Strange Moon Rising

by wolfykeith

Summary

"The Louisiana heat can leave a man gaspin' for breath. It can curl up in your guts and sleep, rattle tail flicking between your rib cage.

Keith knows this feeling all too well."

After a terrible divorce leaves the family broken into pieces, Lance chooses to head down south with his mom, where a job waits with good enough pay to keep them afloat. The second he steps out of the car, he feels a shift in the air. A strangeness to the town that walks a step behind him, following him as he meets a boy with desperation and fire in his blood. As they try to solve a string of murders, things change: Lance has haunted dreams, the river water turns red and somewhere along the way, he thinks he might be falling in love. |

Notes

Strange Moon Rising playlist: Here

See the end of the work for more notes
Strange Moon Rising

They say: *there's somethin' in that old church.*

It curls between the pews and you can feel it sprout in your lungs. There's somethin' in that old church and it watches you on Sunday mornings, huffing against moldy strewn verses.

*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death-*

You better fear all evil.
Chapter 2

The Louisiana heat can leave a man gaspin' for breath. It can curl up in your guts and sleep, rattle tail flicking between your rib cage.

Keith knows this feeling all too well.

It visits him now as he rolls over in his bed, the trailer smelling of recently fried eggs, the heat from an open window making sweat blossom on his pale skin. Summer came and went fast but that heat will stick until it makes Keith wish not for the first time that the south had some kind of drastic, permanent seasonal shift.

With a groan, he pushes his thick hair away from his forehead and rises, body aching all over. A swath of bruises trail from his shoulders to his navel, down the length of his legs- a testament to his night. He lifts his shirt and looks in the small mirror beside his bed, hissing at the raw skin that pulses beneath his fingertips.

"Yo, Keith-"

The shirt lowers with record speed and he turns to the sound of Shiro's voice, the sleepy haze in his mind clearing. His best friend raises a brow as he slides the door open, pale wood creaking.

"'Sup?" Keith feigns normalcy, "Cookin' something?"

Shiro nods, "Uh, yeah. Eggs and toast, the usual."

"Cool, I'll be out in a minute."

Looking at him for only a moment longer, Shiro finally turns away. Keith slams the door shut again and rushes to shove on some pants, pulling his dark hair back with a simple rubber band until it's partially off of his shoulders. He inches around his bed and laces up his boots, ignoring the stain of mud and muck around the sole.

When he finally leaves his room, the rest of the trailer is bright. Their yellowed curtains flutter from the window pushed open behind the couch, the potted plants that Shiro works so hard to keep alive sitting near the stove, a huddle of deep green.

"Here." Shiro nods toward the plate on their small table, "Bab came by with some jam before you got up."

"I didn't sleep that long." Keith mutters but sits quickly, practically scarfing the food down in one gulp.

Shiro smirks, "You got home after midnight."

Keith shrugs, "Worked late."
"Uh huh."

Rolling his eyes, Keith reaches for Shiro's lukewarm coffee and chugs almost half of it before he can complain.

It's a simple routine, these easy mornings.

It's something that Keith doesn't think much about until it's gone.

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**ONE YEAR LATER**

"I can't believe it, Hunk. I just can't believe-"

"I get it. I know. You can't believe it, it should be illegal, there's no way it's happening."

Lance sighs and sinks lower in his seat, the night passing around him in momentary bursts of orange from tall streetlamps. Different from the city, from the constant sound and light of Los Angeles, this new darkness has him on edge.

"I just." He sighs and tries to lower his voice, the tense set of his mom's jaw making him conscious of their trek and her tired eyes, "I'm gonna miss you, man."

Hunk sighs on the other line, "Me too, bud."

It's quiet then, the cool blast of air from the vents slowly lulling him to sleep. He'd been complaining over the phone for the last hour, having given up on texting altogether. Open red rock and inner cities gave way to fields of dead grass, fenced rundown houses and ghostly horses. Until, finally, the swamp began to take shape. Lance can smell it in the air, the tinge of something rotten. He scrunches his nose and turns the cool vent away from his face, slightly grateful that it's so dark outside of his window. Occasionally, beneath the light of a lone streetlamp, he can catch the ominous shape of shadowed trees.

Thick forests stretch around them for miles. Not the spacious red woods or the winding hills; it's too dense for that.

Too thick.

"Well." He sighs and finally has mercy on his best friend, "I guess I'll let you sleep. It's later here-"

"Are you sure?" Hunk asks, but Lance can hear the ruffle of sheets.

Hunk has never liked to stay up too late, especially not when he's needed so early in the morning.

The hardships of being a genius, Lance supposes.

"Yeah, man. I'm good. You have that presentation tomorrow, don't worry about it!" Lance feigns a
playful laugh, "You might even see Shay-"

"Yeah, yeah, okay." Hunk interrupts with a loud snort, "I'll call you tomorrow."

"You better!"

After they hang up and Lance has stared at the ended call long enough for his eyes to water, he shuts it off altogether. Wheels roll over rock and pavement and Lance leans his head against the cool window, finally shutting his eyes.

His mom rests a hand on his leg and squeezes once, the only comfort she can give without kissing him on the forehead.

He doesn't blame her for her silence.

He doesn't blame her for anything.

"I know, my love." She whispers, "I know."

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Waking to a room that has never been your own can leave you disoriented.

Lance blinks rapidly against the morning light, particles of dust floating languidly beside his window. He turns his head to watch, dazed from such a long drive and late night. Taking a deep breath, there is the smell of a worn house. One that has seen many families before his, has weathered countless storms and devilish heatwaves.

The walls of his room are bare and boring, the off-white making his brows crease.

It takes a while but eventually it all comes back to him. The fight between his mom and dad several months ago, the splitting of the house, his choosing to follow his mom so far away from home so that she can take a good paying job and not be alone.

So she can hide away from her old life.

Their old life.

Lance stands and opens his window, taking a deep breath of the thick southern heat. It'd only been four years after the storm that took out almost all of the coasts and he remembers seeing the flashing news after he'd come in from a game of basketball. The hurricane had been monstrous. They'd shown coverage of destruction; the horrors of the Mississippi coast and the flood waters of New Orleans, the entire place looking more like a post-apocalyptic film than somewhere real.

Looking out now, it's strange to think that all of this had probably been underwater.

He spots the flying of crows against gray clouds and at the thought of rain, he jumps into action. He shoves on shorts and a sleeveless shirt, baseball cap pushing down his brown hair and shading his eyes.
"Off so soon?" His mom calls from her spot in the living room, dark hands trying to hang a painting his sister had completed just before they left.

"Looks like rain soon!" He calls before shoving on his shoes.

She laughs, "Be careful! Don't get lost!"

"Lost? Here?" He scoffs, "No worries!"

And then he's out of the door, swallowed up by the heat. Without the cover of his house, it's almost too brutal. Whereas the Californian heat had been hot, it was still dry, meaning he could breathe.

Here?

It's as if the humidity was drowning him.

He brings an arm to swipe at his forehead and heads toward the car, glad to see that his mom left the keys on the seat. It's a short drive to town, if the layout of the land had been correct on his phone the night before. He takes to the windy roads, all flat and rather dull, ignoring the scary dirt paths that seemingly lead to nowhere.

It's strange, the way the town settles like something haunted. The closer he gets to civilization the more houses there are. Though it doesn't bring any crowds, no bright lights or smiling faces. Old people sit on their porches, rocking with glasses of water and sweet tea. Children kick lone balls in yards, play with scraggly dogs, leave a corner store; hands already sticky with melting ice cream.

Some houses look decrepit and forgotten, as if the storm had stolen them and refused to give them back. Lance glances at one now, at the flutter of old curtains and torn, aged police tape. He passes a gas station with only one truck filling up their tank, a restaurant named Ole Joe's, a road leading to the elementary school and junior high.

All around his blue car, oak and pine trees sit trunk to trunk, creating a dark and foreboding wall.

Lance sighs and turns the radio down, some scratchy excuse for a station a faint distraction, before finally pulling up to what he assumes is the center of town. For anyone here he supposes it's big enough but compared to everywhere else, it's embarrassingly small. Wincing, he climbs out of the car and locks it, eager to take a look around before the rain moves in. Distantly, behind the screaming cicadas and wind, there is the rumble of deep thunder. He can smell it in the air and it puts a pep in his step, no matter the depressing storefronts.

He looks for Help Wanted signs, for anyone eager to have a helping hand. Ignoring a mean looking man, white skin wrinkled as he watches Lance cross the street, he instead eyes a faded green ice cream cone hanging from a roof. The open sign flickers and a small bell rings when he steps inside, a cool waft of stale air hitting his nose. But he welcomes the change in temperature. The sweat on his skin cools, his shoulders relax, the cap on his head comes off with all the politeness his mom raised him with.

"Hello?" He calls out, eyeing the strawberry ice cream.

There's shuffling in the back and a drawl of a curse, boxes shifting and a door slamming. And then the man is racing to the counter, orange hair surprisingly vibrant in such a dull place.
"Hello, lad!" He practically shouts, "What can I get you today?"

He stares at Lance with hopeful eyes, brows raised high on his forehead.

Lance glances back down and points to the strawberry, "Uh, this one please."

The man hums and scoops two whopping balls of ice cream onto a cone, "I've never seen you around! New in town? Visiting?"

"New." Lance nods and watches as the man wraps the cone in napkins before holding it out to him, "My mom got a job at the hospital, seems she heard you guys needed the help all the way from Cali."

"California, eh?" The man beams, "Visited there once myself. Great place, blue water! Beats our ole' Mississippi river sludge, eh?"

Lance nods again and slides a few bills across the counter, muttering to keep the change.

"I was wondering," Lance says between a mouth full of ice cream, "you wouldn't happen to need any help around here would you?"

"Not really, no."

Disappointment washes over Lance like a tidal wave. He'd looked at almost every shop until this one and found all of them lacking, at least in the sense that he'd feel completely welcomed. The man stares at him for a moment, fingers twiddling with his mustache, before letting out a little sigh.

"I'm sure I could think of somethin' for you to do though, don't ya' think?" He looks behind him to the room in which he'd previously departed, "Lot's of organizing needing doing ever since my niece went off to college."

"I'll do it." Lance nods eagerly, "Anything, really."

The man lets out a loud laugh and slides the ice cream glass shut, "Good to hear, then! What's your name?"

"Lance. Lance Pérez. I can start anytime you need me to."

The man holds his hand out over the ice cream counter and grips Lance's fingers tight, "Call me Coran."

Lance smiles, a wide beaming thing, and feels a small bit of anxiety ease from his stomach. While his mom makes more than enough for them to live comfortably, Lance has never been one to sit idly by.

He likes to help.

"Wanna start today, then?" Coran asks and reaches beneath the counter for a box, "Need you to deliver somethin' for me."

Lance finishes the last bit of his ice cream and wipes his hands on his pants, "Sure, of course."
"Take this to the station, down the block to the left. Ask for Officer Thace, if you would."

"What is it?" Lance raises a brow at the box and shifts, noticing how heavy it is.

Coran's mouth thins but he still lets out a small smile, "Returning some personal belonging's of his. Meant to do it for a while but.."

Recognizing a need for privacy when he sees it, Lance is quick to nod and step toward the door, "Officer Thace, got it."

He walks quickly, eager to get in the police station and out, never one to enjoy being around them much. It's always been awkward, tense and sometimes scary, three things that Lance tries to avoid at all costs.

Though when he enters the station, it's surprisingly busy.

Several cops sit around desks, computers humming against the clacking of keys. A phone rings and paper prints, a sobbing woman blows her nose into a wad of handkerchiefs.

"Can I help you, son?"

Lance tenses at the term but plasters a smile on his face all the same, placing the box on the counter. The man behind the counter stands and straightens his belt, handcuffs flashing.

"I uh-" Lance tears his eyes away, "Coran. From the ice cream shop. He told me to deliver this. This box. Right here."

The man looks at it, "To who-"

"Thace. I think. Officer Thace-"

A boom rings from further inside the station and a door slams, turning most eyes toward the commotion. Several cops sigh at the boy that points a finger in the face of a tall man, his fingerless gloves looking aged and dirty.

Lance straightens, nerves making him fiddle with the keys in his pocket.

"-you son of a bitch! Y'all haven't done shit!"

"I need you to calm-"

"Don't tell me to calm down, it's been twelve months-"

"I told you-"

"No leads! Nothing! How 'bout you do your fucking job before I have to do it for you!"

