Summary

Lance Serrano has made a life for himself living on the brink of civilization in the red dirt of the new world. He poses as an alpha with the aid of revolutionary and illegal suppressants. When joined by Keith they watch each other’s backs in a world of hungry wolves, ruthless gangs, unhappy natives and predatory alpha.

Then Shiro arrives.

Notes

All Galra are alpha, but not all alpha are Galra. Marmora do not ascribe, they are either male or female.
Beta are androgynous and intersex, sex varies on a continuum. Galra were engineered to terraform the land, farm the land, and build cities. Their alpha counterparts are leaders and
legislators. Beta are specializers, whose techniques and schools of thought are passed from parent to child. Omega are carriers and homemakers. In the founding of the New World, they’re little more than property and living legal contracts.
The Fringe

“Hands where I can see them!”

Ch-chunk!

There was nothing quite like hearing the sound of the shotgun you greased last night being cocked while your spine was out in the open. Lance slowly and meaningfully reached for the sky at the risk of burnt bacon. He looked over his shoulder.

Standing half in the dark half in the light of the windows that ran the whole south side of the house was the beaten omega Lance thought was dead yesterday. He looked worse now, if that were possible, with his jaw and cheek blooming purple and bandages poking under a shirt six sizes too big and knees shaking harder than a newborn kalternecker.

He shook the gun and Lance looked in his broken face. “You know how to shoot that?”

The stranger cocked. “Wanna bet?”

“There’s really no need to hold me at gunpoint,” Lance turned slowly, meaningfully. “I dressed your wounds while you were unconscious.”

“Mighty kind of you alpha. Sure you’re looking for some sort of reward for being human now, huh.”

“Shows how grateful you are,” Lance snorted. Louder, fangs flashing lightly, “and if I wanted to mate you I’d have marked you in your sleep, dumbass.”

The stranger’s eyes narrowed. He was probably pretty under the bandage and puss. The burn on his cheek would scar, though. Shame.

“You plan on leaving?”

“I sure as hell ain’t planning on staying,” he shook the gun and Lance tread forward at the crude gesture. He was led to one of several wooden posts that supported the slab roof. Rope was thrown at him. “Tie yourself and tie yourself good. I’ll know if you do it too loose.”

“What’ll happen to me when you go? You’ll leave me to die of hunger?”

The stranger obviously didn’t like how cool Lance was talking because he shook the gun again. “Someone’s bound to check on you sooner or later. Now tie it.”

Lance tied.

The stranger stepped close to check that it was good work. He hit Lance once on his shoulder with the butt of the shotgun to distract him and check the knots over. They were tight. He brought up the weapon again when Lance glared at him, hissing all the while.

“Sorry,” the stranger looked mildly apologetic. “I gotta make sure you don’t double cross me.”

Lance rested his temple against the almost square pillar and shrugged. “No hard feelings. Just one favor?”

“What.”
“Turn off the stove? The smell of burnt bacon’s getting to me.”

A doubtful look passed over his face, but he put the loaded weapon aside and abided. Shortly after he began opening and closing cupboards with a vengeance. Lance kneeled meanwhile, counting his heartbeat where his shoulder hotly throbbed. The rope chafed on his wrists. He stopped moving, but the slamming was grating.

“Water’s under the kitchen sink!” He yelled, and was satisfied when the slamming stopped. “There’s fruit set aside in an ice box under the mat over here. Just lift up the carpet. You’ll find clean clothes in the wicker chest under my bed and an emergency first aid kit in my pick up. Keys are in the kitchen—”

“Why’re you helping me?” his voice was close and Lance twisted to look over his shoulder. He walked quiet. That was unnerving.

The stranger looked at him with bitter doubt, even with one eye closed from what must have been a brutal beating. “Answer me. Why are you helping me?”

“Because it’s rough out there for an omega,” he whispered.

The stranger scoffed so hard and loud he threw back his head from the effort. “What do you know about living like an omega? Don’t patronize—”

“I am omega.”

He paused, parted his lips to scent the air between them. His brow furrowed with clear distaste. “Bullshit.”

“I keep the suppressants on a ledge over the window in my bedroom. Go for it if you don’t believe me.”

The stranger humored him. He returned with a biscuit tin container riddled with sealed plastic squares and a paper of handwritten instructions clearly outlining how the pills worked and how to take them. They were larger than most, and obnoxious white, but their home cooked quality and smell of some benign toxin coincided with universal omega memory.

The stranger looked at him. “How do I know these are yours and not some rando omega’s?”

“You really gonna ask me to drop my pants?”

The stranger’s eyes fell.

Lance crossed his legs and squealed, “No!”

“What do you have to hide? I’ve seen pussy before.”

Lance flushed. “Fuck off. Just vandalize my home and go. I’m not stripping for you just cuz—hey, hands off!”

He copped a feel...to Lance’s utter horror. When space came between them again, the stranger looked thoughtful. His dark eyes, dark lashes fanning them, dark histories behind, flickered to Lance’s bound wrist and his jerky fingers followed.

Lance rubbed the raw skin and took three steps back, and they sized up one another anew. The stranger offered the biscuit bin of illegal medications as a truce. “My name is Keith.”
“Lance,” he accepted his medicine. “I take this to mean we aren’t enemies anymore?”

“We never were,” Keith averted his gaze to the dirty rug. “I don’t have anything against omega. I just. I have nowhere to go.”

Lance softened. “I know what that’s like.”

“I’m sorry about your shoulder.”

“No hard feelings,” Lance repeated, shaking his head. “Like I said, life’s hard out here as an omega. It’s hard at all.”

“How do you survive?” Keith followed him as he took up the shotgun and put it away, crept up the window to stow the meds. “I mean, suppressants aside. How come you even smell alpha?”

Lance dropped and watched him a minute, gauging his trustworthiness. “How about we eat and trade stories? It’s been a while since I’ve had company that wasn’t coated in musk or sweat.”

Keith smirked something confidential, like there was an inside joke the product of friendship ten years old. The smile fell. “Sorry about the bacon.”

“It’s alright,” Lance rubbed his wrists.

“And tying you.”

“It’s fine, Keith,” Lance looked at him with no small sense of amusement. “Didn’t take you as the type to apologize much.”

Keith stayed quiet at that.

“You sit down, keep off that ankle.”

At the mention, Keith’s right ankle throbbed in agreement. “I want to help,” he protested.

“Pull a chair to this counter, then. Cut up and ground some stuff for me. How do you feel about venison stew?”

“You have deer meat?”

“Did you think my gun was for show?”

Keith didn’t reply.

“My neighbors call me when we go for group hunts. Split the spoils and stuff. You were right about someone finding me eventually but we still live far away enough that I could’ve died before Kolivan found me.”

“Kolivan?” Keith muttered through guilt and chopping. How surreal. One moment he was threatening Lance’s life, the next the man put him to work…

Lance was pulling something out the subterranean fridge where he had mentioned he had fruit. The meat was cleaned and gutted and looked bright. Fresh. Salted too. “Kolivan is my closest neighbor. He’s older. He’s nice. Made the wind chimes you see everywhere.”

Keith had thought the various mobiles sounding off at the slightest puff of wind were rather numerous, cacophonous really. He started when Lance slammed the meats on the counter across from
him and started carving through them with an exceptionally sharp knife.

“Who else lives around here?”

Lance glanced at him and glanced back down. Keith felt unwelcome suddenly. “Alphas, mostly,” he replied. “About six that are less than a day’s drive away. A few of them are married, a few aren’t.” He looked at Keith again. “Nearest city is twelve days off. Who did you run away from?”

“I don’t have an alpha husband or wife, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I’m just wondering if I should be expecting a knock on my door.”

Morosely, “No-one’s looking for me.”

Lance read the mood and abated. He put some meat aside and carved into more red marble. “I don’t mean to pry. I just want to know that I’m safe. That we’re safe.”

Keith looked at him and his sudden smile.

“After all, we’re a team now, right?”

Keith, despite being unsure and untethered, smiled.

“You need something for that itch?”

Keith dropped his hands into his lap with a palpable smack. “No,” he grit. “It’s fine.”

Lance glanced up again from cleaning his pistol. “You certain? No pressure, but I can make a salve.” He clicked the weapon together and switched on the safety.

“No.”

Lance watched him. He stood, “Alright—”

“I—will you teach me how to do it?”

“Huh?”

“The salve. Teach me how to make it.” Keith folded his arms after he’d yanked the sleeves firmly over his right red wrist. “I’ve been leeching off of you for days.”

Kindly, “I think I told you already that your company has been more than welcome.”

“Still, it doesn’t feel right. I want to start pulling my weight.”

Lance regarded him a minute longer. Eventually, “Come with me?”

Keith limped resolutely.

The air was warm for approaching the end of summer. In the blue haze, the sun was a cold pin-prick of light and the stars were a little green. Succulents grew in rusted cans on Lance’s steps to the verandah, and in the distance, studded in the shorn grass, were a series of twigs emulating a fence.

“I don’t know a lot about herbal remedies,” Lance said as he sat on the steps. Keith, swimming in the dark blue cardigan behind him, remained standing and attentive as Lance pointed at a flowering
seedling. “This is a baby juniberry. Alfor says they can grow in almost anything. They heal almost anything too. But for you, aloe vera. They said that this one came from the First World mostly untouched. Can’t say that for a lot of vegetation out here.”

Keith watched him pull at the barbed tentacles of a darker, juicer plant in a heavy broken cauldron at the base of the flight. “Lance, how long have you been out here?”

Lance drew hardy scissors from his dirty belt. “Ten years.”

“How long did it take you to build this place?”

“Huh? Oh, a week. The community helped. We help each other—trade a lot, build each other’s houses, repair each other’s equipment…I’m a good shooter so I trade furs, skins and meat for seeds or cutlery or, I dunno. I got a generator off Rax.”

Keith looked up. Community? Far as he could see there was just hills and dirt. There was jungle to the north. “Rax?”

“An alpha from this extended family west of here. The Balmerans. Nice family but you don’t want to get on their bad side—we should go meet them. You’ll be safer if people know you’re here.”

Keith shivered a little. “Maybe not just yet.”

Lance stopped snipping and gathered the dripping leaves in a checkered cloth. “Keith, how’d you get out here?”

“I…stole a horse.”

“Where is it now?”

“Lost it at the river.”

“River? What river?”

Keith was honestly surprised by Lance’s ignorance. “When I’m better I’ll show you.”

Lance climbed three wind washed steps and Keith slid aside to make way for him but Lance paused right in front of him. Keith didn’t like the scrutiny. “What?”

“Stop whining, I’m just looking at the bruises,” Lance mumbled. “How’re they feeling?”

“Fine.”

“Someone hit you didn’t they.”

Quiet.

“I can’t imagine someone would go through all that trouble of hurting you and not hunt you down. Omega aren’t common ‘round here.”

Keith averted his eyes.

Lance’s brow flickered as though with a mixture of worry and hurt, but it flashed into a neutral expression just as abruptly. “Alright. We’ll cut this longitudinally and scoop out the goop.”

“You ever had to treat wounds before?” Keith followed him inside to the space of the dining and
kitchen, leaned against a counter as Lance reached for things and rolled up his sleeves and started working like an apothecary.


“Parasites?”

“Don’t walk outside barefoot after it rains. And cover any cuts you have as soon as possible in the summer. The jungle encroaches on the land during the long summers and the bugs take advantage in the heat. They lay their eggs in open wounds that heal over and keep their babies safe.” He laughed at Keith’s expression. “I know. I don’t know where I’d be if it weren’t for Kolivan and Alfor!”

“Who’s Alfor?”

“Hm, oh—Alfor’s the owner of the land we’re on. Twenty acres. Not much in the grand scheme of things. Alfor bought this place in case things went south in the cities.” Lance was mashing. “He’s a doctor. And he travels a lot learning different ways to heal people. I saw one of his diaries once. He had a whole chapter on how the Marmora—”

“He’s a doctor? Is he the one who gave you the suppressants that make you smell alpha?”

Lance stopped mashing. “No.”

Keith waited. “Are you going to tell me?”

“Are you going to leave if you get your hands on them?”

Keith paused, startled by the sudden vulnerability in Lance’s voice. He straightened. “I mean. I wasn’t planning on staying here forever.” He was terse, “And you can’t make me stay by not telling me where I can find those tablets.”

“I won’t—by the ancients, why are you so quick to think the worst of people? I’m not trying to keep you here against your will.”

“You’re the one who…?” For some reason he felt embarrassed. He had felt threatened by Lance’s evasion. “Sorry.”

Lance wasn’t fooled by how on guard Keith remained. He stayed a little dejected. “Alfor has an omega daughter named Allura who’s a genius with medicines. She’s the one who invented the tablets. I’m due a trip to the city. If you’re healed up enough I’ll take you to her.” He nodded to the milky clear goo in his calabash. “Here.”

Keith accepted it. “Thank you, Lance. For everything.”

“Hm.” Lance still looked a little put out, but Keith didn’t let his mildly tortured heart brood over trying to figure that out. He was more concerned about spiriting away to the table and taking care of the injured skin around his fresh tattoo.

When Keith asked why all of Lance’s clothes were oversized, Lance blushed. “Hand-me downs from the community. They say I’ll grow into them.”

Keith looked at him dryly.
“Don’t look at me like that.”

“Aren’t you like, thirty already?”

“Twenty-seven, thank you and fuck off! I’m taller than you!”

“Doesn’t change the fact that you’re short.”

Lance spluttered.

Their friendship was fresh and unapologetic and liberated, though occasionally haunted by Lance’s wistful melancholy or Keith’s biting reluctance. By the second week of their acquaintance, they were sleeping in the same bed, attracted to the novelty of being safe beside another omega. Ironically, apart from when their cold feet would bump in the night under duvet and mosquito net, they were barely tactile.

Much as Lance was accommodating and a light along the tunnel Keith never thought he’d come across, his feet and belly were telling him to move on. A short autumn was coming and after that the long winter. Food would be scarce and hard to source. Staying with Lance would be ideal, but Lance’s skepticism about Keith being hunted was not unfair and he didn’t want to risk Lance’s hospitality to the small chance that he did have a Galra tail. He had to move on, no matter how thoroughly Keith was certain he’d evaded attention.

This mentality was what motivated Keith to keep his distance. Keith’s distance was in turn the reason Lance was less and less upbeat anticipating their drive to the cities.

“You depressed or something?” Keith was walking firmer, Lance noticed, though he still favored his right side.

“Hm?”

“You haven’t added another stitch or whatever you want to call it to your…uh, blanket.”

“Tapestry.”

“Whatever.”

They’d had this argument six times now.

“Just tired,” Lance rubbed his eyes and pulled at the dyed wool through the loom. “Not looking forward to the drive.”

Keith set aside the duffel he’d been packing and stood beside the cushioned stool where Lance was seated. He had a good view of the world here through the windows that stretched from the rafters to the floor. They opened onto a back porch where three wind chimes sang in front of another ethereal sunset. In the distance was the low and gradual rise to a mountain range further away than the visage purported.

“What do you do with the tapestries you make?”

“Sell them to Alfor and Allura,” he yawned. “Allura pretends that she’s the one who makes them and accepts commissions from people in the city.”

“Why don’t you just sell them to people around here?”

“Because alphas don’t weave, Keith. That’s omega work.”
“It doesn’t have to be,” Keith bristled.

“I mean, yes, you have a point, but I don’t want to be the guy that starts defying convention, alright?” He pulled a little roughly. “Technically I’m not—uh—I’m not in the mood to talk social constructs right now.”

Keith watched him a minute. He sighed and sank to his knees. “Have you heard of the concentration camps south of Taujeer?”

Lance blinked blearily and then turned to him in alarm.

“I was born in one of them.”

“What the f—”

“I presented as omega when I was twelve and the warden sold me to a Galra named Throk.”

“By the ancients.”

“It wasn’t that bad. He didn’t touch me once until I was sixteen. I was a favourite out of his harem so he let me get away with murder.” Keith ignored how Lance’s horror increased at “harem”. “I had access to his library and he let me sit in on all his business meetings with others so I started to learn how to balance books and how Galra smuggle and destroy villages for their trade. I was twenty when I tried to escape for the first time.”

Lance shifted and faced him.

“I wasn’t the favourite after I almost got away the sixteenth time. I was too expensive to maintain. He gave me away as a gift to a ringleader named Sendak.”

“I’ve heard of him,” Lance’s eyes widened. “He leads the largest gang past Arus.”

“Some say he leads the largest gang period,” Keith shrugged. “He’s… complicated.”

Lance dropped his hands from the loom. “Rumors reckon he’s the one responsible for the destruction of Balmera.”

“Who told you—oh. Didn’t think there was a relation.”

“Rax and his family named themselves after the home they lost. So far as they know they’re the last of their people in a hundred mile radius. Keith, you defending Sendak?”

“He’s done horrible things, Lance. But…you know the Marmora?”

“Of course. Kolivan’s Marmora.”

Keith’s eyes widened. “He is?”

“Why’re you so—”

“I’m half-Marmora.”

“You’re what?”

“I’m half Galra half Marmora. When Sendak found out—”
“You’re half Galra? What the hell, Galra aren’t omega! They can’t be!”

“Neither are Marmora.”

Lance’s eyes narrowed on Keith, “What does that make you?”

“What?”

“You’re an omega born to people who can’t be omega. What does that make you?”

Keith deadpanned, “Omega.”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“No, I don’t know it. What are you implying? That I’m a freak?”

“No! Will you stop picking a fight?”

“I’m not the one slandering—!”

A howl.

It was long and lonely and simple. Keith didn’t like the way Lance froze at the sound of it. Then there was a mad dash for the shotgun and the windows, and Lance drew a bead through the slats while Keith scanned the brush. The edge of civilization looked bored. Not a single blue pelt rose to the call.

“Should we be worried?” Keith whispered.

“Not now,” Lance withdrew the weapon. “Maybe during the winter. When they get hungry they come to human settlements. They know they can find food here.”

“You ever had problems with wolves before?”

Lance’s eyes darkened. He placed his shotgun aside and kneeled in front of Keith to roll his trousers up and over his knee. In his calf was no small divot textured with stringy flesh. Keith suppressed a shudder. “It was the third winter after I moved out here. I used to herd sheep then. I went to the barn to check on them and found most dead. Three wolves blindsided me.” He pressed a hand to his side. “I’d be dead if it hadn’t been for Kolivan.”

Keith stopped and crossed his arms on his knees. “You’re afraid of wolves.”

“I think it’s a reasonable phobia,” he defended a little hotly.

“Never said I didn’t think so.”

Lance eyed him and then stood. Keith stayed on his perch on the ground as he called, “For a guy who keeps accusing me of seeing the worst in people you’re pretty bad at trusting others yourself.”

“ Excuse me?”

“Ever since we met you’ve been pushing my buttons like you’re trying to drive me away and sometimes you get really defensive like, really defensive over stuff.” He stood. “You’re a damn hypocrite.”

“Well, fuck you too.”
“If we’re friends we gotta be honest with each other, don’t we?” he shrugged and returned to the windows keeping an eye out. The view remained innocuous and Lance stared plaintively.

“I suppose so.”

“Tell me more about Kolivan.”

“Hm? Oh, I guess you’d wanna meet one of your people, huh?”

“There’s that,” he bared mischievous teeth, “but there’s also the casual way you’ve been throwing his name around. If I didn’t know any better I’d say you had a little crush.”

Lance jolted to a halt.

“Does he know you’re omega?”

Lance was quiet.

“Oh—might explain all the wind chimes.”

“What? Why?”

“I’d say it wouldn’t be that out there to speculate that he had a little crush on you too.”

Lance still looked put out as he stalked to the kitchen, but to Keith’s satisfaction he looked far more energetic than when he’d set up shop before his loom. “It’s lonely out here but it’s not that lonely.”

“Don’t talk yourself down.”

Lance snorted. “I wasn’t. How do you feel about soup? We can use up the perishables before we leave for Arus.”

“Is this your way of avoiding the conversation?”

“They’re some lentils and carrots we can boil down in venison broth.”

Keith smiled broadly until Lance turned around and paid attention to his unspoken snark and moved to slap that silly Cheshire grin off his teeth.

“You don’t like beta?”

“I don’t not like beta,” Keith corrected, lukewarm wind blasting through his hair. “I just find them creepy.”

“All of them?”

“The way they look like a man and a woman at once. Like they’re something all their own.”

“Well, yeah,” Lance replied from behind the wheel. “They are. They’re beta.”

Keith’s face scrunched up from the effort to explain.

“You ever really talked to one?”

“Throk’s accountant,” Keith shrugged. “Wasn’t much of a talker unless it was about putting the
Lance hummed thoughtfully and Keith let himself drift into the scenery. The world was flat, flat, flat. From here, three days out from Lance’s homestead, not even the low-rise snow-capped mountain was visible. There was a pale straight line ahead of them during the day and stars during the night, sometimes a faraway glow of a depot where they topped up on fuel.

They stopped once to wait out a dust storm and slept almost the entire day through. When they woke up they were coated in a thin veneer of red and Lance revealed a penchant for black humor with a light threat of dust pneumonia. Keith had frowned at him.

“What?”

They got to Arus in half the time, what with them switching shifts. They arrived at twilight and one day after another train arrived in town, some pelt and gold traders from the south. Keith shied away from the window at the obvious stink of Galra and their short lived horses. His eyes went a little emotionless at the tall, tall, tall figures standing in silhouette of saloons and whorehouses.

“And here I thought Arus was considered a respectable town,” Keith grunted as he cranked the window to a close. “Never seen so many prostitutes in one place.”

Lance snorted, “What respectable town wouldn’t have its unlocked knees? Half of civilization as we know it wouldn’t exist if it weren’t for two things: water and sex.”

Keith grinned, eyes on the road. “And where are your friends?”

“Deeper in. They’re not on the main road. We’ll have to park by the Holts—fair warning: they’re a beta family.”

Keith made no outward reply.

The lights got dimmer while Lance droned, “Mami and Papi Holt are both scientists. One’s a doctor on machines the other on plants. Their two kids are like an unholy mix of the two. I think you’d like Pidge. She’s scary and dry. Like you.”

“You think I’m scary?”

“You held a gun to my back the first night we met—”

“But I—”

“—forced me to tie myself up and then hit me in the shoulder to distract me while you made sure the knot was tight.”

“In my defense—”

“Nothing to defend, my man. I’m just saying you’re a force to be reckoned with and I pray for anyone that gets on your bad side.”

Keith scoffed loud and grinning. As he cushioned his cheek against his knuckles, “Is that an actual compliment I hear?”

“I mean, if you’re digging, sure.”

“Hardly digging. You’re saying I’m badass.”
“When did I ever say that?”

“Ever heard of subtext?”

“Sounds kinky.”

“Damn you.”

“Woah! Idiot, don’t push me!”

The car swerved—horns brayed.

The Holt homestead was not a brick townhouse with a plastic façade as many other homes bordered Main and North Streets were. It was an independent domed cottage with a small yard lined off by a low brick wall. There were others like it studded along the dirt road. The closer the fields of corn and grain, the quieter the lights, the louder the crickets.

“Hard to think we were in the middle of a city in full swing three minutes ago,” Keith rolled his shoulders.

Lance exited and started rifling through the backseat for their bags. “Keith, help me with this.”

He looked away from the ghost white dome. It looked like a half-buried moon with vines growing up one side. “Shouldn’t we knock and let them know we’re here? Oof.”

Lance settled a fat backpack on his shoulders and cracked the door shut with his hips before loudly jingling his keys. Somewhere very close by a dog sounded. “Ah, there goes the doorbell.”

Under a yellow lantern a door swung open and a lean, androgynous silhouette poked out. “Quiet, Bae-Bae!” A bang of a mosquito screen being thrown back. “I’ve got a gun!”

Lance preened, “No you don’t!”

Keith chortled.

“Lance!”

Barefoot, with hair wild and a mess, with denim overalls too loose and the shirt beneath riding high and showing a hungry midriff, the character known as Matt dropped into Lance’s arms after a thoroughly complicated handshake. He withdrew arms akimbo and demanded, “Where have you been? We were expecting you weeks ago to—who’s this?”

Lance thrust a rolled up tapestry in Matt’s hands. “The reason I’m delayed. Fucker showed up out of nowhere and threatened to shoot me with my own shotgun.”

Keith let out a wordless call of protest.

“Language, Lancey,” admonished Colleen over Matt’s laughter.

“Mom! Lance got us another wall carpet!”

“It’s not a wall carpet!”

“Semantics, sweetie,” she kissed Lance’s temple and turned her eyes to Keith. She looked everything like her son. Just a little rounder and shorter and mature. “And what’s your name?”
“Keith, Mrs. Holt,” he extended his hand.

She shook it and it was with a firm grip. “Welcome to Arus. You’ll be staying long?”

“Everything’s up in the air right now,” he withdrew.

Lance said, “Keith wants to get his hands on some of Allura’s tablets.”

“I see,” her eyes turned curiously critical. “The two of you must be exhausted. Will you be staying with us or the Lyons?”

“Coran can find room for us,” Lance grinned, “though I did want to see Pidge before we bounced over there.”

“Katie and dad went to visit Uncle Iverson. They won’t be back till tomorrow,” Matt leaned in the doorway. “Sure you don’t want to stay with us? I could use a second on Phantasm.”

“That game is going to rot your brain out, Matthew.”

Matt shrugged, not denying it.

“Could you have us for lunch tomorrow?”

“Of course. And we’ll have a place set aside for you too, Keith.”

“Much obliged,” Keith returned gracefully.

“See you later!”

“Bye, Lance!”

They walked out of the warm light of the spherical bungalow and had their boots crunching on the ice under the pebble in the dirt road leading back to the glow of the city. They had bare essentials strapped to their backs and Lance balanced his other tapestry on one shoulder.

“That must be heavy. Give it here.”

“You’ll find it heavy too, dumbass.”

“We can take turns, dumbass.”

“Sorry,” and he gave it up. “Just testy. Tired.”

“Really? I feel great. It feels good to stretch my legs after all that time cooped up in the truck with bad company.”

“Hey!”

“I’ve been wanting to get out of that rust bucket for hours.”

“Don’t you dare talk about Blue that way. She’s a beautiful marvel of modern engineering!”

“Yeah but we live in the postmodern world.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Never mind. How much father?”
“Won’t be more than a ten minute walk,” he sighed. “Over there.”

The geometric narrow townhouses came into view again, this time facing away from urban fanfare. Each façade was different and brightly coloured and uniquely textured, each lantern taking on a distinctive colour of flicker or flare. They seemed to be fighting the monotony that disoriented Keith and he was compelled to ask how Lance could tell them apart.

“Here we are!” and he hopped up the short grey flight to a nondescript pink door.


Keith shifted the tapestry from one shoulder to the other. “Why the fuck is this so heavy? Did you weave silver into it?”

“Not this one.”

Keith hesitated. “You’ve woven with silver before?”

Lance opened his mouth to reply.

The door swung open and they both gasped at the breeze that sucked them forward. They blinked at the vision of a gentleman wearing a light pink gown gauzy from the knees down, a soft cotton hat over his hair and ears and mustache a little shocked.

“Coran!”

“Why, Lance!” And they swept one another up into a hug. “Good to see you, boy! We were expecting you a while now. I—oh? We have company?”

Lance still had his nose pressed to Coran’s cleavage as he replied. “That’s Keith. He’s been staying with me.”

“Hi.”

“Hello, Keith,” and Coran relieved one arm from Lance’s shoulder to wrap Keith in. He startled, dropping the tapestry, stunned because the old man was gentler than appearances. “I can tell that you have quite the story to tell. How about I show you your room, run you a bath and then get some food in you before I put you to bed?”


“You’re drugging him, Coran,” Lance giggled.

“I can’t help it, he looked so worn down,” Coran kissed Keith’s crown and he let out an abrupt purr. “You both do.” He smacked Lance’s forehead.

“Gross!”

“Get going,” he slapped them on their rumps and closed the door and rolled up their sleeves. “You know where.”

Lance chuckled and motioned to Keith. “C’mon puppy.” *Wham!* Keith tripped over nothing and fell hard into the unforgiving stairs.

“Jesus Christ!”
“Everything okay out there?” Coran called.

“Fine,” Lance moved the tapestry aside and Keith brought himself to rights. “Christ, that looked like it hurt. You okay?”

“I’m okay,” sounded a sobered reply. “I hope I didn’t wake anyone.”

