Watercast

by Fishwrites

Summary

Shiro has been a Galra prisoner for over a year; with his flight feathers clipped and unable to fly. Desperate to escape, he jumps overboard while being transported to the capitol on a Galran ship. Lance is a merman who saves him from drowning. Keith thinks Shiro is about to become mermaid dinner. Hunk just wants Lance to stop going to the surface all the time, dammit!

(AU where Avians (winged folk), Galra, humans and merfolk cohabit earth. Shiro and Keith are avian soldiers, Lance is the youngest son of a Queen, Hunk is also a merman and Pidge is still looking for her family. They get caught up in a war.)

NB: to be finished end of 2019/NY2020
quick context: humans and galra live side by side on earth, but humans are more or less subjugated. Avians have been at war with the Galrans since forever, and generally have the strategic advantage of being able to attack from above. All three tend to try stay clear of the merfolk, who keep to themselves and will often drown/sink Galran or human ships if they think they are trespassing or have hurt merpeople in the past.

Copyright Notice: DO NOT post any of my stories, partially or wholly, anywhere else - online or offline, for profit or non profit. These include, but are not limited to, places such as Good Reads and Wattpad. Copying, whole or in part, must be done with written permission - this includes language translations. Thank you!
“A drowning man is not troubled by rain.”
- Proverb.

now.

There were stories, of course. Shiro had grown up with them, just like every other avian child: *A bird at sea is a bird lost forever*. It was worse than being grounded; because once you touched the water, you never came back. They all had that fear trained into them, first with nursery rhymes, and then at the Garrison – what to do to keep your wings dry, to land on earth, on rock: *better break your bones than drown*.

It was a well-founded fear. And even in his desperation, it makes Shiro falter – the rain and storm roaring above the ship, the water a black mess of crashing sound. He was frozen, bones locked tight, screaming in dread. The salt burned the cuts in his lip, the wind lashing at his skin. Behind him, someone shouted in the midst of a flare of fire; the ship rocks to the side with the hungry crest of the sea.

It had been so long since he last flown. He couldn’t fly. Not anymore. Shiro risked a glance back, hand on the rail of the ship. The ship rocks again, and his captors slip – stumbling. Then someone shoots at him – and the bullet clips the arch of his wing in a spray of blood.

The water was slick on his skin, cold on his feathers.

Shiro jumps.

before.

It wasn’t as if they were *forbidden* to go to the surface.

Technically.
“Can you stop nagging,” said Lance, swimming around the long shadow of a rock towards the glow of the moon, “There’s no law against hanging around up top. It’s not illegal.”

Hunk swam just behind him. Lance wasn’t sure how his friend was able to make such disapproving hand gestures while swimming so fast. Some innate, undiscovered talent, clearly.

“You’re right, it’s not illegal for merfolk to go up to the surface,” said Hank, “so you know. I’d be fine! But it is illegal for you to go to the surface without telling anyone.”

Lance made a rude sign over his shoulder.

“Eh, whatever,” he said, “I told you didn’t I?”

“That doesn’t count!” sand Hunk, exasperated. “Your mom is going to kill me if she finds out. Again.”

“Pssht,” said Lance, “Mom loves you. What can she do to you anyway?”

“Uh,” said Hunk, “She’s the Queen so she can do whatever she wants, obviously!”

But Lance had stopped listening – he could hear the storm more clearly now, the soothing thrum of rain hitting the sea, the waves swooshing and buffeting them even at this depth. He had to sweep his tail constantly to stay near Hunk, even as they circled closer to the surface.

Lance gave a few more hard swipes with his tail, propelling from the hips until he finally broke the surface with a splash. Lance gasped, taking air through his nose and mouth rather than his gills – the sudden absence of water making the air bite cold. It was so much brighter up here, even under a heavy storm. Hands steadying himself against the rock, Lance pulled himself up above the water level. There was something aglow in the near distance – a red yellow glow.

Excitement ignited at the base of his spine.

“It’s a ship!” he shouted, splashing Hunk who had just emerged beside his elbow. “Look! Look – it’s a big one. Haha, it’s totally going to sink, what is it doing out here.”

“Why are you so bloodthirsty,” said Hunk peering at the ship and narrowly avoiding Lances’ jabbing hand, “Could just be sailors. Fishing. For fish. How long are we going to hang around because I’m hungry.”

Lance frowned at his friend.

“That is not a fishing vessel,” he said, “It’s military. Galran. I’d recognise that hull and the shape of that dumb canon anywhere.”

“You know my eyesight isn’t as good as yours,” Hunk complained, “Not up here.”

The ship seemed to be moving eastwards – or trying to. It was sailing perilously close to the rocks.

“C’mon, let’s go take a closer look!” said Lance, and dived off the rock and back into the water. He barely acknowledged Hunk’s annoyed yell and propelled himself forwards, back deeper through the water where the rocks were further apart, squeezing himself through a short cut and scraping his fin on the barnacles clinging to the other side. He wanted to swim under the ship, maybe see a few sailors up close. Maybe prank them.

The water flowed fast and thrilling through his gills as Lance swam; his heart thumping with
excitement.

He loved storms.

Lance swam slower as he neared the ship, arching his back to look upwards at its small shadow on the water. It was being tossed in between the rise and fall of the water, like a small toy on the breath of a huge beast. Lance grinned with all his teeth at the thought – there was no love lost between Galrans and the merfolk.

He swam closer – glancing behind him for a sign of Hunk. His friend didn’t seem to be around, and Lance made an annoyed bubble with his mouth. Maybe Hunk had decided to go home without him. It was nearly supper time. Shrugging, Lance twisted his tail and swam further into the shadow of the ship, letting himself float upwards.

He could see a huge steel anchor: the chains were thicker than Lances’ arm, so there would be no casting them adrift today. He pulled at one of the metal gaps anyway, tugging hard. He jammed the hilt of his knife there – but it was too new. Lance patted the chain.

“Next time,” he said, tucking the knife back on the woven loop that sat over his shoulder and hip, “Next time.”

He followed the chain up to the bottom of the ship. It was huge – they always looked ginormous from this angle – and Lance pressed a curious hand to the thing. Most of the ships were still wooden, but the Galran had started plating the bottom with metal to stop Merfolk from tampering and sinking their vessels. This one had crudely beaten metal armour, thin but sturdy. The rivets stood out like knobs on a spine, and Lance followed them languidly as he swam, tail brushing against the ship. It was smooth against his scales; asides from crusted rust and various sea shells that had made their home there.

Lance was chipping away at a gap in the plating, absently humming to himself, when something in his peripheral vision made him pause. He turned, head cocked. Something had fallen into the water with a big splash. It was a sizeable smudge, moving and churning up bubbles. It wasn’t sinking all that fast, so it wasn’t cargo, and –

Lance’s eyes widened.

It was a person!

Abandoning his task, he propelled himself away from the bottom of the ship and towards the struggling form. It was the wrong shape for a Galra, too short… but also the wrong size for a human. He whipped his tail back, pushing himself through the rough water. He tried to stay deep enough to be out of sight of the fire glow – he didn’t want to be spotted, or get too close if…

Lance froze, hand still clutching his blade. He was close enough to see why the figure cast such a strange shape in the water. It was neither human nor Galran.

He had wings.

“Oh no,” Lance breathed, swimming closer. He fumbled his knife, trying to put it away, and within seconds was close enough to touch. Given the tales, Lance had half a mind to turn tail and swim off to safety. But something kept him there.

The avian was still struggling, disoriented and sluggish. Its wings were half spread in the water, buffeted hard by the ocean. Lance could smell the sharp tang of blood, fresh and hot. It made his teeth come out, and he pulled in a few long draws of water through his gills to calm himself.
“Hello?” he said, reaching out. The Avian twisted in the water, trying to look at him. It was making a lot of bubbles. “Hey – can you – do you need help back onto the ship? Hello?”

It had a pale face and dark hair. A broad chest and two legs, just like the humans. Its wings dark too, dwarfing them both with the span of it. A gush of bubbles escaped the Avian, his eyes were wide and panicly. They stared at eachother in the water for a moment, before the avian made an aborted movement, jerking away from Lance. All of a sudden, he went loose limbed.

Belatedly, Lance recalled that Avians couldn’t swim. Like, At all.

“Oh shit,” he said, grabbing the figure underneath his armpits, “Oh shit – no, please don’t die. Please don’t die.”

He was a lot heavier than Lance anticipated, but it was fine, Lance was a ace swimmer, the best. He propelled himself hard with strong strokes with his tail, hauling the avian close so he could hook both arms underneath his armpits, with the wings facing out. They were heavy and dragging and hard to manoeuvre, but Lance swam as hard as he could towards the surface of the water.

“Come on,” he muttered to himself, There!

With a heaving gasp, he pulled the Avian’s head free of the waves, trying vainly to prop him up on his shoulder so that its head would be above the water. It was hard with the rain and the churning waves – Lance had to keep sweeping his tail in tight fast strokes to keep his torso out of the water. The Avian’s wings were waterlogged, like limbs tied to the weed – and they kept going under the waves.

“Hey,” Lance shouted into the Avian’s ear. He would have slapped him except both his hands were occupied. “Hey! Wake up! Do you need to go back to the ship?”

No answer. The Avian was limp in his arms, face slack against Lance’s neck. He could feel the warmth of the skin – unnaturally warm – against his gills. He shivered, hoisting the body as high as he could. He got a mouthful of wet feathers for his trouble.

“Argh,” he spluttered, “Hunk? HUNK!”

Nothing. Goddamit.

What was an avian doing aboard a Galran ship? Lance looked from the ship, then to the dark outline fo the cliffs. On one hand, the ship was this avian’s best bet for survival. Lance had never met an Avian up close before, but he was pretty sure they didn’t have gills, or nostrils on the side of their heads. Which mean that this one wasn’t breathing properly.

“God you’re heavy,” he complained, hands slipping on the clothing. He hooked a wrist under the shoulder of a wing and tried to let the avian lie on top of him while he floated. A wave crashed over the both of them, and they went back down again. “Shit, what do I do. Come on, wake up!”

Nothing.

Lance gave the ship one more look – and then began towing his cargo towards the cliffs.

Given the war, it wasn’t likely that this Avian was having fun on that ship anyway. And plus, Lance would have to get real close to Galrans if this avian was to be returned up top – which meant risking his own tail. No thanks.

Lance gritted his teeth.
It was hard trying to swim half out of the water – his back was going to be sore tomorrow. His tail hit rock and Lance hissed, but kept going, trying his best to keep the Avian above water. Despite the sea, his skin was warm against Lance. He wondered if all Avians ran hot like this.

Lance was so preoccupied with his multitasking that he failed to notice an incoming shadow from above, until something sharp and metallic swiped him on his exposed shoulder.

Lance gave a screech of pain, instinctively arching his hip to dive back deeper into the safety of the water – but before he could, he felt the whip of a rope, or thin spun metal – it stung and would have wrapped itself like a garotte around his throat had Lance not twisted himself in the water. As it was, the thing wrapped itself around his hurt arm and pulled taut, cutting into flesh.

Lance shouted, barely keeping a hold on the Avian with his other arm. His back hit rock, and then suddenly there was someone above him, blocking out all the light from the moon. That someone was shouting, blade in one hand, garrotte in the other.

“Let him go you filthy fish!”

Lance hissed with all his teeth, spitting and twisting with confusion and pain but mostly bloody fury.

“What the hell!” he screamed at the newcomer, “Get this off me! What are you doing? Who are you?”

“I’ll drive this through your skull if you don’t let him go!”

It was another avian; miraculously still air borne despite the lashing rain and wind. He was very close to the water, wings flapping in huge great strokes to keep himself aloft. The water reflected off some kind of shimmery armour. He looked like an avenging angel statue that all got their wings chopped off and destroyed during the war.

“I’m trying save this dumb bird,” Lance shouted, “Hello! He can’t swim and neither can you.”

“I’m not going to ask again,” said the avian, pulling on the garrotte. Lance jerked forwards with the force of it, the pain making him hiss again. He wanted to throw a dagger at this man, but had no free hands. He felt like his shoulder was going to be pulled right out of its socket.

At the back of his mind, he wondered if this was what fish felt like at the end of a hook – and shuddered at the metaphor.

“You let go or I’ll drown the both of you,” said Lance, patience and good humour leaking away. His arm was bleeding. The avian was bleeding. His tail was probably losing a few scales. Between the two of them, they were probably attracting all the sharks in the neighbourhood.

The garrotte didn’t loosen.

“You’re two seconds away from falling into the sea anyway,” said Lance, “And once in, you know you’re not getting out. You lot can’t swim for shit.”

“Why would a Mer try to save one of us?” shouted the avian, who was turning out to be a real douchebag, “Why should I trust you?”

“Good question!” Lance shouted back, “Maybe I should just let your friend become shark food!”
The avian was trying to grab onto his friend, but he couldn’t get close enough without losing flight, and the downed avian was far too heavy to lift. The reality of this seemed to strike him with renewed desperation.

“Can you bring him to shore?” he asked, chest heaving with exertion.

Lance stared at him through the rain.

“Cut this noose,” he said.

Lightening lit up the cliffs behind them, illuminating the water for a brief second.

The avian threw his garrotte into the water. Lance was quick to pull it free from his arm, wincing. It hurt something awful where it had cut into his skin, but he took a deep breath through his mouth and hooked his arms around the unconscious avian again.

There was a heartbeat at least. He could feel it, throat to throat. Poor thing had no gills; no wonder it was panicking.

Cursing his own curiosity and cursing Hank’s absence, Lance pulled them forwards into the waves, swimming half on his back to keep the Avian above the water as best he could. He knew, without looking, that the other avian was following.

They sped through the storm, closer and closer to the cliffs.

---

Keith had not been the top of his flight class for nothing.

But even he was having trouble flying in what felt like a bloody monsoon. His entire chest and back felt like it was on fire, his breath coming in strained gasps. His hands were going numb and he wasn’t sure whether it was the exertion or the freezing rain.

Only the sheer adrenaline of finding Shiro after all these long months was keeping Keith airborne. He had a wingspan and genes that favoured agile, acrobatic flight – not sustained long distances. And whilst the slim taper of his wings helped him with the strong wind that was buffeting them left right and backwards, he also had to work five times harder just to stay level.

As it was, he could barely keep up with the merman who was slicing through the ocean like the shadow of a shark. Even with a fully downed avian in tow, that thing was fast. Keith reluctantly let some of his height drop as they neared the side of the cliff face; squinting through the rain. He could see Shiro’s pale face in the water, still like a corpse.

Stop it.

The merman led them a little way around the curve of the coast, keeping to the fringe of the cliffs. And then, between one beat of his wing and the next they were gone.

Keith cursed, tucking in one wing and dropping as close as he dared to the water.

They were gone. There was nothing but water and dark rock.
He should have never trusted a goddamn fish. Keith clutched his sword, feeling like his heart was about to thud right out of his ribs. He’d let it go. After finally finding Shiro, he’d let himself be tricked. Stupid, stupid, stupid! There was a noisy buzzing in his ears, screaming Shiro, Shiro, Shiro —

He was interrupted by a big splash, followed by a piercing sort of whistle. The merman was back, tail arching at a slitted entrance through the rocks that Keith had missed. He was being waved.

“Oi!,” it called, “You coming in or what?”

“I can’t breathe under water,” Keith shouted back, eyeing the dark entrance.

“Keep to your right!” said the Merman, who was still out of sight save for the shiny reflection of his tail fin, “There’s a ledge. Sort of. I don’t think it’s too deep. Hurry up, your friend is really heavy!”

Swearing under his breath, Keith sheathed his sword, swore some more and then took the leap of faith – he tucked his wings in and let himself drop the remaining few feet through the air.

His boots took most of the impact, and Keith scraped his gloves on the rock trying to stay upright. For an awful moment, he slipped and the water just kept coming, past his knees, and Keith thought – fantastic, now you’re both going to be fish food. But then he found his grip, and the water stopped; lapping forcefully around midriff. The bottom of his wings were getting completely soaked, but he couldn’t do much about that now – he shuffled along the edge of the rock, ducking his head and tucking his wings as tight as possible to himself.

After a few long moments of crawling and getting a faceful of seawater more than once, the space suddenly opened out. The sound of the ocean storm abruptly dimmed, to be replaced by the hollow echo of water lapping against rock, and the rasping sound of Keith’s own breathing. It was almost pitch black, but judging by the echoes, the cavern felt very, very big.

Ahead, just to his left, he could hear the sound of sluicing water and gentle splashing.

“You okay there, bird brain?” came the merman’s voice.

“Ye – aghht”

Later, Keith would deny that he shrieked at all, but the sight of a pair of blue eyes glowing at him out of the water almost sent him tumbling back into the sea.

The eyes blinked.

“Why are you crouched like that,” said the merman. He was bobbing serenely – the water much stiller here without the waves – just shoulders above the water. His eyes had a strange, bioluminescent glow, which did not disappear when he blinked.

“Where’s Shiro,” Keith demanded, hand going for the hilt of his sword.

The merman cocked his head.

“What’s a shee-roh?” he asked, coming closer. Keith pressed his wings against the slimy rock. There wasn’t really anywhere to go. “…oh right, your friend? I put him down. You guys are really heavy, you know? How do you even get up into the air?”

Keith’s eyes nearly bugged out of his head.
“Put him down – we can’t breathe under water!”

The merman splashed him with his hands.

“Relaaax, I’m not stupid. I put him on dry rock. There’s bits of the cave that doesn’t get flooded, even in high tide, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know,” snapped Keith.

“Uh huh,” said the Merman. “Wait, hang on. I know what will help.”

And before Keith could say anything, the merman had dived back into the water in an arch of flesh and scales. His tail fin came up a breath later in a sweeping arc, splashing water all over Keith’s face.

“Goddamn!” said Keith. Ten more Keith’s echoed the curse back at him.

From the depths of the cavern, a voice floated back on the water:

“You gotta stop falling for that!”

“I fucking hate merfolk,” muttered Keith.

The merman didn’t leave him waiting for long; a few moments later there was a little blob of light streaking towards Keith. As it came closer, it illuminated what appeared to be a huge lake, water gleaming smooth for as far as the eye could see (which wasn’t very far: Avians didn’t have good night vision). The merman was holding some kind of crystal lamp, which emitted a blue glow. Belmeran crystal lamp. He wondered how a merman got a hold of something like that, but pushed it to the back of his mind.

The merman came right up to Keith, skin glistening with water. Held out the lamp.

“Here,” he said, “Be careful with this. It’s not mine. Pidge would kill me if you broke it.”

Keith stared at the hands holding the lamp. They were remarkably human looking hands; smooth skin, perhaps longer than average fingernails. The same number of knuckles; same number of fingers. But he could also see translucent webbing between the digits, and the faint shimmer of fine, tessellated scales on the soft side of the wrists. Those were not human hands.

Keith had never seen a merfolk this close up before. Usually no one lived to tell the tale.

He took the lamp.

The merman was staring at him, eyes big and curious. It had hair, just like Keith, and it wasn’t green like the stories, nor did it look anything like seaweed. It was brown and a bit spikey with salt. Then the merman smiled and Keith fought the urge to recoil at the sight of a mouthful of sharp, sharp teeth.

“You can walk around the whole edge,” said the merman, seemingly oblivious to the effect of his grin, “that bit is usually bigger in low tide, but. You should still be okay. Pidge has a dinghy but it’s down the way, I usually tow him in ‘cuase that’s faster, but you look like you’re gonna fall over any second. So just keep walking it’s not far.”

Keith eyed the rock warily, but straightened up properly. Transferring the lamp to his left hand, he kept his right on the rock face and inched forwards. His wings kept getting in the way, scraping the
side of the rock-face.

The merman was still staring at him, floating lazily on his back.

“Is it hard to balance with those things? They’re huge. And not waterproof, apparently. What happens when it rains? Do you all just, drop out of the sky? Seems a bit dumb. Hey, I’ve never seen an Avian up close before. This is cool.”

Keith took another step; the metal shock-heel of his boots loud on the rock. The ledge was barely two hand-breadth’s wide. The water shone, inky black.

“…Do you want me to hold your hand or something?” asked the merman.

“Will you shut up!” said Keith.

Keith splashed his way across a shallow divot, uncaring of the water as they came in sight of Shiro. He was sprawled on a wide rock bed, wings splayed out. Keith put the lamp down with a clang (“Hey, be careful with that!”), dropping to his knees beside his fellow avian.

“Shiro,” said Keith, patting at his face, his neck – checking his pulse. He was breathing, thank god, even though it sounded laboured and watery. Keith shook Shiro by the shoulders.

“Wake up. Come on, Shiro. It’s Keith. I’m here. You’re – “ he tried to pull Shiro up into his lap, off the cold stone – but only half managed. Shiros’ head lolled back into the crook of Keith’s elbow, and Keith felt like something was being pulled slowly, painfully out of his throat.

He pressed his cheek to Shiro’s cold one, trying to breathe normally. His eyes stung; with salt or tears… Keith squeezed them shut, wings coming up instinctively to cover them both. Distantly, he realised his hands were shaking.

There was the soft gurgle of water as the merman pulled himself up on the rock; chin resting on his folded hands.

“Is he going to be okay?”

“I… I don’t know,” said Keith, quietly. He looked down at Shiro; at the new scars on his face; the bruise swelling his eye and the wound that was still bleeding his feathers red. “Been looking for him for a long time. Thought he was dead. I can’t – he’s – “

Keith choked on the words, relief and disbelief making him feel sick and dizzy. The merman made a clicking-crooning noise at the back of his throat, a distinctly inhuman sound, but full of sympathy all the same. Keith finally looked up.

“Can we – is there anything to make a fire? He needs to get dry and get warm.”

At the word ‘fire’, the merman seemed to recoil a little into the water.

“Um, I don’t think so,” he said, “I might have some – dry stuff to help? I have lots of things in my collection!”

“…your collection?” said Keith.
Turned out, the merman was some kind of hoarder.

“Where did you get all this stuff?” said Keith, looking at the piles and piles of assorted knick knacks. Even just within the puddle of light from the lamp, he could see cutlery, silver and bronze plates and bowls, glass baubles, jewellery, ten telescopes in a neat row, a few odd pairs of boots, two chipped mirrors and trunks barely closed with linen, books, drawing implements and – gold coins? There was also a leather bundle of what looked like a collection of knives and throwing blades. They shone free of rust, well looked after.

“Did you steal all this?”

“Ships,” said the merman, “and it’s not stealing if it’s just floating around. Look in the brown chest, I think Pidge put all the fluffy stuff in there.”

Keith set the lamp down on a nearby trunk and opened the nearest brown-wooden chest. Inside were stacks of woollen blankets, kept miraculously dry by a thick cushion of purple-green moss that smelt faintly floral. He grabbed as many as he could carry.

“Do you have a name, or are you all Shiros,” said the merman, splashing idly, “I’m Lance, by the way. You didn’t ask, which – rude – given I saved your feathery asses and all, but that’s okay. I forgive you. I’m very forgiving. Because I’m awesome.”

“I’m Keith,” said Keith from behind a mountain of blankets. He hooked the lamp onto one wrist and they made their way back to where Shiro was still lying unconscious.

“What kind of name is Keef,” said Lance.

“Keith,” said Keith, “with a ‘th’. And for that matter, what kind of name is ‘Lance’?”

“A name that you humans can pronounce,” said Lance, “My full name is too hard to say apparently.” He made a complicated noise that was a combination of hissing clicks, ending in a shriek. Keith almost slipped over at the high-pitched noise.

“‘Lance’ is fine,” he said hastily.

“Hrmpph,” said the merman.

In the end, Keith found the driest place he could on the rock and made a nest out of the blankets to provide as much insulation between the cold rock and Shiro as possible. Then he dragged Shiro across to it, taking off his shoes and wrapping Shiro’s feet in one of the blankets. Then Keith began the slow, arduous task of trying to drying Shiro’s feathers. Keith could feel the salt crusting his own wings, and it made him itch where it had dampened the soft down feathers close to his skin. He wish he could build a fire. But Shiro came first.

There was a loud slosh of water – and Keith turned just in time to see Lance pull himself out of the water in one, effortless heave. Suddenly, the merman was right there, peering curiously at Shiro, hair plastered to his forehead, scales gleaming. He was sitting on the rock. He was out of the water. Why was he out of the water? Keith was sitting in a giant sea cave with a merman who hadn’t drowned them yet.

Instinctively, Keith went for his sword again – but stopped when Lance gave him a very
unimpressed look.

“Seriously?” he said, lying down carelessly on his stomach and propping himself up on his elbows. “Seriously birdy? If I wanted to kill you, I’d have done it already. You’re two fluffy birds at sea. What are you gonna do. Fluff at me?”

“Get back – “ Keith tried.

“Oh wait,” said Lance, turning onto his side, “You’re too soggy to fluff right now.”

His tail stretched long and languid on the wet stones – it was longer than what Keith had imagined, tapering down and fanning out at the tail fin which was still swishing idly in the water. He didn’t seem at all bothered by the cold, which made sense – but his bare skin looked like Keith’s own skin. It melted into blue-silver scales somewhere around where the human waist would have been. The scales deepened in colour along the tail, and as he turned, Keith could see scales on the merman’s abdomen, shimmery and pale and soft looking. Curiosity mixed with something hot burned at the pit of Keith’s stomach.

His throat felt very dry, and he swallowed, hard.

It was probably all the salt water he had consumed in the last hour. Keith hated the sea.

He turned back to Shiro, pushing out his let wing and pressing a blanket hard to it. Running his fingers through the feathers, Keith could see that someone had done a cruel job of hacking at the flight feathers. They were uneven where they had been shorn off, and there was clusters of feathers that were clumped by dry blood. They clipped his wings, thought Keith furiously, anger rising like bile, they clipped his wings.

Pressing his fingers to one such hacked feather, Keith pulled it out with a practiced twist of the hand. The wing jerked in his grasp, but he pinned it down with one knee. Shiro did not wake.

“Hey!” Lance grabbed his sleeve, “What are you doing?!”

Keith wrenched his arm out of the merman’s grasp, startled. They stared at each other, wide eyed.

“Helping,” said Keith. Without looking down, he pulled out another broken feather from Shiro’s wing. Lance visibly flinched, staring at the discarded feathers on the blanket and then back up at Keith.

“You’re hurting him,” he said, accusingly.

“Why do you care?” Keith shot back.

“I – you - !” spluttered Lance, “I saved him! I saved him first, he’s mine now.”

Keith narrowed his eyes.

“Know much about helping Avians recover, do you?”

Lance pouted at him, blue eyes glossy wet. Pouted. Keith reminded himself of the sharp, sharp fishy teeth behind those lips. He tugged Shiro more comfortably against him, so that the wing draped downwards across them both. Keith could hear his breathing better this way; it was reassuring.

“It’ll grow back faster if I pull them out,” he explained after a long moment of silence, “They – the
Galrans cut our flight feathers like this so they don’t grow back properly. You have to pull them right out.”

“You can’t fly without them?” said Lance, patting the shape of Shiro’s feet with unbridled fascination.

“No,” said Keith. He resisted the urge to kick the merman right back into the water as Lance lifted Shiro’s right foot and squinted at the toes, face pressed right up close.

Keith could see the blue scales under Lance’s jaw, covering the soft part of his throat. The light was too dim, but he thought he could see gills there too, parallel slits of silver.

“How long does it take to grow back?” asked Lance.

Keith sighed.

“Do you ever shut up?”

“Hey, I just saved your lives! In return, you shredded my arm. You totally owe me some answers buddy.”

Keith swallowed his guilt as he looked at the aforementioned arm – it wasn’t shredded, but it was bloody; the garrotte having sunk into flesh; twisted and pulled. The skin was red and puffy, and he realised that the Lance had been actively keeping his weight off it.

“I’m… sorry,” said Keith, carding his fingers through Shiro’s feathers, “I thought you were trying to drown him.”

Lance snorted.

“For what?”

Keith tensed.

“Merfolk drown sailors for fun,” he said, “everyone knows that.”

Lance rolled his eyes. It was an uncomfortable thing to watch, given that they basically glowed in the dark.

“Right,” said Lance, “Merfolk are all barbaric monsters who sink ships for shits and giggles, right?”

Keith had offended him. He blamed the delirious exhaustion; and was suddenly keenly aware that, if he wanted to, Lance could drag both of them back into the water right now.

“I’ve never met one of your kind before,” said Keith, defensively.

Lance crossed his arms over his chest – and then winced as it reopened the wound on his hurt arm.

“Just because people are crappy sailors doesn’t mean that someone else is always to blame,” muttered Lance, “And plus. We don’t drown people for fun.”

He leaned close, face inches from Keith’s.

“We drown them for dinner.”
Lance grinned, showing all of his teeth. They were inhumanely sharp, and there seemed to be way too many of them, and was his jaw unhinging –

“Fuck,” said Keith, topping backwards into the wall. Shiro groaned as he was dropped unceremoniously back onto his blanket nest.

Lance cackled, his laughter bouncing off the cavern and water.

“Kidding!” he said, “but not kidding. I’ll eat you if you pull your knife on me again.”

Keith glared at him, chest heaving with adrenaline. There was something in his hind brain that screamed danger! danger! at the sight of fangs and water and scales. He couldn’t help it.

Lance’s grin faded a little at the expression of Keith’s face.

“Look, I don’t like eating chicken, okay?” he said after a long pause, “I’m not going to eat you. But it would be nice to get some gratitude, just sayin’.”

“Did you just call me a –“

“Keef,” said the merman, raising both eyebrows.

Keith slowly, deliberately, took his hand away from his sword. He let it clatter to the rocks beside him. Then he came back within arms reach, settling his hand back in Shiro’s feathers. It was an anchoring warmth. He sat down, pulling the blanket back over Shiro from where it had slipped off.

Lance tilted his head. The lamp-light made the scales under his chin glitter. He looked otherworldly.

Keith stared determinedly at Shiro’s face.

“Thank you for saving his life,” said Keith finally, not looking up. “We thought he had died months ago. Two others are still missing. Pretty sure they’re dead.”

Something cool touched his ankle, and Keith flinched – but it was only Lance. He had put his teeth away, thank god, and was looking sympathetic again.

“If Shiro’s alive, they might be too – right?” said Lance.

Keith shrugged. His entire body ached. He just wanted lie down next to Shiro, curl up between their wings and just sleep. He had been travelling for so many nights, flying under the cover of darkness to avoid being shot at.

Lance seemed to read his mind.

“You can rest, you know,” he said, “no ships ever sail this close to cliff. Too many rocks. Lots of wrecks. You’ll be safe.”

“They’ll know he’s missing,” said Keith, dully. He brushed the damp hair off Shiro’s face, pressing the back of his hand to Shiro’s forehead. His skin was clammy with cold.

“They probably think he drowned,” said Lance, helpfully, “Unless they saw you while you were trying to kill me. Flapping around. Screaming blue murder. That’s gratitude for you. Anyway. I can keep watch.”

Keith stared at him.
Lance huffed out an annoyed breath. He slapped his tail against the rock.

“Or not, whatever,” he said, “You don’t have to sleep. Stay up and become a corpse, what do I care. I’ll stick around and make sure your buddy doesn’t die.”

And with that, the merman pushed himself off the rock and slipped back into the water with hardly a splash.

Keith shrugged off his own soaked clothes and wrapped one of the blankets around himself, before doing the same to Shiro. No use dying of hypothermia at this stage. He swapped out the damp blanket for a dry one, and went back to patting down Shiro’s wing, methodically yanking out the broken flight feathers one by one.

The lamp glowed steadily at their side, never flickering.

“Shiro?”

He could hear the sound of water swishing; Lance swimming in the still lake. Presently, he began to hum, the sound echoing in the yawn of space; ghostly and hypnotic. There were no words, just a lilting tune, wistful and aimless. It was punctuated by the drip and soft splash of water, a repetitive melody that seemed to slow Keith’s heartbeat to a calm lull.

_Sirens_, he thought absently, _siren song_. He knew he should be more afraid, but …

Somewhere between the third and fifth verse, Keith fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

very new to this fandom, so if you have time please let me know if my characterisation is okay! (any other crit is also welcomed, especially pacing!). _fun fact:_ merfolk here are matriarchal, so Lance is not really in line for the throne as such. He's just the spare heir; baby prince :3.

Thanks for cosu & KC and rachel for getting me into this fandom... it's all your fault... and thank u Ess for being my beta/squee buddy! <3 ilu. If any of you are on tumblr or twitter, please gimme a shout I'm looking for voltron ppl to follow!!!!

EDIT: check out _some awesome fanart_ of Merman lance by Azaiira! :O
Chapter Summary

Lance is accosted by his family; Shiro wakes up; Keith still has a lot to learn about inter-species diplomacy. Hunk makes sure no one is fatally injured.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Thank God men cannot fly, and lay waste to sky as well as earth.”
– H.D. Thoreau

:i:

His arm and shoulder hurt.

Lance watched the two Avians sleep for a while, perched next to them on the rock. The angry, super rude one – Keef – had banked his wings above the nest in his sleep, so that the two were almost completely covered from view. They were probably huddling for warmth. Birds did that, right?

Their wings were really disproportionately huge, thought Lance, watching the feather heap rise very gently with their synchronised breathing. The feathers were drying out too, and were starting to show some colour in the pale blue lamp light. The ones on the inside looked very soft and fluffy, while the huge sleek flight feathers were stiff and almost glossy. Lance really wanted to touch… but also didn’t want to be skewered by a sword.

Plus, it might be rude.

Lance was raised by his mama to be polite and considerate of other people’s customs.

He amused himself by studying their feet instead. Keith was still wearing his boots, which were crusted over with salt and dirt. They had long, curved bits of metal on the sole, thin as a blade. Lance couldn’t fathom what they were for – extra height? Bounce? He pinged one with his fingernail, and ducked away quickly –

Keith merely mumbled something, and shuffled his right wing.

After taking another good long look (and a quick lick just to see) at Shiro’s bare foot, Lance slid back into the water, letting the cool lake water soothe over the deep cut on his arm. He really needed to find some poultice or bandage – it kept bleeding open whenever he moved too much. Every fish in the vicinity could probably smell him.

Wanting to watch over the strangers in case the Galra ship returned, Lance played with his collection of hour-glasses for a while, tipping them this way and that, and watching the fine coloured sand trickle through. He lay on his stomach, tail stirring the water with lazy strokes as he
watched the sand drop. He had a whole box full of hour-glasses, from tiny necklace sized ones to one as tall as his forearm.

Eventually Lance got bored. He wanted to go back home and get something for his arm and shoulder. Maybe find Hunk and see if he knew what they should do about the two Avians. And finding Hunk meant finding something delicious to eat and he was reminded by his stomach that he hadn’t had any dinner that evening. Rolling onto his good shoulder, Lance peered through the feathers of his new companions.

*Nope, still sleeping.*

Mind made up, he quickly dived back into the water, caught the first two fish he could find and brought them back to the rock ledge. Knocking them out with a sharp rock, he left them near the blanket nest so that Keith and Shiro would have something to eat if they woke up before Lance got back. They didn’t look like they could swim *at all* – let alone catch any breakfast.