The explosion from the boy's lips sends the entire department into silence. He swipes a stack of papers from a rack and stomps between the desks, pale skin flushed with fury. Dark hair sits heavy on his shoulders and he pushes it back with a shaking hand.

Lance tries not to stare, to just let the guy pass, but the boy's dark eyes are finding Lance's before
either of them can stop it. The boy hesitates, if only by the clenching of his hand, before
shouldering past Lance in a flurry.

The door to the station slams shut, a burst of warm air hitting Lance's back.

And then the station is coming back to life, voices murmuring in the quiet.

The tall officer that the boy had been screaming at makes his way to the front counter, jaw
clenched.

He glances at Lance and picks up a cup of coffee, "Who's this?"

"I'm, uh, Lance? Coran sent me with this for an Officer Thace?"

"S'me." The officer finally looks to the box and nods, "I'll take it."

Before he can stop himself, Lance is leaning closer, "What was that about?"

Curse his curiosity.

Officer Thace looks away from the box and studies Lance's face, sharp intelligence making his
eyes shine, "You new to town?"

Lance sighs, a huffing noise at the thought of being asked that damn question every where he goes,
"Yeah. Moving in today."

Officer Thace nods, "Good to hear. Don't worry him, the boy's just goin' through some things."

"Things?"

"Just," Officer Thace picks up the box and nods toward the door as if to say get outta here, "be
careful. Mind your own and you won't need to worry about boys like that."

With that, he's gone, taking the box with him.

Lance stares after him, mind running one thousand miles a second. He wants to know, nosy thing
he is, and he wants to know now.

Instead, he turns on his heel and leaves. Eyes sweeping the street, part of him wishes he could see
the boy again. He wants to pull at his arm and ask what all that shit was about, to understand what's
so wrong with this town that even Lance can feel it.

He wants to know why it is that he's just arrived and it's already sitting in his chest like murky
water.
When it rains, it pours.

Lance stares from the living room, his blue eyes tired from hours of unpacking and settling furniture. He runs a hand against the windowpane, fingertip trailing along the constant streams of water rushing from the roof. His eyelids droop and his shoulders sag, the wind rushing through the trees outside sounding more and more like something familiar.

Like crashing water and froth, flying of gulls instead of crows, a never ending ripple brushing against his ankles.

He smiles, a soft little lift of his lips.

"I think that's it!"

Lance turns to the sound of his mother's voice and she runs the back of her hand across her forehead, wiping at damp skin and stray brown hair. Curled atop her head, it sits in a heap of chaos and elegance, two things that Lance has never truly been able to comprehend as a pair. When he was a child, he'd run his fingers through the strands, eager to practice the braid his sister Veronica liked to create on her dolls.

Now, he stands and runs a hand through his own hair instead.

"It looks good, Mom." He glances around, "Feels like home."

"Really?" Her eyes shine, hopeful and imploring, "I tried to get those moving guys to place everything exactly where they needed to be before they left but-"

"It's fine." Lance laughs and turns to plop onto the couch instead of the floor, "Everything looks great."

She sighs and shuffles over, happy to land beside him. They sit in momentary silence, the thunderstorm outside rumbling deep and low, distant music from the radio in the kitchen creating a small comfort.

Lance likes to think that everything will work out.

That the house won't have ghosts, like Hunk had playfully suggested before they'd left California. He wants to believe that the town will end up charming, that he'll work at the ice cream shop and eventually start taking classes at the local community college. That both he and his mother can leave the messy events of their past behind them; the fighting and divorce and Lance's decision to follow his mom instead of his dad.

He wants to forget the look on his dad's face, to pretend the guy didn't look at Lance as if he'd been betrayed.

Looking over to his mom, Lance distracts himself by studying her. He looks at the round shape of her jaw and the brown expanse of her skin, the wrinkles on the corner of her eyes and the way a
laughter-drawn dimple sits on her cheek even when she's frowning. He spots the barely hidden heartache, similar to his own, but there's no use pointing that out.

Instead, he simply falls over and puts his head on her lap. She sighs and runs her fingers through his hair, the beginning of a familiar hum on her lips.

And it's foolish, the way he wishes for their life to remain so simple.

It never does.

"How many customers this morning, lad?"

Lance looks away from his notepad and glances toward the back room. Coran is opening box after box, happy to have an excuse to do so now that Lance can watch for business from the front counter.

"Uh, one." Lance grimaces, "Some old man."

"Kenny?" Coran asks, as if Lance could possibly know, "Maybe Ron, that old bastard."

"Is it usually this slow?"

Coran lets out a bark of a laugh and finally sets down the box, some kind of machine in his hand, "It's a Sunday. Most folks are at church or up at St. Peter's."

"Oh." Lance nods, "That's cool, I guess."

Lance had never been particularly religious.

"How would you feel about runnin' another errand for me?"

Lance perks up instantly, pencil falling away from his notepad with a clack. The page was almost completely filled with his silly doodles; a pair of eyes here, floating planets there. He turns and shoves it into his satchel, something that he usually wouldn't want to be seen carrying around back home.

But, well, here he just can't find the time to give a shit.

Here, nobody knows him.

Nobody cares to.

He shoves the satchel over his shoulder and grins, "Sure!"

Coran laughs again and plops a machine into Lance's hands, the weight making him wince. It's circular and a bit rusted, bulkier in the back than it is in the front. He eyes it wearily, brow raised.

"Usually I'd fix this in a jiffy!" Coran places his hands on his hips, "But there's more boxes in storage and I need to get over there before the church crowd starts runnin' the streets. Take this down to Volt Garage, straight shot from here to Mossy Acres. Ask for Kolivan. He'll fix it right up!"
“What...what is it?” Lance asks.

“I have a slushie machine lyin’ around here somewhere,” Coran furrows his brows and glances behind him, ”and that hunka’ junk will get it runnin’. Now if I can just find the old popcorn machine...”

Lance shakes his head and lifts the contraption higher in his arms, letting out an amused huff. He's only been working here for three days and he's already grown used to Coran's rambles and chats, a never ending stream of ideas popping into his head every other moment. He lugs the machine into his car and wastes no time pulling away, immediately turning the cool air on full blast.

The town seems extra vacant now that everyone is huddled in church, the shops empty; signs turned to **CLOSED**. Lance stops at a dead intersection before driving on, looking for anything that could resemble a shop meant for stuff like slushie machines.

He ends up driving by the damned place twice because it's practically *swamped* by cars and miscellaneous metal, bulks and piles that tower into the air like some kind of scifi waste dump. Lance raises a brow and backtracks to the entryway, tires rolling over dirt and rocks. The road is longer than he thought it'd be but eventually he makes it, eyeing the sign like one would a haunted house. But through the thin glass of his windows he can hear the whirs and wacks of hard work. Steeling himself, Lance turns the car off and practically drags the damned thing out of his back seat, grunting at the weight.

For a second he debates somehow knocking the metal against the door leading to the office. But before he can actually try it someone is already calling out to him, accent thick and heavy on their tongue.

"Need somethin’?"

Lance looks away from the office and nods fast, "Sure. Yeah."

It takes him a minute to realize who he's talking to but the second the guy looks up from wiping his oil stained hands on a rag, Lance considers running away. Just dropping the machine and spinning his tires to put some distance between them.

The boy from the police station raises a dark brow, "Well? What is it?"

Clearing his throat, Lance tries to lift the machine higher in his hands, "Coran said you could fix this."

"What *is* it?" He repeats.

"Slushie machine." Lance tries for a smirk, "Part of one, anyway."

The boy looks at him as if he has two heads. Lance forces himself to meet his stare, to hold it and keep his teeth from digging into his bottom lip in a nervous tic.

Why the hell is he so nervous? Why should he be? There's no reason. Sure, the guy isn't afraid to scream at a station full of cops. And yeah, okay, he has the look of a dude who could commit murder and get away with it. But that doesn't mean Lance has to act like a coward.

"Uh, fine then." The boy finally says, already turning back to lead Lance into the shop.

They walk in silence for a minute but Lance sighs the moment they're under the roof, the intense heat lessening if only by an inch.
"I'm Lance, by the way." Lance says, watching as the boy points to a small table for him to set the machine down on.

"Okay."

Lance lets out a relieved breath when the weight finally leaves his arms. But then he's turning, something sitting awkward in his belly.

"That's it?" He crosses his arms, "You're not gonna tell me your name?"

The boy grabs a stool and shrugs, already grabbing tools to take the machine apart. "Why do you care?"

"Cause I'm a decent person?" Lance scowls, "Isn't the south known for hospitality? Where's your manners?"

Keith doesn't even bother glancing up at him, "This'll be ready by Tuesday."

"Actually." Lance places his hand on the metal, disrupting Keith's intention to work out a screw. "Coran said I was supposed to give this to Kolivan."

"Yeah, well he's out today. So you'll just have to let me do it."

"Or you could just put it on his desk or something? Save yourself the trouble."

Keith lets out a sharp breath and leans back in his chair, mouth turning down in a frown. "Or you could just let me fix it and fuck off. Let me do my job."

"How about you shove that wrench up your-" A clamor behind Lance makes him jump and his words fall away. "You know what? I don't have time for this." He says instead, "I'll be back Tuesday."

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**KEITH**

Keith watches the boy walk away with a sinking feeling in his chest.

He doesn't mean to be an asshole. There's no purpose, nothing intentional, about the way he talks to people. It rises in him mean as a viper, sitting dark with sludge in his throat before slicing the air. He blames it on several things: his years spent with foster parents who'd rather take a belt to his skin than talk, the shitty days spent forcing himself through classes full of boys who flicked paper balls at him, calling him names and spreading rumors that he'd kissed some boy in the bathroom. He blames it on the sermons by the river, on the bible pages that had been burnt into his skull and stuck like super glue.

He blames it on a bunch of things. But he knows it's no excuse.

Keith recognized the boy the second he'd seen him through the dusty window of his car. And
though he'd been working on someone else's car Keith had practically run to the guy instead. He doesn't know where that came from. Hell, he hadn't cared about pretty guys since before Shiro disappeared. Shaking his head, he rids himself of the thought, knowing it'll just lead him to darker places.

Now, he watches Lance walk through the mounds of machine parts and get back into his car, a scowl sitting heavy on his face. The same face that had shocked Keith from his vicious anger only three days ago, the police station unsettled by his outburst.

Yeah, Keith is sure he's never seen Lance before. He's new.

"Fuckin' idiot." He mumbles to himself, knowing he could have handled that entire encounter completely different.

But did he?

Of course not.

Looking down at the machine on his table, Keith debates leaving it on Kolivan's desk after all. But Keith needs the money and he knows Coran will pay fair- he always does.

Keith started working at this shop when he was fifteen and effectively dropped out of school at seventeen, much to Shiro's extreme disappointment.

I'll get my GED. Keith had promised.

And he really did plan to. He was saving up money to buy books, more than ready to prove to Shiro that he didn't intend to work at Volt forever. But then the first girl was kidnapped, snatched from the parking lot at the local diner, and all had gone to hell. This small town wasn't prone to chaos. The worst that had happened here in years was the hurricane in '05 and even then the people worked through it. Keith and Shiro had survived on MRE's and stale water, bathing in the only flowing creek that wouldn't leave them with some bacteria-ridden disease.

But these disappearances weren't caused by a monster storm. There were no flood waters whisking them away.

The people...they're just gone.

"You think someone's killing them?" Keith had asked Shiro on many nights, "Maybe there's some freak on a murder spree?"

Shiro would look away from the news with a sullen face and maybe if Keith were smarter, if he were more perceptive, he would have seen the emotion sitting beneath the curve of his brows. He would have seen Shiro's jaw clench, eyes flickering back to the anchor giving details about the third missing person. He would have seen the fear.

Shiro shook his head, "They haven't found any bodies yet, so maybe they're alive."

"Lotsa' people are hoping that's true-"

"It's good to have hope, Keith." Shiro had met his eye, "You always gotta have hope."

Keith will be the first to admit that he doesn't have much of that. Anger? Sure. Desperation? Definitely.
But there's no light leading him on, nothing assuring him that Shiro will magically reappear on their doorstep. As far as Keith is concerned, there's been no correlation with the kidnappings other than age. The youngest had been fourteen while the oldest had been Shiro himself; twenty-seven. Keith, for a while, thought it meant something. Foolishly, he thought it was a lead. But after weeks and weeks of dead ends, of the cops shrugging their shoulders and promising Keith they'd 'catch the bastard', there was nothing else.