“Nah, Coran’s the only one in right now.” Lance opened the third nondescript door to the left of the top of the stairwell. “If Sam and Pidge went out to Iverson odds are Allura and Alfor went with them. Iverson’s a retired sheriff of this town and owns a pretty big ranch about a day’s drive out. His wife is Pidge’s auntie and she grows every herbal plant you can imagine and then some. She sells to pharmacists like Alfor and alchemists like the Holts.”

“What’s the difference between the two?”

Lance threw down their bags and whooped. “Ask them.”

The room was small and warm with one big window and one okay bed smaller than Lance’s. The floorboards were raw and rattled and the whatnot had a face basin with clean water in it and clean face towels set aside.

Keith wanted nothing more than to throw himself into the bed. But instinct told him to bathe first. The same instinct is likely what made Lance sigh so heavily before he washed his hands. Pungent lemongrass filled the air, “handmade soaps,” Lance provided, and Keith joined him to wash up to the elbows and they kept jamming each other at their hips to move aside.

When they returned downstairs to the kitchen, Coran had prepared two glass bowls with roasted potatoes steeped in lamb and its juices. Some pears were set aside.

“Come here, sit down next to me, Keith. There we go. Now then, shall we get acquainted? My name is Cornelius Hieronymous Wimbledon Smythe, shortened to Coran among my family. I was Allura’s mother’s midwife and Allura’s nurse.”

“Nurse?”

“Coran raised Allura through infancy, practically,” and Lance made a rock-a-bye-baby motion with his arms before he sat. “Literally nursed her too.”

Keith blinked. “Oh.”

Lance snorted, “Never heard of nursing before?”

“I’ve never heard of a mother giving their pup to anyone else to feed.”

“Melenor and I were nestmates,” Coran provided as explanation. “We trusted one another with everything. Eat, eat.”

Keith ate. “I used to have nestmates. Well, kind of. We didn’t get along very well.”

“Kinda defeats the purpose of being nestmates, doesn’t it?” Lance slurped at his bowl. Coran gave a sharp smack on his wrist.

Keith looked thoughtful a moment. “I guess, but harem-mate doesn’t fall off the tongue as easy.”

If Coran was alarmed he gave no hint. “How many of you were there?”
“Less than twenty. Twelve at least, the numbers changed. There was always infighting among the mothers.” His eyes narrowed as he remembered. “They didn’t breastfeed, actually. Wanted to keep their teats up or something.”


Coran frowned, “Don’t tell me they were given than god-awful formula. That synthesized baby powder is no good, I know it’s not.”

“Formula?” Lance echoed with full cheeks.

“Work of the devil, never feed your pups the stuff, my boy. Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

At the mention of pups Lance ducked his head.

“So,” Coran returned to Keith, “I see you haven’t had the most conventional upbringing.”

“Far from it.”

“How’d you stumble across our Lance?”

“He found me beaten within an inch of my life. Fixed me up and took me in.”

Lance kept his head down. “And when he woke up he pointed my shotgun at my spine.”

“Why is that the first thing you keep telling everyone about me!?”

“Because it’s true!”

“But does it have to be the first thing?”

Coran laughed. “Eat, eat,” he persisted, and when they were finished he got them more.
Keith woke up in bed alone, which wasn’t as alarming as he thought it would have been after spending three to four weeks sleeping beside another body.

Had it only been a month since he and Lance met?

How time flew. He felt so established in his place beside Lance that he could hardly remember his life before—no, no, scratch that, he could if he tried. Air the room, air the room.

Keith stood and opened the single window that looked over the street they took the night before. In the bright of day, it looked blindingly different and the space race-like bungalows with their eerie roundness looked a lot closer than the walk felt.

He stretched, sore, and felt his hair on his shoulders. I should cut my hair. A brief wind waved his bangs. On second thought.

“Hey, you're up.”

“Mornin’, Lance.” He didn’t turn around.

“How are you feeling?”

“Sore as hell.”

“Drink this.”

“What’s it, a muscle relaxant or something?”

“No? I mean, I don’t think it is. It’s just mint tea.”

“Sugar?”

“Honey.”

“It’s good.”

“Stuff Coran makes usually is. Kept up all his pop-pop’s traditions even after leaving…uh.”

Keith turned to him expectantly. He was frowning, his bangs cropping up slightly in the wind. Keith threaded his fingers through Lance’s hair on an impulse he didn’t question. The minute he did Lance’s eyes and shoulders dropped with a little relief. He rocked his head playfully against the little anchor Keith had on his roots.
“They’re from the First World.”

Keith blinked, “What do you mean they’re from the First World?”

“Don’t tell anybody.”

He recoiled, “Why would I—who would I—”

“First World folk aren’t really liked on the frontier. Accused of thinking themselves as gods or some shit.”

“It isn’t all that unfounded if they really are from the First World like you say. The last colonizers landed two hundred years ago. Is that how old they are?”

“Alfor and Coran are older, obviously but…yeah, Allura’s more than a century.”

“Shit.”

“They came out here after Allura’s mom passed away. Wanted to help with the terraforming march. They move towns every forty years or so.”

“So people can’t tell that they’re immortal?”

“And also that’s just the lifespan of most towns out on the frontier.” Lance folded his arms on the window pane and was saddled such that his side was rubbing on Keith’s belly. Neither moved. “It’s pretty recent that places like Arus have been around for so long.”

“But that’s only because they have water and sex, right?”

Lance threw his head back and grinned wide. “Bingo.”

Keith chuckled.

“Finished?”

“Yeah. Thanks.” He handed over the empty mug.

“Coran said he wanted to take you to the market if you’re interested. Wanted to talk omega.”

Keith tilted his head. “You’re not coming?”

Lance sniffed, “I’m not omega enough, apparently.”

Keith was unsure what to make of the abrupt invitation. He assumed he would be subject to a harrowing inquisition, being as he was a stranger living with, by all appearances, Coran’s surrogate son. But when Keith was taken to that part of the market that was blockaded from car and trolley and introduced to the butcher, the baker, the cobbler, the vendors, he began to realize that he was being adopted.

It was a welcome, not an interview.

“Not a fan of fish, Keith?” Coran guffawed at the way Keith’s nose wrinkled, how his shoulders hitched when the newspaper wrapped haddock hit the bottom of the wicker basket.
“Not sure,” Keith refrained from pinching his nose. “Never had fish before.”

“Truly? Well you are in for a treat. I make a fine fried haddock if I say so myself. Thank you, Plaxum. I can teach you how to make it if you like—what with two of you being out there now I doubt Lance’s staple of bacon and beans would suffice for long.”

Keith grinned furtively.

“Let’s make a B-line for the produce section. With all those travelers in town we’d be out of citrus before you can say sloven day ho!”

The market sat in the middle of a massive quadrangle bordered off by two story townhouses and a half constructed gable roofed building that was trying to be a courthouse. Vendors were on its steps in pop-up stalls, handmade trinkets spread on their tarpaulins braced by split thighs and jaded chewing faces.

Within the quadrangle itself the stalls looked a little more permanent. They were unfolded wooden fixtures connected at their roofs by blue or pink sheets or thin bamboo screens or some sort of resilient paper to keep customers in the shade. Everyone got in everyone’s way, and the smell of street food mixed with the smell of caged chickens mixed with the smell of visiting Galra.

“Bunto, darling! Your tubers are looking exceptionally golden today!”

A tiny woman that looked like a child with wrinkles in a strange but simple headdress of found coins grinned. “Thank you, Coran!” She whispered, “The sweetest are at the bottom of the pile.”

A glint came to his eyes and he dug for them through her display: “Your secret is safe with me.”

She giggled before her large eyes settled on the young man staring at some distant thing. “And who is this?”

Keith startled, “Oh, uh, I’m.”

“This is Keith, my son.”

“Another one? You’ve been busy.”

Keith coughed in his elbow and Coran grinned shamelessly, “Haven’t I? Oh, these are absolutely gorgeous.” She hadn’t washed them, so the smell of earth was rich.

“I’m Bunto,” the woman produced a stubby hand and Keith took it to the elbow. “She blinked, oh, you’re Galra?”

Keith retrieved his hand. “What?”

“The way you shake hands—never mind. What with Galra spreading like a plague sooner or later we’ll all start shaking hands like them!”

Coran’s wrinkles upturned, but he’d moved from praising Bunto’s tubers to her berries.

“Uh,” Keith ventured and she turned kind eyes on his. “Um. Why are so many of them here today?”

Just as he said so, one of them moved at his back, close enough for him to turn but distant enough for him to register it was a hazard of standing with his back to traffic.

“I heard there was flooding in Nazxela and a real brutal sandstorm in Omegashield. Forced a
migration of them looking for food and better land, I guess.”

“The way things are going they won’t be moving back until after the winter,” Coran mused. “How do your scellions come out so succulent?!”

“Eggshells and banana peels and lots of love,” Bunto glowed. “And yes, it’s starting to look like Arus will become a permanent Galra settlement. But can I complain? They bring good trade!”

Keith wondered if she was thinking of the costs of the Galra’s permanent residency, but before he could ask Coran was sweeping him away. “Thank you, Bunto, we must be off. Full house tonight, you see.”

“Thank you,” she accepted his money with two hands and pressed her clasped hands to her forehead.

When they were away Keith asked what she was.

“Arusian,” Coran replied. “She’s a native, like the Marmora.”

“I didn’t know there were other types of Marmora.”

“They aren’t: Marmora is one indigenous people that we’ve bastardized into an umbrella term for all indigenous peoples. Alfor can tell you about them in more detail, their cultures and traditions.”

“Are there any others in town?”

“There must be,” and Coran craned his neck and squeezed them down a narrow way and they popped into another “street” that smelled of spices and heat and burning food. “Though apart from Bunto’s family I haven’t seen any.”

And he’d been living here for ten years, so that was saying a lot, Keith figured. He grunted from the sudden weight Coran hefted on him.

“Sorry, my boy,” he mumbled blindly. “How do you feel about a’rhoti?”

“A what?”

“It’s a type of flaky flatbread—you know what? I’ll get extra. It’s delicious. Twenty five, my good woman.”

Olia howled with laughter behind her stove, “On it! Got extra mouths to feed tonight, Coran?”

“Yes,” and he swung an arm around Keith’s shoulder, “My sons are visiting!”

“Another one? You’ve been busy!”

Keith was starting to see a pattern here.

“This is Keith. He’s been living with Lance.”

“Lance got company? Good for him!” she flipped something. “Planning on marrying, Keith?”

Keith fumbled, “Uh, Lance and me don’t—”

“Aw, ain’t that cute,” she seemed genuinely enamored too. “But that’s fine too. Lance could use a friend out there. He’s almost died out there too many times.”
“What grey hairs?”

They cackled.

Keith realized that yes, yes, actually, ten years was a very long time to be living alone, frequent trips to the city or no.

“He likes it out there,” Coran answered Keith’s unaired question as they moved around a fierce gambling group of hulking cowboys. “I asked him once why he doesn’t stay with us—he wouldn’t really answer. We love him, we wouldn’t mind. But he just keeps going back to that lonely house. It’s a good house, survived many good storms. And he does good work out there, tending to the land, farming or herding on and off. I think he likes the quiet.”

Keith could understand liking the quiet. “He’s not really alone. He mentions Kolivan religiously.”

Coran smiled in a strange way. “Kolivan is a good man.” He didn’t say it with praise.

Keith was suddenly scared to hear more.

“I like you though. And it’s clear Lance likes you too. I think you’re good for each other.”

“You do? Why?”

“I can’t say. I just have a nose for these things,” the curl in his mustache looked suddenly far too smug. “Call it a seventh sense if you will.”

“Seventh?”

“The way you’re around one another. It’s like you’re cut from different ends of the same cloth.”

“Because we’re omega?”

“That has its part to play.” Coran smiled. “Ready for a bite to eat?”

Keith was abruptly jostled. He kept his hold on the basket but turned to overcompensate for the blow to his shoulder. His irritation spiked before he could stop himself, “Hey—”

“My apologies,” the stranger murmured, glancing over his shoulder and tipping his hat and barely passing his pink eyes over him. Keith was absolutely captured however, by the grace the stature and albino he knew all too well.

He was still scrabbling for a name while the not-stranger disappeared to the ground, barely showing a hint of familiarity.

“Keith? Keith, are you alright?”

“Ulaz,” the name came suddenly. “Ulaz! Sorry, Coran I have to—” he thrust the wicker basket into his hands and took off. “Ulaz! Ulaz!”

He heard Coran's faded protest.

Keith was fast, but the grain of the crowd moved against him. “Ulaz!” He was in one moment pressed to some stranger’s belly, another moment, tripping around a gangly child. Had he a coin to his name his pockets would have been filched a dozen times over.
“Ulaz!” he was just about screaming himself hoarse, drawing panicked attention.

At last, Ulaz did pause. He stopped, and Keith stopped, still a yard or two away with his heart thundering and his throat bone dry and eyes trying to shy away from the sudden glare off the white white white white of the not-finished construction site. This was the back of the market, comparatively. The loiterers were tending to horses drinking from their troughs or trucks set up on old jacks.

Ulaz’s wide hat cast his face in black shadow. When Keith took a step forward, he was jostled from behind.

The world spun. He saw the sky, his boots, the cobblestone.

“Woah! Gotcha!”

Keith felt a broad arm under his waist. He held on as he was righted and looked to his savior: and blanched.

Tall and foreboding as the mountains. Dark from heritage and sun. He’d lost an eye and gotten a little weathered since Keith had last seen him. He smelled of new leather coat and dead cologne. When he smiled, his famous filed fangs smiled with him.

Keith grabbed the loose material of the pants on his thigh and stepped back. His eyes hurt with how wide they were.

Sendak tipped his hat and his salt-and pepper hair curled under it. Keith knew what that hair smelled like. “Pardon me. If I’d known that there were such fetching omega round here I would have tread a little more carefully.”

There is a feeling to being in a control test. There is the knowledge that you are not in danger, and that you are isolated to yourself and an irritant. What Keith felt in the abrupt hollow of his bones was that feeling.

Except there was no reaction.

“It’s…fine…” he somehow managed. He stared. He stared as Sendak tipped his hat and swept over his body appreciatively in a single glide. He stared as Sendak strode to Ulaz, who had looked at them with utter boredom. He stared as they walked to their fat horses and pulled out disappeared in Main Streets fray.

Coran, with the help of the astute network of astute vendor women, found Keith curled up on a stool beside a strawberry seller named Vreg who whispered, “He asked me for directions. I told him to sit down and wait for you. White as a sheet, he is.”

Coran set down the wicker basket and stopped in front of the boy curled painfully into his lap. He touched the taut outside of his shoulder carefully. “Keith? It’s Coran.”

Keith looked up with bloodshot eyes.

Coran scanned him for bruises. “Let’s go home, hm?”

Keith followed wordlessly.
Keith didn’t react to Lance when Coran put him in bed.

“What do you mean he ran off and started crying?”

“Shh, Lance, let him rest.”

“But—” he kept protesting even when the door closed.

Keith appreciated the quiet.

It would come to pass that Allura and Alfor were not in bed despite it being ten in the evening when Keith finally roused. He’d scrubbed his face pink but there was some red in his eyes that wouldn’t go away in this bright light, and the drawing room got a little quieter when he appeared.

Lance had been seated directly across the entryway with his arm thrown around a striking black woman. When their eyes met Lance stiffened but Coran was on his feet faster: “Keith, dear. How are you doing?”


“I’ll get you some tea.”

“I can—”

“Nonsense, sit down. Acquaint yourself!” And Coran hobbled to the kitchen and Keith sat in a lone seat growing redder and redder under Allura’s and Alfor’s appraisal.

They looked alike in that non-Holt way. They both carried an air of importance and ability, and had Allura not a telltale softness about her he would have thought them both alpha.

Alfor spoke first, his voice deep and light and clear, which Keith—and the uneasy omega within him—took to immediately, “So, this is the young man who held Lance at gunpoint.”

His horror shocked him out of his melancholy. “Lance!”

In the wake of their laughter, Coran returned with a tray of tea, honey, cups and a jug of lemonade. Allura pooled to the floor immediately, sitting immaculately, somehow. Her trousers flared with abundant material—Keith had thought it a skirt at first glance. “I’m happy we managed to catch you today, Keith. Lance has told us much about you.”

Keith glared. “Clearly.”

Lance declared, “Coran, the lemonade is refreshing as usual!”

“Oh hush, flatterer.”

Alfor rumbled a hearty laugh. “He mentioned that you were interested in healing remedies? The kind of trouble Lance gets in he’s sure to need the help.”

“Hey!”

“Daddy,” Allura admonished and Alfor straightened: “Pardon me, it’s not my place to assume you would, er, stay. You are well traveled, yes?”
“That’s one way of putting it.”

His shoulders softened a little. “If you were planning on moving on, where to?”

Keith’s eyes flickered to Lance’s obstinately guarded façade. “I’m...not sure. I was hoping to wait out the winter, if Lance would have me.”

Lance’s head shot up.

“We haven’t discussed it yet. I’m still thinking.”

“Well, if that happens to be your end goal, that would be perfect,” Allura handed him his tea. “The suppressants I’ve made have different effects on different omega. In Lance it works to erase his heats and simulate alpha pheromones. In Hunk it interrupted his ovulation cycle, rendering him temporarily sterile.” She waved her hand, “Details aside, if you stay for the winter that gives me ample time to catalogue your responses so that I can figure out a recipe fit for you.”

Keith’s brow pinched, “The results aren’t standard?”

“No. Unfortunately, my pills are experimental. I’m still figuring out many things about my own and my fellow omegas’ physiology,” she offered an apologetic smile.

“Don’t let her humility fool you,” Alfor chuckled. “Allura has made incredible advancements. The problem is that we can’t find many volunteers to experiment with and act discreetly at the same time.”

Keith understood discretion. If news of the new miracle pill got out, plenty subjugated omega might want to get their hands on it, and by extension the folk who profited from subjugated omega would want to get rid of it.

Allura smiled, “I’ve had quite a bit of help from Colleen and Sanda.”

Coran stood suddenly, “I forgot the laundry.”

“Leave it, Cornelius,” Alfor waved at Coran’s receding form, “its dark out!”

“I don’t want them to get moldy!”

Alfor sighed heavily and rose to his feet. Keith balked, because he was a large creature. But his smile remained paternal, “Pardon me, folks. When Coran sets his mind to something…”

Allura and Lance tittered when the back door closed.

Mildly curious Keith asked, “Am I missing something?”

“Coran and Alfor have been dancing around each other for years,” Lance knocked his spoon against the rim of his teacup until Allura smacked his knee.

“Decades if you ask me,” Allura sniffed. “Why, the only thing that’s kept them apart has been their respect for my mother’s spirit, meanwhile I’m sure if she could see what those two fools were up to she’d try to marry them off herself! She was a very strong woman, you see.”

She nodded, and Keith felt his lips curl upwards.

“They should marry and get it over with. They’ve already spent a few heats together. I hardly doubt it’s my presence that’s holding them back.”
Lance laughed and put on airs, “Allura, how vulgar!”

“Oh shut up city brat.” She threw a biscuit at him. “Or should I get started on you and Kolivan?”

Keith’s grin turned outright malicious.

Lance paled. “Don’t you *dare*!”

She turned to Keith. “Had he told you?”

“Allura!”

“No, not at all. Who is Kolivan?”

*Keith you cheeky little shit!*

Allura sat in Lance’s lap and tied their hands together to keep him from throttling his roommate.

“Kolivan,” she began over Lance’s rambunctious protests, “is a handsome silver fox who lives in Lance’s community. He’s Marmora, and mostly keeps to himself except where Lance is concerned.”

“For the last time, I don’t get special treatment! He talks to everybody!”

“But do the Balmerans have fifty plus sacred wind chimes in their home? Do the Garretts? No, now shush.”

Keith laughed at Lance’s defeated roll of the head.

“Apparently what happened is that Lance went up to Kolivan’s place looking for a trade. Furs for meat. Kolivan didn’t tell him he had more than enough fur when he made the trade.”

“He was taking pity on a city bug who was living through his first winter!”

“He was taking pity on the pretty young man who was polite and in over his head. Anyway—”

“You’re killing me.”

She wriggled her hips in a way that couldn’t be sexual if they tried. Their play was too dynamic, too easy.

“Anyway,” she insisted, “Kolivan goes out of his way a few weeks later that same winter to see how our boy is faring. Because, y’know, it’s his first winter or whatever.”

“He was being nice.”

“I wish I could find men that would be that nice to *me*!”

Keith’s lips twitched in a poorly hidden grin. He drank the fruity, flowery, frothy drink.

“Poor Lance is starving to death and half-conscious in front of a poorly made fire.”

“Leave me alone.”

“Kolivan picks him up and they spend the winter together.”

Keith balked, “The whole winter?”

Allura sends a knowing look over her shoulder.
“Leave me alone!”

“The whole winter. It’s a wonder Lance never got pregnant.”

“We didn’t have sex!”

“Allegedly.”

Lance buried his face into her hair.

Keith grinned, “Lance you dog.”

“Shut up, heifer.”

They were squealing with new delight when Coran and Alfor returned looking besotted with one another, a little flushed and sans midnight laundry.

Usually when Lance came over he and Allura would sleep together and talk love and science in the bed of the spare room. Tonight, they and Keith stared at the bed forlornly.

“It’s too small for all three of us unless we sleep horizontally and have our feet hanging off one side,” Lance speculated.

Keith turned to Allura, “Would you be against him sleeping with you in your room?”

“Not at all. Actually, the bed there is big enough for all three of us.”

“I don’t want to impose any more than I already—”

“Shut up,” Allura laughed and began dragging him. She was strong. “You’d be able to tell if you made yourself a nuisance, Keith. I actively enjoy your company and would be honored to be your nestmate for the evening. Will you take the middle?”

“I’d prefer the edge,” he admitted. He looked up when they were swept into her room. The ceiling was white and embellished with dinky, intimate fresco. The dresser was simple but ornate, and a matching mirror stood on the opposite side of a rug that looked suspiciously like Lance’s work. The bed was wide and housed them easily, and Allura lit a candle for ambiance.

“I’ll take the middle then,” she declared, and wrestled against Lance who’d been squirming to Keith’s side. “You’ll get him for the winter!”

“Unless Kolivan comes to visit,” Keith grunted.

“You’re two of you are assholes!”

“Language, Lancey,” Coran called as he stopped by. “Everyone in bed. Toes warm?” He tucked in the bottom of the blanket and squeezed ankles and tickled feet. “If you’re going to stay up all night at least make sure we don’t hear you.”

“Only if you promise the same,” Lance whispered.

“What was that?”

“It’ll be like we never came!” Lance repaired and Keith and Allura roared with laughter.
“Riiight. Good night, pups.”

“Night Coran,” they chorused.

Lance curled and spooned Allura immediately. Nose deep in her hair he made the allusion to sheep wool and cotton candy which she ignored in favor of asking, “So, Keith. We thoroughly embarrassed Lance this evening. Is it your turn, yet?”

Lance poked his head over her shoulder to hiss empathically, “Spill the tea!”

“I…don’t think I have anything half as entertaining as Lance,” Keith frowned. He flipped through his memories. “I was born in a concentration camp, was sold to a Galra harem at twelve, lost my virginity to him at sixteen, and he gave me as a gift to another Galra when I was twenty. I stayed with him for three years before I broke out and skipped towns until I got here.”

Allura had blinked through the whole story with a face she fought so hard to keep neutral it was almost comedic. When she frowned, it was with confusion. “How old are you?”

“Thirty.”

Lance whistled. “Damn, you look fine.”

Keith’s nose wrinkled at him. “Ew.”

Lance bristled. Allura ignored him, “What did you do for the seven years you weren’t property?”

Keith sunk into the mattress petulantly. “Sometimes I was a prostitute. Other times I worked on ranches tending to horses. I didn’t need to be ‘round alpha if I had a legitimate reason to tend to the horses.” He curled a little, “Then on Ladnok’s property, when they found out I was omega…I had to fight to leave.”

“I know Ladnok,” Allura whispered. “Not your most cultured landowner but she’s an honest if shrewd businesswoman.”

“You think Ladnok would be on the lookout for you?”

“No. Ladnok’s not the type to go hunting for farmhands that run away.” At Lance’s unspoken question, “And now I don’t think Sendak would be either.”

“Sendak?” Allura snarled, “Why in the world would he be looking for you?”

“He was…he had the second harem I was a part of.”

Allura huffed. “I shouldn’t be surprised he’s a purveyor of the traditional patriarchy. *Harems! In this day and age!* When omegas are voting and graduating from school! Those are the same kind of men who steal land from hardworking people like Kolivan.”

Lance melted against Allura’s shoulder solemnly. Keith shuffled into the give of the sheets.

Lance asked, “What did you mean Sendak wouldn’t be looking for your either?”

“I saw him today.”

Lance jumped up and leaned on his elbow and Allura mirrored his shock. “Are you alright? Is that why you came back from the market looking sick? Did he do something to you?”
“No. He didn’t even recognize me.” His voice went rheumy, “And I don’t know why that hurts as hard as it does.”

“Oh-oh,” Allura pulled him close and shushed in his hair and rubbed his shoulder. The calming scent she released was soft and minty, and Lance’s was bright and briny beside it. They both crooned at him in Omega voice, encouraging him to cry and saturating him in affection. It was hot and hard to breathe and overwhelming but Keith could find neither courage nor power to break away.

“I know he wasn’t a good guy but…he treated me with the most respect I’ve ever gotten in my life,” Keith sobbed and Lance’s heart broke, because Keith never looked so small until today. “When he found out I was half Marmora he introduced me to Marmorans and let me speak with them for however long I wanted. He cheated when he gambled and he ruined towns and killed to make money and he taught me to read and he whipped his employees until they bled and he listened to us when we spoke with him and I…I…I loved him.”

Lance grimaced, but he smoothed his cheeks when Allura shot him a glare. “We can’t help who we love,” she said with gravity.

Lance rested his cheek on Allura’s shoulder. “I think it’s good you saw him today, Keith. Now you can move on.”

Keith sniffled and did not reply.

- —

“Asking him to move on from Sendak is like asking you to move on from Kolivan!”

“I’ve moved on from Kolivan!”

“I think you mean to say he’s moved on from you.”

Lance flinched. “Low blow, Lu.”

She pressed on her pencil and the point snapped against her notebook. “I apologize. That was low.”

Lance leaned up from her workstation. Her lab was tiny but well lit at the back of the house. It shared a wall with the dining room and looked over the backyard. It was littered with glass vials and Bunsen burners and special microwaves and all that new age crap, and she watched him testily beneath her wobbling bun as he moved from her side to the cool window. The sky was grey today.

“Kolivan—”

“You loved him. That much was apparent. And there is no shame in loving.”

Lance was silent.

“I’m just annoyed with your flippancy over others’ feelings. If you feel so strongly for a man of your past, how can you not empathize with someone who does the same?”

“Because Sendak’s a monster, maybe?!”

“And Keith fell in love with him despite that,” she returned. That gave Lance pause. She tried to be gentle, “May I remind you that you will be living with him? You do live with him. And as much as he’s defensive and prickly he’s also so, so vulnerable. And he trusts you, Lance. So much. Don’t let this new piece of knowledge from his past interrupt the obvious chemistry you two have. And what’s
She smiled wryly, “We’re just nosey little parkers and bullied it out of him.”

Lance crossed his arms. “You think that a guy loving the man responsible for murdering and raping people in the name of civilization is worth trusting?”

She turned sharply. “Lance!”

“It’s worth considering, isn’t it?”

“No, it is not. You ought to be ashamed of yourself for thinking so! Keith loves deeply but never has he ever showed inclination to be a slave to his emotions. Anything but that, to be honest.”

“You can’t say that.”

She threw her chin in the air: “And why can’t I?”

“Because you don’t know him! I don’t know him!”

“You’ve slept in the same bed with him for a month at his most vulnerable,” Allura turned in her seat and fixed him with something curious rather than admonishing. “Why has learning that he is capable of love changed that trust?”

He pursed his lips and left her lab and she started hunting for a sharpener.

Keith was reading on the daybed when Lance did a quick turn about the house. He looked up at Lance’s entry and smiled in a way that turned Lance’s heart black with guilt. He pitched, “What’s up? Whatcha reading?”

“Everyday Herbal Remedies,” Keith showed him the cover. “Alfor said I could borrow it over the winter and that it’ll come in handy during the spring.”