“I’ll be back soon,” he said to the quiet cave.

Job done, Lance slipped back into the water.

Alas, Lance did not find Hunk first. Someone else found Lance instead.

All Lance got was a warning screech (*“THERE YOU ARE, YOU LITTLE SEA TURNIP!”* ) before one of his sisters came barrelling out of the water like a shark, half armour on, spear in one hand and then Lance’s ear in the other. She yanked, hard.

Lance floundered, trying to twist out of her grip – she just wrapped her much stronger tail around his instead. All his sisters were older, ergo stronger than he was. Mermaids were generally stronger built than mermen, and his sisters were no exception.

“*Ow, Angie, let go! Angie! Angie!*”

“Don’t you *Angie* me, you stinking water carrot,” said his sister, “Where have you *been*? We’ve been worried sick so you’re in *big trouble.*”

Her entire face seemed to sharpen as she zeroed in on the cut on his shoulder and the laceration on his arm. Angelica let go of Lances’ ear in favour of pulling him closer, frowning at the injury.

“Did the Galra see you? Who did this?” said Angie in rapid fire clicks, shaking him a little. Lance felt like his teeth were being rattled in his skull, “What happened. Lance!”

“*Why are you so mean to me,*” he whined, trying to wriggle away. He failed. Angie was pulling out a flat roll of sea-grass bandages from a small pouch on her waist, and proceeded to wrap his arm in quick, practiced motions. She tied the thing off with a bit too much force, and Lance yelped.

“*Good,*” said Angie, grumpily, “I hope you’ve learned your lesson. Now tell me what happened.”

“Nothing happened,” said Lance, letting himself be towed by his good arm, “I think I just lost Hunk in the storm. And um. Got tangled in some wrecks and stuff.”

Angie gave him a shrewd look.
“And then fell asleep, did you?”

Lance raised his eyebrows hopefully.

“Yes?”

Angie sighed, flipping smoothly onto her back and pulling him into a tight hug as they swam. Her hair was braided tight for patrol, but Lance breathed in her familiar smell and twined his tail fin around hers.

“You’re a really bad liar, baby bro,” she said, turning over in the water. They were fairly deep now; safe from anything that might attack them from the surface. Distantly, there was the glow that signalled home.

“Is mama really mad?” asked Lance, chewing on his lip with his blunt inner teeth, “I just – forgot the time, I swear.”

“Patrols sighted the Galran ship,” said Angie, “So when you didn’t come home we thought – “ she turned, suddenly at an enquiring sound that streaked through the water. She answered with a call of her own.

Yes, I got him! He’s fine.

“But Ma doesn’t know. We didn’t tell her yet, she’d scale us alive.”

His sister ran a hand through his hair, and then gave him another tight hug.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” she said. Then she flicked his ear, “But don’t do that again! You’re always wandering off.”

“I wasn’t gone that long,” grumbled Lance, but followed her dutifully through an overhang. Their home rose out of the ocean bed like a mountain, speckled through with the augmented glow of crystal light.

A moment later, Hunk appeared – along with two more mermaids. Lance cringed in anticipation.

“Lance!” they chorused, and descended upon him, speaking over eachother and tugging his arm out, inspecting the bandages. Someone started rubbing a heavy poultice on the cut on his shoulder, and no matter how furiously Lance wiggled, he couldn’t get away from the foul smell.

“Aghh,” he protested, “No – No, I don’t need it!”

Someone smooshed his face into their neck.

“You stay still you little worm,” said Syrena, “I’ve been looking for you for two hours! Where were you? Huh? Huh?”

“He said he fell asleep,” said Angelica, flicking her tail.

“PAH,” said Merida – she was the oldest – “We need to keep you on a leash, my small shrimp.”

“I’m not a guppie anymore!” said Lance, “Hunk? Help me.”

“Uh uh,” came Hunk’s voice from somewhere over Merida’s shoulder. She had her hair out, and it was obscuring Lance’s vision in a bloom of brown, but Lance could still feel Hunk swimming backwards away, “I’m staying outta this. Neutral party. Hunk is recusing himself.”
"Were you off exploring Galra wrecks again," said Syrena, patting down more bandages and yanking Lance’s arm up so she could tie them firmly under his armpit. It scratched against the scales there, uncomfortable – but the poultice was a balme against the cut. “You know you’re not allowed to go there. What if you get stuck in a window?”

“I’d never get stuck – “

“And we have to come get you out because Hunk was too scared to cut the support beams?”

“That was one time - !”

“Who was on Lance duty anyway,” said Merida, finally pulling back.

“Me,” Angie admitted sullenly, “So this does not get back to Ma. Got it? You all owe me at least once.”

“Relax, we know the drill,” said Syrena.

“What do you mean, Lance Duty,” Lance demanded, trying to pull his tail out of Syrena’s tail hug. He failed, arms windmilling.

“No point worrying her,” said Merida, “and You!” she turned and pointed one sharp finger at Hunk – who drew back as if he had been shot. “I thought you tagged along with him everywhere!”

“He swam too fast!” said Hunk, “I lost track of him in the storm!”

“We should cuff them together,” said Angie, eyeing both boys speculatively, “or cuff Lance to a rock. We could take him for swims after each shift.”

“I’m - !” said Lance.

“Too much work,” said Merida.

“Could have a roster,” said Syrena, “but I’m not free on Wednesday evenings.”

“Can I go now?” wheedled Lance, “I’m hungry.”

“I got leftovers,” said Hunk, finally stepping in to save him. Lances’ sisters finally let him swim more than an arms’ grab away, though all three eyed him with great suspicion.

“I want to see you home before sun down,” said Syrena, flipping her hair out of her face, “I’m going to check at home Lance!”

“I’m too old for a curfew!” Lance squawked, but Hunk elbowed him hard in the ribs.

“What he means is, he will be home and tucked into sleep by then,” said Hunk meaningfully.

Making a trilling, exasperated noise, Merida flipped onto her back and swam away. Syrena paused to give Lance a kiss on the forehead before she and Angie followed suit.

Lance poked at his newly bandaged injuries.

“So you wanna tell me where you actually were all night?” Hunk demanded.

“Food first,” said Lance.
“Yeah, okay,” said Hunk, swimming apace with him.

“Then you’re gonna help me sneak out. I gotta show you something real cool up at the lake.”

Hunk looked dismayed.

“No – Lance, we literally just said we wouldn’t go and – Lance!”

It was the cold that woke Keith.

For the first time in a long time, he woke in increments; blinking groggily at the deep shadows around them, the smell of heavy salt and his own feathers. Then his eyes adjusted to the gloom and he jerked up from where he had been lying on top of Shiro’s left wing. Shiro. He was still unconscious, brow furrowed.

The events of last night came rushing back, and Keith shifted his aching wings, feeling the droplets of water on them like tiny icicles. He squinted across the water, at the shadows lapping at their rock. There was more light now, spilling in from the mouth of the cave and reflecting off the still surface. Judging by the swathe of rock lining the cave wall that hadn’t been there before, Keith realised it must be low tide.

“Lance?” he called, body tensing at the way his own voice echoed off the slick rock.

He concentrated hard, trying to listen for any tell-tale gurgle of water – but none came.

“Hello?” he called again, “Lance?”

No answer.

A fission of panic curled in his gut, which he stamped on as irrational. They didn’t need some fish to guide them out of the cave. All they’d need to do was wait until the tide was low enough and then climb out. Somehow, Keith turned back to Shiro, laying a hand on his neck and then his forehead. The skin was warm to the touch, perhaps a little too warm. Fever? At least some colour had returned to Shiro’s lips, and he wasn’t shivering hard anymore.

Still, Keith needed to make sure he didn’t get any more ill. Or fall ill himself. They needed a fire.

He shook Shiro gently by the shoulders. When no response came, he shook him harder, patting his cheek with one hand.

“Hey,” he said quietly, “Shiro. Shiro. I need you to wake up for me. Hey.”

Then Shiro groaned, eyes scrunching up – before flying open. His hands came up too, reflexive and panicking – and if it wasn’t for Keith’s own reflexes, both of them would have tumbled backwards off the rock. As it was, Keith pinned Shiro down by the arch of the wings, hands catching the other avian by the wrists.

“Shiro!” he shouted, “Shiro, it’s me. Keith!”

The cave shouted back – it’s me, it’s me, it’s me!
Shiro was gulping in desperate gasps of air, pupils blown and chest heaving. But at Keith’s voice, recognition flickered in his face, and the tension drained out of his shoulders after a long, awful moment. His hands stilled; fingers curling around Keith’s wrist. Keith could feel his own heart beat through the thin skin there, like a drum just before a war.

“Hey,” he said, relaxing and drawing back so he was no longer pushing his weight onto his knees. He helped Shiro sit up slowly, arms wrapping around to support his back and wings. They were chest to chest, desperate for warmth and company. Shiro’s free hand came around to mirror Keith’s, fingers in the soft feathers just above Keith’s shoulder blades. His breath rose in the air like smoke.

Keith felt like he was holding a ghost.

“Glad to have you back,” he said, letting his wings stretch out to either side of them.

Shiro made a choked noise.

“Glad to be back.”

Of the two of them, Shiro had the larger wingspan – it came with his build, and he was much more suited to long distance flight than Keith. But right now, his wings were tucked in close to his body, shifting nervously, as if he could tuck himself completely into the shadow of Keith’s wings. He flinched, when a drop of water fell on his face, and Keith felt the burn of anger return, hot and ugly.

Eventually, they pulled back.

“Where – “ Shiro looked around at the cave, “Where are we?”

Keith sat back down on the blankets, fetching a dryer one for Shiro.

“Sea cave. Lake. Not sure exactly where, but we’re off the West coast, near Whitecap Bay. Found you because the ship was trying to anchor in the storm, I think.”

“I thought I’d drowned,” said Shiro, rubbing his eyes. Keith tracked the new scars on his face, the shorn off hair, the grey white flecks. “I remember the water. Did you pull me out?”

Keith huffed.

“I tried. But no, it was a merman.”

Shiro looked up at that, startled.

“A what?”

“Merfolk. He brought you here, for shelter. Not sure where he is now. Maybe he’s left.”

Shiro looked bewildered, thumbing his own feathers incredulously. They had mostly dried in the night, but were crusted with salt and ruffled awfully this way and that. It must itch, like Keith’s own. All he wanted was some dry sand and a lot of hot sun.

“He didn’t drown me?” asked Shiro, “what did he want with us? Was he working for the Galra?”

Keith shrugged.

“I don’t know,” he said, truthfully, “But I doubt he was working for the Galra if he – why would he help us?”
“I thought I was going to drown,” said Shiro, “I thought for sure – but anything would have been better than staying on that – “ he broke off, his whole body shuddering. Keith jerked forwards, wings coming up protectively.

“You’re safe for now,” he said, shaking Shiro by the shoulders, “Shiro? The entrance is too low for boats, let alone a ship. I think we’re safe for now. I’ve got you.”

Shiro just nodded. Keith tried for a smile, but it probably came off as more of a grimace. He sat back, stretching his wings with a groan.

“We need to get a fire going,” he said, “I didn’t come this far for you to die from hypothermia. I’m going to get one going and then help you with your feathers, okay?”

Shiro looked up. He looked uncharacteristically unsure; face still pale in the lake light.

“Wings?”

Keith looked away.

“We need to groom them and get rid of the clipped ones,” he said, “I – I took out the sharp ones last night while you were out of it. They looked like they hurt a lot.”

“Oh,” said Shiro, hunching under the arch of his own wings, “I – yeah they feel a bit better. You don’t have to – “

“Shiro. Shut up.”

Keith made Shiro sit there, bundled in the blankets for warmth (he suspected some of the cloth were actually carpets, they were so stiff and prickly) while he rooted around the merman’s stash of random crap for something flammable. Eventually he came back with a stack of yellowing paper, thick and miraculously dry. They were ship cargo logs, so he presumed no one would be missing them.

His metal lighters were also dry and safe in their pouch, and soon Keith had made a small but happy fire near where they had set up nest. It shone a warm inviting glow on the stone and water, and he pulled off his soggy jacket and made Shiro strip off his shirt to dry. Keith also pulled off his flight boots and tilted them towards the fire – it was easier to walk on the stones without them anyway.

Realising belatedly that they had no fresh water source, Keith made the painstaking journey out of the cave (nearly slipping over twice) and managed to gather a flask-ful of rainwater that had gathered on the moss and stone divots near the cave entrance. The sun almost blinded him, all signs of the storm gone.

Keith stood there for a moment, stretching his wings and letting the sea breeze filter through his primaries. There was enough wind to fly, even from this low an angle – but he couldn’t; not with Shiro land bound. Waiting until his eyes readjusted to the shadows, Keith made his way back along the edge of the lake.

He pressed the water-flask into Shiro’s hand, insistent; and the latter took it without much prompting. He drank like a man in the desert, looking sheepish when he finished the flask in one
go. Keith shrugged, taking it back and recapping it.

“Did you go fishing, while I was out?” asked Shiro.

Keith paused.

“No,” he said, “Why.”

Shiro pointed – and sure enough, there were two dead fish lying near their nest; fat bellied and silver. The smell of them was mostly drowned out by the water, but they seemed freshly killed. Keith shuffled closer, bending down suspiciously.

“I think Lance left them for us…” he said, warily.

Shiro poked one of the fish with a finger. It was definitely dead; a neat smear of blood on its head. It had sharp fishy teeth, just like Lance. Keith glared at it.

“The merman,” asked Shiro, “Maybe he wants us well fed before he devours us.”

Shiro gave him a flat look.

“I doubt he’d want to eat you,” he said, “You’re all sinew and bone.”

“I’m not,” said Keith.

“Have you not been eating your vegetables?”

“Shiro.”

“I knew you would lapse back into bad habits without me,” said Shiro, smiling.

The smile faded when he saw the expression on Keith’s face.

“I’m sorry,” said Shiro, “I – it’s…. How long was I gone?”

Keith stared at the fish. Their dead eyes stared back, cold and flat and alien.

“About a year,” he said.

He heard Shiro’s intake of breath.

“I’m glad you found me,” said Shiro, “I’m – thank you.”

Keith didn’t look up. He was afraid if he did, he’d do something awful – like cry. He busied himself with the fish instead.

“Let’s get you something to eat,” he said, taking the fish to the fire, “You need to rest.”

They ate in silence, both too tired and hungry to be picky about anything. The fish was fat and surprisingly tasty, even without any seasoning – and Keith borrowed two gold plates from the
merman’s vast collection for them to eat off. He ended up giving half of his fish forcibly to Shiro when his friend polished off his portion in five minutes. Keith wondered when it was he last ate any proper food at all.

Keith washed his knives in the lake water, checking over their clothing, which had mostly dried out by the fire. He watched as Shiro struggled with his shirt, moving gingerly and favouring one arm over the other. The bottom of his feet were scraped up too, but they didn’t have any bandages with them. Cursing, Keith tore up one of his spare shirts instead. When Shiro protested, he merely pulled one errant foot into his lap, enough to make Shiro sit back down into the blanket nest.

“You don’t want it to get infected,” said Keith, tying down the cloth strip carefully around Shiro’s ankle, “It’s going to be bad enough while we’re grounded here. You need to be able to walk.”

Shiro’s hand came to rest on his shoulder, and Keith almost flinched away. He swallowed the instinct down, looking out over the lake.

“You don’t have to stay here,” said Shiro, “it’s going to take – well, at least a month before my feathers come in. You should go home, report back to the Garrison and – “

Keith kicked a stone into the water.

“I’m staying.”

“Keith – “

“I’m staying.”

The water lapped at their feet, like the trappings of a lullaby. The exposed stone glittered wet and dark, revealing clam shells and tiny spots of bioluminescent light. Every now and then, the surface of the water would ripple gently, from a small fish fin.

“Oh alright,” said Shiro, finally, shuffling close so that their wings touched, “Thank you.”

“You’ll die without me,” said Keith angrily, “You can’t fly yet.”

“I know,” said Shiro; calm and patient.

Keith took a deep breath, held it – and then let it out again. When he finally felt a little steadier, he shook out his wings so they folded across the two of them. Shiro did the same, a familiar gesture, until it was unclear where one wing ended and the other began. The crown of Keith’s wings were the same as Shiro’s; dark slate grey to his glossy black feathers. Keith’s colours mostly tipped his pinions and the soft underside of his wings, speckled with hawk markings of dusty clay to wine red.

He reached out slowly for Shiro’s wing, only touching when Shiro obligingly extended it open. Keith brushed over a severed flight feather, the ends sharp and harsh. There was clotted blood around its neighbours, where it had cut and rubbed against the exposed wing.

“You’re a fucking mess,” he said, shuffling closer. He crossed his legs so he could fit underneath Shiro’s taller span, letting his own right wing drop low and lax across their shoulders.

“You’re looking a bit ratty yourself,” said Shiro, reaching up and running a practiced hand – warm, sure and firm – along the arch of Keith’s wing. He shuddered with the pleasure of it, groaning as Shiro worked over the bunched muscle and joint.
Taking one of the severed feathers between his fingers, Keith gave it a sharp *pull-twist*, and dodged back to avoid being whacked in the face by Shiro’s wing. Shiro made a yelp of pain, hands stuttering where they were buried in Keith’s feathers. Keith snorted, dropping the ruined feather onto the ground and moving to the next one along.

“Stay still, you huge baby,” he said, “Or I’ll knock you out again.”

“This hardly seems fair,” said Shiro, but he went back to grooming Keith’s feathers and turning his right wing into a puddle of bliss.

He kept his wing as still as he could though, but couldn’t always hold back the hiss and wince when Keith had to take out a particularly major feather or get rid of shattered shafts. By the end, his fingers were slippery with blood, and Shiro was breathing a little faster through his nose. Keith dried the down feathers as best he could with his shirt.

“You okay?” he said, quietly.

Shiro rolled his shoulders, stretching his right wing slowly but as far as he could. He sighed, winching it back in and then repeated the movement several times.

“It still hurts,” he admitted, “But it’s much better. Thank you, I – “

“Will you *stop thanking me*,” snapped Keith, his voice coming out much louder than he meant it to. It echoed around the cave, making Shiro draw back.

“Sorry,” said Keith, passing a hand over his face. He could smell the copper of Shiro’s blood beneath his fingernails, and he reached over to wash them again in the lake water, “Sorry I’m. Just tired.”

“What if we both stop apologising?” offered Shiro, a wry twist to the edge of his mouth.

Keith felt something settle more comfortably at the base of his heart.

“Yeah. Yeah okay.”

Shiro smiled, a little wider, a little less timid.

“Great. Now turn over so I can do your other wing.”

“All I’m saying,” said Hunk, “Is that *maybe* we should get one of your sisters to come along. Just in case these… bird friends of yours, turn out to be *vicious vicious hunters like everyone says they are.*”

Lance flicked his tail at his friend.

“They’re *fine. Honestly.*”

“They nearly hacked off your arm!” said Hunk, gesticulating wildly.

Lance winced.
“Well that was a misunderstanding. I’m sure they’ll be nicer now that they’re not soggy and drowning! Also I left them food.”

Hunk face-palmed; an impressive gesture while you were swimming very fast through the water. They following the shape of the coast, eastwards towards the cave. It was still thus far undiscovered by Lance’s legion of over-protective sisters, and so that’s where he went when he wanted to be alone or stash his treasures. He wasn’t sure how much food Avians ate – so they had stolen a bit of extra food before they snuck out of the city.

“Does this mean I can eat these seaweed rolls,” said Hunk hopefully.

Lance flipped over in the water so he could squint at his friend.

“C’mon,” he said, “those poor birdies are probably starving. Their wings are really really huge – aren’t you excited to see one up close?”

“That depends,” Hunk muttered, keeping close behind Lance, “is it close enough for them to throw a spear at me?”

Lance paused. One of the crabs in his bag tried to stab him with a claw. He hissed at it.

“I dunno,” said Lance, “Keef was waving a sword at me but he was carrying lots of stuff. I didn’t really check. Anyway shhh, we’re here.”

“Oh joy,” said Hunk, but dutifully followed Lance into the quiet of the cave. The waves still tugged at them here, but much gentler, and it was easily to float to the top of the silky surface. The depth of the cave filtered and dimmed the sunlight so it wasn’t so harsh on Lances’ eyes – he always felt a bit blinded if he accidentally came up top during the day. He liked his cave.

As he neared the surface, he noticed a strange warm glow ahead – displaced amidst the blue – Lance broke the surface, taking in a gulp of air through his nose and froze. Fire!

Hunk grabbed his arm, body tense.

“Lance, I don’t think – “

Lance thrust his bag at him.

“Wait here,” he said, and dived forwards. How was there a fire? Had something caught fire with his stash? Were keef and Shiro okay? He burst out of the water near the edge of the rocks, yelling out a warning. The two Avians – Shiro was clearly awake now – yelped in fright, and it took a moment for Lance to realise that he wasn’t speaking in English.

It took a few more beats for his eyes to adjust… and realise what the fire was burning from. Papers. His papers. They were burning his books, his treasures, his things! Indignant rage swelled up in Lance like a ferocious wind, and quick as a whip, he lashed flipped backwards, forcing his fin up in an arc that sprayed water all over the fire, putting it out.

Everyone was shouting, their voices echoing and bouncing off the cave walls. The other Avian – Shiro – had flattened himself against the rock wall, away from Lance. His eyes were wide with shock, mouth agape. Keef, the ungrateful, destructive shrimp was yelling at Lance.

Lance switched to English for the purposes of effective retaliation.
“You!” he screeched, all teeth and flashing eyes, “How dare you burn my stuff! My papers! I collected those! Pidge helped me dry them! And you burned them.”

“Stay back!” Keith shouted, and there was the sword again.

Lance narrowed his eyes.

With a twist, he leapt from the water, throwing himself scale first on the rock and snagged Keith’s ankle – his boots were off – before propelling himself back into the water by his tail. Keith screamed as he slipped, sword clattering when he hit the rock, wings snapping out in huge desperate flaps.

“Wait!” came an unfamiliar voice. It was Shiro; with his dark wings and curiously white hair, “wait! Please!”

Keith was waist deep in the water now, but having produced a dagger out of no where, he had slashed at the rock and was now holding on for grim life. Lance hissed, spluttering when a wing knocked him hard against the side of the head.

“Please… I’m sorry we burned your things, I didn’t realise what they were,” said Shiro, hands out, wings tucked neat at his back – unintimidating, “Please don’t drown him. Please.”

His tone of voice, still hoarse from the sea, made Lance pause, just a little.

“I fed you,” said Lance, peevishly, “I fed you, I let you sleep on my blanket collection and you burn my books.”

“I didn’t burn any fucking books,” snapped Keith, still trying to crawl back onto flat surface, “They were just ship logs, cargo lists – let go of me!”

Lance gave him another pointed tug on the ankle, in the direction of the water. He sunk his nails in a little too, just to make the point… but then let go. Without the tension, he sank to his shoulders in the water.

“I don’t like fire,” said Lance, watching Keith clamber back to relative safety. Lance could smell blood again, and saw Kith wiping his palms on his clothing, smearing red. Good. Served him right.

“It’s freezing in here,” said Keith angrily, “Shiro is sick. I had to build a fire. They were just logs, they’re worthless!”

Lance bared all his teeth, and Keith recoiled a little. But before he could speak, Hunk emerged from the water behind him.

“I’d just like to point out,” he said, “it’s still pretty rude to destroy his stuff. Didn’t he save your life?”

Lance folded his arms.

But it was Shiro who spoke. To Lance’s surprise, he took a few steps towards the edge of the water, kneeling down so that his wings were almost close enough to touch.

“Oh,” he said, staring at Lance, “It was you. The one who caught me in the storm.”

Unbidden, Lance swam a little closer, tilting his head.

“Yes,” he said, retracting some of his teeth so he could speak their tongue, “it was me.”
Shiro looked from Lance to Keith, and then back again.

“Vous saved my life,” said Shiro, wondrously, “You could have drowned me.”

Lance hummed an assent.

“Still could, really.”

“Don’t you fucking – “

“How about you shut your beak, Keef.”

“Guys!”

Everyone stared at everyone else. Then:

“I’m sorry we burned some of your things,” said Shiro sincerely, reaching out a hand towards Lance. Lance stared at it, “Keith was trying to keep me warm, it’s – we don’t usually do well in the water. He was worried I’m – I’m sure we can try replaced some of the things.”

“Old ship logs – !” fumed Keith.

“Keith,” said Shiro.


“I guess that’s okay,” he said, letting go of Shiro’s hand and sinking back further into the water, “If you needed it to survive. I just don’t like fire, I guess.”

“We’re sorry,” said Shiro again, “I – thank you. For saving me. And for not letting Keith drown, either.”

Lance flicked his tail behind him, glaring at the second Avian. He drifted towards Hunk.

“Well,” he said, “at least I’m glad I helped one of you.”

“I didn’t need any help, thank you,” said Keith acidly. He was fussing with his wing tips, one stretched out and the other arched high. “God I just dried these out and they’re ruined again.”

Lance smiled, batting his inner eyelid.

“That’s why I splashed you especially, Keef, and not your friend.”

“Okay, Okay, serious question now,” said Hunk, holding up two bags, “Does this mean we only have to feed one and not both of them? And can I get a feather sample from someone please?”

Chapter End Notes

Eeep I know this was a boring chapter but things are picking up soon so please bear with me!! I just felt like some of this emotional stuff was quite important *cries*. If
you have time, do let me know what you think or leave a comment! Criticism is very helpful & loved. Hope you guys enjoyed the wing-grooming fluff because... i love wings...

Also check out some amazing FANART for this I am still screaming with joy, give these a reblog / retweet!!!

merman lance with glowing eyes by Rachel_Huey88
Winged Keith and MerLance + Lance in the storm by vvorlock
baby guppy Lances by Canayam

If you're on Twitter, please come squee! I'm @fishwrites
Over the next few days, Shiro’s fever got worse.

He oscillated between sweating heat and shuddering chills, face pallid in the crystal glow. He had started to cough, a wet hoarse sound that made Keith’s lips go white every time. His wings didn’t stop shivering, even though they were mostly dry, and then he’d thrown up most of what he ate the night before.

They discovered, a bit later, that the gashes on his feet had become red and infected.

On hindsight, it was probably this that kept Keith from any more social faux pas, and Lance from inadvertently drowning his feathery-ass in a fit of pique (according to Hunk). As it was, by the second morning, Keith looked so exhausted he could barely sit up straight. When Lance returned from checking in at home, it was to find the avian propped up next to the dying embers of a fire, holding a pan over it. His feathers were all over the place; reflecting the warm glow of the fire. He looked a little demonic, really.

Lance peered at the bird over the rock. Hunk stayed further in the water, still wary.

“Did you sleep at all?” asked Lance, laying down his bag and hoisting himself out of the lake to perch on the stone.

Keith tensed, but didn’t go for any weapons. They were making progress! Maybe because he knew that Lance wouldn’t come any closer to the flames. Beside them, half buried in blankets, was Shiro.

“I don’t know,” said Keith, taking the pan off the fire. He tested the contents with a finger, and, seemingly satisfied, poured it into a deep-throated goblet.
Shuffling over to his friend, he knelt down to nudge Shiro into a sitting position.

“Hey,” he said, voice a murmur above the water and the flames, “C’mon it’s warm. You need to keep hydrated.”

The mass of feathers shifted in the nest.

“Hurts,” said Shiro, voice a thread from coughing, “Can’t…”

“It’ll help,” said Keith, bringing the goblet up to Shiro’s lips. He notched his wings around them, protective, like a shield against the cool sea air. “It’s warm.”

“We need to deal with his tails,” said Hunk, “before it gets worse.”

“Feet,” corrected Lance.

“Feets,” agreed Hunk, “I got the poultice and some bandages with me.”

Keith didn’t look up, concentrated on helping Shiro drink. Despite his exhaustion, Keith’s hands were steady on the nape of Shiro’s neck; on the belly of the goblet. Lance watched the Avian’s throat move. It looked a little like the baby sea birds he used to watch in spring, when they nested in the cliff-face. Shiro coughed – and didn’t stop coughing for a few long moments.

“Cold,” he said, rubbing his face with his hands and hunching in on himself, “it’s – “

“I know,” said Keith, crouching even closer, “I know – I’ll – I’ll get more kindling for the fire it’s. It’s a bit low.”

“We should really fix his feets first,” said Hunk, “I can smell it from here.”

Keith looked at them then, still wary. But his eyes were desperate.

“I don’t think Merfolk remedies is gonna work on Avians,” he said, bluntly.

“It’s not getting better by itself,” Hunk pointed out. He swam a little closer – just a little.

“Plus,” said Lance, extending his arm, “It works just fine on mine. Remember these?” he rotated his shoulder so Keith could see his own bandages from their first encounter. Keith had the good manners to look a little abashed. Lance smiled toothily.

“Not infected.”

“I should try get help. Get medicine from one of the towns nearby,” he said, doubtfully.

Lance laughed at the back of his throat, a clicking gurgle that made the avian startle.

“You can’t even fly in a straight line right now. But Hunk knows about this stuff, trust me he’s good.”

“I don’t know,” said Keith, looking from Lance to Hunk and then back again.

“Just…put it on,” said Shiro.

They all looked at him.

His hair was plastered to his face, and there were hollows in his cheeks. He smiled though, and it
was a nice smile.

“Can’t get worse,” he said, “I feel like my feet are on fire.”

“There,” said Lance, gesturing, “Fire. Can’t get worse than fire.”

He dug the jar of poultice out of his satchel, along with the bandages. He waved Hunk over impatiently.

“No one’s going to stab you, Hunk,” said Lance. He shot Keith a narrowed eyed look. “Are they, Keef?”

“No one is stabbing anyone,” said Shiro, firmly.

“Hrmph,” said Hunk, but he made the last few sweeps over to the rock. With frequent glances at Keith, he began mixing the two medicines, a thick fine mess that stung their noses. It reminded Lance of his sisters, and he swished his tail uneasily. Hunk handed him one of the leaf bandages, and Lance took it.

“Feet please,” he said, and had to tamp down a little fission of excitement when Shiro complied, sitting up with his hurt leg out of the nest. Carefully, mindful of the warm thin skin, Lance stripped him of the dirty cloth bandages. Shiro hissed between his teeth when he cleaned the gashes with water, but Lance quickly wrapped the skin with the fresh bandages.

Keith was watching with bright beady bird eyes.

Alright, so their eyes looked mostly the same shape and size, but Lance thought they were a little birdy looking.

“How does it feel? Shiro?”

Shiro wriggled his toes. It was a bizarre and fascinating thing to watch. Lance paused in his work and held on to one of the toes. It was sort of like a bean. A warm squishy bean. What did Avians need squishy beans for?

“It’s… cold, sort of,” said Shiro, “Stings less than I thought it would.”

“It’ll keep the infection from getting worse,” said Hunk, “as long as you don’t get any dirt or anything into it.”

“Smells …fishy,” said Keith, wrinkling his nose.

“Well you smell like wet seagull, but you don’t see me complaining about it,” huffed Lance, finishing up on Shiro’s ankle and moving up to the gash on his thigh. The avian flinched bodily when his hands touched his skin there, and Lance drew back.

“Sorry – you’re – your hands are cold,” said Shiro, staring at Lance’s webbed hands.

Keith held his own hands out for the bandages.

“I’ll do those,” he said impatiently.

Lance cocked his head.

“Do you know how?” he asked, dubiously.
“You have to tie it tight enough,” said Hunk helpfully, “but not too tight. I think. I’m not actually sure what Avian circulation is like. Are you always this warm or is it because of the fever?”

Keith made a weird noise in his throat. That definitely was not a human noise.

“Just give it to me,” he said, and snatched the bandage out of Lance’s hand.

They were interrupted by Shiro hacking up half a lung.

“We need to keep the fire going,” said Keith, tying off the bandage and combing the hair out of his eyes with a distracted hand, “We – He needs to keep warm. Sweat the fever out. Otherwise it’ll just get worse.”

Lance splashed the water behind him, looking at the crackling embers. Keith had managed to make a sort of circle with large stones, and it kept the fire in a tidy pile – but the presence of it still made Lance uneasy. He tried his best to ignore it though; since Shiro seemed to still be shivering and cold. It wasn’t time for him to be squeamish!

Keith seemed to be battling with something in his own head. He was staring at a point just over Shiro’s shoulder. Shiro, however, appeared to read his mind.

“I’m not going to die in the ten minutes while you’re gone getting firewood,” he said, in between painful gulps of air, “I’ll be fine.”

“I don’t trust them,” Keith muttered. As if Lance and Hunk weren’t right there.

Hunk frowned.

“Look,” he said, “I think we’ve got more to be suspicious of on this trust ledger than you, Keith,” he said.

“Keef,” corrected Lance.

Everyone ignored him.

Hunk began counting things off on one hand.

“We’ve saved you from drowning. Given you shelter. Brought you food constantly for three days in a row. Risked the royal guard to do all this. Brought you bandages and medicine,” Hunk switched to his other hand, “Patched you up. Let you burn shit.”

“Yes, alright,” said Keith, drawing his wings tighter to his own back, “I – “

Shiro put a hand on his knee, and Keith fell silent – like a storm encountering an anchor, steady and sure.

Shiro looked at the two merfolk.

“We trust you,” he said, “And of course we’re grateful for your help. I owe you my life.”

Hunk splashed the water with his tail, looking uncomfortable.

“That’s not – look, all I’m saying is we aren’t gonna drown you the minute your back is turned, okay?”

“Well...” said Lance, giving Keith a sly grin. Then he yelped when Hunk whacked him on his
good shoulder. He pouted at his best friend.

“Okay, fine, no drowning.”

“It’s just a stereotype,” said Hunk.

“Stereo- Galrans all avoid Whitecap because of how many ships get sunk here!” Keith protested, but it was a lot less sharp than it was before.

“Maybe I’ll have to go look for firewood myself,” said Shiro, making as if to stand up.

“No you won’t,” said Keith. His wings snapped out in his irritation, knocking over the goblet and the pan. The woosh of air it made ruffled Lance’s hair, and it felt warm.

Winching them back in, Keith pulled on his boots. The blades on them made sharp shinnggg noises against the wet rock.

“Aren’t you gonna wait until you’re – “ began Lance.

Keith ignored him in favour of backing against the rockface, and then making a running jump towards the water. His wings flared out, and with a few powerful sweeps he was flying in the cavernous space above the lake. Hunk was gasping like a guppy, making impressed “ooooh,” noises. Lance boggled – he couldn’t help himself. The cave entrance was far too low, even in this low tide, for –

Above them in the dark space, Keith made a few half-curve swoops, before he dived towards the cave mouth. Lanced threw himself back into the water to follow, the splashing sweep of his tail matching the sound of wings.

“Hey!” called Lance, “Hey!”