The trail had gone cold.

It's been four whole months since the last disappearance and though it's technically a good thing, Keith can't help but feel panic swelling in him every hour. If there's no more disappearances, there's no more chances.

He hisses at a prick on his finger, noticing blood immediately blossom on his palm. A sharp point of metal had caught on his skin and he immediately raises it to his mouth, sucking the blood clean before he can make his way to the office for alcohol and a band aid.

"Who was that?"

Keith throws the bandage wrapper in the trash and looks over to Pidge, her fingers flying on her laptop keyboard. He'd long since given up trying to understand what she works on, knowing it'll probably lead her to a future with NASA. Or, they tended to joke, a secret organization in the depths of the arctic.

"Some guy." Keith shrugs, trying to ignore the nagging shame sitting on his shoulders, "New to town, I think. Must be working for Coran. I think I pissed him off."

Pidge hums, "New, huh? Think he knows-"

"Nothing's happened in months."

"So?" She finally looks up at him, her glasses sliding down the slope of her nose, "Shouldn't he still know about it?"

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know." She shrugs, "Maybe so he knows not to wander off by himself? Maybe so he can keep himself safe?"

Keith grimaces, "He was at the station when I stopped by the other day. I'm sure Thace brought it up already."

"Doubt it."

"Course you do." Keith rolls his eyes and pops open a coke, gulping down the drink with a small wince.

They sit in silence for a while and Keith can't help but stare outside, watching the forming dark clouds in the distance.

"Thunder boomers." Shiro would says, bringing a hand to shield his eyes from the sun, "Rain'll be on us soon."

Keith thinks of Lance and the small ice cream shop. He thinks of how strange it could be for someone to move here and not know a soul. It doesn't sit right with him, the way he'd talked to the
guy. The way he'd been so damn mean.

"It's just gonna bother you 'till you apologize." Pidge mumbles and brings her feet up to the counter, stretching out her toes. "Might as well get it over with."

"Nothin' to apologize about."

She looks up at him, face unamused and definitely not convinced. "Unless he's some homophobe or bayou redneck, I doubt you wanted to piss him off."

"I mean-"

"Just go, you idiot." Pidge glances at the clouds too, knowing a storm when she sees one. "Hurry up before the rain gets too bad. I'll get Matt to mark your work, make sure no one tosses it into the junk pile."

Keith sighs and nods, knowing she's right. As always.

With a grunt, he takes his badge from his belt buckle and shoves it into his pocket, quick to record his hours before grabbing his keys. His bike is scathing hot from the sun but he's used to the burn of leather, more than glad to feel it beneath his hands. The engine revs with a low growl, one that blocks out all other sound. In this bubble, it's just him.

He pulls out of the shop, kicking up dust in his wake. Behind him, the clouds gather and darken like a breathing thing, something chasing him to the ends of the earth. Patters of rain hit the wheat fields and the dead grass, cooling everything off before the humidity comes back worse than ever. He out rides it, feeling a mild wind push his thick hair away from the nape of his neck.

When he's on his bike, for just a short while, there are no worries.

There is nothing but him and the wind and the open road.

Lance lays on the couch and listens to the downpour, glad that the summer months are turning out be wet instead of dry. In California the droughts last for way too long.

He sighs and turns onto his side, eyes droopy against the drone of some old movie on the TV. It's black and white and should be scary but he just smirks at the fake fangs, at the way the man appears behind the unsuspecting couple in the castle. Without his mom here, the house is quiet. Emptier than he thought it'd be, considering all of their belongings are finally settled. But she's working a double shift and won't be home for a long while. She'd already called four times since he'd gotten home, not surprised that Coran closed the shop early.

Now, Lance pulls his blanket higher on his body and wiggles into the leather couch, smelling traces of home. If he closes his eyes and tries hard enough, he can smell Veronica's cherry blossom perfume and Marco's spilled smoothies. It should be gross but Lance finds comfort in it. Yet, beneath it all, there is also the heady tinge of tobacco. Of a cigar, imported and strong, that used to sit heavy in the air on Saturday mornings.

With a little sigh, Lance glances at his phone across the room and the blinking blue light. But he's too lazy to get up and check the notification, knowing he'd rather it be as charged as possible in
case the power decided to go out. No way is he sitting in here in the dark. Just the thought makes him shiver and he reaches a hand out to dip a finger into some nacho cheese, trying to distract himself from the possibility.

Suddenly, with no warning, a stream of sharp knocks come from the foyer. Lance jumps up and feels his heart in his throat, knowing neither him or his mother planned to give their address out to anyone. Not yet, at least.

The knock comes again and Lance's brain immediately jumps to home invasions; to racist rednecks and monsters rising from the swamps. With a small noise escaping his throat, he pushes his blanket away and runs to his room, opening his closet door in search for one thing. No gun is locked and loaded and there's no way he'd risk destroying his guitar. But there, leaning against a box of old trophies, is something that he could definitely turn into a weapon.

He grabs the bat and holds it like he's ready to hit the pitch, fingers flexing on the handle as he makes his way down the hallway. The floorboards creak beneath his socked feet but he doesn't care. The knocks grow louder and he debates looking out the window, pushing aside the pretty curtains his mom put up yesterday in hopes to see who could possibly be standing on his porch.

Instead, probably foolishly, Lance goes straight for the handle. He uses one hand to unlock it and the other to grip his bat harder, resting the curve on his shoulder. With a heavy breath in and out, he swings the door open and re-grips the bat with both hands, ready to swing free.

"Uh..." Through the screen door, against the backdrop of pouring rain, Keith stands with a dark helmet under his arm. His hair is pressed flat on his head and oil still coats his fingers, the likes of which are paler in the storm. "You okay?"

It takes a moment for Lance to breathe, to realize that he must look absolutely ridiculous. He lowers the bat and gulps, allowing his heart beat to slow.

When he can finally speak, he does so with snark.

"What the hell are you doing here? How do you know where I live?"

Keith looks sheepish but it passes quickly. "Your house is the only one that's been on sale for years. It was a lucky guess. You gonna make me stand out here all day?"

For a second, Lance considers slamming the door in his face. What if he's some killer? Lance thinks. Like, yeah, he's cute. But he could kill me.

He pushes the thoughts away and forces himself to chill out. The screen unlocks with a soft click and he pushes it open, feeling Keith brush past him with soaked, cold clothes. He brings in something fresh; like he'd been running through frigid wind.

Lance quickly shuts the door and locks it but he keeps the bat in his hand. You know, just in case.

"So-"

"There's something you need to hear." Keith says, already walking through the foyer and into the living room.

Lance follows after him, exasperated at the rude display.

When he rounds the corner, Keith is sitting on his couch, creating a puddle on the floor. Thunder
shakes the windows and the lights flicker but Lance still refuses to sit beside him. He stands on the other side of the coffee table instead, stubborn as a mule.

"Well go on then." He orders, watching Keith eye the plate still full of nachos, "Start talking."
Chapter 4

When Keith was a child he would run like a wild thing. He could track the prints left by coyote's and foxes, spot well hidden animals beneath the light of full harvest moons. For hours he'd explore the tick infested woods and pretend he never had to go back to his shitty foster parents and later to Jennie's, to her rules and thick switch sitting on the mantel of the fireplace. There was a wild, beating drum in his heart and it echoed all over.

Growing up in a place like this, he was prone to getting into trouble. He'd start fires in the fields just to watch the smoke, throw rocks at passing car windows, fight kids who thought they could push him around.

Where's ya' momma and ya' daddy? They'd snicker, We heard they burnt up cause they worshiped the devil!

For a long time, other than moving from house to house with strangers, Keith was alone. There was only him and the trees, the cawing of vultures and hawks flying against the hazy orange of setting suns. When Jennie would take him to the coast he'd wade in brackish water and lick the salt from his lips, wondering if he could one day submerge and never come back up. He imagined he could grow gills, that he'd travel the rivers and the bayou's, make friend's with the gators.

Then, like a miracle come alive, Jennie had hired Shiro to tutor Keith in school. Several years older and a whole lot smarter, Shiro knew what he was doing in every single subject; math and english and science and even history, the likes of which Keith had always been particularly fond. Eventually, they got to talking. They started to bond, to build a connection stronger than Keith ever had with anyone else before. Shiro offered to teach Keith how to drive his old pickup truck and they'd walk to Crescent River; creating their own little world in the reeds. Many times, Keith would lay on the bank and breathe deep, listening to the screamin' cicadas and whispering wind. And always, Shiro would show up and smile, face shrouded in bright sunlight.

Keith saw Shiro as the brother he'd always wanted; the friend he'd always needed.

The day Jennie agreed to let Keith stay with Shiro indefinitely, going so far as to help him become emancipated, Keith was ecstatic.

He and Shiro were inseparable ever since.

"It's been a full year since he went missin'." Keith licks at his fingers, wishing the nacho's hadn't gone so fast. Even though the cheese was microwaved it still managed to settle his stomach. "So, I figured you'd wanna know about the others. To uh, protect yourself, I guess."

Lance scowls from the floor, his long legs crossed. The water bottle in his hand cracks against his fingers and Keith glances at them, noticing how tight his hold is.

"Is that what you were screaming about in the police station?" Lance asks, brows furrowed in thought.

Keith doesn't say anything.
"I mean, I guess I'd be pissed too, you know?" Lance looks up at him, "'Cause that's, like, terrible. Horrible, actually. And if my best friend or one of my siblings went missing i'd raise hell too. But this town isn't even that big, right? So how could so many people just...disappear?"

Shrugging, Keith tosses the empty paper plate back onto the coffee table, "I dunno. S'what I'm tryin' to find out."

"If my mom would have known this was going on we never would have moved here."

"You regret it already?" Keith tries for a joke but it falls flat.

Lance sighs and stands, glancing toward the front door as if something would be standing there, shrouded in the dark and ready to pounce.

"We left everything to come here. And I mean everything. A house that was paid off, a job that treated her fair enough. My siblings and my dog...but I'm not gonna let this stress her out, you know? She has enough to deal with. She's just happy to be away from my dad."

"So is that why y'all moved here?"

The question hangs in the air, settling between them like a live wire cut in half. There's something electric there, something that could blow the glass from the windows and uproot every floorboard. Secrets, Keith has come to learn, are usually festering things. They'll bleed you dry if you don't deal with them fast.

But it's not his place to push.

He already feels sorta' weird sitting here, crowding up a couch that isn't his own. Lance picks up the plate and heads toward the kitchen, the sound of the trash opening and closing louder than the old movie on the TV. Keith stares at it, wondering if he should leave.

"You want a coke?" Lance calls out, interrupting Keith's inward chatter.

"Uh, sure."

Thunder rumbles but it's grown distant, probably already passing through New Orleans. Summer rains usually move fast, turning the dirt to mud and the air a thick, dense blanket. Everyone prefers these wet months to the height of hurricane season, though. No one wants those beasts to make landfall.

Lance tosses the coke onto Keith's lap before plopping down himself, bat left on the floor. Keith eyes it, unable to stop the small smirk twitching at his lips.

"Is that how you were gonna fend me off?" He asks, popping the can open before listening to the fizz, "Bat to the head? Knock my brains out?"

Lance scoffs, "If I had to. You aren't the most welcoming guy around, you know."

"Better than most."

"Yeah, well I can handle everyone else." Lance takes a gulp of his drink, "I grew up in California and most people couldn't care less about you there. But I guess the ocean made up for the assholes."

Keith hums, "Never been."
"It's great. But it can never really compare to Cuba. Havana sings through my blood, man." Lance smiles, a wistful look overtaking his face. "Wish we coulda' moved there instead."

"We have an ocean, too."

"No, you have a gulf. Totally different."

"It's connected to the sea, though." Keith argues, feeling a tiny spike of annoyance.

"From what I've seen online, it's murky and it smells."

"All oceans smell."

Lance rolls his eyes, "You're just trying to get the last word."

"Aren't you?" Keith asks, "Cause that's what it sounds like."

"You're impossible."

"Ditto."

The TV flashes with lightning and a man in a cape stares from a window, his face covered in scars and blood. Keith downs the rest of his coke and he kinda wants to finish the movie but he knows he can't just camp out on Lance's couch. It's not like they're friends.

