beware the tides that drag you down (mercy isn't something they know)

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by LadyLiterature

Summary

Lance watches the blood well up from the scrape on Hunk's knee. She stares for a long moment, swipes her thumb along the wound, and then sticks the bloody appendage in her mouth.

Hunk watches her with resigned eyes.

"You aren't developing a taste for blood, are you?"
"I can't develop something I already had, sugarplum," Lance says brightly. She leans down and licks his knee all along the cut, humming happily at the taste.

The two of them watch as the cut closes before their eyes.

"I feel like I should be more concerned about this," Hunk says, not sounding at all concerned. "This is very not normal. Like, delving into concerning levels of how not normal this is."

Lance wrinkles her nose. "Normal is boring. And you live for my weird flair. Keeps you entertained."

Notes

beware the tides that drag you under: a playlist based on this fic and the viciously creepy Lance that stars in it

Hey guys! This is a very special project I've been working on for a while and it holds a pretty special place in my heart! I have a probably unhealthy obsession with Halloween and creepy things and this fic is my love letter to that. I tried to keep things "gleefully creepy" with an enjoyable darkness woven through it all that hopefully gives you the same feeling as when you watch the Addams Family. It isn't out to scare you, but rather delight you with its charming gallows humor.

Enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes
she's creepy and she's kooky, mysterious and spooky.

Some stories are so important, so beloved, that they are told over and over again. Each time they're a little more changed, a little more polished. A thousand retellings of the same story and a thousand different versions.

There is one version of this story, where Lance is born a squalling baby boy who grows into a man with too-long limbs and a shamelessly flirtatious smile.

There is one version, where Lance and Hunk meet too late. Where they pass by each other until they’re forced together in the Garrison. When it’s too late for them to change the other in all the ways that matter.

There is one version, where his insecurities stem from himself. Where the idea of him not being good enough, the thought of being forgotten and unneeded burns him from the inside out and leaves him cold and empty.

That is not the version being told now.

In another version, Lance is born a screaming baby girl. Her limbs still too long and smile still shameless but now there is a sharpness to it that wasn’t there before.

In another version, Lance is born of warriors and lightning and stardust. She is raised in a home filled with weapons and people and stories. She is raised feared.

In another version, she meets Hunk—the boy dipped in gold—in third grade. They grow tangled at the roots, connected in a way so few understand. They grow together and they grow strong.

That is not the version being told either.

But…

It is closer.

***

When Lance is born—this version of him, them, her, at least—the moon is bright and full and brilliantly silver, as if the celestial body itself is welcoming her to the world with open arms.

(She is. She knows what has been birthed into this world and she is paying her tributes, as is her dues.)

The small bundle of blood slicked limbs and dark hair slides out of Maria Martínez and for a heart-stopping moment, she is absolutely silent.

Then, she opens her mouth and sings.
Her eyes—gloving blue and as deep and dark as the storming sea—stare up at everyone with an awareness no newborn should have as she croons symphony sweet notes with a voice like crashing ocean waves. Family and friends and doctors all fall for this child with nothing but a few music notes, their eyes glazed over and ready to fulfill her every order. Ready to follow her to the ends of the earth, if she so wished.

Maria stares down at her, awash in the new glow of motherhood but so tired, and smiles at the beautiful bundle of woe nestled in the crook of her arms. Dante, her dear husband, stands at her side. A silent sentinel with scarlet eyes that seem to flash in response to his daughter’s song.

Across the room, Lance’s three elder sisters’ eyes do the same. A trio of bright, unearthly, sky blue.

Dante reaches out first. His finger trailing down from the furrow in Lance’s brow to the tip of her stubby nose, across the apple of her cheek, and curved down the side of her face all in one fluid and soft motion. It smears the blood still on her skin, but that hardly mattered.

Their Familia was far too used to blood to fuss about it now.

Lance’s song quiets at the completion of the motion and the doctors break from their reverie to go back to putting about, cloudy eyes clear once more. La Familia, however, stays crowded around the bed, staring down at the child that is just a little too odd. A little too strange.

All too perfect.

One by one, the rest of them mimic Dante.

Down her nose, across her cheek, curved around her jaw.

Down, across, curve.

*Down, across, curve.*

The action is something powerful.

*Olde magic,* his Mamá says. A silent promise fueled by blood and love and loyalty.

*I will protect you,* the gesture says, *Always and forever. Because you are* mine.

They all take turns trailing their fingers across her face, pledging themselves to her in the only important way they know how. Marking her as their own.

Abuelita laughs when Lance tries to bite her finger after she does it, all sharp, needle teeth and no coordination. The other aunts and uncles gathered around pout at the action.

It seems Lance already has a favorite relative.

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It is no secret that the Martínezes are an odd family.

Though, perhaps how odd, is kept closer to the chest than one would think.

***

The Martínezes are eventually kicked out of the hospital after Lance’s elder sisters are caught throwing around kunai and ninja stars in the nursery.
Francisca had tried explaining it was just practice for her newborn baby sister and that the other child had only been lightly skimmed and would no doubt survive. A pity, really. Even if the scarring would be so very pretty.

One’s first scar is always such a magical thing. Francisca knows she remembers her own fondly.

But the nurse had been so distraught she hadn’t listened to a thing.

It probably hadn’t helped that not an hour earlier, all their cousins had been discussing how best to blow up the elderly wing of the hospital (completely hypothetically, of course. Why blow up those who were going to be dying soon anyway? There’s no challenge.) and she knows her dearest grandparents had been raiding the medicine supplies for new potion and spell ingredients.

Though, Francisca was sure that her grandparents hadn’t been caught in their heist--they were the best thieves in la Familia for a reason--so really, the nurse in front of her was far too frazzled for the circumstances.

But she and her sisters were nothing if not polite. They grabbed their darling little monstrosity from where she had been trying to get at the other babe’s bleeding shoulder like a particularly avid bloodhound, and went off to find their parents to tell them the news.

Papa would be making dinner tonight because the girls got kicked out of the hospital first. He would be unbearably proud that he had lost the competition. No doubt crowing about their deviousness and mayhem all night.

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They’d all only just walked out the doors of the hospital when the building gave a violent shake behind them. All eyes turned to Tio Mateo who just grinned. Dante clapped him hard on the back and sent his younger brother tumbling to the asphalt.

“Well done, little brother! Explosions or a summoning?”

“Why not both?” he asked innocently. The building gave another violent shake as they all piled into the car, laughing like a pack of wild hyenas.

***

The headlines the next day read: Twenty-Five Confirmed Deaths at Hospital Attacked by Eldritch Horror?

Abuelita cut the article out and carefully framed in on the wall along with all the others.

***

Lance is quickly bundled off to the family home in Santa Monica, her trail of relatives following her faithfully.

La Familia always stays close after a new birth, the entire lot of them settling into the seaside manor to help with the rearing of their newest addition. It’s a tradition more from Dante’s side than Maria’s, but her family has no trouble adopting the new habit.

Raising a child takes a village after all.
Lance grows and grows and grows.

A certain kind of darkness clings to her, the kind that bespells the weak and harkens of greatness. She's always surrounded by music, a haze of haunting melodies following her every step and somber notes falling from her lips whenever she stands still too long. Her voice is mesmerizing. Syrupy sweet and beautiful, even without the intoxicating magic clinging to her every note.

It's not quite compulsion. Not the way she'd strung it all together in the delivery room.

She doesn't need to force any of la Familia to love her. Even within her tender cocoon of infancy, she knows that much. Knows she doesn't need to demand it, because they'll give it freely. Knows how they'll swaddle her with the warmth of their love while they weave stories of boogeymen and murders to lay her to sleep.

It's such an obvious kind of love, tangible and so real that one would have to be blind not to see it.

***

She’s no older than one year but she moves far faster than any toddler should. Especially in the water.

She has to be in order to dodge the knives flung at her whenever she toddles into a room. She’s getting much better at throwing them back though. her aim improving faster than normal, even for a Martínez.

The first time Lance nicks Sabre with a stolen kunai the Familia celebrates with electric eel for dinner; Lance’s favorite. The way the sparks make the baby fuzz on her head flare and stand on end makes her gurgle happily for hours after the meal is finished.

***

At two years old, la Familia gathers for Lance’s birthday with barely contained excitement.

The party is held on the beach, seeing as there’s no place Lance loves more, and everyone in attendance is in varying degrees of undress. Clothing shucked to the side in favor of swimsuits and skins half peeled off to reveal iridescent scales or fluttering wings. All their masks of normality discarded in favor of bloodsport and friendly attempts at murder between family.

There are no barriers between la Familia today, nothing to separate them from one another. It's a symbolic gesture and a new tradition. A visible display of the all-encompassing love Lance brings out in them.

Eventually, they progress to the part of the celebration everyone had been waiting for. Maria drags Lance from the water, a bloody water serpent clutched in her chubby fist, and sits down before the mountain of gifts to begin opening them.

Maria's side showers her with knives and pocket pistols and stolen silver trinkets that are no doubt worth millions.

Dante’s family gives her seashells and rabbit's feet and poppets ripe for the pricking.

The most important gift though, the one everyone had been waiting to see given to the birthday girl, is in the rattling metal box hidden off to the side that keeps making odd creaking and growling noises.
Surprisingly, it’s from Maria’s side of the family.

Abuelita steps up next to the box, the growls from within rising in fervor like it can sense the movement. With the type of showmanship only a Martínez can possess, she slowly reaches down and undoes the latches. The second the last one falls, something comes barreling out of the box like a speeding bullet.

The thing is all earth-shaking growls and black fur and burning red eyes. It looks like some unholy hybrid between a dire wolf and a lion with its thickset front half framed by a man of wild dark hair. Drool falls from its square jowls and the sand beneath the beast turns to lumps of glass with a harsh sizzling noise whenever a drop of it lands on the ground. There’s a deadly sort of ferocity written into every line of its still puppy-small body and everyone hastily back away.

Everyone, except Lance, the birthday girl with whom this present is for.

The second she lays eyes on the furious beast she babbles musically, notes of affection and joy unforgiving as it tugs at the hellhound before her. The pup--a giant thing that stands as tall as Lance is now and will only grow--practically melts in her hands. Her small hands bury themselves in its thick scruff, her eyes meeting the hellfire of her new companion's and she watches as they bleed with intelligence.

The threatening growling abruptly stops as it snuffles at her hands and blows hot air in her face just to see her laugh. She grins, wide and teeth too sharp, and in a voice filled with the type of confidence only children have, she declares the hellhound's name to be 'Smudge'.

Smudge's tongue lolls out between his gleaming white teeth in what might be a grin. He seems more than content with his name.

To be Named is a powerful thing, after all. And Lance will grow to be a very powerful being.

One would have to be blind to not see that.

***

The time for la Familia to depart the manor in Santa Monica comes and goes and no one leaves. They don't all stay at the manor, but those that don't end up buying the houses along either side and settling down along the coast like a little village.

A shared hunting grounds for la Familia and a wild, little kingdom for Lance who'd grown into a long-limbed terror bent on mischief and mutiny. She is the mad queen of this kingdom nestled in the trees and sprawled across the shoreline. She is the true reason la Familia doesn't leave, the unyielding glue holding them all together when they so easily separated before.

***

Lance speeds past four years old with the burning interest for everything around her settled in her heart and Smudge by her side.

She spends more time beneath the waves than on solid ground, but la Familia still manage to wrangle her off to school anyway.

The elementary school they send Lance to has a very strict policy against pets they all pointedly ignore. Smudge follows Lance faithfully to each class, curling up in the dark shadows of the room and just watching with that predator's stare he has.
An exception is unofficially made for Lance and her dog.

There’s nothing the school can do to stop them, but not for their lack of trying. Demonic parents and gruff mercenary cousins are enough to scare any faculty into submission.

***

Crayons of various colors spread out across the dining room table in a charming sort of chaos while Lance doodles happily. Her legs swing to the beat of her child-like humming. The tune managing to be both haunting and upbeat at the same time.

Maria comes up behind her daughter, a jar of something red and thick in her hands. She sets it on the table in front of Lance, carefully out of reach of Smudge's curious nose.

“What are you drawing, mi aguamala?”

Lance hums, blinking up at her mother with her glowing blue eyes. The picture in front of her is almost completely covered in red crayon.

“The Fires of Hell. Uncle Mateo was telling me about it earlier. All the screaming and ash.” Lance sighs wistfully. "I want to visit.”

Maria smiles, her scarlet lips stretching with a slow crawl. “Ah, such lovely memories,” she says fondly. “I remember your Papi took me there for our honeymoon. Gave me a tour of all the torture racks.”

Lance sticks her lip out. “I want a tour of the torture racks.”

Maria drags her nails along Lance's face affectionately.

Down, across, curve.

“I’m sure Papi would love to show you around his childhood home when you’re older, barracudita.”

Lance pouts, obviously put out by having to wait.

Maria looks back at the drawing. "How about we put this on the fridge so Papi can see it later, sí? If you ask really nicely, I'm sure he'll even tell you how he tortured some of them."

She perks up at that, hopping off her perch and running over to the fridge. The appliance was starting to look more like a macabre clashing of bloody dismemberments and all the eldritch horrors Lance befriends deep beneath the waves than a child's art gallery.

But that's just how they were.

Lance giddily pins her latest creation up with a magnet and goes back to drawing. Excited to wait for her Papi to come how and tell her all about the screaming of the damned.

She decides her next drawing is going to be of The One With Ancient Eyes. Maybe if she gives him a pretty picture, he'll tell her funny stories too! She always gives him presents, flowers she thinks he'll like or treats her Mamá helped her make. He always calls them silly things like 'tributes' or 'boons' that make her laugh and him snort, his big wet nose blowing hot air in her face and ruffling her bangs.

Lance doesn’t look up at the sound of glass breaking followed by Smudge's happy yip as he laps up
the gooey, red puddle. Glass and all.

Maria just sighs, not surprised in the least at the hellhound’s acrobatics. She should have known he’d get it somehow.

“That was supposed to be for dessert.”

***

There are nights, when the moon is heavy and bright in the sky, where Lance will gather up as much of *la Familia* as she can and herd them all to the shoreline laden with blankets and pillows and a whole buffet of nibbles. She’ll have them all sleep curled into one another—after they’d all tired themselves out with attempted strangulations and drownings, of course—and then she’ll *sing* while the stars glitter overhead and the waves lap at her toes.

All the things she loves gathered in one place just for her.

On those nights, Lance thinks it’s the most content she’ll ever be.

***

When Lance is five, she finds her heart torn in two directions for the first time in her young life.

She had always loved the night sky. The moon and stars so captivating in their beauty that she had no choice but to love them. But it was in such a frustratingly *distant* way. She couldn't *reach* them the way she could the ocean.

Her ocean was here. It could wrap her in its comforting embrace and whisper in her ear all its secrets. She could spend hours soaking in its comforting embrace where she could only bask in the dim light of the stars, longing tugging at her bones.

That is, until she learned of *planes* and *aeroships*.

Suddenly, the stars had never seemed so *close*. Like she could almost reach out and touch them, cup them in her still too small hands and whisper all her love to the gloriously bright lights.

When Lance turns five, she starts *really* looking at the stars. Becomes enamored with them and the galaxies and *flying* in the same way she is enamored with the pull of ocean waves.

When Lance turns five, the voice hidden in the back of her mind that she could only truly hear when she was swimming along the ocean floor, starts whispering when she looks at the stars for too long. She doesn’t really understand what any of it means, but she does know she will someday.

It becomes one of the few things she is content to wait for.

***

The Martínezes are an odd family. Strange and weird and unsettling.

Lance is even more so.

Sure, most of her… *uniqueness* is shared across her sprawling family tree. The wrongness of her existence shared in the blacked blood running through her veins.

Her Papa’s side of *la Familia* shares her craving for blue steak and raw fish. They understand her fascination with all things dark and morbid and share her ability to blend into shadows without
trying. They encourage her bloody hobbies and interests and they tell her stories of fire and death and teach her how to make people *scream*.

Her Mamá’s side teaches her how to handle the knives and guns and tasers she’s so interested in. They praise her the first time she bites an older kid so hard it draws blood when he makes the mistake of picking on her at lunch. They show her how to fight and manipulate and *survive* and she loves every second of it.

But neither side seems to understand the way the waves sing to her, intoxicating and heavy. They don’t share her ability to know the direction of the ocean no matter where she is. They don’t call the waves to them like she does, can’t spend hours under their surface without coming up for air because she doesn’t *need* air. Not like they do.

They don’t hear the stars whisper or feel that, despite being cocooned in her own personal kingdom of love and *Familia* and shadows, it seems like something important, something *vital*, is missing.

Lance isn’t the first child born from Dante and Maria. There are her elder sisters, just as dark and deadly in their own ways and the closest to her out of anyone in *la Familia* with all four of them being the only products of the union between such powerful lines as they are.

But even *they* don’t understand.

Even among them, she is different.

There is something even more *off* about Lance. Something deep and dark like the ocean she adores is hidden behind her bright blue eyes and not even she can guess at what it is.

***

“Francisca?” Maria calls, gliding gracefully around the corner to the kitchen. “Have you seen, Lance?”

The girls freeze when she rounds the corner, four unsettlingly blue eyes staring up from where they all sit on the floor, absolutely *covered* in blood.

All four of them are bleeding sluggishly from their left wrists, hands hacked off before the joint. In the middle of the room, their missing hands are engaged in some sort of violent, thumb wrestling competition.

Sabre is winning, of course, but Lance’s stubby little hand makes her hard to grab and is a close second.

Maria tuts. “Really girls. You’ve made quite the *mess.*”

“Smudge was gonna lick it all up later for treats,” Lance explains in all of her six-year-old wisdom.

Maria hums, eyebrow arching high. She turns to her three teenage daughters, “Aren’t you supposed to be doing your studying? Where is Cousin Maleficent?”

The three of them are doing an abysmally fantastic job at playing mute. “If you three are so fond of silence perhaps I should cut out your tongues. Abuelita needs something to cook for dinner and you lot aren’t using them.”

“They locked her in the torture chamber with Cousin Penumbra,” Lance supplies helpfully. The three eldest shoot her a glare that Lance doesn’t heed. “They’ve been in there for two hours.”
Maria places a delicate, black painted hand on her cheek. “Oh dear. Well, I suppose it was high time those two decided if they wanted to kill each other or not. It was starting to smell too much like love potions around here. *Disgusting.*”

Lance nods vigorously. “*Disgusting.*” Her hand waddles back over to her, thumb bent at an odd angle, and Fransisca helps her reattach the limb properly, the skin already knitting back together.

Maria bends over and plucks Lance from the mess, heedless of the blood staining her elegant funeral dress. The color is so good at hiding bloodstains it hardly matters.

“I want this cleaned up before dinner. It’s time for Lance’s lessons with Aba.”

The three eldest groan in unison while Maria pretends not to notice Lance cackling in her arms at her sisters’ misfortune. She swiftly sidesteps the throwing axe and *kunai* that thud into the doorframe and she walks off with her youngest.

Such lively sibling bonds between her girls. She couldn’t be happier as a mother.

***

Lance is eight when she meets Hunk.

He and his family are new to the town. They have to be. Because she would have *known* if he was this close to her before.

She would have *found* him, long before now.

She and Smudge are in the sandbox making sandcastles when she hears his voice.

Her head whips up and around so fast that if she were any other child, she would have broken her neck.

Across the playground, she sees a boy in lemon yellow curled in on himself and surrounded by a group of boys who never know how to mind their manners. One of the mean boys says something, and Lance can’t hear the words but the tone he uses is easily recognizable. The way Lemon Yellow flinches is even more so.

Trevor shoves Lemon Yellow backward into the fence and Lance is out of the sandbox and across the playground in the blink of an eye.

One moment, there’s just Trevor yelling abuse at Lemon Yellow demanding something or other and in the next Lance is there in all of her lacy, blue dress and shadow black ribboned glory. A scowl is set on her face and beside her, Smudge’s eyes burn with hellfire.

The boys around her flinch back at her sudden appearance but bolster themselves quickly.

The time in kindergarten when she bit that second grader had given her a sort of reputation among her peers. Then the generally unsettling offhand comments she makes and her more… horrific habits had given her a lot of say in what happened to the children around her. She’d become the unspoken ruler of their elementary school and everyone was too scared to take it from her.

Until now, that is. But, as in every monarchy, there will be rebellions.

Trevor stands as tall as he can in front of her, thinking he can intimidate a girl who breathes seawater
and hunts with bloodied sharks as her companions. Lance tries not to laugh as Smudge’s growls grow in volume. Her beautiful little hellhound alone could tear him apart and happily lap at the blood he spills across the flagstones.

But she doesn’t need her hellhound to fight her battles for her.

Lance is powerful, even in her too-small body at eight with so much left to learn. The ocean whispers to her of greatness and the stars twinkle with hidden promises. Her blood sings with power while this boy is just sadly, piteously, human.

When Trevor refuses to back down, refuses to just walk away and instead steps forward with a fist raised and acid words tumbling from his lips, Lance reacts lightning fast. Her hand curls around his wrist without hesitation and a sharp crack is heard across the playground.

Then, he screams.

But Lance is smart and clever and different.

She stares down at Trevor who cradles his broken wrist and wails like a baby and then she grabs the sides of his face, her shining black claws digging into the flesh of his cheeks, and she sings.

Her voice carries over his screams as they slowly taper off and reaches out for everyone on the playground with a sticky sort of sweetness.

Later, when the teachers ask everyone what happened, no one remembers.

No one, but Lance and Lemon Yellow, that is.