Keith didn’t answer; they both sped towards the mouth of the lake. At the very last minute, Keith tucked his wings to his side, zipped through the gap – so close that his toes almost dragged the surface; drawing faint ripples like an exhale of breath.

He was so close that Lance could reach up and…

And then the avian was out of the cavern, wings snapping out again in the sunlight. The wings seemed to catch on something invisible, because he was lifted with a jerk from the shoulder-blades, like a fish on a hook.

By the time Lance’s eyes adjusted to the bright sun, Keith was just a silhouette against the sky.

It took a few trips for Keith to bring all the firewood and assorted kindling back to the cavern. The clouds on the horizon weren’t too ominous; but he wanted to make sure they had enough to last them through a day if it started storming again. It was good to stretch his wings after long hours cramped in the cavern, and the altitude cleared his head a little.

He dared not stray too close to any of the towns, unsure whether they were friendly to the Galra state or neutral, but Keith did manage to snag two fat rabbits and a bundle of late autumn fruit. Shiro couldn’t survive on fish alone, no matter how exotic they were.
By the time Keith was satisfied, the sun was dropping fast over the horizon, and patch of light that spilled across the lake was a small candle puddle near the entrance.

The tide was coming in.

Cursing the water – he would have to dry his boots again – Keith made ducked beneath the yawning archway. It was too low for him to risk flying in, and also too dark. He had to stand for a long moment, forcing his eyes to adjust. Avians had brilliant eyesight in general, but that was during the day-time. He could see the glow of the fire on the other side of the lake, bright and healthy. Shiro was silhouetted in front of it, one wing stretched out. Beside him was Lance, his slim profile tapering all the way down to an elongated tailfin which threw up long shadows against the rock face.

Keith hurried towards them, his boots loud against the rock and his breath against his face.

“Keith!” Shiro when he was within reach of the fire.

Keith dropped his loot unceremoniously onto a slab of rock and stalked forwards. Lance seemed to be ensconced in Shiro’s wing, hands deep over the arch of the feathers. Keith stared.

“What are you doing?” he said.

“Helping,” said Lance, not looking up.

“He’s getting rid of the last of the bulle-ah!” said Shiro.

Lance had plucked something from the wing, making Shiro hiss and Keith jerk forwards reflexively.

“Ah-ha!” said Lance, holding up something minute and shiny between two fingers, “That’s the last one I think.”

He threw the thing behind his shoulder into the water, and then patted some more poultice onto Shiro’s wing joint with a slender finger.

“…Someone didn’t clean it properly,” said Lance, twisting on his tail to face Keith.

Keith glared at Shiro.

“You said it felt fine.”

Shiro looked trapped.

“You probably didn’t see it, Keef,” said Lance, tail flicking gently in the water, “What with your puny birdy eyesight.” His own eyes glowed, even backlit by the fire. Keith didn’t bother disputing pronunciation.

“You are very fluffy though,” said Lance appreciatively, “and warm. It feels so weird! But nice. Nice weird. We don’t get many dry fluffy things you know.”

Then the merman ran a hand through Shiro’s down feathers…and Keith felt like his eyes were going to bug right out of his head.

Shiro, still bundled in blankets, looked flushed in the face – but whether that was from the fever or inappropriate wing groping, Keith couldn’t tell. His own feathers felt like they were standing on end. Keith opened his mouth to protest – but was glared into silence by Shiro’s eyebrows. Keith
glared back, tucking his own wings tight to his back pointedly.

A small stray feather fell on to Lance’s nose, and he went a little cross-eyed trying to look at it.

Keith cleared his throat.

“Where’s your friend?” he said, looking around at the still water.

Lance was playing with the feather.

“Mmhm?” he said, “Hunk? He’s seeing my sisters off. I need to go home soon or they’ll come looking for me but I wanted to make sure Shiro’s wing was okay first. And wait until you got back.”

“…oh,” said Keith, feeling a little ashamed that his mind had gone straight to an ambush. “I – thank you.”

Lance shrugged, and then rolled back to a sitting position. It was a strangely fluid motion, unimpeded by human joints and limbs. His blue tail splashed against the rocks wetly, where it still trailed down. Keith distracted himself by handing Shiro one of the fruits, and took one for himself.

“Is it really too dark to see?” asked Lance, head tilted up to watch Keith move the rabbits closer to the fire. “Even with the flames? And the lamp?”

“It’s workable,” said Keith, retrieving his dagger. He felt a bit better with it in his hand; and he saw Lance eye it warily.

“I thought Avians had legendary eyesight,” said Lance, still playing with Shiro’s feather, “How else do you spear a mermaid from the sky?”

“We don’t spear – “ Shiro coughed into his elbow, wings shuddering with the force of it, “- we’re not. We don’t have quarrel with merfolk.”

“Hmm,” said Lance, “I suppose not.”

“The flames move, so it’s – harder for our eyes.”

“But we see fine enough,” interjected Keith carefully. He deposited the guts and innards of the animal carefully to be thrown away later, and kept going. Lance twitched towards him, interested by the smell of food, but still wary of the fire to come any closer.

Lance gave him a long, shrewd sort of look, head cocked to one side. Then he stared at the feather in his hands and to the clumsily patched up bandage on Shiro’s arch. He put the feather down carefully on a dry rock.

“I have an idea,” he said. And without any further explanation, he slipped into the water.

Keith stared after him.

“So he doesn’t have to splash water everywhere when he does that,” he said, affronted.

Shiro made an amused sort of snort which turned into a cough.

“I think that’s just you,” he said.
Keith skewered the rabbit with irritation and began on the second one.

“Nearly gave me a heart attack,” he said, “letting him patch up your wing like that. I could have done it.”

“He said he could smell the wound,” said Shiro, working his way carefully around the fruit. He hurt Keith to watch him like that, as if he hadn’t eaten anything fresh for a long time. “Said he could. Beginnings of infection maybe. Wanted to help.”

“So you just let him fondle –“

Shiro gave Keith a wild stare, eyes big.

Keith huffed out a breath, embarrassed.

“He could have hurt you,” he said.

“I think we can both agree that we’re not fish food, at this stage,” said Shiro.

Keith bit his tongue.

Shiro sighed, shuffling his wings until they were closer to his shoulders. It was still jarring to see them aborted like that, their usual length cut cruelly short. It made Keith angry every time he saw it.

“I’m just – it’s hard to be suspicious when he’s been so kind. Okay? This is. Compared to – “ Shiro looked down at their makeshift nest of blankets and assorted clothing piled up into a bed.

Keith let it go.

He was too tired – they were both too tired – to turn down help. As much as he wanted to leave this place, get away from the dark yawning promise that was the sea… Shiro was in no shape to be rock climbing and it was impossible for Keith lift him anywhere on his own steam. They were stuck here, at least until Shiro got better.

He skewered the second rabbit, and then went to wash the blood of his blade and his hands. He dried them on his trousers.

“How are you feeling?” he said, kneeling down next to Shiro and putting one hand tentatively across his forehead; his neck; felt the pulse in his wrists. “Still feverish,” said Keith. He went to fetch the last of the fresh water he had hoarded in a glass vase (also borrowed from Lances’ stash).

“Here,” he said, handing a cupful to Shiro.

“We should save – “

“Here,” said Keith.

Shiro took it. At least he was able to hold it himself now, hands a little steadier than before. But he was still far too warm; his skin clammy with sweat. Keith worried at his bottom lip.

“It’s just a cold,” said Shiro, “I’ll be better in the morning.”

“You sound like your throat got sawed in half,” said Keith uncharitably, refilling Shiro’s cup when went to put it down, “I’m. I’m worried, okay?”
Shiro took the cup, trapping Keith’s hand with both of his own. His skin was hot on the back of Keith’s hand.

“I’m fine,” he said, “Keith. You need to sleep too.”

Keith opened his mouth to protest – because who would keep watch for any returning Galran ships? – when the water to their left rippled, heaving before something blue and glowing came rushing towards the surface. A moment later, Lance appeared with spray of water, and he was carrying –

Keith leapt to his feet.

“Holy quiznak,” he shouted.

To his side, even Shiro had been startled to a half rise – his wings arching out in surprise.

Lance paused, bobbing up and down gently in the water. His face and chest was illuminated with that same steady blue-white glow, because he was carrying the largest chunk of Balmeran crystal Keith had ever seen outside of Galran engines. With the light, Keith could see each tessellated outline of his fine scales; the slits of silver under his jaw; the water on his skin.


Lance approached. He held the crystal out to Keith – who was closer – and said: “hold this for a second, would you?”

“...What?” said Keith, still staring.

It must be at least as thick as his own torso; a huge chunk of unrefined Balmeran crystal that glowed a deep, steady blue. The firelight seemed to dim alongside it.

“Holding…” said Lance, slowly, “Fingers. Hands?”

Keith took the crystal. He realised, belatedly, that he was holding his breath. The stone felt strangely sentient somehow, vibrating an echo of something along his arm when his skin made contact. Lance hoisted himself out of the water, shuffling so he could sit closer to Shiro on the other side of the fire.

He looked from Keith’s gob-smacked face to Shiro’s slack jaw, then back again.

“What?” he said, frowning, “I don’t have another lamp. Pidge made that. But I’ve got lots more of these, so I thought they’d help you see! That’s probably my biggest one, so I’d appreciate it if you don’t crack it or anything.”

“Crack it,” Shiro repeated hoarsely.

Keith quickly set the crystal down on the edge of the blankets, making sure it wasn’t on bare rock.

“Where did you get this?” he demanded, once he found his voice again, “Did you – steal it from a Galran ship?!”

Lance looked highly offended.

“Of course not,” he said, eyes narrowed, “They’re from home!”

“What do you mean, *from home,*” said Keith, gesturing wildly at the lake, “Like just in the water?
Floating around?"

Lance was looking at them as if they had gone insane. Maybe they had gone insane. Must have been all the sea water. Maybe Keith was hallucinating right now. That would be a more plausible explanation than a giant high grade Balmeran crystal sitting by his feet like a common boulder.

“These are very rare,” said Shiro, after a long moment of shocked and confused silence, “They’re – the Galra control basically all of the mines. There’s none left, from what I’ve heard.”

“They’re on the sea bed,” said Keith, things clicking together in his head. He stared at the giant crystal piece, mind whirring. “Of course. The ones left are on the sea bed, where the Galra can’t get to because of the Merfolk. That’s why you’ve been sinking ships along this coast, isn’t it? To keep the crystal to yourself?”

Lance’s eyebrows were disappearing into his hairline.

“I just thought,” he said, bringing his tail up and wrapping a fin around the crystal protectively, “That you guys would feel safer with some light.”

His tail fin was a translucent thing, blue like the crystal but with deep veins of darker blue. It didn’t mute the light; merely refracted it into different shades of colour. It was dizzying to watch. The crystal seemed to pulse a little, gently like a heart beat.

“We do –” said Shiro, quickly, “We – it’s just a shock, that’s all. It’s …” they all stared at it, “Beautiful,” Shiro finished.

That seemed to mollify Lance a little. He patted the crystal’s surface like it was a small pet.

“The Galra get sunk because they are wankers,” he said, “And hurt us.”

“Wankers,” repeated Keith.

“So it’s really valuable, then?” said Lance, after a moment, “the crystals?”

Keith and Shiro glanced at eachother.

“Very,” said Keith. He toed his boots off to sit down heavily on the rock. He was so distracted that he almost singed his wings on the flame behind him – and shuffled quickly away.

“How valuable?” asked Lance, eyes glittering.

Keith frowned. Did the merman want to barter? What could they possibly have that he would want? Maybe something of fancy; Keith’s flight boots, or his dagger, or –

“No one trades in it except the Galra,” said Shiro. He swallowed hard before continuing, voice thin. “Most of the mines are deserted now. Empty.”

Lance sniffed carefully at the bandages on Shiro’s feet, and then at his wings. Shiro held himself very, very still. Keith could hear nothing but the thud of his own heartbeat and the sound of dripping water.

Then Lance turned to him with a bright, toothy smile.

“How much birdy medicine do you think it’ll get for Shiro?” he asked.
In the end, Lance gave Keith a small thumb-sized bottle of Belmeran crystal shards, as well as a pouch of Galran currency that Lance had hoarded on the basis that they were shiny. He mostly gave it all to Pidge, when she visited. Most the cities traded on Galran these days, Pidge said, even the Resistance.

The injuries on Shiro’s feet and legs slowly lost their angry red and yellow; and his skin smelt healthier as the long days passed. The bullet wound on his wing was getting better too, and Lance would watch him do slow wing stretches.

The problem was his fever. When he wasn’t sleeping fitfully, Shiro was coughing with every other inhale of breath; the sound wet and deep in his chest. His wings would jerk with the force of the coughs, and by the fifth day he had lost his voice completely, skin pallid with red blotches on his cheeks.

Keith’s shoulders grew tighter and tighter with every passing hour; eyes flat in the firelight.

“Is he still too cold?” Lance had asked, putting a hand to Shiro’s cheek as he slept. The Avian’s skin felt burning hot, and there was sweat in his hair.

“I think there’s an infection in his lungs,” Keith had said, “It – I need to find him medicine. Human and avian medicine.”

And so heedless of the clouds on the horizon, Keith had taken Lances’ gifts and left the cave.

That had been over a day ago, and Keith had still not returned.

Lance splashed the surface of the water gently with his fin, a steady nervous tick, feeling it sluice through the soft parts of his tail. *Pretty as a coral flower,* his mama always said. Lance swished his tail some more, eyeing the slowly dropping sun at the cave mouth and the sputtering fire next to Shiro’s nest. It dying out, guttering and smelling strongly of smoke and burnt wood. Lance wrinkled his nose, ducking his head under the water to stifle the smell a little.

Lance and Hunk had taken it in turns to stay in the sea cave with Shiro, returning home so that Lances’ presence wouldn’t be missed.

But right now, watching the fire sputter and flicker, Lance wished Hunk was here. Hunk was better with human things; it was Hunk who helped Lance organise the things he found. Hunk could probably build a fire out of water. Lance didn’t even want to think about setting anything aflame – but if it went out…

Lance shifted so he was closer to Shiro, heaving himself out of the water for a better look. He made an enquiring noise, clicking gently with his tongue. *Nothing.* He clicked some more, letting the air rush past his gills.

Shiro stirred, eyes blinking open. His pupils were blown wide and dark, and from the way his eyes swivelled rapidly, it was a while before he seemed to recognise where they were.

“How are you feeling?” asked Lance tentatively.

Shiro made a wheezing noise, trying to sit up by his elbows. It took a long moment before Lance
realised he was trying to say cold. Lance eyed the fire apprehensively.

“I don’t know how to… make it hot,” he said, “Um. Can you do it?”

Shiro shuffled his wings, tucking them close to his back as he patted the blankets around him. His hands were unsteady, and he had to stop to cough into his sleeve. Lance blinked worriedly.

“Shiro?”

“N-nothing to burn,” said Shiro eventually. He showed Lance a small metal rectangle, which Lance recognised as Keith’s fire-lighter. Shiro smiled at him weakly.

“s okay,” he said, withdrawing further into the blankets, “s fine.”

“How can you be cold when you’re burning up?” said Lance, leaning forwards. He could feel the heat from here, hand hovering just before Shiro’s face. He pressed palm carefully to Shiro’s cheek again, and Shiro made a groaning noise, tilting his face into Lance’s hand.

His breath was so hot it made Lance’s entire arm tingle; the exhales puffing over the soft scales on the inside of his wrist. Lance stared at the blacked mound of ash for a long moment.

“If I find you something to burn, can you do the lighter thing?” he asked, his tail swaying behind his back.

Shiro nodded, flicking the lighter open. Lance flinched backwards as the a little hot flame burst into life between Shiro’s thumb and index finger, but then it was gone again, Shiro grabbing at his hand.

“- sorry,” he was mouthing, “s-sorry-“

His hand was very hot around Lance’s wrist.

“I don’t… like fire,” said Lance, swallowing hard, “But I can find you some stuff for it.”

Shiro let go. Lance smiled at him, careful to tuck away his teeth as best he could.

He let himself slide back into the lake, careful not to splash Shiro as he did so and swam to the other side of the cavern, where a long sandy beach of dark sand and sea-glass stretched upwards. Beaching himself, Lance used his tail to climb upwards on the sand until he reached the high rock ledge, where he stored all the stuff that had to be dry. Hissing a little with the effort, he hoisted himself upwards. There was a row of chests. He undid the latch on one of them and opened it.

The scent of grey moss and lavender puffed out.

Lance was careful to dry his hands on the wood before reaching inside, where his books were. He had taught himself to read human script from these books; and he loved the feel of thick dry paper. There were soft rolls of what Pidge later told him were parchment pieces – Lance loved those too. He shifted a few of his favourite books aside, reluctant to sacrifice them.

He ran a finger along the cover of one; cloth bound and a bit ratty but it had lovely big swirling letters and calligraphy. Not this one, thought Lance, putting her aside. The next had little illustrations of black and white trees and vines all along the page boarders, and Lance put that aside too. He bit his lip, worrying at his teeth.

Across the cavern, Shiro’s cough echoed awfully.
Lance looked up, tail thwacking against the smooth wet stone.

“Come on,” he muttered to himself, “You haven’t even read these for ages. You’ll find new ones.”

Taking a deep breath, he pulled out a big tome of cargo lists, three full of stories that were almost identical in some of the other books he had, and miscellaneous reports and letters. (The love letters Lance kept rolled in their bottles. He didn’t have the heart to let them go.)

Then he carefully bundled them in his arms and wiggled until he was back in the water again. He’d have to clean his scales after this, he thought, as he scraped his tail across the dark sand.

Swimming upright was harder than his sisters made it look. Lance had to keep the books above his head, keep his shoulders above the water, and move forwards at the same time. He didn’t know how humans did it, to be quite honest, and it took him way too long to make the journey that usually took a few tail swipes.

By the time he reached Shiro, the avian was sitting up close to the fire. The heel of his bare foot peeked out from the folds of the blanket, and Lance realised he was trying to re-light the fire.

Lance dumped his pile onto the dry blanket edge and heaved himself up in a wet slosh of water.

“Here,” he said, nudging the books towards Shiro, “These should be dry enough to make a fire, right?”

Shiro looked startled, lighter in hand, wings half spread. They really were big; his feathers broader than Keith’s at the edges, even the soft ones. They looked massive and heavy, but Shiro seemed to have no problems with them. They moved, like limbs. Lance could still barely believe he was sitting so close to one.

Shiro flipped open one of the books.

He shook his head and put it back down.

Lance frowned.

“What? Did I get them wet?” Lance leaned forwards and sniffed at them.

The scent of lavender so strong that it made him sneeze, tail flapping hard against the water. It smelt dry.

Shiro shook his head again, looking aghast.

“…can’t,” he said finally, “Yours. Books. Can’t burn.”

Something warm flickered in Lance’s chest. He hadn’t met many Avians, but he decided he liked this one a lot. Lance tilted his head and hooked his tail in the air in what he hoped was a nonchalant sort of way.

“It’s okay,” said Lance, “I’m bored of these ones anyway.”

Shiro shook his head again vigorously. His feathers shook with him. Lance narrowed his eyes.

“If you die from a sneeze, Keef will kill me,” said Lance. Taking a deep breath, he opened one of the books, shut his eyes, held his breath – and ripped out a chunk of the pages from its spine. He couldn’t help the whine he made at the noise. Lance thrust the pages at Shiro. “Get warm,” he said.
The look Shiro gave him bled so earnestly, Lance felt it like a hook behind his collarbones.

The books burned a warm yellow glow. Shiro’s hands stopped shaking somewhat; he was pressed up so close to the flames that Lance was slightly concerned that his feathers would be singed. His silhouette was a huge shadow on the wall of the cave, the outline of his feathers blown up a thousand times. Lance put his chin on his hands, fin in the water, stomach on rock.

He was showing Shiro his collection of telescopes and how he found each of them. Shiro seemed content to sit by the fire and listen to Lance talk.

“And this one,” said Lance, holding out a thin lightweight thing only the length of his palm, “I’m not sure what this is for but I can’t see through it properly at all but it’s so pretty, Look! Look. The end of it twists see, and the glass bit gets shorter. Not sure what this little dial does but you can turn that too. I found this one on a beach, you know, not a wreck. I think maybe someone dropped it, you know? I think the glass bit is a tiny bit scratched from the sand though…”

Shiro took it from him with a curious nod – before blinking furiously and sitting up straighter.


Lance blinked at him slowly.

“Why?” he asked, leaning closer.

Shiro was adjusting the little brass dial at the end of the thing, looking much more animated than he had in the last few hours.

“Engineering,” he said, “for making very small pieces.”

Lance took the contraption back from him, grinning.

“Oh, Pidge will like this then,” he said happily, turning the lens and peering into the big glass end of it. He almost poked himself in the eye with it. Oops. “I thought it was just a normal telescope. But for small children. Or something. Tiny hands?”

Shiro laughed, which was aborted into a cough. But his smile was still there, crinkling his eyes.

He seemed to remember something all of a sudden, and untangled his hands from the blanket to grasp at the back of his neck. He pulled something out from under his shirt. It was a necklace. He held it out to Lance, pressing it insistently into his hand.

Lance took it, giddy with excitement. The metal was warm to his skin, and it was a small round metal tag. Engraved on one side was an intricate emblem of feather and arrow. The other side, in neat precise script: Takashi Shirogane. Flock VII, I. G. Garrison.

“What’s this?” asked Lance, running a thumb across the engraved letters.

“Flight tag,” said Shiro. He shook his head when Lance tried to hand back the necklace. “From… before. My flight tag. And flock.”

Lance’s eyes were wide.

“From before you were captured by the Galra?”
Shiro nodded.

“… don’t have much,” he said, shrugging, “Don’t have anything,” he corrected himself. “Anything
to give you. For saving my life.”

He coughed again, drawing his legs up close to his chest. The sleeve on his arm was drawn back
by the movement, revealing the dark slash of letters. 117-9875. Lance reached out to touch, and
Shiro let him.

“Is this your pod number?” asked Lance, “So you don’t get lost if you lose the necklace?”

Shiro shook his head.

“That’s what the Galra soldiers called me,” he said. “prisoner number.”

Lance hissed through his teeth. He looked at the tag in his hand.

“You don’t have to give me anything,” said Lance, “I wouldn’t have let you drown anyway!”

Shiro pushed the tag back into his hand.

“Please.”

Lance stared at the tag. He was touched by the gesture in a strange, burning way. It had to mean a
lot to Shiro, and here he was, giving it away. Lance put the necklace on. It sat, hot and heavy on
the skin of his chest next to a shell necklace Merida gave him and his mother’s scale, encased in
crystal.

“Thanks,” he said, beaming.

Shiro opened his mouth to reply – but the moment was cut short by a violent sneeze; and then
Shiro yelping when he accidentally thrust a wing into the fire. Lance shrieked and dived back into
the water. He surfaced almost immediately, panicking and wondering if he needed to splash out the
fire quickly – but it was to Shiro laughing and wheezing, the sound reverberating on the lake like a
thousand thrown pebbles.

Lance swapped places with Hunk (bless him) just before sunset.

He swam home slowly, turning Shiro’s tag this way and that, admiring the shiny metal. Shiro had
assured him that it wouldn’t rust, but Lance thought he might keep it in the cave just in case. He
didn’t want it to get lost or scratched up. But maybe he could wear it for a few days, just for now.

He had dinner with Angela, Corinna and his mother. His other sisters were out on patrol, but Lance
found himself distracted from the food.

“Merida tells me you’ve been off wandering a lot, my guppy,” said Mama, “Says no one sees you
around until dinner time.”

Lance groaned.

“Not that much, Ma,” he said, chewing sulkily. Merida was such a snitch.
His mother brushed her tail fin – so much huger and sturdier than his own tail – against him, fond.

“As long as you’ve got someone with you,” she said, pushing a few scallops his way. “Don’t want you to get hurt or lost. Or stuck.”

“I’m fine,” he said, “just exploring with Hunk.”

Angela snorted. Lance slapped her tail with his own. She didn’t even move, merely smiled at him pityingly. Corinna passed over a few sea fruits. Lance decided she was his favourite sister for that week.

“Just a lot of ship sightings, Lance,” said Corinna, patting his bandaged shoulder. She had hair the colour of beaten bronze, “We’re just worried.”

“Yeah,” said Angela, “Worried you’ll get stuck in a vase somewhere again.”

“Angie,” groaned Lance, “I was four.”

“Mm,” said Mama, “but it wasn’t your last vase.”

Lance buried his face in his hands.

“I’m full,” he said grouchily, “I’m gonna go find Hunk.”

His mother reeled him close by the tail, brushing her nose against his. Lance made a face but hugged her back, breathing in the scent of her hair and pressing his cheek against hers. She ran a hand through his hand.

“Sweetling,” she said, tapping the shell of his ear, “Honestly. You make me worry.”

“Sorry,” said Lance guiltily, thinking of Keith and Shiro. He was harbouring not one, but two Avians. Oops.

His mother sighed, squeezing his tail with her own.

“No you’re not,” she said affectionately, “Just be careful, okay? Don’t go too far.”

“Yeah mama,” said Lance, “Can I go now?”

As it turned out, Lance missed Keith’s grand return.

By the time Lance got back to the cave, it was to the steady murmur of voices in the honey dawn light, and the sight of Keith stoking a much bigger fire. Hunk was nowhere to be seen. Lance took the opportunity to barrel out of the water and tugged Keith by the ankle. He wasn’t disappointed:

Keith made a very satisfying squawking yell, whirling around in a blur of feathers.

“Hi,” said Lance cheerily, ducking backwards as Keith made to kick him, “You’re back!”

“Arghhdilanviadsakh!” said Keith, pressing a palm to his face. His chest heaved, wings half raised and feathers poofing out so he looked much fatter for a few moments. Extra fluffy – Lance made a
mental note to surprise him more often.

“Jesus,” said Keith. He kicked at the loose rock, which Lance easily dodged.

“I hate you,” said Keith.

“Mmhm,” said Lance, looking around, “Where’s Hunk?”

Keith sat back down on a rock.

“Said he’s getting a friend of yours. …Pidge?”

Lance paused, counting the days in his head. In all his excitement of the past week, he had totally forgotten Pidge’s visit was today. He splashed the water behind him excitedly.


Keith crossed his arms.

“I still don’t know whether we can trust –“

Shiro made a noise from where he was sitting.

“I’m sure we can trust Lance’s friends,” he said.

Lance preened.

Keith made an exasperated sound.

“Yes, let’s just. Tell everyone where we are! Not like we’re trying to keep a low profile or anything!” he said throwing up his hands. He stomped across the ledge to his bag, digging out a pale green fruit. He slashed it in half with a knife that was far too big for the job, in Lance’s opinion, and handed the bigger piece to Shiro wordlessly.

“We’re in a sea cave inaccessible to anyone without Merfolk help,” said Shiro, “I think we’re doing okay.”

Lance perked up.

“Hey, you sound better!” said Lance, swimming closer and propping his arms on the rock next to Shiro, “Are you feeling okay now? Did Keef get you the good birdy stuff?”

“Keef had to fly all night to find a non-hostile settlement,” said Keith, crunching mutinously on his food. But his leg was pressed up next to Shiro’s own, and they exchanged a smile that was at full of relief.

“Much better, thank you,” said Shiro to Lance.

His voice was still on the hoarse side, but at least he wasn’t hacking up his lungs every second word.

“Fever broke overnight,” said Keith, “You’re still sick though so don’t leave that blanket.”

“Yes, mom,” said Shiro.

Keith kicked at the loose stones again.
“Hmph.”

He finished his apple half and threw the core into the water – it landed with a small splosh, the ripples like tickling fingers against Lance’s back. He rummaged around in his jacket pocket before withdrawing a small glowing bottle. It was the crystals, still mostly full. Keith held it out to Lance.

“Here,” he said, “I – it was more than enough to get what we…” he coughed, looking embarrassed and awkward. Lance raised an eyebrow, waiting. “Thank you,” said Keith, after a moment.

Lance shrugged.

“You can keep it,” he said gallantly, “who knows if you’ll need it later?”

Keith stared at him, expression inscrutable. In the morning light, his wings were a bright, burnished copper gold. He curled his gloved hand over the bottle.

“Or you can give it to Shiro,” said Lance, stretching his tail out in the water so it caught the light, “I like him better than you anyway.”

Keith let out a huff of laughter, tucking the bottle back in his jacket.

“What!” said Lance, “I do! Look what he gave me!” Lance pulled at the necklace string so that the tag clinked against his other necklaces, “See? An awesome birdy tag! I don’t see you giving me any tokens of gratitude.”

Keith was frozen, one hand still on his pocket.

Shiro was peering at him, wings sloped, relaxed and easy.

“That’s right,” he said, “What about your birdy tag, Keith? Which division did you end in?”

There was a long, long silence.

It stretched longer than it should have been.

“...Keith?” said Shiro.

“I don’t have my tags anymore,” said Keith stiffly.

Shiro looked confused.

“Why? Did – “

“I got kicked out of the Garrison,” said Keith bluntly. “They – they didn’t want to keep searching for the Kerberos team. I did. So I left.”

Shiro’s face looked like the collapse of empire.

“Keith – “

Keith turned away, his wings a tight rigid shape against his back, hiding his face.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he said. He glared at Lance. “And I do have something for you. Come on.”

And with that, he stomped away from his companion. Lance looked from Shiro to Keith, feeling...
like he was intruding on something awfully big. Shiro hadn’t looked away from Keith’s back; eyebrows sloped in a devastating line. He turned away from them both, pensive. His wings curved about him like a feathery wall.

After a moment of dithering, Lance let go of the rock ledge to swim tentatively after Keith, who had retreated a little way along the flat ledge to where some of their things were stashed along the higher areas. Keith was pulling at a small bundle of wax paper, tied up with sturdy twine. He sat heavily, legs crossed, wings spread on the dry sand.

He thrust the package at Lance.

Lance stared, a little doubtfully.

“Um,” he said, “What is it?”

“A token of gratitude,” said Keith, not sounding at all grateful.

Lance twitched, but pulled himself up onto the rock with a powerful stroke of his tail – to sit right next to the avian. Water left him like a veil.

Keith stiffened at their proximity, eyes widening…but he didn’t pull away. His eyes were drawn to Lance’s tail, which now dangled from the rock, fins barely touching the water.

Lance took the parcel from Keith’s slack hands, sniffing the package.

It didn’t smell like food. It didn’t rattle. Lance used his teeth to break the string, pulling it free and unfolding wrapping. Inside was –

Lance stared.

It was three stacked books, each with heavy covers bound by some kind of – he couldn’t recall what they were called – not cloth, but something [pebbled and smooth. There were golden letterings embossed into it. He opened the first one carefully, carefully, to reveal thick pages and colour. There were pictures, it was a book full of pictures of land animals and land plants, strange things that Lance didn’t recognise, some that he did. And they were all coloured in meticulous detail, spindly print labelling the various animals. The book had the scent of the well treasured.

Lance stared at it.

He stared at Keith.

Keith stared at the water.

“What,” he said, not looking at Lance.

Lance put the books carefully back on their dry wax paper, and set it aside so it wouldn’t get splashed. His heart was thudding hard behind his ribs, and everything was a thousand times louder than they had been a moment ago. He could smell Keith’s feathers, warm and airy and right there.

Lance wondered if that was what the sky smelled like.

He wondered if flying was very much like swimming.

“Keef,” he said, very seriously.

Keith was still not looking at him, so Lance let himself slide back in the water, turning so they
were face to face; sky and sea.

“Wanna know a secret?” said Lance, slyly.

Keith looked reluctantly intrigued. His eyebrow twitched, as if tempted by an emotion that was not stubborn hostility.

“What kind of secret?” he asked.

Lance rose a little out of the water, his tail sweeping gently like a pendulum to keep him steady. He braced himself against the ledge between Keith’s legs. Their faces were very close now. Lance leaned forwards –

Behind them, came a shout. Then several things happened at once – Lance turned to see the water splitting as Hunk emerged, tugging a familiar looking wooden dinghy behind him. They were two figures silhouetted against the sunlight at the cave entrance, but Shiro had leapt up unsteadily from the nest and looked like he was about to jump right back into the water. In a blink, Keith had scrambled up too.

Shiro looked like he had seen a ghost, wings out and face white. The cave echoed his shout back to him:

“Matt?”

Chapter End Notes

Ahh, sorry again that we haven’t gotten to the truly emotional and plotty bits yet but I hope this wasn’t too slow or boring? Once again, any feedback is really appreciated!! Hope you enjoy the extra long chapter...and didn't fall asleep haha... as usual, please come chat on twitter if you're there! i’m @fishwrites

Also i’m crying because there's some absolutely stunning fanart and i'm just so overwhelmed. RL is really awful and this fic and this fandom is really holding me up right now. Please take a look and give these a like/reblog!

- Merlance from chapter 1 + bioluminescent Lance by Bron.
- Lance flirt-splashing Keef + Garrison Keith, rescued shiro, soggy Keith, poofy Keith & more by Kveykur.
- badass Keith with enormous wings + Lance with his treasures by Lanceytown
- Keith rescuing Shiro and sly Lance by tempilina.
- winged keith by sarcasticbirb
- Lance saving Shiro from drowning by Whumpby.
- smol fluffy Keith fighting with guppy lance + guppy lance + baby keith by canayams
- painting of the storm & Keith descending by muttondog
Chapter Summary

The only thing worse than hope is disappointment; Keith finds that he never got time to grieve, he bonds with Lance and there is a lot of interspecies miscommunication. Keith and Lance navigate incidents with honey, pears and the scientific method (but not all at once).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"One never fell in love gracefully."
– Connie Brockway

Everyone was shouting.

Keith had an arm thrown in front of Shiro’s chest, the other at his wing to stop him from jumping bodily into the water. In the boat, Pidge had leapt to her feet, causing the whole thing to wobble dangerously despite Hunk’s best efforts. Making a split decision, Lance twisted backwards into the water, and was at the dinghy’s side in two broad strokes of his tail. He anchored the tail end, with Hunk at the front.

“Sit down, sit down, sit down,” Hunk was muttering. Lance made a warning noise at him as the little boat rocked again with Pidge’s feet, and they both pushed it quickly towards the lake-bank.

“Matt,” Shiro was still shouting, wings hitting Keith as he struggled like a man possessed, “Matt?”

“Stop – Shiro, stop – “

“SHIRO?” Pidge shrieked.

As soon as the dinghy touched rock and gravel-sand, Pidge was out of the boat, her belongings abandoned at the bottom, splashing her way up the rocky flats. Shiro lurched out of Keith’s grasp, wings snapping out to both sides. He met Pidge half way down, sweeping her up into a hug that obscured her momentarily from view, tuck into the shadow of his wings.

“What’s going on – Pidge?” said Hunk, helping Lance shove the boat more securely into the rough sand before coming closer to the three on the shore.

Lance looked from Keith to Shiro to Hunk – and then to the patch of hair that was Pidge. Shiro has sunk down to his knees, wings trailing on wet rock. His voice was as rough as the stones beneath his feet.