He forces himself to stand and stretch, glad that his clothes have had time to dry. "I'm gonna get outta here."

"Now?" Lance asks, looking up at him with wide blue eyes. "You don't have to go if you don't want to."

Keith shakes his head, "I should probably get back to work."

He makes his way to the foyer and finds the keys in his pocket, hearing Lance shift close behind. The door opens to filtered yellow sunlight and Keith breathes in the damp heat, not really looking forward to how muggy the garage is going to be when he gets back. With a sigh, he makes his way to his bike and shoves his helmet over his hair, anticipating the layer of sweat that'll sprout on his face and neck.

Lance followed him out and now he's close enough that he could touch Keith's bike if he wanted to.

Instead, he brings a hand to the back of his neck, "I'll see you around?"

The question makes Keith hesitate. There's something yearning in Lance's face and it's so familiar, so full of desperation for companionship, that Keith feels a sharp twist in his gut. How many times had he looked like that, wondering if the boys or girls at school would play with him at recess? How many times had he asked something similar, tired of the hours spent by himself?

He swallows and nods, just once, in confirmation.

When Lance smiles, it's as bright as the sun.
LANCE

If there were some deity in the sky, they'd probably knock a celestial hand to the back of Lance's head. It's not like he planned to disregard Keith's warnings and it's not like he isn't smart enough to know that what he's doing is reckless. But it's been days since he and Keith spoke and even though they'd sat on his couch and shared a damn soda, the day Lance picked up Coran's junk still managed to be filled with some kind of awkward tension.

Lance doesn't like it.

He doesn't like the silent mornings and the even quieter afternoon's, his calls with Hunk never truly lasting long enough. So, after a surprisingly busy shift at the ice cream parlor, Lance had taken off like a bat out of hell. He's tired of the same old routine already, can feel it becoming stale in his lungs. He'd never been one to choose stagnation and even though there's some kind of function going on at St. Peter's, he isn't very inclined to participate.

Instead, he finds himself driving down to Crescent River, more than ready to take a dip. There's no local pool and it's making him antsy, the need to feel his body doused in water urging him to act. He spots the dock that Coran had mentioned and heeds his warning, gripping tight to the taser he'd pushed into Lance's hand.

There aren't any gator's down there, the warden keeps 'em up toward the swamps, so it'll be fine for you to swim at the docks. Coran had sounded more serious than ever, But be careful, lad. Strange things happen around that abandoned church.

If it weren't for Keith's surprise visit several days ago, Lance may have laughed his boss off. But now all he can think about is missing people and possible crime scenes; blood soaked grass and bodies strewn like an episode of CSI. He eyes the docks, kind of surprised to see them clear of damage. The locals must use it for their boats, shrimping and rafting two things that keep the kids busy in the summer. Lance knows that close by, hidden in the thick southern pines, the swamp rises in shadow and moss. But it's far enough away to ease his worries.

Getting out of the car, he quickly takes his shirt off and wanders down to the bank, feeling the grit of dense sand and dirt between his toes. There are no waves but the water isn't too still either, which means there shouldn't be any intense bacteria build up. The dock stretches far out into the river and Lance takes notice of the pole sticking up beside him, the water line resting at a deep 12 feet.

"Don't be a chicken." He mumbles to himself, trying to keep his eyes from the tall swaying grass on the other side, "It's just a river. Like an ocean but darker."

With a decisive nod Lance raises his arms above his head and dives, feeling the surprisingly cool water swarm his body. He doesn't open his eyes and he hopes that his splash scared any kind of snake or turtle far, far away. The last thing he wants is to feel a bite on his toes.

The water washes over him in a refreshing surge, making his heart quicken and his lips tilt into a relieved smile. He kicks through the bubbles and pushes himself to the surface, flipping his damp hair from his face. The sun is shining bright with the last hour of the day and he soaks it up, letting himself float on his back. He stares at the clouds, wispy and colored in swaths of peach and gold. Crickets and locusts begin their evening performance but Lance doesn't really hear them. His ears
are soaked, water muting the world above the dark river. In the back of his mind there is a patch of worry; a semblance of fear that something swims beneath his body. Like the movie he’d seen when he was a child, he imagines some creature stalking him from the depths.

But then a swarm of little bats flit across the sky and he takes a deep breath, working to settle those intrusive thoughts. Instead, he focuses on the sound of his own breathing. In and out, steady and deep and alive. It's a familiar habit, one that he held on to during the worst nights in California. His parents are as human as any other. They did their best to raise their kids and Lance would never doubt that; but all human beings make mistakes. It's a truth every one must live with, that everyone will grow up slowly understanding.

But, God, did his dad make a lot of them.

The fights that would erupt were always sudden. It gave him whiplash, set him off with the want to run away while a need pricked at his skin, urging him to protect his mother. His father wasn't usually a violent man. He never really laid a finger on her.

But that worry still sat heavy in Lance; as it must for all sons in a house filled with shattering glass.

Thinking back now, it's hard to remember what started the screaming in the first place. Underlying, they all knew of his father's adulterous habits. And for a long time, Lance's mom put up with it. She waited it out, dealt with the emotional neglect and the constant haunting knowledge that her husband wouldn't be coming home late from work.

He'd be coming home later from fucking his whore.

Anger boils in Lance at the thought, the same anger that helped back up his decision to follow his mom all the way down south.

Letting out a sharp breath, Lance quickly dips himself back beneath the water. Like before, he doesn't dare open his eyes. But he lets the water swallow him whole, let its swish out the salt water of the west coast and replace it with murky mud and brine. It travels into his lungs, coats his veins and sprouts moss around his heart.

He sits and sits until he can sit no more. Until his lungs are aching to burst.

With a gasp, he resurfaces and sucks in the air. It's thick and wafts of the swamp hit his nose with a staunch smell but it doesn't matter. As long as he can breathe, he'll deal with the stench.

Blinking away the water, his brows immediately furrow. Head tilting, he listens hard for a sound he swore he heard but now, it is much too quiet.

That is, until it rises again.

Like a hissing thing the noise slithers across the top of the water and into Lance's ears. He can't decipher it and he can't hope to reply to it- all he can do is listen. Turning his head slow, his eyes go wide as he once again stares at the tall grass.

He wades closer, looking intently at the dark innards of the bank. He gets to shore, breath snatched from his lungs. And as he takes a hesitant step forward, the rest of the world falls away.
KEITH

Keith speeds down the vacant road like a convict on the run.

After days of radio silence, he managed to get the nerve to find Lance; to apologize to him for being so damn reclusive. The guy wants nothing more than a friend, Keith knows that. And yet Keith continues to act like a dumbass, a total prick with a stick up his ass.

As such, his intent to talk to the boy is what has lead him here.

The closer he gets to the docks on the Crescent River, the more something churns in his guts. The rumble of his bike can't settle these kinds of nerves. Nothing can, other than the knowledge that Lance is safe. Keith'll be damned if another person goes missing when he has the ability to stop it.

He barely waits for the engine to turn off before leaving his bike next to an abandoned blue station wagon, spotting Lance's jacket splayed across the front seat. From this distance, Keith can just make out the rippling brown water, the overgrown foliage on the other side broken and mashed; a decrepit steeple protruding toward the darkening sky.

"Lance!" He calls, voice echoing.

When the boy doesn't answer, or rise from the depths of the river, Keith feels something slice at his chest. He'd never been one to think things through completely. If there was something wrong, or something that needed doing, he was always the first to dive in.

This time is no different.

Wading into the water, he never bothered to take off his boots. They'd just slow him down. He grits his teeth, calling out to Lance with a voice growing more and more panicked. His eyes sweep the river, squinting at the bank.

"Lance!" He calls again, cupping his hands around his mouth. "Lance!"

Up ahead, on the bank, there is a rustling. Like something crawling, limbs pushing at weeds and reeds and brier. Keith tenses and wades closer, feet no longer touching the silt bottom. His pale hands are a murky beige beneath the surface, fingers pushing him forward with strong strokes. The moment he walks on shore, clothes water-logged and dripping, bats take off into the dusk. Keith watches them fly with a pit growing in his stomach. It spreads to his toes and fingertips, makes his breath hitch on his lips.

He wonders, for just a moment, if Shiro felt this before he was taken. If he felt watched; hunted. If he ran.

If he fought.

With a heavy gulp, Keith pushes at the tall foliage and sloshes his way through. All around, there is marsh. Open land that cascades from shallow pits of mud to dark depths, haunted by toads and cranes and poisonous spiders.

There's only one other place Lance can go.

Keith follows a torn path, noticing with a trained eye the way certain tall wisps are broken clean in half from a clumsy foot. Steps are pushed into the muck, some sinking deeper than others. If he
weren't so determined to find Lance, he knows he'd be frozen to listen. Ears pricking, hair rising on his arms, he'd rake his eyes all around in search of something he simply cannot see. Whatever stalks him is quiet, very careful to remain hidden.

But Keith knows it's there.

That thought alone makes him speed up.

And when he finally reaches his destination, he feels a mixture of emotions wash over his damp skin.

In front of the dark church, with its towering steeple and cracked, white wood, Lance stands alone. He's drier than Keith and though he doesn't appear to be hurt, Keith can tell that he isn't okay.

That something is wrong.

"Lance?" He asks, quiet against the deafening cicadas and crickets.

The boy doesn't move.

Keith takes a few hesitant steps forward, refusing to look into the dark of the church. If there are pews, they are lost to him. If there are bibles strewn on the floor, ripped to pieces like the rumors say, he doesn't want to confirm it.

"Hey." He says, finally coming to stand beside Lance.

When he doesn't reply, Keith reaches for him. His fingers brush over his brown skin but where he should be warm, there is a chill to the flesh. Keith gulps again and wraps his fingers around his wrist, tugging just a bit to see if he'll move.

Nothing.

"C'mon." Keith tries again, chills breaking out on his own skin at the look in Lance's eyes.

They are vacant yet filled to the brim with tears. Bloodshot and wide, pupil's taking up almost all of his iris, until the crystal blue is but a thin ring. Like a bullet to the heart, the look is all too familiar.

For a flashing moment, he sees Shiro. He sees him standing in the field across their dirt road, white shirt pushing against his body against the wind. Still as a statue, it was like he wouldn't move even if a red wolf were to run at him, nipping and snarling and wanting to kill.

The memory makes Keith desperate. He moves to stand in front of Lance, effectively blocking him from the dark of the church. His hands, shaky and awkward and unsure, rise to cup either side of his jaw, a touch that is too intimate and familiar- yet he can't bring himself to care.

"Lance." He gulps, urging him to respond. "Hey, you okay?"

Slowly, like something from a damn horror flick, Lance's eyes travel down and down and down. Away from the top of Keith's head, until they settle on his own eyes. He blinks once, twice, three times in a movement so slow Keith can't help but think his mind is playin' tricks.

But then Lance is taking a sudden wracking breath, chest shaking at the force of it, eyes clearing like rain on a muddy sidewalk. His hands immediately grab hold of Keith's own, resting palm to knuckle from where they still rest on his face.
"Keith?" He whispers, panic playing on the edge of his voice, "What's-where are we? Why are you here? I...What's happening?"

Keith doesn't move an inch, trying to do this the right way. Unlike his times with Shiro, he doesn't want there to be a total freak-out.

"Let's get back to your car, okay?" He keeps his voice stable, soft.

Lance looks seconds away from bolting. But Keith just steps closer, urging their eyes to remain locked until he can barely stand it. As much as he began to embarrassingly imagine the two of them this close the last few days, he never wanted it to happen like this. His cheeks are red as a tomato, he's sure of it.

"My car." Lance repeats, hands finally falling away from Keith's before he takes them from his cheeks. "Right. Yeah."

Neither of them move for a moment but Keith can only take the ominous building behind his back for so long. With a subtle nod, he motions for Lance to lead the way. But the boy is quick to grab at Keith's hand, lacing their fingers together in a vise grip.

"Don't think too hard about it." Lance grimaces, "I just. I'm a bit freaked out, that's all."

Keith glances at their hands, "It's fine."

Like a shadow, Lance sticks close to Keith's back as they trek through the path he'd created. Neither of them will admit it, but Keith is sure they both want to run. They want to get the hell away from whatever waits inside of that old church. When they enter the river water, Lance slides his hand from Keith's own. He dips beneath the surface and disappears for a frightening minute, only to resurface further ahead. Keith speeds up until they're walking onto the bank together, dripping wet like tense cats after a rain storm.