“You plan on staying that long?”

Keith’s eyes flickered but did not rise to meet Lance’s. “I don’t have to stay at all.”

Lance hesitated. He folded his hands into his pockets. He snarled, “Dammit, Keith, stop looking like a puppy I kicked, will you?”

Keith set aside the book with a small frown. “I’m just letting you know that’s an option. You saved my life, Lance. That’s more than enough. I can’t ask for anything more. Like…like staying.”

Lance pursed his lips.

“What do you want, Keith?”

Keith stared at him and his throat convulsed like the words were physically forcing their way out. He murmured, “I want to stay with you.”

Lance felt a little angry. “Then stay,” he rebuked with a heat that had Keith startle back in surprise. “Why do you keep giving me the option of turning you out?”

Keith shrugged. He never answered.

Chapter End Notes
Writing is so odd. It's like when you say a word over and over again.

Editing is like saying a word over and over and over and over and over and over and over... 

Tell me what you liked and what you're confused by and what you're interested in. Tell me how you feel and what you were eating as you read this. I’d be honored to know what notes I hit in people.

As always, thank you for reading.
Chapter Summary

In which the definition of omega is addressed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#). 

Pidge barreled him into the floor. “You said you were coming for lunch!”

Lance wheezed.

“Mom said we were supposed to expect you three days ago!”

Lance wheezed.

“Perhaps if you alleviate pressure to his diaphragm,” offered helpful Allura, “he might be able to defend his treachery.”

Pidge sat up and Lance grinned through his gasp. “Aw, you missed me!”

She elbowed him in the gut. She crawled into Coran’s arms next, and Matt and Sam and Colleen appeared in the doorway each with a bowl of one thing or another. Alfor extended the dinner table and rustled up extra chairs and in moments the house was happy cacophony.

Keith found it overwhelming. Lance and Allura would nudge each other under the table and point at his wide-eyed expression whenever someone asked him to pass the mash or pass the gravy or take some more meat because he was too damn thin. His face was flushed from the unending excitement, and Lance was worried he might have to take him outside and give him a beat to recharge.

But Keith powered through and he smiled politely where he didn’t grin outright at jokes and stories passed around, and he answered questions easily in one liners.

Most memorably had been when Pidge, wonderful, intelligent, tactless Pidge shrieked, “Hey Keith, what do the numbers on your wrist mean?” She was playing around with code and the fact that it was only prime numbers (depending on how you grouped them) before Keith broke the levity, “I was born in a concentration camp.”

The table went quiet.

“It’s okay, though. I got out.”

In the stunned silence Allura reared forward, “Was…was that a joke?”

Lance beside her crossed himself. “Good lord, the world is ending.”

And Alfor spat his drink a little gracelessly, and Coran and Matt roared with laughter, and Pidge looked absolutely morose until Keith reached over and flicked his thumb over her wrist in reassurance. “I’m sorry, I thought it was funny.”
Pidge smile awkwardly behind her glasses, “To be honest, if it wasn’t my social faux pas I would have laughed.”

It was only in retrospect that Lance registered that Keith had lied, because the tattoo was new and was the reason Keith wanted to learn itch-relieving slaves in the first place.

But at the end of dinner, someone brought out alcohol and Matt and Lance wandered to the daybed and started talking like drunk old men and Alfor whipped out the piano and some mad skills and Pidge and Keith, Sam and Allura, Colleen and Coran began different variations of dance.

Pidge was absolutely robotic and flushed when Matt and Lance applauded her sarcastically from their perch. Her mother came to her rescue: “If you think you can do so much better boys, why don’t you?”

And so Matt leapt to his feet, Lance took his offered hand, and they descended into the most maladroit waltz Keith had ever seen. Alfor had increased the tempo to match them and at one moment someone screamed “¡olé!” and hip gyration and pretend fans were flying. It was delightful chaos.

True to Lance’s prediction, Keith and Pidge took to one another and Pidge had started begging her mother if she could stay to spend the night with him.

“There’s more than enough room,” Coran assured Colleen.

“I appreciate that,” she was stern, “but Katie has to go to school tomorrow.”

“I’ll get up early! I promise!”

“No means no, baby.”

“Dad!”

“I’ll have to stick with your mother on this one. You can see Keith tomorrow after school.”

“School is so boring!”

Matt laughed, “You’re graduating three years ahead of your class, you’ll be out in two months!”

Lance moved to hug them good-bye and got a lovely swelling welt courtesy of Pidge’s love tap. When the Holts left, the house felt a lot smaller. Keith mentioned as much.

“It often feels like that,” Coran sighed. “When we first moved in it felt so cramped. Now it seems good company has stretched it out like a favourite shoe.”

Keith liked the analogy. He watched the back of Lance’s head as he thought so.

“Keith?”

He jerked to attention and met Allura’s sapphire gaze.

“Come with me?”

Lance hesitated at the bottom of the stairs. He blinked a little too rapidly when Allura rewarded him with one of her dismissive smiles, “Don’t wait up on us, darling.”

Lance’s eyes shifted between them. “Don’t bully him?”
“When do I ever—”

“Two days ago you wouldn’t get off my dick about Kolivan.”

Coran brushed past with a blasé sing-song “language!”

Allura tangled her arms with Keith’s in an elaborate knot. She swept Keith away without further argument, and only after Keith was properly seated in Allura’s lab did he hear the staircase squeak as someone ascended.

She closed the door and breathed. “Ah! Finally alone! Lance can be so protective!”

Keith smiled briefly but it didn’t meet his eyes. “What can I do for you?”

“It’s the opposite, truly,” she rummaged through her drawers. Keith winced as Coran’s dutiful organization was dismantled in a heartbeat. “I believe your menses is approaching, correct?”

“You can tell?”

“It’s subtle, but your scent has changed a little. More—hm, how do I put it—pungent? Defensive?”

Keith sulked. “You can say smelly. I’ve been told that before.”

Allura laughed consoling, “Oh—no, no, not at all.” She came to him and rubbed and squeezed his shoulders. Something was held in the fingers of her left hand. “We all go through that, Keith. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. And your scent is absolutely not repulsive. It’s…fertile. Rich. Betrays your health.”

Keith offered a wry smirk, “Connoisseur of omega scents, are you?”

“What with the omega I’ve treated for this or that condition over the years I’d say rightly so!” She paused. “Have you started already?”

“No—truth be told I didn’t even know it was coming.”

“Are you usually irregular?”

“All my life.”

“Any pattern at all?”

“Hm…three, four times a year?”

“Does it coincide with your heats?”

“Heats are rarer.”

“Oh?” she flew to her notebook and wrote something down. “I’m going to ask you to take note of your cycle from now on. It would be wonderful if I knew the habits of your cycle before introducing hormone interrupting pills but…we are on a strict schedule—I believe you’ve mostly made up your mind about staying with Lance for the winter?”

Keith nodded.

“Excellent,” she scribbled something further. “I’m going to ask you to keep a diary and record your week by week reactions.”
“Things will be happening to my body each week?”

“Maybe yes, maybe no,” Allura handed him an empty notebook that was pre-ruled. “Maybe absolutely nothing happens and the pills have no effect. Write that down. Or perhaps you find yourself hungry all the time, or that you’re putting on weight although you’re not eating as much, or your nipples feel tender or you’re feeling friskier out of the ordinary…you know how your body behaves on a normal day. Write down things that you feel are unusual, no matter how small they are. And date everything. Please.”

Keith nodded. “Alright. And the pills?”

“Right here. They’re the same kind as Lance uses. Depending on what data you can give me at the end of the winter I might be able to tweak them so that they work better for you.”

“I thought pills were supposed to be standardized.”

“They are, but people are unique,” she sat. “And you’re the first person I’ve had come in with a wildly erratic cycle. I assume that I will need to make adjustments for that. Your data will be very useful—I’m grateful for your help, Keith.”

Keith shook his head. “You’re helping me.”

“And you’re helping hundreds of omega of the future,” her eyes twinkled.

He blushed. “Uh.”

“Not used to praise, are you.”

“Not from people who don’t want something from me.”

She sobered quickly. “I’m sorry. Technically, I do want something from you. Your data. But—”

“That’s not what I mean,” Keith said the same moment Allura said, “I know what you mean.” Their eyes met and they smiled.

Keith looked at the pills, “These are the same ones that make Lance simulate being alpha?”

“Yes,” her brow furrowed, “which is infuriating. I was completely blindsided because Lance suppressing his omega pheromones and producing alpha pheromones was the farthest thing from what I was aiming for. It made me consider that alpha is an unlocked physiology in each of us but… that theory remains unfounded. Lance is especially unusual because his menstrual cycle is perfectly predictable to the hour and his heats are non-existent with absolutely no repercussions.”

“Lance sure got the full package.”

“And by total fluke!”

Keith tilted his head, “Allura, hit me if I’m wrong, but did you give Lance that land so that he could stay close for you to study him?”

Allura grinned fiendishly and slapped his knee. She declared, “I love Lance. And quite frankly giving him the land wasn’t my idea, it was father’s.”

“Oh.”

“Though I must admit him being close is brilliant for my research.”
Keith’s mouth jerked. “So you’re saying you’re an opportunist.”

She did not slap his knee.

Lance had plans to shop for the season: find Keith some clothes, stock up on supplies…but that was before Keith started crying in his sleep. Coran produced sweets and warm water bottles, and then Keith spent an alarming amount of time in the bathroom throwing up.

“Do you think he’s rejecting the tablets?” Allura murmured from the door.

Keith’s grunt echoed in the toilet bowl and Lance finished tying his hair out of his face. “I dunno if the tablets are the reason why he’s throwing up but I can tell you they’re definitely rejected by now.”

Keith groaned, “I don’t think it was the tablets.”

“You usually throw up on your period?”

“…no.”

“Maybe it was something you ate?”

“I’m not allergic to anything.”

Lance frowned at Allura, “Do people throw up if they’re allergic?”

“Sometimes.”

“I thought they broke out in hives.”

“It depends.”

Keith threw up.

Coran arrived with a stomach settler. Keith was washing out his mouth and drinking it the same moment Allura loudly considered that Keith could be allergic to her anti-omega pills. Lance winced at the name and she apologetically diffused that she was working on a less dysphoric title before Coran dismissed her and her too clinical conversation from the area. She didn’t leave without insisting that Keith drink plenty of water to flush his system.

Keith sat on the rim of the tub and abruptly shrieked when he stood. Lance startled: blood was everywhere.

Alfor was curiously absent the entire day.

“You should go do your shopping,” Coran murmured when Keith was in bed again. “I’ll look after him.”

Lance shuffled. “I know but.”

“You want to stay.” He smiled broadly, “I’ve never seen you attached to someone so readily before. Even with Pidge it took a little time.”

Lance looked away. “We’re a lot alike.”
“You are. He’s a survivor too.”

Lance blinked wetly.

“The winter won’t take care of itself.” He dismissed him with a love tap on the rump. “He’ll be here when you get back.”

“Thanks Coran.”

“Of course, my boy.”

Allura left the house with Lance’s invitation. They walked hand in hand, dwarfed by the Galra visitors who stared at Allura openly but did little else.

“Brutes,” she snarled under her breath, curling under Lance’s chin. “You’d think they’d never seen a woman omega before.”

“Some of them likely haven’t. Guy omegas are more popular on the frontier because it’s believed they’d survive better.”

“Nonsense!”

“I know,” Lance appraised one coat against another. “Do you think I should get the bigger one for Keith?”

“Shouldn’t you wait until he’s feeling better so that you can let him choose for himself?”

“I don’t want to drag him into town if Sendak’s around,” his gaze hardened, his voice dimmed. “God forbid he gets another panic attack or Sendak actually recognizes him next time.”

“Ah. Right. Sorry.”

He shook his head.

“I recommend the bigger one, then. More room to add layers on beneath, if anything. Cozier.”

“Alright,” and Lance bought it. They moved on.

“Keith said that he’d be staying with you.”

“Mhm.”

“You two spoke?”

“Not for very long,” his face twisted. “Sometimes I think he’s just humoring me. I don’t know what he wants.”

“He’s not that challenging to read.”

“Says the woman who makes a living out of reading people.”

She snorted and slapped his forehead.

“Ouch!”

“I find he can be very expressive. His eyes, his shoulders…”
“Shoulders?”

“Shoulders.”

“Huh.” He stared hard at scarves and mittens and leather. “Kolivan makes better versions of these.”

“Then maybe you should buy from Kolivan. It would be a good opportunity to introduce Keith as well, and let everyone know you have an omega husband.”

“I—wait, husband?”

She shrugged, “Keith rejected the medication that could let him pretend to be alpha. Rather than having an omega free with all these Galra hooligans around, it might give him a little base protection if people are aware that he’s…yours, for lack of a better word.”

“I’m,” he hesitated. He whispered, “But I’m omega, Lu.”

“Not to the majority of Arus you aren’t. And out on the frontier the only people who know you’re otherwise is Kolivan and Hunk. It’s not a terrible farce.”

“It’s a terrible farce!”

“Why?”

“For one I can’t mark him!”

“Plenty alpha-omega couples live and love without marking. My parents did.”

“All due respect, your parents were aristocrats from the First World.”

She arched a brow in challenge, “So?”

“So, they’re weird!” His mouth twisted and he scratched the back of his neck. “And I dunno. Posing as a couple? Sounds a little intimate.”

“Just behave as you already do. You and Keith are plenty intimate.”

“We are?”

“You are,” she was enigmatic. Lance left her to her little secrets.

“Hey, you know…”

She turned to him.

“You can come out with us and visit sometimes. See the land and how we’re taking care of it.”

She smiled blindly. “I really do insist you invest in a phone. Don’t give me that look. Or at least a radio.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Oh, will you think of herding sheep again?”

He made a face.

“I was wondering if you would change your mind with Keith there now.”
Lance’s face stayed, “Nn—I’ll think about it. Maybe if Keith says he’ll stay-stay I’ll think about it.”

A ruckus ahead drew their attention. Lance held Allura close when she got jostled by a kid running past. “Sorry miss!”

“Hey,” Lance caught him at the shoulder, “what’s going on?”

“An alpha in rut, he’s gone crazy! Am goin’ get the sherrif!”

“Oh honestly,” Allura righted herself. “All this for one alpha gone mad?” She stepped into the fray.

“Allura, what are you doing!”

“Step aside,” she said coolly, and someone stopped her. “Excuse me?”

“This is no place for an omega, little miss.”

“I beg your pardon this is the exact place for an omega, in particular an omegan physician! You hold me back you let that poor stranger suffer all the more!”

Lance peered over her shoulder. There was a large man, Galra, being pinned down by six non-Galra alpha, all looked affected in one way or another in the exertion to keep the howling stranger down.

“Let her through,” Lance said to the man who was holding her back. “She’s Lyons’ daughter she knows what she’s doing.”

“I’m a doctor,” and she slapped some woman’s hand away and stepped forward without sparing a glance. Then she kneeled in front of the drooling, crazed stranger and reached into her pocket and took out a vial that had something crushed and strong smelling in it.

“Who let that omega in there?”

“Someone get her out!”

“She’s gonna get hurt!”

Lance kept watch for anyone prepared to interrupt her.

Allura waved the vial in the rutting alpha’s face, murmuring gently all the while. He jerked at first, red eyes closing. He stopped shrieking. She added her own smell to the mix. The alpha pressing him into the dirt relaxed first, and then the ring of people watching silenced.

And Lance stared at Allura’s bowed back and listened to her sweet nothing prayers and would remember this vision for the rest of his natural life and think that Allura was never ashamed of being omega. Never. And she made people know that.

Keith, irritable and lonely, kicked off the duvet.

“Fuck.” He regretted not cutting his hair now.

The open door sounded. “Knock-knock?” Coran sang apologetically. “I brought you some tea, if you’re feeling up for it.”

Keith groaned. His red skin possessed a sheen from the past two hours of irritable thrashing. He
burrowed his way into the sheets. “Mrnf.”

“I highly recommend it. Melenor and I used to share it when our cycles synced. Takes the bite of it.”

“It sure feels like I’m being eaten alive from the inside.” He welcomed the weight that meant that Coran was sitting on the mattress. He closed his eyes and stilled under the cool digits that pressed into his brow. He hummed when they shifted to his belly and rubbed.

Coran’s scent wasn’t as stark as Lance or Allura’s. It was clean, but it was soft, worn down by wind and sunlight. It smelled like a fuzzy childhood blanket felt.

Keith felt himself relax. He felt himself bloat. “I feel disgusting.”

“You look radiant.”

“Hn.”

“You should’ve seen Lance before he went on suppressants. Terrible menses. Would bite off the head of anyone who crossed him. Got in a bar fight once.”

Keith chortled, “Oh my god.”

“I heard he was a riot. Pow! Biff!” Coran did the gestures and everything, Keith didn’t have to squint hard to see the visuals explode behind him. “Started an entire brawl single handedly.”

“Oh my god.”

“Got a good clock on an alpha nearly twice his size. That was his first night in Arus.”

“His first night?”

“Mhm,” Coran at last prodded Keith into sitting up. He fluffed the pillowed behind his head and back and had him lean against the headboard. He shuffled the tea into his hands. Keith took a moment to appreciate Coran’s grace. He made to drink as Coran went on.

“He appeared out of nowhere,” Coran’s eyes glittered under his lashes. His smile was dusty, sentimental. “He slept off his bruises in this bed for three days. Didn’t speak to us for three days.”

Keith sipped, but it was too hot. He kept his eyes on Coran, moving, every joint blooming with emotion.

“It was hard to look after him at first.”

Keith was quiet. “…why?”

Coran looked up, past Keith’s gaze. “Because…he reminded me a little of my own son.” He sighed. “My boy…passed away. A long time ago. He was Allura’s age. Lance looked so much like him bruised and-and…I could do no less than love him.”

Keith’s lips and eyes fell to the rim of his teacup but he did not drink.

“Forgive me,” Coran breathed suddenly, broke the spell and squeezed Keith’s knee. “I just.” He grinned and he was crying. “Sorry. Lost in my memories.”

Keith shook his head quietly.
“How are you feeling?”

His cramping was miniscule, suddenly. He nodded.

“Yeah? Feel like you could eat?”

He made a face despite himself.

“Maybe later then.” His mustache curled.

Keith’s voice broke: “Coran.”

“How?”

“I’m. Uh.” Coran smiled. “Thanks for looking out for us.”

“Of course. I—”

The both jolted at the screech of KEEEEEIIIITH that shook the townhouse to its very foundations nearly as much as the elephant tripping up the stairs did. In absolutely no time at all Pidge landed on the mattress and Keith and Coran had to scramble to keep the tea from spilling.

Pidge, of course, was unapologetic.

“Hi!”

“Hi,” Keith went oof as she landed on his chest. “Wow, was school that bad?”

“Horrible. I have a teacher named Dos Santos, and he’s a total idiot. And he knows it too, that’s why he never picks on me when I raise my hand when he asks a question. He always picks on the kids that have their hands down and don’t know the answer so that he can say it out loud like he rediscovered Newton’s Law or something. And—”

Coran mumbled, “How did she get in here?”

“—so then I told him that he was being unfair, and then of course I get sent to the principal’s office, and for some reason adults always think that if a kid gets sent to the principal’s office sixteen times in one month that means that they’re the issue and not the teacher, so I had to sit through like an hour of shitty—”

Alfor cleared his throat from the doorway.

“Sorry,” Pidge squeaked.

Coran rose, “So you’re the reason this little monster got in.”

“Guilty,” and wow, Keith thought Alfor was irrevocably whipped. Coran only had to stand and smile and he held the alpha at rapt attention. Coran wasn’t unaware of it either. There was a lilt to his hips that weren’t there while he’d been ferrying tea back and forth. What power.

Pidge seemed ignorant the way she went on and on about an article she read about data storage in human DNA. Keith didn’t know what she meant and had to ask her to explain, which she was very eager to do, and Keith was impressed that he understood in the end.

“Hell, seems like you ought to take over that class from Dos Santos.”
Pidge lit up. “That’s what *I* said! That was what sent me to Principal Montgomery’s office the seventh and twelfth times.”

Keith grinned. He felt a thump through his body when she landed her chin directly on his sternum. Allura and Lance had coddled him, he realized in that moment, because fifteen year old Pidge was half their size and painting bruises on him within ten minutes of her arrival.

She peered up at him and her eyes glittered in the blue afternoon. He thought she was pretty as he raked fingers through her hair by an instinctual impulse he did not question.

“I didn’t even ask what you’re doing in bed. Are you sick?”

“Not really. You know about Allura’s pills?”

“Yeah, the suppressants.”

“They don’t agree with me. I threw up a lot this morning.”

“Are you better yet?”

He stopped. He didn’t know much about children, but that telltale glint reminded him too much of Lance when he was about to tickle him in the mornings. “If I say yes what are you going to do?”

“Nothing.”

Liar.

“My uterus is eating me alive.”

She seemed disappointed. “Should I move?”

“Nah. Pressure feels nice, actually.” He hummed as she settled. “You’ve done this before.”

“Matt and Lance use me for the same reason,” she pouted.

“Your brother menstruates?”

“Yeah, but he doesn’t have ovaries.”

“How does that work?”

She stared through the open window and its bluing sky for a solid eight minutes. Eventually he felt her shrug and heard her hum, *Iruno.*

“You don’t?”

“I have a vagina but I don’t have a womb.”

“Huh?”

“I have a scrotum, though.”

“How does *that* work?”

*Iruno.*

*Weird,* Keith relaxed his head into the fluff. *It’s like procreation is just…an option for beta. Not a*
rule. He felt his face pucker.

“Does that weird you out?”

He winced. “A little. Sorry. It doesn’t make sense to me that the parts are divvied up like that.”

“Hm. I guess alpha and omega have it easy when it comes to finding partners, huh?”

He wondered about that.

“Oh, when did Coran and Alfor leave?”

Keith looked at the doorway. “Uh. Maybe don’t go downstairs for a while.”

“Huh? Why? What’s up?”

“Just trust me.”

When Keith woke up it was to a cramp.

Night had fallen, the bed was warm, and his leg had somehow got thrown over someone’s jabbing hip. He didn’t need to see who it was. He didn’t need to smell who it was. He curled a little harder to wait out the wave and the body he was straddling shifted and breathed.

Keith wriggled. *Ugh.*

The bed felt damp.

“Lance. Lance.” He threw the covers off of them and shook his naked shoulder.

“Whuf.”

“I bled on the bed. Get off. I need to—”


“Are you awake yet? Move. I bled on the bed.”

“Oh.” He didn’t move.

Keith pinched his butt. Lance yowled and rolled over and crashed into the floor. Keith winced, more for the noise than out of empathy. But the floorboards everywhere else stayed undisturbed. “Really? Drama much?”

He felt Lance’s glare heat up his left shoulder.

“Turn on the light. I need to see if I got it on the duvet.”

A sigh. A *click!*

The duvet was untouched, but the fitted sheet and mattress had a pretty red rose where Keith’s loins had just been. *Ugh.*

“I hate being omega,” he growled. He didn’t see how Lance paused mid-yawn.
“Give me those.”

“What?”

“I’ll rinse out the sheets downstairs and take care of the mattress.”

“But—”

“You go wash up. Cloth or cup?”

“Cup.”

“Go wash up. Clean sheets are in the bathroom.” He yawned. “I’ll take care of this.”

Keith hesitated. Then Lance was all but kicking him out and wrestling the sheets into the inky blackness of the stairs.

Moments later, with his intimates and borrowed nightgown dripping from the shower curtain railing, Keith stood in the bathtub with tears in his eyes and hyperventilating. Eventually he crouched and turned on the tap and flinched at the cold water and watched with morbid fascination as a stream of his blood went glug swallowed by the drain. He splashed himself and flinched. It was cold water.

He splashed himself.

Knock-knock. “Keith, I’m coming in. The sheets are soaking and the mattress is fine. It had a cover.” He paused and slowly closed the door behind him. His voice was softer, “Keith, you okay?”

He abruptly began to cry.

Lance teleported to his side, panicking and twisting the knobs off. One hand he kept on Keith’s pink shoulder. His ankles were speckled bright red. He looked like he was bleeding more than menstruating.

“I-I-I—I—can’t.”

Lance rubbed his skin. “Can’t what, baby?”

“It hurts.”

“More than usual?”

Keith shook his head and breathed in and Lance winced. It was like he was coughing in reverse.

“Talk to me, I can’t help you if you don’t talk to me.”

Keith turned his bloodshot eyes up and rasped a single hot breath. “The cup won’t come out. It hurts when I pull it.”

“Coran didn’t teach you to take it out?”

Keith stared at him. Keith stared at the door over his shoulder. “Did he?”

“Stand up,” and Lance did the same and offered his hands to grant Keith leverage. “One leg up. On the rim of the bath.”
“Okay.”

“Lemmie guess, you’ve been pulling it by the tail, right?”

Keith nodded. “That’s not what it’s for?”

“No, it’s not a tampon.”

“Tam what?”

“Never mind. What you want to do is squeeze the bottom of the cup. Pinch it?”

“Yeah.”

“And then pull it down.”

“But what if the blood spills?”

“You’re in the bathtub, it’s fine.”

Keith grunted.

“What, want me to do it for you?”

“No!”

Lance smirked, “Oh, I see. You can fondle my nethers but when I do it—”

“I’m bleeding, it’s gross!”

Lance’s smile fell. He sat on the edge of the tub, right next to Keith’s propped up foot. He clasped his hand over his ankle. “Keith, baby look at me.”

Keith frowned at the sudden pet name and softened under Lance’s rare solemnity. His innards squirmed.

“There’s nothing gross about this. Bleeding is a part of what makes us strong.”

“I don’t feel strong.”

“Well, that’s because you’re anemic.”

“Lance.”

“Look,” Lance’s thumb flickered on his ankle. “I’m too fucking tired for this—look, do you know how strong your body and mind have to be for you to witness your body willingly shedding blood and treat it like nothing? You know how an alpha would react if they bled from their dicks?”

Keith frowned.

“They’d scream. They wouldn’t be able to handle it. They can’t handle it when their wives bleed much less themselves. And our bodies do it as a matter of course. Like we survive a war every month. This right here?” Lance tapped Keith’s flinching inner thigh, “This is nothing short of a testament to your natural predisposition to take the lemons life gives you and make fucking apple cider.”

“That’s not the saying.”
“Don’t interrupt,” he smacked a milky thigh lightly and Keith smirked. “Look, you’re a goddess. Your body knows it, it’s about time you know it too.”

Keith sighed, but tears welled up in his eyes again.

“Talk to me, beb.”

“I’m, uh.” He put his hand over where his womb would be. “I’m scared. It hurts like I’m pulling out my cervix.”

“That’s the suction. It’s what helps keep it up there to begin with. Sure you don’t want me to help you?”

Keith looked torn.

“First and last time. Just so that I can get you out of this damn tub and back into bed.”

Keith chortled. “Alright.” He flinched when Lance’s fingers grazed his labia without further prompt. All at once there was concern about his smell, about his hair, about letting another being with dreams and fears and disgusts reach into his own body.

But then something in him gave and he relaxed, and the water started up and he saw wine red get guzzled up. A damp cloth was handed to him.

Keith cleaned his loins.

“Feeling better?”

This was after the cup was reinserted—with methodical instructions Keith paid clearer attention to—he was in fresh underwear that was close against his crotch and ended at his upper thigh, he was in an oversized shirt Keith figured had been donated by one of the burly families Lance had befriended. They’d remade the bed together, checking each other’s hips and tossing pillows all the while, and then the lamp was off and they were leeching off of each other’s body heat.

“Thank you, Lance.”

“Sure,” and he nuzzled his forehead.

“I never thought omega as powerful before.”

Lance sighed. “It’s easy to forget. Allura reminded me today.”

“I don’t think Allura has ever been omega.”

“Huh?”

“She was raised to be alpha. She just. Happens to have a vagina.”

Lance screamed a laugh into his pillow. “You know you’re totally right?”

“Don’t tell her I said that.”

“I’m totally telling her you said that.”

“Ass.”
“Bitch.”

Lance trilled an omega trill, one that they knew in their bones meant happy and safe, like when Coran had embraced Keith for the first time, and Keith felt himself warm in his belly that Lance felt this way with him.