“Oh god,” he was saying, over and over, “Oh god, Matt, I – oh god, oh god.”

Keith looked frozen, face pale in the lamplight.
“Shiro – “


She seemed to struggle against the embrace, but Shiro held on. The silhouette of his wings was shaking. Lance could hear the stutter of his breath, shallow like a landed fish. He floated closer, carefully, slowly.

“Hey,” said Hunk, a warning edge to his tone with Shiro didn’t let go, “Pidge. Pidge you okay?”

“Shiro?” Pidge said again, “Shiro where’s dad?”

Keith managed to get a hand on Shiro’s shoulder but the latter didn’t move. His eyes, when Lance got close enough to see, were blown wide and glassy.

Hunk slapped his fins against the rock, a loud noise – and when that didn’t work, he let out a sharp calling trill from the back of his throat. It bounced off the cavern, like a stone being tossed.

Shiro wavered on his heels.

“… Matt?” he said, voice hoarse.

“Who?” said Lance.

“Yes,” said Pidge, a half sob, “Shiro, where’s dad and Matt?”

Shiro flinched back, and he looked to Keith like he didn’t recognise him. His eyes moved over the lake, the boat, over Lance – like he didn’t quite know where he was.

“I don’t know,” he said, hand still on Pidge’s shoulder, “I don’t know. I’m sorry, I don’t know. I … I don’t – “


“Someone tell me what’s going on!” demanded Pidge. Lance quietly agreed.

“I’d like to know what’s going on,” said Hunk.

Pidge rounded on him, eyes big behind her glasses.

“You didn’t say it was Shiro!” she shouted, “You didn’t say – did you see any other Avians while I was gone? Anyone else? Did – “

“Everyone shut up!” yelled Keith.

Beside him, Shiro was as white as a ghost. Lance could hear his heart too, erratic and awful. He pushed himself up on the rock, tail slipping from the water.

Pidge looked absolutely furious.

“No, you shut up. Shiro’s alive which means dad and Matt – “

“Pidge,” said Hunk, “Pidge I didn’t know that you – “

Lance made a low trill in the crest of hollow of his throat. It was not a human sound; and it
thrummed below Pidge’s anger and confusion like ripple of water. Carefully, slowly so as not to
startle, he lay one hand on Shiro’s ankle, humming a low soothing note that brought sharks to
trance.

Both Pidge and Shiro stopped. Shiro’s eyes had moved, sluggishly towards the hand on his ankle.
Lance sang a little louder, flattening his tongue to the back of his teeth for a sound that would
usually vibrate the water around his gills, had he been under water.

Even Keith had gone quiet.

After a few quiet moments, Shiro’s breathing evened out and the hunch of his shoulders seemed to
relax a little. He shifted on his feet, and Lance let go of his ankle. His hand was very, very warm.

Beside them, Pidge let out a sob.

Hunk looked at a loss.

“Katie,” said Shiro. And this time it held the weight of recognition and every moment of absence.
“Katie.”

Pidge threw herself at Shiro, and they did not let go for a long, long time.
Shiro sounded very tired.

“I don’t know. *I don’t know.*”

“We *have* to go look for them!” Katie insisted, voice rising, “Every minute we’re wasting could – “

Keith had had enough. He pushed himself out of his blankets, stretching his wings carefully behind him, *right and then left.* He glared at Katie Holt, sitting there with her fresh face and demands whilst Shiro hunched beside the fire.

“Shiro isn’t going anywhere,” said Keith flatly.

“Keith,” said Shiro, turning towards him. He was holding a cup of something warm, and he smiled. Keith didn’t smile back.

“Shiro’s not going anywhere until his pinions come back in,” said Keith, “and until he’s strong enough to fly again. And then probably not even after that because no one ever goes to the capitol these days without being *shot out of the sky.*”

“But my father – “

There was something tight and ugly inside Keith’s chest and he wanted to dig it out with his hands but he was frozen in his anger and fear.

“If we head off now, we all die. Or worse. I’m not delivering Shiro back to the Galra on a silver plate.”

“Katie is right though,” said Shiro, folding his knees, “Every minute we’re here might mean… It’s already been so long its…. “

Keith flung out a hand, wings snapping out with it. His feathers hit the wall of the cave but he didn’t care.

“It’s been over *a year,*” he shouted, getting to his feet. Shiro made as if to placate him, but Keith was blind to it. “If they’re dead then they’re already dead! But you want Shiro to go on a suicide mission for *nothing* – “

“It’s not nothing – “ said Shiro, holding out a hand, “Keith – “

“It’s too risky!”

Pidge threw her cup at the ground. It rolled, clacking to a stop at Keith’s foot.

“What the hell would *you* know about it!” she snapped, eyes red rimmed and hair a mess, “You don’t *have* any family!”

She was very small next to Shiro and Keith but in that moment, her words filled the cavern like blood in water.

Keith stared at her; at her thin-line mouth and the anger in her eyes.

“Yeah, I don’t.” said Keith eventually, “that’s the whole fucking point.”

Then he turned, wanting to get as far away from the pair as possible before he did something like *cry.* Shiro moved as if to follow and Keith flung out one hand to stop him.
“Don’t – “ he said, not wanting to turn around, not wanting to see the expression on Shiro’s face, “Leave me alone.”

“Keith,” Shiro began, imploring.

But Keith darted quickly away, side stepping towards the wall of the cavern. Shiro didn’t follow, and Keith let himself breathe out, walking mechanically along the edge of the lake. Belatedly, he realised he didn’t have any shoes on, and his feet was quickly becoming numb on the cold slippery rock. It was easier to walk like this though, and soon he was at the cave mouth, the roar of the sea louder and the wind fierce in his feathers.

Keith clambered to a higher ledge, further out from the shadow of the overhang, until he was perched on a flat out-crop overlooking the water and the rising sun. He let his wings stretch out on either side of him in the strong sea breeze, feeling it ruffle his feathers. It made him shiver, and it stung his face.

You don’t have any family.

Well. She wasn’t wrong.

Keith tucked his knees close to his chest. Settled into watch the sunrise.

Keith wasn’t sure how long he sat there, but the sun was out today and it felt amazing to have some heat on his feathers. His knees were protesting at being cramped for so long, but he stretched forwards, letting his wings extend as far as they could. He held them there until they started to shake, before winching them slowly back in.

It felt good. It was okay.

His stomach made a disgruntled noise, but Keith ignored it. He didn’t want to go back inside the cave yet; didn’t want to confront Shiro and Katie and all the ghosts that she carried with her in that small wooden boat.

Keith was so preoccupied with his thoughts that he almost missed the ripple of water edging close to the cave until the sun caught on something sparkling and gold, a meter or so under the surface. Keith sat up a little – and saw a paired flicker of silver blue. They were there and then gone again, slipping into the shadow of the cave. Hunk and Lance. Keith rubbed absently at his own wrist.

A moment later though, the blue-silver streak was back – and then Lance broke the surface of the water in a splash of white spray and blue scales. Keith was high enough not to get splashed, but he did snap his wings back quickly.

“Keef!” said Lance, swimming up to him, “What are you doing?”

“…Keeping watch,” said Keith, folding his arms.

Lance pushed himself up on the rocks with his arms and then slid and wriggled until he was on the ledge below Keith. His hair was plastered to his head with water, and this close in the sun, Keith could see all the patches of soft silver-blue scales on his curiously tanned skin. He had his hand cupped around his face though, against the sun. His pupils weren’t quite human, thought Keith,
they were slitted, like a cat.

Lance must have noticed him watching.

“It’s a bit bright,” he said, spreading the webbing between his fingers like a sunshade, “We don’t usually come up this close to noon, but. Gotta feed you lot.”

“Oh,” said Keith, looking to the sky. The lack of cloud meant the sun reflected straight of the water. It was bright, even for him.

“…you okay?” said Lance, peering up at Keith.

“Yes,” said Keith quickly.

Lance tilted his head. Keith could see each slit of the gills below his jaw, glistening with water. Even in air, they fluttered sometimes, small butterfly movements. He made a strange thrum-hum noise at the back of his throat, and Keith shifted, curious despite his melancholy.

Lance sounded like a dolphin. Keith had seen pods of them from the air at a distance, and he liked watching them play with boats and jump out of the water. He wondered if merfolk could talk to dolphins. …Probably.

“Okay,” Lance agreed easily, not pushing, “but you should come eat.”

“I’m fine,” Keith repeated – but his stomach made a noise again.

Lance grinned at him. And then his eyes dropped to Keith’s feet.

“FEET!” he exclaimed, splashing the water, “You’re not wearing shoes! I knew those were detachable. Knew it.”

Keith tried to shuffle back on the rock but there was nowhere to go – trapped between a hard place and a … Keith shook his head. Lance was half up on his ledge already, eyes fixed on Keith’s feet.

“You also have beans,” he said pointing.

“I – what.” said Keith, completely side tracked.

“Can I please look,” Lance wheedled, “Kee. Hunk says you always need to have 3 samples at least! Keeeeeef.”

And perhaps it was the salt air, or the lack of sleep, or both – but Keith wordlessly unfolded his legs and extended a bare foot slowly over the rock ledge. Lance made an excited trilling noise and grabbed his foot.

Keith yelped.

“Shit you’re cold,” he said.

Lance held his foot up to the light, almost tipping Keith onto his back.

“Hmm,” he said, eye pressed up close to the arch of Keith’s foot. Keith could feel the sharp nails on the merfolk’s hands pressing gently into the meat of his foot, and it was simply so bizarre he couldn’t –

“But – they’re all the same,” said Keith, his voice a little strangled, “Feet. All the same. Five toes.
Everyone’s got them.”

“Well *that’s* boring,” said Lance, “Most of our fins are different, you know.”

Keith let out a huff of breath.

“No, I wouldn’t know,” he said.

“Eh,” said Lance, and then he twisted on his him. With a loud sucking-swoosh, his tail arched out of the water and suddenly Keith was slapped with a huge flaring tailfin, wet and cold and spanning from his hair all the way down to his hip in a wet translucent bloom.

“See?” said Lance, gleefully.

“I’m – oh my god *I’m* - “ he spluttered and try to move back. At least his eyes were stinging with salt now, and not just tears.

Lance laughed, a high trilling sound as he kept a hold of Keith’s foot and smacked him again with his tail fin again, gently.

“*Stop it* it’s wet and – ugahdfakjl!”

“Everyone says Hunk has prettier fins than me,” said Lance, “But that’s unfair because he gets to have such a cool colour. I want to have a gold tail. Everyone has blue or green. One time we met a pod migrating north from the tropics and they have all sorts of amazing colours, I wish we had such cool colours. And patterns! Momma says my blue is a tropical blue though, so maybe that’s okay. I look after my fins. Hardly any tears, see? Not like Hunk. Hunk never uses seaweed conditioners.”

“Blskdfjb,” said Keith, trying to peel part of said fin from his cheek. It was surprisingly non-slimy. The texture of it wasn’t really all that familiar; smooth and cold, almost like translucent cloth. It was gossamer thin near the tip of the tail, thickening to deep blue as it neared the tail itself.

Keith tried not to accidentally lick anything.

Eventually, Lance took pity on him and swayed his tail away, letting it drop back into the sea with a splash. Keith found himself wide eyed and out of breath, hair sticking up with sea salt. When Lance let go of his foot, Keith felt weirdly disappointed.

“That was disgusting,” he lied, wiping his face on the hem of his shirt.

“Rude,” said Lance cheerfully.

“I’m all wet now,” said Keith, “ugh.”

“Mnhm,” said the merman, “but you also feel better.”

Keith didn’t know what to say. He sensed a patter.

Lance slipped further back into the water.

“C’mon Keef,” said Lance, “Come eat the jelly fish I got you!”
Keith had been fully prepared to make a hasty retreat after Lance and Hunk had left for the day. But Shiro pre-empted this; herding Keith back towards the fire with one giant wing. Keith tried to duck underneath them and was punished by the universe in the form of very slippery rock and a giant bruise on his ass. He groaned. It was going to hurt.

“It looks like rain later,” said Shiro, grabbing him by the arm, “You’re not hiding outside.”

“You can’t tell me what to do,” said Keith – which he immediately regretted because for god’s sake, they weren’t fledglings anymore.

Shiro clearly agreed because he just snorted and wrapped one arm firmly around Keith’s shoulders.

“C’mon, you can do this.”

Keith tried to spread his wings and knock himself out of Shiro’s grip, but Shiro clung on. He shuffled Katie over with his other wing – curse his wingspan! – until they were all huddled around the freshly built fire. Katie was staring at her feet, arms folded. Keith folded his arms too, for the sake of symmetry.

Shiro sighed, and poked Katie in the shoulder.

A pause.

Then: “I’m sorry.”

“What was that?” said Shiro.

Katie sighed too. At this rate they were all going to put the fire out with their combined angst, thought Keith uncharitably.

“I’m sorry,” said Pidge, “For yelling about your family.” She shuffled her feet and looked up. “Anyway, we’re your family so. You know.”

Keith tried to keep his face blank. Shiro’s arm was still around his shoulders, and he gave Keith a hard squeeze.

Keith breathed in, held it for a few long seconds, before letting it out again. His wings were slack against Shiro’s bulk. It was comforting, really.

“I’m sorry too,” he said, after a moment, “I just. We can’t just go charging in,” he glanced at Shiro, at the set of his jaw, and conceded: “Not yet.”

But Shiro was nodding, a hopeful smile on her face.

“I know. I know, it’s – I just thought they were with you guys. That’s all.”

Shiro reached out with his left wing and scooped Pidge bodily towards them. Hooking his free arm over her neck, he pulled them both close. She squawked in protest when her glasses got knocked askew, but didn’t break away from the group hug. Keith let his head drop to Shiro’s shoulder, hooking his own wing close to complete the circle.

The fire crackled, warm and cheerful despite the ocean waves.

Keith cleared his throat.
“…What kind of name is ‘Pidge’ anyway?” he said.

It turned out there were a lot they didn’t know about Pidge.

If the situation had been anything else, Lance thought he might have felt a bit betrayed. After all, they’d known Pidge for nearly a year now – she was his first human friend. Well, Lance’s only human friend. A curl of doubt settled in his stomach. Perhaps she hadn’t really trusted them at all.

But it was hard to feel anything except sympathy; watching the way she sat very close to Shiro’s wings, like she hurt something fierce to be separated. They had fallen asleep like that, tucked up next to each other. Keith had to wrap them both in blankets and unroll Pidge’s sleeping bag; relight the fire. He kept vigil, like a rust red blade in the stone – loyal to the last.

It was morning again, and they were in a familiar low-lying area of the lake where a convenient divot in the rock made for a nice floating spot for Hunk and Lance. This time, however, there were two Avians there too. The tide was calm now; and so was the atmosphere in the cavern. The shock had gone, sunk to the bottom of the lake for now.

Keith was very quiet, watching. He was peeling a strange green fruit with practiced ease, eyes never even flickering away from his companions. He was twisting the peel off with a wooden-bladed knife the length of his finger, and Lance watched him go twist-dig-sweep, over and over.

“I thought Avians didn’t live with humans,” said Hunk, snacking on a fat ocean tuna they had caught for breakfast.

“Sometimes we do,” said Shiro, “We used to live in human cities too, before the war. Bit too dangerous now.”

“Mom’s human,” said Pidge, “Dad’s Avian. Matt took after him and I took after mom.”

“You never told us you were part birdy before,” said Lance, unable to keep the sulk out of his voice.

She shrugged and bit into her sandwich.

“It never came up,” she said, looking uncomfortable. “Anyway, I didn’t know how you felt about Avians and stuff. Don’t you guys hate each other?”

She squinted from Shiro and Keith down to Hunk and Lance.

“You don’t look like you hate each other. I thought Merfolk ate Avians for dinner.”

“Ughh, not you too,” said Hunk, thwacking her gently with his tail fin. She retaliated by flicking breadcrumbs at Hunk’s face.

Lance was eating his own piece of bread – he loved human food (unlike Hunk) – even though sometimes it got stuck in his teeth and tasted very weird with seaweed. He still liked how weird the texture was on his tongue, and he licked his piece of bread happily, sniffing at the burnt-aroma of the crust.
He noticed Keith watching him with a weird, constipated sort of look.

Lance paused, tongue still out.

They squinted at each other.

Grudgingly, Lance held out the piece of bread.

“Wanna try some?”

Keith still looked constipated.

“You’ve just licked it all over,” he said.

Lance licked it some more, to prove the point.

“Whatever, I’m being nice,” he said, crunching down, “you could at least offer me some of that weird thing.”

Keith paused.

“This?” he said, waving the fruit, “You’ve never had pears before?”

Lance swished a little closer in the water, sniffing. The fruit smelt – well it wasn’t sour. Rather sweet really. Lance licked his teeth. He liked sweet things – earth people had the best sweet things, it really wasn’t fair.

“Why is it called a pier? Is it grown near the sea? I’ve never seen any.”

“What,” said Keith blankly.

“Oh for – just give him some and he’ll stop bothering you,” said Pidge.

Lance folded his arms beside Keith’s knee. He ignored Hunks tail-thwack from below the surface. Hunk had no sense of humour.

“Yeah Keef,” said Lance, showing off his teeth, “Feed me.”

Keith threw up his hands.

“Oh my god okay here – “ he thrust one of the pieces of fruit at Lance’s face. Keith’s hand hit Lance smack on the nose.

Lance’s entire frame of vision went fuzzy and white. He made a startled screech, diving back into the water.

It was like being blinded by scent and smell and sensation and everything. For a second Lance forgot how to switch back to his gills and he could feel tears welling up behind his second eyelid as he breathed water in the wrong way. He curled his tail around himself, settling down deep into the water. He shook his head a little, trying to clear away the sensation.

His eyes were out of whack; things were blurry and strangely fogged.

Lance put his hands over his ears, but he could still hear the muffled voices above the water – Hunk trying to calm everyone down.
“…but I didn’t do anything!” (Keef, the filthy liar).

“…did you knock him out?” (that was Pidge).

“Why isn’t he coming back up?” (Shiro).

_Yay Hunk_, thought Lance dazedly, dealing with the humans and birbs so Lance could… just float until this was over.

He didn’t even want to touch his own nose, it felt too sore and too sensitive after being whacked out of the blue. _Warm_, he thought, Keith had weird warm hands. So warm. _Warm_. Lance sucked in water hard through his gills, squeezed his eyes shut tight.

He counted bubbles like Merida taught him, and by the time he got to forty bubbles, water no longer felt like it was assaulting his face and senses. He could see a bit better now too, and he took a long drag through his gills.

Lance turned slowly on to his back, watching the light filter down from the surface of the lake.

He must have been there for a little while, because he heard a loud plop of water and Hunk’s golden fins came into view. Then Hunk was peering at him, up-side-down.

“…You okay?” he asked in the clicking squeak of Mermish.

Lance shook his head.

“I think you ruptured my ears,” huffed Hunk, swimming a little closer.

“Well Keef _punched my nose,_” Lance wailed. He struck up sand with his fin, and it billowed around his tail before settling back down again.


“I hate him,” said Lance, staring at the surface, “I can’t believe he would do that to me.”

“It was an accident – “

“He probably was aiming for a grab to render me helpless,” said Lance, trying to dig himself into the sand like a guppy. He was too big, but he managed to get the narrow part of his tail buried. There. He could lie here forever, until everything was okay, and all dirty Avians had gone _home._

“I’m pretty sure their noses are just for smelling stuff,” said Hunk sagely, “They’d have no idea what it means to… you know. Bop.”

“He didn’t even use his nose,” said Lance sourly. “He used his hand! Like we were – “ Lance dropped his voice, embarrassed, “ – you know.”

Hunk rolled his eyes. It was a technique he had perfected from Pidge and was a lot harder with two sets of eyelids than just one. Lance still couldn’t quite pull it off.

“Their noses are _just_ for smelling stuff,” Hunk repeated, “and it was an accident! – “

“It’s _never_ an accident when it comes to – “

“ – You were up too close. How should he know – ”
“Keef knows,” said Lance sourly, turning in the sand, “I bet He knows. I know he knows. He knows that I know that he knows – “

Hunk grabbed him by the arm and tried to pull him up. Lance whacked him with his tail but Hunk was much sturdier built.

“No,” said Lance, squeezing his eyes shut again, “No, it’ll be too bright! Hunk! I feel like I’m concussed! I don’t wanna – “

“Shiro’s worried,” said Hunk, “he’s telling Keith off.”

“GOOD,” said Lance.

“Lance.”

“Hunk.”

“…”

Lance shook his head, and then tentatively brushed a hand over the sensitive parts of his nose and mouth. He tasted the water with his tongue; the familiar scent of the lake and Hunk’s presence. He shook his head some more, trying to get rid of the feeling that something was still touching his nose. He felt bad for all the times he had tried to play with sharks when he was younger; if his over-enthusiastic grabbing had felt anything like this...

Lance let himself be floated up to the surface with Hunk. They emerged a little way out of the grotto, and immediately there was a half splash and Shiro was kneeling down near the water, along with Pidge. Keith hung back, still smelling of fruit.

Pidge was holding a notebook.

“Hunk says Keith touched a ‘major sense organ,’” she said enthusiastically, “is your sense of smell impaired right now, do you think? How did it feel?”

“You can’t just – “ Shiro flailed, bless his feathery fins, “- just ask – “

Lance pretended to mull the question over.

“It feels like it was Keef’s fault,” he said, folding his arms across his chest. “It’s the utter most insult to hit merfolk over the nose you know. The utterest. We have killed people for less.”

“We have not,” said Hunk.

“Keith’s going to apologise,” said Shiro. He turned to his companion, eyebrows rising meaningfully. “Isn’t he.”

A doubtful pause.

“I’m sorry for touching your nose,” said Keith, deadpan.

Lance slapped his tail against the water with a big splash. He noticed Keith’s eyes tracking the arch of it.

“You could have knocked me out,” said Lance, nose twitching indignantly.

Shiro slapped his hand on over his own face (including his nose) in exasperation. Both Lance and
Hunk gasped in synchronised horror.

In the end, it was Pidge who managed to get Lance to stop sulking. He kept giving Keith surreptitious looks and staring at Keith’s nose. Keith wanted to ask Hunk to explain the series of bizarre events, but every time he made to ask, Hunk mysteriously started talking to Pidge. Keith resolved to figure it out later.

For now though, Lance was thoroughly distracted.

“It’s for both you and Hunk,” Pidge was saying, holding something above her head in an attempt to keep it out of the merman’s reach. Being so short, this wasn’t really working out. Lance was an elongated line, tail half tucked beneath him as he pushed himself out of the water. He managed to grab Pidge by the waistband and Pidge screeched and kicked him with her boot.

“But I want it now,” said Lance, throwing his arms around her knees to hobble her, “You didn’t tell me you brought honey. Why didn’t you tell me sooner. Give it to me. Give ittttt to meeeeee.”

Pidge flailed.

“Because you’d eat it all and give none of it to Hunk which is unfair!”

“Hunk doesn’t like honey,” said Lance imploringly. He was now trying to climb Pidge like a snake.

“Hunk does like honey,” said Hunk, who was examining a book that Pidge had brought. Now that they had had time to unpack Pidge’s dinghy, Keith realised that she had brought a lot of various mammalian essentials that he had missed until now. Like soap. And dry bread.

Shiro was sitting safely out of the splash zone, his wings backed up against the warm fire. Keith edged towards him. He held out the last of the toasted sandwiches. Shiro broke it in half and they chewed, watching the drama unfold.

“…I’ve been waiting forever,” Lance was saying, “Forever. So long. You said you’d show me bees but you never brought me any. I want my own bees. They sound cute. Remember how I found that giant crystal shard for your microscope? Remember? I deserve extra honey for that.”

“I was the one who carried it in,” said Hunk, “Because your arms – and I quote – ‘got tired’.”

“I’m sorry,” said Lance, “I think it was… oh yes, finders keepers, not –“

Pidge twisted around, arms still outstretched. Then she threw the jar desperately towards where the Avians were sitting, watching the show.

“Catch!” she yelled, and Keith caught it out of reflex.

There was a moment where the entire tableau froze. Then Pidge yelped as Lance let go of her, and himself across the rock towards Keith. Keith shrieked (something he would later deny) as his hindbrain registered what appeared to be a giant humanoid snake launching itself towards him and his wings snapped out. Shiro made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a cough and dived out of the way whilst Hunk dived the other way to save his book.

Keith, foolishly, was still holding the jar.
For the second time that day he fell backwards onto his ass as Lance grabbed him around the knees to stop him from running away. His tail — so long, so long — came sweeping up behind him and around them and before Keith knew what was happening he was flat on his back, wings akimbo, arms flying. His head didn’t crack on rock though — his wings caught most of the fall.

Lance had his tail half curled around Keith’s legs, keeping him down.

Keith oofed as he was elbowed in the gut.

“Mine,” said Lance, the words a bit muffled through his teeth and hissing, “Keef give it to me!”

“Fine!” said Keith, smacking the jar into Lance’s hand, “Oh my god you can just ask! What the fuck! I could have broken my neck!”

Lance stopped flailing. He stared at the jar in his hand, with big blue eyes. He stared at Keith.

Suddenly Keith was very much aware that they were chest to chest, hip to hip and — Behind them, Pidge groaned dramatically.

“Really?” she said, stomping back towards Hunk, “Really.”

“Now I’ll never get any,” said Hunk sadly.

“Look I’m sure he’ll share,” said Shiro.

“Um no, I won’t share,” said Lance, still lying on top of Keith. Keith’s trousers were getting soaked through. He tried not to think about the weight of the merman; nor the pressure against his thighs. Shit. Too late.

Lance grinned down at him; face very close. His teeth were very sharp.

“Thanks buddy,” he said, and then promptly cracked open the metal lid of the jar with his fangs. Keith swallowed hard. Lance didn’t seem to notice, merely flicking the metal away and then sticking a long finger into the honey.

Pidge had given up completely and appeared to be making some hot cocoa with Shiro by the fire. Hunk swam closer to the two of them.

“Ugh,” he said, “Why do you always do that.”

Lance, who was slowly sucking his finger clear of honey, paused.

“Wot,” he said, around his finger. Keith wondered how he could do that without slicing his finger into tiny ribbons by virtue of those teeth. Maybe they were retractable? That would be handy.

No Keith.

No.

“You’re so grotty,” said Hunk, getting more comfortable at the edge of the rock he was resting on. He held out his hand.

“C’mon, share. I want some.”

“Give it to him Lance,” called Pidge, “Or else I won’t bring you anymore.”
With a popping sound, Lance drew his finger free of his mouth.


He dipped two of them back into the jar again. He tilted his head back to catch the honey, brows furrowed with concentration. He chased a drop of gold down his wrist, fin swaying idly with content.

“Can you let me up now?” Keith asked.

Lance didn’t answer, too busy licking around his fingers and the webbing near his hand.

“Oi,” said Keith, trying to stop his voice from cracking and failing a bit, “I’m getting cold!”

“Nope, you’re nice and warm,” said Lance, tail sliding against Keith’s legs as he shifted, “I’m comfy here.”

He held out the jar to Hunk.

“Here,” he said magnanimously, “Your turn.”

Hunk made a series of click-squeaks, taking the jar and brandishing a spoon.

“See! This. This is what you use. You’ve got like five hundred of these. Use one.”

“Don’t use the silver ones,” said Lance, I just cleaned those. He paused. “Want some?” he said, offering his index finger to Keith. He looked perfectly earnest.

Keith didn’t even know what to say.

“I – no, quiznak,” he said, “Let me up already! Shiro! Pidge? Little help here?”

“Language,” said Shiro, that cocoa sipping jerk. Keith hated his dry, warm self.

“Serves you right,” said Pidge.

Lance’s laughter was like a string of pearls.

The next day, Keith brings Lance a small tin of sweetened milk from a nearby village, and Lance smiles and smiles and smiles.

Despite the unlikelihood of their entire circumstance, they fall into a routine.

Lance and Hunk would bring the bi-peds fish and various seafood, whilst Keith made regular trips to gather fuel and firewood on dry days. Pidge had brought a whole new box of fire-lighters with her, as well as two big lamps and spare food – so no one was cold. Shiro would do repetitious “sit ups” and “push ups” which mostly involved lying down and then sitting back up again over and
over … Lance really didn’t know what the point was but he figured if it made Shiro feel better, that was okay.

He also did lots of wing stretches as well as (and this was Lance’s favourite) some form of exercise that involved Shiro crouching down and then flapping his wings as hard as he could without lifting off the ground. Afterwards, he would groom his feathers with his fingers, and often Keith would help. Lance wanted to help. Lance wanted to touch fluffy feathers.

When he enquired about the flapping exercise, Shiro looked a little embarrassed.

“Need build my muscles back up,” he explained, when Lance asked, “Haven’t flown for a long time now. I’ll get cramps if I try too suddenly.”

Lance nodded seriously.

“And do your feet beans help with this, or not really?” he asked.

“Um…” said Shiro.

Pidge was a bit annoyed that Lance had played around with her crystal lamp though.

“It was Keef’s fault!” Lance protested, “he can’t see in the dark!”

“And how is that my fault, exactly?” demanded Keith.

“You’ve chipped this bit,” said Pidge, swapping out the metal reflector disk out for a new one, “I told you to be careful Lance.”

Lance pouted.

“….Keef chipped it.”

“If you say his name one more time,” said Hunk, “I’m going to bury you in the sand.”

Lance poked his tongue out, Hunk slapped him hard with his tail… and they chased each other around the lake for a good fifteen minutes until Pidge yelled at them to come back up by blowing on the bone whistle that Hunk made her.

Lance winced – she always blew that thing way too hard – and burst out of the water near her feet in retaliation.

Pidge didn’t even flinch.

“Oh okay cool,” she said, handing Lance a familiar orange ball attached to a spool of rope. “I want you to make sure the string is tight all the time okay, you need to be at the same distance.”

“Yes, yeah,” said Lance, pushing the buoy under the water and then watching it pop back up again with a ploop, “I knowww.”

“I thought we figured the frequency out last time,” said Hunk, eyes bright. He swam up to where Pidge had everything spread out on the flat rock, and obligingly held the chassis still while Pidge fitted the crystal shard – smoothed and cut down to an octagonal cylinder – into place.
“Keith,” said Pidge, “take your boots off they’re too loud on the rock.”

“Too loud for what?” asked Keith, coming over. Shiro had abandoned his “sitting ups” too and wandered over, wings tucked neatly behind his back. They were always like that whenever Belmeran crystals were involved, thought Lance fondly, like tiny feathery months to a big flame.

“I’m trying to optimise the way the crystals can be harnessed for energy,” said Pidge, pushing her glasses up her nose, “we’ve figured out that – certain level of vibration in pitch can help a lot but it’s hard to recreate it.”

Keith blinked.

“Replicate what?” asked Shiro.

Pidge waved her hand.

“The sound. You’ll see what I mean. Lance, get into position!”

“How?” asked Keith, sounding peeved that he was being forced to ask so many questions.

“Explodes?” said Shiro, looking worried, “Is that – has that happened before? I don’t think you should be standing so close if – “

“I’ll be fine, I got this,” said Pidge, tapping her goggles, “And it only happened once because Lance thought there was a spider on his back.”

“Cave spiders are yuck!” protested Lance from across the lake.

“Stop moving!” snapped Hunk, tugging irritably at the end of the rope. “Okay. Okay are we ready?”
“Yep, underwater, trial 12. Crystal density at grade 3 point oh five. Here’s your note, Lance! You ready?”

“Yeeees,” said Lance.

Pidge pulled out a silver fork – two perfectly parallel prongs which joined at an ‘U’ at one end. It was a tuning fork, and she had a whole series of them. Lance liked the big ones the best; their notes full and throaty. This one was somewhere in the middle.

Pidge struck it against another bar of metal, and the noise rang out like a gong across the water. Then carefully Hunk lowered the crystal and its casing into the water, just below the surface. He clicked at Lance; a signal it was all ready.

Lance rolled his shoulders and let himself sink into the lake. He could see the soft glow of the crystal, refracted by the tiny metal disks. And, holding that note in his head, he opened his mouth and echoed it back.

It wasn’t a hard note to hit, not too high or too low – a nice steady B flat. Lance let the water flow through his gills, taking several deep draws. His voice bare wavered as he counted in his head. *One bubble pop, two bubble pop, three…*

He could see the glow of the crystal get brighter and brighter, flooding the water with pale blue glow. He shielded his eyes…and once he got to fifty bubble pops, he stopped and resurfaced again with the buoy. He slapped his tail in the water, swimming towards Hunk and Pidge, who were hauling the contraption back out of the water.

“How did I do!” said Lance eagerly, “Was that long enough?”

Pidge gave him two thumbs up. Lance preened.

“So you’re saying he’s like a… fuel source,” said Keith, who had wandered close again.

“I’m confused,” said Shiro, “I don’t think any of us could make a sound like that. So what’s the use of…”

“I think it *tripled,*” Hunk was saying.

“Yeah!” said Pidge excitedly.

Lance offered his tail fin for a high five and she slapped it gleefully.

“Okay, okay I think if we do the same thing – according to the last time we did it, it should be just less than what it’s like under water. Which I still don’t know why because give the lack of obstruction…”

“Might just need to modulate a bit more,” said Hunk, shaking his head, “See – “

“Oh. Hmm.”

“Guys,” said Lance, throwing the buoy up into the air and then catching it, “What nowwww.”

“Air test now,” said Pidge, “Air test. Everyone stand back and shut up.”

She set the crystal on the rock, readjusted the wax string and threw a small pebble at Lance.

“Back into position please,” she called.
tucking the buoy under his arm, Lance dived back into the water, heading out towards the side of the cave until he could feel the rope pull tight. He bobbed back up to the surface.

“This high enough?” he called in Mermish.

Hunk gave a chattering reply.

“Can you face a little bit to your left?” called Pidge.

Lance twisted.

“I’m bored,” said Keith.

“SHHHH,” said Shiro.

“Everyone shut up,” said Pidge. “Okay. Need this one for the same amount of seconds if you can. Listen for your note Lance!”

She selected a different tuning fork from her pouch and carefully struck it again. The note was louder this time, without the water – and the cave echoed it like the inside of a glass. Lance shook his head, gesturing. She struck it again. Lance tilted his head to the other side, frowning in concentration.

Then, holding himself as still as he could, he echoed the note back to her.

It was harder, doing this above water – the air was dry when you kept inhaling it and it tickled the back of Lance’s throat. He resisted the urge to cough.

Lance’s heart beat faster as the crystal glowed slowly brighter and brighter – *steady, steady* – just like they did at home when he sung to them. It was a gentle thing, pulsing in time with the thrum beneath his gills. The light became so expansive it illuminated not only Pidge’s face and Hunk’s bright scales, but also threw huge shadows onto the walls of the cavern. The sunlight was barely noticeable on the water surface, a clear, deep sheen.

Lance shielded his eyes with one hand, since he couldn’t turn away from the crystal. It glowed through his webbed fingers, a bright blue.