***

As everyone fusses over Trevor, Lance turns her bright, intensely blue eyes to Lemon Yellow who’s staring at her like she’s something surprising.

She tilts her head with interest, normally people who aren’t her Familia stare at her with something closer to fear or uneasiness. But this boy just smells like curiosity.

They stand like that for a long moment, the other teachers wisely leaving the pair of them alone at Smudge’s growls. Then, quite suddenly, Lemon Yellow smiles something bright and brilliant and with none of the sharpness she normally sees when people smile

“I’m Hunk!” he says happily, if a bit nervous as he extends his hand to her. “Thank you for helping me.”

Lance stares down at the hand for only a second before she has it in her own and is bringing it to her lips to press a featherlight kiss to his knuckles. She’s seen Papi do it to Mamá all the time and she’s always been very good at mimicking things so she's sure she did it right.

“My name’s Lance, and that’s Smudge,” she chirps, not letting go of his hand and returning his smile tenfold. Then, "And I'll always help you. You're mine."

The words have a certain weight on her tongue, a heavy kind of truth to them like the magic Aba Amelia teaches her on weekends.

Lance thinks she likes the way it tastes. Like sunshine and sea spray and petrichor.

Hunk blinks at her, and then down at their entwined hands.
“Okay.”

Lance then drags him to the sandbox, bouncing happily and talking a mile a minute while Hunk listens faithfully for the rest of recess.

***

With Hunk at her side, Lance finds that the feeling of missing something in her chest has… lessened.

There are others, she knows, more pieces that she must collect to make herself whole. But with Hunk here, by her side where he belongs, they are easier to ignore.

She knows she’ll find them eventually. She knows what she’s looking for now, so they won't be hidden forever. Can't be.

Not from her.

But right now, she has Hunk and the sea and the stars.

Right now, she is content to wait.

***

Hunk is... different from anyone she's ever known.

He's not like her and her Familia. She and her Familia are born of shadows and nightmares. They are the boogeymen hiding in closets and the monsters parents warn their kids about. They are darkness and violence and terror.

They are feared.

Hunk's... isn't.

His family is normal. The same kind of normal Lance sneers at on the playground.

But Hunk isn't.

He's not bred with shadows but he's not average either. He's something else, something in-between. *(Something almost like her.)*

***

She asks question after question about his family, trying to figure out how he turned out so different, so strange. He answers each one excitedly and never looks at her strange when she asks why his teeth aren’t sharp or how come his eyes don’t glow. He's indulgent in a way no one outside la Familia is, is bright in a way la Familia isn't.

Lance hopelessly, ardently, endlessly adores him for it.
But there are times when she looks at him, and her blood runs cold.

(Well, colder. Her Familia normally runs hellfire hot, but it seems she’s closer to the corpses she sometimes helps Mamá bury, or to the freezing depths of the sea and the empty spaces between the stars she so loves.)

For all the harsh brightness of his core, Lance can’t help but look at him sometimes and see someone who is soft and vulnerable and achingly fragile.

He doesn’t know how to throw a punch or where all the important veins you should rip out first are. His teeth aren’t sharp and his claws grow so slowly and are so dull she doesn’t think he can cut anything with them.

She doesn’t want to lose him so soon after she just got him.

So she vows to herself she’ll teach him. He is not made of shadows, and Lance promises to never let them smother the brightness in him, but a blinding light is just as dangerous as the darkness she hides in. Just as easily molded for their needs.

***

Two months into Lance’s friendship with Hunk, when she is eight-almost-nine, she traces her first vow of protection into Hunk’s skin.

*Down, across, curve.*

Her Familia does it to her all the time, sometimes as a greeting, sometimes as a goodbye, sometimes just because. But it’s a gesture she’s very familiar with despite never doing it herself.

She will be powerful one day; but for now, she is the protected, not the protector.

Hunk asks about it because he is too curious for his own good. Because for as many questions Lance asks about his family, he asks twice as many about hers.

(The way he approaches all her Familia’s quirks and traditions with nothing but a sense of curiosity and wonder fills her up with affection until she thinks she might burst. For someone so shy and meek, he was incredibly tolerant of what would have terrified the other children. Lance thinks he would make a wonderful Martínez.)

She does it again as she tells him what it means.

*Down, across, curve.*

He nods once and doesn’t ask again. As always, on the same wavelength as her without even trying.

But now, when Lance reaches up towards his face, he bends down for easier reach as she traces all her love and sea storm protection into his skin. Every time he does it, it makes her smile all the wider.

Lance plans on keeping him for as long as she can. For as long as both of them walk this mortal Earth.

And then, she plans to keep him for even longer than that.

*Down, across, curve.*
She’ll drown and bury and *maim* anything that tries to take him from her.

***

Lance likes to spend time around the edge of the Whispering Woods when she’s not running along the beach with Smudge or far exploring the parts of the ocean humans can’t get to.

She was fond of the plant life that grew along the edges.

The carnivorous ones were her favorite in particular. It was funny when they would try to snap and bite at her fingers like playful puppies.

The first time one of them actually got a taste of her blood, it shriveled and cried out in pain not seconds later. The second plant grew five feet in two days.

She named it Cleopatra.

Lance plucked one of the blooms off Cleopatra and ran off to give it to Hunk. The blood orange flower would look lovely with his eyes.

***

Lance remembers the first time she had seen magic. Not the everyday, absent sort of magic for household chores or the deadly wards along the property edge, but true, *real*, magic.

Willful magic. Cast with *purpose*.

She was very young, of course, because everyone in *la Familia* takes to magic like breathing, but she still remembers it clear as day.

It wasn’t something simple--because nothing in her *Familia* is ever *simple*--but it was familiar, in a strange sort of way.

She remembers the low hum in the air suddenly becoming a dull roar of symphony notes. The power of her whole *Familia* coming together and converging into something… *breathtaking*. The way her Aba’s low but powerful cello notes lead everyone else in the Circle. The way her Aba called power to her as easy as breathing made Lance *ache* in ways she only truly felt from the missing pieces in her chest.

Lance shivered at the feel of it washing over her, needing to be *closer*.

She jumped off her Mamá’s lap and walked confidently up to her Aba as she led the Circle.

Nobody stopped her.

Lance’s skin *hummed* with how close she was to the center of everything her *Familia* was. Without missing a beat, her Aba grabbed her small hands and had her join the intricate dance around the candles nestled along the edge.

She knew every movement as if she’d been dancing it for years. Her feet taking each step for her while Lance stared up at her Aba with her too bright blue eyes. Her Aba stared back, almost expectant.

The power poured through her too, filling her up until she thought she might burst. The roaring in her chest threatening to tear her apart if she didn’t *let go*. 
So, she released it in a low, haunting croon of notes, the magic of *la Familia* flowing around and *through* her now and it was... *electrifying*. It was like coming home. Like lying on the seafloor and listening to the waves whisper to her. Like the familiar weight of a gun in her hands.

It felt *right*, like so few things in the world are.

The sky above them thundered and cracked to the beat of Lance’s choosing and everything was *perfect*.

Lance didn’t stop smiling for *days* and Aba started teaching her proper magic *immediately*. Far younger than any apprenticeship in *la Familia* for decades.

Her parents and sisters were *unbearably* proud. They didn’t stop throwing sharp things at for hours afterward.

***

The day Lance and Hunk’s blossoming friendship is noticed by the teachers is the day the faculty starts panicking anew.

They aren’t sure if it’s a good thing or not. If they should be worried or relieved.

Hunk has only been there a while, but he is such an obviously sweet and brilliant child. And Lance… *well*. It’s no secret that she absolutely *terrifies* half the faculty and has the rest wrapped around her tiny, clawed finger. Never mind the thing she calls a *dog*.

Their first worry is that Lance might *eat* him.

Their second is that she’ll rub off on him and then they’ll be *two* of them to torment the school.

What they never expected was for Hunk to remain stubbornly himself, only now with the addition of a small, ferocious girl done up in bright blues and deep purple-almost-blacks, that trails behind him like a living shadow.

And *that* is far scarier and unsettling than anything they could have imagined.

***

The first nickname Lance gives Hunk is *Lemon drop*.

The second is *sugar cube*.

Then, in no particular order, comes *cake pop, Pooh Bear, rosebud, petals, sunshine, honey-crunch, ducky* and a hundred thousand others.

She gives him as many nicknames she can think of. Mostly because it makes him smile and laugh with her ridiculousness but also because a Name is a powerful thing.

Lance--was, is, *will be*--a powerful being.

When she Names him, she gives him just a little more power. A little more claim to the world around him. So, she gives him a thousand forgotten and cherished names and builds him higher and higher with each one.

Because you can’t use his name against him if you don’t know them all.
Lance releases the bowstring in her hands with a satisfying twang.

The dull thump of her arrow hitting two inches off from her target is pointedly less satisfying.

“Loki’s womb!” Lance curses.

Her Papa’s disapproving voice rumbles from behind her. “What did we say about invoking gods in the house?”

“Not without proper sacrifice,” she recites obediently.

Papa smiles down at her. “There’s a good little snake. Come along, stop tormenting Tio Gomez. It’s almost dinner time.”

“It was Tio Gomez’s idea to work on target practice, Papa.” The father and daughter both turn to stare at the man currently tied to a chair 50 paces away, an arrow sticking out of his left shoulder. Gomez nods happily, seemingly more than content with his current position despite how the blood is most definitely ruining his suit. “I was aiming for his heart but missed.”

“But you were so close that time, my dear!” Gomez encourages.

“Practice makes perfect,” her Papa agrees, and Lance is still disappointed, but she grins anyway.

Lance watches the blood well up from the scrape on Hunk’s knee. She stares for a long moment, swipes her thumb along the wound, and then sticks the bloody appendage in her mouth.

Hunk watches her with resigned eyes.

"You aren't developing a taste for blood, are you?"

"I can't develop something I already had, sugarplum," Lance says brightly. She leans down and licks his knee all along the cut, humming happily at the taste.

The two of them watch as the cut closes before their eyes.

"I feel like I should be more concerned about this," Hunk says, not sounding at all concerned. "This is very not normal. Like, delving into concerning levels of how not normal this is."

Lance wrinkles her nose. "Normal is boring. And you live for my weird flair. Keeps you entertained."

Hunk pokes his knee, apparently pleased with its newfound wholeness--not even a scar! He wipes himself free if dirt and stands back up. While he's still bent over patting his thighs, Lance traces his face--

Down, across, curve.

--then kisses his cheek for good measure. Only then does he straighten up.

"Being interesting doesn't excuse the weird stuff you do."

Lance grins as she tangles their fingers together, pulling him back down the path into the woods.
"Yes, it does."

***

The thing about magic, as Aba drills into Lance, is that it calls to itself. The more magic you control, the more magic will come to you.

*Like calls to like,* she always said.

And, well, the Martínez’s don’t so much control magic as they *are* magic. Most of them, anyway.

So really, it shouldn’t be that much of a surprise that after a few years of them living along the outskirts of Santa Monica, the area starts getting an increase in fairy circles and mysterious disappearances that, on occasion, have nothing to do with *la Familia’s* Hunts.

Strange things start happening in the city. Like the shadows that seem to linger around corners and slink along next to you even when there’s nothing to cast them. Or the darkness that falls fast and falls heavy, over even the brightest parts of the city. Or how the flourishing gardens across the city becoming overrun with strangle vines and bloody, red roses and venus fly traps. And even the cats that start staring at passersby more often, a sort of forbidden knowledge hidden in their void-like eyes.

(Eventually, people learn to not stare back at the things wearing cat skins.)

A thousand and one things change in the city but the locals, like any self-respecting city dweller, see the new additions then shrug and continue on their way with only the slightest change to their daily life to accommodate for the new Rules of Santa Monica.

If one were to ask a local, they’d probably say that a shadow seemed to descend upon the city, though they’d probably blame the criminal underworld. Which, in truth, isn’t *technically* wrong, though it has more to do with Dante’s family than Maria’s if everyone’s being honest.

As the years pass, it seems like the city is lying in wait for… something, even if no one knows what it is.

***

Lance hurtles towards twelve years old with a certain flourish and reckless abandon everyone has come to associate with her at this point.

Her birthday is tomorrow and her entire *Familia* is gathered from all four corners of the Earth and Underworld for her party like they always are.

Tomorrow, she will gather them all up together and bask in their warmth. Tomorrow she will lay in the center of her *Familia*, underneath the blanket of stars and next to the sea and she will sing to them all. Tomorrow she will be content with their presence and she will bask in the tangibility of their love for her.

But today, she lays under the stars with only her dearest Hunk--and Smudge, of course-- with their hands clasped tightly together. They spill secret after secret into the darkness around them, comfortable in each other’s presence and Lance *knows* this is exactly where she wants to be.

Lance tells him every secret she’s kept in her chest. Every doubt and worry and dream.

She whispers about the crooning call of the waves and the sparkling laughter of lightning storms and
the intoxicating beat of star song. She tells him about the voice in her head that calls for her across the desert and about the missing pieces in her chest and all of her thoughts about him.

For every broken, bloodied piece of herself that she gives him, he carefully cuts out a matching one to replace it with.

He haltingly tells her of how, before he met her, he thought the deep humming of mountains and the light tinkling of sand was all in his mind. How he could see numbers and schematics and formulas dance in front of his eyes but the way the very molten core of the earth spoke to him scared him to tears because he didn’t understand until he met her.

He tells her that she was his salvation. The thread he needed to finally connect all of the pieces together.

Because while he loves his family, they’re normal. And, as he keeps telling Lance, she isn’t.

And now, it seems, Hunk admits he isn't either.

Lance spends a long moment staring at him, sprawled as she is across his chest, each of her hands cradled in one of his own. She memorizes the slope of his still baby fat heavy cheeks and the creamy caramel of his eyes that she knows would look so pretty as a brilliant golden amber. Then, she leans forward gently and presses her lips to his, light but firm.

When she pulls back, her eyes flash and Hunk is looking up at her, confused but patient in waiting for her explanation.

“That was weird,” he says and yeah, Lance knows that. For as many things Hunk is to her—best friend, companion, soulmate—he will never be her consort.

Smudge yips next to them as if in agreement and Lance rolls her eyes at them both. For as smart as Hunk is, he can be so obvious and Smudge, with how he adores Hunk as much as she does, is always willing to take his side even if it’s a stupid one.

Especially, if it’s the stupid one.

“I’m aware, lollipop,” she quips, trailing her finger—Down, across, curve

--over his face. “But I need to show you something and I can’t have you drowning on me. Not yet, at least.”

She moves carefully off him and then pulls him up to stand by her easily. He looks resigned and mildly panicked now, an expression she does so enjoy on his handsome face.

“Okay, now I’m worried.”

“Don’t be,” she says simply, shucking off the pretty blue party dress Francisca made her with all the black lace that looked like grinning, bleached skulls. Then she waits for Hunk, clad only in her training bra and panties and shin-deep in the waves that pull desperately at her skin.

She motions for them to wait and they do, but it does not stop them from pushing further up to her knees. They’re no better than spoiled puppies sometimes.

Hunk purses his lips before pulling off his shirt and then his shorts, leaving him in his boxers.
“Okay,” he says and then steps into the water with her.

Lance grins, waves to Smudge who is settling himself down in the sand, content to stay put, and flicks her wrist. Immediately, the water surges up around them and drags them mercilessly into the dark sea. Hunk is surprised only for a moment.

The water had risen up too fast for him to catch a breath and he panics without air.

He turns scared eyes on Lance who floats in front of him calmly, her hair spread out around them and swaying in the playful currents.

It doesn’t take him much longer at all to realize what has happened. Lance wouldn’t be so calm if he was in danger, and he will never be in danger so long as he’s in the sea. Cautiously, he takes in a breath and breathing water is weird, but he can breathe.

Lance grins at him, all too sharp teeth and glowing blue eyes. Then she leans forward and presses her lips to both of his eyes and the saltwater sting disappears. Hunk gives her a look that is immediately undermined by the awestruck grin overtaking his lips.

‘Come,’ she mouths and takes his hand, pulling him deeper into the darkness below. Deeper into a world not even her Familia is a part of.

***

The two spend the rest of the night dancing amongst the waves, spinning and twirling and laughing.

Lance brings him to her favorite coral reef and shows him the pods of dolphins that taught her to swim and the sharks that taught her to hunt.

Lance drags him deeper and shows him the bioluminescent sea life, she shows him the sunken city that glitters with Greek fire, she shows him the slumbering Kraken that she kisses lightly on the head in greeting.

She shows him her world and makes the fish dance for him as she sings and sings and sings for him and him alone.

She’s not sure how he knows, but the moment midnight strikes and it’s her birthday, Hunk pulls her to halt and cups her face in his hands. He presses their foreheads together and mouths, ‘Happy Birthday, daughter of the Ocean,” into the space between them.

Lance doesn’t tear up. But even if she had, you can’t tell with all the saltwater anyway.

Her Familia calls her ‘little siren’ and ‘Songbird’ and ‘jellyfish’ and a thousand other pet names, but no one had ever dared call her what she is. The words, even if not truly spoken, feel like coming home.

‘Thank you, my son of Earth,’ she mouths back and watches, fascinated, as Hunk shudders. His eyes flash bright golden for only a second before they settle back into their normal honeyed caramel.

But Lance had seen them. She knows what he will become one day.

She grins, sharp and victorious.

It seems her and Hunk are birds of a feather. Two different, but ultimately complementary beings destined for power.
At thirteen years old, her Mamá finally lets her fly a plane.

Lance finally gets to soar beneath the stars as she has always longed for and she falls irrevocably in love with the feeling of weightlessness when she does a barrel roll and a figure eight that has her laughing and screaming at the same time. The fiery explosion when she crash lands into the Whispering Woods is just an added bonus.

As Lance saunters from the wreckage, licking up the line of blood on the back of her wrist from the already closing wound, she finds that her heart is torn between the sea and the sky.

But, she supposes, that isn’t truly anything new.

Lance spent most of her childhood in the ocean swimming with sharks and deep-sea creatures long lost to time, but that didn’t mean she neglected to explore the forests surrounding her home.

It’s a part of her world, a part of what’s hers. And so, Lance knows every inch and shifting corner of it all.

Despite the trees’ tendency to move around when she wasn’t looking, she always knew where she was and never got lost. It’s hard to get lost when she has a built-in compass pointing her ever faithfully to the sea and her home. That and a hellhound who would rather die than let anything bad happen to her.

The shadows were deep in the woods, a sort of endless darkness one couldn’t look at for too long else they go insane. But Lance had grown up slinking in and out of shadows. She knew how they worked and held no fear for them here.

Besides, Smudge seemed to be having fun stepping into one here and then reappearing over there. Lance grinned and ruffled his ears.

He was getting good at traveling through shadows.

It still took him a while to stop being all fuzzy at the edges and hard to look at, but he wasn’t showing up twenty feet in the air anymore, so Lance just praised him the good boy he was.

There were many summer and autumn days she spent wandering through the trees when she was younger, chasing sprites and talking with the forest spirits. The One With Ancient Eyes was always her favorite to talk to. He was old. Older than Abuelita and Pipo and he always spoke so respectfully to her.

It made Lance feel grown-up as a little girl.

And the coins that hung from his giant antlers were very pretty. She makes sure to tell him so whenever she can. She can’t imagine how much work it takes to keep the strings from tangling up, so he probably cares about them very much. He would always chuff at her, sticking his big wet nose in her face and saying something about compliments and sugary sweet words.

Lance just grinned wider up at him, she wasn’t exactly sure how, but she knew that he appreciated it every single time.

Lance was older now, and she understood more about spirits and the fae. She knew the risks and the
pitfalls and the rules.

That doesn’t necessarily mean she followed them, of course.

She still danced and sang in faerie rings. She kept leaving her gifts and offerings for the spirits. She still spoke to them like equals, like friends. She didn’t stop going into the Forest.

As far as Lance was concerned, the Whispering Woods was hers and nothing was going to keep her away from that.

But she knew how to be respectful and sweet and clever. She knew how to doublespeak and lie and charm. She knew the balances and how to protect herself.

She takes to wearing an iron choker around her neck and weaving marigolds and St John’s Wort into her hair, the vibrant yellow practically glowing against the heavy bronze of her skin. She brings yeast bread and sugar and other such things. She always knows where water is, running or salt or neither.

She walks with confidence and pride and for years it is fine. But… the Gentry are fickle beings and it is not fine for long.

***

She wakes up in a sort of in-between place. Formless, chattering shadows-that-aren’t dance around her and the only comfort she can find is Smudge’s thick body pressed firmly against her side. She raises her head high once she gets her bearings back and allows herself the one weakness of burying her fingers in the thick fur around Smudge’s scruff and holding on tightly.

The comforting call of the ocean blooms in her chest. Granting her poise and a calm-before-the-storm type of composure. It fills her up and reminds her who she is.

She is a stranger here, outside of her territory and on unfamiliar land.

But that does not make her less powerful.

The Gentry are fools if they would think so.

She waits for a minute that might also be an hour for someone to come fetch her.

Then… all hell breaks loose.

***

In the end, she stands before a crowd of Gentry, her hair dirty, dress torn and entirely soaked, but her head is still held high.

Behind her, Smudge growls his agreement, something threatening and deep that vibrates along the floor and up your spine and sends you shivering with fear. It is a growl that awakens nightmares and horrors you don’t want to know.

The Gentry do not flinch, but she hadn’t expected them to.

Chin in the air and shoulders back, she stares down the supposed Fae Court--not True Royalty. Never them. Even la Familia, even Lance, has lines she will not cross--and she says, "You cannot keep me."