He’d never felt comfortable with dependents. Having someone, a whole other person, depending on him for something, even as mediocre as a favor, left him unnerved. Skittish. It was one reason he was so devoted to the knowledge of contraception and abortion. Yet, with Lance breathing on his breast, reliant on him for comfort and, somehow, happiness, Keith was alarmed that no matter how properly he searched his soul he didn’t feel the least bit out of place.

Their legs slid together.

Lance must have been thinking too because: “Keith?”

“Mf.”

“Will you be my nestmate?”

Keith’s fingers licked Lance’s spine. “I thought we already were?”

Lance pressed his nose into Keith’s sternum and grinned and hurt his jaw. “Yeah.”

Chapter End Notes

Actually, this fic was inspired by two other fics: “The Running” by yaoikazowie and “At the End of the Road with You” by rangoatemybabynsfw.
The Packs

Chapter Summary

Lance and Keith go home.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Loading up the truck was a competition in strength.

“This isn’t a competition, Lance.”

“That’s what the losers say.”

Keith set down the box suddenly.


Allura stepped out of the house to see Keith and Lance chasing one another around the truck, squealing.

“Men,” she growled before Coran smacked them over their heads with a rolled up newspaper. Alfor meandered down the steps a moment later with a crate of provisions they’d rescued from the market remains that morning. Matt, Colleen, Sam and Pidge were behind him with other tributes.

“Why’re you going back already?” that was Pidge, latched to Keith’s middle, scenting him by virtue of proximity and the fetching fur coat he was wearing that swallowed them both.

Keith tangled his fingers in her bird’s nest at the back of her skull. She purred a little bit. “Sorry. Lance wants to get the house ready for winter. Something about prepping the windows.”

Alfor sang that he told Lance that floor-to-ceiling windows were a poor insulating design.

Lance barked irritably, “Tell me that in the summer!”

Pidge cushioned her cheek into Keith’s chest. “Summer out there is the worst. I spent a summer out there. Spent the entire time naked.”

Keith chuckled, “Sounds like faulty insulation to me.”

Lance barked more offended defenses of his home. Colleen distracted him by pooling a latched box into his arms. “Oof, what is this, seventeen solid gold bars?”

“Close,” she grinned. “It’s a radio set.”

“What?” he whined the same moment Allura cheered, “Finally!”

“You’re out there all by yourself the majority of the time, Lancey. We worry about you. Frankly speaking forcing this into your home has been long overdue.”
He shuffled it into the truck bed reluctantly. As he strapped it down, “I wouldn’t get my hopes up if I were any of you. I don’t even know how to work this thing.”

“That’s alright, Keith does.”

Lance’s head snapped up.

“And he promised that he’d make you radio us in every other week.”

Lance looked at the back of Keith’s giggling head thoughtfully. “He’s not even my real husband and he’s already taking over my life.”

She smiled a secret smile.

Allura cajoled, “Try getting it up and running before winter ends?”

“No promises,” he hopped down and to the side as Matt aimed to land a crate of tinned meat and fruit on his toes. They made faces at each other and Matt moved aside.

Because he jumped from the bed he didn’t see how Colleen’s face shifted. She pressed her hand into his shoulder, firm and disciplinary, and he was suddenly reminded that she was a mother. He stilled, intimidated. She said, “Lance, please listen. I’m concerned about the influx of Galra in the area. I heard what happened with Keith but even outside of that they are dangerous, manipulative alpha. They will press into the frontier, Lance.”

Lance worked a grim jaw. He didn’t mean to treat their concern lightly.

“Allura, Coran and Alfor have each other and the Holts can find family near anywhere. But you and Keith are alone out there. Even while you’re posing as alpha that’s dangerous. I beg of you—work smart. You don’t just have yourself to look after anymore.”

Allura nodded avidly at her side. “I stuck my nose in some gossip and it seems like the Galra in Arus are all part of Sendak’s posse.”

“All of them? And none of them recognized Keith?”

“So long as the rumors are true and the losses they suffered at Omegasheild and Naxzela weren’t blown out of proportion, I wouldn’t be surprised if he had to outfit his crew with new men,” Colleen surmised.

Allura went on, “Apparently they’re interested in setting up legitimate businesses here. Security of land routes, cheap physical labor, that sort of thing. A lot of people are interested in investing, but I wouldn’t trust it.”

Lance grimaced. “So they’ll be around for a while.”

“Still worried about Keith?”

“And what, his weird low key defense of Sendak?”

Allura’s brow firmed.

“Yes,” Lance whispered. “But I’m not…judging him for it, if that makes sense.”

“Progress, I suppose.” She slapped his shoulder and grinned. “I’m proud of you.”
He scoffed.

Keith chose that moment to penguin walk over to them with Pidge still attached to his frame and boots and babbling.

Sam laughed from the stoop, “Katie, give the poor man space to breathe!”

“It’s alright, Mr. Holt,” Keith rasberried her hair. “Lance? We ready?”

Pidge chimed nooooooo and Lance stroked her hair and hugged Allura and Colleen at once. For Matt, a smack on the ass.

(Matt yelped.)

Coran refused to let Lance go without a big serving of bird and mash, this and that, something and else for them to eat on the ride back. Alfor refused to let Keith go without a sizeable load of books and a copy of a manuscript of aboriginal herbal remedies. The whole horde was still grinning and waving when Keith pulled out for Main and Lance was half out the window waving back.

It was evening, so the clubs and pubs and brothels were stirring. Lance scanned the crowd, parting titanic Galra from posturing alpha, wondering who and who were the faces Keith knew from a past life. When he stole a glance, Keith had his eyes forward and his jaw taut.

For an hour they were just quiet.

It was getting cold. Night aside, the day had been suitably depressing for the season. Keith had looked at Lance like he was God when he gave him the coat. It was velvety inside and soft fur outside—made out of some wildcat maybe, he didn’t know—fell to his shins and had a broad hood that he occasionally went out of his way to rub his cheek in.

Lance asked, “You like the coat?”

Keith’s head swiveled to him in the dark.

“What, you forgot I was here?”

“I thought you were asleep. You should sleep for your turn at the wheel.”

“Then make space in your lap for me.”

Lance had been half joking, but Keith switched hands and patted his thigh without looking, without hesitation. Not one to stick his hand in the mouth of horses, Lance made a bed there.

“Don’t I smell?”


“Myrrh? What—no, I meant my menses.”

“Hm? No, can’t smell anything. I heard that people can smell their own period blood more than someone else can. I guess it’s true.”

Keith palpably relaxed. “I guess.”

Lance pawed at Keith’s calf. “You didn’t answer me.”
“About?”
“The coat. Do you like it?”
“Yeah, it does its job.”
“That’s not what I meant.”

Keith’s brow pinched. Lance saw it. “What do you mean then?” He heard a tenseness in his reply. It was invisible to him two weeks ago. Allura was right: he was expressive.

“I mean do you like it? I got it with you in mind. I hoped you’d like it. It’s soft. And warm.”

Keith grinned suddenly. Looking up at him like this Lance could see better that crooked incisor half tucked behind his canines that made all this teeth look sharp. He switched his hands on the wheel again and put his free hand in Lance’s hair. “Yes, I like the coat, Lance. You sound so damn vulnerable, what’s gotten into you?”

“I think I’m catching it.”

“What, a cold?”

“Your menses. I get emotional on my period.”

His nose wrinkled and didn’t meet his focused eyes. “Good grief.” His smile had dialed down but was no less genuine.

“Coran told me he and Melenor used to be on the same cycle. No more than a day apart.”

Keith hummed.

Lance went on, “Coran always said he felt like Allura was half his daughter because he was so in tune with her mom. Coran’s and Allura’s menses have lined up for as long as either of them could remember.”

Keith hummed in interest.

“I read that nestmates can conceive at the same time even if they have different partners. Does that hold up to what you know?”

“No,” albeit Coran’s story flashed in his mind, “but I’ve never really had nestmates before, remember?”

“Oh. Right.”

Keith hummed.

“I used to wonder if Allura and me would get pregnant at the same time. Kinda made me think that if I slept around I magically wouldn’t pop out a baby until she did.”

“Do you want a baby, Lance?”

“I mean.”

Silence.
“Lance?”

“You can’t ask me that when my body is literally programmed right now to make me answer yes.”

“Your body isn’t you.” He scratched his hair.

Lance deliberated. By the time he answered he realized that Keith thought he’d fallen asleep, because the muscle in his thigh jumped. “In a different world, maybe.”

“…different world, huh?”

“More—I mean, *ideal* world. That’s the word I was looking for.”

“And what do you think an ideal world looks like?”

“Well, it would be nice to not have to hide the fact that I can conceive, for starters.”

“Amen.”

“And it’ll also be nice if Galra weren’t running around and destroying stuff. Doesn’t make me feel guaranteed that I can raise a kid in a safe environment.”

Keith hummed petulantly.

“And…if I had a partner that wanted to stay with me and live with me and raise a kid with me. I wouldn’t want to do it alone. It doesn’t really need to be someone I’m in love with—though that would be nice—just someone I can live with and who wants a baby as much as I do.”

Keith hummed.

“And it would be nice if I could raise them at home. Close to my parents and sisters and brothers and their kids. In our heritage and language.”

Keith was quiet.

Lance murmured, “Yeah.”

“Why’d you leave home, Lance?”

Lance turned so that his nose pressed into Keith’s belly. “I married a wife beater. And it was easier to get to Arus than go back home.”

Keith looked down at him. He was curled like a kid. If he wasn’t the only other person in the car Keith would have doubted that it was Lance who’d spoken.

“What happened to him?”

“He. Drowned.”

Keith winced.

“It wasn’t *me.*”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You were thinking it.”
“I’d drown him too if he hit me.”
Lance snuggled closer.

“Did he hit you?”

“Yeah. I mean, when we had sex he’d hit me. Part of it. But I never liked it. I told him to stop and he apologized—sorta? He said he couldn’t help himself. That I felt too good.” He was jeering the ghost of his ex now. Then he was somber, “But he’d spank me too. Not in the sexy way. You’ve seen the lines on my back?”

“Jesus Christ, he whipped you?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Cuz…I’d embarrass him in front of his friends or something. It wasn’t that weird in a God-fearing puebla, if I’m being honest, kids get hit to discipline them all the time.”

“But not to scar like that.”
Keith’s belly warmed where Lance’s exhaled harshly.

“Was he alpha or beta?”

“That shouldn’t matter.”
Keith shut up.

“…sorry.”

“No, it’s fine.” Keith’s fingers returned to being soothing. “You’re not wrong.”

“I’m just. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“That’s fine. Sleep.” He rubbed the back of his head.

Lance slept.

Lance woke up later than he expected to. Blue was still puttering and it was significantly warmer. When he shifted, he realized Keith had thrown a coat over him. He moved: realized his head was not pillowed on thigh. Alarmed, he peeked over the dashboard.

Winter twilights were polite things. They were not as glorious as their tropical counterparts. It was all horizontal, petulant mists broken up by vacuous light. It made the world look like a painting that didn’t try very hard to be realistic.

Lance blinked. They were at an outpost. Keith was chatting with the old man stationed here, another one of those silver foxes named Ozar. There was something about the frontier that just made the old men fit and humble.

Lance sneezed.
His crotch felt wet suddenly.

“Shit.”

He picked himself up and tumbled out of the truck and exchanged the empty ring of the car seat for the muffled whisper of footsteps and quiet laughter.

“Look who’s up,” Ozar called good naturedly and Keith turned to meet him.

“Mrnf,” Lance crashed into Keith’s shoulder and looped his arms around a body in parts that were deliciously warm. “Whumf.”

“Lance get off me.”

Ozar smiled, “When’s the wedding?”

Keith blushed despite that his hand was smack in the middle of Lance’s drooling face. “Oh. Um.”

“That’s fine, take your time courtin’. There’s value in that too.”

“Thanks…”

“It’s nice to see our boy finally settling down. He’s spent a mighty long time alone out there.”

Keith’s brow pinched. “Everyone seems to know Lance.”

“Well, he’s popular. Good manners, fair haggler, never mind he keeps good company with the Lyons and Holts and Iversons. He’s a good kid. Easy to like, easy to remember.” He pulled something from his coat. “Not pregnant are you?”

Keith flinched.

He shook a small marijuana kit. “Mind if I smoke?”

Keith relaxed, despite Lance nibbling on his shoulder. “Don’t mind us.”

Ozar took his time rolling, licking, sealing and lighting his spliff. “I appreciate you takin’ the time out to talk. I’m something lonely myself. Couldn’t get lucky like Lance and bag a husband though.”

“You topped up our fuel, talking’s the least I can do. How many vehicles do you see in a day?”

Ozar shrugged, “Three in a week. Not a lot of folks exist this far out. But outposts like mine make good money because there’s no competition for another day or two in any direction.”

Lance was a little more awake and started swinging. Keith rocked with him, “You trade?”

“Sure do. Lance ‘ere trades me furs, meat n’ fat all the time. You know the Garretts?”

Keith flinched.

“Kindly family. You should meet ‘em. They have a lot of omega kids and each one has good hands. Whatever they make I buy. Heard of Kolivan?”

Ceaselessly. “Yeah, Marmora.”

“Yeah. I’d almost say he’s cut from the same cloth as Lance and me but not so. He embraces the lonely. Never seemed to need another body. He’s good at making things for the frontier you never
thought you’d need.”

“Hm.”

Lance had started scenting him.

“Someone’s getting impatient,” Ozar laughed, and laughed a little harder when Keith changed colour and smacked Lance off. “You newlyweds get going. Thanks for the chat.”

“Yeah. Have a good one.”

“You too. Bye Lancey.”

“Mwrf.”

The last thing Ozar heard before they piled into the truck was Keith’s incredulous, “How the heck are you still asleep?”

He grinned and waved them off.

Lance wasn’t sleepy, he was clingy. True to prediction, his period came. He was irritable and nibbled (the steering wheel weathered his teeth marks), but mostly looped his hands around any body part he could find purchase. To Keith’s embarrassment, Lance laced their fingers together and held their hands between them while it was his turn to drive. It felt terribly more intimate than anything else they’d done.

Keith kept his chin in his free palm, his eyes on the distant plateaus, and his red nose to the cold glass.

Then Lance yanked him.

He fell gracelessly to the seat and Blue wobbled off the dirt road as Lance laughed.

“You crazy ass!” He slapped him.

“Sorry, I missed you.”

“I’m right here!”

“Come closer.”

“Ancients,” Keith crawled into his lap, reversing their positions from earlier. The bench wasn’t wide enough to take Keith with his legs fully stretched out. So with his head on Lance’s thigh he propped his feet freshly shed of their boots against the blustering window. Blue’s heater was poor, but outside was poorer and Lance said not to complain out loud otherwise she’d turn off the heat out of spite.

Keith decided not to test old Blue’s sentience.

“Are you always like this?” Keith’s irritation was cut short by a reflexive purr from artful fingers splayed in his hair. Lance rubbed his head with too much dedication to be giving the wheel the attention it deserved. “I hope you’re watching the road.”

“What’s to watch? This is sixteen hundred miles of mud. I’d sooner hit a Hunter than another driver.”

Keith frowned, “What’s a hunter?”
“Marmora fairytale of people who turn into rotting megafauna after falling out of grace with God and survive by eating the flesh of immoral men. It’s supposed to scare children into growing up into respectable adults.”

Keith shivered. “Kolivan told you that story?”

“Yeah.”

Keith looked up at him. Lance’s ministrations did not still.

“I can feel you staring at me, babe, what's up.”

“What happened between you and Kolivan?”

Lance’s mood plummeted. It was in the rise of his sunken breast, the twitch of his index fingers. Keith’s didn’t care much for the softness at the edges of his grin which turned superficial in a blink. Woah, and Keith felt guilty.

“I’m sorry, I—”

“I fell for him. We…danced around each other for a while. Eventually he said that he couldn’t invest in me. That it hurt him to think I’d outlive him and be left alone.”

“Is he that much older than you?”

Lance scowled. “He’s pushing sixty.”

“Jesus, Lance.”

“You don’t understand he looks damn good for sixty.” Lance sighed, “And he treated me with respect. Like his equal.”

Unbidden and unspoken was the memory of Keith echoing similar sentiments about Sendak. If Keith thought of it in that moment looking up Lance’s nose, he made no mention. Lance felt his heart and mind grow tumulus as he revised their parallels. It wasn’t the same thing, he heard himself trying to convince himself. It wasn’t.

Petting Keith remedied his immediate discomfort. Keith purred.

“You’re so handsy today.”

“I’m bleeding, leave me alone. I don’t hear you complaining.”

“I’m not. I like you touching me.”

“Awww, babe.”

“Shut up.” Keith shifted. “By the way, did you know you talk in your sleep?”

“I do? What do I say?”

“Mrf.”

“What?”

“Mrf.”
“I can’t hear you, you’re talking into your clothes.”

“Yeah, that’s what you sound like.”


Come nightfall they’d pulled aside. They pulled one of the three five gallon bottles from the truck bed to rinse what they needed to rinse their underwear and loins and cups, which was brutal, they were shaking out of their very skins—and Lance delivered a tactless joke about their wombs catching fever that Keith didn’t appreciate.

They wrestled Blue’s seat to recline as much it was able and set up camp between their folded legs. They made quick work of Colleen’s fruits, Coran’s cooking and Alfor’s reading to pass the evening before tucking in.

“What’s this word?” Keith turned the book upside down again.

With lips blue from jabaticaba, Lance muffled, “Coagulate.”

“Coagulate,” Keith repeated.

“Do you know what it means?”

His nose still pressed to the paper in Blue’s shitty yellow car light, “No, do you?”

“No.”

“Judging from the context I think it has something to do with bleeding. Stopping the bleeding.”

“Like clotting?”

“If it’s clotting why didn’t they just say clotting?”

“Because half of looking smart is that you have to be indecipherable.”

“Then how are learning people supposed to understand you?”

“Big words aren’t for learning people, it’s for learned people.”

“Stop talking out of your ass.”

“Admit it, it was a good line.”

Keith stuffed his maracuya into Lance’s grin.

“Mm.”

“Yeah, me too. Clean up and call it a night?”

“Mhm.”

They tossed the fruit peels out the window, bagged the rest and left it on the dashboard. The plates they’d eaten Coran’s leftovers out of they’d already rinsed and set aside. The truck smelled of the iron ring of fresh water and the bright twang of citrus. It was better than smelling of stale home-cooked food, however decadent it had been moments before.

They slept on Lance’s coat and under Keith’s. They tucked their arms around each other, they
twined their legs together, facing each other. Keith yawned big and loud and Lance stuck his hand in his mouth.

“Asthpltshft!”

“Cover your mouth when you yawn.”

Keith smacked his shoulder.

Lance, face still split, pressed his lips briefly against Keith’s. “Night babe.” And he snuggled in.

Lance was settled for all of three seconds before he realized that Keith had only just started to recline. Through the haze of the temptress of sleep he figured that the air was charged, somehow, therefore Keith’s lips against his again did not surprise him.

“Hm?”

“Hmm.” Keith moved his lips. No tongue, just soft, lazy squishing of their mouths. Lance reached up to finger Keith’s nape. They breathed as they kissed. No urgency. Their hearts did not race. It was a polite, sleepy affair.

It was wonderful. Lance began to lift his leg—hesitated—Keith’s cold hand slipped under his knee and pulled Lance’s thigh over his hip. Their groins saddled together, they undulated unhurriedly, squeezing a little closer each time.

“Keif,” Lance breathed around the cavern of Keith’s mouth.

“Hm?”

“What—mm. What are you doing?”

“Shush.”

And Lance shut up, eyes never opening once, and let Keith take care of him.

They fell asleep with their mouths embraced.

-

Another poetic morning later, Keith blinked awake to the fuzzy image of something watching him. Wordlessly, he turned, shuffling away into fur and the smell of them and their saliva.

“Babe, we gotta go,” Lance sounded like he was laughing. There was no escaping him. Keith’s nose was pressed against Lance’s inner arm. Keith’s chest against his chest, their nethers entangled such to shame pretzels. By burrowing deeper he was burrowing into Lance.

Lance’s hand shook the indecent spot between Keith’s naked hip and lower back. His hand felt broad, overwarm, long twiggy fingers made to ensnare. There was a spidery quality to his hands. A musical quality. All those thoughts bubbled unbidden in Keith’s throat.

Not for the last time his mind supplied that they had kissed. Keith thought it would be more profound than this, less cordial good mornings and more awkward hellos and, maybe, more passionate makeouts. He thought that Lance might shove him off at worst. He hadn’t been thinking ahead when he chased Lance’s flavor. He did remember a voice in him salivating: mine, mine.

Keith’s eyes flung open.
“That tickles.”

Keith blinked, and Lance giggled, “Stop,” pulling away from Keith’s lashes.

*Shit.*

Keith croaked, “Lance.”

“Hmm?” Lance easily raked his spidery, musical fingers through his hair. Lance combed his bangs back and he felt naked, all the sand in his eyes caked up and face unflattering from inevitable grease —“Keith? Jesus babe, *what.* You look like a ghost.”

Keith averted his eyes, rubbed his eyes. When he blinked he had more clarity about him and Lance kissed him chastely. “Alright, let’s go. Long day ahead—”

Keith snatched at the cloth and wrist where he could find purchase. Lance fell *fwumpf!* right where he began. The bench groaned. “Babe, *what!*”

Red: “Why do you keep I mean why.”

Slowly, steadily, humor and affection blossomed over Lance’s features. His lips curled and one delicate brow angled up and emphasized his already big, buggy eyes. “What?”

Keith scowled and fell back. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“Then don’t look at me like *that!* With your hair all over your face like you’re like you’re like you’re—I’ve already *been* between your legs, thank you very much, stop seducing me!”

Keith’s heart went *bang.* “I can’t seduce omega.”

Lance blinked his lashes dramatically, “Is that for lack of trying?”

Keith’s eyes darted away.

“You’ve never—”

In vague panic, “I *think my omega imprinted on you.*”

Lance cocked his cheek against his fingers. “I’d hope so if we’re nestmates.”

“No, not like that. Like. As. Um. As an omega prints on an alpha.”

“Can’t be.”

Brief was Keith’s crush. He felt the muscles in his face and jaw a little too keenly while he took in Lance, relaxed, free, ignorant. “I know I smell alpha but it’s not real.”

“*Feels* real.”

“It’ll go away. It did for Hunk.”

Something sharp and impolite poked at the splinters of his heart. “…Hunk.”

“Hunk Garrett. We didn’t see him while I was patching you up. He’s a friend of ours, and helps Allura with her omega research too.”

“…Hunk.”
“We’ll meet him when we get back.” He rubbed Keith’s shoulder. “You okay? You still look a little out of it.”

Keith rolled further into Lance, who squawked. “No. Just. Thanks.”

A pause. “…’f’course, buddy.”

It was both a shower and a tub.

It was square and felt like rough bricks. It was as red as bricks. The red went up the entire wall where the water from the gravity fed showerhead might splash. Keith had showered: now he soaked.

Most frontier bathrooms were separate from the house, Lance mentioned earlier. It was especially true for big homesteads or dinky communities. Keith was horrified to learn of the concept of communal bathing on the frontier. Much as he liked Lance, bathing was the only reprieve he’d ever been able to find from him.

If for nothing else, it was over bathing that he was happy that Lance didn’t live closer to the others.

As he pooled the water over his knees he considered that it might have been a selfish thing to think, because Lance begged for Alfor’s easternmost land out of security, not personal preference: the way he spoke about how Hunk described his brothers and sisters and in-laws and nephews and nieces and cousins would splash and play and scrub backs betrayed how lonely Lance was. Lance didn’t see his face in those moments. He didn’t see how his smile was pretty, parted, and heartbreaking.

Keith pulled his hair back. Maybe I should cut it, he thought. His fingers automatically started braiding. Maybe later.

He was in another one of Lance’s oversized hand-me-downs, this being fluffy trousers and thick sweaters that hid his hands completely. Lance was dressed similarly. He was sitting on one of his high chairs with his back to the cast iron stove liking away. It was situated on the west wall, adjacent to the open kitchen and front door, and had an askew ziggurat of wood beside its last legs.

Keith loitered in the dimmer corner of the living area despite that Lance had already looked up from tuning his guitar. He was backlit by fire and a happy chirp: “There he is!”

Keith smiled sadly. Coran’s and Allura’s and Ozar’s voices overlapped: he’s lonely.

“You didn’t mention you played,” he mumbled, weirdly vulnerable as he grabbed some floor by foot and fire. Lance pushed his big toe against Keith’s shoulder to throw him off balance before he properly settled.

Lance clucked his tongue and tightened a string. “We’ve known each other for all of what, five, six weeks? There’s a lot we don’t know about each other.”

“And yet we’ve already stuck our fingers up each other’s pussies.”

Lance spluttered gracelessly. Keith laughed.

“Ancients, Keith, you’re so fucking crass I swear!”

Keith hummed. The evening was good and quiet. If they listened close enough they could hear starlight. But only in between the eclectic stanzas Lance pulled as he relearned something. Keith
thought his hands felt a little empty, but he was sick of Alfor’s books for now. Alfor’s books and their damnable jargon.

Then, like a stream coming to life, Lance plucked a song out of the air. It was so organic Keith didn’t notice at first. He listened, looked up, stared at Lance’s weaving fingers, listened some more. Then Lance started to sing.

Keith started. It was not a language he was familiar with. But it was smooth. Sensual and low. Pleading. Keith didn’t like it: it had no business butting into his heart.

“You like that, acere?”

“Hated it.”

“Ha-ha—fuck you.” Lance stepped off the stool.

“What language was that?”

“Puebla.”

It…was a beautiful language. Keith couldn’t tell if it was sensual by design or if that was the way Lance spun it. “You have a nice voice.”

Lance froze in his transition to lie beside him. His head rolled up their wide eyes met. Lance didn’t have pretty eyes. They weren’t framed or shaped in that feminine way. They were jarring. But mostly they were emotive. Lance couldn’t lie to save his life if he met you eye to eye. Watching him now was like reverse empathy: Keith could feel the gratitude broadcast through the air.

He scratched his pinking cheek. “What, people don’t tell you that often?”

“No. You should hear my brothers sing. They are angels. Alpha in a thirty mile radius fall at their feet! They make you feel, you know?” and his accent bled through, suddenly. “They could make you feel. You could be six, or sixty, don’t understand a word. But you feel miserable or elated or grateful.” He reclined. “They got that from our mother.”

Keith got to his feet and pulled two sheets loose. They huddled together. Keith was palming Lance’s ice cold toes when he mumbled, “Tell me about her.”

“Who?”

“Your mother.”

Lance blinked at him before he consulted the fire. “My mother…is strong. The way you’d expect a mother to be. She raised sixteen kids. My brothers and sisters, five, and then my older brother’s kids, that’s seven, then her sister’s kids, that’s ten, then some of our friends who’d play football with us in the rain.”

“You’d play when it was raining?”

Lance grinned, “Yeah. You’d get ringworm but…it just looks epic to run and kick and arcs of water splash in your wake.” They rubbed shoulders.

Keith prompted Lance with a new question each time he reached for his guitar or seemed to drop asleep. By the time they were lacing their legs together Lance was speaking almost exclusively in Puebla.
“Go to sleep, mango,” and Lance kissed his lips. “I’m tired.”

“One last one.”

“No.”

“Lance is a weird name from someone who comes from the pueblas.”
Lance’s eyes opened and Keith bit his tongue, because the fire caught on his top lashes and made him look like he was made of light.

“Lance is…well. My birth name was Leandro.”

“Leandro,” Keith repeated with reverence and perfect trill.
Lance swallowed and went closed his eyes. “Go to sleep.”

“What does Leandro mean?”

“Sleep, Keith.”

“Did you change your name because you didn’t want your husband’s friends to avenge his death?”

“I told you I didn’t drown him!”

“That’s what a guilty person would say.”
Lance throttled him.

Chapter End Notes

The last chapter of the establishment arc, according to my outline, but those things are never consistent.
Our Community

Chapter Summary

In which Keith is introduced as Lance's husband.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Keith learned that Lance did not like radios.

Blue had a radio. Every time Keith moved for it, Lance smacked his hand away. Lance left the erection of the radio Colleen forced on them entirely up to Keith. The most he had done was cajole him down from the roof when he was erecting the antenna.

“How is that tiny little thing going to hear what Allura’s saying from the other side of the country anyway?”

“The broadcast waves—”

“Is just anyone going to be able to eavesdrop on what we say to each other?”