The whole cave was ringing gently, and the water seemed to shudder and shiver around Lance’s waist.

Lance had lost count of the number of seconds, but no one was waving at him to stop so he tried to sustain the note as long as he could. He was getting a little light headed – he couldn’t take a new breath without breaking off the note, not like he could do under water with his gills, and he’d have to stop soon, he could feel himself struggling to keep the pitch…

Something moved in his peripheral vision. He blinked, risking the light and lowered his hands. He saw Shiro, close to the edge of the water and the silhouette of Hunk pushing him back, back onto land and –

*Splash*.

More splashing. Closer now.

Lance turned towards the sound. A mistake as it turned out, since the surprise made his voice waver unsteadily. The crystal pulsed.
It was Keith. Keith, who had somehow managed to wander into the lake and was now standing, chest deep. His wings were half submerged behind him, but he was still making his way serenely towards Lance, ripples of water spreading out from where he was moving.

Lance stared, confused.

His first thought was – Keef’s feathers are getting soaked!

His next thought was – what the hell, as Keith’s foot hit the edge of the sand bank and his head suddenly disappeared under the water.

Lance gasped, his singing aborted, all thoughts of the experiment forgotten and dived towards Keith, accidentally tugging the buoy down with him. Distantly, there was a loud crash, and Lance twisted, freeing himself from the wax rope while also pulling Keith up by the armpits. He had to get him up, up.

Had Shiro been this heavy? Lance thwacked his tail hard in the water and pushed them above the lake surface. Keith was limp, but conscious.

“Keef!” said Lance, trying to keep Keith’s above his shoulder. The sense of déjà vu was too much. “What are you doing you dumb bird?”

Keith didn’t answer. He wasn’t struggling. He was just… staring at Lance, nose to nose, eyes huge and pupils blown. His wings a heavy weight in the water, tipping their gravity so that it was hard for Lance to keep them upright – it kept dragging him backwards. Lance pulled Keith closer, trying to get a good grip under his arms and wings so he could swim them back to shore.

This close, Lance could feel the hot puffs of the Avian’s breath on his face. They were hot against his gills, and made his scales shiver with it.

Then Keith put his hands either side of Lance’s jaw and fell forwards, kissing him hard on the mouth.

Lance’s brain short-circuited.

His nose felt like it was being rubbed with hot scales, the sensation making his eyes water as Keith’s nose rubbed up against the side of Lance’s own, the heat of his skin overwhelming the sensitive nerves there. It made Lance gasp reflexively, gills opening, straining even though they were above the waterline. He couldn’t breathe, but it felt so good, it –

Keith’s mouth was hot, and soft and wet. It was not the same affectionate kisses Corinna gave him, or the cold gentle press of his mother’s cheek. It was desperate and fever-run. Keith lips were dry and chapped, but soft still – the insistent pressure and the slick wet heat of his tongue and his exhales made Lance’s tail jerk, slapping on rock and turning them in the water.

Instinctively, Lance pulled back, backwards into the water – and Keith came with him, one arm tight around Lance’s neck, the other pressing a searing brand into the side of his jaw and his left gills. Everything was sharp as they fell back under the water, and finally Lance could breathe, he could breathe! He tugged Keith close, twisting his tail around them both to better take them deeper, where it was safe and mine, mine, mine –

There was a sudden tang of blood in his mouth. Keith had cut his lip on one of Lance’s canines. Lance didn’t care; he licked back into the hot heat of Keith’s mouth, the strange blunt teeth. The warmth was intoxicating, and he pulled Keith towards the glow of the crystal, wings billowing behind Keith like a swelling sigh. Lance took water through his gills in a great rush, pressing
harder into Keith’s mouth, *so warm, so warm so* –

Something screeched through the lake, startling Lance like a fishhook to the spine.

And then Hunk was there in a blur of gold and orange. Lance snarled at him, confused – but Hunk was quicker, dragging Keith apart and pulling him up, away, kicking and –

Lance came to himself in a rush.

*Oh god what had he done!*

They broke the surface in gasps and confused coughs. Hunk, stronger than Lance by a mile, pulled Keith bodily towards the bank, and Lance helped him dump the soggy avian back on land. Keith was strangely compliant now, coughing and wet like a rag doll. He sprawled there on the rock, one leg still half in the water as he turned and coughed for five minutes straight.

Behind them, Shiro was also drenched – the source of which became clear by the goblet in Pidge’s hand. She had poured water in his face.

“What was that?” she demanded, waving her earmuffs hysterically, “What was *that*!”

“I don’t know!” said Shiro, “I just – I think I zoned out for a second there I – “

“Keef?” said Lance, wondering if Keith was going to pull out a knife and start screaming at him. Keith didn’t though – just continued to stare at Lance, a little dazed. Lance patted him on the cheek tentatively.

“Keef?”

“You just – wandered into the water,“ said Pidge, waving her hands. The crystal was still pulsing, brighter than it had previously been. “We were busy trying to stop Shiro from jumping in and then next minute you were on the other side and…Walked right in! Like you were in a trance or something.”

“I –“ Keith coughed again. His hair was plastered down on his face, and he looked a little pathetic, feathers soggy and eyes wide. He didn’t look murderous though. “I heard something,” he said, dazed, “Like a… I heard something…”

He looked to Lance.

“It was you.”

“I didn’t meant to!” said Lance desperately, “I didn’t mean to … make you into a Keef zombie, I promise! I was just singing the note like you said! Pidge!”

Pidge had an expression on her face that suggested she had just had the biggest epiphany. Her eyes were guppy huge behind her spectacles.

“We know you didn’t Lance,” said Hunk soothingly, patting him on the shoulder, “Hey – it’s okay. We know you didn’t mean to. Actually I thought only mermaids could do that.”

“You mean you’ve tried?!” said Lance, aghast.

“No!” said Hunk, “Maybe! I don’t know!”

“I mean, Pidge never did anything like that,” said Lance, upset, “I didn’t know it would – I
wouldn’t drown anyone!” he turned to Keith, who was huddling under his wet wings. They looked a big smaller now that they were all soggy. Lance felt awful.

“You have to believe me,” said Lance, tugging at his own fins, “Shiro?”

“I’m fine,” said Keith, voice salt hoarse but surprisingly calm, “Lance – I’m fine.”

Shiro looked a bit shaken though.

“I’m going to build up the fire,” said Shiro, “We don’t need you to get sick as well, Keith – c’mon.”

Gently, he pulled his companion upright on wobbly feet.

“Yes,” said Pidge, rubbing her hands together, “You build up the fire and we’re going to run that experiment again.” She tugged off her earmuffs and handed them to Keith. “You wear these. Let’s see if I’ll do the same thing.”

“No Pidge.”

“Yes Pidge,” said Pidge, waving a tuning fork like a knife, “This must be where the siren myths come from! We could replicate it! Think the possibilities. I bet this is how you guys manage to – “

“No!” said Lance, pushing away from the rocks, “I don’t want you to drown!”

“Eh,” said Pidge, “Hunk will stop me from doing anything silly. Won’t you Hunk?”

“Umm,” said Hunk.

“This is a stupid plan,” said Lance, folding his arms, “What if both Pidge and Shiro jump into the water? Hunk can’t grab you both.”

“Shiro,” said Keith faintly, “I feel a bit… sick.”

Then he promptly passed out.

Chapter End Notes

I had... a lot of trouble writing this chapter; I think it’s too choppy and anti-climatic. I don’t know if I got the proper emotional depth across so if you have any crit please let me know... if yor’e reading this, congrats you made it to the end and i’m very grateful *sobs*. next chapter will have more klance focus... adslkjfas i’m sorry!!!

also we are blessed with more amazing art, i love these so much please give the artists some love!!!

- Curious + entranced Lance & Keith by Emuyh
- Younger Kestrel Keith and merlance by the shore by cuppacats
- nose to nose keith & lance (and bonus) by zaca/lanceytown
- Baby Lance + baby keef by JasmineLavenderTea
- Merlance by Kokuro
- winged keef by ravenking
- winged keith, from (ugly) baby to teens + fantail goldfish lance by muttondog
- portrait of flirty lance by canayams
- Lance with Shiro’s wings, poofy pouty baby keef sketches by hiranadira
- merlance & keef sketches by societallydysfunctional
- Lance and keef sketches by Rehndezvous
- cave scenes by framed-in-red-draws
- winged keith by twinkletalon
- merman lance by lancesexual

pls leave a comment if you can, or come chat on twitter or tumblr.
Arc 1 - Part 5

Chapter Summary

In which Lance hides a lot and Keith finally puts his foot down. Several times.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You may be deceived if you trust too much,
but you will live in torment if you don’t trust enough.”
– Frank Crane.

:i:

Keith woke to a gentle rocking.

For a strange, in-between moment, he thought it had just been a dream. He leaned into the sideways dip, gentle and slow, was like the cradle of a nest bed in cliff wind. His left wing was horribly cramped; he probably turned and slept on it for too long. Keith shifted instinctively, eyes still closed –

Then his ears and nose seemed to catch up to his waking mind, and he jerked back to reality and the heavy scent of salt and unmistakable sound of water.

The sun was very bright in his eyes.

“– don’t move,” someone was saying above the wind and water, “Or we’re going to tip over. Was that Keith? Keith?”

Someone kicked him in the thigh.

Katie. Pidge. What - ?

“I think he’s awake,” said Shiro from right behind Keith’s ear. They were pressed up close and cramped, Shiro supporting Keith against his chest. Both their wings were folded uncomfortably close, knee-to-knee. Keith was grateful for the warmth, even as he squinted away from the sun. His wings felt heavy and glued together. His joints ached. Keith wished he could go back to being unconscious.

The rocking motion didn’t stop; steady as a pendulum.

Shiro shook him gently by the arm.

“Hey,” he said.

Keith’s throat felt dry and awful, a bitter taste lodged at the back of his tongue – he made a few aborted gagging sounds. He tried to sit up, but found his way barred by Shiro’s bicep. Keith pushed at it weakly, perplexed.
“He’s awake,” said Shiro, “Hey – it’s okay. You’re okay. Don’t move, there’s not much room.”

“This boat was not built for three,” said Pidge from somewhere behind Shiro’s left wing. “I should know, because I built it. For me.”

“And your stuff,” Hunk added.

“And my stuff,” Pidge conceded.

“And remember,” said Hunk – Keith couldn’t see where the merman was – “there’s three of you, and only two of us. So if you tip over…someone is going to have to swim on their own – ”

A moment of thoughtful silence wherein everyone verified this on their fingers.

“Can we go any faster?” said Pidge, “I can’t feel my legs.”

“ – and that person is going to be you Pidge,” Hunk continued, “Because Keith is too soggy to float.”

“We could just try turn the boat back the right side up?” suggested Shiro.

Keith rubbed his face, trying to clear his head. It didn’t work.

“…what’s going on,” he said, trying and failing to get his wings in a more comfortable position, “Where are – what happened?” He blinked a few times, then realised properly where they were.

“… why are we in a boat.”

“You fainted,” said Pidge, “we’re all in my boat to get you dry. Somewhere. Lance says there’s a beach. You need a sand bath.”

“We’re lucky it’s been sunny all day,” said Shiro, running a calming palm over the arch of Keith’s left wing, “We need to get you dry, and this is faster than a fire. How are you feeling?”

“Actually you both need a sand bath,” Pidge continued blithely, “everything smells like wet feathers and feet. Yeesh.”

There was the sound of something wet slapping the bottom of their boat, and Keith realised that Hunk was pushing the dinghy from behind while someone – presumably Lance – was pulling it from the front. He could see the shadow of a long, shimmering tail below the surface of the water, arching out from under their shadow. But he couldn’t see Lance himself.

“How long was I out?” asked Keith, still disorientated, “I’m – I think I swallowed too much water.”

“Not sure,” said Shiro, “But wasn’t like I could fly you out.”

“Nearly there,” said Hunk, and the dinghy dips a little with the crest of a wave, “more to the right, Lance.”

He made an inhuman series of furious clicks. Keith assumed Hunk was something along the lines of ‘no, your other right!’ as they veered towards the looming cliffs. He realised, belatedly, that they were heading towards an unfamiliar shoreline. It was a little hook-cove, hidden from the wind by a tight curve of rock. The water grew stiller as they got closer, and Keith could see a small bank
of soft sand – a soft yellow medallion in the blue.

Keith put a hand over the edge of the boat, feeling for the water.

“Lance?” he said, letting his fingers drag in the slip stream. They were going faster than any human would be able to row, the water shocking cold against his skin. But this time, he was devoid of fear.

“Lance? Are you okay?”

There was a quiet sort of trill in the water, just beneath the white foam.

Then a hand brushed against Keith’s, and Keith jolted, accidentally elbowing Shiro in the ribs. He reached into the water, and felt a responding grip – brief, but sure – around his wrist, before it disappeared.

“What?!” said Shiro.

Keith drew his hand back.

“Nothing,” he said, pressing his face into Shiro’s down feathers. “I – is Lance okay?”

“He’s fine,” said Hunk from behind them both, “just steering. Can’t chat, he’s under water.”

“Oh, right,” said Keith, feeling embarrassed.

“Hold on we’re nearly there.”

Seagulls called from their rock nests and suddenly their dinghy hit the sand with a jolt.

Letting out a shout of delight, Pidge threw herself out of the boat and onto the beach with a spray of water. She immediately toppled over.

“My feet!” she said, groaning, “Ugh, help, pins and needles!”

“Tails are better,” said Hunk automatically.

Pidge held her backpack above her head and splashed onto dry sand, dumping the bag on a cluster of rock before coming back to help tow the dinghy more firmly onto the beach. Lance popped out from under the boat, a long line of scales and bare skin as the water became too shallow.

He seemed to move like a snake, tail sweeping in tight arches to propel him and the boat forwards. Keith tried to stand up, but he overbalanced with his wet wings and wobbly legs. Shiro caught him before he could fall face first into the sand, and hauled him bodily out of the dinghy.

The soft dry sand felt like heaven between Keith’s toes.

Then he frowned.

“Shiro,” he said.

“Yeah?” said Shiro, a little out of breath. Wet wings were heavy.

“Where did my boots go?”

Shiro dropped them both bodily, his wings snapping out with a relieved *oomph*. It threw up a spray
of sand.

“I took them off,” said Shiro, “otherwise you’d have cut someone when you twitched.”

“Your feet stink,” Pidge offered, from where she was pulling out bottles. She stomped over and thrust one into Keith’s face.

“Here,” she said, “Drink this. You too, Shiro.”

Keith did as he was told. The water felt wonderful going down.

“Is this dry enough?” said Lance, who was half in the water, propped up on his elbows. His tail disappeared into the lapping waves, and his scales shone iridescent in the midday sun. It was blinding but Keith couldn’t look away. Perhaps he really had drunk too much sea water, because he fancied that he could still hear a soft ringing in his ears, like the remnants of a choir.

Shiro took the water bottle from Keith and drank a long gulp himself, before capping it and patting the sand around them. The sand wasn’t too fine, but it was dry and warm – having baked all morning. The heat of it was soaking through Keith’s pants, and he wanted to roll around until his feathers breathed again.

“This is good,” said Shiro, taking a big handful, “C’mon buddy.”

Keith stared at him. He looked at the two mermen, who were watching with rapt attention, eyes big. Keith looked back at Shiro. His cheeks felt uncomfortably warm.

Pidge snorted.

“I think he wants you to turn around guys,” she said, wriggling her feet into the sand and lying down, using her bag as a pillow. She pointed at Lance and Hunk with one foot. “Yeah. Turn around.”

“What,” said Hunk, “Why? I want to see how it works.”

Lance looked like he agreed.

“– to see – !” spluttered Keith, going red.

“Maybe if you could turn around,” said Shiro diplomatically, “This is a more involved process given how soaked he is.”

Lance shrunk back a little; tail wriggling as he pulled himself back into the water.

“Um, I’m going to – go get some food,” he said. And with a twist, he disappeared into the sea again, tail fin sweeping up once and then gone. Hunk made a noise, before diving after him.

And in a few moments, the cove was quiet again.

“Oh look,” said Pidge, not opening her eyes, “He got embarrassed. Cute.”

“Katie,” said Shiro. He cleared his throat, tucking his own wings back until they were nestled to his back. He turned to Keith, still with a handful of sand.

“C’mon,” he said, “Let’s get you dry. Must be awful.”

“I feel like all my feathers have stuck together,” said Keith, taking a few steps over so they each
had enough room on the beach.

Undoing the laces of his shirt, Keith buried it in a patch of hot sand to deal with later. Something tugged at his neck, and he untangled it from his undershirt.

It was the necklace that Lance had given him weeks ago, with its tiny bottle still a quarter full of tiny Belmeran crystals. There had been more than enough for Shiro’s medicine in the end, and Lance insisted that he kept the rest just in case. Miraculously, it hadn’t gotten undone under water. *A token of goodwill and trust*, thought Keith, fingers curling around the small bottle. *A debt?*

If so, it was worth it to have Shiro beside him again, shaking his feathers out with a wry grin.

The crystals were pale blue under the sun, but the glass was warmer than expected against Keith’s palm. Digging his shirt back out of the sand, Keith carefully wrapped the necklace in its sleeve.

Then he lay down on his back, wings first. The heat was glorious against his wet feathers, and he shuffled them with practiced motions, digging the arches first into the sand until he worked up a divot. He used his hands and pushed with his legs, arching his heels into the ground until slowly his wings were buried underneath dry sand.

Beside him, Shiro was doing much the same. There hadn’t been an opportunity since he himself had been drenched a few weeks ago, and even though they groomed each other every morning, it wasn’t the same as a good hot sand bath.

Keith covered his face with his hands to shield his eyes against the sun, luxuriating in the friction of sand against his feathers. It stuck to his damp pinions, but as he shuffled in slow circles, it dried off and scraped down—leaving the feather fresh and airy.

He winced though, when he pressed against a lump on his temple. When he reached up to brush his hair away, his fingers were slightly sticky with blood. He must have hit something when he fell over.

Keith tried to think back to the moments immediately before he woke up—he could remember a beautiful ringing sound, like a hum that vibrated the cord in his bones. He could remember feeling warm all over, could remember the blue of Lance’s eyes and the feeling of soft scales on the palm of his hands.

There was a cut on the inside of his mouth, from kisses and sharp teeth.

Keith shivered.

To his left, Shiro had buried himself—shirt and all—so enthusiastically that he had created a mini sand dune behind him. Pidge was watching them lazily a few metres over. Keith felt suddenly very self-conscious. She tutted when she saw him staring.

“Nothing I haven’t seen before,” she said, voice muffled from her bag pillow, “I help Matt when he was moulting. He whinged so much.”

Keith risked a glance at Shiro, but Shiro only huffed out a laugh.

“No pinions, no opinion,” he said, flicking sand at Pidge half heartedly.

She stuck her tongue out.

“You need help pilling it on?”
“…No,” said Shiro.

Pidge got up with a determined look on her face. Belatedly, Shiro tried to extricate himself from his sand dune.

“I said no thanks Pidge, I remember what happened last time you – go away!”

Keith sat up, letting the sand run off his wings.

They were still damp, but he already felt ten times better than he did half an hour ago. He stretched his wings out with a groan, shaking them one by one to get the sand from in between his feathers. Then he shuffled a few meters further up the beach to repeat the whole process with a fresh lot of sand, leaving Pidge and Shiro to their sand fight.

He took his shirt and his the necklace with him.

Lance couldn’t remember ever feeling quite this awful.

The guilt and embarrassment was sour and sick at the back of his throat, and he swam as fast as he could into the deep cover of the water, out of sight, out of earshot – somewhere else. He could hear Hunk calling his name – his real name – piercing and loud through the water.

Lance didn’t want to stop. He wanted to swim until he was too tired to go any further. Then he wanted to go home and curl up in his nest, float among the crystal and soft moss; maybe wait until Corinna finished her shift and go cuddle with her. He wanted someone to tail hug him very tight. He wanted to count his spoons until he felt better again. Lance wanted to sleep.

He dove through a hook-gap between two rocks, twisting his spine to avoid colliding around the next bend. A stone scored against his scales, but Lance didn’t stop. Wriggling until he was through into the open space beyond. The water was ink against his skin; blue where it refracted off the glow of his scales at his wrists.

“Lance! Wait up, jeez, Lance.”

Hunk grabbed at his fin, and Lance eventually slowed, looping his torso around in a reluctant circle. Hunk half dove past him with his momentum, and had to double back. He looked peeved.

“Hey – c’mon man. What’s going on?”

Lance gave his friend a baleful look.

“What’s going on? I nearly drowned someone that’s what went on! I – I didn’t know I could do that! Why didn’t anyone tell me I could do that?”

Hunk tried to hook his tail around Lance but Lance moved away, hugging himself with his arms.

“That’s not your fault,” said Hunk placating, “Totally not your fault. You can’t control how they react to mersong. That’s the whole point, right? Remember what your sisters always said, if in trouble, s-“

“- scream as loud as you can,” finished Lance, “…But that’s just to – stun them, or whatever right?
Knock them out. So you can get away. Not – not this.”

He could feel Hunk’s careful, steady gaze on the back of his face. Lance took a deep drag of water through his gills, trying to calm his heart. It didn’t work.

“What’s ‘this’ exactly?” said Hunk.

Lance let out a frustrated scree.

“He kissed me!” he said, waving his hands, “He just – mouth to mouth, like we were bonded already! He was so – it felt – …I could… “

Lance had to concentrate very hard so he didn’t choke.

“No one does that. No one cares when I sing! No one has that reaction ever because I’m too scrawny, and I’m not good and – “

“Hey,” said Hunk sharply, poking Lance in the shoulder, “That’s not true! You’re the best singer, everyone says so. You lead all the Crystal ceremonies and the – “

Lance twisted his tail impatiently.

“That’s not the same,” he said. His chest felt cramped and squashed, and he clenched his hands into fists to try add a counterweight. “That’s not the same,” he said again, “You know that’s not. Mom’s important and everyone…it’s not me. That’s just….”

Lance laughed, choked and bubbly.

“Just physics and frequencies and luck, like Pidge said, right? Not like anyone’s sang back or anything… Keith only skipped that part because he’s a stupid bird and it was just a mistake, and - ”

Lance his face behind his tail, but Hunk followed, trying to grab his arm. Lance wanted to cry – but he couldn’t, not under water. He felt ugly and humiliated and suddenly wanted to be anywhere but in front of Hunk and his pity.

“ – mistake and physics,” he said.

Hunk managed to hook an arm around one of Lance’s, pulling him to a stop.

“That’s not true,” he said, “Lance. Keith might not mean it in – well, mean it properly but you don’t know that until you talk to him and ask – “

Lance screeched in horror. The sound reverberated around the rocks.

“Talk!” he said, “TALK!”

“Yes, Lance, talk,” said Hunk. Then he paused. “Do you want me to talk to him? That…it wasn’t okay. You don’t do that. Not to someone you haven’t courted.”

Lance wanted to tear his hair out.

“Keef doesn’t even know what he did!” Lance yelled, “They’re birds! He wouldn’t care! He’ll blame me, for – Merfolk drown people for fun,” mimicked Lance, “scary merfolk trick people into the water and then drag them to their water graves, that’s what he thinks. That’s what Shiro thinks. That’s – “
Belatedly, Lance realised someone was bound to come looking for them for all the ruckus they were making. At least they were far enough away from the cave and the cove that no one would stumble upon two Avians and a human. Hopefully. **Oh god, what if they got into trouble while Hunk and Lance were gone?** Lance looked up, and he couldn’t even see the surface properly.

They were very far down.

Hunk was still holding onto his elbow, face furrowed in worry.

Lance let himself shift until he was floating on his back, tail fin drooping to the sand, arms loose. A tiny translucent fish flickered curiously at his glowing wrists, then darted away again when Lance flicked a finger at it.

“Keith doesn’t hate you. Shiro doesn’t – they know it was a…” Hunk trailed off awkwardly.

“A mistake?” said Lance, tilting his head back.

“Well,” said Hunk. “Yeah.”

Lance closed his eyes.

“I just. Want someone to sing back, you know?” he said, not looking at Hunk, “Not as part of a ceremony. Not because of the Belmera. Or mom. I thought when it happened it would be – it would…just…”

Distantly, he could hear whale song. It sounded a little like his own voice inside that cave.

Wordlessly, Hunk dipped his tail fin to Lance’s; a reassuring pressure. Lance pressed back, but let himself float a little closer to the ocean floor. Shiro’s tag was drop of weight against his throat; while the crystal floated just above his collarbones like a star.

“It will happen,” said Hunk, quietly.

The whale was still singing. Somewhere up ahead, its partner sang back, and overlapping sound like a third and a sixth slotting together.

Lance exhaled through his gills.

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore,” he said.

---

Later, when the sun sat in the crook of the cliff edge and the water shone a crystal white, Keith and Shiro shook out the sand from their feathers with great ruffling flaps and settled down on a fresh patch of sand to groom each other’s wings. They took it in turns to work through the hard-to-reach feathers, while Pidge worked idly in her notebook – papers spread out on a flat outcrop of rocks and moss.

It was Shiro’s turn.

He was lying on his stomach across the sand, wings loose and spread out either side of him while
Keith sat cross-legged, combing his fingers through the glossy outer layer and making sure the soft inner feathers weren’t wet. He brushed out the sand with pinched fingers, bit by bit while Shiro melted into the beach like a fluffy puddle. It was therapeutic, and gave Keith’s hands something to concentrate on while his brain replayed the morning’s incident in his mind.

“Your pinions are coming back in,” he said, absently – running the flat of one thumb over the new feather. “Is it uncomfortable?”

Shiro grunted.

“Not really,” he said, “just itchy.”

Keith snorted.

“That’s what uncomfortable means, Shiro.”

“Eh.”

Keith studied the colour of the flight feathers, shielding his eyes from the sun. While Shiro’s old feathers were the same black and slate grey, the new ones seemed lighter – they were coming out pale grey and white. They stood out against the rest of his feathers, a stark contrast.

Shiro must have felt his hands pause. He twisted a little to look at Keith over his shoulder.

“What?”

Keith cleared his throat.

“Nothing,” he said quickly, “Just. Making sure nothing’s splintered.”

Shiro raised an eyebrow.

Keith sighed.

“Your feathers are different,” he said, smoothing a hand over the arch of Shiro’s right wing. “Has it always been like this? I don’t – I mean I could be wrong – “

Shiro shrugged. It was a hard thing to do while lying on your chest.

“It’s okay,” he said mildly, stretching his wings out of Keith’s grasp so they trailed a long curved line in the sand. “I noticed them the other morning. As long as they’re still the right feathers, huh?”

Keith looked away. The intervening year yawned, like a chasm between them. Keith had never been a marksman; had never had quite the steady hands nor the temperament for it. And now his hands shook, betraying the fear and grief in his gut.

Shiro winched in his wings and sat up, hooking Keith in with the edge of his right wing when Keith tried to stand.

“Hey – c’mon,” said Shiro, “Your turn.”

Keith swallowed hard. He was aware that in his periphery, Pidge had gone still. She was watching them.

“Okay,” said Keith, forcing his wings to loosen. Beside them, the ocean makes shushing sounds, soft in the cove. Keith reached for the necklace under his shirt. “Okay.”
As it turned out, Keith had forgotten how crafty Shiro could be. He hid it under all of those mild, benign feathers... waiting until Keith was half snoozing into the sand before planting a knee on the back of Keith’s arch. As soon as he had Keith half buried in the sand like a sparrow, Shiro wanted to talk.

“So,” said Shiro, piling sand through Keith’s down feathers, “How are you feeling?”

Keith turned his face into the sand, wondering if he could just suffocate himself. Instead, he dislodged a small crab and inhaled half a lungful of the beach in alarm.

Shiro didn’t let up.

“That was a pretty strong reaction back there.”

Keith spluttered and wheezed, trying to yank his wing out of the sand and propping himself up on one elbow.

“Wasn’t my fault,” he said, after the crab had gone.

“Not saying it was anyone’s fault,” said Shiro mildly.

Keith groaned into his elbow.

“Don’t want to talk about it.”

Shiro carded his fingers through Keith’s feathers, shifting the damp sand off and heaping more on. It felt amazing. Keith felt faintly mutinous.

“Lance seems upset. …You okay?”

“Pretty sure Lance’s just embarrassed,” said Pidge. She was sitting up now, cross legged on a dry slab of rock with her notebook and backpack spread around her knees. She was chewing on the end of a pencil, and Keith could see her shrewd sharp stare burning the top of his ears. His cheeks felt hot too, just from the memory of the kiss. He pressed his nose into the sand.

“Maybe I’m embarrassed,” he muttered.

“What’s that?” said Shiro, lying through his stupid white teeth. Avians had excellent hearing. Case in point, thought Keith sourly.

“Why me though?” said Keith, after a while. The weight of the sand was lulling him, and he wasn’t sure he could have moved even without Shiro being a manipulative hen. “Why didn’t you also – “ Keith stuttered to a halt.

“Also…?” prompted Shiro.

“I snapped him out of it pretty easy,” said Pidge, shaking her half empty canister of water at the two Avians. “You were all sneaky like – when I turned around you were already in the water on the other side of the bank.”

“It was like a choir singing,” said Shiro. He shifted so that his shadow shielded Keith’s eyes from
the sun, wings sloped and smelling like fresh salt, wind and cliff grass. “I just remember the… sound of it. Keith?”

Even the memory of the sound made something hook in deep between Keith’s ribs, as if tugging him gently back to the water, back to the cave. It pulsed in tandem to the rhythm of the waves: shhh, shhh, shhh.

“Yeah,” he said, after a long pause. He wet his lips, “but like it was coming from inside my own head.”

“Do you remember walking?” asked Pidge eagerly, “Getting in the lake?”

Keith turned his face so that his cheek was pressed to the sand. The waterline looked so much closer from this angle, running parallel to the shadow of the cliffs on the other side of the cove. It was so quiet; there were hardly any gulls and nothing to suggest a fin or splash in the water.

“Not really,” he lied.

“Mmhm,” said Shiro, still in that mild agreeable tone, “then what happened.”

Keith dug his toes into the sand, feeling a swell of frustration at the back of his throat.

“I kissed him,” he said. It came out a little more forcefully than he had intended.

Behind him, Pidge’s pencil scratch-scratch paused ominously.

Keith tongued the cut in his mouth.

“A lot,” he added for clarification.

“…then he dragged you into the water,” said Shiro.

“I don’t really remember that bit,” said Keith. “Why didn’t you have the same reaction?”

“Probably because Shiro doesn’t want to snog a fish in the first place and –“

“Pidge.”

Suddenly something horrible occurred to Keith and he tried to sit up. Shiro pushed down on his shoulder blades.

“Wait – what if he – Lance was upset about the – when I bumped his nose – is he okay? Did he say anything? How long was I out?”

Lance had seemed okay – he hadn’t been under water clutching his face at least – but he was also uncharacteristically subdued. Keith felt a little ill. It felt like they had taken five steps back for the few they’d made.

“He didn’t say much,” said Shiro, “I think you should talk to him.”

“No,” said Keith flatly.

The very thought made his face burn hot again. He could taste the salt at the back of his throat; the phantom pressure of a powerful tail around his legs. He couldn’t remember the cold at all.

“Yes,” said Pidge.
She smacked the back of Keith’s leg with her notebook. Keith tried to kick her but missed.

“How else are we going to run a re-trial? I have to figure this out! It’s very important. More important than your unresolved sexual ten— “

“Pidge!”

Keith spluttered into the sand.

“There’s nothing unresolved or sexual about anything!” he protested, trying to bury his face deeper into the sand. It made talking difficult and he spat out a mouthful of dirt.

“I still think you should talk to him,” said Shiro diplomatically, “You should tell him you’re not angry.”

“Of course I’m not angry,” said Keith angrily.

“He thought I would be angry,” Shiro continued blithely, “And I told him everything was okay.”

“Yeah,” said Pidge, “Like six times between the cave and here.”

“But I think Lance cares more about what you think of him, Keith,” said Shiro.

“Please don’t wave a knife at him,” said Pidge, “I don’t think we’d ever recover from that.”

“I would not!” said Keith, “He knows I wouldn’t.”

There was a long sceptical pause.

“You need to talk,” said Shiro firmly. “With words.”

“But - !”

“Words.”

But Lance wasn’t there when dusk fell.

And when Hunk came to help them return to the lake, he came alone.

Contrary to popular belief, Merfolk couldn’t see in the pitch black.

Their eyesight was a lot keener in the dark than humans and Avians, but it was not all that much better than the Galra’s used to be – back when they lived deep in the mountains, cloaked in rock and snow and earth. Instead, Merfolk relied mostly on sound in the deeper depths; threading each call through the water – in between the whale-song and the dolphins who had come for the salmon in this part of the ocean.
Lance swept his tail through the dark ocean floor, stirring up a cloud of sand and a few flickers of silver fish.

The surface was like a rippling sky, the light muted and gentle on his eyes. It was afternoon now, the sea thick and throaty. Lance liked lying in the ocean like this, watching the shadow of fish and sea birds above him. But today, the surface felt very foreign.

Sweeping up more dirt, Lance swam slowly to the surface, following the shape of one particular shadow. It was the silhouette of huge wings, sometimes sweeping closer, sometimes disappearing into a pinprick.

Keith was flying again.

Lance followed him beneath the water, the shadow just a few meters above him. If he tilted his head, it might even have been his own. He kept pace with it, belly up so he could watch light change and the shape of the wings as they snapped close and opened again. Sometimes they would glide smooth for long, long minutes, beautiful and huge – extending either side of Lance’s own slim shadow.

His tail was a lot longer, but in those moments when their shadows slotted together…Lance felt like he might have been flying too.

Lance let himself swim closer to the surface, close to the edge of the rocks so he wouldn’t be spotted. He knew he shouldn’t, he was meant to be avoiding … but he so desperately wanted to see. Lance had to squeeze his eyes shut as he broke the surface. Even then, the sun etched itself in a bright red-yellow ring on the back of his eyelids.

But then Keith flew in front of a cloud, the white-grey throwing his dark-red feathers into sharp relief. He was very high up now, but Lance could still see the way he tucked his wings as he executed some kind of circling flip. One second he was gliding, the next he was in a curving dive, wings tucked close before they fanned out again in a rush of Lance’s own breath. One could almost mistake Avians for normal birds at this distance.

Keith looked utterly weightless.

Lance exhaled, pulling himself a little out of the water so he could watch Keith above the cliff tops.

Keith was doing repeated dives now, wings flapping hard as he ascended and then tucking close as he rocketed towards the sea like a bullet. Each time he stopped a little lower, a little closer to the water – his wings pulling him up short as they snapped out – hooked on some invisible force and tugging him back up into the sky from the shoulders, into the sun.

He was bright and blazing.

He looked beautiful.

Lance had never met something quite so out of reach.

He dived back beneath the surface of the ocean.
And Lance might have swam in the dregs of his own melancholy for a lot longer… had it not been for the return of Mia and her pod.

It starts it always did; familiar sounds at his periphery.