"You wanna follow me back to town?" Keith asks, already picking his keys up from the seat of his bike. "Or your house-"

"Not my house." Lance shakes his head.

"Oh." Keith gulps, "Well. My house then?"

When Lance nods, a spike of fear bursts inside of Keith like a supernova. It's fast and consuming, reminding him that he hasn't had anyone inside of his shitty trailer in a full damn year. But another look at Lance's face, eyes wide like a doe, has him agreeing before he can even think it through.

LANCE

Keith watches him as if he'd suddenly peel out of the yard. On the contrary, Lance turns his car off and gets out with a relieved sigh, already feeling one hundred times better. And when they enter the trailer, that feeling only increases.
"This is nice." He says and he means it. "Cozy."

Keith clears his throat, "Uh, thanks."

Although it's smaller than his own house, the trailer is way bigger than he assumed it would be from the outside. A kitchen spans one wall, the fridge a bit smaller than any Lance is used to but a fridge all the same. He wanders to it, eyes finding old Polaroids and drawings on aged paper.

"Is this him?" Lance asks.

He can hear the caution in his own voice, the way he's worried there's a line being overstepped.

Keith simply hums in confirmation, stalking toward a back room with heavy steps. A door shuts but Keith doesn't pay it much mind. He's too busy studying the pictures, finding Keith in each one like a moth to flame. In many, he looks grumpy. Reminiscent of the first time Lance saw him, his mouth holds a sharp frown even as a child. His hair is always a mess, dirt splotching parts of his face, arms folded across his chest as if he had to barricade himself from the world.

But there is one that Lance is drawn to over and over, a small smile playing on his own lips.

Keith is hunched a bit beneath a heavy arm, grin wild at the hand ruffling his hair. A front tooth is missing and there's a bandage over his nose but other than that it is the most carefree picture on the entire fridge. Beside him, with a smile just as big and bright, is a boy a few years older. He looks kind. He looks happy and maybe even proud. Lance can tell just by the way he looks at Keith so fond, a look Lance had received from his own brother more than once.

A burst of sunlight shines from the corner of the picture and behind them, looking newer than it does now, is the trailer.

"That was the day I moved in." Keith clears his throat, making Lance jump.

He turns and notices the new black shirt sitting on his body, hair curling at his throat as it dries. He holds out a hand and Lance looks down, taking the clothes before he can stupidly ask if they're for him.

Like some kind of real southern gentleman, Keith turns around to let Lance dress.

"He looks really nice." Lance tries to fill the silence as he slips on soft gray pajama pants, "Super macho but nice."

Keith lets out a snort, "Yeah, he was."

"Did he grow up here too?"

"Kinda." Keith moves to the stove when Lance confirms that he's dressed, "His folks moved here when he was a kid, wanting him to grow up away from the chaos of Chicago. They still visited the city from time to time anyway. Or so he says."

Lance smirks at that, listening to the way Keith's tone changes when he talks about him. It's nice. He plops onto the couch and lets his new, warm clothes melt against his skin. Outside, night has arrived in swaths and Keith turns the blinds above the sink, effectively blocking out the dark. There's a pot on the stove top and the gas flicks a few times before lighting, flames dancing against the bottom.

"I can wash your clothes if ya' want." Keith mutters, already picking them up. "But my dryer is
"I don't have anywhere to be." Lance says, wanting nothing more than to curl up on the couch and go to sleep.

"Cool."

It's quiet for a while but neither of them really mind. Between the water being brought to a boil and the sound of wind pushing against the walls, Lance thinks it's definitely cozy. Comforting, almost.

"I don't really have a lot of food but I can whip somethin' up." Keith offers, already pulling a box of noodles from a small cupboard. "And I don't have a TV anymore but there's a shitty old radio in my room I can grab."

"I'm not the president, Keith." Lance snickers, "You don't have to treat me like some important guest."

"You are. A guest, I mean."

Lance feels a smile tugging at his lips, watching the way Keith's dark lashes brush against his cheeks when he shifts his gaze away.

"Fine." Lance sighs and leans his head back on the couch, a flutter starting to beat against his ribs. He pushes it away, knowing it's hopeless to feel anything other than circumstantial friendship.

"Treat me like a king then. I won't complain."

Another snort leaves Keith but this time it is accompanied by nothing short of a giggle. And Lance may be dealing with his own raging emotions, and stupid hormones for that matter, but there's no way his brain conjured that sound up.

Keith brings the radio into the living room and plugs it into a socket on the wall, motioning for Lance to find a station. They're all different than those he knows from Cali but it doesn't take him long to find something bearable. The song is soft acoustic and though he doesn't know it, he picks up on the chords with ease. Humming comes easy to him and he does so while watching Keith move around the stove, pouring in some sauce after draining the noodles, bringing a whiff of garlic to Lance's nose.

Without shame, though much secrecy, Lance lets his eyes trail along Keith's back. The shirt does little to hide the muscles of his shoulders, his biceps in no way bulging but definitely defined. Gulping, Lance tears his eyes away and studies the objects on the small table beside the couch. He eyes a few knives and a small plant, the leaves brown and hanging on for dear life.

"You should probably water that poor baby."

Keith glances back, eyes following Lance's gaze to the table. "I always forget."

"Well," Lance smiles and hops up, taking a few steps to the stove before nudging at Keith with his hip so he can find a plastic cup to pour water into, "good thing I'm here now. My grandma had a major green thumb so I can't take all the credit. But I'm damn good at bringing stuff back to life."

"Yeah?" Keith keeps his eyes trained on the pasta.

"Yup."

Lance brings the cup to the table and lets the water trickle into the pot, turning the dry soil a deep
brown. He hums some more and smiles when all of the water is gone, soaked up and put to good use. Moments later, a bowl slides beside him on the table, wafts of steam hitting his arm. Picking it up, he turns to see where Keith will sit and quickly follows suit. The couch is big but Lance doesn't care to move over, instead silently reveling at the way their knees brush together.

"You don't have to eat it if you don't like it." Keith mumbles, staring at his own bowl as if it had done something to upset him personally.

Lance makes a show out of slurping up some noodles, the noise no doubt loud enough to be obnoxious. From his peripheral he can see Keith look at him, a grimace on his face.

"Not gonna lie, buddy." Lance sighs long and slow before turning to Keith, a smile finally breaking free. "It's really good."

The color that finds Keith's face makes that flutter in Lance's ribs grow to a beating of wings. When he takes another bite, Keith finally starts eating too and it suddenly feels so normal, Lance isn't sure what to do about it. They eat in silence for a while, listening to the changing songs.

"Are we friends?"

The question is sudden and it makes him startle, fork stopped midway to his mouth. Keith's bowl is on the floor, already mostly empty.

Lance puts his fork down and licks his lips, not at all used to a question like that. Most of the time, people come and go with no need for confirmations. Other than Hunk, he never really stopped to think about whether someone was his friend or not; he simply knew that they at least pretended to be.

"Yes." He finally says, "If you want us to be."

Keith nods, looking both embarrassed and relieved all at once. His expression is as honest as his words, his lack of a filter becoming rather endearing. "I do." He says, "I haven't had many."

Lance looks to him, knowing that first impressions can stick. He'd done something ridiculous to get people's attention too many times to count. He's sure that someone out there remembers him as a class clown, a total dork, an asshole and a shameless flirt. But he'd never been like Keith.

Lance isn't a storm in human skin like him, ferocious enough to lash out at cops, brave enough to ride motorcycle's and wade into dark water for a guy he barely even knows.

Yet, all of these things make him seem more real to Lance than anyone else he's ever known. He isn't putting on an act, smiling at Lance's face before talking about him behind his back. Just by the way he picks at the skin on his thumb or rubs at his slightly crooked nose, he is who is; to the bone.

"I haven't either." Lance eventually breathes, feeling a weight lift from his shoulders. "I mean. Like. Real friends. Just one, honestly."

Keith looks slightly disbelieving but it passes fast.

And then he is picking his bowl back up and finishing off his dinner with gusto.

"What happened at the river?" He asks around a mouthful, finally bringing up the one thing Lance simply doesn't want to talk about.
"I don't know." It's the truth. It makes no sense but it's the truth. "I was just swimming, thinking about stuff, you know? The next thing I know, you're in front of me looking scared as hell. There was a ringing in my ears at first, like something had been whispering way too loud and fast, words overlapping before going away with a snap."

Keith turns and crosses his legs on the couch, forearms resting on his knees. "Whispers. Like voices?"

"Hissing. Rattling. I don't know, man." Lance winces, "How'd you even know where I was?"

Keith shrugs, "I uh, went to get some ice cream but you weren't there. Coran told me you talked about goin' down to the river."

"That little snitch-"

"I'm glad he did, Lance. If he didn't and you disappeared...it'd tear me up."

Lance blinks, "Oh."

"I just don't want to see anyone else get hurt." Keith clears his throat again and bites at his lip, "And I'm trying to figure all of this out but it's like i'm runnin' in circles. Nothin' makes sense."

Lance nods and scoots closer, bringing his own knees toward his chest. "You've been searching a long time."

The words make Keith go tense, shoulders pulled taut. He brings his eyes to Lance and lets them roam, flitting from his eyes to his nose, to his ears and his mouth. Searching for something. The radio shifts to the dj’s voice, a smooth roll of Louisiana accent. Before Lance can catch onto what he's saying, Keith brushes his hair away from his face and stands, looking down with something like resolve.

"Can I show you somethin'?" He asks, seemingly prepared for Lance to decline.

But Lance doesn't. With a swipe of his tongue across his bottom lip, and a nervous tilt of his stomach, he nods.

"Sure."
In two places, at the exact same moment, beams of light fall across seas of swaying grass. There is a body in the marsh, strewn like cattle after the slaughter and there are two boys marching to a dark shed, yellow paint chipping on the shutters.

Lance follows Keith with a hurried pace, eyes skittering this way and that in a show of unease. His heart is in his throat, wanting nothing more than to grab hold of Keith’s cotton shirt. He can feel the river at his back, the water lapping at his spine and churning in his stomach. To avoid embarrassment he brings a hand to his mouth instead, nails becoming bitten to the quick.

Miles away, radio chatter brings order to men and women in dark suits, too nice for the sweltering southern heat. Sweeping the marsh this late is a purposeful secret, meant to stay between the confines of their flashlights and sniffing hounds. It’s a secret that is bound to erupt, of course. But this won’t happen until the lights flash through the streets, until the sirens blare on the freeway.

“Hold this.” Keith thrusts his flashlight out to Lance, their eyes meeting in a strike before pulling apart.

Lance grips the flashlight like a lifeline before he hears the telltale click of a key in a lock, a worn wooden door soon swinging open with a push.

In the distant field the grass is shifted, relaying a sight of carnage and broken flesh.

“I’m trustin’ you with this.” Keith whispers, suddenly standing close enough to Lance that he can feel a brush of breath on his neck; on the shell of his ear. “I haven’t shown anyone else. Not ever. They’d think I was batshit.”

A match flares and it’s this moment that Lance realizes there’s no electricity out here. One by one, Keith lights lanterns and candles, the flames casting a shadow-dance along the walls. Yet, through the orange haze, Lance’s view is clear enough.

Paper is tacked up one after another on the wall ahead, red strings leading to big black X’s on maps and pictures yellowed by humidity and time. Most descriptions seem to be scribbled by a quick hand. It’s a bone work of desperation, put together like a web. Lance’s breath halts in his throat but he takes a step forward anyway, letting the flashlight rest on a small table, the bright white light shining on faces of the missing.

“You did all of this?” He asks, almost in disbelief.

Keith crosses his arms and leans against the wall beside Lance, brows furrowed over the dark of his eyes. He watches Lance with trepidation, probably wondering if Lance could actually be trusted. No doubt thinking he spoke too soon, that he’d been way too eager to finally bring someone into this morose place.

“Thace told me he better not catch me investigating shit on my own.” Keith scowls, “But they
aren’t gettin’ shit done by themselves.”

Lance nods, “Well, it totally looks like you are.”

He reaches out and touches a frayed edge on a piece of a paper, something somber settling in the cavities of his heart. A young girl stares back at him, her hair curled, smile wide and pretty to show off slightly crooked teeth.