“If they’re on the same frequency—”

“Does that mean we can spy on anyone else?”

Keith threw something sharp and javelin shaped at his roommate.

True to prediction, Keith took over Lance’s life. He’d taken the weeks Keith was injured or sick for granted. Keith was fit. And he cleaned the entire cabin in one furious day, tuned Blue in an afternoon, and calculated the equipment they’d need for the winter, catalogued and outlined in a book that displayed his time under Throk’s accountant. The man was a machine.

“We’ll need more food.”

“More food?”

“You keep forgetting there’s two of us here now.”

“Sure, but I didn’t expect you to eat like a horse.”

Keith threw something round and wooden at his roommate.

It had quickly become tradition.

In between bickering, wood gathering, clothes mending and last minute sheet washing, they would puzzle over Alfor’s books and throw words at each other in Altean, Puebla or even Marmora.

Lance learned from Kolivan.

(Of course.)
“I’m starting to think your beloved Kolivan isn’t real,” Keith grunted during his whittling. He blew on the latest figuring sharp and fast and set it beside the three knights and eighteen pawns he’d already fashioned. He was eager to teach Lance how to play chess.

“You think I made all these wind chimes myself?”

Keith thought not. Though he hadn’t seen Lance’s craft in anything that wasn’t textiles, the bone, shaped rock and glass didn’t match Lance’s style. Still: “You have spent a lot of time by yourself…”

Lance chucked something at his head. “Ass.”

Keith chuckled and took a break. Lance was working his loom again. His fingers worked fast. They worked like if Lance’s head dropped off they’d still move and complete the…uh…

“Tapestry?”

“Blanket.”

Keith made a strangling motion with his hands. “How much do you make in a month?”

“In a month? Just one—well. Now that you’re here and stealing all my work from me, I’ll probably be able to make two or three a month. Depends on materials though. I’m running low on wool.”

Keith’s eyes flashed. “That’s why you used to keep sheep.”

“That’s one of the reasons, yeah,” Lance grinned. “Around this time they’d be lactating so I’d get plenty of milk, and I’d bleed them to make food. Don’t give me that look. You have not lived until you’ve had blood with rice. Divine.”

Keith stayed skeptical. “Sounds like plenty of hard work.”

“It was, but it kept me busy.” His fingers didn’t slow once. “Anyway, according to your fancy little book we’ll need to pay a visit to some of my friends.”

Keith watched his smile curl.

“I get to prove Kolivan’s real.”

Allura’s notebook seemed inconsequential, but Keith was nothing if not dutiful. On the hours’ trip to the Garretts, he made note when he had his period, how he felt during it, why it was different from the ones that came before it, and a postscript that he and Lance had synchronized. He flipped through the empty pages and wondered where he’d be in life when they were full. Here? Back in Garrison? With Lance?

He closed the book and tucked it away.

Lance noticed and offered his hand. Keith took it.

They had not discussed their habitual kissing. For Lance it seemed to be a matter of course. But it struck Keith as significant. Nestmates, as he knew them, did not kiss. In fine, they were rivals for their alpha’s attention, particularly after they’d given birth. They’d forever felt challenged by Keith and his youth, his flat belly and his disinterest in following their path to motherhood. Catering to their alpha was all that they had left. All Keith had was the drive to move on.
Kissing he’d only ever done with patrons who visited the brothels he worked at, and even then only the ones he liked. The soldier boys from Garrison were easy favourites. They were fit, and they didn’t mind if the omega didn’t ride them. They liked being in control and having something under them. Keith learned during their midday pillow talks that it came from being under the boots of their superiors.

Keith interpreted kissing as sexual. At a stretch, romantic. Keith figured Lance thought it platonic, casual, confiding. That’s how he kissed. And he more often than not responded with surprise when Keith returned kisses that were charged and passionate, but he never pushed Keith away either. So Keith was adequately stumped over where he stood.

Lance’s thumb flicked over the side of his hand.

Keith flushed, brought from his reverie to see Lance’s profile against the edge of the frosty jungle outside their window. He flushed again. Lance wasn’t alpha. Keith knew that, he could see it. So he knew that the lurch in his gut wasn’t thanks to faux pheromones.

“I can feel you staring at me, puppy.”

“Ugh.”

“What?”

“What is with you and pet names?”


“Please don’t call me wub-wub.”

Lance grinned.

“Don’t. Babe and puppy is more than enough.” He frowned. “Why?”

Lance shrugged easily, rolling Blue through the shallow cleft of low grassy hills. “Automatic. Lita always had names for us. Couldn’t remember all of our names so she gave us interchangeable ones.” He laughed suddenly. “I can hear her now: venga Marco—Luis—Manuelo—rayos, ¿quien eres? Querido, ven aquí. Ha! Need me to tone it down?”

Keith wondered. “No,” he surprised himself. “No, it’s alright.”

Lance grinned a little more genuinely and said nothing. He turned around one more hill and a wooden fence appeared.

It was black from time, or maybe that was simply because the vast expanse was immaterial white. It fenced off a lot of space. Keith couldn’t see where it ended. He noticed there was a barn and an empty corral, and there were six wooden lodges on stone foundations, each with two chimneys, three trucks tucked away beneath an open shed, and roofed platforms that connected some of the lodges together. They were scattered around the compound in no direct order at first glance, though it gave plenty of room for the cars and chickens and horses and kalterneckers that he could imagine were locked away in the barn for the winter, a barn that was thrice the size of Lance’s and could even easily swallow his home.

“Wow.”

“Uh-huh,” Lance let himself through the open gate. “The Garretts have a lot of members. Four
generations live here and they are in no want of labor. Most summers are spent building and farming. They’re fucking ripped, each and every one of them.”

“A lot of alphas?”

“A couple, but twice as many omega,” he parked beside a jaded yellow pick up.

“Do they all know you’re omega?”

“No, that’s just Hunk. Grab the stuff from the bed, babe?” He slipped a finger under Keith’s chin kissed him lightly. “I’ll let them know we’re here.”

Keith hesitated as Lance turned away. By impulse he latched onto Lance’s shoulder—and it was taut beneath his palm—and he shifted forward and held Lance’s waiting face and licked into his mouth. Lance’s hand flew to Keith’s elbow to stabilize, in surprise, and he hummed faintly in approval.

Keith kissed him deeply for three swipes of his dexterous tongue. When they parted, Lance was a little flushed, a little glossy eyed, and Keith felt like he succeeded at something.

“Keith—”

“I’ll get the truck.” He flung himself out the door and Lance jolted in the quiet, wondering if the buzz in the air was just the silence or from his fried brain.

He made his way to the front porch of the main house eventually, though he need not knock. He saw one of Hunk’s nieces press her nose into the glass window. She and her teenage cousin, a pretty omega named Umi, opened the door. Umi grinned, not bothering to hide the fangs that detracted. His crush on Lance was well known and not unique.

“Lance!” They shrieked, and threw themselves onto him.

“Ouch! Ow! Careful, careful, the both of you have grown up since I last saw you!”

“Stop being an old man,” Umi teased, but peeled his baby cousin off with a gentle, “Come, Pogisa, let’s let him inside, hm?”

They had long dark curling hair like Hunk, and Lance combed his fingers through them as they beamed up at him—well, Pogisa did. Umi had shot up over the summer and stood at Lance’s height. He was sure to be taller soon, like all the Garretts.

“Hi guys, what Pogisa you lost a tooth!”

Pogisa grinned wider to show off the gap.

“Lancey?” someone called from inside that smelled warm and foody. Hunk’s aunt appeared, his mother’s sister, dark till she was blue and big and round in a way that could snap a man’s spine in two and heft a toddler on her shoulder in the same breath.

“Hi Aunty Grace,” and Lance found himself drowning in her breasts a heartbeat after.

“I thought I heard your rust bucket come in!”

“Hey!”

“Say all you want about Blue, Lancey, she’s old, and the second cylinder doesn’t fire. Makes a fairly distinctive sound.”
“…Lance?”

They swiveled at the sound of Umi’s watery timbre. Grace took a defensive step forward, but Lance soothed, “It’s okay, that’s Keith. He’s been staying with me for a few weeks.”

Grace blinked, first at Keith then at Lance. “Oh.”

Keith chimed, “We brought cake.”

“Oh! Well, come in!” Umi pranced loudly up the steps.

“You little sugar addict,” Grace accused as she smacked her grandnephew inside. “Come in, Keith. It’s nice to meet you. Thank you for befriending our Lancey. Though I can hardly see why.”

Keith handed the box to her. “Lance saved my life. And he really stuck out his neck for me.”

“Sounds like a story,” she beamed. “Stay the night.”

“Shouldn’t you ask mommy first?”

Grace swiped at him. It seemed slapping Lance was a universal phenomenon. “Mom will be happy you’re finally visiting. Fair warning, she’s been in a baby craze ever since Shay began courting Manuia. First thing she’ll ask is why Keith isn’t pregnant.”

Keith tripped.

Lance shrieked, “Shay’s courting Hunk!? What!”

Distantly, “Who’s yelling?”

“Hunk! Huuuuuuunk!”

“Lance?”

“Is that Lance?”

More chimes of Lance Lance Lance that sounded younger and besotted.

The lodge felt smaller on the inside than it looked on the outside, but that was because of the sheer stuff and people. Keith couldn’t walk anywhere without stumbling over a toy or a tool, a folded rug or discarded boot. There was a lot of yelling for the kids to pick up after themselves but in their defense they had been happily playing before they swarmed at Lance’s legs, Lance who was swept up in the meaty embrace of the famous Hunk Garrett.

Hunk Garrett was a head taller than Lance, twice was broad, his arms put Lance’s thighs to shame, he had long hair in a thick braid down his back, tattoos flexing on his calves, and the softest, sweetest scent Keith had ever stumbled into.

He was the quintessential image of the perfect frontier omega.

“Wow,” Keith sighed, and then bristled when Hunk kissed Lance’s cheek loudly smack!

“Hi buddy,” Lance would have fallen at the jostling of kids at his feet and teens at his back had he not Hunk to support him. Even the kids half his height looked like they could bench press him. Keith was happy to be innocuous in his corner.
“Easy, easy! One at a time! Hello Timothy, hi Bonnie—Puku you’ve gotten so big!” He addressed them each by name, and Keith didn’t miss how the older ones flushed as he did.

Hunk laughed, rich and throaty, “Dude, where have you been? We expected you weeks ago. Did you change your mind about spending the winter with us?”

“Uh,” and Lance’s eyes flashed to Keith’s, who jolted. “Yeah, I think so.”

“Aw, why?” and Hunk took note of the stranger at last. “Oh, sorry. Didn’t see you—Pogisa, move please—hi,” he offered a gargantuan hand. “I’m Manuia. Lance is in the habit of calling me Hunk.”

“I can see why.” Keith took his hand. “You’re beautiful.”

Hunk tensed, smile blooming, “Wow, thank you! You beat me to the punch. You’re the prettiest thing I’ve seen out here since the red frangipani.”

Keith blushed and decided he couldn’t dislike Hunk.

“If you’re quite done flirting,” Lance interrupted, a three year old pup—Timothy, possibly—latched to his belly, “I’d like to introduce you to my husband.”

Hunk didn’t miss a beat. The way he looked between them said it all. “Oh, grannie will be happy to hear that. First thing she’ll ask is why you aren’t pregnant!”

Keith turned red again. Still, it was funny to see the older kids past Hunk’s shoulder wilt at the mention of ‘husband’. It was less funny to see them straighten when he made eye contact with them.

(They could bench press him too!)

Hunk asked Umi and Emanuel and Ana to stay with the pups while he ushered Keith and Lance to see his parents and uncles and this grandmother of legend. “She’s the matriarch,” Lance provided over his shoulder as they paraded up a narrow staircase. “She runs everything. Ninety-odd years old and still going. She gives the First Worlders a run for their money.”

Keith said, “She sounds scary.”

Hunk laughed, “She is. But you’re new, so she’ll be nice to you.” They came to a corridor line with a long, long rug that—

Keith cocked his head. “Lance, is that your handiwork?”

Lance jostled his shoulder. “You can tell my style already, huh?”

“It’s hard not to tell. Everywhere I go I see it.” He paused. “Do they know you made it?”

“Yeah, and they know I’m hiding that I make it because I’m alpha. I’ve bought enough yarn over the years since I quit rearing sheep myself that they start asking what I do with all of it. So I told them, and the Garretts are my finest customers.”

Hunk grinned, “We have too many kids is the problem, and we’re all used to tropical climates by nature. We’re always cold and commissioning blankets.”

Keith eyed Hunk’s bare biceps.

“Hunk’s been showing off for Shay lately, that’s why he’s showing so much skin.”
If Hunk’s complexion allowed it he likely would have changed colour. “Dude!”

“When were you going to tell me that you’d caught the fair Shay Balmera’s attention?”

“When you showed your stupid mug,” and Hunk jostled him, and Lance flew, and Keith laughed. “Shay’s only been courting me for, what, three weeks? You hadn’t been around in months. Short of driving over to your place I was sure I’d get married without you knowing!”

“I’m surprised you’re not already married!” And Lance turned to Keith: “Shay and Hunk are childhood sweethearts. Grandma taught them how to read and write the same year and the first thing they wrote were each other’s names.”

Keith grinned devilishly. “Aw. How cute.”

Hunk stood rigidly. “Shut up, god! Lance, you’ve met your match.”

Lance swung his arm around Keith’s neck in reply. “I know, right? Keith, where have you been all my life?”

“Horse barns and brothels.”

Lance spluttered into Keith’s throat, struggling not to laugh. “I shouldn’t find that funny.”

Keith looped his arm around Lance’s shoulders. “I thought it was funny.”

Hunk tapped on an ornate door at the end of the rug. It was intricately detailed with good lacquered work. Ozar wasn’t kidding when he said the Garretts had good hands.

“Come in,” said a clipped voice.

“Hi grannie. Lance came by. And he brought a husband.”

Keith couldn’t see past Hunk’s hulking frame, though he made out the glimmer of a fire and the frame for a folded mosquito net.

“Lance got married and didn’t invite us to the wedding? Kick him out.”

“Mommy!” Lance cried, “You’re so mean!”

With mirth, “Move aside, Manuia. Let me see their faces.”

Hunk did so, and Lance and Keith stepped forward. The room was hot. The fireplace was roaring, and the grandmother of legend was sitting on the floor with glasses on her nose and a fine web of crocheted fabric in her lap.

She was tiny, which was not what Keith was expecting, and though she was wrinkled her skin shined like it was leather buffed yesterday. Her narrow eyes were grey, her arms and legs were littered with gorgeous designs. She was tiny, but she was strong.

When she hurriedly gestured them forward, her starlight loc’ed hair wobbled from its self-tied bun.

“Huh,” she snatched Keith’s wrist and turned it over. Keith pulled back on reflex. “Feisty,” the grandmother of legend said. “And from the Taujeeran camps.”

Keith was quiet: “How did you know that?”

She produced her own wrist, the numbers faded blue. In the stunned silence she patted the floor
beside him and Keith sat. He flinched when she tossed fabric in his hands.

“Go away,” she demanded of Hunk and Lance. “Come back in an hour.”

Lance hesitated. “Will you be alright, Keith?”

Before Keith could reply mommy set a glare on Lance something fierce.

“Going, going!”

“Smart boy.”

Hunk laughed as the door closed.

Keith wriggled out of his coat and the sweater beneath. He paid attention as she instructed him what she was doing, and said that she was making a table cloth, and that it will take some doing but his hands were good and not arthritic like hers, so he would be good at it. “An omega needs to be good with their hands,” she said. “We don’t have inborn strength.”

“I never would have guessed it.”

She smiled despite the interruption. “Yes, well. The Garretts and the Benga are descended from big bones, for that I am grateful. My children and their children aren’t to be trifled with, everybody knows. And I make sure that they have good hands. You can be the prettiest thing on the planet but if you don’t have good hands, a good heart and a good mind you’ll stop living the minute that prettiness goes away.” She watched him. “You’re plenty pretty.”

It didn’t feel like a compliment.

“You smell like a whore.”

Keith stiffened.

“Don’t look at me like that. I wasn’t different. Wasn’t as smart as you though. Got pregnant. How long did you whore for?”

Keith hesitated. “…five years.”

“Huh. And no-one bought you out?”

“There were offers.”

“A lot of offers I’m guessing.”

Keith hesitated.

“Why’d you turn them down?”

“I was already bought and sold twice. I wasn’t looking forward to being property again so long as I had a say in it.”

“Seems you’re fine being Lance’s property.”

“I’m no-one’s property.”

“Lance knows that?”
“Of course he does.”

“You know he’s omega?”

Keith hesitated.

“He don’t know I know,” and she pulled something. “But it’s not all that hard to guess. He’s good with children. He likes them, and they like him back. And he’s too easy with omega. And too dismissive of alpha. He’s too pretty too. Puts half my grandchildren to shame.” She plucked something else, threw it in Keith’s lap. “He needs to be careful. Observant people can see past his scent.”

Keith looked down. “I know he’s omega. That’s the only reason I stayed with him.”

She watched him. “And how long will that be?”

He watched her.

“You don’t seem like the type to settle down.”

“I’m done running from what I was running from.”

“That’s all well and good. But when people stop running from something they gotta stand for something.”

He watched her.

“I like you,” she grinned suddenly, and was missing more teeth than Pogisa. “You got balls.”

That startled a laugh out of him.

“Take care of Lancey.”

Keith didn’t take her blessing lightly.

“My sister’s getting married.”

“Shut. Up.”

“Wedding’s gonna be in spring. Grannie wants them married before we start erecting the house.”

“Can I come?”

“I’ll beat you up if you don’t.”

Lance laughed.

“So Keith, huh?”

“Yeah.” And Lance hopped onto the counter of Hunk’s workstation and dropped his bare feet in Hunk’s lap: “So. I’m in the jungle looking for the mushrooms, you know the ones—”

“The red tops with the yellow stem.”

“I thought it was the yellow tops with the red stem.”
“The red tops with the yellow stem.”

“I’m going to poison myself one of these days.”

“You already have.”

“So I’m in the jungle looking for my immediate doom,” and Hunk chuckled, “and I find a whole person laying in the mud. He’s got on a coat sure but he’s blue from cold and beaten to all hell. Burned too. Saw the mark on his face?”

“Hard to miss it. What makes a burn like that?”

“I was thinking cattle brand or poker. No?”

Hunk shrugged.

“Anyway, I decide to do the whole Samaritan thing. Pick him up and patch his wounds. He’s out for a whole day before he finds Susie and points her to my back.”

Hunk’s brows lifted. “Wow.”

“Nearly shot my spine out.”

“Hardcore. How’d you get out?”

“I told him I was omega. We struck a deal, I’d let him get his hands on Allura’s suppressants.”

Hunk perched his chin in his hands. “I’m guessing they didn’t work?”

“They didn’t, he near hacked out his stomach.”

“Ouch.”

“How’d you guess that?”

“Well, I mean, if the pills worked he would have moved on, right? He had no to reason to stick with you and pretend to be your husband if he can pretend to be alpha himself.”

Lance frowned. “But it wouldn’t last forever.”

“Sure but he doesn’t need to use it all the time. You do because it cut out your menstrual pain and kills your heats. I do cuz I like having sex and not getting pregnant.”

Lance smiled something cruel. “Does mommy know you and Shay are fucking already?”

“Point is he can take what you and me use in a year and make it stretch for two, maybe three. If he’s survived this long without suppressants he’d know how to survive longer with them. Pretending to be alpha could’ve helped him get out of whatever situation got him on your doorstep I’d bet.”

Lance went somber. “Yeah. He was Ladnok’s barnhand.”

Hunk rose his hands like “see?” and leaned back. “Bummer it didn’t work for him at all though.”

“Allura’s working on alternatives.”

“You don’t look too happy about that.”
“I like him.” Hunk perked up. “I like him being around. It’s nice living with someone again. And we really get along. I’d…hate if all this didn’t mean as much to him and then when Allura can make him alpha he just…vamooses.”

Hunk’s mouth twisted. “Sorry, buddy. I don’t know what to tell ya.”

“Yeah.”

The next morning, with Blue properly looked over by Aunt Grace and Hunk’s dad and their bellies full with the culinary magic of the Garrett Matriarch, Keith pulled them out of the complex.

Lance had been thinking the majority of the morning. He curled between Hunk and Keith that night no problem, but seemed to be in a dull mood since.

Keith didn’t like that look, despite that the single omegas at the breakfast table whispered that a pensive Lance was an erotic one. He didn’t disagree with them—Lance’s lines cut a little starker when he was relaxed and still.

“Lance?”

Lance turned to him.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” and he reclined again. “Well, no. I mean—hypothetical question.”

“Shoot.”

“If…if I fall in love with some pretty alpha one day. What’ll you do?”

Keith snorted. And then: “Oh. You serious.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

Keith didn’t know how to explain that he thought Lance didn’t fancy alpha. Couldn’t even find a way to justify why he thought so. “Uh. I mean, that’ll be fine, right? You love who you love.”

“You wouldn’t care?”

“That’s not what I mean. It’s not my business. So long as it’s not hurting you I won’t say anything.”

“What if they were omega?” Lance watched his shoulders. “What if I found a pretty omega and wanted them to live with me?”

Hunk came to mind. Keith’s shoulders were stiff. “I figure the same rule applies.”

Lance wondered what to make of that. “You ever loved anybody Keith?”

“Short answer? I dunno. I told you about Sendak already. You don’t seem to think much of that though.”

Lance twisted away hotly. “Sorry. I was…out of line. Allura chewed me out for that.”

Keith shrugged.
“Sorry.”

“From the outside looking in I guess loving someone who destroys towns for a living is psychotic.”

Lance was quiet a beat. “You think that’s what’s gonna happen to Arus?”

“Yes.”

“Wow, you didn’t even need to think about it.”

“Nothing to think about. Balmera, Taujeer, Naxzela, Omegasheild—anywhere Galra go they destroy. And they’ll destroy out here too.”

Lance pulled both knees to his chest. “I thought when I ran I ran far enough.”

Keith wondered. “I know you said it didn’t matter, and tell me to shut up and never ask again if you want. But the husband you drowned—”

“I didn’t drown him.”

“—what was he?”

Lance threaded his fingers through Keith’s. “Alpha,” he said at last. “And it shouldn’t matter, but the point is that it does. It matters to me so hard. And I never want another alpha to touch me ever again.”

Keith tugged him.

“Wha—”

Guilty as he was to admit it that line of vitriol and resentment gave Keith hope. So when Lance stumbled to him he took his feet off the pedals and his hands off the wheel and cradled Lance’s face. Blue rolled forward.

“Keith, what are you—”

“I’d like to stay with you. For as long as you’ll have me.” Each breath ghosted over Lance’s stunned open lips. “I don’t care if you’ll never love me back or if you change your mind and decide to get pregnant one day I just want to be beside you. You’re the most amazing human I’ve ever met and I can’t believe you’re alone—mmf.”

Lance kissed him. Passionately. The way with tongue and teeth Keith had been clueing him in on for the past week. His fingers searched for Keith’s hair with hunger and they only stopped when Blue, unmanned, tripped over a rock, leaned up the shallow rise of a hill, and her heater glitched out and blasted them with cold air.

“Ugh!”

“Shit!”

“Off off off off —”

They sat there for a heartbeat, Blue purring, their cheeks pricking from the cold. Then they laughed a little and exchanged a sloppy embrace and messier kisses. Kissing Lance straddled the realms of amused affection and raunchy promises. But like everything else that involved Lance, it felt like the most natural thing in the world.
Keith breathed, “I’m guessing those airy hypothetical questions was you hinting that you liked me too?”

Lance’s giggle felt loud. “They’re as bad as you and your crazy kisses.”

“Kissing you was a far better hint than you going on about marrying someone else!”

“Yeah,” he kissed him, wet and loud, and they both whined. “Your right.” Then his eyes fell. “Keith…”

“Oh what now? Things were getting good!”

“I know but—this is important. Do you like me or…is all this you just reacting to my alpha scent?” At Keith’s exasperated glare Lance recoiled. “I know, I know! But. Humor me?”

“If anything I want you in spite of your alpha scent, not because of it. I’ve had my fill of alpha.”

“Literally.”

Keith slapped him. Lance kissed him.

---

Five years ago

He kissed him cryptically.

Shiro’s brow did not crease but he stayed on the bed, staring at the tiles in the ceiling, dreaming. The mattress flexed as the advisor left it. Shiro’s eyes did not roll to him to chase the finery that was his belt that cinched his maroon robes.

“I thought you were an advisor,” Shiro had asked on the first night after the close of the revolution. “Not a priest.”

And Adam had laughed and thrown his arms out. He quoted, “Why dost thou wear mother’s drapes?”

And Shiro had snorted rudely.

Then they’d promptly ruined Adam’s uniform, and wore the bed springs into nubs. The excitement from standing on the precipice of a new world wore off very quickly after that.

“I’ll be coming to pick you up at eight.”

Shiro tore his eyes away from the bleak texture of the sky. “Hm?”

“For the party tonight?” Adam clarified, and stared until Shiro confirmed. “You forgot.”

“No,” he was truthful. “I was hoping you would.”

“Funny.”

“I try.”

Shiro shifted to his feet on the opposite side of the bed and found his clothes politely folded on a plump chair. He frowned, wondered if Adam had tidied it or one of his new servants had. Frankly
the idea that his lover had thought to fold his clothes and put it aside was a little more unnerving than if a paid servant had entered the room and done so while they slept.

“It’s thrown by the House of Sanda,” Adam went on as if Shiro were ignorant. “It’s unspoken, but we’re honorary guests.”

“If it isn’t explicitly said then I doubt that my presence would be missed.”

“Semantics.”

Shiro scowled in disagreement. “Wouldn’t you rather not go?”

“I’m advisor to the head of Sanda, I can’t not go.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

Adam schooled his features into something dutiful and Shiro lost hope and turned away, shoving his arms and bed hair through his shirt. Adam’s mouth sounded prettier strangled on his—

“And Griffin was kind enough to lend us his cousins to escort.”

Shiro turned, a deer in headlights. “Wut?”

Adam deflated. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten Griffin—”

“No, not that, why are we escorting his cousins?”

“They’re omega.” Shiro was blank. “They’ll be on our arms.”

“...why? I thought you and I were going.”

“It doesn’t look good that two alpha walk into a party empty handed. We’ll need eye candy.” Adam dismissed.

And Adam dismissed, but Shiro stood in the milk white of early morning under dressed and staring at Adam’s funky robes thinking, dreaming. “Why?”

Adam had made his way to the doors of the stupid big room in the time it took Shiro to sound like an irate child. Tersely, “Why what?”

Had Shiro canine ears they would have pressed flat to his skull. His voice was apologetic. “Why can’t you and I go in together? It’s no secret that we’re friends.”

“Yes. Friends, Shiro. Do I really need to explain the intricacies of society to you?”

Shiro hardened. “Humor me.”

“Look, immoral relationships are popular in new generations but the old families hate it. It undermines how they make their connections by marrying their way to more money and power.”

“Homosexual relationships aren’t immoral.”

“You know what I mean.”

“And they aren’t uncommon. We wouldn’t cause a scene.”

“It’s dust swept under the carpet. You don’t see Griffin parading around with his new boy toy every
Shiro blinked. “I wasn’t aware that Griffin was gay.”

“Exactly. Look, that’s just how upper tier works.”

Shiro followed him into the corridors that led out of the west wings. They were carved wood in terraced grids, they were narrow and perpetual, and they were straight out of an Old World horror movie. Shiro challenged, “I thought you were trying to destroy how the upper tier worked.”

Adam halted anew.

Shiro remembered Adam’s plans. They were nineteen, cadets in the thick of a revolution six days old, and their respective COs thought they were going places. Adam was a tactical genius. Shiro a charismatic prodigy. They were friends, they were powerful as they won the love of soldiers as they rose through the ranks, and they shared bunks from day one. Shiro was always committed to his orientation. Adam always took convincing.

But Adam spoke with a gleam in his eye when he referenced the ideas for future worlds as riddled by those ancient philosophers—First Worlders like Smythe and Gregory the Infern who invented entire cities from the man up, outfitted him with a family, a job, a world of taxes, and then played the board game of interchanging his economy, his politics, his religion, designing the best outcomes for the megalopolis.

They were the ones who made Garrison.