Lance squeaked sharply at Hunk, waving to get him to stop his excavation.

*They’re here!*

Their home was often host to pods of dolphins. The salmon came through here every spring, and that always meant great meals for everyone. It was a good spot. The water wasn’t too cold; the rocks made for good cover, and the coves and cliff edges made for good hunting. But Mia’s pod had been a particularly steady presence ever since Lance had been a guppy, often staying for a couple months at a time, hunting and playing with the resident Merfolk.

Their calls were instantly identifiable from miles away, and shook Lance out his absent search after forgotten trinkets. He pulled his shoulders out of a half shattered porthole, one hand still on the wreck, bag slung across his chest.

Lance called back, a sharp piercing enquiry. Not even a second later, he received an answer, followed by a furious storm of excited clickering. Lance perked up, dropping the plate he had been examining. There were unfamiliar voices, which mean the pod had –

“- babies!” he shrieked, thwacking Hunk hard across the tail as he pushed away from the Galra ship, “Mia’s back! Hunk! Hunk!”

“They’re still miles away are you really going to – oh jeez, Lance get back here you said you’d visit Pidge and – Lance!”

Lance didn’t even look back, swimming as fast as his tail could carry him through the water. He kept up the calls back and forth; their chatter attracting a questioning call from a nearby whale. It vibrated through the water like a bell being struck, deep and sonorous. It sent the baby clicks into another crescendo, and Lance peered through the water as hard as he could, trying to catch a glimpse of the approaching pod.

And suddenly, there they were, streaking through the water around Lance in excited circles, whirling him onto his back with the force of their slipstream. Lance laughed out loud as one of the dolphins rubbed herself all along his side, nudging him none-too-gently with her beak with excitement. Lance rubbed her back, baring his own teeth in greeting. He rubbed her chin vigorously, and then promptly found himself surrounded by her friends, also wanting chin rubs.

“Hello,” he said, “Hello, hello did you miss me? How was winter? You look so big now! Aww, I missed you! Who’s a pretty girl? And pretty boy! Aww! Hello hello hello! C’mon gimme a kiss, give Lance a kiss –”

Then he got to Mia.

Lance screeched, the sound bouncing off the rocks and making the other dolphins chatter. s

“You!” he said, giving her a huge hug. They exchanged tail slaps, spinning through the water and narrowly avoided slamming into a rock. “You’re so big!” he ran a hand down her smooth belly, past her fins and back up again. She was definitely big. Very big. Lance cooed at her.

“Are you going to be a mom?” he said, swimming around her, clapping his hands together. Mia spun like a little tornado in the water, fins wiggling excitedly too.
Someone younger nipped at Lance’s tail fins and he slapped them playfully with the end of his tail.

Mia rubbed her cheek against his stomach affectionately. Lance clutched at her beak in a mock tussle. They had almost grown up together; since the pods often came around Whitecap bay to give birth to new calves. It was safer, with Merfolk around. They watched out for each other, and not many sharks could get past the mermaids.

Lance had been present when Mia had been born. They had been roughly the same size then, matching grey-ish tails and dopey smiles – but now she was much bulkier than he was; powerful and sleek.

Asides from a new notch on her fin and a few new scars on her tail, she seemed to be in the height of health. Lance rubbed her tummy with a ball of seaweed, making her wiggle her fins happily.

“Am I going to be Uncle Lance? Auntie Lance? Did you come visit? Do I get to name Mia junior? Eyyyy.”

“Oh my god,” said Hunk from somewhere behind them, “You are so high pitched my ears are bleeding. I hope you never have kids.”

Lance spun around, spinning the dolphin with him, upright like a dance partner.

“Mia is going to have a baby!” said Lance happily. He ooffed as someone else knocked into his chest, but he was too busy giving out hugs to care. The ocean around them rang with squeaks and clicks and dolphin chatter. Some of the pod were already nosing at the ocean floor for fish, re-exploring the rock formations and crystal clusters.

One of the smaller dolphins seemed very interested in Lance’s bag, nipping and pulling at it with his beak whenever he thought Lance wasn’t paying attention.

Mia gave her friend a stern poke with her beak and they squeaked off to annoy someone else.

“Aww look there’s already new ones to the pod!” said Hunk, swimming alongside a new calf who was shadowing his mother. The latter was giving Hunk suspicious looks, but the baby seemed totally enamoured with Hunk’s golden scales.

“When are you due then buddy?” said Lance, smoothing a hand over Mia’s fin, “Beautiful girl. Look how big you are! So big!”

Hello, hello, hello! she said, swimming around him in a tight circle. Salmon over west. Salmon over west. Go, go, go guppy, go.

There was nothing quite like swimming with dolphins.

They chased each-other through the shallows, riding off each-other’s slip stream and surfing the white spray. Up ahead, the dolphins were breaching. There was the resounding cracking sound of the lead smacking the surface as he came down; the noise pinpointing the shoal just underneath the surface – and they were off.

Lance and Mia breached in tandem, leaping from the water to dive in clean, resuming position underneath the shoal as another member of the pod stirred up the sea bed in tight circle. Hunk
voice was clear and sustained, helping the mid-belt tighten the net as he swam; a gold streak amidst the grey blue.

Lance suspected that Mia saw him as some sort of deformed dolphin baby. She kept bringing him half chewed salmon in the wake of their mud net successes, clicking at him insistently. Never mind that Lance would bring her food as well.

“You’re too skinny,” said Hunk, chowing down, “She just wants to look after you.”

“But I’m full,” said Lance, flowing belly up.

Mia pushed him under his waist insistently with her forehead. Lance realised a second too late what she was trying to do.

“Hey – hey stop that you arghhh,” he spluttered as she half tossed him out of the water like a log. He smacked the surface coming back down, to the chorus of laughter. Hunk was laughing too, the traitor. Mia giggled in a way only dolphins could, somersaulting through the air in a perfectly executed flip of smugness. Lance was there beneath her to chase her deeper into the shoal, tagging other dolphins with his tail on his way through.

And the ocean didn’t feel quite so vast.

Lance hadn’t shown up at the lake for three days in a row and Keith was getting antsy.

He felt unfinished; words half abandoned at the very corner of a page with nothing more than a smudge of sea water to show that they had been read. He had cleaned and sharpened all his knives, poked through Lance’s hoard of weaponry and threw stones into the water.

The last hobby he had to cease and desist after Pidge threatened to push him into the water if he so much as splashed her note book again.

But it was now the fourth day, and Lance still didn’t turn up.

Hunk had said very little when Keith had asked – just dropped off a neat line of fat fish and told them that Lance needed some time to himself. Shiro had looked meaningfully at Keith, but Keith had stomped out of the cave in a sulk and gone flying. What else was he meant to do? Stick his head under the water and yell?

The quiet of the lake cavern was too empty.

Which was why it was a surprise when he spotted the flash of tail fins heading towards the cave entrance. Keith paused, trying to keep his place, chest heaving with exertion. That was definitely Hunk and Lance; their tails were too distinctive to mistaken for any other kind of ocean animal, long and glittering in blue and gold. But they weren’t alone; there were other tails, fins that streaked through the water like arrow heads and –

Keith did a double take.

Something had leapt out of the water, then dived back. He flew a little closer, gliding on the strong headwind and half tucking his wings so he wouldn’t get buffeted back up. He could count maybe
ten more sleek fins – sharks? Dolphins?

They drew close into the shadow cast by the cliff, and then disappeared into the cave mouth. Keith tilted his head, snapped his wings in, and followed.

He was getting a lot better at landing on slick ocean rock – but it still took him a little while to work his way back into the cave and around the perimeter of the lake in the half dark. But it definitely wasn’t empty anymore: the entire cavern was noisy with tremendous splashing and squeaking and squealing and a chatter-clicking sound he had only ever heard Lance and Hunk use. It was so loud, the echoes bouncing every which way that it was slightly disorienting.

Then he heard Pidge’s excited voice.

“…Babies?”

And then Lance’s voice. Keith hated himself for the way his head jerked towards the sound.

“…yes! This girl here, she’s my best friend, say hi Mia! She’s going to be a mom, I think within the week! She’s really friendly you can come closer Shiro.”

And as Keith himself got closer, he could pick out the individual sounds of the dolphins. Some were splashing about in the shallows, seemingly following the fish that they had herded into a corner. Others were further out in the centre of the cave, and all he could see of them were the occasional flick of a tail. But he could hear them, talking to each other and rippling the dark inky water.

Hunk appeared to be holding onto two dolphins at once as they streaked around the lake in circles, spraying up water in high arches. But Lance was leaning on the rocky outcrop, half in the water and patting a dolphin as Pidge crouched right on the edge.

Up close, these were a lot bigger animals than Keith had thought.

“Here,” Lance was saying, “Here, give this to her she’ll love you!”

Then he slapped a small silver fish down onto the rock, stunning it before pushing it into Pidge’s hand.

“Just drop it in?” said Pidge, “Or should I throw it?”

“Eh,” said Lance, “Maybe just give her this one.”

“But I want to see her jump up! How far can they go?”

“I don’t think you should tease them, Pidge,” said Shiro, who was standing a few steps back. But he was grinning, wings relaxed as he leaned forwards with interest.

Pidge held the fish by the tail, dangling it just above the dolphins’ head. She squeaked loudly, splashing up the water with her fins and opening her mouth in what looked like a huge smile and – Keith stared – there were a lot of teeth there too, long rows lining the beak.

Did everything in the ocean have this many teeth?

And then the dolphin snapped up the fish in two chomps, and Lance was laughing again.

“Aww look! She says thank you! Wanna give her another one?”
“Yes!” said Pidge, and she was reaching out, patting the dolphin’s head like she wasn’t within biting distance.

“Hey,” she called over her shoulder, “Shiro! Come pat! She feels so smooth, wow!”

Then she spotted Keith too.

“Keith!” she exclaimed, “Keith! Come see Lance’s dolphin friends! They wouldn’t come into the cave last year this is the first time I’ve touched them! Come over you huge scaredy bird.”

Keith hesitated, watching the way Lance went still at the sight of him.

“I’m fine here, thanks,” said Keith, peeling himself away from the rock wall and making his way towards where the lamps were. He sat down heavily on his pile of blankets and began busily unlacing his boots, just so he didn’t have to meet anybody’s gaze.

“Oh come on Keith,” said Shiro, “How many times are you going to pat a dolphin?”

“When I’m next fishing you out of the sea,” muttered Keith to his boots.

“Hey,” said Shiro, “I heard that.”

“Bully for you,” said Keith, unlacing his other shoe.

“Oh hey,” interrupted Lance, “Oh look, Bart’s saying hello – Shiro I think he likes you!”

There was a few loud splashing then a peal of laughter from Pidge and Hunk.

“He’s so confused,” said Hunk, “Look – haha, oh my god he’s so confused.”

“Is he waving at me?” said Shiro.

“Well I mean, pretty sure they haven’t realy seen an avian this close either,” came Pidge’s voice.

Keith couldn’t help himself, he looked up.

One of the dolphins was standing upright in the water, almost right up close to the rock bed where Shiro was standing, half crouched with his wings out. When Shiro stretched out his right wing, the dolphin waved his left flipper. When Shiro stretched out his left wing, the dolphin flapped his right flipper. It was the worlds strangest mirror mime.

Shiro arched both wings, pulling them back and forth in mock flight – and all the spectating dolphins went nuts, squealing and clicking furiously, splashing up a storm. Lance was laughing too, wheezing and shaking with his arms around one of the dolphins.

Hunk handed Shiro half a fish, and Shiro held it out to the dolphin closest to him. The dolphin squeaked happily and snapped the fish out of his hands (Shiro jerked his hand back but he was laughing). Then the dolphin was promptly submerged by one of his friends who dived on top of him to get some fo the fish too.

“No!” Lance was saying, smacking the water, “That’s not for you oh my god, where are your parents - !”

“I want to pat Mia again!” said Pidge, making grabby hands, “Hunk, tell them to come over here!”

“I can’t tell them to do anything,” said Hunk.
“Sure you can, you speak dolphin don’t you?”

“Is that a thing you can learn?” said Shiro. He was still playing copy-cat with the dolphins, raising one wing then the other then both at the same time. All the participants seemed enthralled, showing their pale bellies in the water as they jostled closer.

“I don’t think you have the right equipment to make the sounds,” said Hunk.

“But we can teach you a few words! Can’t we Mia?” said Lance. He rested his elbows on the rock, beckoning Shiro closer.

“First, I’m going to teach you how to swear.”

“Lance!” said Hunk, “Seriously?”

Pidge slapped her hand onto her notebook.

“Teach me to swear in dolphin, I want to know. How do I say ‘your mother is an ugly octopus’?”

Shiro made a strangled noise, looking wildly at the dolphins as if they could understand English. If they could, none of them looked very offended. One of them tossed a small fish out of the water, just to chase it back beneath the surface again.

They seemed to have quite forgotten that Keith was there at all.

Lance was a fleeting presence over the following few days – Hunk said he was helping out with the pod and Mia.

The dolphins proved to be a good distraction from the awkward silence that hung heavy in the salt air between Lance and Keith. Even Shiro was a distracted enough by their new aquatic friends that he didn’t really nag Keith to use words; though he did give him heavy, meaningful glares over the top of Pidge’s head every time he thought Lance or Hunk was preoccupied.

But one evening, Lance returned – this time without most of his dolphin entourage: just Mia and Hunk. Or so Keith thought, until he saw a smaller fin shadowing the bigger dolphin’s side.

Lance burst excitedly out of the water, waving at Keith where he was sitting with Shiro by their makeshift camp.

It took a few moments of excited clicking and squeaking for Lance to switch to English.

“Guys, guys, come meet the new baby, come say hi, I’m an uncle!”

He splashed the water hard with the flat of his tail fin, eyes bright and hands waving. Immediately, Shiro and Pidge were by the waters edge – Keith followed too, just behind.

Mia the dolphin was quieter this time, bobbing in the water with a darker small dolphin by her right. It looked like a full grown dolphin, thought Keith, but in miniature. It was darker, and seemed to be squeaking a lot more sustained notes. Hunk was a respectable distance away, floating contentedly.
“Oh wow,” said Pidge, pushing her glasses up her nose, “Is it a boy or a girl?”

“It’s a baby boy,” said Lance rapturously, “Mia has already named him but I get to give him his English name.”

Lance smoothed a hand over the baby dolphin’s beak, over his head and made cooing clicking noises back at him. The baby splashed the water with its two flippers, nudging repeatedly at Lance’s stomach.

“Aren’t you a handsome boy? So cute. So handsome. I love you a lot. I’m going to call you Toastie.” The cooing devolved into incoherent clicks.

Pidge groaned.

“Lance, you can’t name everything after food.”

Lance paused in his cuddling.

“Why not?” he said.

Mia bopped him hard on the shoulder, and he let go of Toastie. The little dolphin swam around and under his mother, fluke paddling furiously. It seemed to still be getting the hang of swimming in a straight line.

Keith edged closer to the water, wanting a better look.

“Hunk, why are you all the way over there?” called Pidge.

“Being polite,” said Hunk.

“Moms get protective,” said Lance, patting Mia’s flank, “But she knows me really well so it’s okay. Isn’t that right baby? Uncle Lance is here to look after you and Toastie – …Uh I wouldn’t pat him, if I were you Shiro.”

Shiro paused, retracting his hand a little guiltily.

“He’s really cute,” said Pidge, who was lying on her front so she could watch the dolphins.

“Maybe we should feed them some fish,” said Keith.

Lance turned his luminous eyes on him.

“Toastie doesn’t eat fish yet, Keef,” he said, “He’s too little. You can feed Mia though. Hunk?”

And then there was a fish flying towards them – Keith reached up to grab it out of reflex, but Mia pushed herself out of the water and snatched it in her mouth, falling back into the lake with a huge splash that soaked all of their faces. Lance and Hunk howled with laughter, while Toastie squeaked up a storm.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry,” said Hunk, swimming a little closer. He reached into a net-bag near his waist and handed Keith a flat-silver fish with black eyes and dots all along its side.

“She’ll like that,” said Hunk, nodding encouragingly, “Go on.”

“C’mon Keith you’re the only one who hasn’t fed anyone yet!” said Pidge, still lying on her front.
“Don’t do anything stupid,” said Shiro.

“I’m – I can feed fish,” said Keith defensively. He eyed Mia. She eyed him back.

Dolphins really were quite large. She looked like she was calculating her chances of bowling him over and mugging him for that fish. Keith held it out over her head.

He wasn’t sure what happened next – maybe he didn’t let go fast enough – but suddenly he lost his balance as the dolphin snapped the fish, at his hand. Keith yelped, throwing the fish as far as he could. If it hadn’t been for Shiro’s out flung wing, he might have falling face first into the lake again.

A huge triumphant splash, and Mia returned to the water, resurfacing a little way away as she ate.

Toastie, however, was still there, circling Lance and flapping his flippers hopefully. He was wiggling his fluke like he was trying to stand up and take a better look. Lance playfully pushed the dolphin back under the water by the forehead.

“Aww baby,” he said, “You can’t eat big fish food yet, you’re too little!”

Toastie squealed, coming back up and bobbing up and down in the water. He had huge big eyes and a curious expression. Perhaps it was the shape of their mouths or their foreheads, but they really were quite cute. In a moment of bravado, Keith held out his hand over the water, glancing to see that Mia was not within biting distance.

Clicking curiously, Toastie pushed up against Keith’s hand – just once, briefly – before nosing back into the water and back to his mom.

There was a sudden pause. Lance was staring up at Keith, head tilted.

“Aww,” he said, “He likes you.”

“And,” said Pidge, “You didn’t even lose a finger. Progress!”

Shiro, folding his arms across his chest.

Behind Lance, Mia made an insistent noise, followed by soft splashing.

Keith saw his opportunity leaking away.

“Wait – Lance – “

“I’m going to get Mia and Toastie back to their pod safely,” said Lance, turning around in the water. His gaze met Keith’s for a moment, but then he sank back into the lake so smoothly there was barely a ripple. And just like that, the cavern was quiet again.

“Oh jeez,” said Hunk into the awkward silence. He swam closer and dumped the satchel of fish onto the rocks. They flopped wetly in the net.

“Dinner?”
By the end of the week, Keith had run out of patience.

To be fair, he never had much patience to begin with. But any reserves had steadily dripped out over the past few days leaving him confused and irritated at his own confusion. And as Shiro often complained, when Keith was pissed, he was impulsive.

It would explain why he was stealing Pidge’s dinghy in the middle of the night with one of the belmeran lamps.

At least he was conforming to precedent, thought Keith. He’d left his flight boots on his bed, so his footsteps were muffled on the stone. But it was still tricky balancing the heavy lamp on one side and a very slanted cave wall on the other. He managed to make it to the dinghy without splashing or making any loud noises, and Keith set the lamp carefully between the wooden slates before climbing in himself. It was an awkward thing – his wings were too big to fit in behind him sitting down, but there wasn’t enough room to spread them out either side. He had to half kneel in the boat so that they could tuck in behind him, half raised.

Even in the calm lake waters, the boat rocked gently from side to side. Taking the oars in both hands, and thankful for his gloves, Keith unravelled the anchoring rope and pushed the small boat away from the wall.

Avians… were not the most experienced sailors. Keith had never rowed a boat in his life, but after a few tries, he figured out a rhythm and how to dig the oars into the water without accidentally dipping them in too far and having them slide out of his grip. But he quickly discovered that rowing in a straight line was harder in practice than it was in theory – he kept drifting side ways and knocking into rocks. Keith was worried about the sturdiness of the wood…and he wasn’t even out of the cavern yet.

He swore under his breath when a huge droplet of freezing water smacked him in the eye.

Taking both oars, he leaned backwards into the push-pull, and slowly, wobbling, he emerged out onto the open sea.

It was loud, out here. And less dark. It was a clear night, the moon making the water a silky silver. The ocean had a hushing roar that was at once loud and also deep. Keith tried not to look down into the water, or think about how deep it was, or what could be lurking underneath his very thin, very small boat –

Too late.

He rowed faster, splashing the oars back into the water. He had to make a ruckus to get Lance’s attention. At least, that had been the plan – if Lance wouldn’t talk to him, then Keith would go to Lance.

But now that he was in a boat, sitting amidst the night… Keith realised he hadn’t quite thought this brilliant plan through. The sea was… huge. How was he possibly meant to catch the attention of one merman? Maybe he needed to shed some blood into the water; attract Lance by scent. But that could also attract the wrong kind of things. Sharks.

Or worse.

Keith hooked the oars to rest and contemplated his dilemma. He gripped the handle of his knife very tightly for comfort. It didn’t help.
Perhaps he could stick his face into the water and yell.

Keith tried to shift in his seat so he could see over the edge of the dinghy – but his wing caught on the side of the boat and he nearly tipped himself sideways. The boat rocked ominously as he pulled his wing free, hands gripping both edges of the dinghy.

*It’ll be fine,* he told himself, *If anything happens you can just… fly away.* He eyed the sky dubiously. It was a still night. He probably couldn’t get himself airborne before he got into the water.

…Maybe *that* was the solution: maybe he had to get into the water and splash around for Lance to notice. After all, that had worked for Shiro, right?

Keith slapped a palm over his own face.

“*Fuck,*” he said.

There was absolutely no one around to answer back.

He picked up one of the oars and slapped it against the water in frustration. It rocked the boat a little, but it was loud-ish. He did it again. And again.

“*Fuck,*” he said more loudly. Then: “Lance. Lance! Stop being a – a coward and come talk!”

Nothing.

He slapped the water some more.

“Are you going to just avoid me forever?” yelled Keith, “Really? Just – come *on!*”

There was no echo out here; only the sound of the sea. Keith threw down the oar, clambering upright so he was balanced in the boat, standing up, wings half held out for balance. Maybe it was the sea wind, the salt or the cut that was still open on his lip, but he felt reckless and full of fire. It burned, despite the water, hot at the base of his spine.

“*Hey!***” he yelled, “I know you’re there! Lance! Lance!***”

Keith’s voice cracked a little on the last word.

“I’ll jump in if I have to!” he shouted. The boat rocks and he has to snap out his wings for balance, “I swear I’ll – “

“Don’t *jump in* are you insane!?”

Keith whirled around.

It wasn’t a smart thing to do in a small dinghy – the movement tipped it precariously to one side, and if it wasn’t for Lance grabbing the head of the small boat and the anchoring countering weight of his long, long tail, the dinghy probably would have flipped over. As it were, Keith was tossed back onto his ass, one wing sticking out and one half crushed beneath his right side. The lamp clattered to its side as well, the glow half shaded as it rolled underneath the wooden seat.

But there he was – arms resting on the edge of the boat, scales softly luminous under the moon. They stared at each other for a long, long moment, Keith a little out of breath, Lance looking incredulous, peeved and flushed in his cheeks.
The merman shifted a little, pulling himself more securely onto the edge of the boat. Something strong thumped quietly against the bottom of the boat; and Keith realised it was Lance’s tail, keeping them steadily in place.

“…you weren’t really going to jump in, were you?” Lance said, after a while.

Keith scowled.

“If that’s what it took to get you to stop running away like a coward.”

Lance narrowed his eyes.

“Not a coward,” he said; though there was a bit of a pout to his voice. “Been busy with Mia and —“

Keith snorted.

They fell into silence again; caught on the line of the horizon – both of them hovering in a place of in between. Lance was watching him steadily now, no darting eyes or reluctance. And now that Keith had him here, he didn’t know quite what to say.

“Did you come out here to talk to me?” said Lance, resting his cheek against his hand.

Keith tried to sit up a little straighter and less like a downed chicken.

“Well, you wouldn’t stay to talk to me,” he said.

“Not worried I might drown you?” said Lance mildly. Again, his tail rocked against the wooden boat, and there was a soft splash on the other side of the dinghy where his fin emerged like a fan out of the water. It sparkled, catching the moonlight.

“I know you wouldn’t,” said Keith bluntly.

Lance was still watching him.

“Do you really,” he said, almost to himself.

“Yes,” said Keith, “I’m here, aren’t I? In this stupid boat with all this stupid water.”

Lance blinked at him, slowly. It was a mesmerising motion: a translucent film shuttered over glowing eyes; there and gone again. The pupils were slitted and dark, and not human.

“I suppose you are,” said Lance. He ran the pad of a thumb over the edge of the boat; the rough wood and the sanded oars. “Silly bird. Silly Keef.”

Keith swallowed hard.

“I’m sorry for what happened,” he said. “I shouldn’t have... Done that without asking.”

Lance went very still.

“I think it was my fault,” said Lance, ducking his head for the first time since he appeared, “I wouldn’t – I wouldn’t hurt you or Shiro.”

“It wasn’t anyone’s bloody fault,” said Keith impatiently, “It just – I don’t know. Neither you or Hunk would explain and I just don’t know. Okay? I don’t know what I did, or what you did and I want to know.”
He rubbed a hand over his face.

“I just want to know.”

“You’re not scared,” said Lance, “Or angry?”

“I’m fucking confused,” said Keith bluntly, and that startled a huff of laughter from Lance. He shifted down the boat, closer to Keith. The dinghy dips gently with the movement, but Keith felt safe there in the middle of the ocean. He wasn’t alone, anymore, shouting into the night.

“It just means you liked my singing,” said Lance after a moment, “…not everyone likes it.”

Keith was sure there was a book’s worth of unsaid things in those two statements, but he didn’t press. His heart was beating hard against the inside of his ribs, so loud he was sure Lance could hear it. They were almost at eye level now, Keith half cramped on the bottom of the boat, Lance hanging over the edge.

The sea said: hush, hush, hush.

“Do you want to try it again?” said Keith, before he could stop himself.

Lance tilted his head to the other side.

“Try what.”

Keith pulled himself up, so he could count the scales over Lance’s eyelids. Up close, he could see the pale spotted pattern over Lance’s nose, spreading over under his eyes like freckles. But they were pale; the afterthoughts of stars.

“The kiss,” said Keith.

Lance stared at him. And then promptly dived back into the water.

Keith lost his temper.

“…Are you serious!” he yelled, trying to get his legs out from under him, “No – no you get back here, Lance. Lance!”

He tried to stand up again, but was pushed back down when the boat started moving through the water by itself. Keith was thoroughly confused for a brief second ….before he realised it must be Lance at the bottom of the dinghy. They were headed back to the cavern. Keith stamped on the bottom of the boat.

“Hey,” he shouted, “Hey I’m talking to you!”

The boat wobbled a little, but kept going. Keith stamped some more – but this was hard when he couldn’t get a steady balance to stand up. He made a raw sound of frustration, embarrassed beyond belief. His face felt hot, and Keith hoped, irrationally, that if he was blushing, it was too dark to see.

The dinghy paused, a few yards before the mouth of the cave. Keith took the opportunity to thump the bottom of the boat some more.

“Lance!”

“I think you should bring me some honey first,” said Lance, reappearing like a ghost on the
opposite side of the dinghy. He tipped the boat with his own weight so that Keith fell over hard onto his left elbow, bringing him face to face with Lance at the water’s edge. “Or maybe more of that sweet milk thing.”

He leaned closer.

“But okay,” said Lance.

Then he pushed himself out of the water, a smooth, momentary thing – and pressed a lingering kiss to Keith’s slack mouth.

And Lance was sliding smoothly back into the water with a clickering laugh, and a parting thump of his tail on the bottom of the boat.

Keith couldn't move.

The Keith in the water stared back at him, equally confused. Keith stared harder.

But all he could see was the blurry outline of his own face, refracted by the moon and the soaring ache in his chest. He let his head thump back against the seat of the dinghy, wings cramped underneath him and half sticking out of the boat. He lay there, staring up at the sky, until his heart beat a little more calmly, and he could control the smile making his cheeks hurt. He felt foolish, but very alive.

Then Keith realised one of the oars was missing.

Chapter End Notes

Phew. I'm. I really hope this wasn't a disappointing chapter after the relatively long wait. I'm having some really tough RL stuff (gonna be homeless in jan :< )and working long hours so I've had really bad writers block. I hope it wasn't too anticlimactic? I'm not really happy with the pacing but i don't know anymore haha.

The next update won't be as long a wait I promise! It really means so much that you guys take time to comment or come chat to me on twitter. It's all that's keeping me going through RL and i can't express how much it means to me. Really really is my safe happy place.

Here is a list of amazing fanart posted after last chapter ;A; i'm cry - I want to make a zine collection so i can hug it every day....pls give them a retweet or reblog!

I've also got a watercast trivia post if you're keen. Keep an eye on my twitter & tumblr for a giveaway very soon!!!!!
Chapter Summary

Love is easy; but courtship is trial-and-error.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“All colours are the friends of their neighbours, and lovers of their opposites.”
– Marc Chagall.

Pidge had not been pleased to be short one oar.

Keith was dispatched to the nearest fishing village to barter for another set. Then he had to fly back awkwardly with them in his hands, swearing all the way as the stupid things threw his balance off. At least it gave him an excuse to bribe a local trader for a few cans of sweetened milk – there was no honey – without Shiro asking too many questions. He hid it at the bottom of his bag, underneath a few loaves of bread, potatoes, carrots, cheese and salted meats. As much as Avians liked seafood, they couldn’t live off a diet of pure salmon.

(“Okay,” said Pidge, throwing up her hands, “I get that salmon is Keith’s favourite - but I will puke if we have to eat it for another day!”

Lance pouted dramatically. One tooth poked out from his lip.

“Shiro likes salmon too,” he said, “don’t you, Shiro?”

Shiro looked torn.

“To be fair, you did say it was your favourite fish too,” said Hunk.

“I want something else,” said Pidge, crossing her arms. “Also Shiro needs vegetables.”)

Keith had wanted to bring more food back, but there was only so much he could carry by himself. As it turned out though, he needn’t have worried about variety because Lance started bringing them all sorts of things: different coloured fish, flat fish that had eyes on the same side of its face, shell fish, big clams and hard-shelled mussels. Once, he brought Keith a huge clawed lobster, pincers snapping and legs scrabbling. At Lance’s insistence, Keith ate some of it raw – and it wasn’t too bad. He’d told Lance as much, and Lance had been so pleased that Keith quietly resolved to eat whatever Lance brought him.

Like most resolutions, it came with a side of regret.

Lance returned to the lake with more splashing fanfare than usual.

They were all sitting just outside of the entrance. Pidge and Hunk were crowded around one of the Balmeran lamps; making the most of the sunlight. On the other side of the flat rock, Keith and
Shiro were enjoying the afternoon heat on their wings; lazily grooming each other’s pinions. They watched as Lance’s silver-blue tail did an abrupt U-turn near the mouth of the lake, before he breached the surface where they were all sitting.

Lance ignored Pidge and Hunk completely, swimming up to where Keith and Shiro were sitting. He was holding something huge and gelatinous in one arm, and hoisted himself up to the rock with his spare elbow. Lance made a frustrated, chirruping noise at the back of his throat.

“Why you gotta sit so high,” he said, tugging Keith’s bare foot.

Keith made a half-hearted kick, but shuffled closer to the edge. This turned out to be a huge mistake, as Lance promptly slapped the thing he was holding into Keith’s hands with a resounding squeal-slap. He was beaming, a huge sunny smile displaying all his teeth.

Keith was too disgusted with whatever he was holding to react.

“What – “ he said, stretching his arms out as far away from his body as possible. The thing wobbled. It had long translucent tendrils that were cold and slimy and draped all over Keith’s wrists and lap to trail over the rock. It smelt like salt and fish guts, but it was as big as his head. The bell-shaped head also wobbly and slimy.

Shiro leaned in for a good look. He poked it with one finger.

It wobbled, dangerously. Keith wondered if it would explode if he put his knife to it. Better not try.

“I caught it for you,” said Lance, proudly.

“Uh,” said Keith, “…thanks?”

“Don’t worry I already cut off the poisonous bits,” said Lance happily, smacking his tail against the rock.

“What is it, though?” asked Shiro, giving the thing another poke. Keith glared at him and moved his arms away.

“Is that a fucking jelly fish?” called Pidge.

“It’s delicious, that’s what it is,” said Lance, nudging the thing closer towards Keith. One of the tendrils curled around Keith’s thigh and he had to fight the urge to just throw it back into the ocean as hard as he could.

“Oh…” said Keith, swallowing hard, “You eat this?”

Lance beamed at him.

“It’s really good,” he reassured him, “want me to chew it for you?”

Keith grimaced.

“Ah – no I’m okay – “

“We should really cook it before you eat it,” said Shiro, now pulling out one of the tendrils as far as it would go. He had to lean back because it just kept going. He twanged it – and then made a high pitched noise when it came off the body.

“Noo, you gotta eat it like this,” said Lance, “I dunno if it’ll taste good once you put it in fire. It’ll
be all shrivelled up!”

He turned big, hopeful eyes towards Keith.

“Just give it a go,” he said, “You can try a little bit first!”

Lance pulled out a small whale-bone blade from a pouch around his waist and proceeded to slice a translucent chunk from the jelly fish. He wiggled it enthusiastically in front of Keith’s face. Keith went a little cross eyed.

“Come on Keef,” said Lance.

He was about to politely decline, when he noticed Hunk glaring at him with wide, deliberate eyes behind Lance’s back. Their gaze met and Hunk nodded furiously, and then mimed eating motions with his hands. Beside him, Pidge was sniggering so hard she was barely sitting upright. When Keith still hesitated, Hunk narrowed his eyes and made cut-throat motions with a sharp-nailed finger.

Keith gulped.

He opened his mouth to acquiesce, and Lance took the opportunity to shove the jelly fish sashimi into his mouth. Keith held his breath and chewed as fast as he could, trying not to think about it, trying not to taste it. *just swallow you can do it Kogane, it’s a goddamn jelly fish.*

It was just as cold and slimey as he imagined it would be – and when he swallowed, it slithered cold and gloopy down his throat. Keith shuddered, feeling his down feathers all stand up on end. He wanted to wash his mouth out, but managed to control himself enough give Lance a tentative smile.

“Was it good?” said Lance, “Did you like it?”

“It was – interesting,” croaked Keith.

Behind Lance, Pidge wheezed until she toppled sideways. Even Shiro was looking like he had a full glass of schadenfreude. Keith glared at them both.

“I think Shiro and Pidge would love to try some,” he said – and shoved the jelly fish into Shiro’s hair. Shiro yelled with disgust, arms windmilling. Keith snapped his wings up to avoid any of it getting into his feathers, but Shiro was bigger and stronger and had him pinned down in a flash. Keith kicked at his shins, smearing a handful of jelly fish sludge across Shiro’s face.

“Why won’t you try the cuisine,” yelled Keith, “Chicken!”

“I was CLEAN,” roared Shiro.

In the ensuing scuffle, the jellyfish ended up squashed and half smeared into the rock.

“My jelly fish!” cried Lance.

A few hours later, no one was laughing as Keith dry retched into a large gold soup bowl.
“I told you to cook it in the fire first!” Shiro was saying for the fifth time, “You never listen to what I say Keith.”

“…I’ll cook you in a fire,” muttered Keith.