Beneath the picture a small note card reads: Mary Crenshaw, 14. Last seen walking home from school, backpack left in a ditch on the side of the road near Shipjunk Bar. No ties to Shiro.

“She was the first to go missing.” Keith murmurs, pushing away from the wall to stand beside Lance, “Lotta’ people thought she ran away. Rumors ran wild about her, most about her mom, how she’d lock her outside for hours after a beatin’.”

“She.” Lance breathes, willing his eyes to remain dry.

I don’t know her. He tells himself, I don’t know any of them.

But when he looks at the next picture, his throat goes dry. He clears his throat, trying and failing to hide the way his blue eyes let flow a small drop of water.

“Sorry-”

“Don’t apologize.” Keith sounds prepared, as if he were expecting this reaction. “You don’t have to apologize for feelin’ sad.”

“Yeah, I just.” Lance works to pull himself together, quickly turning his face away from the wall. From the picture. When he glances over, Keith is already looking back. “I just can’t imagine how you must feel. And I wanna help you. Somehow, someway…but there’s no way I can. I’m kinda useless, you know?”

Keith frowns, “You’re already helping.”

“How?”

“You’re here.” Keith’s hand rises but falls back to his side, fingers closing tight against his palm. “You’re here and you’re listening to me. Other than Shiro, no one’s ever really done that.”

He’s quick to look away after that. Lance watches his attention ultimately settling on the smiling picture of Shiro. It’s tacked to the top, several red strings connected to outlier portions by clear thumb tacks. Lance gulps and forces himself to look back, too. To take in the scope of Keith’s research.

Newspaper clippings are cut and highlighted, headlines correlating.

Eight go missing around Algier’s, New Orleans.

Shreveport, Louisiana: Local police department at a loss. All missing person’s cases remain open.

Jackson, Mississippi: Three months, a total of five disappearances. Where did they go?

Alabama, Georgia, Florida-

“All of these are within the past year?” Lance asks, hardly believing it.
Keith nods, “So far there’s no reports in the upper states. At least none like this.”

“You think it’s like, a serial killer or something?”

“Nah.” Keith finally looks away from the wall, as if he can’t bear to look at it anymore. He moves to sit against the wall near the door, legs pulled up so he can rest his forearms on his knees.

“Whoever it is, they’re movin’ too fast. Too quick. It's like there’s more than one person.”

Lance takes a seat next to him and spreads his legs, ankles crossing. They stare at the wall together, the air growing thick but not as bad as it would be during the day. Lance leans his head back against the wall and closes his eyes, feeling that tired wilt return full swing.

“Hey.”

He opens his eyes and tilts his head, not bothering to lift it. His eyes slide to Keith, noticing the way the flames highlight his pale skin. Not for the first time, Lance thinks that he sees a strange little ring of color in his iris. Not orange and not really yellow, either. More muddy.

But when he blinks, the color is gone.

“What is it?” Lance asks, clearing his throat.

Keith lets out a slow breath, shoulders tense. “If you wanna forget about all of this, I won’t blame you. If I’m bein’ honest, I don’t want you gettin’ caught up in what’s probably coming.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Keith’s fingers fiddle with the fabric on his pants, nerves making his eyes slide back to the floor, “that I don’t want you gettin’ hurt. That this isn’t something you should be involved in-”

Lance snorts, even though his chest feels close to bursting. “I’d say I’m already involved.” At Keith’s questioning look, he continues, “Whatever happened to me at the river…it isn’t just gonna go away. It was like something grabbed hold of me. I can’t just forget that. And, I mean, I’m probably wrong but I feel like it had something to do with this.” He motions toward the wall.

Keith stays quiet.

“Besides,” Lance smirks and lets his head fall back again, eyes sliding shut, “my Mom was worried I wouldn’t make any friends. Can’t wait to bring you home to meet her. She’s gonna hate your motorcycle.”

The laugh that leaves Keith sounds like most others: unexpected, low and gravelly and just loud enough to make Lance lick his lips.

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**KEITH**

When Lance goes to bed, Keith splashes cold water on his face from the sink in the kitchen. His breathing is fast and his pulse is racing, an avalanche of emotions raging through his body. Showing Lance the shed was something he never thought he’d do, especially not so soon. It was
chock full of Keith’s obsession, of his endless search for people who others deem unfindable. Lost.

It would scare anyone else, the way he routinely sits in that musky place. The way he stares, eyes stingin’ and burnin’ from lack of sleep.

But Lance had stared too. His own gaze was damp but he didn’t run away either, didn’t think all of this was pointless. Keith finds strength in that courage. In Lance’s ability to sleep in Keith’s bed, trusting that he would come to no harm. Most others wouldn’t trust Keith if he was the last person on Earth. He has half a mind to go to sleep himself, to curl up on Shiro’s bed and breathe in what traces of him that he can. To feel even a bit closer to him, maybe pretend that he’s just at a late shift at the power plant. With a disheartened ache, one that always leaves Keith feelin’ a bit too sad to function, he turns to shut the screen door.

But before he can, he’s spotting something in the road. Or, rather, someone.

For a brief moment, he thinks it could be Shiro. That he’s found his way home, that he’s been stalking across marsh and field and swamp until he could return to the place where he’d been at peace.

It’s a moment never meant to last.

“Bab?” Keith calls out, recognizing the flowing skirt around the old woman’s thick ankles.

Her flashlight is dim, the ruddy glow looking pathetic against the stagnant dark. With a curse, Keith grabs his own flashlight and makes sure to shut the door firmly behind him, locking it with a swift flick before bounding down the short steps to the driveway. He jogs until he’s close enough to reach out to her, steadying her feeble shuffle.

“You alright, Bab?”

The old woman grabs hold of Keith’s hand, brown fingers wrinkled from a life long lived. Her thick gray hair sits in a dreaded bun atop her head, glasses hanging from a colorful cord against the floral pattern of her long dress. When Keith glances down, he notices that she’s wearing her running shoes, the way she seems a bit too sweaty to have just walked from her small house to his trailer. She’d been coming around here for as long as he can remember, offering Shiro jams and jellies and the best baked goods either of them ever had the pleasure of tasting.

She was a treasure. She was someone Keith would do anything for, no doubt about it. She was also prone to wandering around at night, which always made Shiro a worried mess.

“You wanna come in?” He asks, keeping his voice steady no matter the anxious beating of his heart. “What’s got you out so late?”

She rubs at her forehead, mouth twisting with words that drawl. “Keith, baby.” She grips his hand tighter, practically wrapping him up to tug him closer. “They found somethin’ over yonder—”

“What?”

The word is shaky and leaving his mouth before he’s really understood what she said.

“I was out on my evenin’ walk but I went further than usual, felt like I got a burst of energy outta nowhere. Wandered all ‘round Marshall’s depot and St. Peter’s, all the way to the bayou. Wasn’t ’till I was ’bout to turn around that I saw some lights speedin’ down the freeway. They pulled in real close, stopped near the marshes.”
Keith waits, his skin going clammy.

“You know I’m nosy. Can’t help myself sometimes.” She wipes her forehead again and Keith guides her to their shitty excuse of a porch, quickly pulling out a dark blue lawn chair for her to settle into. He squats, holding her hand as tight as she holds his before she continues, “I knew it wasn’t our police the second I saw the cars, could hear their dogs barkin’ and echoin’ all around. Heard some of ’em talkin’ and they mentioned a body. Said it was up yonder, just a few feet from me, I reckon. I got outta’ there as fast as my ole’ legs could go. Faster than Satan on Sunday, I’ll tell ya’ that much.”

Nausea washes over Keith. It makes him tremble; leaf in the wind, tree falling from the strength of a surge.

“Did you hear who it is?” Keith asks, already feeling a fire lighting beneath his feet.

Bab can see it too.

She holds him tighter, “No, baby. But I know it isn’t him. I can feel it.” When Keith doesn’t look any closer to calming down, Bab grabs hold of his jaw, her thick fingers gentle but strong enough to hold his gaze in place. “You wait for the news, ya’ hear? Don’t go wandering to the marsh. Promise me.”

Keith nods but she can tell he’s not telling the truth. She can see it in the way he glances toward the road, as if he were already running a mile a minute.

“Keith.” She tries again. “You promise me you’ll stay home ’till mornin’. Don’t go off by yourself. Ole’ Bab can’t handle losin’ you too.”

At this, Keith finally brings his attention back to her. Her face is lined with age, wrinkled and fierce in her beliefs. In her love for Shiro. For him.

“I promise, Bab. I won’t go anywhere.”

She sighs and smiles, hand falling away from his face. When she stands he quickly moves to help her, noticing the way her left leg buckles a bit.

“You gotta promise me you won’t go walking so far again, then. Especially this late.”

She laughs and pats his arm, “I can handle myself, baby.”

When he offers to walk her home, she declines. She just turns on her old flashlight and lets her dress brush against her ankles, a low hum starting in her chest. Keith watches her until she reaches the end of his road, dirt and stones unsettled beneath her heavy steps. He watches her until she’s turned the corner and her figure is overtaken by the thick woods, no doubt already on the path leading to her small house. In the garden, holy figures stand guard, most of the stone covered with moss and little bugs.

Keith watches for her until the sun begins to rise, splitting the horizon in a fateful day.
Lance wakes from dreams of wicked things.

His body is damp with sweat, legs tangled in sheets that aren’t his own. With a bursting gasp, he rises with a hand to his chest, heart beating way too fast. He can feel it thump, thump, thump beneath his shaking hand. Eyes wide, he breathes in and the smells Keith’s trailer: last night’s spaghetti, pine, something like stale bonfire smoke.

Behind his lids, he still sees flashes of red. Pooling, thick drops that slide down the walls of the old, decrepit church by the river. He smells mud and salt and the Mississippi, all soot and thick, rolling water. He hears the whispering and it follows him beneath red water, never stopping, not even when he begins to thrash in the reeds.

Shaking his head, he pushes the sheets away from his body with small tugs, feet kicking for freedom. When the air finds his thighs, he in turn finds relief. It’s not cool inside the trailer but it’s not so bad now that he’s able to stand and stretch. Still shaking, he pushes his hair away from his nape before swiping at his forehead, grimacing at the beads of sweat that make his arm shine. He looks for his clothes moments before remembering Keith took them to be washed. Other than his boxers, he’s got close to nothing to cover himself up.

“Keith?” He calls, wincing at the way his voice shakes and cracks. Clearing his throat, he tries again. “Keith? Buddy?”

Nothing.

Lance risks a peek through the door, eyes roaming from one empty side of the trailer to the other. With an exasperated sigh, he turns and debates just getting into his car and driving home without his clothes altogether. But the thought of leaving without talking to Keith, well, it just doesn’t feel right. So, hoping the boy won’t mind, Lance scrounges up an old black t-shirt and a pair of blue jean shorts. Thinking back to Keith’s physique, Lance assumes they’re old, a bit tight on his thighs but it’s no big deal, especially considering the day is already a scorcher. He can see heat rolling in the dirt road when he glances outside.

With a sigh, he pushes away the unease of his dream and finally leaves the room. Sunlight filters in through the window above the sink and he’s quick to splash water on his face, washing away any lingering traces of sleep. He makes a quick stop in the small bathroom to brush at his teeth with his finger, grimacing at the feeling.

It’s not like he can stay here all day. He knows that, especially because he’d taken up too much of Keith’s personal space the night before. Still, he goes about filling up a glass of water before chugging it down, sighing the moment it touches his dry throat. Then, he pours the rest in the small plant on the table, smiling at the way the leaves have begun to perk up. He washes the glass and follows up with their dinner bowls, making sure every inch is scrubbed clean. Wiping the counter is fast and though he knows it’s not really his place, he straightens up the boots by the door and opens the curtains behind the couch, sneezing at the thin layer of dust that brushes against his nose.

Looking around, he knows there’s nothing else he can do to procrastinate leaving. He assumes Keith must have gone to work and decides to leave him a quick note, smirking at the thought of seeing it tacked up on the fridge.

*Hey, decided to head home. I hope you don’t mind that I stole some clothes. I’ll return them soon, I promise.*
Lance hightails it outside before he can crumple the note, making it to his car in record time. Before he drives away, he takes a lingering look at the shack near the woods. At this distance it simply looks like any other work shed, probably filled with old tools and a lawn mower. Only, he knows the truth. He sees the photographs, the reports, the way Keith trails connections with red string-

With a huff of breath, Lance quickly turns on the radio and rolls down the windows, happy to feel the warm wind send his hair flying. He hums and feels the sun soak into his bones, making his lids droop as trees and fields pass in a blur. Navigating his way to the town takes a bit of effort considering Keith lives so far out. Yet, nothing prepares him for the commotion he finds when he rounds the corner to Main Street.