And Adam dreamed big. So big. Bigger than the damn bedroom as broad as Shiro’s apartment. He dreamed of the redistribution of power. He dreamed of opening up the Houses’ villas to transform them into public baths. Shiro wasn’t sure when Adam seemed to stop dreaming.

“It’s not easy dismantling a system that’s been in place for centuries.”

“Yes it is,” Shiro barked. “You figured it out when you were twelve.”

Adam scowled. “There were a lot of details I left out when I was twelve.”

“I thought you wanted to make a difference—”

“I am.”

“Yes. Making the House of Sanda richer and richer!”

“Don’t you—”

“Sanda’s using you. You’re smart. You’d make a bad enemy. That’s why she invites you to parties and gave you that big fucking bedroom—”

Genuinely flummoxed: “What do you have against my bedroom?”

“—just—just.” And Shiro breathed, “I think your goals have…changed.”

“Of course they’ve changed,” and Adam’s eyes narrowed. “We can’t all stay children at heart.”

Shiro felt that hit, somewhere. “What are you—”

“I’m going to be late.”
Shiro watched him go down the horror show corridor and felt promptly hated by the opulent walls, like they were sneering at his simple clothes.

Chapter End Notes

This fic I hope to update every week or every three weeks or in between.
His Purpose

Chapter Summary

In which Shiro loses friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Seventeen years ago

Garrison was created by the First Worlders. It was the first city, the first colonized patch of red dirt. It was designed brick by brick with individual and communal psychology in mind.

It was ruined by restless Galra.

Frankly what little history Shiro knew about the First City was horrendously outdated and knowingly misinterpreted. He and his classmates and teachers knew this. But they knew nothing else. So they clung to the vague mistruths that the First City was wrangled from the immortal gods not once but thrice, and the unending wars rippling through its urban valleys since were an omen that Garrison would never return to its former opulence.

The theory was sound at the surface. And it satisfied most men, save for Adam.

Adam had it in his mind that he was going to be the archeologist of tomorrow by digging up the truths of their not-so-distant past. He woke Shiro up in a cold sweat one night, panicked by a dream he was desperate not to forget. Shiro remembered being sore as hell because Commander Iverson was recently divorced and lost custody of his dog and was taking it out on the cadets.

Shiro groused, “I’m usually a very nice person.”

“Takashi: what if forgetting about our history was intentional? What if the entire city was subject to amnesia?”

“I’m usually not a nice person at three in the morning.”

(Adam never took the hint.)

He’d read and question the computer and created a book that documented noteworthy inconsistencies. He picked up words that would or would not frequent certain references. He traced orators to their roots until they disappeared behind the veil of unauthorized access.

Adam became the local conspiracy theorist.

Seventeen year old Shiro was popular despite his squirrely roommate chasing him down with his latest discoveries and a paper trail of blaspheme behind him. Exceptionally masculine alpha were quick to sniff out the stale taste of runt that stuck to Adam’s skin. Shiro smelt it too, and let Adam hide in his shadow while he chatted up the classmates from their logistics and strategies course, the teachers of their weapons training classes, and, of course, the communal showers.
Omega were rare in military school, to say the least.)

But what came with the territory of defending his newfound shadow was a perennial cloud of thought and theory. And he realized, belatedly, that Adam was a genius. Shiro encouraged his prattling once and that was it. It was all the spark their friendship needed.

They shared their free time getting into fevered, heavy debates that left their minds hot and heavy. Shiro was never dispassionate when they traded academic blows, but Adam’s words always had a weight to them. He believed they were the stepping stones to something, somewhere big.

“I’m just powerless now,” he said between pull-ups. Shiro’s fingers slipped on his sneakers and he fell back without the anchor.

“Don’t stop, Sanda’s making her rounds,” Shiro whispered.

Adam closed his eyes against the dirt and sun and sweat. “I’m just powerless now. When I rise through the ranks, when I get up there—I’ll find a hidden library or something.”

“C’mon Adam, twenty-one. Twenty-one? Twenty-one?”

Adam did the twenty-first pull-up just as Sanda marched past.

Shiro whispered, “Is that why you joined the army?”

Adam paused. “Beg pardon?”

“To get to your hypothesized secret library. Is that why you joined the army?”

“Oh,” Adam warmed, because Shiro wanted to continue talking with him. He was listening. “No,” he snorted.

“Twenty-two.”

“I’m the last kid of eight and the only alpha. All my siblings were married off for huge dowries to House heirs.”

“Twenty-three.”

“My parents didn’t know what to do with me. They didn’t have a business to prime me for like other families, and their retirement plan was settled when they married off my eldest brother. So they enlisted me into the army as soon as I was old enough.”

Shiro winced. “Sounds rough.”

“It can’t be rougher than being an orphan.”

Shiro’s lips flattened. “I dunno about that.”

That gave Adam pause. “Why?”

“It’s just…kind of sadder that you have parents who didn’t want you around than if you didn’t have parents at all.”

Adam growled a little. “I never said my parents didn’t want me.”

Shiro’s mouth twisted in disbelief, but he apologized and they switched places at the whistle. From
then on, each time Shiro crunched up Adam had a solemn far-away look in his eyes.

Several hours later Adam was shaking him awake.

Shiro didn’t even open his eyes: “If it weren’t for the laws of this land…”

“What, Adam.”

“You were right.”

“Usually. But you’re gonna have to be more specific.”

“God you’re an asshole at twelve o’clock.”

“It’s fucking twelve and Iverson still hasn’t gotten his dog back, what do you expect?!?”

Adam started pushing him and Shiro rolled, but not with a dissenting groan. He slipped under the covers and didn’t say anything else, which Shiro reveled in for the minute it took his gut to figure it was wrong. He turned in clunky, loud, rustling movements, and shook the shadowy lump leeching his body heat. “Hey.”

“What.”

“Now who’s moody?”

Adam whispered so low he whistled: “You were right.”

“What?”

“I tried to contact my parents. I can’t get through to them.”

“I mean, if you’re calling at twelve—”

“No, I’ve called before. I always figured I was calling at the wrong time but…what if you’re right? What if they didn’t want me? They didn’t want any of us. So they just…gave us away.”

Shiro frowned.

“I thought that parents had this unconditional love for their kid that they get when they’re born and it never goes away but. My siblings were literally sold away. And me…I was tossed.”

Shiro told him to stop talking.

Adam started crying.

“Please stop crying. Please stop crying. It’s twelve o’clock.”

Adam laughed wetly.

“…can I hug you?”

Sniff. “Please.”
Adam called his parents thirty times after that for each hour of the day.

He never got through.

Unspoken, Adam would crawl into Shiro’s bunk to sleep and Shiro would crawl into Adam’s to think. At every opportunity they met up, worked out, studied and played. Sometimes Shiro wondered if they looked weird. *Immoral.* But Adam returned that gay relationships were very common in the army.

“I mean I *figure,*” Shiro said between bites. “But I’ve just never *seen it.*”

“You’re just too busy with your nose in a book to notice.”

“That’s rich coming from you,” and he threw a cracker at him. Adam opened his mouth like a goal post and invitation to throw another. Shiro shot…Shiro scored.

*Munch-munch.*

They grew up a little bit when the rebellions branched into their district.

“There was a scholar who theorized that civil unrest blows up in Garrison in a predictable pattern related to the balance between advertisements, food supply, and geopolitical locations.” He closed his book and untucked his pencil from his ear. “He was never able to prove his theory though.”

Shiro was already huddled into their shared bunk. “Why not?”

“He was killed by a stray bullet. *Allegedly.* I feel like it was intentional.”

“You think he was assassinated?”

A distant boom went off somewhere and car sirens wailed. Adam flicked off his lamp and slunk into the sheets. By unspoken consensus Shiro reached for him, and they watched the windows warily. Classes had been suspended. Their superiors were tense.

Adam swallowed.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

Shiro rolled his arm a little tighter around him. “Good. Cuz I’m not.”

Adam laughed, “Ugh, stop, I’m drowning in your tits!”

Shiro pressed him in harder.

“*Stop!*”

Laughing they parted until they could breathe again.

“Alright, let’s sleep,” Shiro yawned. “Cuz now *I know* Commander Iverson is never going to get his dog.”

Adam burst out laughing.
“Whaat? It’s true!”

Adam couldn’t see him in the dark nor through his jubilant tears. But he could smell him. A smell that tasted warmer and more familiar than the distant brush of his mother’s cologne. A smell that meant that he would be listened to, be thrown crackers at, and have an alibi when he was five minutes late for roll call.

His hand lay flat against Shiro’s chest and he snaked up to the back of his neck. It was a blatant question. He felt eyes on him, then lips and breath was on him.

It was messy and uncoordinated. But for the life of them they could not pause. There was a sense of inevitability that fueled their passion. They were already in bed, so it was bound to happen. The bombs were going off outside their window, so it was bound to happen.

Shiro flipped Adam on his back, braced his shoulders with his elbows, and Adam’s warming fingers traced ten rivers up his abs, round his ribs, down his quads, somehow over naked shoulders magically divested of shirt.

Adam felt Shiro learning how to kiss. He was a little more meaningful and used his tongue to caress and his lips to hold. And then he performed decadent sin with his hips and Adam wrapped his legs around on reflex.

They rubbed their knots together until—

“Nmf.”

“Hn!”

“Shit.”

“Will that stain?”

(It was twelve o’ clock.)

- 

Twelve years later

It was twelve o’ clock.

Adam stood in his formal gown with a Griffin omega on one arm, a Sanda emblem on one breast, and absolute indifference in his eyes while he chatted with the couple who birthed him.

Shiro watched him from a dark railing that overlooked a less lit partition of the city. The Griffin cousin he’d been saddled with could only stand being rebuffed twice, and left to mingle with his stag friends gossiping over Captain Kinkade’s new marital status.

Everyone looked the same as they cantered across the glossy malachite floors. He thought it was only omega who dressed silly, then he saw the broad-boned accountant and ledger keeper for the House of Sanda sporting a solid gold monocle.

Shiro felt himself scoff and drank nunvil. It tasted like horror. It was the only thing palatable here.

“You’re the life of the party.”

Without looking up: “Good night, James.”
“Is everything okay?”

Shiro’s eyes opened on the little Griffin cousin who was definitely looking at them before he paid attention. “Everything’s fine. Erin is…beautiful.”

James snickered over the rim of his flute. “That’s all he is.”

Shiro was relieved he didn’t have to say it.

“I invited Leifsdottir and Kinkade to come with me to Altea, but they turned me down. I was hoping you’d agree to be my wingman?”

Shiro watched him and his silver lapels groggily. “You invited married alpha to a red light district?”

“And they turned me down, so their chivalry is intact.”

Shiro arched a brow as though to imply, Yours isn’t.

James smiled. “My husband understands there’s a difference between sex and marriage. He looks the other way when I smell like sex, I look the other way when he has his friends over.”

Shiro returned to watching Adam. “I think I’ll pass.”

“I never thought the day would come when I would be begging for company for a night out.”

“Are you that against going alone?”

“The omega down in Altea are nothing like the ones you meet around here. They’re treacherous. Smart in a way you wouldn’t imagine. Shrewder than Ryan.” Shiro snorted. “The only way a dapper alpha such as myself is going to survive down there is if I travel with a pack.”

“Sounds like a lot of effort.”

James hummed and straightened because Adam had rejoined them.

“Shiro, you’re scaring away everyone that wants to dance with you.”

“That means my scowl is working.”

They chuckled.

“Everything okay?”

Adam smiled shallowly at his lover. “Hm? With what?”

Shiro watched Adam’s parents make their way towards the exit. “It’s the first time you’re seeing your mother and father since the rebellion.”

Adam breathed deep to reinforce himself. “I wish I could say I don’t feel anything. I’m mad at them. It feels like they were addressing a councilman before they were talking to their own son.”

Shiro pressed softly, “They hadn’t seen you in over ten years, Adam. You can’t expect them to be familiar.”

“And you expect me to be?”

“I would have thought you would give them a chance.”
“I don’t need their support. Emotional or otherwise. I’m not a child.”

Shiro pinched his tongue between his fangs. Again, there was something aimed about how he phrased that.

James came again with his nonsense about visiting Altea.

Adam arched an unamused brow. “I don’t do omega.”

“They have alpha brothels.”

Adam’s eyes flickered to Shiro.

Shiro blinked. He looked over his shoulder. “…something on my face?”

“I’ll think about it,” Adam returned to James. “For now, have you seen Aaron?”

With hot incredulity, “You actually like Aaron?”

“No. He’s an idiot.”

Shiro swallowed a laugh.

“But he interjects his unasked opinions in conversations and makes other people feel very out of place. It’s entertaining. He’s quite useful when it comes to conversations I’d rather not have.”

Shiro murmured, “That’s one way of objectifying omega.”

Adam’s mouth jerked as though it wasn’t sure it wanted to smile.

James wasn’t as subtle when he guffawed. He parted from them, “I’ll see if I can find him for you.”

“Much obliged.”

Shiro watched him go with a nod of the head. “I never would have guessed that you hate being here as much as me.”

“Attending these parties are a slow death. James’ invitation actually sounds refreshing.”

Shiro laughed and watched the city. He was so focused on the geometric high rises, the ancient aqueducts turned highways, the bland sameness to the brilliant architecture that he missed Adam’s pensive regard until the latter stepped forward and murmured, “You don’t care that I’m considering James’ invitation?”

Shiro half-turned and read his expression. “What. To Altea? Of course not. Out of all of us you ought to unwind the most.”

Adam, for the first time since the week began, looked a little out of place. A glimmer of the kid Shiro fell in love with showed through the cracks where his eyes stuttered and his mouth worked for a moment. At last, “We. You and I…were we never monogamous?”

Shiro’s eyes narrowed. As though it were plain as day, “We’ve had sex with other people, so no.”

“But we weren’t together then.”

As though it were plain as day, “Were we ever together?”
Adam watched him a spell.

Shiro felt his blood pulse with a challenge but it died when Adam’s features smoothed over. He was dim suddenly, “Right.”

James returned with Aaron…and Erin. Adam smiled stiffly. Shiro was faintly certain his own smile was a scowl.

James looked straight through their facades. “So I take it I’ve found my wingmen.”

---

Altea was a seedy little district of stone pavement walkways too narrow for cars and too craggy to be called streets. Stout buildings layered on top of each other on either side of the walkways resembled volcanic structures, cubes upon cubes, raunchily decorated in neon, fairy light, obscene paints and obscene subjects, with omega dressed in bola littering their windows in various stages of undress.

There was a smell about the place as well. It didn’t smell like a place that was unsafe. It smelled holy. Which was odd against the music and the obvious shrieking of someone getting railed in an unlit public bathroom.

“Is that incense?” Adam said at last.

Ah, Shiro inhaled, incense, yes. “I was wondering what that was. Leave it to a priest to figure it out.”

“I’m not a priest!”

“Not anymore at least,” and he watched the white billowing shirt tucked into high-waist slim slacks with clear approval. He hadn’t looked like he wasn’t part of a corrupt clergy in a long time.

Adam narrowed his eyes and curled his lips into something knowing, but not without returning the once-over. Shiro had simply stripped what he’d worn to the gala. Now he stood in shiny shoes, crumpled black slacks and a fitted tank, army tags he never let alone chiming beneath it. He never lost an ounce of muscle mass since the day he won them.

James ahead of them was dressed between the two in things that were simple and easy to take off. There was little else they could do. Already the way they walked and spoke would betray their money.

An omega perched on a barrel flipped her folded fan from the white side to the red as they walked past. Her eyes stayed on them, but she flipped it back to white when they passed.

“Some prostitutes pick and choose their clients and make themselves available for the ones they want,” James answered Adam’s ask. “White means fuck off, red means fuck me.”

“Do all of them use fans?”

“Just the freelancers.”

Shiro frowned. “Freelancers?”

But he must not have spoken loudly enough because James laughed loudly when he caught sight of someone. “Ina!”

“James,” she was a beta, pretty, but there was something no nonsense about her. The space where she took up residence had no omega loitering outside for one, and the walls of this place simply eked
out times and prices. Shiro read them through introductions.

“One day? One week?” Adam read over his shoulder, “By the Ancients, they rob us at Daibazaal!”

Ina made herself known to them then: “Daibazaal stock isn’t as hardy as the omega you’ll find here. These are frontier omega. Strong. Resilient. With stamina.” Her eyes settled on Shiro, “They might even give the big one a run for his money.”

Shiro huffed, “I don’t do omega.”

Ina didn’t blink. “Reckon the girls can change your mind.”

James intervened, “Shiro and Adam are more, er, southbound.”

“The A district? To each his own,” she smiled easily. “And you, Griffin?”

James turned to them then: “Mind if I take a look around, boys?”

They were indifferent. Inside was dark and carpeted. There was a lounge, with couches oriented around standing stoves that warmed feet and sported little cauldrons of candles and incense on them. Things hung from the ceiling, grasses and glass. It favored a witch’s tavern more than a whorehouse.

But then Ina gestured, led James to one side, and Adam watched a heartbeat before following. Shiro tuned out their low voices, casually watching the others in attendance instead. He noticed that some had already begun to play without a thought to anyone else who might be watching. He averted his gaze accordingly, but they were too busy getting fucked to be ashamed.

Then sounded a jaded voice: “Hi, stranger. You been treat right?”

It came from a slight thing with pale skin and long hair so dark it seemed to suck the light out of the air. They had an androgynous face and a slim body hidden beneath sheer and drape that, while looked easy to come off, didn’t betray their gender. Or their sex.

Shiro let himself look but said, “I, uh. I’m not looking.”

“And I can respect that. But I’ve gotta wonder why you’re here if you aren’t.”

“Here with friends.”

“Griffin?”

“He comes here that often, huh?”

“Not that often. But always with a group. Poor sucker gets mugged once and he never comes back without groupies. First I’m seeing you though.”

“He promised me I’d enjoy myself.”

“I can promise you that too.”

“I’m not—”

“Into omega?”

“Yeah.”
“Ever tried one?”

“…no.”

“I can tell.”

“Can you.”

“Would you like to? Can’t knock what you’ve never had.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I’ll give you an hour sample free of charge. If you like it I can give you the day.”

James appeared suddenly and with a pout too big to fit on his face, “You never give me such great deals.”

“You’re a slut. You’re easy.” Their eyes returned to Shiro’s.

“Try the hour, Shiro,” James petitioned. “If you don’t like it, nothing’s lost.”

“Save for my opportunity to have a good time with a handsome and intelligent stranger.”

James frowned suspiciously. “I’ve never heard you grovel before.”

They glared, “And you never will.”

“Take the hour Shiro,” James smacked him on his back. “I’ll take Adam to the south. We’ll come back for you later.”

“But I—” but James was gone, and the pretty omega was already outstretching their hand. Shiro sighed, considered it, spent a little too long trying to make meaning out of the blue tattoos there.

The fingers wiggled. “You coming, stranger?”

He took his hand and was pulled forward. “Where are we going?”

“My room. Come,” they parted a curtain. Behind it was a hexagonal stone room with a flat mattress in its middle and low tables in its corner sporting a mound of melted together candles, a bowl of water and towels, and an assortment of oils. Here, like anywhere else, smelled powerfully of myrrh. The omega closed the curtains behind him.

“Not much in the way of privacy.”

“Privacy is a myth. Sit.”

“Listen—I know you’re just trying to do your job, but I’m in the wrong place.”

“I won’t force you,” they shook their hair and quickly braided it. They were suddenly less sexual, more practical. “If I told you I was using you to get an hour of rest, would you let me?”

Shiro watched them move. The way of their hips was gone. The bounce in their toes was gone. All that was left was a person, looking themselves over in a little mirror on the ground and rinsing their face clean in the bowl provided. Shiro sat then, on little more than a padded carpet, and curled his arms around his knees and watched them and the sheer material that didn’t hide their back, belly, arms and legs.
He said, “How many clients do you see in a day?”

“Two, maybe three a week? They take one to three day sessions.”

“Sounds rough.”

“I have to work to find my breaks,” they sighed. “Didn’t think that Griffin would have a friend he wanted to scare off alpha enough he’d bring him here though.”

“He isn’t. I mean—he’s been in homosexual relationships himself.”

“Hm.” They pat their face dry. “Anyway, thanks for coming along. You don’t mind if I take a nap, right? If you change your mind you can do whatever you want but, don’t expect me to be crawling into your lap.”

“I’ll keep my hands to myself, no worries—but before you turn in I do have one question.”

They sighed and bedded down on the flat mattress beside him. Shiro had turned to move, but they reached a hand out and pressed it to his thigh, keeping him there. “What?”

“Why do you have to find breaks? Aren’t they assigned to you? And isn’t having one customer for a week a bit much?”

“Hm, you’re cute.”

“Wha—cute?”

“Under Ina we get a good deal. She’s our pimp. We spend days entertaining singles or couples or groups that come in for a flat rate. But the more hours we work—or that we look like we’re working—the greater our chances she’ll sponsor us to get Garrison citizenship. She does one each year. Then we can get out from under her or start demanding our own rates. Until then? She’s the only thing between us and getting kicked out of the city.”

Shiro stared. “You’re not from the Garrison?”

“Born and bred? No. Do I look Garrison?”

Shiro honestly couldn’t tell.

“I count as frontier omega. Exotic, if I do my hair right. Means that Ina can charge more because we can take more. I’ve seen Garrison omega put through three days of fucking. They can barely stand at the end of it.”

“And you can?”

They nodded. “It’s an average. That’s why she pays us in time, not money. That’s why her place is so popular and she’s so rich.” They watched him. “Why are you interested in this stuff?”

“I—I just never knew. It sounds…”

“Like hell?”

“…less than optimal.”

They grinned a sarcastic thing, stretched and Shiro shifted when knee bumped back. “Working under Ina is paradise in comparison to what the other girls gotta go through. If you don’t mind now,
stranger, I’d like to get some shut eye.”

Shiro nodded, but the omega was already out like a light, snoring into their arm as though they hadn’t been speaking three minutes earlier. Shiro eyed the tattoo on their wrist.

Despite himself he grew curious.

Adam suddenly saw less of him.

In the months that followed Shiro disappeared into the grain of the city learning about how the omega lived. His orphanage had been gendered. Before his eighteenth birthday his knowledge of omega was limited to text books. And during the army, well. Then the rebellion…then the parties, where only the vapid omega decorated arms. Shiro was clueless, and he hadn’t been aware of his ignorance.

Then he paid a little more attention to the whores of Altea and Daibazaal. He paid them for their time…and their stories. Documented each one. Traced the reasons why they were vetoed by husbands, banished by families, resorted to this choice. For some it wasn’t a choice. For some it was a matter of course.

He learned inner city language and trade, familiarized himself with their slang and clothing. Made unlikely friends. He took pictures. He read books. He spent less and less time staring at the stucco of Adam’s stupid tall ceiling.

Then he published a paper.

And all hell broke loose.

He was attacked from all angles. Attacked for generalizing omega into the helpless. Attacked for blaspheming on the sacred texts. Attacked for his personal lifestyle unrelated to his publication that dared to consider that erasing omega poverty could uplift all the Garrison. He weathered the calls and derisions.

(He stopped receiving invitations to parties—thank God.)

And then Adam, who’d been quiet during the whole thing, invited him in and barely butchered words: “I don’t understand why this is so important to you. Several months ago you and I went to Altea. You called it a night to de-stress. You weren’t acting high and mighty then.”

“People can change their minds. I didn’t know that those omega were suppressed. I didn’t know that they were being abused, being robbed, raped, held at gunpoint—I didn’t know that they were refugees, or sold their by their husbands or parents, or that they were being drugged. I thought they had consented! I thought they were sex workers on their own terms!”

Adam scoffed and called him naïve. “So many things are wrong with this city and you thought its sex industry would be progressive?”

Shiro blushed hotly. “I was wrong. I’m man enough to admit that. And I’d like to think I’m doing the right thing by calling attention to it.”

“There are far more pressing things for us to deal with in Garrison.”

Shiro felt that as much as he might have felt a slap to the cheek. “Than brutalized people?”
“Rebellions and revolts that keep undermining our infrastructure. Nutritional illnesses that cause more and more birth defects and shorter lifespans. Couples refusing to have children and those who do are resorting to blue blood. Not to mention the disarray in the political strata, the crime levels caused by kids routinely dropping out of school—people going to either the army or to crime instead of investing in the fields we need: medicine, engineering, social workers, educators—”

“Omega make up one third of Garrison’s population. Half of them are from outside of it. Everything that you just mentioned the omega don’t have so much as a foothold in! How is what I’m talking about not important?”

“The people who have the power don’t care, okay? Is that what you want to hear? The old, rich fat asses who inherited their land and wealth from their great-great-great grandparents don’t care that one third of the population lives in the gutters!”

“And don’t you see anything wrong with that?!”

“Of course I do! But I can’t exactly get close to them if I’m doing what you’re doing!”

“What I’m doin—Adam, this isn’t about getting close to them! You told me we sided and fought with Sanda to undermine the system from the inside, not to join them. ”

“Stop simplifying it into a cult, Takashi—”

“But it is! It’s a brotherhood on a huge scale, no different than school when everyone else was prepared to pick on you and the only way you could survive was by befriending me!”

The apartment was eerily quiet all of a sudden. Shiro felt his shoulders heave and he took Adam in, sizing him up, red faced and sentinel and irritable. His voice was much, much too calm: “Is that what this is? You resent me now that the tables have turned?”

Shiro snarled, “This is not about us! This is about people who need our help and you—YOU REFUSING to recognize it is a problem! It’s PART OF the problem!”

“Don’t shout at me.”

“Don’t be a pretentious asshole!”

Adam clasped his hands. He was soft, “Get out.”

“What?”

“Leave, Takashi,” Adam was cool, but his fangs dropped and his eyes gleamed. He was a far cry from the tiny thing that hid behind him in the showers. “We’ll talk again after you’ve sobered up.”

“I’m not—”

Adam crossed the room suddenly and opened the door.

Shiro, stunned pink, shouldered his bag, grabbed his boots, and made his way out. He never heard the door close behind him and he refused to give Adam the victory of a backwards glance.

(Maybe Adam was right. Maybe he was immature.)

The pub that took him in was nondescript enough. Not so loud that he couldn’t think, but loud
enough that he was invisible. He drank something fruity and sweet because the harder stuff was
stupidly overrated. He sipped, sipped, all the while his published paper burning a hole in his satchel.

He sipped.

“Takashi Shirogane?”

Shiro spoke without looking: “Not interested.”

“I’ll only need a minute. Please hear my words.”

“Whatever you’re selling, I’m not interested.”

“You’ve already bought it.”

Shiro, alarmed, looked up, hand flying to his wallet—but it was safely nestled against his right
nipple. Irritated at the distraction, he turned to the voice.

A thin elderly woman stood, olive brown skin and short dim white hair with a band in it. Her eyes
were slanted such, her nose long such, her mouth wide such that he knew she was indigenous, or at
least part of her was, though she spoke as clearly as any other Garrison person he wasn’t sure he
could assume her origins.

“I’ve never met you before.”

“Not face to face, no,” and she smiled. “May I sit with you?”

“Free country.”

“Debatable,” she rebuked.

He paused in sipping his drink but her smile was disarming.

Unsettled, “You said I already bought something from you?”

“Or rather,” her back was damn straight, “we’ve already bought into the same idea. Garrison is
dying, Mister Shirogane. There are men and women who do not believe it, and more often than not
the people who believe that this world can be salvaged are the ones at the top or in church. But
undoubtedly it is running straight down the path of ruination and showing no signs of stopping. We
live in a post-apocalyptic world.”

Shiro hummed and sipped. “Nice pitch.”

She persevered, “But you are a vanguard of truth.”

“Beg pardon?”

“You had the courage to say what many of us have known for ever but have never had the courage
or the power to be heard: that omega and their power over rearing the next generation is the key to
repairing our world, to building a new society. As Garrison exists the family unit is unstable, the
community by default is unstable, and it creates a Domino Effect that transforms into what we see
today. Rampant crime, gaps in fields where we need them—I don’t need to reiterate all of this to you,
you wrote the paper.”

Shiro cocked his head and felt the tavern lurch a little bit, “Sorry, did I catch your name in all of the
doom and gloom speech?”
“Reyner,” she answered.

“Nice to meet you. I’m sorry if I’m being blunt but that paper that you’re talking about? That you’re going off about almost word for word? It cost me my career. My friends. My own boyfriend of seventeen years.” He frowned quizzically for a moment. It was the first he put a label on it.