Keith had already emptied his stomach of everything he had eaten; including that cursed jellyfish. His mouth tasted like bile and his throat was sore from throwing up – but his stomach still cramped, making him shudder and clutch at the bowl. His abdomen hurt. He wanted to curl up by the fire and just sleep, but every few minutes he would get the urge to throw up again.

It reminded Keith of the time he had eaten some stale rations on a long recon mission. But he had rarely gotten sick at all after getting all his flight feathers, and Garrison training meant they were all very fit. But clearly even his iron clad constitution couldn’t cope with some devil fish from the pits of hell. It was just another sign that birds and the ocean did not mix.

Keith coughed into the bowl, retching miserably. All that was left was bile; sour and burning.

Lance was beyond contrite.

“I didn’t know,” he had wailed, patting as much of Keith’s right wing as he could reach, “I’ve never gotten sick eating it before! Or Hunk! Everyone likes squidley fish, it’s chewy and light. And really hard to catch, look it stung me heaps!”

“They are hard to catch,” Hunk agreed, “I can’t believe you guys wasted such a good one.”

“How many times do I have to tell you,” said Pidge, in the tone of someone who didn’t mind re-telling again, “We don’t have the same stomachs as you!”

“…But it’s so yummy,” said Lance, sniffling.

Keith groaned, pushing the bowl away. It reeked something awful and made his stomach turn. He splashed his face with cool lake water. He was about to rinse out his mouth when Pidge slapped his arm and shoved a bottle of fresh water under his nose. Keith took it gratefully.

Lance was still patting his wing in short repetitive motions; just the outer feathers. But his sharp nails would card through the fluff, scraping gently along the spine of each feather. It felt good, even though his hand was persistently cool. Keith wanted to turn around so Lance could do his other wing.

He eyed the puke-bowl dubiously, calculating lunge-distances in his head.

Lance poked his cheek gently with the pad of a finger.

“Keef?” he said, “Are you going to throw up again?”

“…I think I’m fine for now,” said Keith, capping the water bottle.

Lance made a sympathetic cooing noise, brushing Keith’s hair back from his face. Keith shivered at the temperature difference, and Lance paused, hand on Keith’s forehead.

“You’re really warm,” he said worriedly, “Is that the jelly fish or just normal for birds? Hunk?”

A gurgle of water. Hunk slapped a hand to Keith’s face. A long pause as both Mermen pondered.

“I don’t know,” said Hunk, “Need more data.”
He swam out of sight. A moment later, there were two more slaps, and indignant noises from Shiro and Pidge.

Distantly: “I think that temperature is normal…Shiro is less sweaty though.”

“…’m not sweaty,” protested Keith.

“Yeah you are. All clammy.” said Shiro, trudging back into Keith’s line of sight. He passed a newly filled water bottle into Keith’s hands and this time, Keith drank a little slower.

“I’m hungry,” said Keith. “I want some of the beef jerky I got.”

“No food for you until morning,” said Shiro cheerfully, “Have to settle your stomach. You look awful.”

Keith shuffled his wings.

“…well you smell like jelly fish,” he said.

Shiro gave him the stink eye.

“I don’t think you look awful,” said Lance, sidling up close. His hand was still on Keith’s wing, “Still pretty, Keef. Still fluffy. Even when you’re puking.”

Keith went red in the face.

“I’m – I’m not fluffy – !”

“Can we get Keef some birdy medicine?” asked Lance, oblivious to the spreading glee on Shiro’s face. Keith hid behind one wing, curling up around his knees. His stomach was so sore.

“It’s just food poisoning,” said Pidge grumpily, “he doesn’t need anything.”

An ominous pause.

“…POISONING?!” Lance wailed.

“Stop yelling and go clean Keith’s puke bowl,” said Hunk.

If Shiro thought that would be the end of the exotic food exchange, he was wrong.

A few days later Lance cornered Shiro outside the cave. He simply emerged from the water, quiet as you please. Shiro was exercising his wings, and nearly fell onto his ass in surprise.

“I need a favour,” said Lance, solemnly, “You have to say ‘yes’ because I saved your life.”

Shiro paused.

“…Sure,” he said, carefully, “what can I –“

Lance slapped a live eel, as thick as his forearm, onto the rock. He was holding its mouth shut with one fist, whilst holding its powerful body down with the other. The eel did not look happy to be
there. It thrashed, angrily, on the stone.

“I need you to try this and tell me if it’s yummy before I give it to Keef,” said Lance. “Yummy for birbs.”

“You want to see if I puke first, don’t you,” said Shiro.

“Well how else would we know?” said Lance manically.

As spring set in with full vigour, the sun lingered longer and longer above the line of the sea. The surrounding cliff rock gained a dusting of yellow-green, and grey seabirds began to settle in as their neighbours.

Shiro’s flight feathers grew in slowly but steadily, strong grey-white that Lance could see without Shiro stretching out his wings anymore.

In the end though, Keith didn’t get to eat any eels (it escaped while Shiro was arguing his case against raw eel) – but Keith did make use of the warm updrafts to make longer journeys in-land, bringing back all sorts of strange and wonderful food that Lance had never had before.

He was starting to think that Pidge had been holding out on him.

(“There’s only so much I can carry down a friggin’ cliff, Lance,” she said, peeved, as Lance licked frantically on an apple skewered on a stick. He’d never had an apple like this before: it had a hard shell of brown sugar that was both shiny and delicious at the same time.

“We can’t all survive off trash food,” Pidge continued, “I brought you bread. I introduced you to honey. Which you ate. You always eat all of it.”

“But no bees,” said Lance, “Pet bees!”

“Bees don’t live in caves!” said Pidge. “They need flowers to survive. If we got you bees they would all die. Do you want the bees to die, Lance?”

Lance didn’t want any bees to die, so he had dropped that request.)

Hooking his jaw a little wider, Lance sank both sets of fangs into either side of the apple. It made a very satisfying crack-crack as it broke through the sugar shell. When he tried to shift, however, he found that he was stuck.

Across from him on a dry patch of rock, Keith was watching with slightly round eyes.

“You’re gonna choke,” said Hunk from where he was eating lunch.

“Urmmmph,” said Lance, narrowing his eyes.

He didn’t want to chomp through the apple all the way, in case the sugary bits fell into the water. Lance tried yanking again, but his bottom canines were quite stuck. Keith was beginning to look concerned.

“You’re not actually choking, are you,” he said.
“Don’t give him stuff he can choke on, Keith!” said Shiro.

“Too late,” said Pidge, smirking.

Lance slapped Keith’s hand away. He didn’t need any birb help. Widening his jaw further with a yank, the apple came loose of his teeth – but slipped between his fingers. Squeaking, Lance snatched at it, jaw wide, tail out, arms flailing … and there was a soggy *crrrrunch* as he caught it in his mouth, jaws snapping shut in surprise.

Lance swallowed in a big (but sad) gulp. He licked his teeth for any remaining bits of sugar toffee.

“…well,” said Pidge. “That was mildly disturbing.”

Both Shiro and Keith were staring, eyes round.

“I can’t believe you didn’t even let me try any,” said Hunk, in the tone of someone who is not the least bit surprised.

“…I wanted to eat that slowly,” said Lance.

Wriggling on his hip, Lance shifted a little closer to Keith with his best hopeful look. He blinked at him, eyes big. Wordlessly, Keith reached into the open satchel in his lap and came out with another paper wrapped apple. Lance couldn’t help the trill he made, sweeping his tail out of the water to flatten it against Keith’s foot in appreciation.

“Aww yes!”

Keith flipped out a pocket knife.

“I’m going to cut it in half so you don’t get stuck this time. Dumb fish.”

“No, I want to lick it!” said Lance.

“Ugh,” said Pidge, throwing up her hands. She nudged Hunk’s tail with her shoe. “C’mon Hunk. Shiro. Come help me with this lamp, I need a new casing.”

To be frank, they were doing this all in the wrong order: but seeing as Keef couldn’t really swim, it wasn’t like they could go through all the motions anyway. Lance was willing to cut him some slack.

In any case, the avian wasn’t just bringing Lance food. He brought other things too; more books, coloured inks and – to Lance’s great delight – spoons. They had been poking through Lance’s cave stash in preparation for dinner one evening (roast rabbit courtesy of Keith’s hunting skills) when Keith held up a box of gold spoons of all different sizes.

“Why do you have so many anyway?” he asked, picking a particularly small one out. It had little red gems set at the top of the handle – and other than a chip on the rim, was very shiny. Lance had taken good care of all the gold ones in particular.

“I like spoons,” said Lance defensively, snatching the box back. “They’re pretty.”

He waited for Keith to make some sort of patronising comment (his sisters never appreciated their
spoon gifts; and Pidge had sniggered at Lance’s soup spoons), but Keith only gave the cutlery collection a solemn sort of look and shrugged. His wings shrugged with him.

“Fair enough,” he said.

A pause.

“Those are nice spoons,” Keith added. “Very…shiny.”

“The gold ones don’t go black or go rusty,” said Lance grudgingly, putting the box back on the rock. Noticing that Keith was still holding the red-gold teaspoon, Lance took a deep breath.

“You can keep that one, if you like,” he offered.

Keith looked taken aback. They both stared at the spoon. Then they stared at each other.

“…don’t you like spoons?” said Lance.

“I like spoons fine,” said Keith, quickly.

Lance squinted at him.

“I like knives more though,” Keith admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. Nevertheless, he slipped the little teaspoon in his breast pocket. Lance felt a little ball of warmth in his tummy.

“Oh,” he said, beaming, “That’s alright.”

After that conversation, Keith had brought Lance new spoons. And what’s more, he’d given Lance a set of wooden spoons – not the kind that had rotted a bit in the water or got half broken in a wreck; these were smooth, new spoon that smelt awesome. It probably smelled something like the forests Pidge told him about; wood that hadn’t been soaked in sea salt and scraped raw by wind and storms. It smelled earthy and dry, even through the smell of Keith’s leather gloves. Lance liked to picked them up and run the wood along his palm, relishing the smooth sandy texture.

He kept the Keef spoons with his gold ones.

Today though – today was food day.

Keith had been gone most of the afternoon, and Lance was swimming near the mouth of the cave, hoping to catch him flying back. He loved watching Keith make his landings – loved watching the way he would shift and tilt his entire body to nyoom between the rocky outcrops, wings a slim, sleek line. Lance liked holding his breath, a little nervous each time the avian came closer to earth – Keith was such a huge silhouette it was hard to see how he didn’t just fall splat onto the ground or smack into the cliff. But somehow, he landed on his feet each time with a ring of metal on rock. Sometimes he came in fast and used his wings like huge sails. Sometimes it was a vertical drop, and he’d land in a crouch, wings spread out all the way on either side. Sometimes he could fall a little short and splash his way up to dryer rock, swearing and cursing.

He was slightly fluffy each time; and Lance found it awfully endearing.

The tide was particularly low today when Keith came back, and so he made a clean landing on the dry rock-bed; dropping like a stone for most of the descent before snapping his wings out in a huge whumpf of air. Lance slapped the surface of the water loudly with the flat of his tail; appreciative. Keith turned, shuffling his wings.
“Hey,” he said, coming over to flop down next to Lance.

“That was a good landing,” said Lance cheerfully, “Do you always have to wait until last minute to do your fooomp-foomp thing? One day we will have a Keef Splatter.”

Keith was undoing the complicated laces of his flight boots; but he managed to give Lance a stink-eye anyway. His wings were relaxed though, in a giant puddle of feathers around his shoulders, resting in a gentle slope down either side – so Lance knew he wasn’t really annoyed.

“I know what I’m doing,” said Keith.

“But what if you go splat,” said Lance, pulling himself further up on to the rock so he could stretch out. The sun wasn’t glaring now; and it was more comfortable for him to lie on his back without being blinded.

“Then I go splat,” said Keith, deadpan. “There wasn’t much horizontal wind today, I know what I’m doing.”

“Mmm,” said Lance, stretching so he could pull on one of the big flight feathers. He snuck a glance at Keith’s expression, but Keith just lifted the wing, shaking it a little before letting it settle over Lance’s head. Lance could feel the warmth of the feathers even without touching; and they smelt like the sun – freshly flown.

Taking care to dry his hands on the warm rock underneath them, Lance ran the back of his hand the feathers within reach. *Soft. Dry.*

Keith cleared his throat, and dumped a familiar satchel in between them.

“Here,” he said, “I got some fruit that you probably haven’t tried before.”

Lance turned onto his elbow – accidentally on purpose shifting so he was ensconced by warm feathers. For a second, he thought Keith would move away; but after a pause, Keith just crossed his legs like always, wings half hooked in a slanted feathery tent shape.

He held out something small, blue and round.

“Try this,” he said.

The blue ones were called blueberries, but the purple round fruits were not called purple berries. Both, however, were yummy, and Lance ate most of the stash. They were so *small.* Then he discovered the red ones were not called *red* berries either.

“Strawberries,” said Keith.

“What’s straw?” asked Lance.

“…dried grass,” said Keith.

“I thought dried grass was yellow,” said Lance.

“It is.”
“Why is this a strawberry then?”

Keith was pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Just eat it,” he said, “I swear to god.”

Lance tossed one of the bigger red berries into the air and caught it in his mouth.

“Okay, okay,” he said, chewing. He beamed. They were sweet and had cool gritty texture on the outside. “This is good! I like – “ he paused, coughing, “I …”

Lance coughed again, trying to clear his throat, which felt like there was something stuck halfway. He couldn’t swallow properly, and his mouth felt weirdly warm now. He tried regurgitating the berry, but it didn’t really help – his tongue had gone numb. He tried regurgitating again, hacking coughs away from Keith’s wings, but there was no more berry left. He blinked rapidly; feeling his gills opening and closing in confusion.

“–ance? Lance – did you swallow too fast?” Keith was pulling at his arm, trying to get him to turn around, “Why can’t you just eat it with your hands like normal people.”

Lance coughed again, wheezing.

“Feel – feel – can’t swallow?” he managed to say.

“Shit, you did choke –” said Keith, sounding a little panicked.

Lance shook his head furiously, mouth open, gasping.

What was going on?

Pushing away from Keith, Lance rolled himself back into the ocean with a huge splash. Perhaps if he could get some water through, it would feel better? But he didn’t feel better; he felt like he couldn’t breathe properly, even though his gills were fluttering hard against his throat.

He could hear Keith shouting his name above the surface and Lance quickly came back up before the stupid bird dove in after him. Keith was already half way into the sea. He made a grab for Lance, pulling him back onto the rock as Lance wheezed.


Warm hands on Lance’s shoulders; on his throat, under his jaw. Lance would have been wriggling with joy if he could breathe and swallow. Then the hands were gone and Keith disappeared for a few moments. Lance could hear him though, hollering into the cave.

“Guys – SHIRO. SHIRO HELP, I THINK LANCE IS DYING!”

“…not dyin,” Lance protested, except all that came up was water and bile. Stupid red berries, he thought. Stupid, stupid, red berries. No wonder Pidge never ate dried grass. Stupid dried grass berries.

Then suddenly everyone was there; Pidge, Shiro and Hunk.

Hunk didn’t even bother with talking – just grabbed Lance by the neck and pushed at the corners of his jaw to force his mouth open. He peered inside. He thumped Lance’s stomach.

“Wahslkf,” said Lance, still gasping for breath.
“Nothing stuck,” said Hunk.

“What did you feed him,” Pidge demanded, “Was it raw? What’s the jelly fish equivalent on land?”

Lance made gagging sounds of distress. Was this revenge for the jellyfish?

“It wasn’t a land jelly fish!” roared Keith, “It was just a strawberry!”

There was a long, ominous pause – punctuated only by the sounds of Lance’s pathetic wheezing.

“Are merfolk allergic to strawberries?” asked Shiro, “Hunk!”

“I don’t know!” said Hunk, “Why would we have strawberries under water?! Probably? Yes? I don’t know!”

“He’s allergic?” exclaimed Pidge. Then, “Keith give me that bag.”

“Oh my god is he going to die?” said Shiro, pulling Lance from Hunk’s arms and tilting his head back. It was very warm. At least it was a nice way to go, thought Lance. Warm and feathery. Not too bad. If only he could breathe – his head felt foggy.

“Stop panicking and open his stupid mouth,” said Pidge, “I found an apple.”

“What’s an apple going to do that a strawberry can’t do!” said Keith, a little hysterically.

Pidge didn’t even bother answering.

Lance couldn’t tell what they were doing, but the next moment, someone was dribbling water – no, apple juice? – down his throat and there was a warm hand on his jaw.

“C’mon, you gotta swallow it,” said Pidge calmly, “Then try eat the apple properly. Lance? I know you’re awake. Lance!”

“Buddy, you’re gonna be okay,” said Shiro, patting Lance’s hair.

“Keith, do you have more apples?”

“…only the toffee ones.”

“– I swear to god! – “

“They’re his favourite ones!”

“Stop enabling him,” Hunk was saying sternly.

Lance coughed, trying to remember not to try breathe with his gills and just drink the juice – but after a few attempts, it cooled his throat a little, and it was easier to drink. And then it was easier to swallow, and someone pressed a piece of apple to his lip. He sneezed, confused, but ate it: wanting to swallow the pieces whole but chewed obediently.

He blinked his eyes clear.

Shiro, Hunk, Pidge and Keith were all staring at him. Keith still had half an apple in one hand and his knife in the other. Lance coughed, chewing down the rest of his apple.

“I can’t believe you’re allergic to strawberries,” said Pidge, wiping her hands on her shirt.
“You two have to stop eating everything!” said Shiro, who still had an arm around Lance’s back, supporting him on the rock, “One day you’ll just – I don’t know, keel over from eating the wrong thing!”

“No more strawberries,” said Shiro.

“No more strawberries,” repeated Keith, sounding betrayed.

“I know they’re your favourite, but Lance can’t have any.”

Keith crossed his arms in front of him.

“You don’t have to say it so many times, I’ll be more careful.”

Lance peeked at him from under one eyelid.

“At least we’re even now, Keef,” said Lance.

“That’s it,” said Hunk, slapping both hands down on Lance’s tail, “No more food courtship gifts!”

At this, Keith visibly poofed up; the volume of his feathers expanding as they stood on end. His cheeks were flushed pink. Behind Lance, Shiro stiffened.

“Now wait a minute,” said Shiro, frowning loudly.

Lance threw up all over his left leg.

The days grew warm and comfortable like that; they never really spoke about it, but languished in the sun and easy affection. The passage of time was a mere suggestion; Keith seemed content to sit amidst piles things and listen to Lance recount the story behind each one. He drew Lance small pictures on scratchy paper, and taught him out to fold paper cranes and swans. (And if Lance’s paper birds turned out a little fat and squashed, well, that was okay).

In return, Lance coerced Hunk into making more bone-flutes, one for Shiro and one for Keith. Lance had spent ages smoothing down the curve of the flute; it was a small short flat thing barely longer than his palm. He’d tried to carve a little dolphin tail at the end of the instrument, but it didn’t quite come out right. It looked more like a fin. Lance compensated by setting a little round Belmera crystal piece into the bone.

“If you blow it under water, we can hear you,” he said, poking Keith’s cheek with the end of the flute, “so don’t lose it, okay?”

“How do we blow if we don’t have air under water,” said Keith flatly; though he turned the flute over carefully in his hands.

Lance frowned. He hadn’t thought of that.

“Just…just blow out into this bit,” he said. When Keith made as if to try it out, he slapped a hand over Keith’s mouth. “Not above water Keef, we’ll go deaf! Jeez!”
Keith stared at his hand, then moved his eyes slowly to stare at Lance. Suddenly, Keith’s lips were very, very hot on the skin of his palm. And then Keith licked his hand, wet and hot. Lance shrieked and threw himself backwards into the water with a ginormous splash, flailing his licked hand. Keith was cackling with laughter.

Beside them Shiro cleared his throat.

“Thank you, this is really thoughtful,” he said.

“Well you know, we made Pidge one,” said Lance, going for nonchalant and failing hopelessly, “So I guess it’s just to be fair.”

“Oh huh,” said Pidge, “I don’t remember mine having any bling on it though.”

“Mm, neither has mine though,” said Shiro meaningfully.

Lance hid his face in the water. Above the surface, he heard Keith shift on his heels.

“Well you guys can’t have mine,” he said.

Lance grinned into his tailfin.

Keith loved flying.

Most Avians did; though the act of flight often hurt some more than others. It hurt Keith too, when he flew too long or banked too hard. More than one student at the Garrison had been put out of commission by persistent wing cramps, and flight fatigue was nothing to laugh at. And all younger Avians had, at one point or another, broken an ankle when landing wrong.

But Keith loved flying. He loved the heady sensation when he reached a height just a little too far; the ache in his lungs in the thin air; the push of wind beneath his feathers and the sensation of soaring upwards on hot wind before dropping into a perpendicular dive.

It was one of the reasons he and Shiro were such good friends; they used to go gliding for hours in easy silence; talking in wing shadows and silhouettes and whistles. Shiro’s wingspan meant he could glide for far longer than Keith could, and would always insist on returning home before Keith could tire out. But Keith could quite literally fly circles around Shiro, and learnt some of his best technique trying to surprise Shiro in the air. In return, Shiro was uncannily agile for someone his size.

They hadn’t flown together for a long time, since before Keberos – but soon, thought Keith, soon.

Shiro was getting stronger every day; his feathers coming in straight and sleek. They were the same shocking white, but other than the colour shift, the damage done by the Galra was slowly hidden away under new feathers. His right wing was still giving him a bit of trouble, but it seemed to be cramping less too.

Shiro would perch on one of the higher outcrops to stretch his wings and watch Keith fly; and when the cloud cover was right, Lance would swim with him – following Keith’s shadow like a silver blue bullet in the water.
They’d race each other like in the early mornings, before the sun had properly come up – and Lance would leap from the sea in soaring arches as Keith banked low as he could to meet him in a half circle.

Keith had always loved to fly; but never before had his flying (a thing of breathing and living) been greeted with such naked wonder and enthusiasm.

For a creature of the ocean, Lance spent a lot of time above its surface. He liked watching Keith fly, and Keith found himself using it as an excuse to revisit some harder routines. It was harder to fly flips or some of the trickier manoeuvres low over the ocean – the wind was horrendous along the cliff face – but he did it anyway just so Lance could see.

When the lift was right, he could toss himself backwards, head over hip; keep his reverse arch open for a dizzying few moments before he had to flip himself back again and claw back the height. In those few moments, Keith would wonder, recklessly, where his fear of the sea had gone. He didn’t much care to find it.

So if the weather was right, Keith tied his hair back to go flying.

Right now, he was perched a little precariously on a pointed rock that protruded like a middle finger out of the ocean. It was the tallest and biggest of the rock islets, and so they found it a good spot for Keith to rest – whilst being close enough for Lance to be within chattering distance.

Lance passed up a metal flask of water helpfully, and Keith took it, draining the whole thing in one gulp. He was still heaving for breath – keeping your wings open while purposefully falling backwards in the air was hard. It was also not a common manoeuvre unless your opponent was also an avian, so Keith was out of practice.

His wings rose and fell slightly with each breath; heart thundering as it slowly came back down to a normal rate. Lance had his chin propped up in his hands, eyes big and sparkly.

“You look really poofy,” he said gleefully, as Keith shook out his feathers to clear the sweat and smooth them back down, “So cute.”

Keith blushed.

“I’m not poofy,” he retorted, “I just have – I just have fine feathers.”

“Oh huh,” said Lance, tilting his head.

“It’s a good thing,” said Keith desperately, “It keeps me warm.”

“And fluffy,” added Lance.

Keith gave up. No dignity was to be had here.

“Did you see my flip?” he asked, sitting down so he could rest his wings on his back for a bit. “The double one.”

Lance splashed the water excitedly.

“Yes! Loops! Loops are great, I can do them too. But better.”

“Not loops; flips. Flips are harder than loops.”

“Do you get dizzy?”
Keith re-capped the water bottle.

“No,” he said proudly. “You have to tuck in your wings on the way down for the momentum.”

“And then floof them back out,” said Lance eagerly.

Keith rolled his eyes.

“No one is floofing anything.”

Lance made a squeaking sort of sigh.

“I wish I could fly…” he said, bringing his tail up in a huge graceful arch over his own back. Perhaps it was a trick of the sunlight, but Keith swore the blue scales were bluer than they were a few weeks ago.

“You jump pretty high as it is,” said Keith. Absently he redid his pony-tail. No matter how well he tied it, his hair always escaped after flying.

Lance preened at the compliment, translucent fins over his face as he carded his tail with his fingers. The line of his spine was a liquid sweep, like the flourish of a paintbrush.

“I do, don’t I,” said Lance, “I can jump even higher than Hunk! I’m the best in my pod. Asides from my sisters, obviously.”

“How high can you jump?” asked Keith curiously, “Do you have to swim really fast and then…” he mimed exploding out of the ocean.

“High enough to catch any silly birds,” said Lance confidently, turning on the rock so that he was looking at Keith upside down, belly up. Pale baby scales stretched up over his stomach and abdomen, petal-like and shiny.

Keith swallowed hard.

“Bet you can’t,” he said.

Lance smiled with all of his fishy teeth.

They picked a spot clear of the rocks for their contest. Shiro was sunning his wings near the mouth of the cave; a tiny figure from Keith’s birds-eye-view. Hunk and Pidge were having some kind of picnic over a bunch of papers, off to the side.

Out here, Keith could see the different shades of blue in the water, where the shallows and deep met in a jagged fault line. The wind was picking up, and it was tiring to try staying in one place.

“Obviously you can’t fly all the way to the clouds,” Lance had said, pouting a little, “I don’t have huge fins. I can’t fly. That’s just not fair.”

“Less complaining, more jumping,” said Keith, rolling his eyes, “Or are you all talk and dive?”

So here he was, working his wings to an ache trying to stay at roughly the same altitude. Keith let himself rise and fall a little with the air current, feet loose as he surveyed the ocean beneath him.
Distantly, he thought he could see the little white crowns that signalled the dolphins near the cove; curious and friendly as ever.

He squinted down at the water; waiting for the blooming shadow that would signal an approaching merman. Given Lance’s speed, he wouldn’t have much warning.

Snapping his wings closed – he was tiring already – Keith let himself drop for a few feet before sweeping them out again, beating down hard once, twice, three times. He flung his head back, eyes closed, face to the sun.

Then Keith stretched his wings out with his arms, as far as they would go; rotating his shoulders until they clicked. Keith returned to surveying the water. Maybe Lance was waiting for him to tire; to come closer to the surface…

Maybe he got distracted by a salmon. The wind whipped at his hair; and Keith felt lighter than he had for years.

Keith made a slow languid circle at the same altitude, scanning the white water crests and the brushed edges of the beach. Over the top of the cliff, the ground gave way to green, deepening in a sweep as it broke way to trees, forests and later a valley. Distantly, clouds bloomed like flowers over the horizon.

A movement in the water caught Keith’s attention – He held his wings out, letting himself glide a little lower. He narrowed his eyes.

And then Lance was streaking out of the water with barely any splash; launching himself straight up from beneath Keith’s shadow.

There was barely any arch to his leap; a mesmerising trail of water followed by the flare of a fin and then Lance was right there and before Keith could fly any higher, Lance’s arms hooked around his knees. The sudden weight made Keith drop a few feet straight down – and he let out an embarrassing shriek, arms wind-milling; beating his wings furiously trying to regain his height.

“Holy shit!” he yelled, twisting his legs as he struggled to keep aloft “Lance what the fuck, holy shit let go let go I’m not gonna –

Lance only screeched in reply; a high-pitched whistle-wail. In his periphery, Keith noticed a few dolphins surfacing beneath them.

Probably came to watch their imminent demise, thought Keith manically.

They were still falling; haphazardly as the wind caught on his downward sweeps. They lurched up and down as Keith flapped for all he was worth. Instinctively he kicked out, trying to dislodge Lance who was still screeching; having wrapped both arms around Keith’s legs. He appeared to be trying to climb Keith like a tree; arms around his thighs. Keith could feel the pinprick of his clawed-nails on his skin.

“What the fuck are you doing!” he yelled downwards.

“Don’t let me fall!” Lance yelled back as they jerked up and down.

Below them, Keith could see Lance’s long tail sway like a pendulum, curving upwards towards them and then falling straight again. He appeared to be trying to twine his tail around Keith’s legs too, but couldn’t get a proper grip. The changing weight meant Keith had no way to compensate – and a gust of warm air pulled them suddenly higher as it caught under the sail of his wings.
Lance wailed.

“I’m gonna fall!” he cried, “Don’t let me fall Keith!”

Keith tried pushing at Lance’s head to get him to let go, but he couldn’t bend without losing the rhythm of his wings. He heaved for breath, trying to keep going.

“Lance it’s just – you’ll just fall back into the sea what is wrong with you – “

“I DON’T WANNA FALL,” yelled Lance, tightening his arms around Keith’s thighs and burying his face into Keith’s crotch. Shocked, Keith forgot to keep flying. They plummeted.

Lance screamed.

“NOOOOO!”

“Just let go, you’ll be fine!” shouted Keith, “It’s just the sea, you’ll be fine, but if you don’t let go I WILL FALL IN.”

“Put me back down!” Lance shouted into Keith’s left thigh.

“We’re not even that high up!” screamed Keith, “Just let go!”

“WE’RE TOO HIGH,” Lance insisted, “Go lower!”

Keith’s shoulders were aching now. He wasn’t used to lifting this much weight – and they were straying dangerously close to the ocean. The danger and Lance’s persistent face-smashing into his crotch was having a very different effect on his dick. He was going to drown in the most humiliating of ways, thought Keith desperately.

He wriggled his legs, trying to dislodge Lance’s arms. Lance made squeaking noises as he slid down a few inches – and Keith used the opportunity to wrench one leg free, swinging the other until Lance slid all the way to his shoes.

“Keef no!”

“Keef yes,” Keith grunted.

He kicked hard.

Lance had his eyes squeezed shut, but still managed one wide-eyed look of enraged, terrified betrayal before he fell the few feet down…and back into the ocean with a tremendous splash.

Free of his burden, Keith beat his wings in a few full relieved sweeps; quickly returning to a safe height. He made a bee-line straight for Shiro and the promise of flat earth, shoulders and lungs screaming at him. He landed badly with a jolt to his hip; half crashing to his side and knocking his left wing against the ground as he came to a half-roll stop. Keith crumpled into a foetal position, heaving for air, wings shaking a little from the exertion.

Once Keith could hear past the roar of blood in his own ears, he realised Shiro was wheezing with laughter.

“I’m – oh my god,” said Shiro, face in one hand, “You’re – that was – you guys just swung from left to right, left to right – “ Shiro made swinging motions with one hand before succumbing to laughter again.
Keith glared at him from under the tattered remains of his pride.

“I fucking hate you,” he said, still breathless, “That was not funny.”

“I missed it!” called Pidge, “What happened?”

Then, from somewhere behind Keith, Lance popped up out of the water. To Keith’s surprise, he didn’t look at all traumatised, or out of breath. His eyes were big and sparkling, and he was waving his hands.

“THAT WAS SO MUCH FUN,” said Lance, sliding up onto the rock, “I flew! Pidge! Hunk? Did you see me! I flew!”

“Did not,” said Hunk.

“Did so!” said Lance and launched himself onto Keith.

Keith back-pedalled furiously, but not fast enough to miss a lap full of merman. He oofed as he fell backwards onto his wings; head tilted back so that all he could see was the sky and Lance’s face. He was very aware that Lance was, once again, between his legs.

“Can we go again?” said Lance, oblivious, “Again!”

“No,” said Keith, incredulously, “You were screaming with –

“ – Fun! Screaming with fun!” said Lance, slapping the rock repeatedly with his tailfin.

“Why are you like this,” said Hunk.

Shiro fell over onto his side, still laughing, wings shaking with mirth. He looked so different from the man Keith found in the sea just a few weeks ago that Keith found himself staring, staring, staring.

“I’ve never seen you look so hilarious,” said Shiro, picking himself up and rubbing at his face with his sleeve. He shuffled his wings back in and wagged his eyebrows at Keith.

Keith tried to telepathically convey ‘go away’ with only his eyebrows.

Lance had Keith trapped between his elbows, hair dripping salt water onto Keith’s face. The merman leaned in close, snaggle tooth peeking out on the edge of his lip. Keith could feel the soft scrape of his scales against his stomach; the smooth sensation of skin on skin. Lance was cool to the touch; but Keith shivered for a very different reason.

The sound of everything else seemed to become background with his proximity. Keith turned back to Lance.

“Keeeeef,” said Lance, “I won the bet. Told you I could jump high enough.”

“Yeah,” said Keith, voice hoarse.

“Caught a silly bird,” said Lance, and touched the tip of Keith’s nose gently with the pad of his index finger. He was smiling now, eyes crinkling into tiny crescents; two silver shells in the sand.

Slowly, so that Lance could stop him if he wanted, Keith raised his hand and slowly mirrored Lance’s gesture. Gently, Keith pressed his thumb to the side of Lance’s nose. Lance sighed, leaning into the touch. One set of his eyelids, paper-thin and translucent, fluttered shut.
“Yeah,” said Keith, wondrous, “You did.”

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to update by Xmas but RL got in the way again (I'm sorry). The next chapter will come fast though! I'm really worried this chapter is too flat and boring/anticlimatic, but I wanted to give them time to grow into their affections. If you have any thoughts on pacing or characterisation, please let me know because I really feel i'm not hitting the right note?

Originally this chapter had an extra scene-ish but I thought this was a better place to end it. Ugh I don't know I feel really iffy about my own writing it's. I'm worried im making cute things bland & anticlimactic :( 

Other notes : If you missed it, please check out the podfic of chapter 1 & 2, read by Prone!
I've also updated the Fic Soundtrack quite a bit, & will post the fanart soon (there's been some effing aMAZING STUFF i've cried over thank you SO SO SO MUCH. I also apologise for not having replied to comments & feedback on last chapter - i've read them all (multiple times thank you so much TT___TT) but haven't had any time to myself :( Please know I really really appreciate it and you guys keep me going - not just with this fic, but also in RL. THank you.
As usual, please follow my twitter or tumblr for updates, squee or giveaways! Pls come chat with me I'm lonely lmao.
The rest of Shiro’s flight feathers come in like petals inhaling after a hail storm.

They were fanning out now; broad and smooth, their edges slowly filling-in a silhouette that had been waiting, waiting, waiting. They filled in Shiro’s edges too - the chips and hollows Keith had missed in the rapturous shock of finding Shiro alive all those weeks ago. He smiled more easily; laughed more carelessly; said “Keith” and “Pidge” with an affection so familiar it made Keith’s throat close up.

It was like the warm wind had brought something more than salt to the cave rock. Every morning the pinions looked as if they had grown just a little bit more; grey-white and sand-fine. The shafts of each new feather were coming in smooth and straight; and now, almost fully peaked, they extended Shiro’s wingspan back to where it used to be; a whole armslength further than Keith’s own falcon curves.