The Ruler stares back with their thousands of eyes and, in a voice like bells and drums and the wind
on a cold autumn day, they speak to her.

"Why ever not?"

Lance thinks they might be amused. They also might be very, very angry. She isn't sure which would be better.

"Because I am not yours." The shadows around her pulse and the whispers in her head rise like a wave about to crash. It sounds something like approval. "I am already claimed, and it is not to you."

The Ruler blinks down at her, their scales and oil slick horns glittering in the low light. “And if I do not give you back?” The Ruler leans down and their body stretching and twisting in unnatural, grotesque ways. Lance doesn’t so much as twitch. “I have taken many children, Ocean Child. You would be no different. I could make you mine just as easily as you breathe.”

It is Lance’s turn to blink now, slow and content.

“I’m sure you could,” Lance agrees. “But you won’t.”

The Fae cannot lie. If the Ruler had any intention of keeping her, they would not speak so flimsily. “I hold little interest for you. And you know the blood that pumps through my veins. If you don’t let me go, la Familia will come for me anyway.”

“Is that a threat, You Who Sings With the Ocean’s Voice?”

“Of course not, You Who Rules the Fair Folk.” Lance smiles, long and slow and with too many teeth. “It is a promise.”

The Ruler does something that may be a laugh but is more akin to the screeching of wind on a skyless night. The Court around her echoes them.

“You would do well in my Courts, I think. You are clever and bloody enough to survive here.”

Lance doesn’t know if that is meant to be a compliment or not. She does not ask.

The Ruler settles back into their throne of bones and roses and teeth, tucking themselves back into something almost resembling human. Their horns and eyes and scales stay firmly in place. “If you leave, I will not stop you. In fact, I will give you a gift for your troubles.”

“I have nothing to give in return for you being such a gracious host,” Lance says because it’s true. She has nothing.

Nothing she is willing to give up, at least.

The Ruler waves what might be a hand through the air in dismissal. “You have no debt to us. There is no price to be paid.” They make some sort of snapping sound and a trio of Fair Folk with long necks and ears and fingers comes up to her, something held in their hands.

Lance tilts her head, curious as to the game that is being played.

When the first comes up to her, it’s with a ring of woven flowers nestled in the palms of their hands. They glow in a way that flowers don’t and when they place it on her head, it brightens before dying down.

Lance isn’t stupid. She knows what this is.
But she doesn’t understand it.

They crown her thrice. Purple asters and ocean blue hyacinths and charcoal black dahlias rest on her head. Thorns that don’t belong cut into her skin, her blood dripping down her face in glittering rivulets. Like a river filled with gold.

This feels almost like a facsimile of victory. A mockery of it.

The Gentry do not lose graciously, so Lance knows she has not won, but she hasn’t lost either.

For a moment, she wonders if this is kindness. But the Fair Folk are not kind. Not like humans are. Their kindness is cruel and deadly and interesting.

So no, this isn’t kindness. This is… respect. It’s possession.

The Fae could not keep her, so they made her like them. Something in between.

Something more.

She is a new breed of changeling, sent off to rule the world in their stead.

She should be furious. They dared to claim her when she is not theirs to claim.

She is not.

She’s no longer human, but had she ever truly been? She is a Martínez, and after all of this, she will still be a Martínez. They may have claimed her, but she is not theirs to control. Not another one of their playthings to toy with.

“Why?” she asks because she never knows when to quit. Because she is still curious about their intentions. What they get out of this besides her.

“You have won this game and we do not break our bargains. But you will be powerful one day, and when you are, you will remember this moment. This kindness.”

“I do not owe you.”

The Ruler gives the impression of raising an eyebrow though they do not have any. “You do not. But you are mortal, and you mortals are all so similar in this regard.”

Lance doesn’t care to untangle what they mean by that and instead bows, not as deep as she probably should be but, well, The Ruler seems to like her for whatever reason. She can get away with it.

With that, she sweeps out of the Court, the Gentry parting for her and Smudge dutifully following behind her. The call of the ocean is warm in her chest and she thinks that it may be proud.

***

“And here I believed you could not surprise me anymore,” a honey-smooth voice calls from between the trees.

Despite not being completely out of the Whispering Woods, Lance is far enough out of Elsewhere that she’s comfortable enough to let her smile stretch across her face at the familiar voice. She spins around to face him, posture easy and open despite how when dealing with spirits she should definitely be the opposite.
“Ah, you know me Prongs. Always keeping you on your toes,” she teases, the nickname falling from her lips easily.

The majestic Deer That Was Not steps from the shadows between trees. The coins hanging from his antlers glinting in the light with mesmerizing waves.

*The One With Ancient Eyes* snorts at her, gracefully cantering to her side and headbutting her in something like affection, him having to duck to do so seeing as he’s far bigger than a deer has any right to be. Lance grins up at him, fingers gliding along a few hanging coins—*wishes*—as she strokes down his shimmering coat. At her side, Smudge nudges against his leg in greeting.

“You are lucky to be alive. Most in this forest do not hold the same affection for you as I.”

“Aww, Moose. I knew you cared.” Deer That Are Not shouldn’t be able to give the impression of rolling their eyes, but he does. Lance continues unperturbed. “Besides, most in this forest wouldn’t dare touch me even if they do hate me. Not with *la Familia* and you still around and kicking. Not when I put up such a fight.”

He looks down at her disapprovingly, snuffling at her crown that is more thorns than flowers at this point, the buds wilting the longer they stay in her presence. “*The Fair Folk are not most.*”

“Really, don’t worry about it, Old Man. I’m fine, see?” She throws her arms out, showing that she’s whole and alive if more than a bit dirty and covered in what the Fae considers blood.

“You youth are so tiring,” the deer spirit sighs, the warm air shifting her bloodied bangs. “Come, your family is waiting. I will escort you to the edge of the trees.”

“Such a gentleman,” Lance teases as he moves to start walking out of the small clearing.

“I am merely concerned you will be unable to stay out of trouble long enough to leave the Woods.”

Lance stops, blinking after him before a wide smile stretches across her face. “Was that a joke? Are you finally developing a sense of humor?” she laughs, trotting after him to keep up. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

***

Lance had thought her whole trip into Elsewhere had gone fairly well all things considered. That is until she walks through the manor door and finds all her *Familia* gathered around the living room, frantic and chaotic and far too disheveled for her tastes.

Hunk sticks out like a severed thumb with his bright clothes, but it means Lance notices him quickly and also the way it looks as if he hadn’t slept or eaten in days.

Well, it seems like things in her plan may have gone a bit awry.

“I may have been gone for longer than I realized,” Lance says to the room at large and every eye snaps to her immediately. That and a few knives and throwing stars that are flung in her direction. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

She neatly sidesteps them, and they thud into the door behind her.

Despite the speed and reflexes of *la Familia*, it’s Hunk who reaches her first. He barrels into her and knocks her to the ground, Smudge somehow caught up in the hug as well as Hunk ferociously scolds her and tells her how worried he was and how glad he is that she’s back and, oh no, now he’s *crying.*
He always seems to be crying but this is different. He was sad and worried and, of course, now Lance is crying too, the world around her going blurry and thick. She clutches onto him with more strength than she normal puts into their hugs, scared of breaking his bones, but she can’t stop now because Hunk is hugging her just as hard and she needs to reassure him that she’s here. That she’s okay.

When he finally pulls away, Lance wipes the tears from his eyes before he can, and he does the same to her.

“You were gone for three days, Lance,” he tells her in a shuddering half sob.

“I’m sorry.”

“We didn’t know if you were dead and Jocasta couldn’t find any trace of you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You could’ve been spirited away forever, Lance. You’d be gone and I wouldn’t be able to find you. You can’t go where I can’t follow! That’s not how this works! That’s not how we work!”

“I’m sorry,” she says again, her own sob bubbling up in response to Hunk’s worry and fear and sadness.

“Stop saying you’re sorry!” he yells and Lance flinches back from the force of it.

Hunk sighs and gently knocks his forehead against her own, resting it there. “I just… We’re supposed to be together. Until the end of time, remember?”

Lance blinks furiously as she stares into Hunk’s brown eyes that are looking more golden every time she sees them.

“And then even longer’” she recites faithfully.

Hunk nods. Then, with shaking fingers he reaches his finger up to her forehead, reverent in the way only he can be, and his finger moves across her face.

Down, across, curve.

And this isn’t how it’s supposed to work. Lance is the stronger one, she protects him.

But, well…

She can’t say it isn’t nice. The solid warmth in her stomach that Hunk would tear apart the earth to protect her just like she would boil the sea for him.

And maybe she should be more concerned how willingly they would tear themselves apart for one another, but Lance’s Familia is in the habit of using violence to display affection, so from her point of view, everything is as it should be.

She nuzzles into Hunk’s neck and her Familia takes that as the sign to surge forward and wrap her in their arms themselves.

Lance isn’t left alone for hours after that, and she can’t truly say she’s upset about it.

***

It’s a fairly normal day, nothing too interesting is happening besides la Familia preparing for another Hunt. Lance is old enough to join them on it now, but considering her new abilities and cravings,
she’s banned for the time being.

It’s disheartening but understandable. It’d be no fun for anyone else is she didn’t let them play have a chance to play with the toy too.

She’s sat in the living room, mind idle as she flips through channels while *la Familia* plans and sets elaborate traps. A certain channel catches her eye, her finger freezing on the button as her whole body goes tense.

It’s some interview that Lance doesn’t hear, doesn’t *care* about.

What truly catches her attention is the man on screen. She notices the dark, tousled hair and prim military uniform first. Then, it’s the strong jawline and determined eyes and the proud line of his mouth as he effortlessly charms the interviewer into twittering giggles.

There’s a sharp *tug* behind her navel and then Lance in kneeling in front of the screen before she even realized she moved.

Staring at him isn’t like a piece slotting into place, not like it had when she took Hunk’s outstretched hand, but it does make something in Lance sit up and take keen notice.

*Captain Takashi Shirogane*, the words scrolling along the bottom of the screen say. *Youngest Officer to Lead an Aerospace Mission in Galaxy Garrison History.*

He’s not hers—*not yet*—but he will be.

Lance sighs happily as she kneels in front of the screen, her finger tracing underneath eyes that are bright and hopeful now, but Lance knows down to her *bones* will be filled with terror and broken pieces and bloody nightmares soon enough.

A smile curls at the corner of lips.

Oh, how she *loves* broken things.
Chapter Summary

She wears strength and darkness equally well, the girl has always been half goddess, half hell
— Nikita Gill

Chapter Notes

mild (mild!) sexual content in this chapter (it's like two separate paragraphs and its fairly vague description wise)
Also, violence and a murder scene. again, not terribly graphic but be warned.

Lance sets her sights on the Garrison with Hunk tucked into her side and the blessing of la Familia echoing in her head.

They all know she’ll be absolutely wretched over there. Mischievous and a handful and wonderfully morbid.

They all can’t wait to see what kind of destruction she brings. Which instructor she’ll drive to madness first.

Lance grins at the thought, eager to stretch her wings and paint the school a bloody, dripping red.

***

The Garrison is even less happy about Smudge tagging along behind her to the program, but again, it only takes a few words before the faculty realizes there isn’t anything they can do to stop her.

Lance trots happily down the hall between her classes, Hunk on her arm and Smudge snapping playfully at anyone who dares get close enough. There have been more than a few times where Lance sees Smudge’s teeth are stained red and immediately drops to her knees to ruffles his ears and praise him for being such a good boy.

Her faithful hellhound, her Cerberus remade. He and Hunk are her anchors in this new land. This empty desert with no oceans or rivers for miles and no Familia for even farther than that.

They keep her sane as she rebuilds her kingdom, as she stakes claim to the very land itself as is her right as a Martínez, as a Changeling, as a Stormbringer. She’ll paint this school in shades of her own design, of shadows and thunderstorms and sickly-sweet poison.

She’ll crown herself Queen once again and she’ll do it with her two constant companions at her side. Her beautiful boys. Her shield and sword.

Her King and bloodied Beast.
The day Lance meets Iverson, she rolls her eyes at the man who wears power like an ill-fitted suit. He postures and yells like it’s meant to intimidate her. She tries very hard not to smile at this man who thinks he holds any true power over her, but it must glitter in her eyes because he goes an alarming shade of red.

The glare he sends her would make anybody else cower.

But she is not anybody else. She is a Martínez. She is-was-will be powerful.

He is not.

Iverson realizes she won’t be easily broken and switches tactics.

It’s the stupidest thing he will ever do.

Because when he realizes he can’t get to her, he decides to try and use Hunk to control her instead. Hunk, who was sweet and shy and emotional. Hunk, who despite his easy acclimatization to her and her lifestyle--despite the iron core at his center--is still gentle and fragile along the edges in a way he’ll never be rid of.

Hunk, who still cries when people shout too loudly at him.

Lance does not tolerate people making Hunk cry.

She breaks formation, shoving herself between Iverson and Hunk and she snarls up at her commanding officer, making sure to let her eyes glow bright with other just so he gets the message loud and clear.

You do not touch Hunk. You do not touch what is hers.

He stumbles back in fear and surprise and Lance bares her too sharp teeth in victory.

The day Lance meets Iverson, she cements herself as the Problem Child and, to a lesser degree, resident eldritch horror.

Not bad for a day’s work in her opinion.

She sees Shirogane in the halls. Passes by him on the way to class or mealtimes.

She’s always aware of him, sharp eyes following his path across any space.

But she never moves to speak, to interact. To claim or covet.

He is not ready yet. Not yet broken and blood stained so she can rebuild him anew. Not yet other enough.

She tries not to let the disappointment spoil the air around her whenever she sees him, still whole and healthy and not hers.
Lance picks up the chattering words jumping from mouth to mouth and a smile curls across her lips like a spider’s legs, her fingers twirling her ever-present lace parasol--a parting gift from her Familia--as she walks her halls.

They twitter and gossip about her smile and her eyes and her mouth. They whisper about the darkness that follows her, about the dog that pads along behind her, eyes hellfire red and fur like spilled ink.

Lance drinks in the attention, basking in the whispers and longing looks like she was born for it. She flourishes in a way she never had before. Her hair is thick and shiny and beautiful even within its regulation bun atop her head. The uniform shimmers a blood-orange against her clear, sepia brown skin while still being the same scrap of fabric everyone else wears.

The stares and voices swirl around her, and she drinks it in. The taste of admiration and jealousy is heavy and sweet like cream on her tongue.

She lives for every rumour that pops up about her.

The taste only sours when they start gossiping about the one thing she will not tolerate.

They snicker about Hunk; all kind words and polite smiles were Lance is snark and biting laughs. They giggle at his wide, dopey grin and doe eyes and eternal happiness that hovers at his shoulders like a cloak. They assume what they know nothing about, and Lance grows cold in the face of their close-minded ignorance.

She is as much playful waves and sun warm rivers and she is deadly whirlpools and freezing hailstorms. The water may look kind and calm and inviting, but it will drag you down mercilessly and leave you for the sharks to feast on.

Those that whisper about her and Hunk in any capacity she disapproves of find themselves with haunting nightmares and auditory hallucinations. Shadows that speak and music that comes from nowhere. Things like that.

Or so she’s heard, seeing as she’d know nothing about such things after all.

The campus becomes a gloomy and miserable place for those who go out of their way to be cruel. Not just to Lance and hers, but anyone.

Lance may be the Mad Queen, but she believes in protecting the innocent. And as far as she’s concerned? The innocent are hers too.

She always had been a greedy little thing.

***

Lance has always wielded words the same way Sabre her knives and Fransisca her beauty. Her voice as her greatest weapon, even when compared to her excellent aim.

But now, when she speaks there is a new weight to them as they sit on her tongue.

She becomes very careful about promises and weaving massive webs of half-truths. Her word is her bond in a way it wasn’t before.

But it also binds others when it previously hadn’t. She hoards names and secrets like a jealous dragon. Her shadows fluttering around and gorging themselves on gossip and skeletons carefully
hidden in closets. People introduce themselves and something heavy settles in her bones. Something
instinctive and hungry.

Power spills out of her throat, fills her mouth until she thinks she’ll drown in it.

And Lance? She basks in every second of it.

***

Every time Lance sets foot inside the Chemistry classroom, something explodes. Even when they
aren’t doing lab or are working with non-explosive materials.

Every time it happens, Lance just looks disappointed. That small little pouting tilt to her mouth that
causes girls and boys alike to swoon in her direction.

Hunk places a consoling hand on the small of her back and she leans into it.

“That was meant to take out the whole school wing and then flood the rest with poisonous gas,” she
says, sounding more than a little despondent.

Hunk nods understandingly. “Well, we can’t all have the natural talent Tio Mateo has with these
types of things.” When Lance still doesn’t perk up, Hunk wraps his arms around her while Smudge
nuzzles into her calf. “We can try summoning The Never-Ending Hunger in Culinary later?”

Lance looks up at him hopefully. “Do you really mean that?”

Hunk grins. “As much as a murderous scorned lover hates their cheating fiancé.”

Lance smiles, her eyes flashing with something dark and Hunk’s doing the same. Everyone in the
room leans away from them instinctively, some primal part of them recognizing the deadly predators
in the room.

Eventually, Lance is no longer allowed in the Chemistry classrooms.

***

Three days later, the Culinary teacher is exposed as a serial cheater and fired for indecent conduct.

On an unrelated note, they are also immediately hospitalized due to the very odd phenomenon of
them losing worrying amounts of weight despite being unable to stop eating.

Their desk is cleared for the substitute teacher to take their place and on it, sits a pristine red velvet
cupcake with a single bite taken out of it.

***

Lance sends an entire batch of cupcakes home that very same weekend the poor culinary teacher is
hospitalized.

She receives a letter from home waxing poetic about her baking skills. Everyone thought they were
divine. The gushing, gooey filling was especially well done according to her Abuelita.

***

With all the excitement of the Garrison’s new Problem Child, no one even noticed how the deserts of
Arizona suddenly started getting unusual amounts of cloudy days and thunderstorms.
No one noticed the music notes that glided like silk threads through the air in perfect beat with the thunder and lightning, either.

But then again, humans rarely notice anything of use.

***

Lance’s ‘Emotional Support Animal’ is as much of an enigma as its owner.

Normally, Smudge can be found padding after Lance, or less often, sleeping in the library or shop class around Hunk. Everyone’s gotten used to the sight of the thing that cannot be a dog following along behind the school’s creepiest student.

The thing cackles like a hyena and stares at you like it thinks you’re a particularly tasty treat. Its eyes seem to dance with flames and stares at you with an intelligence no animal should have, but Lance dots on it like it’s no more than a particularly mischievous puppy.

They just try to ignore it, for the most part. Stay out of its way and let it be.

But there are somethings that cannot just be ignored about the Dog That Wasn’t.

The way it sometimes seems to melt into particularly dense shadows. Or how it looks fuzzy at the edges, like an unfocused photograph, like it’s not actually there. Or how sometimes, when Lance and Hunk are lazing around the common room, Smudge will be gnawing on a bone that looks horrifyingly human or has blood on its muzzle and honest to god grins at people like it knows exactly what it’s doing.

No one wants to get close enough to the thing, scared it will eat them.

And, according to Lance, it is an entirely plausible occurrence.

Miranda, the girl who asked about The Thing That Could Not Be a Dog, bursts into tears and actually takes Lance by surprise with her sobbing. Lance tries to explain it just means he likes you but that only seems to make it worse.

***

While the hallways after curfew are dark, it is still light enough to see where you’re going. There isn’t so little light that a student could hide away in a corner without detection from passing hallway patrols.

Or, at least that’s what Iverson had thought until he nearly runs into the terrifying thing that is Lance Martínez. He jumps back, almost knocking into the wall behind him in his haste.

Martínez, meanwhile, hadn’t moved a muscle. Her parasol continuing to rest on her shoulder, her expression pleasant and calm.

Iverson realizes what he had just done and can’t help fuming. He refuses to be scared of a child.

But… with the way her eyes seem to glow in the darkness, her pupils reflecting and absorbing all light at the same time, Iverson has the insane thought that Martínez might not even be a child.

He pushes the insane thought away almost immediately.

“Pardon me, Commander Iverson,” she demures, pleasant and smooth and still somehow terrifying. “I hadn’t seen you there.”
She salutes, textbook perfect, and practically glides away. Smudge growls at Iverson as he passes and the Commander *swears* he sees the shadows flex and writhe as the pair ventures further down the hall.

It’s not until she’s gone from his sight that he realizes she was out well after curfew and not even heading in the direction of her dorm room.

He should go after her and issue a punishment.

He doesn’t. Instead, he sleeps with the lights on that night, hoping that it will drown out the way the shadows seem to giggle and whisper about him when he’s not looking.

---

Lance counts down the weeks-days-hours until the Garrison approved Family Day arrives.

When it does, she bursts into the cafeteria and launches herself at the dark center of the room that all other families give a wide berth.

Her Papa catches her and spins her around and around, her musical laugh filling the room up with her joy. The rest of *la Familia* converges on her easily after that. Soft hands and warm, razor-sharp smiles and hidden knives she dodges as easily as breathing.

It’s like she never left.

*La Familia* crowds around her, hands brushing over her hair and face and arms.

*Down, across, curve.*

*Down, across, curve.*

*Over and over and over again.*

Lance drinks it in like she’s coming home. Because it is.

Home is where your bloody, beating heart is and her *Familia* tore hers from her chest the second she was born.

“Lance, it’s been *so boring* without you haunting the manor halls,” Fransisca moans, fingers that are more like claws cupping the arch of her cheek. “When are you returning?”