“And I’m sorry to hear that—"

“Literally any praise that you have for me is wasted. Because it didn’t reach who it needed to reach.”

“What you don’t understand is that it did.”

Shiro paused from taking a sip again. “Beg pardon?”

“Your paper has touched my heart, Mister Shirogane, with its sincerity and its honesty. And there are many others like me out there who are taking action according to it. Because of it.” She paused. “There are men and women who are taking a stand against omega oppression. And we need you to stand with us.”

“I have no more time for rebellions, thank you.”

“Not a rebellion—not a direct one at least. We’re making a new city. One far, far away from Garrison. We move slowly but surely at night.”

Shiro listened.

“Many of us are omega. Or families divided because we are immoral according to Garrison law. We carry with us forgotten scriptures and lessons of the Ancients. We have engineers and builders and social scientists. We have whole families—we’re building a society and its working.”

“You mean a microcosm of some unreachable utopia?”

“I admit that’s what it started out as but it’s developing into a town. A real functional town.”

“That’s good. Then it will become as big as Garrison and the anarchy can start all over again.”

“If starting again and again is what it takes for us to get things right then so be it. And if anything, human history demands that that’s precisely what must be done.”

The way she spoke about knowledge of the ancients…human history…he frowned. He put down his drink. “How do you know all this?”

She smiled. “I see I have your attention.”

Chapter End Notes

Comments are forever appreciated. I’m especially interested in how people feel.

If you feel nothing, that’s valuable too.

EDIT: There were some inconsistencies in this chapter which reflected my mediocre interpretation of sex and gender that I remedied. A more detailed account of said changes are in the post-script of the next chapter.
His Mission

Chapter Summary

Keith's and Lance's relationship deepens.

Shiro arrives.

Chapter Notes

The ABO world building from the series "Shiro the Hero loves you, baby" by Sasaan is very satisfying. I stole elements concerning sex and gender from their work. Details in the closing notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Present Day

Waking up was a jarring experience.

"Argh!"

He pulled something.

He panted and whined despite himself, but that only lasted a moment. His disorientation was fueled by dizziness, by pain running up his left arm, by cold lightning shooting up his spine from his sole, and his skin felt hot and itchy like cabin fever replaced the natural material of his dermis.

Then a mother’s touch, gentle but insistent, pressed against his chest and forehead and their smell layered over him so thickly he could taste it. He parted his lips: safe calm omega safe. They smelled like myrrh. They smelled like incense.

Shiro blinked and swallowed. He swallowed. His voice was woodwind.

"Thirsty?"

“Mmm.”

The rim of a glass bottle was pressed to his lips. The first swallow of water felt like knives. The rest like ambrosia.

“Easy. Trying to drown yourself again?”

Shiro’s voice was rough and loud: “What do you mean again.”

In the darkness the omega in shadow paused. It was night. There was candlelight aside, but it was on a floor in a corner, dim yellow, and illuminated nothing of his mysterious caretaker other than the gloss of the bottle in hand and the sheen of a scar on their right cheek.
The omega turned their back to put the bottle aside. “We found you half drowned in a river a few hours’ drive from here. You don’t remember us picking you up?”

Shiro winced at the memory of dirt and ice impaling his face during an inopportune explosion. His throat felt bloody from shrieking *go go go!* He just barely remembered stuffing Reyner and Olia through the crevice.

He snapped to again, smelling the heat of the blast, the acrid flavor of the bombs. A distinct sense of nausea swept over him with the disassociation between a dark, hot room and Bandor’s terrified screams.

He didn’t know where the bucket came from but it was in time.

The myrrh mother was rubbing his back. Shiro had bolted forward to throw up, and his arm and hip were berating him for it, but he was in too much pain to recline again. He spit. He groaned.

A moist towel was rubbed against his mouth and the bottle of water reappeared. He rinsed out his mouth. He spit. He gasped. His eyes were closed all the while.

“Closer to earth yet?”

“Who are you?”

“The guy who decided to pick you up before you became a frozen carcass in the frontier’s backyard.” He left with the bucket. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

In the time it took his caretaker to toss and rinse out the bucket and return, Shiro had wrangled himself into lying down again. His eyes were still squeezed shut, but he smelled when they returned: “Where do I know you from?”

“I saved you. I just said that.”

“No. I know your smell.”

Irritated, “Wow, just met and you’re already scenting me? Fucking alphas.”

“No.” He reached and found blind purchase on their arm. He could imagine it pale, slender, and with a blue tattoo on the wrist.

“The *fuck! Let go!*”

“Who are you? Who sent you? Did Montgomery put you up to this?”

Shiro’s hand would have burned where the omega was desperately clawing at him, but the omega was only breaking their own nails against the unforgiving metal and plastic. Myrrh mother's voice went calm, “Let me go.”

A new smell swept into the room and it was so refreshing like a literal breeze, sea breeze, all briny and tropical, fresh and encompassing.

Shiro hissed when his bionic fingers were ripped from their perch, the jolt tearing straight down his side, and two shadows stood where there was one before. They shielded one another in an assemblage of arms.

“You okay?”
“Fine, fine.”

“He bruised you.”

“I’m fine. He’s not...here. Mentally.”

“Did he do anything else to you?”

“I’m fine, Lance. Help him.”

The new shadow shifted, and Shiro felt himself go ramrod still at the owlish eyes that set on him. There was the sense of walking up a mountain, suddenly, knees and shins jarring against the gravel. A baby crying in their group, and then the abrupt smell of motor oil.

He gasped when the mattress depressed. “Krolia? Your name’s Krolia, right? Those were your dog tags?”

Shiro’s hand slammed into his chest and the shadows jerked forward, prepared to pin him down. “No. No-no-no-no, no, where is it? Where did you put them?”

He turned, “Keith—”

Keith, the myrrh mother, put a wide berth between himself and Shiro to place something in Lance’s hand. Lance dangled the dog tags. “They’re right here.”

Shiro reached for them.

Lance put his hand against his chest, “Now wait just a minute.”

“Please,” Shiro strained. He felt his mouth watering, his head pumping.

Lance breathed in deeply, “Breathe in? Out. Do it with me. I’ll give you the dog tags, but I need you to calm down first, mkay, buddy? In? C’mon. In?”

Sensing no alternative, Shiro echoed him. Peace was a long time coming but it did come, and Lance rewarded him by pooling the dog tags and chain into his hand. By then, Shiro had something new to worry about: “Who are you? Why am I here?”

Keith frowned in his corner.

“I’m Lance. Short, pale and brooding over there is Keith.”

“Hey.”

“As far as first meetings go you’ve gotten the politer one.”

“Are you still on about that? I apologized!”

Lance grunted, “After hitting me with my own gun.”

Shiro took the lull in the interrogation to maneuver the chain over his head. He felt safer with her name nestled against his heart. Nestled against his heart the cold, unforgiving water that stole him away from his mission—

He came to with the hand on his knee. In the dim light he could see a polite grin beneath owlish eyes. “Hey, it’s okay. Whatever you went through to get here, it’s over now. You’re safe.”
Shiro heard loud in his mind: *No it’s not. “I need to leave.”*  

Keith leaned up from his perch, *“Leave? Leave and go where? It’s negative fuck outside and you’ll freeze your knot off before you make it fifteen yards in any direction!”*  

*“Never mind your left arm is broken, your right ankle is sprained, and you’re lucky your hip and ribs are only bruised,”* Lance added. *“I’m sorry Krolia, but we can’t put you out there in good conscience.”*  

*Takashi.*  

*“What?”* they chorused.  

*“My name is Takashi.”*  

An obvious question seemed to flash in their eyes, but they didn’t ask it. Lance squeezed his knee a little, *“Alright, Takashi. Please listen to reason: at least let your ankle heal up before you try going anywhere. The closest town we can take you to is Arus. We can talk more about it in the morning but right now you need to rest. Are you hungry?”*  

Shiro was forlorn. *“No. How long will it take before I can be on my feet again?”*  

*“I wouldn’t feel comfortable giving you less than two weeks.”*  

*“That’s too long.”*  

Keith snarled, *“Well shit, how about we just throw you back into the river we found you in? Seems like that’s what you’d prefer!”*  

Lance sighed, *“Babe?”*  

Keith balked, ignored how chagrined he felt, and sulked instead.  

Lance took a steadying breath and returned to the unwavering resolve of the alpha they took under their wing. Now that he was awake his smell was prominent. It was corrupted with distress and mistrust, and it was stinking up the floorboards and making Lance and Keith anxious.  

Keith’s finger’s twitched with the urge to *scrub* the smell away.  

*“How’s this,”* Lance bargained. *“Eat, sleep and rest regularly and we can negotiate an early discharge. Hm?”*  

Shiro, defeated, sunk into the pillows meant to prop him upright. He was so damn *big* he took over the entire bed without trying. *“I don’t have a choice do I.”*  

And Lance’s smile was a bit less polite.  

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*Several hours earlier*  

Lance started when Keith maladroitly threw himself into the bathroom. Before he followed he probed himself: did he feel bloated? Nauseous? Irritable? No, yet his period *was* due. And if his synchronization theory held true, then Keith should also be anticipating his.  

Lance kept an ear open for retching and a toilet flush, but heard nothing beside a toothbrush
clattering into the sink and a mumbled whoops. So he willfully accepted the excuse to leave the behemoth of a read that the radio manual was and took up residence in the bathroom doorjam.

Keith stood in front of the mirror, pantless. His bed hair was flying every which way like an agitated barn owl and he had two hands in his mouth painting an obscene image of red gum and askew fang in the mirror.

Lance kept his face as straight as possible: “You’re really gonna make me ask, aren’t you.”

Keith smacked his mouth back into normalcy. He replied, “I read something in Alfor’s book that described that people in the city are more likely to have badly aligned teeth with less wear than indigenous people because of a difference in diet: where city people have access to a lot more food that are pre-processed and easier to chew, indigenous people work with natural foods that require a little more effort, and that effort translates to more pressure applied at the top of the mouth which affects the sutures in the skull, especially in the face, properly spacing out the teeth.”

Lance whistled. “That’s a mouthful.”

Keith’s mouth and brow pinched.

“Oh come on! How are you not laughing? That was a good line!”

Keith returned to the mirror, “I always thought that I had weird teeth because I was Marmora, not because I ate Garrison food as a kid. Go figure.”

“I didn’t know you lived in Garrison.”

“Live is a stretch,” Keith shrugged. “I spent time hiding there. They have a lot of rules and it’s hard to stay. But when I was a kid I didn’t have much of a choice.”

“When you were a part of that first alpha’s harem you mean?”

“What’s on the agenda today?”

Lance visibly jerked. He watched Keith’s resolute gaze. “I was hoping we could visit Kolivan,” he settled, “and I get to prove to you that I didn’t make all the wind chimes myself.”

The wind chimes in question were very still, according to the season. Unless one of them walked obnoxiously they didn’t ring. It’ll change come spring and summer, Lance promised.

Keith grinned, “Yeah? Sure you don’t want to go alone?”

“Very funny. I thought you’d like to see a fellow Marmorite.”

Keith frowned. “Isn’t that racist?”

Lance shrugged vaguely. “Didn’t bother him when I said it. Besides, you could ask him to sink his teeth into your theory.”

Keith remained undisturbed.

“You suck.”

“You wish.”

“What?”
“What?”

Then a light went off in Lance’s eyes and Keith immediately set to pushing him out. “I’m going to bathe. Get lost.”

“We can bathe together~”

“Shut up, I will slap you.”

“God I hope so.”

“Out! Out! Out! Out!”

Lance stumbled onto his face and Keith would have been guilty if he wasn’t scrambling to slam the door before Lance could catch on how pink he was. He was the farthest thing from innocent blushing virgin and far from unfamiliar with sexual innuendo and flirt. But Lance was earnest with his play, genuine in his affection—Lance’s attention felt like water was being poured down his throat and into a cup in his chest that was rapidly overflowing. Keith’s heart couldn’t survive the assault.

Keith felt his innards jump at Lance’s voice: “Babe?”

“What.”

“Can I at least wash your hair?”

A shuffle. The bathroom door clicked open. “…what?”

Lance folded his hands into his pockets and smiled easy. “May I wash your hair please?”

“…why?”

“I want to take care of you.”

“I can take care of myself just fine.”

“I know you can. And you have. But I think you should give me a turn.”

“Is this your way of telling me I’m not taking care of myself properly?”

Lance grunted and his seemed a little taller when he growled, “There you go again. Assuming that I mean the worst.”

Keith flushed.

“Maybe I just want to show you how much I care about you. Is that so hard to believe?”

Keith pouted. “…don’t use that tone on me.”

Lance pouted, “Sorry.”

“I didn’t mean to make you mad.”

Lance laughed a little. “You’ve clearly never had siblings, aw, pobrecito. Fighting is a part of loving each other. So? Can I? Please?”

Three minutes of breathless please please please’s got them naked and sharing the tub. Keith was almost embarrassed. Then Lance started singing while he spooned Keith and scrubbed his back and
hair and Keith picked up enough to start harmonizing as he scrubbed Lance’s cuticles.

Like everything else, it was the most natural thing in the world.

“You’re a good singer.”

“I have a good teacher.”

“Oh? Who’s that?”

“You.”

Lance didn’t know why that agitated the butterflies. Keith kept humming and pronouncing some words incorrectly—Lance gently amended him and soon they were singing like one voice perfect, trill, inflection and all.

Then they drained the tub and sat on the wide counter on its level where Lance had a decent assortment of bottles. They did not leave the Garretts’ empty handed: the Garretts made oils from anything, and Lance combed that and his fingers through Keith’s hair until he smelled like strawberries.

Lance liked the relaxed pallor in his skin. He kissed the shell of his ear, and Keith hummed lazily.

“Can I touch you, wub-wub?”

Keith spluttered out an abrupt laugh. “Don’t call me that!”

“Very well, my cherub.”

“My god.”

“Oh, is that your nickname for me?” He traced an artful tongue around the articulation of Keith’s ear and whimpered, “It’s accurate.”

Keith huffed and felt his skin warm. “Is it.”

“Can I show you?”

“Please.”

Keith slipped into Lance’s lap and their skin fit together. They shared warmth. Keith was grateful he could hide his embarrassing expressions while Lance ran magical fingers over the angle of his hip bones and curve of his thighs. Lance might be shit at this foreplay fingering thing, but that wouldn’t matter. He was being touched by someone he’d fallen for—he was guaranteed to come.

The interesting part was how.

Lance’s fingers were not gentle. They were firm. They did not bruise. They felt like they had a mission while they enclosed flesh. And his palms cupped him diligently as well. Lance ran his hand over Keith’s pink flat belly and vaguely squeezed with reverence the same time his pressed his damp lips to the back of Keith’s ear.

Keith covered his mouth as he squeaked.

“I didn’t expect you to be reactive,” Lance purred, and his voice wasn’t dripping sex. It was affectionate, playful. Keith felt some tension slough off his joints.
Keith leaned into Lance’s chest. “I don’t remember the last time I was touched like this by someone who wasn’t me.”

Lance nibbled on his shoulder. “Is this okay?”

“Mhm.”

“I like touching you.”

Keith shut his eyes and grimaced. “I like you touching me.”

“Why are you gritting your teeth?”

“It’s embarrassing. But it comes so easy for you.”

Lance deposited his hands on Keith’s sides and nuzzled his shoulder. Keith felt the shift immediately: the play was on pause. As he turned to listen to what Lance was about to say he couldn’t help but wonder how and when he’d gotten to read Lance’s non-verbal cues.

“You find it embarrassing to tell me you like me?”


Lance rubbed his ribs patiently.

“I feel like whatever I say doesn’t match how I feel. I can’t come up with words so that you know how much I…like all this. I sound stupid.”

“No, you don’t. I get it. You’re more of a physical kinda guy, if you kissing me before telling me you were in love with me was any indication.”

“Please let me live that down.”

“No, it’s almost better than the time you almost blew my back out when we first met.”

“I apologized for that.”

“Do you feel weird with me talking?”

“You mean. Talking dirty?”

“Woah, easy there, I was just taking the horse out for a walk, you just took him all the way to the city!”

Keith ducked his head and blushed and Lance rubbed his thighs and laughed into his spine. “No, that’s not what I meant. Not yet anyway. Like if I’m touching you and I talk about what I like about your skin or ask you if it’s okay if I do something more. Would that be okay?”

“Y-yeah.”

“You don’t have to talk if you don’t want. Teach me to read you.”

“You read me fine.”

“I’m not confident in reading gestures like you are.”

Keith shrugged at that, he had spent too much time on her back or hands and knees vulnerable. He
had needed to learn to predict others’ movements. “Okay.”

“I’m going to put my mouth on you now.”

Keith closed his eyes and nodded, threaded his fingers through Lance’s laying in the bowl of his naked lap.

Lance lapped up Keith’s neck a tapered trail between his scent glands and Keith sighed from the peripheral stimulation. On some days they were more sensitive than his clitoris. The ones on his thighs especially because he paid them extra attention.

Lance did it again and again, getting closer to his left gland. Keith was predicting him to suck on it. He didn’t predict teeth. He jumped—he wasn’t bitten, it was just pressure.

“Sorry. Too much?”

“No, you just surprised me.”

“Are surprises bad?”

“No, but. Can you—use your tongue instead? Teeth there kinda feels…like a threat. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, that’s fine.” He traced his tongue around the edge of the gland and then kissed it, sucked on it, and felt it harden under him from the stimulation.

Keith’s broken moan and knees twitching apart seemed like a good reaction. Lance restarted tracing patterns up and down his thighs as he laved and worshiped one gland, then the other, till Keith was red and his mouth wet and his glands delightfully enflamed.

Lance’s hands were edging towards the inside of his thighs as well, just squeezing, rubbing, reassuring, feeling. “Was that okay?”

“Yes.”

“Would it hurt if I continue?”

“A little? I dunno. I’ll tell you.”

“Can I touch the ones on your thighs too?”

Keith parted his knees and Lance ate the offering.

Within moments their laps were sticky with slick, Keith was drooling with his head thrown back and breathing shallow, his glands bright reds and stinking up the space with unbridled pleasure. Keith had started rocking, looking for a knot to knock against by instinct, and Lance was a little sorry he didn’t have so much as a vegetable to substitute. So he kissed the back of Keith’s neck and was surprised his own voice came out a little husky, “Permission to finger you?”

Keith’s fingers dug into Lance’s thigh. “Yes yes yes yes.”

So Lance’s left hand slipped from its place in Keith’s lap and, with a quick flick of the wrist, had his fingers dripping in slick when he curled his middle finger beneath and over Keith’s clitoris.

Keith’s knees bent higher, his spine bowed, his toes gripped the ceramic on either side of Lance’s knees. Lance understood, and curled his finger again and again, each time with a little more pressure. Keith whined and hissed and his fangs dropped.
Then something very interesting happened. Keith grabbed his own throat. Lance placed his hand over it on impulse, on concern, then Keith froze a little.

In a hot second of guesswork, Lance added a little pressure to the hand covering Keith’s throat and jerked his clit in fevered circles.

Keith’s panting returned, a little shrill, a little ecstatic, and Lance was worried that he was going to drive them both into a premature heat.

But all at once Keith snapped forward, ripped Lance’s hands off him, and hid his head in his folded arms while his pussy fluttered on his lover’s lap.

Lance worshipped Keith’s back until he came to, dropping a steady stream of kisses.

Then Keith reached back and Lance held fast without hesitation.

Keith’s voice came, “I told you you could read me.”

Lance resisted the urge to sink his teeth into him. He kissed his gland, “Thanks.”

“For?”

“For letting me take care of you.”

Keith chirped something low, happy and embarrassed.

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*Present Day*

“How do you ever sleep?”

Shiro exhaled. “Would you sleep comfortably in a stranger’s bed?”

Lance grinned, “Yes, but the ancients didn’t make us equal. Hungry?”

“How long has it been?”

“Since we brought you here? About a day.”

“I should be hungry,” he sent a mental probe to his belly, where it disappeared. “I don’t know why I’m not.”

“How do you feel about some chicken broth?”

Shiro groaned something resigned.

“Then we’ll get you some.”

“Like I have a choice.”

“Glad you’re catching on.”

“Lance?”

Lance turned back, “Yes, Takashi.”
“Was there…did you see anyone else out there? Besides me?”

Lance’s smile fell. “No.”

Shiro closed his eyes. “Okay.”

Something cold stuck to Lance’s belly after that.

- 

Several hours earlier

“Lance! And Keith! Wonderful of you to call. It’s only been three weeks since we last heard from you.”

“You’re going to turn into a tree at the rate you’re throwing shade.”

She broke off in a screech of laughter.

“See, this is why I didn’t want a radio. Now people want you to call them every day. Convenience ruins us.”

“Oh, tish tosh!”

“Wouldn’t you agree, Keith?”

Keith, desperately horny, averted his eyes from the stray nipple he spied in the gap of Lance’s baggy shirt. “Uh-huh.”

“Hello Keith,” and Keith dropped his temple to Lance’s shoulder and pulled his knees to his chest and paid the box mumbling in Allura’s voice a little more attention. “How have you been feeling? Have you had any heats yet?”

“No, I think I’ll go the winter without one. My period’s due though.”

“Mine too!” Lance chimed.

“Oh? Your cycles have lined up already?” That was Coran. “How exciting! It means you’re very compatible!”

“Hear that, bug? We’re compatible.”

Keith’s eyes snapped up from Lance’s crotch. “…bug?”

Allura asked after Hunk and Lance launched into song full of all the titters, emulations and embellishments surrounding Hunk’s older sister’s impending wedding while tastefully segueing into how Hunk was fucking Shay behind mommy’s back. He was gesturing hard even though his audience was blind, and for a moment Keith figured he was performing for his benefit. But no, Lance was just swinging his arms because the story demanded it. So he dropped his face into Lance’s lap to give him room.

The fire was hot, so they were scantily clad. Underwear and baggy sweaters and socks. It was simple bliss.

But for Keith it was a unique torture. It would only take an inch, a little wriggling, and then he could get his mouth on Lance’s sex. He was hungry! And he marveled that Lance didn’t seem the same.
He felt his fangs drop and let them, gnawing and drooling harmlessly on Keith’s leg. Lance giggled and smacked him. “What are you doing?”

“What?”

“Not you, Lu. Keith. He’s chewing on me.”

“Oh, he seems to have adopted your habit of sinking his teeth into things that ought not be eaten.”

“Is this about your dolly?”

“She used to have perfect skin!”

“I said I was sorry.”

“Sorry doesn’t repair indentations! Coran, stop laughing at me!”

Lance suppressed a giggle when Keith pressed his nose between Lance’s thighs. “Where’s Alfor today?”

“Daddy went to see Iverson again,” and she sounded stiff.

“Something wrong?”

Keith paused in his ministrations.

“It’s…nothing wrong, per say. But the Galra have made themselves at home. They’re setting up businesses as they claim, and sure, the town’s booming thanks to it. And I know I shouldn’t let prejudices get the better of me but I just don’t trust them here in Arus.”

“It’s not prejudice if it’s true,” Keith said. “The Galra have destroyed whole civilizations. History says they were made for it, the way indigenous peoples got wiped out for the creation of the First City and the foundations of Second. If your gut says you don’t feel right in Arus I say listen to it.”

Allura sighed, “And where would we go?”

“Here,” Lance jerked brightly. “There’s always space for you here.”

Allura sighed, “Lance…”

“Frontier life isn’t bad, Lu. I know I used to complain about it but it isn’t. It can be hard work sure but it just takes a little adjustment.”

“Lance.”

“And when more people live together the work gets a little easier. I got a lot of time freed up since Keith came to live with me.”

“We’ve spoken about this, Lance. Frontier life is hard for a woman in my profession. Staying in established cities, established towns…it’s easier to find a living than darning and spinning wool. I’m not looking down on what you and Keith and your friends out there do—Ancients know I’m impressed and proud. But I wouldn’t have the time and the freedom to perfect my work if I become a frontier woman.”

Keith spoke in Lance’s stunted silence, “With the Galra in Arus that town has an expiration date.”
Lance hummed. He scratched Keith’s hair when he restarted his ineffectual gnawing. “I remember him. God, I’d let him break me in half.”

There was a loud aborted laugh somewhere behind Allura’s amused, “I realize you have a thing for older men with tragic backstories.”

Lance looked down and winked at Keith, “That I do.”

Keith burrowed his face in Lance’s thighs with new vigor. Lance laughed in time with Allura, assuming Keith’s reaction was out of embarrassment. He squeaked when Keith’s tongue laved over the scent gland on his inner thigh. When he looked down, Keith was looking up, eyes questioning, fingers tugging on the hem of Lance’s panties.

“That aside, Lance, I meant to tell you that your latest tapestry was well received, thank you. I’ve gotten three requests for rugs and blankets, do you think you can meet the demand for the end of spring?”

“You’re killing me,” and his voice was tight, because though he put his hand on Keith’s head he didn’t push away, so Keith had taken it as permission and settled between Lance’s legs, kneeling on the floor and cajoling Lance’s hips forward on the chair such that he could slip his underwear to his ankles and spread his thighs.

“Oh, hush. You can handle the workload.”

Keith thought the omega sex was grotesque before Lance. But when he parted labia major—and Lance swallowed a huff as he wrote down the details of the requested designs that Allura dictated—he couldn’t think of anything other than an unfurling flower, a rosebud dripped with dew, bright pink and breathing and that should have been a little gross, but more than that Keith’s tongue needed to be in there.

He struggled to be patient. He sucked on Lance’s pussy, lips and all, tongue tracing the folds between and flattening over his hole before ricocheting off his clitoris.

Lance grunted. It was sharp, he jerked, but it wasn’t loud enough for Allura to hear. He cast a glare at Keith’s head and covered his mouth with his free hand.

The texture of Lance was wonderful. It was silky, velvety, wet and meaty. And when Lance gushed a little, excited and pleased, and squeaked in embarrassment, Keith drank what was offered—it was bland, vaguely salty, for some reason palatable.

Keith didn’t expect to enjoy himself this much.

Lance’s writing went erratic when Keith receded the hood from clitoris and sucked and stayed there the bitch.

Lance slammed his head into the table.

“Lance?!” Allura stuttered, “Are you alright?”

“Fine,” he coughed out the squeak. “Fine, fine. You said the second carpet. They wanted what colours in it?”

Keith sucked on his clitoris, ducked his head, laved over his fluttering hole and repeated the cycle
with easy predictability. Lance felt his tingling arousal crest and fall like beach water. He felt himself shiver. He heard Keith moan, appreciative, elated really when Lance’s thighs threatened to close around his head. Keith encouraged it, his mouth devoted the entire time.

Lance cursed.

Allura laughed, “Yes, I figure it would be something of a challenge for you. But you’ve made a name for yourself.”

Sweating, trembling, he barely managed to quip back: “I think you mean to say you’ve made a name for yourself.”

“Allura, I was just telling you when I—hm—”

“No,” but his no broke off because Keith introduced two fingers at his entrance. They were barely moving, just there, implicating. “No, I have everything I—hmm—I think I have everything.” And he bit his knuckle white.

“You’re certain?”

The fingers shallowly thrust now.

“I am so good, Lu.”

“Very well.”

Keith wasn’t really even fucking him! He was just staying at the entrance of his vagina, thriving in the feel of Lance stretching gradually, and Lance was melting under the warmth of that stretch, the promise of getting something deep inside, but mostly the consistent pressure and slick on his clit. When Keith curled his fingers, pumping a little harder, Lance curled over him, clutching at his hair and throwing kisses into it. Tears were coming to his eyes from the building pressure and the demand to stay quiet. His muscles and eyes and brain burned with that good fever.

“Shall I leave you to it, then?”

“Huh? Oh,” and he looked at the loom on the other side of the room. “Yeah, the sooner the be—hn. The sooner the better. Talk soon.”

“Of course, darling. And congrats on your relationship with Keith.”

“Wha—”

Lance didn’t even had time to be mortified. No sooner did Allura sign off did Keith turn everything up to eleven and Lance threw his head back, breathing hard, legs raised and coiled, near riding Keith’s face half out of the chair.

When he came he convulsed and ripped his lover off, and Keith kissed his knee and licked his lips and watched him carefully as he breathed and came down.

Lance dragged him up by his hair and kissed him wildly. “You absolute asshole.”

“Says the slut that got off on it.”

