to Iverson’s attention that James Griffin turned in his final term paper the other day without properly citing his sources,” he starts telling Keith, keeping his tone painstakingly neutral despite the abrupt mood change in the room. “Which, according to school policy, is technically considered plagiarism, and therefore grounds for automatic course failure.”

Keith’s brow twitches with sudden interest.
Then, while mashing his lips into a rigid line to conceal any trace of sublime satisfaction, the man reaches for his pen, primly, and concludes, “So instead of spending vacation time on his parents’ yacht, sounds like someone will be stuck roughing it in summer school.”

The two of them share a look, full of knowing.

And then Keith starts laughing so hard he almost falls out of his chair.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again for being so patient with me as I cranked out this beast of a chapter lol. I can’t believe there’s only one more left!!! I’m not gonna get all sappy and emotional on you guys yet, but just know that..... feelings are being felt.

IF YOU DO ANYTHING, PLEASE LET IT BE SUPPORTING THESE CRAZY TALENTED ARTISTS WHO HAVE SO GENEROUSLY TAKEN THEIR TIME TO CREATE ART INSPIRED BY THIS FIC!

@ceciledraws has done it again with a stunning scene of our boys getting together, right over HERE!
@cosmic-canvas drew the boys at the beach from the last chapter and it's CHEF KISS, right over HERE!
@riena-94 made a comic out of the "apology grilled cheese" scene and it's THE CUTEST THING, right over HERE!
@the_arthipelago on twitter did a precious little doodle of our boys, right over HERE!
@kiilea fucking took my breath away with a gorgeous sketch of our boys getting all cozy, right over HERE!
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