Lance twirls her parasol, despite the weather outside being far from a sunny day. Her *Familia* always did have a knack for gloriously gloomy weather. “Oh, you only want me back so you can try cutting me open again,” she teases as *la Familia* laughs.

Fransisca pouts despite being ten years older than her. The expensive bladed fan twirling expertly through her fingers like she’s *dying* to slide it across Lance’s throat. “You let Mace cut you open whenever she pleases.”

“Mace needs the anatomy practice,” Lance reminds. “Besides, she lets me do target practice on her. You know she’s the fastest.”

“Oh, Lance. You flatter me.”

“Only because I’ve missed you all so much. It’s been positively *dreadful* here with only Hunk and Smudge for company. They do their best but it’s nothing compared to the woe you all bring.”
Her Mamá curls her arms over her shoulder, sharp nails scraping against the fabric. “I’m sure you’ve been making it miserable over here, barracudita?”

“Of course, Mamá. Anything to remind me of home.”

“That’s my girl!” her Papa cries sweeping in to pick her up in a bone snapping hug. Lance laughs even as a rib punctures her lung and blood coats her throat.

***

Later, Lance will hear the whispers about her Familia wandering the halls. Of the dark deadliness they all hold in their veins. The way having them all together in one place, even if they were all happy and loving, had terrified the other parents.

She can’t say she blames them. Her blood splattered family is a stain on any establishment they set foot in. Rowdy and kooky and altogether spooky.

The way shadows writhed and reached for them probably didn’t help, but that was hardly their fault. They were all together again, you can’t really expect them to exclude the shadows from their little reunion.

She feels warm and loved and rides the feeling for the next week, even as the whispers turn to the wide, unsettlingly happy smiles she wears as the student body and faculty guess and wonder at what horrible thing she has planned now.

***

“Come on, sugar heart,” Lance whines from where she’s sprawled across one of the common room tables in a way that has everyone but the center of her attention panting after her. “You can’t deny that Hunk Martínez sounds positively brilliant.”

Hunk doesn’t even look up from his advanced flight engines book, flipping a page idly as he hums at her. “This has to be the weirdest proposal I’ve ever gotten.”

“Hunk, please.”

Her best friend remains steadfastly silent and Lance whines, high in her throat. Around her, at least three people choke on their own spit.

“Spoilsport,” she pouts, “Why not?”

“I don’t need your last name to be the most important person in your life,” Hunk says tiredly.

She rolls her eyes and then onto her stomach, her long ponytail falling on the pages of Hunk’s book finally making him look up at her. Unblinking blue eyes stare into rich soil earth and Lance’s crimson lips curl into a grin. “I know that. But imagine how fun it would be, coffee-crunch! I’ve already told you a thousand times you’d make a glorious Martínez.”

Hunk sighs heavily and turns back to his homework, content to let Lance lounge on the table and mess with his hair while she pouts over his stubbornness.

She’s been trying to get Hunk to take her last name for years, and he still refuses. But she supposes she still has plenty of time to convince him.

***
As a child, Lance had been unsettling.

As a not-quite adult, Lance is still unsettling. But now there is a difference in the way she holds herself, in the way the air around her shifts, in the way people are drawn to her.

She has a lure—an aura that draws people in like flies to honey—that hadn’t been there before.

She laughs and people fall over themselves. She looks at you and you’re suddenly frozen. She speaks and everyone else goes silent to hear what she says.

On Valentine's day, she receives dozens of blood-red roses—all disappointingly thornless—and enough chocolates to start a confectionary. She plucks the treats she likes from the pile, ignoring the love sickened notes that smell of desperation and sour hope, and happily gives everything else to the only person known to hold her attention for any meaningful amount of time: Hunk Garett.

She becomes the most wanted girl in the Garrison while Hunk becomes known as her permanent plus one, her best friend, her other half.

She becomes Problem Child numero uno, harbinger of chaos and Queen of Mischief, while Hunk is the Golden Student, a joy to have in class and the nervous ray of sunshine that casts the light so Lance may thrive in her web of shadows and rain.

He’s nice and friendly and polite but there isn’t anything really special about him.

But Lance—the girl who mingles with darkness and has a smile like knives that still charms people to their knees, the girl who walks with a grace no teenager should have, the girl whose gaze is a blessing and a curse all at once—chooses to spend time with this completely normal boy and nobody understands why.

At least, not until the rumors start.

Whispers about light switches with personal vendettas against certain disrespectful students start circulating at lunch. Videos featuring students doing a whole manner of unsavory things filter through social media from untraceable accounts. People who start getting too…friendly with Lance start experiencing gruesome accidents in shop class.

No one knows who causes them, or even if they’re caused to begin with. But every time a rumor is brought up in front of Hunk, his ever-present smile turns just a hair colder. His eyes more intense and for a moment, some even swear they burned with gold.

But then he blinks and it’s just Hunk again and everyone wonders if maybe they’re just imagining it all. If this isn’t just a big web of coincidences that have nothing to do with the boy at all.

‘No way he could have caused all that!’ they say when Hunk walks past.

‘He’s just a kid!’ they laugh when Hunk coos at Smudge like he’s nothing more than an overgrown puppy.

‘He would never!’ they say in front of officers while Lance twirls her parasol, eyes unblinking and blue, blue, blue.

‘Hunk couldn’t hurt a fly!’ they say as Lance smiles across the room, her crimson-stained lips curling like spoiled milk.

Even so, the students learn not to cross Hunk as well as Lance. Begin to suspect why Lance is so
taken with him, not that anyone would ever say anything about it.

They are the King and Queen, the unrivaled rulers of their mighty kingdom. Their sparkling smiles and whispering, deadly knives that protect the worthy and destroy any who speak against them.

They are feared as much as they are admired.

That is, until Keith Kogane.

***

He doesn’t start the school year until the second semester.

This means that, instead of starting school with a fairly normal student body, he’s thrown headfirst into the writhing storm of a kingdom Lance is concocting. He notices the sharpness of the shadows and narrows his eyes at the way thunder and music float around her like waves.

The others are used to her and her oddities—or have at least learned to live with them.

He has not.

And he’s not interested in learning.

But it’s not his disobedience that captures her attention.

Rather, it is the way that the second she sees him, something red and bright and burning, sits up in her chest and screams. It rakes at her rib cage and scores across her heart and it makes her feel agony like the prophecy it is.

Lance hums at the sensation, eyes sliding half-mast as she licks her lips in anticipation.

What a glorious feeling.

***

She approaches him because of course, she does. Hunk stands beside her always, is everything she could ever hope for, but she still wants more. Is still greedy for it like a dying man is for life.

She offers him her hand and one of her genuine smiles. The one without sharpened teeth and glowing eyes, without malice and threats. It is only herself and the other contentedly settled beneath her skin.

She had dared to hope she could piece herself together just a little more. Dared to believe that she would gain another steadfast companion to follow her down her darkened path.

But her destined Knight, her unforgiving inferno given form, had refused her. Looked her in the eye and discarded her like they were not a fated pair. Like he was not as much her match as Hunk or Shirogane.

Like she was nothing to him.

She watches him leave and the rejection burns in her chest and turns her to ash. The pain wasn’t meant as promise or comfort.

It was meant as a warning.
That night, the thunder *screams* an unholy symphony to the Earth.

That night, Lance *sobs* as she spills all the bloody pieces from her lips and clings to the embrace of her Earthen Warrior, her only anchor in the raging storm.

Every time she looks at him, the bloody red, *angry* thing in her chest *rages*. Slashes at her ribs and tears her apart. When he’s near, flames claw at her throat when she speaks, like they’re desperate to return to him.

She gets used to the taste of ash and Hunk offers to rip him into pieces for her.

But Lance isn’t mad, doesn’t want to break him the way she should. It isn’t rage that burns her throat and bubbles in her chest.

All she can feel about it is sorrow. All she is, is *tired*.

Keith is her own. Like Smudge and Hunk and *la Familia* are.

He doesn’t want her, but that doesn’t change the way he’s curled deep into the very core of her. She will not raise a hand to him, and she won’t let Hunk or Smudge do it either.

She protects her own, and Keith is still that, even if she wishes he wasn’t.

Slowly, the flames seem to burn more and more of her away until Lance *aches* for the soothing coolness of the sea and stars. She is sick with her need for the balm of whispers and tugging waves.

She takes it out on Keith—seeing as he is the cause of it— but only in petty superficial ways that she knows mean nothing to him. She challenges and struts and begs for the day he notices her *trying*. A vain hope that if he *sees* it might make it all *stop*.

It never happens.

Spring break comes and Lance is still despondent despite Hunk’s trying to cheer her up by throwing knives at her or sneaking up on her with his homemade taser. He even baked her his special blood raspberry tarts and while she always enjoys his treats, it does little to soften the heartsick still festering in her chest.

“Songbird, you look absolutely wretched,” Dante tells her the second he sees her.

“Thank you, Papi.” Lance sighs as her parents step away from the hearse to envelop her in their arms. “I’m afraid I’ve gotten myself involved in quite the vexing problem.”

“Something even a knife to the ribs can’t fix?” Maria asks, surprise lacing her tone.

“I’m afraid so, Mamá.”

Maria hummed sympathetically, tilting her daughter’s chin upwards with a single, wickedly sharp nail.
The pair stared at each other for a long moment, predators of the same breed. Scarlet lips painted in macabre shades, eyes lined with kohl and the same warm, twilight dark skin, like the fires of hell were dancing beneath their flesh. They even wore their hair twisted in the same intricate knots atop their heads.

“I think you’ve been away too long. When was the last time you’ve had a proper sacrifice?”

Lance’s face twists into something like disappointment. “Almost a month Mamá.”

Cousin Morbid gasps from where her head is hanging out of the window.

Aunt Jocasta, who’s helpfully holding the severed head shakes her own in disbelief. “Well, no wonder you’re so out of sorts. You’re a growing young lady who needs her blood baths! Come along, we need to fix this immediately. We’re lucky we’ve been saving that mangy deadbeat in the basement.”

“Jocasta!” Dante cries. “He was supposed to be a surprise.”

Lance perks up, a smile stretching across her face slowly. “You saved me a present?” Papi looks sheepish while Aunt Jocasta looks unapologetic and Lance laughs. She stands on her toes to kiss her Mamá and Papi on the cheeks. “Oh, you always know just how to cheer me up.”

***

Lance returns to the manor and her kingdom and immediately, the fire inside her quiets. Like being here, surrounded by love and blood and darkness, Keith and his apathy cannot reach her. The second she touches the ocean, it’s as if thoughts of him flee like madmen.

She only knows the whispering of her oldest friend and love, only knows the contentment of her loving embrace.

***

Her Familia keeps throwing pointy objects at her. Any time she walks into a room, something goes whizzing by her nose.

She’d be affronted about their shameless bullying of her if she didn’t know it was only because they missed her. She missed them too, and so instead of getting upset, throws them back quick as lightning and aim impeccable.

She’d been getting rusty, what with the Garrison frowning upon throwing knives at her fellow students.

It’s not her fault normal people are so fragile. She was only trying to improve their dodging skills.

But that means little to her now.

She’s once again surrounded by the gloom and woe and bloodthirstiness of her Familia and she could not be happier. Not having to dodge ninja stars and bladed fans every day had made her slower than when she left, but she’s still a Martínez and is plenty quick enough to best her sisters.

Especially when she tricks them into following her to the shoreline.

***

The moon is high and full, and Lance’s entire Familia stands behind her on the sand, the sounds of
crashing waves filling the air around them.

Before her, lies the broken slump of what might’ve been a man, but Lance prefers to think of as a pest. Lance breathes in deeply; she can practically smell the fear clouding around the pest as he stares up at them from where he’s knelt.

Lance places the tip of her parasol right under his chin, the sharpened edge causing blood to bead along his fragile skin. Behind her, her Familia shifts with excitement.

Her eyes flash and the pest whimpers.

She leans close to the pest’s face, a smile spreading across her face like scuttling spider legs as she utters one word. A whisper with the weight of a gunshot in the night.

“Run.”

***

The sounds of howls and cackling laughs can be heard all along the shoreline and winding through the woods as the pest scrambles away from them. Runs for his life like he isn’t already a dead man.

Lance relishes in it all, soaking in the power that thrums through her veins.

She brings the tip of her parasol to her lips and licks the blood from the metal. Behind her, la Familia surges forward, a writhing shape of teeth and laughter and blood.

The Hunt is on.

***

It takes thirty minutes to hunt down the pest, but that’s only because la Familia was too busy playing around to really take him seriously. That: and Lance wanted to watch him squirm.

When they finally surround him in the woods, the pest practically shaking at how the trees seem to laugh at him, it is Lance who steps out of the shadows like she was molded from them. She’d been given the honor of finishing what she started, the honor of bloodying the earth with glorious sacrifice.

She is more woman than child and, despite having spent the last half hour in the woods playing with her Familia, she looks impeccable. Dressed like sin and as deadly as poison.

Fransisca really did a wonderful job with the tight bodiced little number she’s wearing, the fabric pooling around her ankles like a lake of blood. Red isn’t normally her color, but she can’t deny it does look divine against her skin and will hide the bloodstains magnificently.

“Well, you’ve been a naughty boy, haven’t you?” Lance asks, circling him like a shark. Her feet make no sound as she steps around him.

The night is quiet. Too quiet.

The only sound being the fearful beating of the pest’s heart.

A sound that won’t last for long.

“Shall I read the charges, or would you like to just plead guilty and we can all go home happy? Or, well… We can go home happy. I’m afraid you won’t be going anywhere ever again.” Lance laughs
at her own joke, the shadows echoing its haunting melody around her.

“You’re all insane. Crazy fucking nutters!” he shouts, cowering when Lance stops in her circling of him. Her sharp eyes leave the parasol she was twirling, the grinning skulls stitched into the lace seeming to laugh at the broken pest before her.

“Now, now, little pest. Flattery will get you nowhere at this point.” She continues her walking, slowly getting closer and closer to him in the middle. Coiling around him like a snake squeezing its prey of precious life.

“Murderous little thief, aren’t you? Scuttling about like an insect, taking what you please, killing who you wish. La Familia is very understanding of a little fun now and again, we all need some way to destress, now don’t we? But,” Lance halts, parasol tapping against the ground as she tsks at the cowering man twice her size. “then you made the mistake of killing the wrong somebody, didn’t you? Came after the wrong family.”

Lance’s eyes burn with fury as she stares at him.

“Please,” he begs. “I'll do anything! Just let me go.”

The cackling in the trees gets louder. Closer.

Lance huffs, gently hanging the parasol on an outstretched branch. “Really. If you cannot keep your life, you should at least hold on to your dignity.”

At that moment, Smudge chooses to bleed from the shadows behind the pest, snapping at his heels before dancing around him with a mad cackle. The pest shrieks, jumping and trembling like a terrified child.

His eyes follow Smudge, tongue lolling out between gleaming white teeth, as he trots faithfully to her side. His eyes are wide and dilated in fear, staring at Smudge like he’s the scariest thing in these woods.

As if her beautiful hellhound is the deadliest predator in front of him.

Lance will delight in proving him wrong, of course.

“You know,” Lance says conversationally, her fingers ruffling the fur behind Smudge’s ear, drawing out his fear as long as she can. The smell of his terror is thick and tantalizing in the air, her mouth already watering. “You really are very lucky it takes so long to put Abuelita back together. Otherwise, you’d have her to deal with instead.”

Lance slinks forward, the shadows writhing and the sounds of distant thunder rumbling around them.

“And trust me, she’s far more patient than I when it comes to punishment.”

And then, between the space of one breath and the next, Lance’s control snaps.

She leaps, Smudge and her Familia only a second behind as the meaty sounds of tearing flesh and snapping bones fill the night air.

The pest screams.

And then…

He keeps on screaming.
Uncle Amaris does eventually finish patching up Abuelita’s body, but their matriarch refuses to get back in it.

Abuelita has found herself fond of being a poltergeist and adamantly refuses to go back to being alive. She says it’s ‘painfully droll’ and that she ‘has much more fun skulking about the manor and flying through walls’.

La Familia rolls their eyes but doesn’t protest.

They hold a lovely funeral where Abuelita gives her own eulogy and then they bury her in the family tomb. Afterward, all the Martínez family ghosts throw a welcome party for their newest member that shakes the house to its foundations while the living members of la Familia host the wake.

Hunk and his family obviously visit for the funeral and wake. Hunk congratulates Abuelita on finally dying for good while the rest of his family happily mingles with her own, only a few minor hiccups in conversations regarding what (or rather, who) is in the hors d’oeuvres.

Hunk’s family has, after all, long since grown used to the Martínez’s, but they are not their son. They may be family friends, but they will never be Familia.

Well, the little ones might. Lance thinks she got to Hunk’s brothers in time, at least. The smallest one seems practically enamored with the knives strapped to Sabre’s hip after all.

Sadly, all good things must come to an end and Lance finds herself saying farewell to her Familia once more.

Returning to the Garrison is… bitter after the magnificent week back home. The second she steps back on the grounds the flames flare back up. They are smaller and less furious, and for that Lance is grateful.

It is perhaps a sign that things will get better. That she will soon heal completely. It is a naive hope, but with fresh blood under her nails, it seems more real. Achievable.

Hunting with her Familia--her first Hunt with la Familia--has left her thrumming for the thrill of the chase. She hadn’t realized how much she missed it all until she was thrown back into it and now, she is unwilling to let it go again.

She can probably talk Hunk into throwing sharp objects at her--his target practice needs work anyway--but she needs something more.

Luckily, she thinks she knows just the thing to chase after.

Griffin is the school’s resident pretty boy. Charismatic and filled to the brim with bright energy and the overwhelming drive to do the ‘right thing’. He postures and bluffs his way into being confident and spits out aggression like it will put him in control.

He’s possibly the most talked-about after her and Hunk.

Lance finds him utterly boring.
His personal shadow though… *him* she can get into.

Talk Dark and Handsome first catches her attention when she notices that the shadows whisper about him in a more… familiar way than they do others. A way that’s almost intimate.

She starts looking after that and she can’t help but like what she finds. Silent and thoughtful. One to hold onto his thoughts and hoard his secrets. Deadly with a gun in his hand and a slippery moral compass to match.

She’s had her eye on him for a while but never cared to do anything about it. It was painfully obvious Kinkade was head over heels for Griffin even if neither of them has bothered to do anything about it yet. It was more amusing to watch the two stumble around one another anyway.

That is, until it wasn’t.

She approaches Kinkade after soon-to-be Mr. Adam Shirogane (or maybe not so soon-to-be. Her shadows do whisper such delicious things about him and her Shirogane) dismisses their class.

Before either of them can move, Lance slinks her way onto Kinkade's desk, one leg folded neatly over the other while she leans casually on her hand. Smudge circles around both of them, caging them in until Lance deems them ready to leave.

Kinkade blinks up at her, expression unchanged like he expected this. Lance finds that reaction utterly fascinating and leans closer to him.

“You know, most people are less calm about my little visits.”

“Most people aren’t as familiar with shadows,” Kinkade shoots back, unblinking.

“Darling,” Lance practically purrs. “I’m much worse than just shadows.”

Kinkade hums non-committedly, but his eyes look a little sharper. A little hungrier.

Lance grins, wide and wicked and sharp. There was a reason she liked this one.

“Uh?” a confused sound perks up from the left. Lance and Kinkade turn at the same time to look at the puzzled expression on Griffin’s face. “What is happening in front of me right now?”

Lance can’t resist the light chuckle that escapes her lips and though Kinkade is much better at hiding his emotions, she can see the corner of his mouth twitch.

In one graceful move, she dismounts Kinkade’s desk and swings herself so she’s leaning against Griffin’s, her face close enough that he has to lean back quickly so they aren’t nose to nose.

Her eyes stare into his unblinkingly and she’s pleasantly surprised to note that while he backed up, he refuses to back down. His wide brown eyes stare back up at her with stubborn intensity and, okay, he’s not exactly her type but she can see what Kinkade likes about him.

She tells them both as much.

That does get a laugh out of Kinkade, but Griffin just looks like he’s not sure if he should be offended or not.

Lance bops him on the nose before he can decide. “Don’t worry, tweety bird. It’s a compliment. There might be hope for you yet.” She lifts her face up to smirk at Kinkade. “He’s cute, mind if we share?”
“Are you talking about me or to me?” Kinkade asks, face back in his impassive mask.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” she teases with a wink. Then, with a flourish reserved for ringmasters and conductors, she steps back, Smudge coming to a stop at her heel. “Well, boys. While this has been a pleasure, I’m afraid I have other things to attend to. People to maim, stuff to destroy.” She shrugs casually. “You know, girl things.”

Griffin looks bewildered, silently mouthing ‘girl things’ to himself while Kinkade tries and fails to not look curious.

She blows each of them a kiss before sashaying out of the classroom.

***

In an effort to better understand her new prey, Lance takes to studying Griffin. He is still bright and confident and tediously aggressive but the closer she looks, the more that starts to chip away.

He’s loyal. The kind of loyal Lance is, the kind of loyal she likes. And the longer she looks, the more his aggression fades into ferocity. Into a bloodlust that has no other way of escaping him.

It’s enough that Lance is willing to look for more. To dig deeper into him and see what other hidden treasures she finds.

***

She makes a point to approach her new favorite playthings at the most inconvenient times she can. Griffin always jumps at her sudden appearances, the poor lamb, and while Kinkade is also taken aback, she has yet to make him do more than blink in surprise.