“Hnmf!” He was cut off by lips and fang and tongue before he could rebuke. Kissing Keith today was like being swallowed. He could feel every undulating of tongue and cheek and it was divine and scary. Keith’s hands ran up and down Lance’s thighs meanwhile and when they broke apart it was in
a series of tapering kisses.

“I bet you’d like if Kolivan saw you like that too.”

Lance coloured.

“We could invite him.”

“He doesn’t…I don’t think…”

“Let’s ask him. Let’s go and ask him.”

“Fuck, why are you so horny?”

He bit at his lip. “Dunno. Calmed down yet? Can I do it again? Will you ride my face this time?”

Lance blanched. “I’m going to die.”

Present day

When Shiro woke up again, Keith was in the room. He’d been filling a bowl with water on the dresser. When he turned around and caught Shiro’s gaze he glared. With the pitcher tight against his breast he moved toward the door in less than a whisper.

Shiro spoke in a croak that gave him pause, “You’re from Garrison. Aren’t you.”

Keith did not turn around.

“In a way…I owe you my life.”

Keith’s foot twisted like he wanted to turn around and ask Shiro to speak plainly, and Shiro found himself disappointed when the omega wordlessly departed instead.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve confused myself and likely confused my readers. Omegaverse is strange at best, and I navigate it with a fledging understanding of the distinctions between gender, sex, and sexuality. I am cis-female and identified as heterosexual until I lived away from home and learned that loving people who have the same genitalia as me isn’t a bad thing. I’m still learning about how the continuum works, and rewiring my brain away from thinking in the binary terms of male and female/penis and vagina as the exclusive end all be all.

And because of that, I didn’t notice until the close of chapter six that I didn’t design a world where people have secondary genders: I designed a world where it is taken as a matter of course that sex does not correlate with gender. Being masculine or feminine has no power here: having male sex organs, female sex organs or intersex organs does.

I made a mistake. Being gay is about being attracted to someone who is the same gender, not necessarily who has the same sex. If Shiro likes Keith, for example, he’s still
gay, because Keith identifies as male. It shouldn’t mean he doesn’t like pussy.

It makes the previous declaration about Adam not liking omega because he’s “gay” inaccurate.

I’ll fix that later.
Familiar

Chapter Summary

Between things unspoken the threat of becoming friends looms its ugly head.

Chapter Notes

I’m grateful to everyone for leaving their comments, thoughts and kudos. I apologize that I did not keep with my commitment to update between every week and every three weeks—alas, time (and academic deadlines) wait for no man!

Prior to writing this chapter I read and revised the previous four several times combing for inconsistencies and loopholes. For example, in chapter seven, a man with a broken arm should not be able to grab someone else’s arm, so I amended that to Shiro having his prosthetic at the time. Other significant changes are mentioned in the closing notes of previous chapters.

Comments are ever a delight, no matter how innocuous or small. Happy reading!

Though it had stayed in his peripheral vision for as long as he had known this bed to be his home, Shiro hadn’t gotten a good look at the candle until Lance picked it up one day. It was not a candle at all. It was a lamp, not unlike a kerosene lamp, with pretty orange paint decorating its bulbous glass, but it didn’t burn black enough or smell sharp enough to be kerosene.

“Yupper fat,” Lance provided, unprompted, eyes glittering with mirth when he caught Shiro’s vigilance.

Shiro’s eyes fell from Lance’s face to the lamp he moved to the bedside table, and then back again, where the irritable flicker cast his smile in a solemn glow.

Lance had a pointed chin, a kicked up narrow nose, large glassy eyes and wide round ears handling a sharp jaw. He possessed neither a whisker nor hint of struggling to be rid of them. He was the type of handsome that was handsome when he moved rather than if he were blown up sixteen feet on a billboard. He was the kind of handsome where his looks worked in tandem with his voice, words and expressions. When their eyes met Shiro felt overwhelmed by brutal sincerity. When he smiled Shiro felt the muscle in his cheek jump.

Lance was vigilant suddenly, so Shiro blinked at attention. “Can I touch you? Check your temperature and the like?”

Shiro wiggled. “I can do little to stop you.”

“Your words would stop me,” Lance sat down, elbows bracing his knees, grin wide and toothless. “Keith and I are only mean when it comes to your health.”
“And your safety, clearly,” he gestured with his chin to his missing arm.

“If you want your prosthetic back that badly we’ll give it to you. But it’ll hurt you more than us.” He tapped his own side as indication.

Shiro rest his head back and sighed, feeling the throb in his own ribs.

“Are you cold?”

“I’m fine.”

“Hungry?”

“I’m fine, Lance.”

Lance hesitated. “Would you rather be left alone? It’s just…you’ve been sleeping all day. I thought company might do you good.”

Shiro sent him a rueful pout. “I’m sorry. I’m just…I have no arms and can’t walk without support when a day ago I was hiking through the mesa.”

Lance paused, his hamster wheel near audible. He corrected tenderly, “Two days ago.”

“…it’s been that long?”

“You’ve been asleep through most of it.” Lance propped his toes on the edge of the bedframe and laced his long arms around his knees. He smiled, “That’s your alpha hormones kicking in. Your right arm should be good as new by the end of the month, all goes well. Might even be less provided you’re a good boy.” He winked.

Shiro must have made a face because Lance giggled.

“The way you were ready to run out of here though I’d bet my left foot you’ll break it again before then.”

Shiro replied instead that he was grateful. “I’d be dead with my face in the ice if it weren’t for you and Keith. I literally owe you my life.”

“Easy, tiger,” Lance laughed.

“Really. I’m in your debt. I don’t know how to repay you.”

And he rolled his neck and shoulders, “Y’know, Blue could use some parts. Some good parts—not the fourth generation three times used stuff we’re always trading out here. You look like a guy with connections, hook us up?”

Shiro smiled. “I don’t have much authority back home…but I’ll see what I can do.”

Lance grinned easy. Everything about him came easily. “Awesome. How’s your pain level by the way?”

Shiro winced at the mention.

“I can brew some Clear Day root for you.”

Shiro started, “That’s a narcotic.”
“Yeaaahh, you’ll feel a liiiiiiittle high. But! It’ll ease the pain. I once smoked the stuff and I couldn’t feel anything in my extremities for days. Clear Day my ass—it took Hunk to tell me I had a nail in my foot.” At Shiro’s expression: “I’m not doing the best job talking it up, am I.”

“Not precisely, no.”

“Well if nothing else it’ll keep your mind off the pain. Might even settle the irritability you mentioned.”

“I’m not keen about being out of it for three days or developing an addiction.”

“Brewing it into a tea won’t stone you, don’t worry. You’ll still be aware but the intensity of everything will just dim. Supposedly. I’ve never drunk it myself. As far as I’m aware.”

“Great promotion.”

Lance grinned. “I’ll whip it up for you.”

Shiro relented to his fate, quietly wondering how he would have survived in the veld. Lack of motion drew his attention and he saw Lance there, standing still, still smiling, gesturing with an open hand. Shiro nodded.

Lance pressed his slender fingers to forehead and throat and Shiro was horrified to find himself leaning into it. It was a polite but indelible touch, and cradled his jaw and stroked the stubble on his cheek pensively before abating.

“Don’t go anywhere,” Lance cooed, a ghost of a love tap lingering on Shiro’s nose.

“Funny,” Shiro groused, fighting down his own grin as Lance sashayed through the door. His movements were decidedly feminine, for a frontier alpha.

It was a baffling juxtaposition.

Where Lance was easy and casual Keith was clipped. Keith checked Shiro’s ankle, checked his arm, checked his sores, his temperature and made note of how and what he ate, but rarely spoke. Still, Shiro found his presence a delight. In part he wondered if it was because he was under the attentions of a feral beauty. But he banked on the vaporous insistence that he knew Keith.

Since the first night Keith kept his distance unless Lance was in proximity. When Shiro woke on the afternoon on the third day, Keith was reading. The stool Lance had been perched on the night before was replaced with a rocking chair decorated in a wooly throw and a cushion. Keith had his legs folded, cheek in hand, reading, the most unguarded Shiro had ever seen him.

He must have breathed differently or twitched or something, because Keith’s eyes were upon him in an instant, as calculating as a housecat stalking a caged parakeet.

Shiro could do nothing but breathe under the scrutiny.

Keith silently closed the book. “How are you feeling?”

“A little thirsty,” he admitted.

Keith fluidly unfolded his legs, dropped his book, reached for a glass bottle set aside and sat on the edge of the bed to press the rim to Shiro’s lips. For the first time since he woke up, Shiro’s eyes
flickered away from his face to keep focus on not drowning.

Keith set the bottle aside. “Your ankle’s doing well. You can put your weight on it soon.”

“And my prosthetic?”

Keith’s eyes were sharp again. “We’re aware that it’s a weapon.”

“I can take the retractable blade out. I can tell you how. It’s just…I’d like to get some of my autonomy back. You and Lance have been great but…” and he lifted his stump to gesture, wiggled the fingers of his injured arm.

Keith’s face twisted into something unreadable and unsympathetic, but at least it wasn’t passive. “Let me check your ribs again.”

Shiro held his breath as Keith peeled the shirt away. Keith pressed his fingers somewhere and told Shiro to breathe.

“Where did you learn medicine?”

“Still learning.”

“…oh.”

“Frankly I’m glad you came along. I was itching to practice on something.”

“It’s a pleasure to know that I’m your test dummy.”

Keith watched his face.

“I was joking.”

“I wasn’t.”

Shiro shut up.

Drawing back, “I’d feel more comfortable waiting at least a day longer.”

“Lance said my arm would be fine within a month.”

“Provided you don’t put too much stress on it,” and he returned to his little nest in the chair. It made Shiro’s jaw weak to see the omega curl up and wrap the throw around him, chair rocking mildly.

“What did you do? Throw yourself off a mountain?”

Shiro closed his eyes. “Something like that.”

Keith paused. He looked as though he were about to say something, but he instead opened his book and continued reading.

The pain was keeping Shiro awake, mad tea long since worn off. He was not a stranger to narcotic drugs—having suppressed three uprisings in Garrison, this was far from his first broken arm—but his alpha instinct rallied against requesting another mug be brewed for him. He couldn’t be redundant and oblivious, and especially not in the home of an alpha that was too friendly and an omega that was too unfriendly.

But, he tried to reason with himself, I’m safe. Safe from true danger at least.
Meanwhile, inevitably, his instinctual alpha huffed and hemmed and hawed and gnawed on the prison bars of his mind grunting it was not safe not safe not safe because friendly, bubbly cheerful Lance was alpha. Rival. Threat.

Instinct was an absolute bitch.

And he thought it was absolutely wrong. He had a feeling it was Keith he should be more afraid of. He moved too quietly, his dark eyes were too pensive, too predatory. Keith could straddle him and plunge a knife into his chest and Shiro wouldn’t blink he’d be so unsurprised.

Keith looked up and Shiro averted his eyes.

“What.”

“Nothing.”

The book closed. “Do you need something?”

“…well, I’d like to try walking today, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Lemme ask you something: do you want to recover?”

“Of course.”

“Then do me one thing.”

“Yes?”

“Stop pissing me off.”

Shiro sighed, “I deserved that.” And when his eyes skittered to Keith again he thought he caught trace of a raised cheek. He closed his eyes again and smiled a little to himself. “Can I at least bother you for ten minutes of conversation?”

The book snapped shut with an annoyed lilt.

“My brain is eating itself alive without something to focus on.”

A snort. “I thought alpha got off on doing nothing.”

“I can’t speak for other alpha,” he looked at Keith’s calm face half squashed in his palm. “But I feel like my best self when I’m doing something.”

“Yeah? What do you usually do?”

“Well, at home I like to clean.”

Keith snorted. “Seriously? You?”

Shiro snarled playfully. Keith tensed at the action, though he relaxed when Shiro’s tone remained light, “It’s the army in me.”

“Should’ve guessed you’re an army man. You guys put housewives to shame.”

“In the army it maximizes efficiency. But to give Mother Dayak credit my habit started with the orphanage I was raised at. Our caretaker wouldn’t take shit from any of her kids. Some workers let
us get away with murder—not her. She taught us to clean up after ourselves proper and share responsibilities. I think she used to be a nun.”

“You were raised in a church?”

“No…most churches were pulled down before I was born. They’ve made a comeback recently but…back in the day people said the churches were spreading self-destructive propaganda. A lot of holy texts were burned back then, and a lot of not-so-holy ones too.”

“Sounds like a party.”

“It was nothing short of intellectual culling. When you keep the masses ignorant they’re easier to corral.” He smiled bleakly. “Sorry, went off on a depressing tangent there.”

“Actually,” Keith surprised him, “it’s interesting to hear that coming from a Garrison alpha. Until now I figured you all blindly patriotic.”

Shiro snorted and hid his flinch behind genuine amusement. “That’s a little fair. That described me, until…well. I met someone. After that I read and talked to people and I…realized that the glitter in the city wasn’t gold.”

“…Krolia?”

Keith saw Shiro’s stump jerk as though he wanted to palm the dog tags hidden beneath his marina.

“Krolia was another positive influence on my life.” He sighed, and though there was forever a pinch in his facial expression, he seemed more relaxed now than ever. “Krolia was the one who never gave up on me when I lost my arm, my life, my friends, my motivation. I tried to make a difference and I paid the price for it. She was the one that proved to me it was never a loss.”

“…is she…?”

“Dead? Ha. No way. Death itself would come for her and she’d have him beneath her boot before dinner.”

Keith whistled. “Sounds like a charmer.”

“She left the Garrison to live in the frontier.”

“She was the one you lost at the river?”

Keith watched the defenses build up, a careful construction of stillness and faux contentment. “No, it wasn’t her.”

Keith waited for more, but it seemed they both had their fill of intrapersonal communication for the day. Keith returned to his book and Shiro to the atrophy of cabin fever, and the air between them didn’t taste as thick or metallic as it had before.

Sleep, which was a fickle mistress, ran away at the slightest pin drop. When Shiro woke up he was exhausted, tired, annoyed—his skin felt like it had accreted another layer in his sleep and his arm warmed uncomfortably as if to greet him.

He closed his eyes but a hiss roused him. What—
“Keep your voice down.”

A smack. “Don’t you dare—”

“Keith, ssh. He’ll hear us.”

Naturally, Shiro eavesdropped.

They spoke softly enough that he had to strain to hear them, even despite his augmented senses. For a moment he wondered if they had heard him, they were silent.

Then Keith grunted, “Lance, please listen to me.”

A huff.

“Lance. He’s an injured alpha who shows up in the frontier supposedly with people we can’t find the same time Galra are taking over the closest city. There is a relation and we should ask.”

“What, you think he’s working with the Galra?”

“No.” A pause. “Maybe.”

“Keith, the Garrison have hated the Galra for centuries.”

“Wrong—they hated the Galra centuries ago. They kicked them out centuries ago.”

“They never let them back in.”

“That’s what they want you to think,” Shiro could hear someone pacing. “Why are you against this? Aren’t you even a little curious why he’s out here?”

“Of course I am.”

“…but?”

“But it’s none of our business.”

“He hijacked our bed, I’d say that’s plenty of our business!”

Shiro made himself not shift despite immediate discomfort.

“People get hurt out here all the time. You did.”

“I had a reason—”

“Maybe he does too.”

A huff, more pacing. “He’s hiding something.”

“I agree.”

“Then why won’t you side with me?”

“I think…we’re safer if we don’t know.”

“…knowledge is power, Lance.”
There must have been an exchange of glances after that, because Shiro fell asleep before he heard anything that could count as a rebuttal.

On the afternoon of the fourth day Lance provided Shiro with an impossible choice.

“Either I bathe you or he does.”

Shiro blanched.

“It’s non-negotiable,” Keith added. “You stink.”

Shiro flushed.

“Keith. Por favor, más amable.”

Keith appeared unrepentant.

“I don’t suppose I could bathe myself?”

They chorused, “Your arm’s broken.”

Shiro took that to mean that he wasn’t going to get his prosthetic back today. He wilted under their patient staring. He considered Keith, because he felt like the default option. An omega would be attentive to his needs whether he voiced them or not. But Keith was brusque, and that set him on edge such that he wasn’t looking forward to being vulnerable around him.

Lance, however, he didn’t mind touching him. Looked forward to it, in fact. But between his firm and guiding grips and almost naïve nature Shiro was apprehensive for another reason: Lance was leggy, dark skinned, bright eyed and hopelessly his type.

Shiro didn’t want to be bathed by someone he was likely developing an attraction to.

But Lance was alpha. Would he feel comfortable with his omega alone with a naked stranger?

“Preferably today,” Keith prompted.

Shiro averted his eyes. “Uh. Um, Lance. Please.”

Lance’s smile neither widened nor dimmed. “Sure thing, buddy. Let’s get you in the bathroom. Keith, ¿puedes cambiar las hojas?”

“Bueno.”

“Gracias, m’amor. Now Takashi we’re going to take this slow,” he was already at Shiro’s side. “I’m going to help you sit up. Oh, maybe you’d like some more Clear Day before we—”

“No!” Lance and Keith startled. “I mean…thank you, but no. I’d rather be…cognizant for now.”

Lance nodded, smile back in place, and Shiro was starting to think it was fake. Then Lance gripped him in that comfortable way, avoided all his bruises and aches, and had him on his feet for the first time in forever. His legs itched with the strain and he wanted to do nothing more than go for a nice long jog to shake out the pins and needles.

But first, a step. He was unsteady, but he braced on Lance enough to recapture the rhythm of
walking that he’d never take for granted ever again.

He took in the rest of the house for the first time with a little exhale of awe. The roof was littered with hanging dreamcatchers—no, they were wind chimes—motionless and vaguely ominous, and a hearth with a polite fire and a cast iron stove with a roaring one made the main room warmer than the bedroom. A few feet away from the hearth was a nest, a comfortable set up on the floor outfitted with pillows, books and sewing materials. Beside the bathroom door was a loom and something incomplete and colourful on it.

Homey as the setup was, Shiro felt apprehensive. It didn’t smell lived in. It smelled like fire, a little bit of food, but mostly it smelled like nothing. Not even dust. Did Keith clean ceaselessly?

The bathroom was much the same in the way of smells, but it was perfumed by oils made from nuts and fruits and Shiro focused on those, even as Lance put him to sit down on the tiled counter on level with the tub.

“Alright, now let’s get you nekked!”

Shiro swallowed a whimper.

“Hm? What’s wrong big guy?” Lance tilted his head to look into Shiro’s face. “Embarrassed? Don’t be, I promise I’ll be totally professional. No illicit groping.”

Keith growled from the next room over.

Lance barked back, “Eavesdropping is rude!”

Shiro blinked at his toes, “It’s fine, I’ve gone through things more humiliating than this.”

“No, no, I don’t care for that look at all,” Lance tapped his chin lightly, “Look at me.”

His voice bore no room for dissent. Shiro faced him, shamefully vulnerable.

“We’re not trying to humiliate you, Takashi. Far from it. We’re trying to help and heal you. Now yes Keith can be an absolute troll—”

More distant growling.

“—but in his own special way he means well. I do too.” He smiled, one of the genuine ones. “I know it’s uncomfortable being naked and bathed by someone who’s practically a stranger. I understand you don’t trust me—”

“I trust you.”

Lance blinked, taken aback.

Shiro dropped his gaze to his feet, surprised with himself. “I trust you,” he repeated, a little to himself. He yelped lightly at the abrupt fingers in his hair.

“Aw, puppy. That means a lot. Look, we’ll go slow, okay? And talk if you’re uncomfortable with anything. Anything at all. Got it?”

Why did Shiro feel like a child again? “Got it.”

His marina was cut off of him, and Lance sang “one foot now the other” stripping him of his pants and underwear, and then he was in the bath, sitting such that his arm in sling was above the water.
He kept his eyes closed while Lance moved from his back to his shoulders to his arms...he didn’t focus very hard on that. But Lance didn’t linger and was soon scrubbing his feet. Oddly, Lance was humming all the while.

“Should I cut your nails too, big guy? O-or I could get Keith to do it. It’ll make you more comfortable, hm?”

“I don’t mind you doing it,” Shiro replied, falling asleep to the lather in his hair.

“Really?” A pause. “You don’t find it weird that I’m alpha and doing this for you?”

Shiro blinked awake. He admitted that he was at first. “But it faded pretty fast. Kinda forgot you were alpha, to be honest.”

Lance was quiet.

“N-not that being alpha or not means people can’t love or care for each other I just meant—”

“Easy, pup. I know what you meant.”

Shiro scoffed a little. “My turn to ask a question.”

“Mhm?”

“Were you raised in an omega dominant family?”

“...yes.”

“I thought so. You’re too nice.”

“Nicer than Keith, even?”

A distant growl.

“You’re just jealous I’m his favourite!” Lance called back. To Shiro: “Keith’s plenty nice. But the world hasn’t been nice to him back so he can be a little tense.”

Keith appeared in the doorway. “Talking about people behind their back is rude.”

Shiro quickly crossed his legs.

Lance poured a bowl of water over Shiro’s hair, laughing, “Go away. What’s for dinner?”

“What else? All we have is deer and bacon.”

“We can make bacon and beans—”

“Over my dead body.” In a new tone, “We’ll have to go hunting soon. An extra mouth to feed is hurting our stores.”

Shiro gasped, “I’m sorry. I can help hunt—”

“What part of you’re injured don’t you understand—” Keith yelled at the same time Lance hissed, “Like hell we’re putting you out there—!”

Shiro wilted beneath their admonishments, which was a fine feat. He was a six five, hulking, hard-to-miss mass in a sea of able bodied soldiers, let alone a dinky tub beside a wiry couple. He let himself
sulk, already tired, and Lance doused his head again.

“I’ll go hunting tomorrow,” Lance declared.

“We can wait a few days, just letting you know.”

“Aight.”

“And I’m cooking tonight. I’ll be damned if you give me more bacon and beans.”

Lance laughed that they were a frontier classic. Keith returned that Lance was a hazard to their nutritional needs.

Lance was still chuckling when he bowed over Shiro, either uncaring or ignorant how Shiro crossed his legs again, and unplugged the bath. “We take turns cooking,” Lance grabbed a towel. “I’m a better cook than him though he doesn’t believe me.”

Distantly, “You cook the same damn thing each time!”

Lance conspired with Shiro in a whisper, “He never complains when he’s eating it.”

A little more in love with them, Shiro grinned.

Lance stepped back. “That’s a good look on you.”

“Wha—whuf!” A towel was promptly thrown over his head and everywhere rubbed at once. When he was dry and his arm checked over, Lance sat him down to rub lotion in his skin. Very necessary, Lance insisted. He came from a tropical climate and the winter turned his skin to scales. Never again. Oils were a very necessary part of living on the frontier. Shiro weathered his ministrations, struggling against a grin all the while.

When he was clothed again, in pants cottony and baggy but helplessly close on his hips and a big black soft sweater that looked like it should have itched but didn’t, he felt like a whole new person and the smell of dinner was lingering.

“There you are,” Lance stepped back to appraise his work. “How do you feel, puppy?”

“Infinitely better.” He stood. “Thank you, Lance.”

But Lance didn’t look as content as he did a moment before. In fact he looked downright shell shocked, emotion drained from his face in the same time his arms slipped from his waist. Shiro shifted, about to ask what was wrong, but Lance jerked away violently in response, sending a clatter of bottles to the floor. Like a signal, Keith was there in a heartbeat, smelling of heavenly herbs and seared meat, and he took one look at them before sprinting to Lance’s side. “Lance?”

“Is he alright?”

“What did you do?!”

“Nothing!”


“Bullshit,” Keith hissed, but didn’t stop Lance from going.

Shiro lingered at the bathroom door, hurt and worried, staring at Keith’s back as he stared at Lance
through the front door. When Keith turned, it was like a whip. When he approached, it was like facing down a charging bull.

“What did you do.”

“Nothing,” Shiro stood his ground, finding his hackles rising. “I thanked him.”

“Thanked him?”

“He asked me if I felt better. I said yes. I thanked him. That’s all.”

Keith blinked a moment before he realized he was craning his neck up and up and up. Shiro was standing on his own for the first time. He was big.

Keith turned away, scared in his bones but he refused to let his scent sound like anything but the crackle of thunder. “Oh,” he said simply.

“…will he be okay?”

“Yes.” Frustrated, “But he’ll kill me if I didn’t make sure you ate first.”

“Go after him. Please.”

Keith spared him a look then nodded, tossing on his coat and boots in a heartbeat and was out the door in a flash, leaving Shiro to struggle to turn off the stove when the something in the skillet started to burn.

Lance was shuddering in Blue.

He unlocked the door and moved over when Keith tapped on the glass, but not without starting violently first. When they were saddled together, hip to hip, Keith wrapped his coat—the one Lance gave him—around his lover, pulled the hood over his hair, and held him. When Lance began to rock, he rocked with him and felt himself let out a relieved breath.

“Please tell me I don’t smell like a bitch in heat.”

Keith paused, looking up to the house in alarm. “…I thought the suppressants killed your heats.”

“With the way I ran out there looking like one I don’t doubt I smell like one too.”

“Hush, Lance,” Keith mumbled sharply. “You don’t look or smell like you’re in heat.”

“Don’t I?”

Firmly, “No. You just look scared.”

Lance scoffed wetly. He sniffed, and his hand went under the hood to wipe at his nose and eyes, but Keith did not see, and he granted Lance that little privacy. “I am. I am scared. Do I smell scared?”

“You don’t really smell like anything. Maybe it’s the suppressants.”

“God, you think he finds it weird I don’t smell like anything? Like I’m trying so hard not to smell like I’m on my menses—I bathed him in the smelliest stuff we have but I was scared he’d find out any minute.”
“What did he do to you?”

“What, nothing. He—nothing. He just. He’s big. I didn’t notice until he stood up and, just, the entire bathroom just.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“I felt like I was on the floor looking up at him. And he was smiling? And my head was telling me he was being nice but...shit, I think I pissed myself a little.”

“It’s okay, Lance.”

“It’s not. How am I supposed to face him again?”

“Tell the truth?”

Another wet scoff. “Yeah: ‘Hey puppy, sorry I ran out earlier. It's just that I’m an omega in hiding and I used to get whipped within an inch of my life by my dead husband and today you reminded me a little of him! Could you pass the pepper?’ That’ll go over well.”

Keith pursed his lips, wondering what to tackle first. Unfortunately his curiosity took precedence: “You call him puppy?”

Lance sighed, “Sorry, yeah. Habit.” He shuffled close to Keith. “It’s the way he lets me take care of him. Like my brother’s pups when I used to bathe them.”

“Jesus, Lance, mind turning the motherhood down from eleven?”

“Sorry.”

“He doesn’t have to smell you to know you’re omega if you keep up with shit like that!” Mommy Garrett’s warning came to mind.

“Shit, I said I’m sorry already, get off my dick.” He sniffed. “I fucking hate crying.”

Keith rubbed his shoulder.

“Maybe...I should keep my distance from him for a while.”

“...yeah, maybe that’s best. But, just so you know, he will be walking around now. Think you can keep it together or should we dump his body?”

“God. All that trouble to get him onto his feet and you want to kill him as soon as he inconveniences us?”

Keith tucked his index finger and turned Lance’s rheumy red eyes to him. “If it means your comfort, yes.”

Lance looked like he was about to cry again, so Keith pressed their foreheads and noses together, wrapped them in a tight never ending hug. “Lance?”

Watery, “H-hm?”

“I love you.”

Lance abruptly started to bawl.
Despite Keith communicating not to through his eyes, Lance volunteered to feed Shiro. Shock therapy, he kept telling himself. Shock therapy.

It helped that Shiro looked horribly put out and promptly apologized when they were all seated, and how his eyes lit up when he took the first bite. *Puppy*, Lance had to fight himself from saying. Puppy.

“This is amazing. What is it?”

“Roasted heart and flash fried liver.”

“This is *liver*? What!”

Keith shot a look at Lance.

“Stuff it,” Lance replied.

Then something alarming happened. They each had one utensil each. Lance had made a habit out of switching utensils when he ate from his own plate versus when he fed Shiro, but he slipped up once and ate with Shiro’s spoon.

Keith’s eyes darted to Shiro, hoping he didn’t take notice.

He did.

But he said nothing when Lance fed him again, again with the same spoon.

When their eyes met across the table, Keith felt himself straighten. Did he know?

Did he know?

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