His speed slows the moment he sees the flashing blue lights, people gathered around the entrance to the police station. Lance’s eyes trail across every face, looking for Keith in the crowd. The people are energized, shouting questions and talking fast, curiosity peaked by the squad cars parked all along the sidewalks. Then, a new dark car pulls to the curb. Officers swarm and people are kept back, all gawking at the person who steps from the back seat.

Cuffed at the wrists, Keith looks as if he’d been through hell and back. With the breath snatched from his lungs, Lance slams on the breaks and stares wide-eyed at the boy. He doesn’t see Lance but his face is kept downcast anyway, dark hair shrouding his expression.

Lance finds a place to park and practically sprints to the police station, heart thumping loud in his ears. He thinks back to the shed and Keith’s quiet disposition, the way he spills what he’s thinking and how he pulled Lance from the church. He thinks of his inability to leave things alone and he knows there’s no way he can leave Keith alone. Whatever the boy’s done, it can’t be good.

Pushing past the crowd, Lance manages to duck beneath the arm of an officer and find his way inside. Cool air meets him the second he enters, several eyes swinging to him before looking back at the men and women dressed in dark suits littering the small space.

“You supposed to be in here?” A cop asks, her blonde brow raised to her hairline. “You need to leave, kid-”

“Officer Thace!” Lance yells, ignoring her. “Sir!”

The older man turns fast, though is expression remains stoic. When he doesn’t tell Lance to leave, the woman lets him pass. He hurries through the tables and the rush of officers, face burning hot with worry.

“What’re you doin’ here?” Thace asks, “Lance, right?”

“Yes.” Lance winces, “Yes, sir. I saw, uh, well you brought in my friend. And I’m here for him-”

“Your friend?”

Lance nods, ignoring the imploring gaze of a woman in black. “Keith.”

At the name, Thace brings a hand to his face and rubs at his temple. He looks as if he’d rather
Lance had called on the name of the devil.

“You’re a friend of Keith Kogane?”

Lance looks over to the woman who spoke. Her eyes are blue but darker than Lance’s own, framed by thick lashes and light hair. There’s something intimidating about her, more so than the badge she flashes when it appears he won’t answer her question.

FBI.

Shit.

“Uh, yeah?” Lance’s face flushes, though it’s not really because he thinks she’s beautiful. Which, she is. But the thought of Keith being in trouble with the FBI? That makes an intense, overwhelming bout of panic ignite in his gut, far surpassing his instinct to compliment her. “Yeah. That’s right. I am.”

She nods at Thace and motions for Lance to follow her, right through the elusive back door and into a dimly lit hallway. There are a few cells meant to house criminals before they’re transferred to the state prison but thankfully Keith isn’t in any of them.

“Can I ask what’s going on?”

The woman glances over at him, “My name is Allura Altea. You?”

“Uh, Lance.” He brings a hand to his ear, fiddling with the lobe. “Lance Pérez.”

“Nice to meet you, Lance.” She leads him through a final door, her voice low. “It seems you’ve got yourself involved in a sticky situation, hm?”

“Can you tell me what’s happening? Why Keith’s in handcuffs, like some kinda criminal?”

She turns to him, finally stopping. Her hair is pulled into a high pony tail, dark brown skin covered in a thin, almost translucent sheen of perspiration. “How old are you, Lance?”

He clears his throat, “Nineteen.”

“So, no need to call a guardian.” She nods as if it answers many questions before finally leading him into a room on the left.

Once inside, he feels his nerves spike to even more extreme heights. Another man stands inside, his arms crossed, eyes fixed on the slumped figure sitting in a chair at the table.

“Do you know this boy, Keith?” Allura asks, voice expectant, even familiar.

Immediately, Keith looks up in shock. His eyes widen but all Lance can do is lift a hand, giving a small, pathetic little wave.

“The fuck is he doing here?” Keith asks, not taking his eyes off of Lance for a second.

Allura motions for Lance to sit before she follows suit, finally drawing the attention of the other man. “This is Adam Weiss.”

He doesn’t change his expression, though his eyes do take in Lance with fierce intelligence.

“Right.” Lance gulps and meets Keith’s eye, trying to figure out what’s going on without the need
“Now, I don’t feel we need to have separate conversations so long as you both cooperate.” Allura continues, folding her hands in front of her on the table.

“Can someone just tell me what’s going on?” Lance can’t help the annoyance in his tone, “Please?”

“Early this morning, Mr. Kogane was spotted near an active crime scene.” Adam starts, “We aren’t inclined to say he’s guilty of anything but it’s imperative that we understand just why he was there in the first place.”

“I told you.” Keith growls, “It was all circumstantial-”

“You were looking for the body.” Adam snaps, “It was obvious by the way you intended to sneak through the grass.”

Allura sighs, “We need to know why, Keith.”

He glares, ”You know why-”

“Wait, hold on.” Lance clenches his fists on his knees, bunching the tight fabric of his shorts. “Are you trying to say he’s…like, involved with a body? A dead body?” When no one replies, Lance knows this is serious. He glances between the two agents, “You’re really considering him to be a suspect?”

“As of this moment, yes.” Allura confirms, looking just as unhappy as Lance feels.

“Well, that’s bullshit!”

Keith looks shocked at Lance’s outburst, as if he didn’t expect defense at all.

“Excuse me?” Adam leans both of his palms on the table, looking at Lance from the top of his glasses, “Wanna repeat that?”

“I said,” Lance releases a large breath, urging himself to calm down. “that it’s impossible for Keith to be a suspect.”

Allura tilts her head a bit, “Why is that, Lance?”

“Because.” He clears his throat, heat blooming on his neck, “Because he was with me. All night.”

Before they can question any more, he continues, “And I... I dared him to go.”

He wonders if they can tell that he’s lying. They’re professionals, aren’t they? Trained to see the way a person tics, the way they try to get out of situations just like this.

“A dare.”

Lance nods, “Right. We uh, heard the sirens after we took a swim in the river. I was being a total dumbass. And as a dumbass, I thought it would be hilarious to dare him to go check it out. To maybe even take a picture.”

Now, he can’t even look at Keith.

“And you did what? Just went home while he wandered around in the dark?” Adam questions, writing something down in a slim notebook, “Thought it was funny to send your friend out even if
the situation seemed dangerous?"

Lance lets out a shaky breath, "Yep. Pretty much." He winces, "Like I said, I’m a dumbass."

Allura shakes her head and pushes a stray strand of hair behind her ear, small golden hoops glinting in the staunch florescent lights. "Other than your suspicious escapade," She gives Keith a sharp, pointed look, "there isn’t much we can hold you for. But I suggest both of you take this as a severe warning."

"Of course." Lance nods, trying to feign bashful guilt, "Won’t happen again. No more dumbassery."

Though Allura is standing, looking content with the outcome, Adam still looks unconvinced. He watches Lance, eyes narrowed behind the frame of his glasses. He walks over, hands shoved into the pockets of his suit.

"I’ll walk you out." He says, "I’d like a word with you anyway."

Giving Keith a lingering look, Lance unwillingly agrees. Adam keeps pace with him through the hallway, their gate slow.

"You grow up around here?" Adam asks, sliding his eyes to and from Lance every few seconds, "Know the area good?"

"Uh, no, actually." Lance decides honesty from here on out is probably best, "My mom and I just moved here not that long ago. Still settling in, getting used to everything. I’m from California."

"California." Adam nods, "So you’re a long way from what’s familiar, yeah?"

"I guess."

Adam stops him before they head back into the station’s main fray. He meets Lance’s eye, looking rather serious. "I’ve worked a few cases in places like this. Small towns, everyone seems to know each other…people like to gossip and tell all kinds of stories."

"And?" Lance shrugs, "If you’re trying to scare me, you’re kinda late to the party. My best friend got that area covered before I even left California."

"I’m not trying to frighten you, Lance. I just want you to be careful." He glances back toward Keith, who just finished speaking with Allura. She’d placed a hand on his shoulder and winced when Keith shrugged it off. "Since it’s apparent you haven’t known Keith for long, I want you to keep in mind that it’s best not to trust too easily-"

Lance scowls, "I’m not afraid of Keith. I’m not sure what you’re implying but I know he’s a good guy. He’s just been through some crazy shit." He practically snarls, "It’s his best friend that’s missing, you know. They’re practically brothers."

For the first time since they’d met, Adam’s face shifts. He gives a small nod, gulping. "I know. Believe me, I-"

“So I’m free to go?” Keith snaps, coming to a stop behind them.

Lance looks at him with relief, shoulders sagging a bit now that he’s not cuffed. Before Adam can answer, Keith is grabbing Lance’s wrist, face set in determination. He opens the door and stomps through the chaos, ignoring Thace’s call and the people still lingering outside. They glance
between the two of them but it’s not like Lance can stop and explain the situation. Keith is making a beeline for the other side of the street, boots kicking up rocks before they finally round the corner.

Once they’re free of the hassle, he lets Lance go before whipping around fast.

“Woah, what-?”

Keith shakes his head, expression dark and stormy. “Why’d you do that?”

“Do what?” Lance is confused, shocked to see him so damn intense.

“Now they’ll be lookin’ at you too.” Keith glances behind them before grabbing Lance again, hurrying toward his parked car.

“If I didn’t show up, you would’ve been screwed.”

“I’d be fine.”

“No.” Lance rips his hand from Keith’s, heart thumping fast in his chest, “You wouldn’t. You had no alibi, nothing that could make them less suspicious. You’re welcome for lying my ass off.”

He opens his door and gets inside, slamming it a bit too hard. Keith stands outside for a few seconds longer, looking at a loss for words. When he eventually slides inside, Lance is glad that the air is blowing so hard that it makes up for the silence. Dipping his head, he fiddles with his fingers. Thunder rumbles in the distance but it’s too far to tell if it’ll reach them. Beside him, Keith runs a hand across his eyes before pushing his hair back.

“I’m sorry.” He eventually says, voice quiet. “I didn’t mean… I know you saved my ass. I just don’t want you gettin’ hurt.”

“You’ve said that already.” Lance sighs, knowing they’ll likely have this conversation every time something goes wrong.

Though they’ve only known each other for a short amount of time, Lance has no doubt the boy is as protective as a wolf in a pack.

“You’re serious?” Keith asks, probably thinking about their conversation from last night, “You want to stay involved in this? With me?”

Lance nods, not hesitating for even a moment. “My Mom, she uh, believes in fate. And even though she’ll kill me if she finds out about all of this,” He smirks at the cheesy words, though he definitely believes in them. “I kinda think we’re in this together for a reason. So, yeah. I’m pretty serious.”

Letting out a loud breath, Keith leans back in his seat and shuts his eyes. There are dark circles beneath them, a testament to his apparent sleepless night. Then, in a whisper, he says what Lance was waiting to hear. What had been in both of their minds, kept secret from the agents in the police station.

“We gotta go back.” Keith says, “We need to see that body.”
dun dun dun the first body is found.

Some info: Allura went to high school with Shiro and Adam did too, though they all went their separate ways after graduation. This doesn't change the fact that they were close and this investigation is hitting close to home for all of them. Lance doesn't know of course, so more on that later.

next chapter: if you have a queasy stomach...sorry in advance. I'll try to keep it from being super terribly gross but *shrugs* it's a horror fic so..

Thank you to those reading and leaving feedback!!!! It's super awesome to see and I appreciate it, it definitely keeps my creative inspo flowing. The next few chapters will be uploaded a bit slower because i'll be at work all weekend but I should have something up by at least Tuesday.
Chapter 6

KEITH:

The night has returned with a fog, all the roads swept gray in the dusk.

Lance parks the car near the woods a good distance from the marshes, making sure to cover the roof with as much underbrush as Keith could find. They had to walk along the two-way road for a long while, steps crunching against strewn rock.

Kicking at a particularly large rock, Lance looks at Keith walking beside him. "So."

Keith raises a brow and glances over, "So?"

"What's your favorite color?"

"Really?"

Lance sweeps his flashlight along the ground and shrugs, "I'm bored. And I still don't know your favorite color which I should definitely know by now."