It’s a wonderful challenge and Hunk, disinterested in her love life as he is, only rolls his eyes in amusement whenever she perks up at a chance to torment them.

“Lance, you’re going to break them,” he tells her after one particularly memorable encounter where Lance appeared behind Griffin when he was walking from the showers to his dorm in only a towel. He’d startled so badly he dropped his towel, not that Lance had minded the free show.

When she told him that, he’d blushed red from the tips of his ears down to—well, it’s not ladylike to kiss and tell now, is it?

“But they’re so fun,” Lance whines. “Tweety Bird has just enough spine to stand up to me and Winter Soldier is… well, delicious is a word I’d use. He’s dark and lethal in a way so few others are.”

“I don’t think Kinkade is the bloodthirsty type,” Hunk warns.

“I know,” Lance sighs wistfully, falling back across the fainting couch that isn’t supposed to be in her dorm room. “He won’t be giving me any bloody ornaments but a girl’s still gotta eat, sugar crunch. And it’s not like I have to marry the first person that catches my eye.”

Hunk grumbles from his place on her bed. “Just be careful alright?” She looks over at him, face twisted in a perfectly innocent expression. “Aren’t I always?”
Hunk throws a screwdriver at her, the head impaling itself into the cushion an inch from her ear. Lance taunts him about his aim until he throws another one she actually has to dodge.

***

Three days later, Lance walks into her room and finds a present left on her desk.

It’s a bouquet of a dozen roses, boring and trivial normally, except that these ones aren’t.

Eleven of the flowers end abruptly before the petals can even start, their buds hacked off harshly and without mercy. The only one spared from the massacre being the single, gleaming black rose standing tall in the center of it all like some sort of deadly victor.

Lance picks up the lone survivor, uncaring of the vicious thorns pricking at her fingers, and holds it up to her face.

She doesn’t need to look at the card to know who they’re from, the lingering scent of cardamom and copper and gun oil answer enough.

She hums happily, licking the blood from her already closing wounds. It seems one of her boys is a fast learner.

She might actually make something useful out of them it seems.

***

She wears the already wilting black rose in her hair the next day, two of the pricklier bud-less stems acting as hairsticks.

She smirks every time she feels the razor-sharp stare slice across her form but pointedly doesn’t turn around. She’s pretty sure Kinkade likes the view more anyway.

***

It’s not long after that, she finds the small, half shattered skull of a cactus wren sitting where the roses had been. It’s sun-bleached and missing half of the frontal, parietal, and squamosal regions as well as the lower jaw.

She runs her finger over the beak, gentle and curious, as she breathes in the smell of stale death hanging off the cracked skull. There’s also the smell of leather and lily of the valley filling her room enough to make her to raise an eyebrow.

Nosey little minx, isn’t he?

She looks back at the skull and can’t help smiling. It’s not as bloody as she would’ve hoped, but a gruesomely lovely gift, nonetheless.

She fashions it into a hair clip, the chalky white of it standing out lovingly against her umber, dark hair.

***

The next few weeks are ghoulishly punctuated by Lance receiving gift after gift in some strange one-up-man courtship dance, Griffin and Kinkade seemingly competing for her favor with increasingly macabre and morbid gifts.
She’s half-convinced they’re courting each other as much as herself, which she doesn’t exactly mind.

Still, she sends a few back of her own, the most noticeable being a clipping of Audrey the Third she leaves in their shared dorm to fight over. It was amusing to see the pair the next day with cuts and nicks all along their arms—only most of which had been given by Audrey.

She’d smirked knowingly at them both before settling herself next to Hunk in the common room, snuggling into his side while she watched Griffin almost snap his pencil in half when the movement caused her shirt to ride up, exposing dark, golden flesh.

*Oh, how she does so love these games they play.*

***

Then, Keith approaches her at lunch.

A horrible idea, really. Hunk is sitting right there, practically growling at the idiot and her soup is definitely growling at him and this is all just such a bad idea on his end.

She’s more centered when it comes to him, but that doesn’t mean the fire in her chest is any less intense. She wishes she could just smother it and shove the ashes down the bastard's throat.

But she can’t.

*Instead,* the fire blooms and burns and it feels both happy and furious at the same time. Pleasantly warm and scorching all at once. His very presence makes her giddy and tired and a hundred other not good things and she wishes he would hurry up and decide if he wants anything to do with her or not.

Keith is standing in front of her, glaring at the tablecloth and silver platters holding her and Hunk’s meals and all the decadence that follows wherever she goes, and Lance can’t stop a part of her—the same part that daydreams of bloodbaths and destructive supernovas—from hoping Keith is here because he’s finally realized he wants her. Wants them.

She is, of course, disappointed.

“Martínez,” he bites out, tone clipped like he’d rather be anywhere else.

“Kogane.” Lance gives him her sharpest smile, tone cloying and flirtatious. The same way she always speaks to him these days. “To what do I owe the… pleasure.”

Keith’s scowl deepens, possibly because of her tone, possibly because every second in her presence makes him want to scream. “Call off your attack dog.”

Lance blinks. “I beg your pardon? Smudge is perfectly well behaved and certainly hasn’t done anything as brutish as attack someone.”

“Don’t play dumb.”

Hunk’s fork is bending under the force of his fist and Lance reaches across the table, careful of his platter seeing as it bites, and wraps her hand around his wrist. Her thumb rubs soothing circles at his pulse point in an effort to calm him down while she keeps her eyes on Keith.

“Not exactly my style, I’m afraid. I prefer playing with guns.”

Keith’s hand slams down onto the table, rattling the silverware. Lance nor Hunk even flinch. “Griffin
is trying to impress you or something—I don’t care why. But whatever he’s doing, get him under control or I’ll send him through a wall the next time he tries to talk to me.”

Her eyes flicker to the growing bruise forming on his cheek and she’s unsurprised by the anger and irritation snaking through her chest at Griffin for trying to fight her battles, for daring to hurt another one of her people. That is an expected reaction, she had not let Hunk do as he pleased with Keith for this reason.

What does surprise her, is the bright flare of indignation at Keith’s tone, at even the implication that she somehow controls Griffin or any of her boys, at the threat of harm coming to something that is hers, because she hadn’t known Griffin was that important until right then.

Her eyes flash and in the next moment she’s standing almost nose to nose with Keith, a snarl bubbling in the back of her throat. Around them, the room grows quiet and dark, the shadows pooled in the corners writhing and flexing like waves in a storm.

“I don’t control Griffin, and you don’t have any right to order me around,” she hisses with all the malice she can muster. All the well-earned terror and grace she and her family so covets. “So, I suggest you run off before I do something far worse than send you through a wall.”

She won’t, of course. It’s the first threat she’d ever made with no intention of following through, but Keith doesn’t know that.

He looks surprised by her outburst for all of a second before he’s angry once more. He’s always angry, she can smell the suffocating, sour spice of it on him all the time.

For a second, she thinks he might actually strike her, or try to at least.

He’d never land the hit. Hunk can barely do that, and he’s known and fought against her for years. He must see something in her eyes or posture or just finally listen to that voice in his head that tells him he’s way in over his head and that he’s the prey about to be eaten by the deadly predator in this situation.

The sound of something like a growl reverberates through the air between them, and she thinks he may even do something like snap his teeth at her before he’s stalking out of the lunchroom, running off to who knows where.

Lance gracefully returns to her meal, ignoring the whispers around her for once and pretends she doesn’t want to run after him. Pretends she doesn’t care about him at all.

With the way Hunk is looking at her, she doesn’t think she does a very good job.

***

She spends that night in Hunk’s bed, wrapped in her honeybee’s embrace and with Smudge curled on her stomach like the lapdog he most certainly isn’t.

She feels warm and safe and loved.

It’s almost enough to drown out the burn of smoke and hot coals in her throat as she cries.

***

Lance feels… off, for the next few days.
She is still sharp and beautiful and flirty, but during one of her physics classes, she is humming and accidentally lets too much melancholy hang in the notes of it, causing everyone around her to burst into tears.

It doesn’t even make her feel better. Well, no, she does laugh. But only for a little bit before she goes back to being horribly emotional.

Damn Keith for doing this to her. Why doesn’t he just look. He can’t really be this blind to the thread tying them together, can he?

Perhaps he just doesn’t care.

The thought makes Lance want to tear someone apart. Luckily, she already needed to have a… chat with Iverson regarding certain matters.

She might as well kill two birds with one axe, as it were.

***

Iverson enters his office to find Lance settled comfortably in his chair, her feet kicked up on the desk and Smudge in the darkest corner, his burning, red eyes glowing from within the unnatural darkness.

She relishes in the way the man jumps, face draining of blood as he realizes who, exactly, has broken into his office.

“Evening, Commander,” she says, voice smooth as silk and smiling wide enough to show all of her teeth. “Please, come in. I do believe we have things to…” the lights flicker and thunder shudders through the room. “discuss.”

She watches as his throat bobs and has to hold back the pleasant hum.

Oh, yes. This will be fun.

***

She’s walking down the hallway, hand placed in the crook of Griffin’s arm as he escorts her from one class to another, when they pass Iverson. She knows the exact moment Griffin sees him, his entire frame tensing up as he freezes in the middle of the hallway, hand already coming up to salute.

Lance doesn’t move a muscle as she watches Iverson notice them.

The second he lays eyes on her, he’s ducking his head and rushing back down the hall. Scurrying off to wherever they aren’t.

Griffin stares after the Commander in bewilderment and something like relief, his hand falling from the salute in surprise.

Lance does little to hide her satisfied smile.

She does so enjoy the smell of fear.

“What the hell was that about?” he asks into the silent hall around them. Their fellow students staring after the Commander with the same confusion he feels.

Lance shrugs languidly, twirling her parasol in a wide arc. “Haven’t the faintest.”
Griffin cuts her a look that is unfairly suspicious. He really does just assume the worst of her, doesn’t he? She’d be proud if it wasn’t currently so inconvenient.

“What did you do,” he says flatly.

“Why do you assume I’ve done anything?” she says innocently, eyelashes fluttering.

It doesn’t have the desired effect. “Because you’re the scariest person I’ve ever met and also at the center of every crazy thing that’s happened in the two years we’ve been here. Of course, it was you.”

Lance huffs, “James, darling. You’re being irrational.”

Immediately, he stiffens at her side, eyes wide as he stares down at her, seemingly lost for words. “I- you- what did you just-”

She pats his chest comfortably as they stop outside her next class. “That was very sweet of you to say, but I’m afraid I haven’t done anything.” She pauses, the haunting sound of distant singing weaving through the air. “Yet.”

He continues sputtering as the warning bell rings. Lance smiles, sharp nails trailing down his chest. “I really must be going now, James, dear. See you later.”

She stands on her toes to press her lips on the apple of his cheek, leaving a scarlet smudge in her wake. Something in her purrs with pride at the sight.

She’s gone before he has time to process what just happened, the lingering coolness of her hand spreading out across his chest like a disease.

***

Lance watches as Shirogane goes up in his rocket and knows with a bone deep certainty, he will not return the way he left. He will throw himself to the farthest stars and they with swallow him alive only to spit him back out broken and with the emptiness of space bleeding from his veins.

She wishes she could tell Keith that his brother, their fated match, will come back. Wishes she could give him the hope she knows he will so desperately need.

But Keith has turned from her. He will not listen even if she tried.

And she will not give him a chance to reject her again.

***

There is a hallway within the Garrison walls, that no one walks down anymore. It sits there, bathed in shadows so impossibly dark, and it waits.

Nobody walks down it. The people who do, find themselves plagued by nightmares of things they can’t remember. Their minds torn apart by the bloody fragments of bone-chilling terror they feel still gripping at their chests even as the bright, afternoon sun washes over them.

Lance floats down this hallway, the shadows within long and black and alive as she passes. Their chilling fingers reach for her, whispering in her ear of the many interesting activities of the day.

People always let their secrets slip in the darkness, the false comfort loosening their inhibitions. What would they do if they learned they were never truly alone in the darkness they so covet and fear? What would they do if they learned she was as much a part of the shadows as they were a part of
She twists her fingers this way and that, molding the ball of magic and shadows and death into horrifying dancing figures to keep her company. She sings, long and sharp and true, the air shimmering with compulsion and malice.

It’s haunting, the picture she paints around herself. Gruesome and devastating and a million other terrible things.

It makes her positively homesick.

One particular shadow reaches at her, catching her attention with its thick, familiar shape.

She stops, the air freezing around her as the shadow curls itself around her neck, it’s almost tangible shape tightening around her throat.

She smiles, stroking the wispy trail of it. “To what do I owe the pleasure, little one?”

The sound of wind whipping through trees and the screeching of bats fills the hallway. Lance blinks languidly as the sound dies down. Then, without a second thought, she’s floating off down the hallway. Slinking from shadow to shadow like a particularly smug cat.

There is someone waiting for her after all, and its bad manners to keep one waiting.

***

She watches, for a few long moments, as Kinkade stands at the shooting range, testing his deadly accuracy against the Garrison’s simulations.

It has nothing on the Martínez family game nights, but Lance still finds his novice grace beautiful. Like a kitten who has yet learned how to hunt and stalk properly but will soon learn the feeling of blood under their claws.

Lance steps from the shadows, melting from the darkness with practiced ease. She’s behind him, and he doesn’t know she’s there, but when her hand trails across his shoulder blades, he doesn’t jump. He never does.

Lance finds it fascinating.

“You’re too stiff,” she tells him, her voice soft and musical as she circles him.

He looks at her out of the corner of his eye, otherwise unmoving, holding his shooting pose.

She trails her hands along his form, pushing and pulling him into the proper position. Kinkade doesn’t shudder, but she can feel the way his blood heats up beneath her freezing hands, hear the way his heart pounds in his chest.

He shoots again and he is more relaxed, better than he was before, but Lance still tsks. She curves her fingers along his cheek, down his neck and chest, stopping only at the base of his ribs. “So tense,” she admonishes. “You’re tip-toeing, kitten. You need to strut.”

The gun falls to the side and Kinkade grabs her hand, pressing it more firmly into his skin. “Ryan.”

Lance blinks up at him, quirking an eyebrow. She pulls her hand from his and circles him, trailing her nails across his chest and shoulders and finally clasping the back of his neck. He leans into her
touch, pressing his back into her front, chasing after her being with his own.

She shifts, pressing her lips to his ear and whispers, “Won’t you strut for me, Ryan?”

That time he jolts and Lance delights in the reaction from the normally so stoic boy.

She pulls away all at once.

He doesn’t stumble back, but it’s a near thing. She’s already walking backward to the shadows when he whips around after her.

His eyes look as dark and sharp as her own.

Lance smirks, wiggles her fingers, and disappears.

***

James, in a display of stubbornness and frayed nerves, surprises Lance by being the one to actually bring their lovely little game to its stunning conclusion, not long after.

He tracks her down to where she’s standing out in the airfield, the thunderstorm raging around her in the twilight hour and providing such gloomy atmosphere. How romantic of him.

“She calls over the din of the rain without turning around. “What a lovely surprise.”

“Like you didn’t know the second we stepped outside,” James shouts back, Lance smirks wickedly over her shoulder. He’s leading the charge over, Ryan not far behind and both of them already soaked to the bone.

“Don’t be a spoilsport, Robin. You know it looks too good on you.” Lance goes back to looking up at the sky, her head tilted back towards the rain. “To what do I owe the divine pleasure?”

She feels the shadows shift behind her a second before a pair of thin but strong arms wrap around her waist, a warm body pressed against her back. Breath whispers past her ear as James hooks his chin over her shoulder, burying his face in her neck.

He doesn’t speak as Ryan steps in front of her, dangerously close as she watches the rain pool at his bitable collar bones. He’s close enough that his breath warms her face and Lance doesn’t drop her wicked grin as she hooks her arms around his neck, pulling him flush against her front.

His hands fly to her hips right under where James’ palms at her stomach, like he’s been burning just to touch her. His fingers spasm, like there’s so much more he wants to do and can’t decide.

Lance watches as his eyes go dark in that way she so adores and feels a thrill of pleasure when James, not willing to be forgotten, scrapes his teeth along her neck. She leans back into James, pulling Ryan down closer and over her so all three are sharing breath.

Above them, the thunder rolls.

Lance hums, eyes half-lidded at the delectable way things have turned out. “Is this your way of saying you’ve decided to share me?”

Ryan laughs, the vibration humming through Lance’s chest while James squeezes her waist, seemingly unamused.

“You could have just said so the first time.”
“Ah, but where’s the fun in that?” she teases, giving a little shimmy that makes the boys hiss and her eyes flash brilliant blue, blue, blue. “I wouldn’t have gotten to play with you both.”

She turns her head to look at James just in time to catch the way his grin turns almost feral.

Oh, yes. She can definitely see what Ryan likes about him. It’s starting to be what Lance likes about him after all.

“I’ll show you, playing,” he hisses into the shell of her ear.

In one fluid leap, Lance wraps her legs around Ryan’s hips while keeping James pressed firmly against her back as she presses a kiss to his mouth hard enough to bruise. Ryan’s hands spasm once more from where they’d moved to support her weight while Lance swallows every one of James’ heady moans greedily.

James pulls away first, his fragile human lungs annoyingly needing air. He pants against her throat while Lance purrs into his ear, her eyes locked with the molten heat of Ryan’s as he pulls her impossibly closer.

“I’d love to see you try.”

***

Lance finds it fortunate that James and Ryan share a dorm.

It makes finding a quiet spot for their more… rigorous activities so much easier. Especially seeing as she’s not sure either of her boys are ready to brave the shadows and come out with their psyches still intact.

***

Hunk comments on James’ newest fashion statement during their biology class. They were sat off to the side, excused from the whole dissection business when the cat they had been given started moving around on their tray.

Hunk had given her a disapproving look like it was all her fault. Which is extremely unfair. She’d only wanted to test how sharp the knife was. She hadn’t meant to get any blood on their friendly little feline.

Not that she was complaining, mind you.

Everyone else had screamed, trying to get as far away as possible when they noticed the cat’s great yellow eyes starting to blink, the glassy look fading away even as Lance leaned forward in fascination. The beauty stretched out her disused limbs, meowing piteously at the stiffness of them and Lance practically melted.

She wasted no time reaching out to scratch the lovely bombay behind the ear, her dull fur a lovely onyx color Lance can’t help cooing over.

“What a lovely little surprise you are,” she praised, the feline arching into her hand only a little awkwardly as the blood slowly starts pumping through her veins again. After a few moments, she wobbles on to all four feet, takes a moment to look disinterestedly at her audience, and then leaps.

She lands with pinpoint precision on Lance’s shoulder, wasting no time in curling around her neck like a particularly expensive stole. Lance coos at her again, nails scratching under her chin adoringly.
“I think I’ll call you Morte, my lovely little cadaver.” The smell of formaldehyde and death filling Lance’s nose when the newly Named Morte butts her head against Lance’s cheek, purring enough to wake the dead.

Though, Lance supposes, that’s happened already.

Everyone--sans Hunk who was also petting Morte because he’s a sucker for animals--was staring at her in a strange mix of shock and disbelief. Even James and Ryan, though Lance was pleased to note that they both looked more resigned than shocked.

“I wonder if she bites?” Hunk asks, waving a string above Morte to play with while they wait for everyone else to finish up the lab. Before Lance can respond, Hunk snorts. “What am I saying? Of course, she bites. Like mother like daughter.”

Lance blinks at him, feigning offence. “I have no idea what you mean. I’m a perfect lady.”

Hunk snorts again, this time the noise flowing into a disbelieving laugh. “Oh yeah? Is that why James looks like he was attacked by vampires?”

Lance swats at Hunk with her parasol, a disapproving tilt to her mouth. “Bite your tongue! My cousins would never be so sloppy as to leave evidence behind if they attacked someone. We are professionals,” Lance harrumphs.

She looks over to James, eyes raking over the bruises scattered all along that wondrously pale throat. A sly grin slinks smugly across her lips as she looks at her best friend out of the corner of her eye.

“Besides,” she says coyly, “those ones aren’t from me.”

Hunk blinks at her before his eyes widen and snap to the towering form of Ryan who’s engrossed in the slicing and cutting of his own feline cadaver. Lance had received her own fair share of attention courtesy of that devilish tongue, it's only that her… unique genetics kept any glorious marks from forming.

Not that he hadn’t made a valiant effort trying.

“Huh,” Hunk says almost absently, Morte pawing at his hands to get them moving again. He obliges before a thought must occur to him and they stop a second later. “Wait. ‘Those ones’?”

Lance’s grin grows into a leer and her honey bear seems to realize his mistake quickly, eyes slamming shut and hands waving frantically in front of him as if he can ward off the images.

“Oh, gross! Forget I asked, I don’t want to hear about it! I regret this whole conversation.”

She laughs in his face and deftly dodges the hand meant to push her off her chair.

***

The thick, rust-colored collar studded with tiny, onyx cat skulls looks ravishing against Morte’s newly sleek, black fur.

So good in fact, Lance buys a matching gorget styled one for Smudge that somehow makes him look even more intimidating than he had before, and she takes to wearing an equally morbidly decorated, scarlet red choker herself. That way, when Lance walks the halls with Smudge at her side and Morte perched on her shoulder, deathly still and graceful, everyone can easily see the message she sends.
The warning she gives to those who *dare* touch what is hers.

Hunk surprises her at the end of the week by wearing a thick, red leather bracelet to match her and the kids. Lance grins up at him with one of her genuine smiles, sans sharpness or teeth, and coos over how well it goes with his eyes.