"Uh," Keith thinks for a minute, "probably gold or red. Like the wolf moon, when it's cloudy n' stuff."

"Huh. Very introspective, Keith." Lance purses his lips and nods, ignoring Keith's little glare. "I mean it. I thought you'd just be like, purple, and move on." Lance grins, "Mine's blue, by the way. Like the ocean back home. I like all shades but mostly that dark blue, the color it is when it's gonna storm."

"Like the sky right before sunrise?"

Lance nods, a smile lighting his face. "Just like that, yeah."

Heat settles on Keith's cheeks and he swivels his flashlight to the left, recognizing the start of the path he took the night before. With a small whistle to gather Lance's attention, Keith leads them off of the road. They creep into the tall grass with soft steps, each brush of their clothes and occasional squelch of water making them tense and hesitate. After they enter deep into the thick wild they don't talk much but the silence won't stop Keith from holding Lance close, making sure to grasp his hand tight as a vise.

"Watch your step." He mumbles, having already tripped a bit on an upturned mound of muck.

Lance presses his body closer, sneakers getting dirtier and dirtier by the second. Keith almost considers apologizing for it, as if he could do anything to save the white material, but then he remembers that there was no force in this venture. Lance chose to follow him; chose to lace their fingers and urge him on when Keith took a second to consider other options.

Retracing his steps from the early morning, Keith narrows his eyes against the fog. It's thick and rolling, brushing the top of the marsh and towering trees in the distance. The woods are pitch black already, though the sun has yet to set completely.
"Do you think they'll be coming back?" Lance asks, "Like, anytime soon?"

Keith shrugs and sniffs, noticing the change in the air. Something putrid is flowing in the wind. Buzzards wait in the branches, hawks circle above.

"Maybe." He glances at Lance, "But we'll see them coming. Or hear them, at least."

Lance bites at his lip, nervous. "Where will we go then?"

Keith just looks to the woods. To the dark that waits around them. Lance groans and doesn't need to ask for an answer. He just waits for Keith to catch up before taking yet another step closer, until their arms are brushing. Keith refuses to focus on it. He can't be distracted now.

They walk until the road is far behind them, until the land becomes less mush and more tough. Keith welcomes the stability and soon sees yellow caution tape spreading a very large perimeter, fluttering in the breeze.

"Getting close, huh?" Lance suddenly sounds very, very nervous.

Keith hums, feeling the damp touch of their palms. Lance tugs at him, stopping him in his tracks and makes a strange noise in his throat, face panicked when Keith turns around.

"Are you okay?" Keith asks, concerned.

Lance gulps and licks his lips, eyes flicking to the grass. "It's not...I mean I've never, y'know, seen a dead body. Well, I saw my uncle at his funeral but that's different, isn't it? It's not gonna be all fake like that. There won't be flowers and makeup and-" His chest shudders with halted breath, something wild rising in his eye. "I'm not backing out or anything but this is...this is really fucked up, Keith. This isn't some movie or TV show, this is real life and I'm about to look at someone who...who-"

Keith reaches forward, placing a gentle hand on the nape of Lance's neck. His fingers are warm and heavy and he hopes he's helping, not making things worse. He meets Lance's eyes with his own and runs his thumb on the slope of Lance's throat, up to the underside of his ear.

"Hey." Keith keeps his voice quiet, almost blending in with the crickets and cicadas. He waits until Lance is settled enough to pay attention, until he isn't so close to a complete breakdown. Keith doesn't blame him. He can feel it too, the way his own body wants to heave at the smell and the thought of what they'll soon see. He repeats in his mind: it isn't Shiro, it isn't Shiro, it can't be Shiro. "We're here together, right? I'm not goin' anywhere and if it's too much we don't gotta stay. We can hightail it outta here and never, ever look back. You just gotta say it and we're gone."

Lance takes a deep breath, eyes fluttering all over Keith's face. He tilts his head against Keith's hand just a bit, a slow nod working its way through. Then he's nodding in earnest, mouth twitching.

"I bet nobody else has had a first date like this."

At this, Keith freezes. He opens his mouth but nothing comes out and even though Lance is grinning now, Keith feels like he's been sucker punched in the stomach.

"It's just a joke, Keith." Lance huffs a laugh and starts to walk again, still sounding a bit shaken, making Keith's hand to fall from his neck. "C'mon. We need to keep going."
LANCE:

Lance supposes his night could have turned out a lot duller than this. He could be at home, watching some old movie, eating some microwaved popcorn or cheap pizza. He could be staring at his phone in hopes that Hunk will call or he'd be trying to sleep, ignoring the quiet of his house.

Instead, he's staring at a corpse.

The smell isn't what made him throw up first. Although it's horrid and worse than road kill on a sweltering day, it's not as terrible as the body itself. Wiping at his mouth, he rests his hands on his knees and lowers his head, breathing through his mouth. Another roll of nausea makes him shudder but he keeps it under control, already disgusted by the lingering taste on his tongue.

"What the fuck." He whispers, over and over. "What the fuck, Keith. What the fuck-"

Keith hasn't thrown up. But he has kept his shirt over his nose and mouth, face gone pale, fingers shaking. He gets as close as he can to the body, eyes raking over the torn, decaying flesh.

"It wasn't a wolf." Keith says, voice muffled. "This wasn't an animal at all."

"How do you know?" Lance asks, glancing at Keith before looking back at the girl in the grass.

She's young, that much Lance can tell. But she's also drained of her blood, missing all of her organs, tongue removed from her broken jaw. Her cheeks are hollow and her neck is torn to shreds, revealing only stained bones.

Tears prickle his eyes but he wipes at them before they can fall. Not here. Not now.

"I've seen people after an attack. They get hurt real bad, faces unrecognizable. But this..." Keith finally looks away, eyes glistening from Lance's flashlight. "This isn't right. This was intentional."

Lance nods, believing him. "So you think whoever's been making everyone disappear did this."

"Has to be." Keith scans the grass, looking for anything they may have missed. He's already taken dozens of pictures with an old camera he'd kept in a bag strapped across his shoulders, the flash bright in the dark. "There's no other explanation. People don't just die like this 'round here."

"Right." Lance turns his back on the body, instead looking out into the marsh. "People don't just die like this."

Keith sighs and walks a wide distance around the body, making sure not to touch anything. The coroner will no doubt be back soon to gather the remains and take the girl to the morgue, where she'll be studied in better depth. Lance doesn't like to think about what it's like in there, all cold and quiet and sterile. All alone like that, with no family or friends around.

"You ready to go?" Keith asks, quiet.

He doesn't touch Lance but he gets close enough that Lance can still feel his body heat. It's comforting and grounding. Lance nods and motions for him to lead, wanting nothing than to get far, far away. Maybe tomorrow, after he's slept and eaten, he can think about what he's seen. But for now, he just follow Keith back the way they came and pretends he doesn't feel eyes at his back,
watching him with bloody teeth.

"I don't wanna sleep alone." Lance had said on the way back, "I don't wanna go home, either."

Keith rolled down the windows, letting the sweet nighttime air travel through the car. The smell of the body lingered on his skin and it made him want to retch. He glanced at Lance and he could see the way the boy was staring at the moon, the crescent sliver surrounded by thousands of little stars.

"Come over, then."

So he did.

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KEITH:

Keith wakes to Lance standing at the foot of the bed, holding a pillow and a blanket from Keith's old bed. He looks apologetic, a bit awkward, but very determined. There's a question on his lips but Keith doesn't need to hear it to know what it is. He just tries to calm the wild beating of his heart and opens the blanket, lifting it so Lance can crawl in beside him.

When Lance turns to him, cheek pressed to his hand on the pillow, he whispers, "I can't sleep."

Keith had double checked that the door to the trailer was locked and he made sure his shot gun was under the bed, right where he could reach if he needed it. He had placed his knife beside him on a tiny table Shiro installed several years ago and he clicked all the windows to lock; not stopping until the place was a semblance of safe. But as Lance blinks at him, Keith wishes he could do more than that. He wishes he could hold Lance, or at least put a hand at his nape like he did in the marsh, and promise that nothing would happen to him.

But promises fall short. Things do happen. He can't stop it just like he couldn't stop Shiro fading away, drifting off, disappearing completely.

Still, he moves a little bit closer and tries to quell a hitching breath when their legs brush, a sweep of a foot on bare skin. Lance shuts his eyes when it happens, body relaxing into the mattress. Keith watches him drift to sleep, his own eyes growing heavy with slow blinks. But he keeps watch until the moon travels well above the trailer and on, until morning birds begin to sing. And only when he's sure nothing will happen does he finally let himself get some rest.

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LANCE:
There is a snake in the water. Lance is back at the river but this time the church is closer, the steeple towering above to cast dark, wavy shadows. There is a scittering inside, like rats trying to eat through the walls. It gets louder and louder, almost deafening.

Lance lays on his back but cannot move, feeling the serpent send ripples along the surface. He gasps and tries to look for the creature but it's impossible; he is frozen and he is alone and he is in danger.

*The church is safe.* A whisper enters his ears, promising him sanctuary. *Come, Lance. The church is safe.*

He gasps as he begins to sink, water turning redder and redder, covering his body in a sickly tint. It grows thicker, entering his lungs until he's suffocating, snake opening its maws to bite into his throat-

Lance sits up with a gasp, eyes watering as he sucks in blessed air. He grabs at his neck, running his fingers along the skin. His entire body is shaking and he's damp, though it's only from his sweat, not stale river water.

Beside him, Keith begins to wake. He groans and squeezes his eyes shut at the bright light filtering through the blinds, hair framing his face in pretty waves. He turns his face toward Lance and reaches blindly, fingers brushing Lance's wrist.

"You okay?" He asks, voice slurred from sleep.

Lance looks at him, studying him, watching little specks of dust glint and drift all around him. It's a tranquil scene and it draws him back to the bed, where the nightmare can't reach him, where there are no dead bodies and snakes and police searching the bayou. It is just him and a boy, the situation something he'd dreamed about since middle school. And even though Keith is probably the furthest thing from interested in Lance, he can still pretend, can't he? He can rest his head on the pillow and blink at Keith in wonder, eyes traveling all along his profile: his sharp jaw and the scar on his brow and the mole on his chin.

"Sorry I woke you up." Lance gulps and rips his eyes away.

"Bad dream?" Keith asks.

Lance just nods, agreeing with a small hum. He feels the bed shift and when he opens his eyes, Keith is turned on his side, staring at him.

"What?" Lance asks, heat flaring in his stomach.

Keith looks serious, "Do you wanna talk about it?"

Scoffing, Lance rolls his eyes and forces a small smile. "Nah, dude. It's no big deal." Keith doesn't look convinced so Lance tries to divert his attention a different way. "I should probably go. Coran's probably opening up the shop."

Still, Keith says nothing. So Lance goes about getting dressed, blinking away the last of his sleep before running a quick hand through his hair, knowing he must look a mess. But when Keith finally emerges from the bedroom, he doesn't look so hot either. There are dark circles under his eyes and he yawns more than a few times, looking like he'd rather collapse back into the bed than walk Lance out.
When they get to the car, they hesitate.

"So," Lance brings a hand to his neck, running some hair between his fingers, "I'll be back over later? To help with-" He waves his hand, not really knowing what they'll exactly do with the pictures and memories of last night.

Keith glances at the shed, "I'll get them printed and wait for you."

"Okay. Alright, cool." Lance sighs and gets into the car, suddenly giving Keith a goofy, bright grin. "You know, I kinda feel like i'm in the Scooby gang."

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KEITH:

Keith watches Lance drive away with an amused smirk. He keeps an eye on the car until it disappears into the early morning fog, the likes of which has yet to fully dissipate. But once he's gone, taking all the warmth Keith had woken up to with him, he knows he has to get the pictures printed fast. And he can't just do it at the damn library.

So, with a grimace, he gathers his camera and his bag and makes his way to his bike. The engine revs, interrupting the otherwise calm morning. And with a huff, he speeds away, hoping Pidge won't kill him for waking her so early.
Is anyone interested in this being updated and/or finished? Life’s been tough but I’m finding motivation to write again. Just let me know if you’re interested!

End Notes

hi this is a reupload from an old story of mine that i decided to dig out of the depths of my WIP folder. i hope you like southern gothic and all things spooky like me and decide to stick around!

you can find me on tumblr if ya want: wolfykeith

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!