Every time she sees the lines of red hanging off what is undoubtedly *hers*, she feels a wicked surge of affection and the overwhelming feeling of *right*. Despite the color not being hers—she had always been more partial to blue or black than anything—she can’t help but purr at the figurative cords of blood binding them all together.

Well, *literally* in Morte and Smudge’s case, she supposes.

Really, that only leaves Hunk and—*Oh*, isn’t *that* a thought.

***

The *Persephone* is lost.

The Garrison says they crashed.

The lost crew is mourned for the heroes they are—*were*.

Lance narrows her eyes and curls her lip up at them all.

Takashi Shirogane is not dead, and the Garrison is filthy with *lies*.

***

Lance sits on the roof, Morte in her lap and the distant storm clouds rumbling across the golden horizon. If she listens, she can just make out the distant crooning of waves, the sounds of something far into the desert calling her name. It tugs and pulls at her and Lance whispers ‘*not yet. not now.*’ over and over again.

“What are we gonna do about it?” Hunk asks from her right where Smudge is sprawled across his chest, a rumbling purr vibrating the whole rooftop. He doesn’t elaborate on what the ‘what’ is.

He doesn’t need to.

“Nothing fun. Not yet, at least,” she says without looking at him. She knows there’s a frown on his face without turning. “I think we should let them *squirm* first.”

Smudge cackles like nails on a chalkboard and Hunk’s eyes flash molten gold.

Around them, the desert seems to *sing*.

***

Keith is expelled and Lance watches him make a fool of himself in front of everyone. The scene he causes in the lunchroom with Iverson would be amusing under any other circumstances. But as it is, the whole production is ultimately useless, and Iverson doesn’t even bleed for his lies as Lance plans for him to.

Her eyes burn holes into the back of his head as he storms from the school and then she turns back to Hunk and returns to their conversation about the gun upgrades he’s working on for her. She needs to make sure her Kitty-kade stays on his toes, after all.
She has no time for fools who are too hot-headed to use their eyes and see that you learn nothing if you’re thrown from the institution with the knowledge you seek.

***

It’s one of those days where the Garrison has called off classes for the time being due to some unfortunate accident in the shop class--made by some foolish degenerate Hunk dislikes, no doubt--that Lance finally realizes what has been nagging at the back of her mind lately.

Lance had been rearranging the books on her boys’ shelves from most to least bloody, tsking at some of the selection because really, James’ secret little romance collection doesn’t have a single dismemberment or betrayal in it. In fact, they all live ‘happily ever after’ according to him, not a single death!

How droll.

She was contemplating whether or not she should just throw the offensively bright pink covered fluff piece in trash and save herself the trouble when Morte’s earthshaking purr pulls her gaze back to the bed. Her boys are still sprawled across it, James laying half on top of Ryan who had an arm thrown over his back to keep him close. The blanket was just barely keeping their decency, what with James’ flailing limbs throwing it all over the place.

That was all a pretty normal sight to see.

What surprised Lance was that not only was Morte sprawled across Ryan’s chest like an oil slick and making enough noise to wake the dead as Ryan’s magic fingers scratched behind her ears, but Smudge was curled into the crook of James’ legs, pinning down the wily limbs with his weight.

The feeling of ease that permeated the whole scene made Lance breathless with something nameless. The comfort she was faced with made the nagging louder, more insistent.

She couldn’t put her finger on it until Ryan looked back up at her, eyes roving over her naked body appreciatively before landing on her face with affection and contentment buried within his graveyard dirt brown eyes.

Then, it all hit her at once.

Ryan and James were hers. Not just ‘her boys’ but hers in the same way la Familia is hers. They aren’t like Hunk or Shirogane; puzzle pieces of herself she needs to find to be complete and whole, but her Familia isn’t that either and she loves and needs them all the same.

Ryan and James are still new, are still learning her and her ways and they have yet to meet her Familia but somehow Lance knows they’ll stay. They get along too well with Hunk and her kids and her to not. They’re too comfortable around her and her abnormalities to run away scared now.

Especially since her abnormalities have only accented theirs. Broadened and strengthened the interesting bits of their personality and molded them into bloodier versions of themselves. Molded them into better versions of themselves.

Ryan, who held a darkness around him even before Lance had spoken to him. Who’s drawn to corners and whispering shadows in a way that Lance knows will soon morph itself into a sharp need for it, that his very essence will call shadows to him even on the sunniest days.

And James, who is stubborn and vicious and reminds her of Hunk with how he hides his otherness in smiles and blinding light. Who is learning to wield the false security and assumptions that fall
around his shoulders like a weapon, using his ‘normality’ to hide the ferocious and deadly creature lurking beneath his skin.

Oh, yes, the pair had definitely snuck up on her. Slotting themselves into their respective places of her little family away from Familia like cogs that had simply been misplaced and are finally where they were always meant to be.

“Lance?” Ryan whispers, mindful of James' still sleeping form and well aware she’ll be able to hear him anyway.

Lance blinks, abruptly pulled from her thoughts. Ryan’s eyes are concerned, and the firm line of his mouth is leaning more towards a frown than usual.

She flashes him a smile before putting the book back on the shelf and walking back to the twin beds they pushed together. Lance crawls over the covers and neatly swings her leg over to straddle his hips.

Ryan only blinks up at her, eyebrow raised.

Lance flashes one of her sharper smiles, leaning over to press their chests together when Morte helpfully moves elsewhere. Pressing her lips to his collar bone and trailing bites and nips and kisses all the way up his neck gets him writhing under her in that way she so likes, his free hand cupping her ass while his other spasms against James’ back, trying not to wake him.

(He won’t. James sleeps like a dead man and Lance has been around enough of them to know.)

She can’t stop grinning when she finally presses her lips against his, her tongue dragging along his and leaving them both wanting.

She pulls back to look him in the eyes, her hand coming up to trace the familiar pattern across his unfamiliar skin.

*Down, across, curve.*

Ryan blinks, confused for a moment as his chest still heaves, the movement making her bounce slightly. “What was that?”

*Down, across, curve.*

She does it again, finger dragging lightly across his skin as she explains it as simply as she can. When she finishes, she’s traced it five more times and Ryan’s breath catching has nothing to with the beautiful, naked woman sitting on him anymore.

He grabs her hand when she goes to do it again, pulling her fingers to his lips and kissing the tips lightly, *reverently.*

Lance gasps, then shudders at the sensation.

His eyes are molten dark and half-lidded as he stares at her. Lance wonders how pretty they would look holding all the darkness of space in their murky depths.

“You truly are something,” he whispers into her skin, interlocking their fingers together. He doesn’t do it back, but Lance hadn’t really expected him to. She hasn’t told James yet, and Ryan will wait until at least then, maybe longer.
But Lance is contented to wait. They’re going to stay, she knows that. She’ll wait for them to give her what she wants when they’re ready.

She’ll tell James when he’s awake enough to understand what it all means. Until then, Lance has a few ideas on how to pass the time.

***

It seemed she underestimated her boys. They haven’t told her in a way she’s intimately familiar with, in a way that’s ingrained into her bones, but they’ve told her in a way that’s carved into theirs.

She’d noticed the matching little bracelets tied around their wrists early on. They never took them off and when Lance had asked about them, it took a while to extract the words from their throats. They were invaluable to her boys.

But now they were gone, replaced by exact replicas in everything but color. Where there had been black and gold, there is now only bloody red and brilliant crimson. She notices the change immediately and it makes something hot and possessive coil deep in her gut.

The original bracelets hadn’t been common designs. They would’ve had to have the new ones custom made. It makes Lance wonder how long they had been holding onto those. How long they’d been waiting for her to make the first move. To confirm what they all knew.

She corners them both separately and together to show them just how much she likes their new accessories.

***

She’s finally added Ryan and James to her sparring sessions with Hunk, deciding it was time they learned the Martínez way of fighting rather than the Garrison’s pitiful techniques.

She had to pull James out of the way of Hunk’s killer swing four times and Ryan twice in the first ten minutes, but she was laughing the entire time and found it a resounding success. Ryan had even almost hit her with the crossbow she’d shoved at him.

James begged for it to be over a half-hour in, and Lance had smiled at him sweetly, sans teeth and other.

When she went to approach him, he’d almost immediately backed away, his double-bladed baton coming up to protect his chest. She still sent him crashing to the floor, but as he was groaning about bruises on his back, she leaned over him and praised him for how well he did distrusting her.

She’s very proud.

Ryan comes up behind her and kisses her cheek, “You are all kinds of crazy, you know that?”

“Oh, stop it, you flatter,” she quips, twisting the hand snaking around her waist and sending him to his knees while Hunk and Smudge cackle in the background and Morte looks haughtily amused in the rafters.

Honestly, he wasn’t even holding a weapon. Clearly, they have much more work to do with him. James at least was on guard.

Hunk, well versed in Martínez battleground etiquette, stays a safe distance away and blows a kiss to her, baseball bat still firmly in his hand. Lance flutters her lashes as she pushes James back into the
ground with her foot on his chest. He groans, giving up on trying to rise again and Lance smiles.

She has her boys and her kids and Hunk.

Life is, in a word, *glorious*.

***

Time passes, as it is wont to do, and Lance spends more and more of it with her boys.

Her boys that still shower her with gifts that get more and more gruesome as time goes on. Her boys that she starts bringing home for visits because she knows they’d get along great with her *Familia*. Her boys that start to call her beauty and hemlock and vixen and anything besides her name in half-hearted retaliation of her continued slew of ridiculous things she calls them. Of the many Names she gifts them with.

Time passes, and Lance is content with the way it flows.
Chapter Summary

"you’re a monster”
he hissed;
she laughed and said,
“better a monster,
then an arrogant god.”
-unknown

It’s the start of senior year and Lance is once again feeling like something *important* is just over the horizon line, building up like a storm she’s yet to see.

Whatever it is, she knows she and her family will handle it just fine.

She’ll destroy and drown and *maim* anything that stands in their way.

***

Katie barrels into Lance’s awareness with all the grace of a stampede over soft earth.

She’s all whip-smart tongue and poorly hidden rage too big for her body. An explosive concoction of defiance and ruthlessness and unapologetic brutality. Lance watches with a grim type of amusement as this child genius hacks into and tears apart the Garrison systems as she searches for something with a wild sort of abandon, uncaring of the damage she leaves behind.

When she’s thrown out, only to return hidden beneath a new haircut and identity, Lance *laughs*, wild and delighted.

This newly Named Pidge a brilliant and poisonous thing Lance wants to keep all for her own. She’d want to even if it wasn’t for the deep, thrumming pull of *other* in her chest calling out to this perpetually exploding bomb in the shape of a person.

Lance had always loved bloody and broken things after all. And Pidge is something that *makes* bloody, broken things and Lance finds that that is *just* as intriguing.

***

Hunk, in an amusing turn of events, is just as drawn to Pidge as Lance is.

He’s aware of her in a way he wasn’t with the others, his eyes following after her movements hungrily.

*Possessively.*

It’s the same way Lance had looked at him all those years ago. The same way she still looks at him now.

The pull in their chests tugs and whispers at them to *claim*. It yowls and claws at them to wrap her up
in the safety of their arms and introduce her to the bloody world they thrive in—the world they know she would thrive in too.

The desire is almost addictive in its intensity.

And, well… Lance has never been good at denying herself things she desires.

***

When viruses wreck and tear through Garrison systems every other week, Lance finds it hard to hide the proud lilt of her voice or excited curl of her lips. Hunk’s in the same boat, what with the way his eyes sparkle with all the questions he’s dying to ask her. Longing for the chance to pick her brain like he wants to.

Figuratively or literally.

Lance is proud to say Hunk’s gotten less squeamish about that kind of thing as they grew up.

Of course, it isn’t long before officers start pointing fingers. For all the talent hidden behind Pidge’s eyes, she lacks the necessary skills in subtlety.

Lance lightly steps in when things start getting too close, gently batting away attention with honey-sweet words and simpering smiles. Hunk does the same, using his bulk and unassuming aura as a physical barrier between her and suspicion.

Pidge narrows her eyes at them when they come to her aid, angrily snapping that she ‘doesn’t need their help.’

Lance smiles as she stomps away, grumbling about creepy girls and giant boys.

This ruthless, cunning, little viper Lance has decided to bundle up and take for her own has such sharp fangs. But then, that shouldn’t surprise her. They are predators of a similar breed after all.

Perhaps that’s why Hunk’s drawn to her when he had only been passingly aware of the others.

***

Ryan is busy biting bruises up her neck that won’t be there in a few minutes, but he still manages to ask about Pidge.

“The new kid?”

Lance hums to show she’s listening. Or maybe it’s closer to a moan considering James does something extraordinary with his tongue at that exact moment.

“Is he…” Ryan pants, breath heavy as he hovers over her. “He like us?”

Lance digs her too sharp nails into the meat of his shoulders, hard enough to break skin and smear blood across his already slick skin. The smell of it hits her and she twists, flipping them over with little to no warning, making Ryan groan.

Her boys take the change in stride, James crawling up her back agonizingly slow while she teases Ryan the same way he was teasing her.

“*She,*” she corrects, the word is little more than a hiss, but she speaks it still. This is important. They’re all going to be Familia after all. “And not—not you. Like Hunk. Like me.”
“Lucky girl,” James hums, biting at her ear and causing the vibration to echo through all three of them.

That’s all they say on the matter. All they need to say.

***

Lance bundles Pidge into her eclectic, little family with relative ease despite how much she complains.

Her curiosity is much like Hunk’s, insatiable and overgrown. All it takes is one look at the strangeness of their going ons and a peek at the bugs and viruses Hunk installed into the Garrison systems ages ago and Pidge is settling herself within their group like a stubborn cat.

(Between her gossipy shadows and Hunk, nobody *breathes* in this facility without them knowing about it.)

Morte adores her, and Pidge returns the sentiment wholeheartedly, even if she’d rather *die* than admit as much. James and Ryan tease and ruffle her feathers in that brotherly affectionate way of theirs.

It’s appreciated on certain days and despised on others.

Hunk is most happy, she thinks, to finally be able to talk to someone who understands him when he speaks about all his science and engineering nonsense. Lance can tell Pidge is happy about that too.

After a month or so, Lance begins inviting her to their spars. She sits out on the first three, citing her disinterest in dying at fifteen, but after that she begins participating with the same reckless curiosity she approaches everything else with.

Instead of straightforward combat, Pidge prefers to stick to the fringes of things. Creating and setting off traps when they least expect it, her mind far sharper than any blade Lance could hand her.

It’s impressive, and Lance tells her so after the third time she captures James in a bear trap.

Hunk and her are *dying* for her to meet Tio Mateo. The pair of them will no doubt get on like a house on fire while starting more than a few of them in the process.

Her little dart frog is quickly adapting to Lance and the world she lives in. Her curious mind quick to absorb information and ask new questions, eyes hungry and growing darker with every answer she receives. Lance has no doubt she’ll be like Hunk and her boys by the end of the year.

After all, Pidge is *nothing* if not a fast learner.

***

Hunk, light of her life, closest and dearest to her heart, hands her a list of names as long as her forearm one day without explanation.

It’s not until she reads the seventh name on the list that she understands what is in front of her. But when she does, a wicked, gleaming smile unfurls along her lips.

“Oh, baby boy. You always give me the best presents, you know that?”

Her eyes flash and when she looks up at him, his *burn* with that oh, so lovely gold as he looms over her. “I hope you don’t mind that I’ve taken a few treats for myself.”
Lance laughs, throws her head back and *cackles* as the shadows in the room dance and thunder outside *booms*.

Everyone on this list won’t even *look* at something electronic anymore, terrified they’ll be electrocuted or lose a finger somehow. Well, the ones that haven’t already gone ‘missing’ that is.

It makes something warm and happy bubble in her chest.

“As long as you’ve saved some for me, bleeding heart.”

Her deadly Warrior, so hungry for battle.

Who is she to stop his fun?

***

“Is that blood?” Pidge asks, tone carefully blank.

Lance raises her gaze from the liquid in her glass, eyes an unnatural blue, blue, blue, as they bore into her.

Calculating.

Almost… *predatory*.

Then, between one blink and the next, it’s gone. Just Lance, all weirdness and dark humor and half-concealed deadliness. “Why would you think that, sugar maple?” she says, taking another sip that leaves her lips stained a deep crimson not even her lipstick can match.

Her teeth are too long and sharp and *pointed* when she smiles, and Pidge knows she should be terrified at the inhuman sight before her.

She isn’t.

Instead, Pidge sniffs and plops down next to her on the loveseat, shoving a notebook in Lance’s hands. “Hunk said you were best at biology. Check these.”

Pidge expects her to protest and is prepared to badger her into doing it anyway. But she doesn’t, only raises an umber dark eyebrow and pulls a dark, elegant fountain pen out of nowhere and begins checking the page in a lovely blue color.

While she’s distracted, Pidge takes the half-filled, crystal wine glass from Lance’s loose hand without struggle. It smells metallic, like copper or iron with a hint of something else. Something sweet.

Pidge knows what it is. Knows that Lance purposefully evaded answering the question.

For some reason—perhaps curiosity, perhaps the intoxicating allure Lance exudes—she takes a sip.

It’s good and so she takes another.

Lance smirks knowingly and continues checking Pidge’s biology notes.

***

Pidge asks a lot of questions. Makes a lot of theories and voices them.
So Lance isn’t really surprised or caught off guard when Pidge corners her during one of their shared classes and says, without preamble, “You’re a siren.”

When Lance just blinks down at her for a long moment, Pidge gets frustrated, blowing the bangs—bangs that are getting darker, redder, every day—from her eyes in a big huff.

“I’m sorry, viper. Was there supposed to be a question in there?” Pidge glares like she’s imagining ways to dismember and torture her. “Are you? Yes or no?”

“I suppose you could call me that. Among other things,” Lance agrees, fussing with the lace on her parasol, a rich blue this time that reminds her of happy things like violent deaths at sea and the color of a corpse’s lips.

“What other things?” Lance raises her eyes again, stares into Pidge’s with an intensity born of laughing with Death. “I suppose the most accurate term would be ‘Martínez’.”

Rumors follow Lance like dancing shadows.

The content of the rumors, of the whispered words jumping from mouth to mouth, have never been a concern of hers. Only that they are being spoken. She’s been called whore and temptress and monster behind her back too many times to count and it bothers Hunk more than it does her.

Lance knows that jealousy and desperation and want hang heavy on their tongues as they speak them and that is all she cares about. They are the offerings given without thought, gifts lain at her feet that she much prefers over any cream topped vodka or sugary sweets.

“Vain as cats for honey-sweet words,” her Aba used to say.

Lance smirks as she thinks about it. She’s certainly vain as a cat, but she needs no honeyed words. Just plain ones will do, heaped high with devotion and want and lust.

Such delicious attention. A girl could get used to that kind of thing.

Never let it be said that Hunk and Lance don’t fight.

They do, it’s just done differently than most would expect. There are no screaming or prickling silences between them. No words thrown that the two will regret later. Nothing normal.

But then again, those two had never been normal, and it’s foolish to expect something so mediocre out of them now.

When Hunk starts getting on her nerves—which is more than rare, for all that the two seem attached at the hip, they never truly tire of one another—she’ll drug him or hit him over the head with something heavy. Anything to knock him out before she takes him out somewhere and buries him alive.

It gives her time to think and calm down, so then when Hunk comes back, they can go back to normal.
For Lance, when she’s being particularly trying--she is, more often than not, though normally Hunk finds it charming--he'll strap her to a table and experiment on her. Carefully pull her apart and scatter her in pieces. Rip her limbs off one by one and let her bleed out. Breaks her in any way he can imagine and all the while ranting about this or that. Talking to fill the silence.

It’s cathartic. For both Hunk and Lance, which is why she even lets him strap her down in the first place.

It doesn’t really matter what they’d been fighting about this time, because when Hunk stomps up to her, still spitting out grit and shaking sand all over the floor, he just stares at her. Eyes bright and murderous as he threatens to throw her off the cliffs nearby.

It makes Lance laugh, even though he sounds deadly serious to anyone else who might be listening. They both know he would never do anything as boring as that if he ever actually decided to kill her for good.

She pulls him down to her level on the couch, uncaring of the sand scattering on top of her, and traces his skin.

Down, across, curve.

“Good,” she tells him, pecking his cheek sweetly. “Now go shower, sugar plum. You’re filthy.”

And then everything is back to their normal. Forgiven and forgotten, as easy as that.

***

It’s a long-standing tradition between Hunk and Lance that Saturday Nights are spent in the kitchen. Hunk, under the impression that murdering someone every week gets too messy and takes too much work, prefers doing this to decompress and calm down.

“Besides,” he says, perfectly reasonable. “My wardrobe really is too light to handle the constant bloodstains. I’m content with when we go down with la Familia during the breaks, thank you very much.”

Back in Santa Monica, he used to use Aba’s old potions room at the manor so when things exploded, he only shook the walls without bringing them down. Now that he’s at the Garrison, he uses the lower kitchens no one likes (dares) to use anymore.

Lance has to make sure the explosions never get too big because the structural integrity here truly is abysmal, but her shadows have always been so useful and chemical explosions are such nice treats for them.

Normally it’s just her and Hunk in the kitchens, Lance perched on an unused countertop with Morte on her lap and Smudge laid out in the rafters. But every once and a while her boys or Pidge will join them.

Pidge, more often than Ryan or James as of late.

Lance talks non-stop as Hunk bustles about in the cute, frilly apron she’d bought him. Pidge is normally crafting something equal parts dangerous and illegal with stolen computer parts off at another station, content to listen and bask in the presence of Hunk and Lance from a distance rather than engage.

Whenever James comes by, it’s to join Lance in talking non-stop and to eat whatever Hunk puts in
front of him Her dearest wolverine has long since built up the necessary tolerance for the more…
unique ingredients used.

Ryan, like Pidge, prefers to keep to himself. More often than not, he’s off in a corner cleaning and checking the illegal guns Lance keeps giving him. But sometimes, he’ll set up shop in one of the darker shadows and just observe, only his eyes visible from the darkness.

Her beautiful wraith truly is learning to worship the darkness he was made for. She hasn’t asked him if he can hear them whispering, but that’s because it’s a stupid question to ask.

Ryan could speak to the shadows long before Lance came along.

Hunk puts a plate of pleasantly warm chocolate almond cookies at her side before bustling off again after Lance pecks his check as a thank you. She wastes no time biting into the fluffy goodness, the sweet taste of arsenic and cyanide heavy on her tongue.

Pidge tries to reach for one before Lance bats her hand away.

For all that Pidge is a quick learner, she still has a ways to go before she can eat Hunk’s or Abuelita’s cooking. She’ll have to settle for the normal carnivorous platters Lance serves at lunch in the meantime.

***

“You’re up early.”

Lance doesn’t look back at the familiar voice, knowing he’ll come to her given time. “Never went to sleep, Lemon drop. You know that.”

Hunk sits next to her, his legs hanging over the edge of the roof, dangerously close to falling off. It would be so easy to push him, Lance thinks. It wouldn’t be the first time she’d done it either.

But Hunk tends to get flustered when he has to lie to witnesses about how he survived a deadly fall without a scratch on him, so she doesn’t do that. Maybe later though, when there’s less witnesses.

“Oh,” he says, understanding in his tone. “One of those nights?”

She rolls her eyes. “Like you didn’t know just as well as I, that it was a full moon.”

He chuckles, voice warm and bright like sun-bleached earth. “Just making conversation.”

“Hmm.”

“Did she call again?”

Lance doesn’t ask who the ‘she’ is. She isn’t completely sure herself.

“Always.”

They are silent for a long moment, the shadows around them thick and heavy despite the growing height of the sun.

Finally, Hunk breaks the silence, swiftly shifting so his head is pillowed on her lap. “Sing for me?”

Lance obliges, as she always has. As she always will.
And if, in the middle of the vast desert a voice sings back, melancholy and longing dragging each note out long and deep, if the sound of it makes tears spring to her eyes… Well. That’s a secret shared between her and Hunk and the bloody morning sky.

***

Pidge is filled with rage.

It reminds Lance of Keith, the way the flames of her anger dance with, rather than against, her. The difference though, it that Pidge is redwood in a forest fire while Keith was the forest fire. All-consuming and destructive.

Her dart frog is much better at hiding her anger. Not her irritation or annoyance, those she easily lets out like a whip set to strike, but her fury, oh, her fury.

Her fury is made of quiet nightmares and the indifference of ancient forests. It’s the things that lurk in the darkness, the bloody secrets hidden within the trees. It’s familiar to Lance, the way so many dark things are, and so it’s laughably easy to see how angry she gets when anyone even mentions the Persephone mission.

And with her dearest Pidgeon being one former Katie Holt, it’s not hard to figure out why. Two Holts went up in that rocket and never made it back down.

It’s a wonder Pidge hasn’t destroyed this place yet. Lance certainly would’ve.

“No matter,” Lance tells Hunk one night, her daffodil just as quick on the uptake as she is. “We’ll gladly do it for her if she’d rather not get her hands dirty.”

After all, they had promised to rain hell on the Garrison and Lance thinks she’s been more than patient.

Hunk’s eyes shimmer with gold, his teeth too sharp to be normal, and around them, the world sings.

***

Lance is lounging in Hunk’s room, her boys and her kids and Pidge all gathered around her bitching about the new Captain the Garrison had transferred to replace Shirogane. The threats and violently macabre schemes being thrown around makes something warm and possessive and pleased purr deep in her chest.

All of them gathered around for her, their darkness leaking out and manifesting in the world and blanketing her in blissful familiarity.

She silently observes them all, letting their bloodthirsty natures fuel one another, letting their ideas expand and mature and grow. She only speaks when one of them asks, silent otherwise. Curious as to how they play this out, how far they go.

When Ryan brings up the new Head Research Scientist, the one who took over after Lieutenant Holt agreed to be a part of the Persephone mission, something in Pidge sours. She pauses for only a second, her face twisted into something deadly and toxic and angry.

The man in question had made the mistake of being too… enthusiastic about the poor Lieutenant’s ‘demise’ while Pidge was around, Lance would guess.

Then, she suggests the bloodiest and most gruesome death yet, her voice sure and strong and
dangerous.

Everyone in the room pauses. Even Smudge stops batting at Morte’s tail, allowing the cat the opportunity to steal back her dismembered limb and hide away on the shelves above.

Her boys all turn to look at Lance, silently waiting for her cue. Watching for her reaction.

The mercury Lance had been playing with stills in the air above her hand, the silvery liquid glimmering in the harsh lighting as it hangs there, suspended in time.

Her eyes are dark and curious and other when she stares at Pidge.

She’s on her feet in the next moment, parasol in one hand and mercury still swirling around the other. When she smiles, it’s all too sharp teeth and feral eyes. “It would seem to me, that we have a house call to make, don’t we darlings?”

Her hand grabs Pidge’s chin, the nails just shy of painful. Then, with bated breath, the boys watch as she traces her finger across Pidge’s skin, leaving shimmering mercury in her wake.

*Down, across, curved.*

“I get to kill him.”

The toxic metal sparkles with possibilities and Pidge grins as it sinks beneath her skin, strange and unnatural and other. Her eyes flash, the barest hint of bright, poisonous green and Lance knows--just as she had known with Hunk, with herself--that she is-was-will be something powerful.

“Darling,” she purrs. “I can think of no better gift to give you.”

***

Within an hour, Hunk has Lieutenant Pierce’s entire schedule laid out in front of Pidge and Lance.

Lance lets Pidge decide when and where she wants to set the stage, seeing as it’s her prey they’re hunting.

She’s unsurprised and insufferably proud with the little show Pidge crafts.

It will be glorious.

***

It’s Hunk who points it out to her. Takes him saying it out loud for her to realize it, but once he does, she can’t help to think of how right it sounds.

This is a Hunt.

Lance and Pidge and Hunk and her boys, all thrumming with the call of the wild, the call for blood.

She doesn’t stop smiling for a long time after that.

***

“Oh, I can’t possibly decide,” Lance mutters, “Hunk, sugar cube? Midnight or Resolution blue?” she holds out the two dresses for him to examine.
Fransisca was off traveling the world for her fashion line, and as such couldn’t help Lance with her dilemma. She’ll make sure to throw her eldest sister in the iron maiden for abandoning her in her time of need later.

Hunk studies both dresses seriously. “I think the Midnight will hide the bloodstains better with its lace pattern.”

Lance grins up at him, kissing his cheek in thanks. “You always know exactly what I need, coffee-crunch.”

“It’s one of my talents.”

***

The moon is dark, and the world is quiet where Lance stands on the wide expanse of sand, her cobbled-together family clustered behind her, excited and dressed to the nines.

It is, after all, a special occasion.

Before them all, kneels an insect in the shape of a man. He struggles against the shadows wrapped around his wrists, muscles straining for a weakness she knows he won’t find. He had tried screaming earlier. Spitting such uncivil and frankly offensive insults at them all that Lance had been forced to stuff a particularly thick shadow in his mouth as a gag.

“Lieutenant Colin Pierce,” she greets politely. “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Behind her, her family cackles madly. They sound uncannily like a chorus of hellhounds.

The insect does his best to glare at them all in the absent light of the new moon. Still trying to seem intimidating even from his prone form at their feet.

How needlessly proud.

“Are you ready to stop being so ill-mannered, now?” she asks, crouching down to his level so she can look him in the eye. A courtesy he doesn’t deserve but Lance is feeling—how do we say—generous at the moment.

He still can’t speak, but the aborted lunge forward and crass wrinkling of his nose is answer enough.

Lance clucks her tongue in distaste. “So rude. You really should bite your tongue.”

The insect emits a choked off scream as something small and meaty falls from his mouth, staining the sand beneath it black. Morte dashes forward before Smudge can, grabbing her treat with a smug sort of triumph.

Lance eyes him lazily, eyes sharp and vicious and blue, blue, blue. Then, with an easy grace, she jerks him to his feet, a gurgling sort of agony still falling from his mouth. Her hand closes around his lower jaw, sharp tipped claws digging into his skin and making blood well up around her fingers.

She leans close, smile spreading across her mouth like the grinning skull of Mistress Death as she whispers a single word.

“Run.”

***
Lance watches as the insect skitters off toward the caves, desperate in a way he wasn’t moments before. It brings a vicious type of grin to her lips.

She doesn’t think she’ll ever get tired of watching dead men run away.

Behind her, her savage, little family writhes and laughs in the darkness. Hungry for blood.

Lance licks the slowly drying splatter from her fingertips, and watches them run after him, cackling merrily all the way.

They hadn’t waited for her signal, but she can’t blame them.

She’s excited too, after all.

***

He runs to the caves, foolishly believing he can lose them in the darkness.

They move around him like whispering shadows, laughing in his ear and tugging at his clothes until he’s a shaking mess jumping at every noise. They keep it up for hours, slowly leading him deeper and deeper into the tunnels while they laugh and torment.

They play for so long, that the sun is threatening to rise by the time their little game comes to an end.

They have a schedule to keep after all.

With a flick of Lance’s wrist, torches of green fire erupt all along the cavern walls, bathing them all in a sickly light. The insect blinks harshly, momentarily blinded by the sudden light after hours of total darkness.

When he opens them again, she can tell he wishes he hadn’t.

Her little family surrounds him, specters of death waiting for the final signal. The insect knows he is about to die.

It does not make him less terrified.

Pidge stands in front of him, her fitted forest green and floral detailed waistcoat looking absolutely dashing. Her eyes glow in the dim, flickering light. Bright, toxic green.

It truly is her color.

The insect rears back at the sight of her, recognizing her now when he hadn’t before.

He tries saying something, but the shadows stuffed in his mouth won’t let him. Not that they’d be able to understand him, what with him missing his tongue and all.

Pidge grins at him, sharp and deadly and furious. “I assume you know why you’re here.”

The insect makes a harsh whining noise in the back of his throat.

“It’s because you’ve done something wrong, you know. Made a mistake I won’t easily forgive,” she says, “Do you know what it is?”

She doesn’t wait for him to answer.
“It’s that you betrayed us.”

The insect makes a disagreeing noise, outraged and offended before he realizes that might not be the best course.

Pidge zeros in on him, face twisted in fury.

“No?” she demands. “No? You abandoned my father! My brother! People who loved you! Who called you friend? They’re gone and you reap the benefits like a prized pig. Taking their places and lives and not caring at all.”

Her voice echoes around them all. The rage curling around them and in no way quiet anymore.

She surges forward, hand coming to clasp at his throat and squeeze. Not enough to choke, but to make him squirm. To make him suffer.

“They’re gone and you’re grateful.”

The insect tries shaking his head, tries denying once again, but Pidge just snarls in his face.

“Don’t lie to me!”

He whines again, and almost seems to start pleading. Lance laughs at the patheticness of it, Ryan and Smudge following along as it echoes hauntingly along the rock walls.

Abruptly, Pidge drops him to the floor like the trash he is. Stepping back and away, face smooth and blank once more.

It’s more terrifying than anything else she could do.

“Lance’s family has a saying, you know. One that I think fits quite nicely right now. ‘Qui libenter viribus contra nos’. The words pour from Pidge’s lips with a breathtaking sort of ease and Lance practically purrs. “Do you know what that means? It means, ‘we’ll gladly feast on all who wrong us’.”

Pidge tilts her head.

“Those aren’t just pretty words.”

Then, like the viper she so resembles, she strikes. And as one, they join her, surging forward as bones snap and meaty tearing fills the air.

The insect screams.

And then…

He keeps on screaming.

***

Lance throws a spare scrap of meat to Morte as Smudge happily scarfs down everything else. Her shadows slink around them all, happily drinking up all the blood on them and the cavern walls, leaving not a trace of what has happened.

She studies Pidge, who so casually pets a particularly fat shadow as it feeds on the blood soaked into her shirt. She looks content, in that bone-deep way one gets after a Hunt.
Lance can still see the shine in her eyes, the one that never truly goes away. The one that only gets brighter and brighter with each kill.

The beast Lance has created will never be sated, but that was the point wasn’t it?

Lance brushes her hand along Pidge’s cheek, staining the deathly pale skin with bright, warm blood before a shadow licks it away.

Pidge’s eyes are practically glowing, the buzz of her first kill thrumming under her skin and setting her alight even as she settles down into this new version of herself. Slinking into her new being with all the smugness of a cat.

“Beautiful.”

***

The headlines read: Garrison Captain Missing. Curse on Shirogane’s Former Position?

Lance laughs when she sees it, and gets it framed.

***

After that, Pidge joins her and Hunk on their bloody crusade, leaving only ruin and death in their wake.

After that, Pidge joins them as rulers of the school. The General to her and Hunk’s Queen and King.

To celebrate the whole affair, Lance gets Pidge an elaborate red watch with a forest silhouette engraved into it. All sleek edges and hidden compartments.

It’s the height of technology and will be able to do anything Pidge wants, only half because Lance knows she’ll modify it to do so.

Pidge accepts it easily, well aware of what it means, even though no one had told her.

Lance never sees her without it from that day on.

***

It’s dinner time, and Lance is sat as close to Hunk as she can get on one side of the table while James and Ryan sit on the other, practically in each others’ laps in a way that has nothing to do with how Pidge is currently taking up over half the table with all her gadgets and gizmos.

Lately, Lance has been noticing that Ryan and James have been sneaking off more. Leaving her out of things and spending most of their intimate time together.

It won’t be long before Lance is no longer a permanent piece in their relationship.

It’s a fact she isn’t terribly bothered by.

How can she be when she knew it would happen from the beginning?

They would always end up together. Fated to fall into one another’s arms sooner or later. They would always love each other before anyone else, and that intrigued Lance in the beginning.

It reminded her of Hunk. Of Keith and Shirogane. Of all the pieces she had yet to collect. And with
Keith having rejected her, Lance was hungry for the devotion and darkness she could see in their hearts. Was hungry for others like her.

She knew sooner or later, she would become only an occasionally invited guest in their bed. But she would get to keep them in all the ways that mattered.

They’re hers now. And they will still be hers after.

So, she is content to let them go. Content to let them be happy with one another without her.

She can so easily find a new bedmate after all.

***

“Hey, Lance, I need to borrow your- what the hell are you doing?”

Lance looks up from the boiling cauldron in front of her to focus on Pidge who still has her hand on the doorknob.

“Flytrap! What a lovely surprise,” she greets, wiggling the fingers not holding the ornate athame.

“Come! ¡Venirse! You can finally meet mi Familia!”

Slowly, Pidge lets go of the knob and steps further into the room, her curiosity outweighing whatever reservations she had. Her eyes dart around the ornate and macabre decorated room. Everything is in shades of blue and chilling black and none of the standard orange and light gray the room should be.

Pidge is pretty sure that bed isn’t the one the room came with either. Or that silver inlaid vanity. Or that bookshelf with the multitude of books bound in leather.

Well, Pidge assumes its leather but when it’s in relation to Lance, that means it probably isn’t.

The entire room looks nothing like any of the garrison barracks. How does Lance even pass room inspection?

“Don’t you have a roommate or something?” is what Pidge asks instead as she circles around the furiously bubbling cauldron.

“Hmm?” Lance hums distractedly, “Oh. No, I’m afraid the poor dear dropped out a week into freshman year. Can’t ever imagine why,” she says like she truly can’t comprehend the foolishness of such a decision.

Pidge stares at her for a long moment, waiting for the punchline before she realizes there isn’t one. But then, Pidge supposes she doesn’t have much room to talk considering how much she finds herself enjoying the rapidly darkening path Lance is leading her down.

“Where’s your family?” she asks, curious.

Lance’s grin widens, “Right here.” Then, without any warning, Lance slices through the palm of her hand, leaving behind a deep gash that bleeds deep, crimson red.

It splashes into the cauldron which hisses angrily before all but exploding into a cloud of smoke. Pidge coughs, the smell of stale water and belladonna and rotting meat choking her lungs even as the smoke clears. Lance lazily stirs the cauldron with the still bloodied athame and slowly, a picture within the surface seems to clear.

“Aba!” Lance exclaims happily, “You look deathly as always.”
The woman in the cauldron grins, her teeth long and sharp like a shark’s. Pidge can’t help but think Lance is right, despite the liveliness of the woman’s movements, she looks seconds away from dropping at any moment.

“Lance!” the woman turns to look somewhere off to the right, “Everyone! Lance is on!”

Almost immediately, five more faces squeeze into view. Then five more, then even more. Pidge is left wondering how they even do that.

“Hello, everyone! I’ve missed you all.”

“It’s been horrifically dreary since you’ve been gone, my jellyfish,” says a woman who looks exactly like how Pidge imagines Lance will in a few years.

“Oh, how you tease me, Mamá.” Lance says, looking almost saddened at the thought.

“Who’s the fresh meat?” another woman who shares Lance’s coloring but with toxic looking green hair fashioned in a pixie cut.

Lance looks over to Pidge, smiling wide and dangerous and other. She can’t help smiling back, all jagged edges and barely repressed hunger.

The people in the cauldron cackle madly.

“This, little dart frog, is Pidge.” Lance introduces, sharp nails curling under Pidge’s chin. “She’s our newest Martínez.”

The people in the cauldron—la Familia—start cooing and speaking and shouting all at once and they don’t stop for a long time.

Pidge can’t say she really minds.

***

It’s raining. The worst thunderstorm Arizona has seen in years. Power outages are raging all over the state and the weathermen advise everyone to stay indoors for their own safety.

It’s raining and so Lance is outside, dancing and singing like she used to as a child.

It’s coming down in sheets. So hard, you can’t see three feet ahead of you and the thunder so loud, you can’t hear yourself think.

At least, that’s how it is for everyone else.

“You’re a long way from home, Prongs, darling!” she shouts in greeting over the din and from the curtain of water, steps her giant guardian spirit, majestic and pompous as ever.

The closer he gets, the farther away the rain sounds. He stops a foot away from her and by then the air is still and quiet. “As are you, young avatar.”

“I think you have me confused with someone else. I’m only a waterbender, Moose,” she quips, stepping forward to stroke her hand along the side of his strong neck. He’s dry, even as the rain keeps coming down around them. “What brings you so far out here?”

*The One With Ancient Eyes* snorts, his wide black eyes fond and perhaps a little… sad? “I have come to say goodbye.”
“What?” Lance asks, straightening in her surprise. “Why? Where are you going?”

The Deer That Never Was shakes his head, coins clinking together lightly like musical notes. “It is not I who is leaving.”

Lance takes two seconds to untangle that phrase before her eyes narrow. “What do you know?”

“The same thing you do, I’d imagine. That a storm is coming, and you will leave with it. That when you return, you will be different. Just like your beloved Champion.”

Lance softens, fingers trailing down his snout. “Will you still be here when I get back?”

He stays silent and Lance’s face twists. Then, with a determination like a sea storm and deadly waves, she presses her lips to the top of his bent head.

Nothing visible happens, and nothing changes, but Lance knows it worked anyway.

When she pulls back away, her grin is too wide to be natural. “Not goodbye,” she corrects. “Until we meet again.”

***

Lance is wandering the halls long after curfew as she normally does.

Tonight, Hunk had decided to join her on her late-night stroll, the two of them arm in arm as the kids play on ahead of them, pawing and swiping at each other in the way all Martínezes are known to do.

Hunk is in the middle of explaining his newest scheme involving the arrogant Lance Corporal neither of them cares much for when a shadow slinks away from the wall, winding itself around her calf to get her attention.

Lance stops obediently, flicking her wrist to beckon the ink blotch closer.

The sound of rustling leaves and unearthly creaking and the high-pitched whining of electronics echo around the hallway.

Lance’s eyes glow when she hums, interest plain in her voice as she turns to Hunk and says, “It seems we have somewhere to be, baby boy.”

Hunk’s eyes shimmer, unable to decide if they want to be brown or gold. “Is that so? We shouldn’t keep her waiting then.”

She leads her small collection on a merry chase, winding down halls and through doors until they stop at the staircase leading to the portion of the roof Lance enjoys sitting on when it storms.

Pidge, her clever little General in the making, is practically hanging off the edge when Lance silently slips through the door. Around her, are the thousand contraptions and gadgets Lance has seen her tinkering and perfecting and mutating over the last few months.

“Good. You’re here.” Pidge turns around without prompting, sensing them somehow. Her eyes glow in the glare of her computer screen and she looks practically demonic, the way she stares at them. The maniac glint in her eyes and tension down her spine. “Something is coming.”

***

Lance watches the ship crash, exploding the earth beneath it in a glorious display of destruction and
flames.

Something is coming indeed.

***

Lance feels a strange sense of deja vu.

Here she is, once again, staring at Takashi Shirogane through a screen at a major turning point in her life. Only this time, she knows Shirogane is all hers.

She can practically feel the darkness dripping off of him now, can see how damaged he is through the camera. Beautiful and deadly and hers.

So why, are those idiotic med-techs touching what doesn’t belong to them.

She snarls low in her throat as she watches them ignore and mistreat him. Watches them act like he is nothing.

Takashi Shirogane is hers and that makes him everything.

She will raze this place to the ground before she lets them get away with this. With even daring to believe they can keep him from her.

With a low whistle, Smudge is running down the cliff face like a beastly reckoning. He disappears from sight for only a moment before the screams start.

Gracefully, she walks down the cliffside after him, Morte stretched languidly across her shoulders and Hunk and Pidge at her back. She stalks right up to the entrance, guns trained on her and hers and all she does is smile. Wide and sweet and deadly and then… she starts to sing.

The music floats along the wind, cloying sweet notes tugging and pulling at the minds of everyone around her. It’s soft and gentle at first, until, suddenly, it isn’t.

The bodies drop and she steps over them easily. She is focused on one goal, one person, right now.

She doesn’t have time for mercy.

When she walks into the room, the world stills.

Her Champion, her dark victor, is beautiful. She can practically smell the blood on him, the death that coils in his veins and pumps through him with every breath.

Slowly, reverently, she reaches out for him. His skin is cold, like hers, like the winter’s sky.

Down, across, curve.

Down, across, curve.

Down, across, curve.

Then, she presses her lips to his forehead, sealing it all with a kiss.

His breath stutters in his chest and Lance grins, bright and possessive and other. It’s perfect.

Until the explosions rock through them. The ground shaking and suddenly Smudge is back at her
side, whining and pushing her back out the way they came.

She can take a hint and quickly cuts through the straps binding Shirogane to the table, her nails slicing through the leather like butter. She picks him up and when she turns, Smudge is much larger than he normally is. Roughly the size of a horse and more than big enough to take Shirogane’s weight.

She gently lays Sleeping Beauty on his back before slinking back down the hallway, smug at the bounty she’s collected.

Then suddenly Keith is there, and it almost catches her off guard. He stares up at her, something in his eyes that wasn’t there the last time she looked at him, but they don’t have time for whatever it is.

She pushes past him, intent on the desert behind him.

“Should have been faster, darling,” she calls over her shoulder.

***

The Garrison chases after them.

They do not make it very far in their endeavor.

Lance watches the lovely golden explosions as they all disappear within a shadow.

***

Shirogane wakes up and Lance doesn’t waste time with small talk.

The pressure, the presence, calling for her in the middle of the desert is loud. Thundering in her ears and pulling her more incessantly than ever before.

It will not wait any longer, and Lance isn’t inclined to make it.

***

Lance feels the water beneath them, feels the pull of the carvings, feels the calling of the Sea.

She looks to Hunk and Pidge, gently places Morte on Smudge’s back, and then caresses the carvings with all the love and impatience and magic she possesses.

The floor falls out from under them, but only two screams echo along the rock walls.

***

She stands, glowing blue light washing over her, the water still stubbornly clinging to her heels and calves, Smudge and Morte at her side, not a drop on either of them.

The sounds of waves and thunder and whale song floods around her and Lance sings with it, with her.

She steps forward, singing with all the longing and ache and joy in her chest, and the barrier falls and then Lance is drowning.

***
Her Aba always told her, ‘like calls to like.’

In another world, Lance was kind and pretty and gentle like waves. She was fierce but caring and empathetic and normal.

And so, her Lion is too.

In this world, Lance is deadly and dark and a whirlpool disguised as a calm river. She is hemlock and acid rain and burning lines of magic.

And so, her Lion is too.

***

Lance grins, wide and feral and other, even as she feels her lungs fill with water.

She is long used to the feeling of drowning.

She swallows saltwater and lets the sea song fall from her lips, sweetened and made deadly by the water filling her throat. Her Lion sings back, and Lance feels another piece click solidly into place.

Her Lion sings back, and she is the voice of the ocean in the back of her mind since Lance was a baby. Her Lion sings and promises destruction and lightning and vengeance and Lance feels delight coil low in her stomach.

Her Lion opens her maw and roars, wind whipping around her and making the water flare unnaturally high. Lance strokes a giant metal fang, sharp as a blade and twice as deadly, as she walks into the belly of her beast, red lips crooked and curled.

This is what she’s been waiting for.

There’s an entire universe out there to terrorize and she can’t wait to start.

***

Her Lion is exhilarating.

It’s not so much flying as it is the feeling of hitting her target, of warm blood pooled in her hands, of the darkness and rain curling around her like a shield.

It is everything she loves pooled into a single feeling and Lance could get drunk off of it.

She’s just starting to think about flying back to the Garrison, wreaking havoc and destruction in Pidge’s name, in Shirogane’s name, when someone ruins her fun.

She stares out at the deep abyss of space, the sprawling void, and is disappointed to find a warship blocking her view of the naked cosmos.

Her Lions snarls in the back of her mind and the sound reverberates from her throat, echoed by Smudge and Morte and Hunk. Pidge glares and bares her teeth but is not yet other enough for the rage to pour from her body like it does theirs.

She is not yet other enough for her eyes to flash or for the shadows to curl around her fingers and wrists, silently calling for blood.

(She is not yet, but she will be. Soon.)
Lance wants to tear the warship apart, piece by bloody piece, but her Lion promises they will have more than enough time for that later. That they have other things they must do first.

And Lance, who has grown with this voice in her head, who’s spent years, waiting for this piece to click into place, trusts her and follows without a second thought.

She asks Shirogane first, because for all that she is Queen of this court, she knows she is not the one meant to lead them. She’s too bloodied and dark for that. Too possessive and vicious for that power to be placed in her hands.

Shirogane is practical. Equal amounts of cloying darkness and burning light nestled in his chest. He is the ruthless balance required to lead them all and so Lance is content to let him order her.

He is not subduing her, not truly. Not if she allows it.

The wormhole--an intoxicating flirtation with madness--brings them to a faraway planet and an elaborate Castle.

Within, is nestled a sleeping princess and her advisor. A fairy tale given form. Only, the princess is awake when she kisses Lance and it is no true love’s kiss. Her tongue glides along Lance’s lower lip so teasingly. She truly can’t stop herself from nipping at it, the blood staining her already scarlet lips.

Sleeping Beauty pulls back immediately, but Lance has already gotten what she desired. She tastes like ripe pomegranates and springtime. A combination that… intrigues Lance.

The princess moves on, carefully keeping distance between her and Lance. She speaks of destroyed civilizations and thousand-year naps, but all Lance can think about is ‘where, oh, where could her Hades be?’

Things after that are hectic, and Lance watches it all with an interested expression and some vaguely morbid jokes only Hunk and Pidge laugh at.

(Coran smiles, like he wants to laugh, and Lance wonders why he bothers holding back when it’s so much more fun to be free.)

The princess, Allura, leads them through her Castle and weaves tales of ancient war machines and prophecies. She speaks of a Goddess and destinies and their Lions.

Lance is only passingly interested until the princess speaks of a war. A thousand-year-old one soaked with blood and death and violence. She tells them of the mongering Galra that try and crush the rest of the universe beneath their heels and Lance is suddenly chomping at the bit in her excitement.

These Galra, are the ones who had dared touch what was hers, what was Pidge’s. Who had dared to try and take the Earth which was Hunk’s.

Oh yes, Lance can’t wait to eat them alive.

The grin she gives is too wide and filled with far too many gleamingly, sharp teeth. She knows Hunk
and Pidge mirror it where they stand at either side.

“When do we start?” they chorus as one.

***

When her Lion asks her to name her, Lance pauses.

This isn’t the same as Morte or Smudge, isn’t like the little names she gives Pidge and Hunk and her boys. Her Lion already has a Name. A true one, carefully stitched into the core of her being as only a Creator can give to their child. It’s bright and pretty and filled with a truly unconditional type of love.

Lance doesn’t know the Name--the very knowledge of it would burn her from the inside out--but she knows that much. Her Lion was named by something far more powerful than her. For now, at least.

So, when her Lion asks her to name her, it’s not her she’s truly Naming, but who her Lion will be to her. Lance is Naming the bond that ties them together, the cord of silvery and ancient magic that binds them.

Lance pauses, then Names her Zila.

Her mighty shadow. Her Nemean Lion.

***

Lance knows the exact second Pidge finds her Lion because something in her chest clenches and then abruptly shatters.

This isn’t like the puzzle pieces slotting into place. This is the merciless pain of growth. Of becoming more than you were. It’s change and awareness and becoming whole. Of being cracked open and scooped out so that there is room for someone else inside you too.

Pidge--who is sunless forest trails and chlorophyll, who is poisonous flowers and decay, who is the endless cycle of growth and death--sears herself beneath Lance’s flesh and she can’t help but think this is only the beginning.

***

Pidge steps from her Lion reborn.

Tying herself to Lance had changed her, had given her the opportunity to tear herself apart and rebuild herself into something more.

Something other.

Her skin, already pale is now sickly. Her hair is darker, redder, closer now to the colors of rust and drying blood. She is altogether sharper, more dangerous. The shadows reach out to her the same way they do with Lance, curling around her with a simple sort of protective menace.

But most telling, is perhaps, the bright, poisonous green of her eyes that glow so similarly to Lance’s own.

When she sees them, she grins, too wide and too sharp to be natural.

It jars everyone besides Hunk and Lance, who cluster around her immediately, cooing and trilling at the beauty of it all. Lance runs her fingers over Pidge’s face and for the first time, Pidge does it back,
her new claws cutting into the apple of Lance’s cheek and staining it red.

*Down, across, curve.*

Lance beams when she raises the bloody appendage to her mouth and drinks.

***

The warship followed them halfway across the universe.

Lance grins when CORINN tells them, the viciousness of it mirrored in Pidge who is still buzzing with *other.* With the magic under her skin.

There are no arguments on what to do about the warship. No question on if they’ll run or fight.

Lance is a predator. *They* are predators.

And predators don’t run from *prey.*

***

The warship goes down in a plume of fire and smoke. Crushed with a ruthless sort of viciousness and brute strength reserved for the piles of trash that particularly offend Lance. They weren’t special enough for her to use her more… *unique* abilities.

But Lance has no doubt she’ll get the chance to let loose soon. Her *and* Pidge.

They are, after all, fighting a war now.

So many battles. So little time.

***

Back on Earth, the Garrison has three missing kids that aren’t really missing on their hands.

The heads of the program need a cover story and send out the generals to inform the families of Lance Martinez, Henare Garrett, and the newly realized Katie Holt that there had been an accident. That Lance, piloting an unauthorized in atmosphere ship, lost control of the vessel and crashed into the desert.

*None of the students survived the crash,* they lie.

*There are no remains to bury or identify,* they lie.

*We are sorry for your loss,* they lie.

*La Familia* takes one look at the official story and *laughs.*

It’s funny after all.

Like something as *paltry* as a plane crash could kill those three.

***

“What do you really think they’re up to?” James asks with a smile.

Ryan considers for a moment. “Terrorizing some poor idiot, no doubt.” He shrugs. “Lance will tell
us when she comes back.”

***

Two weeks pass and Lance watches them go by with a certain type of hunger glittering in her eyes. Its two weeks filled with Allura, the princess of light and spring with no kingdom to rule over. The new age Persephone that interests her the same way Hunk did when he was new and young.

Two weeks of her and Hunk and Pidge wandering the Castle like whispering shadows. Of the three of them talking about mutilation and black magic over breakfast.

Two weeks of slowly pulling the darkness back out of Coran. Of listening to his silly, extravagant stories and seeing the dark, interesting underbelly he tries to keep hidden. Of a cloying, possessive sort of affection for him growing slowly with each new interaction.

Two weeks of studying Shiro and his internal struggle. Of careful words and gentle nudges. Of assurances that the darkness within holds its own type of beauty.

Two weeks of Keith.

***

There is something changed about him.

Underneath all the spitfire and aggression, under the useless blustering and hissing venom, there’s something sinister that wasn’t there before.

Something dark and writhing and waiting for the right time to pounce.

His year in the desert changed him, some event while he was out there reformed him into something new.

Lance tries very hard to not care. To not let herself be interested. She refuses to let herself be put in a position for him to hurt her again.

The only problem is that he’s making it difficult, just like he makes everything.

He keeps watching her. His gaze lingering from the corner of every room she enters with him in it.

Her shadows whisper about him, but she doesn’t need them to tell her. She can feel his gaze like burning fingers tracing her spine, trailing blisters in their wake.

There’s something in his gaze, something hungry and wanting but she doesn’t know what for.

She doesn’t want to ask.

***

Against her wishes and better judgment, a fragile sort of hope blooms in her chest, heedless of the flames that still dance there.

She doesn’t have the heart to rip it out by the root like she should.

***
Lance wanders during the nights, just like she did at the Garrison, just like she did at home. Sometimes she walks past the giant but oh so feeble door that the Black Lion hides behind.

Most times, Shiro is sat in front of it, head tilted and gazing up as if listening to something. He looks calmer, more centered in those moments even with the dark circles under his eyes.

Rarely, he is absent from his spot in the great room.

But when he is, Lance can hear the quietest of whispers. Songs of starshine and the low murmur of the abyss.

It makes Lance wonder.

***

The cauldron bubbles like hot tar before her, even without the heat of a fire beneath it.

Lance drops a small, mangled animal into the pot. A gift from Morte and just what she needed.

The second it hits the liquid in the pot a plume of murky blue smoke erupts from it, spilling out into the rest of the room and leaving it smelling like graveyard dirt and larkspur and stomach acid.

She leans over the rim, blinking into the surface as something shimmers in and out of focus before solidifying completely. When it does, she grins broadly with too many sharp, white teeth.

“Buenas noches, Mamá.”

Maria presses the tips of her fingers to her mouth. “Oh, barracudita,” she whispers before turning and yelling. “It’s Lance! She’s finally called!”

Lance laughs at the sound of fighting and things getting knocked over while the surface of the cauldron slowly gets more crowded. Once they’ve all mostly settled, Lance greets them all again.

Tío Gomez is the first to speak up, shoving his face in close to the cauldron before Tante Morticia gently pulls him away. “What horrific mischief have you been up to? We all heard you crashed a plane and died! Truly stupendous, my dear!”

Lance raises an eyebrow. “The Garrison aren’t very creative with their cover stories, are they?”

La Familia laughs and she can’t stop the smile from winding its way across her lips. Oh, she truly has missed them.

When the laughter dies down enough for her to be heard, she speaks again, tone calm and neutral. “I’m afraid I haven’t done anything as exciting dying,” she sighs, “But I have found an alien warship and joined a revolution against a warmongering dictator.”

For a long moment, her Familia is silent.

Then, everyone is yelling.

Lance laughs at the questions flying around her and spends the next hour talking to them and explaining it all. When she’s finished, she’ll call James and Ryan too.

She needs to make sure they’re being fed properly after all. She isn’t there to provide anymore.

Not that she doesn’t think they’re perfectly capable themselves.
Hunk is her foundation. The bedrock from which she builds her moorings on. He is the matching set to her everything, the other piece Zeus, in all his messy jealousy, had cut her from. They are not halves of the other, but rather reflections. Two separate beings that will always be better together.

When they bind themselves together, it is more like coming home than anything else.

It is still pain and the breaking open of her soul to make room for another, but the entire time she can feel Hunk on the edges, in every stroke and sting. He fills up all the cracks in her with liquid gold and she paints his insides with ink and saltwater.

A matching set until the end of time.

When it ends and she stops screaming, she notices there’s something beating in her chest. A dull, ba-bump ba-bump that wasn’t there before. That hadn’t been there since Lance plucked her own heart from her chest to place in a pretty mahogany box as a parting gift for la Familia when she ran off to the Garrison.

She almost cuts herself open again, but she recognizes the beat before she can.

It’s Hunk’s. His heart, his heartbeat, pounding away in her ribcage like a trapped bird. It’s poetic and morbid. Her favorite kind of poetic.

It almost makes her wish she still had her own, if only so she could give hers to Hunk in return.

Hunk steps from his Lion and Lance is not surprised.

He is the same, and not, all at once. His eyes shimmer, bright and mesmerizing as they shift with molten gold.

Hunk’s always been better at hiding in plain sight, in blending in with the crowd before stabbing you in the spine. He would not have rebuilt himself the way she and Pidge are. It isn’t how he works.

Hunk is still soft looking and friendly, but she can tell the subtle changes. Can feel them in the air as it shifts around him.

He is sharp in a way he wasn’t before. Ruthless and harsh and golden.

Bright.

Shadows shy away from him and the one behind him is faded and gray where everyone else's is dark and thick. Lance stares at him, and it is like looking at the sunrise. The sun breaching the horizon and the full potential of the day only just starting to be realized.

He is her Golden Warrior finally awakened.

Lance throws herself at him and he doesn’t even stumble. Enhanced strength then, too. Scrambled his insides for all the perks without the looks.

Her clever boy.
“Boo Bear, you promised you wouldn’t die without me,” Lance pouts.

“Promise kept. I’m still breathing.”

Her thumb slides under the skin of his eye, “And what wonderful upgrades you’ve gotten.”

Hunk smiles, grin warm and loving but now deadly sharp thanks to the wicked-looking fangs in his mouth. “Well, you did always say I’d make a good Martínez.”

Lance’s grin sharpens because he’s right. And this is better than any of her wildest dreams.

***

They find cute little aliens scurrying about the planet while Lance teaches Hunk how to fly.

The smallest one likens her to a deity and Lance laughs even as Keith’s gaze burns into her skin.

The devil, perhaps. But she’s never been called a god before.

How cute.

***

After the little aliens have tried to sacrifice themselves something breaks through the atmosphere.

Lance watches it’s fiery decent and knows Zila is already on her way, just as excited as she is to play.

***

The metal casing cracks open like a morbid little egg.

Inside, sits a gleaming monstrosity. Something wrong. A twisted metal behemoth tasting of death with none of the elegance. A twisted, mangled thing that should be dead but instead gets back up and starts walking once more.

A mockery of life created from death and giving neither the honor they deserve.

Lance hisses when she sees it.

The entire thing is offensive and disgusting and she wants to raze it to the ground.

It sours the mood and she no longer wants to play. No longer wants to dance with her fellow predators.

Now, all she wants to do is to destroy that abomination.

***

The battle is harsh and brutal and completely silent until the thing is almost dead, dripping in golden ichor and twitching in something that’s not quite pain.

Zila takes control in order to rip out the things throat, swallowing it down and lapping up the spilling ichor. Like a signal, the other two join and suddenly it’s a frenzy. Metal and blood and circuitry devoured in a vicious feast. This should be a victory, should be happy and jubilant and wonderful.

Instead, Lance scowls. This is only a way to get rid of damning evidence.
A way to get rid of the *monster.*

***

Lance tries very hard to ignore the way Keith looks at her when she steps out of her Lion, Zila’s jowls still shimmering with ichor.

Even if she did look at him, it’s not like she’d be able to understand whatever lies behind his eyes anyway.

***

That night,

That night, Arus experiences its first thunderstorm.

They don’t know that music is not supposed to accompany the sounds of thunder.

***

Lance awakens in the dead of night to bright, unnaturally green eyes staring down at her.

Her hand rises to Pidge’s pale cheek, her freckles looking like blood splatter in the low light. Before Lance can ask, a smile like insanity and spun spider-silk stretches across her face.

“*Someone survived,*” she whispers. “*I can feel him.*”

***

Like a bloodhound, Pidge leads her straight to Sendak.

He looks so surprised by their arrival, it’s almost funny how easy it is to trap him and his companion, the shadows darting out and pinning them to the ground before they can even shout for help that won’t come.

She lets Pidge kill the extra and feed him to Morte and Smudge--the two deserve the treat after all--but decides to keep Sendak alive. For now.

She’s feeling frustrated after not getting what she wanted earlier today.

And besides, he has more crimes to answer to. He dared touch what was *theirs* and for that?

For that, Lance will make him *scream.*

***

She takes him apart, *piece* by bloody *piece.*

The first thing to go is his arm, carefully cut at the shoulder and set aside for Pidge to play and tinker with later. That, and Lance appreciates the symbolism of such an action.

Sendak took their dear Shirogane’s arm, and she is, of course, *happy* to return the favor.

She hums as she works, cutting away at flesh and bone while he screams and sobs the bloody chorus to her song. It’s such a sweet noise, the sound of her prey writhing in pain. The sweetest symphony she can imagine.
Oh, she hopes the rest of the empire will *scream* for her too. Writhe and sob and *beg* for mercy that will never come.

Halfway through cutting apart Sendak’s thigh, Pidge gets an idea, darting back to the Castle quick as a bullet. When she returns, Lance is delighted to find her carrying a large cooler and a book on galran anatomy.

Oh, what a treat for Hunk. He’d been getting sad without any meat to cook with.

***

They don’t return until well after sunrise and Hunk is waiting in the entrance hall for them. He frowns when he sees that they’re both covered in blood.

“What wasn’t I invited?”

Lance laughs at the pout of his lips, standing on her tiptoes to press a kiss to his cheek. It smears blood along the apple of it, but neither of them cares.

“Girl’s night, sugarplum. Sorry. We did bring back a present though.” She swings the cooler in front of him. His eyes shift from that to the arm Pidge is still carrying and matching severed head--she’d been unwilling to part with the bionic eye, even if it *was* wired into his brain--and back again.

She sees the moment he realizes what’s in her hand because a slow smile winds across his face. “I suppose I can forgive you this once.”

***

“This is delicious!” Allura exclaims, eyes wide as she scoops up another bite from her extravagant plate of food. “What did you say this was again?”

“Pig’s heart. Or, well,” Lance shares a smile with Pidge while Hunk chuckles. “The closest thing to it we could find.”

End Notes

Come hang out with me at lady-literature over on Tumblr! I'm always happy to talk.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!