“They’re not that ugly, are they?”

Keith blinked.

They were perched out near the mouth of the cave; making the most of the sunshine. Shiro was doing push ups, wings extended out to either side of his shoulders as he did reps. It was a basic exercise; Keith remembered doing them even after he got used to the weight of his full wings. The key was to keep them open, parallel to the ground but not touching or sloping. It ached something horrid at the base of your shoulder if you were out of shape - and judging by the way Shiro’s wings were shivering, the long months spent grounded had taken its toll.

“They’re not ugly,” said Keith, tucking his own wings close to the heat of his back. He dropped his satchel on the rock and sat down cross legged to rest after his morning trip in-land.

Shiro made a huffing noise and went back to doing his push ups, winching his wings in and then
thrusting them out again with a noise of irritation. His skin was slick with sweat; hands pink from
scraping against stone.

“Stare a lot,” said Shiro, the words punctuating each heave.

“Just different,” said Keith, “I mean...do they feel different?”

Shiro didn’t answer for a few reps; the sound of his harsh breathing drowned out by the water. His
wings twitched sporadically, like he was aching to fold them back in.

“Heavier, I guess,” he said, “Forgotten.”

“You’ll be fine once you’re in the air again,” said Keith. “Take a break or they’ll be stiff.”

Shiro ignored him.

“Shiro.”

Keith toed off his flight boots, rotating his ankles with a sigh of relief. He lifted his wings a little,
so he could catch the cool sea breeze through his soft under-feathers, airing out the damp down
that stuck to his back and shoulders. It felt great after a hard descent; much better than spending
half an hour grooming yourself.

Keith extended one leg and prodded Shiro’s wing-feathers with his toes.

Shiro didn’t stop, but did throw Keith a filthy look under his bangs.

“Maybe you should do some exercises,” said Shiro, “maybe - avoid those wing cramps.”

Keith rolled his eyes.

“I’d like to see you hold up a giant fish for half an hour without getting cramps,” said Keith.

“Probably fine,” said Shiro, “Not as skinny as you. Not - “

Keith stuck his toes into the arch of Shiro’s left wing, which twitched violently - the tips of his
feathers slapping against the ground.

“Aaaand you’re out!” said Keith triumphantly.

Shiro groaned, letting himself fall onto his side and roll onto his right shoulder. He pulled his wing
out of Keith’s reach, the motion a great buffet of air as he swept it up in a stretch, then folded down
again. Even half winched in, they were so huge that they hung over the lip of the flat rock-ledge;
white feathers outlined in clear pencil strokes against the black and moss.

Keith shuffled closer. Held out a can of water in truce.

Shiro took it, still lying on his side. Reluctantly, he wedged himself semi-upright on one elbow to
drink.

“Ugh,” he said, running a hand through his damp hair, “I’m never going to get off the ground like
this.”

Keith climbed over Shiro to take a good look at his wings.

“They’re pretty much all out,” he said, running the flat of one palm down the edge of a strong
flight feather. They lay against each other like a tidy deck of cards. There was barely any trace of the scars or bent shafts that had been the mangled mess of a wing.

“Wanna climb up a bit higher?” said Keith, giving Shiro a sideways look, “We could push you off and see how it goes. I’m sure you’ll glide.”

“Thanks Keith,” said Shiro sarcastically, “I can see why no one in physio ever liked having you around - “

Keith picked out some stray bits of sand and stone from Shiro’s wing, lifting it so that it lay across his lap for easier grooming. Shiro shifted where he was lying, getting comfortable in the shade cast by Keith’s own wings.

“I mean, what’s the worst that could happen?” said Keith, stroking along the bone of the wing, “If you fall in the water I’m sure Lance or Hunk will fish you out. Or one of the dolphins. You’ll be fine.”

“So reassuring,” said Shiro.

“You kicked me off a cliff,” said Keith sweetly, “only fair for you to have a go.”

Shiro tried to turn onto his back but Keith held his left wing hostage. He dug his thumbs into Shiro’s wing joint, feeling the limb shudder and relax under his hand. Keith smoothed down the feathers. They were already smooth; but it was an addictive feeling; Shiro alive and well and breathing.

“Didn’t kick you off a cliff,” said Shiro eventually, voice a little groggy. “You were whining about diving.”

“You kicked me off,” said Keith, deadpan, “I distinctly remember - “

“Encouraging push!”

Keith stared down at Shiro, incredulous. He pulled in one wing so that the sun shone directly onto Shiro’s face, making him wince.

“You grabbed me by the collar, said ‘patience yields focus!’ and threw me off a cliff.”

“Well, learned how to pull out of a dive properly, didn’t you?” said Shiro.

“Nearly brained myself on a rock,” said Keith, shuffling his wings at the very memory, “I don’t have enough glide - my wings aren’t as big as yours. And no, ‘yelling pull out, pull out!’ did not actually help anybody.”

Shiro sniffed.

“Weren’t focused enough, obviously,” he said. He nudged Keith’s stomach with the side of his wing. “Do the underside.”

Feeling warm to the core, Keith obligingly began carding through the under-feathers.

“How long do you think though?” he asked. “They’re about the same length now. Pretty glossy.”

Shiro pushed himself into a sitting position, and Keith ducked under his wings so he could fold them back in. The shadow of them stretched well beyond the tips of his own wings, blocking out the sting of the sea wind at Keith’s back. Shiro pulled his knees up to his chest; leaned the weight
of his left wing so that it rested over and on top of Keith’s wings, sloping on the other side of his shoulders.

And suddenly Keith was ten years old again, having twisted his ankle for the third time that month. His flight feathers had come in very late, and he had never been happy about it.

“...wake up sometimes and it feels like half my wing’s gone again. A phantom weight, you know? Keep thinking - ”

Shiro buried his face in the crook of his elbow, curled in on himself over his knees. Keith felt frozen, like someone had taken a hold of his spine and wasn’t letting go.

“When they cut it off,” said Shiro, lifting his face. He blinked hard a few times, like he was forcibly dragging himself into the present. “I mean, before. They caught us while we were on the ground of course. First thing they did was cut our primaries.”

Shiro stared at a point ahead of them, unfocused.

“But I could still - my balance was off because it didn’t feel like it was gone yet. I kept telling myself once we get to higher ground, or somehow got lift or - that I could get out. Just needed sometime. Wasn’t like they cut my wings off at the joint, right?”

Keith dug the end of his fingernails into the meat of his hand, and leaned closer, curling his wing so that it sloped over his shoulder and down across Shiro’s feet - enclosing them in an almost full circle of feathers. When Keith touched Shiro’s wrist, tentatively, Shiro let go of his own knees to loop his arm around Keith’s back instead - elbow hooked beneath his wing-blades, pulled him into a crushing hug.

Keith fisted one hand in Shiro’s collar; let himself lean in. Shiro smelled like feathers and sweat and ocean; his shirt worn soft at the shoulders.

“Didn’t break anything when I fell. But they would make sure to cut the feathers pretty close to the quill afterwards. I think they liked doing it.”

“I’ll kill them,” said Keith, words muffled in the crook of Shiro’s neck, “I’ll kill every last fucking Galra that - “

“No you won’t,” said Shiro firmly, arm tightening across Keith’s back, “You’re not going to get anywhere within killing distance Keith, it’s not worth it. It’s not worth it .”

“I can use a bow or rifle.”

“Not with your scores, Keith,” said Shiro, huffing out a wet laugh, “I think the only person worse than you was Matt, and he was…”

Shiro’s words broke off with a shuddering inhale. It sounded painful; and Keith’s own chest ached.

“...oh god, Keith . Keith, I think he’s dead.”

“Shiro…”
Shiro tried to pull away, turning his face into his shoulder so that Keith wouldn’t have to see. Keith grabbed him by the shoulder, intending to - Keith wasn’t sure what he intended to do but probably shake Shiro until some of that hopelessness shed itself. Instead, Shiro twisted back into the curve of Keith’s wings, face screwed up with grief. Instinctively, Keith brought his arm up behind Shiro’s back; hand in his feathers.

He could feel Shiro’s heartbeat through his thin shirt; it raced like he was still trying to fly out of that arena, grounded and trapped.

Anger tasted sour at the back of Keith’s throat.

Shiro’s tears were scalding hot as they soaked into the down of Keith’s feathers, the press of his cheeks and nose against Keith’s shoulder. He made very little sound as he cried, but his hands and wings shook uncontrollably, like a bow strung too tight for too long.

Keith didn’t know what to say. He remembered his words that night above the lake, when they had thought Pidge was her brother.

Keith stared out over the top of Shiro’s head; cheek against his hair.

Matthew Holt was probably dead. But feeling the way Shiro shuddered and cried against his shoulder - Keith wondered if it wouldn’t have been kinder for him to find the Holts first, even if it were their graves. Would have been kinder, than to hope.

Shiro’s arm was still tight across Keith’s back. Keith ran his hand in soothing circles between the divot of Shiro’s wings; up down, up down, up down. He tried to breathe slowly too, willing Shiro’s heartbeat to calm and match his own.

Eventually, Shiro pulled back. His face was splotchy, and his nose was red. But selfishly, Keith had never been so relieved that it was Shiro sitting here, wing-to-wing.

“I should never have gotten us separated,” said Shiro hoarsely, “I - it’s my fault. They probably killed him because of me.”

Keith stared.

“What the fuck are you talking about,” he said, flatly, “It’s not your fault.”

Shiro opened his mouth again, but Keith beat him to it.

“It’s not your fault Shiro. Don’t say shit like this. Whatever happened, it’s not your fault.”

“I - “

“It’s survivor’s guilt,” said Keith bluntly, “You know that. We’re not the first ones.”

Shiro buried his face in his hands, digging the heel of his palms into his eyes.

“We’ll keep looking,” said Keith, “I promise, okay?”

“But you think they’re dead,” said Shiro.

Keith pressed his palm on Shiro’s back. He could feel the raise line of a scar there, healed over but deep - like a knife wound at close range. He wondered what happened. A year was a long time.
“Well,” said Keith, “I thought you were dead. And look at us now.”

Shiro let out a bark of laughter, still hoarse and soaked. He pulled Keith’s arm free from his back, shuffling his wings tighter together. Wrapped one warm hand around the circumference of Keith’s wrist; a tether.

“I thought I was dead too,” said Shiro.

“We’ll keep looking,” said Keith again.

“Alright,” said Shiro, very quiet. “Thank you.”

They watched the sun climb the curve of the sky for a little while, neither wanting to move away from the warmth of each other's presence. Out of sight, in the bay, Keith could hear the sound of dolphins.

“Keith?”

“Yeah?”

“There’s something else you have to promise me.”

Keith frowned, casting Shiro a sideways look. Shiro was smiling.

“After we go home,” said Shiro solemnly, “I want you to go back to school.”

There was a moment of utter silence. Then Keith pushed Shiro bodily over onto the rocks in a flurry of feathers.

Pidge folded her arms across her chest.

“It’s been way too long. I have to check in with them.”

“I’ll come with you,” said Shiro, “It’s too dangerous.”

“You can’t fly properly yet,” said Pidge.

“Then Keith can go with you,” said Shiro.

Pidge gave them each a good hard stare.

“Keith will draw the attention of every Galra sentry who happens to look in our direction,” she said.

“I can do low altitude,” said Keith, feeling a tad defensive. He could do stealth. He had been part of the special flying unit.

“Your wings are bright red,” said Pidge, “Plus, I’ve made this same route heaps of times. How do you think I come visit Hunk and Lance? I don’t just live in a sea cave, you know.”

Shiro looked conflicted about whether he preferred Pidge living in a remote sea cave, versus Pidge living with a group of resistance fighters. Pidge took the silence as acquiescence and went back to
stuffing her backpack. Lance was helpfully wiping down tiny vials, each with a little glowing Balmeran crystal suspended in liquid. They had been stored underwater, and now Pidge was carefully wrapping them in wool before packing them away in a small wooden box.

“Pidge knows what she’s doing,” said Lance, patting the last vial dry. He pulled his tail up through the water in hard sweep, making the surface ripple. Pidge’s dinghy bobbed with the motion of the water and Hunk smacked Lance reproachfully on the tail. Shrugging, Lance pushed the boat more firmly against the rock, resting his chin on the back of his hands. He gave Shiro a very big-eyed stare.

“If it’ll make you feel better, you can ride with us to the cove.” He glanced over at Keith. “Not Keith though. Too heavy. Keith can fly.”

“I’m half the size of Shiro,” said Keith, throwing up his hands.

Lance abandoned his side of the boat to float over to where Keith was dangling his legs over the edge. He batted both eyelids.

“But twice as fluffy,” he said sweetly.

Keith didn’t even dignify that with a response.

They ended up all going; Shiro in the boat with Pidge; whilst Hunk towed and Lance scouted ahead in case of any unexpected ships. Keith coasted the warm updrafts, high above them, enjoying the sun on the back of his wings and the solid pockets of air beneath. He could track their progress easily from up here, like a hawk tracking a rabbit on the ground. Being so close to the surface, Hunk’s distinctive orange-yellow tail reflected the sun even under water.

They came to a stop a few miles up the coast, and Keith took the opportunity to fold his wings close for a hard dive straight from above. The wind rushed past his face until all he could hear was the roar of blood in his ears and that heady, over-focused vision he always got when he dove. He counted the gaps in his own heartbeat to keep track - ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump, until he could count Shiro’s feathers -

He snapped his wings out, the force of the air making a huge whoo-umph sound as he pulled out of the dive. Pidge made a screech of surprise, and if the boat hadn’t been resting against sand, they might have tipped over. Keith laughed to himself, holding his position above them, ankles tucked neatly.

Shiro rolled his eyes.

“Show off,” he said.

“Just practicing my pull outs,” said Keith innocently.

“I agree with Shiro,” said Hunk, tying the rope off, “But that was pretty cool.”

Lance popped up out of the water in a dramatic splash, making both Shiro and Keith leap backwards further onto the sand.

“Oh,” he said, pushing himself up onto the beach after the bipeds, “I thought maybe you weren’t going to be able to get back up in time! I was all ready to catch you.”
“Thanks,” said Keith, dryly.

“Well now that you’re here,” said Shiro, “You can fly Pidge’s luggage up to the top.”

Keith paused. He looked from Pidge’s bags to the lip of the cliff, which towered above them. Then he looked around them at the flat flat sand, and the flat flat ocean. There were a few outcrops of rock, but nothing very substantial.

“How did you usually get your stuff up?” he asked Pidge suspiciously.

Pidge was unravelling what looked like a crossbow. Squinting a little and taking aim, she shot the thing upwards and forwards, until something made a cracking sound into the rock above them. Pidge pulled at the line. It ran taut.

“I climb,” she said, wriggling her fingers, “That’s what people do, when we don’t have wings.”

“But it’s so flat!” protested Keith, gesturing at the cliff face. It ran pretty sheer. At least it wasn’t chalk cliffs. He hoisted the bag, and nearly dislocated his elbow, “And there’s rocks in here.”

“You need practice with your back-starts,” said Shiro firmly, shuffling his wings. Then he held them out hastily to avoid the tips getting wet from the waves.

Keith caught Lance eyeing Shiro’s wings with great interest.

“I have a better idea,” said Keith, “Pidge can climb to the top and then pull the bags up after her.”

Shiro shoved the whole thing into his chest, making Keith stumble in the soft sand.

“Less talking, more climbing,” said Shiro firmly, shuffling his wings. Then he held them out hastily to avoid the tips getting wet from the waves.

Keith examined his nails.

“I’m sure Lance would love to see a back-start flight,” he said mildly.

A bare few metres in, and Keith wondered if this was Shiro’s revenge for Keith’s lack of push-ups’ participation. Keith didn’t have grappling rope, and so had to more or less use his bare hands (and gloves) to make the ascent. It was a skill that all young Avians had to master if they wanted to stray anywhere far from home: how to get airborne without geographical advantages.

For most smaller avians, a sprinting leap would often be enough. For Avians like Shiro, they were more or less fucked unless they could find something to jump off. Keith, with his sharp wing-line and relatively slim shoulders, could make do with a tree.

He had gotten very good at climbing trees.

Here though; with the cove sucking the wind out and the downdraft from the cliff’s edge, Keith would need a lot more height than a tree. Heaving a deep breath, he swung his arm out for a higher ledge. The motion of his arms were impeded by Pidge’s bag, which he had slung across his chest. His wings felt heavy and counterproductive, threatening to tip him backwards whenever he tried to make the next hand or foothold.

His foot slipped at the thought, and there was a scrabbling spray of rock and pebbles as Keith flung
himself towards the rockface, feet trying to find purchase.

Below him, there came a wavering sort of wail.

“Don’t fall!” called Lance for the tenth time, “Keith! Keith hold on tighter!”

“...shut... up ...” Keith grunted, pulling himself three more centimeters higher. It was probably high enough now; he was perhaps a good ten wing lengths up.

“Aim for the water if you slip,” called Hunk, “It’s to your right.”

“To his back,” corrected Lance.

“The cliff-face is sloped to the left,” said Hunk.

Keith swore under his breath. His arms were starting to ache, and his hair was sticking to his forehead with perspiration. He hated Shiro. Shiro was just jealous he couldn’t do back-starts with such little room to manoeuvre. Jealousy. That was it.

Tugging himself up on a more protruding ledge, Keith gasped for breath. His legs were stuck in an awkward position, toes digging into the divots in the rock. He went to shift; trying to get his left leg closer to his right - when he felt something crunch and the rock give way to sand and -

Keith flung himself backwards off the cliff, one arm wrapped tight around Pidge’s bag to keep it still. He used the momentum to bring his knees up, flipping backwards through the air as he fell.

Absently, he could hear Lance making a ruckus at the water’s edge.

But then Keith was upright, wings snapped to full breadth, beating them as hard as he could - he counted the full strokes from his shoulders, down, down, down - until he was rising again with each heaved breath, entire chest aching but buzzing with adrenaline. He didn’t waste any time, gaining altitude and flying out of the dead air until he could rise with a gust of wind coming off the cliff. It plucked him up like a sparrow, and Keith was suddenly able to breathe properly again, riding the thermal in a gentle sweep upwards, around and then back down again.

From there it was a simple matter of locking in his heels and landing. He stumbled a little with his excitement, but let his wings droop to rest. He dumped Pidge’s bag into the long grass. Pulled off his hair tie and re-did his pony-tail. His wings ached, but in a good way.

Keith went to the cliff’s edge and had a good look over.

Pidge was still around the halfway mark. Keith gave her a cheerful wave, and got the middle finger in return.

Down on the beach, Shiro was giving him the thumbs. The avian was up sitting in the dry sand, the tips of his wings half buried. Indignantly, Keith realised that Shiro had been having a nice sand-cleanse, whilst Keith was playing a parcel pidgeon.

Lance and Hunk were there too, mostly out of the water. When they noticed Keith was within sight, Lance began waving his arms madly. The wind stole most of his words, but Keith could still catch the distinctive click-whistle-trill, bouncing along the rocks. Then Lance lay down on his back, tail in the water and made vigorous sweeping motions with his arms.

When he sat up again, there was a merman’s imprint in the sand, with two giant sand-wings either side. Lance was pointing at them and making flapping motions. Keith could see the glint of his
teeth when he smiled.
And even though no one could hear him from up here, Keith laughed and laughed and laughed.

The first time Keith brought back flowers, Lance was chewing on a daisy before Keith could move fast enough to stop him. It wasn’t his fault: they smelled good and strange and totally edible; Lance had just assumed they were food stuffs. They tasted okay too, though not as strong as they smelled.

“You’re not really meant to eat them,” Keith had said.

Lance’s eyes got very big and he spat out a mouthful of sad mush.

“Are they poisonous?!”

At the word poison, Hunk, Pidge and Shiro had all looked their way, eyebrows suspicious, all of them judging – Keith had waved his hands, face going pink.

“Not – no, nothing like that you idiot,” he said. His ears were going red too. It was fascinating to watch. “They’re just – you look at them.”

Lance looked at them. The flowers were wrapped in a yellow paper parcel, and a bit squished at the edges. There were white ones, yellow ones, tiny purple ones and a few big pink ones. Those smelled the strongest. He had been about to chomp on those next, but held himself back. Lance looked at Keith.

“I’m looking…” he said, hopefully.

Keith was undoing the laces of his flight boots with sharp motions that meant he was feeling embarrassed. Lance could tell because the short feathers on the arch of his wings were puffing up too.

“It’s just a present,” he said, “You give flowers. To people.”

Lance felt unbearably fond.

“To look at,” Lance clarified.

“Or smell,” said Keith, throwing up his hands, “I don’t know! They’re just flowers. I thought you might like them since you probably don’t get roses and things down here. They grow on different soil.”

“Which ones are roses? The big ones?”

Keith nodded. He was still very red.

Lance had stuck his nose right up to the soft petals – they tickled and made him sneeze several times – but the scent was so heady and intoxicating that he had to lie down on the rock for a little while, just to recover. None of the flowers near the sea had smelled like this – not even the bright orange ones that grew in clumps on the cliff moss.
Lance refused to throw the roses away, keeping them in a little jar in the cave (he couldn’t understand why Pidge sniggered so much) and even Hunk agreed that they smelled very interesting. The scent grew stronger in the days that followed, sweeter but heavier, until it got so much that Hunk threw them away. Lance had thrown a little tantrum when he discovered the bottles empty.

“They were getting rotten,” said Hunk, “Keith can get you more fresh ones.”

“But I liked those ones,” said Lance, snatching the jars back. They still smelled like the roses.

The morning after they saw Pidge off, Keith brought back more flowers. He thrust them at Lance as soon as he landed.

“Here,” he said, “now stop moping.”

Lance drew himself up onto the rock, using his tail as a nest to sit on. He examined the roses happily, sniffing at each one. There were all different colours, and smelled like they had come from very different places. Lance took his time enjoying each scent, pulling back the petals and peering inside each whorl.

“Smell this one,” he said, holding out one of the stems. Keith gave it an obligatory sniff.

“Now this one,” said Lance, switching out the flowers. “Why does the yellow one smell so – so toasty?”

Keith wrinkled his nose.

“Uh…” he said, “I think they smell the same. I got them from the same garden. Uh.”

“You Avians have awful senses,” said Lance sympathetically, “Must be so … boring not to be able to smell properly? how do you tell what to eat?”

“We cook most of our food,” said Keith dryly, laying out some twine, two pieces of dry board and a stack of paper. Lance edged a little closer.

“Are you going to draw a picture?” he asked. “Can you draw me another bird picture?”

Keith shot him an exasperated look.

“No, I drew you five birds yesterday. Anyway I don’t have any graphite on me. I’m going to show you how to press flowers. Gimme’ one of those.”

Keith held out his hand.

Lance looked from the hand to his roses and then back again.

“What are you going to do to it?” he asked, suspiciously, “they’re fresh. They smell great as it is!”

Keith wriggled his fingers. He still had his gloves on. Lance still wasn’t sure why Shiro and Keith were so fond of the strange hole-y gloves when Pidge didn’t wear them at all. Maybe Avians got cold fingers without webbing and scales? He made a mental note to ask later.

“I’m going to press two of them so they don’t go rotten. It’ll keep for longer, if you can make sure they stay dry. They’ll still smell okay. I think.”

“I don’t know if I can trust your nose,” said Lance, sniffing his roses again, “and if you squish
them they’ll be flat!”

“Ugh just – “ Keith made a lunge for the flowers. His hand closed around Lance’s wrist, but he tripped, knee knocking against the meat of Lance’s tail. Lance brought his tailfin up to slap Keith squarely across the face. Keith made yelp of surprise, wings snapping out automatically for balance.

“Lance, seriously, ” he said, knee – knees were hard – digging into Lance’s tail.

“Okay, okay fine,” said Lance, peeling his tailfin away and handing Keith one of the roses – the one that smelled most like dirt. Keith took it, shaking out his wings and tucking them back in a neat fold behind his shoulders. The feathers themselves slowly settled back, sleek and slim.

Picking up a stray petal that had fallen during the commotion, Lance tucked it between two of the bigger feathers. It stayed, despite the sea wind; nestled snugly.

“There,” said Lance, patting the wing. He loved the feel of feathers; he thought he’d never get bored of the way they felt, so soft and dry and warm. “Now you’ll smell nice too, Keef.”

When Lance looked up, Keith was staring at the scrappy rose petal in his feathers – still holding the rose in his right hand. He looked taken aback; eyes wide in his face.

Lance felt his smile falter.

“Keef?”

Keith blinked, head jerking like he was coming out of a trance.

“ – sorry. I’m.” Keith’s face was flushed, and he was smiling now, much to Lance’s relief, “thank you.”

He lifted his left wing a little, so he could look at the petal there. Lance gave him a strange look.

“I just said you smelled bad,” said Lance, just in case Keith didn’t notice.

Keith shrugged.

“We’ve established that your nose is more sensitive than mine. Probably a hunting adaptation.”

“…I’m not picking off any more petals to make you smell better,” said Lance.

“That’s fine,” said Keith cheerfully, picking up the books and twine. Keith laid his rose carefully flat on one of the pages, and picked up the wooden dry-boards. “Okay, I’m going to press this one and you can do the next one. My mom used to press lavender and then hang the flowers in little cloth bags. They smelled really nice.”

Then he brought down the other side of the book and pressed. The flower oozed – Lance could smell it, a burst of scent and water – before Keith was swapping out the paper and dabbing it with a cloth. He did this a few more times (“have to get it a bit dryer”) before pressing it hard one more time and tying the whole thing off between the two boards.

“Is it done now?” asked Lance. It looked like they had simply made a flower sandwich.

“Nope,” said Keith, “Now we wait. I’m going to put it up here to bake in the sun. We can check on it at the end of the day. Unless it rains.”
“At the end of the day…” said Lance, pushing himself up on his hands and tail – but Keith was too tall. “Keith that’s *ages*. Keith!”

In the end, Keith went to have a sand-bath, and they both snoozed – Lance the dip of a shallow rock-pool and Keith with one wing mostly buried in the sand; the other notched up to block the sun from his face and Lance’s skin.

“You’ll get sunburnt,” Keith had said, shortly before closing his eyes.

Even though the water was very warm, Lance didn’t want to move. He tucked flat little sand dollars into Keith’s wings instead, interspersed with smooth sea glass. He couldn’t be sure that Keith was actually asleep, because the edge of his mouth twitched every time Lance touched the feathers.

Lance hummed to himself; smoothing over his the scales on his own tail and checking for cracks or fissures. He sanded a few rough edges with the sharp end of one nail, and dislodged a shiny scale that was going to fall anyway – he must have scrapped it hard on a rock in the lake. It was mostly grey, but had little flecks of blue.

Giving it a quick thumb polish, Lance tucked it next to a sea-shell in the curve of Keith’s wing.

“It’ll fall off again,” said Keith.

When Lance looked over, Keith’s eyes were still closed; cheek pillowed on one elbow.

Lance mirrored him, lying down on his side, tail half in and half out of the water.

“Mmhm,” said Lance, “You’re going to be raining stuff when you sit up.”

Keith shook out his left wing a little, extended it in a gentle stretch. Glass and shells showered the sand, plopping into the water. Lance grabbed the wing and pulled it back over them. Keith opened one eye, shifting a little on his elbow so he could card through his feathers. He plucked Lance’s scale from out between his pinions, then settled back down into the sand again.

“Don’t want to lose it,” said Keith, tucking the scale into the wrist of his glove.

Lance beamed, and pressed a little closer; until Keith’s arm was a warm line against his own.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Lance, “Can always give you another one.”

He paused.

“Actually I’ve changed my mind, give that one back it’s not very pretty.”

Keith huffed out a warm breath that tickled Lance’s nose.

“Don’t think so,” he said – but he let Lance grab his other hand, turning it over. Keith had no scales on his elbow, no feathers either. Lance stuck a finger between the glove and Keith’s wrist.

“Why do you wear these all the time anyway?” he said, wriggling another finger in between the fabric. The skin there was soft and smooth – warm from the leather and the sun. It ended at the knuckle so that Keith’s fingers came out, but now that Lance thought about it, he couldn’t really ever remember seeing Keith without them.

“Habit, I guess,” said Keith. “Also good for climbing.”
“Mm,” said Lance, sniffling the leather. He undid the buckle around the wrist, picking at the metal until it opened up. Keith let him slide the glove off – eventually yanking it off with his teeth.

Keith’s hand looked like a normal hand underneath – the skin wasn’t even really any paler. Lance traced over the lines on his palm, the hot pulse beside the bone.

“See? Just a boring hand,” said Keith, curling and uncurling his fingers. He pressed them to Lance’s hand, palm to palm, pulse to pulse. Lance’s fingers were a little longer, the nails a little sharper. His knuckles were covered in soft scales and pale-translucent webbing in-between.

Keith rubbed a thumb over the scales on the inside of Lance’s wrist, smoothing them over and over in the direction that they lay.

“Feels different than I thought,” said Keith. Their foreheads were almost touching. “You’re not getting dried out from the sun, are you?”

“No,” said Lance, splashing the water a little with his tail fin. He curled his tail up over them, fanning water droplets over their face. Keith only blinked.

“Can I pat?” said Lance, hand hovering towards Keith’s wing and the soft under-feathers that were blocking out the sun.

Keith just stretched his wing in response so that it was a little closer, shielding them from the worst of the sand spray. Lance took this as permission; pushing his hand into the thick feathers and doing a full body wriggle at the soft-dry sensation. He carded his fingers through until he touched the hard bone of the wing itself; digging his thumb in experimentally and watching Keith’s eyes flutter shut.

The feathers seemed to stand up on end with Keith’s next inhale, and then fluff back down on the next exhale. Lance brushed his hand through again, revelling in it. He twitched when Keith moved his hand down to Lance’s hip, his warm palm like a brand where it touched the juncture between skin and scales. Lance leaned forwards, shy, and touched their noses together.

Keith didn’t open his eyes, but he hummed, wings shuffling in so that the pinions brushed against Lance’s tail. He slid his hand across Lance’s skin until his fingers touched the deep-set scales that clustered at the base of the merman’s back, which spread and ran up the length of his spine.

It felt good, and Lance pushed his face into the crook of Keith’s neck, feeling a strange mix of drowsy and electrified. He wanted to stay like this forever; warmer than he could ever remember feeling.

Keith pressed his hand to Lance’s scales, following the shape of each one with the blunt of his thumb. Lance groaned, hand digging into Keith’s wing in response and bringing his tail out of the water so that he could curl around Keith’s bare feet. Keith made a sound like he had just lost his last breath; and his gloved hand came up to cup the back of Lance’s neck.

“I’m glad you didn’t drown, Keith,” said Lance, kissing the hollow Keith’s throat. Lance could feel the pulse there against his mouth, fast and strong.

Keith’s eyes crinkled at the edges, and he leaned forwards to mirror the gesture. His own breath was hot against Lance’s gills, and when he pressed an open mouthed kiss there, Lance forgot himself - his gills flitting in the sudden wet heat and over-sensation.

Keith made a quiet yelping noise and Lance realised he had yanked on the feathers in his fist, hard.
“Oops, sorry,” said Lance, patting Keith’s wing in apology, “Sorry Keef.”

“…s’okay,” Keith said, the words like smooth sea glass, lost quickly in the sand beneath them.

“I guess I’ll never drown now,” he said after a while, smiling.

Lance cocked his head.

“Well no,” said Lance, “Because I’ll always be here.”

Keith huffed out a laugh.

“No, I mean – the story.”

Lance arched himself into Keith’s hand and Keith took the hint to keep running his palm over Lance’s scales.

“What story?” asked Lance.

Keith flushed, cheeks pink.

“Just stupid,” he said, “Nevermind.”

“No, Keef, you can’t just - you gotta tell me now.”

Lance tugged on Keith’s wing, pulling it down until Keith groaned.

“Keef.”

“Jeez, stop that – my shoulder doesn’t bend that way! – okay. Thank you.”

“Is it one of those fake stories you avians make up about us?” said Lance, tightening his tail around Keith’s ankles before letting his fin fall back into the rockpool with a little splash.

“I guess so,” said Keith, “But they said – well, they said... if you ever got a kiss from a mermaid, you’ll never die at sea. You’d be blessed.”

Lance stared.

Keith averted his eyes, face still flushed. He kept trying to shuffle his wings.

“...Well they did say mer maid,” Keith continued, sounding more and more embarrassed, “so it clearly doesn’t apply here. Just a dumb story we got told as kids. One of those nursery rhymes. I’m sure you guys also – “

“Keith,” said Lance, grabbing Keith’s chin.

The avian finally looked at him, eyes very round.

“I think it’s a lovely story,” said Lance.

Then he kissed Keith carefully on the mouth, lingering. Just in case.
His sister found him when he was sneaking back to bed. She sort of loomed out of the shadows behind the glow of the crystals, and Lance would have shrieked loud enough to wake the whole family if he hadn’t realised who it was.

“There you are,” she said, giving him a quick tail hug, “What have you been up to all day? Disappearing off. Hmm?”

She tugged at the bag on his shoulder, and Lance blew an irritated bubble into her face.

“Merida, I want to go to bed,” he whined.

“No one ever sees you around,” his sister continued, grabbing him around the middle for an admonishing hug, “You don’t even turn up to dinner!”

She pulled out an assortment of pearls and shells from the bag. Wrinkled her nose.

“Why are you collecting rubbish,” she said.

Lance blushed to the tips of his ears.

“Not rubbish!” he said, grabbing for the pearls, “I’m just making a thing. With Hunk,” he added hastily. “Hunk and I are just working on a project thing. We’ve been busy.”

Merida rolled her eyes, but relinquished the bag.

“Busy,” she mimicked, “up to no good as usual.”

“No,” said Lance guiltily. He had to get away from her before she forced him to spill all the beans. He yawned, exaggeratedly big.

“Meridaa,” he said, “I wanna sleep now.”

“Mama says to make sure you’re at dinner second moon from now,” said Merida, patting his hair, “A delegation is visiting from down south. They’ve not come through before, so you’re to make a good impression. It’s not a family dinner, okay, it’s an important dinner.”

Lance waved a hand.

“Yeah, yeah, okay.”

“And don’t forget your crown.”

“I won’t.”

She poked him in the cheek.

“And don’t be late,” she said, “...Are you going to forget? Maybe you should stay with me all day.”

Lance wriggled out of her tail hug desperately.

“Oh my god I’m not gonna forget,” he said, “I don’t wanna hang out with you on patrol all day! It’s boring!”

“I’ll scale you alive if you are late,” said Merida, bopping noses with him. Lance bopped back, grudging but warm. She slapped him hard on the back with her tailfin, the force of it propelling
head first into a clump of seaweed. Lance whistled in protest.

“Aww, poor guppy,” she said, pulling him out by the tail. “Why don’t you spend more time with us?”

“Because you’re so mean,” said Lance, “Merida!”

Someone poked their head out from behind a doorway. It was Corinna, with her hair loose from sleep. She squinted at the both of them.

“If the both of you don’t shut up, no one will be alive for the dinner,” she said. “Lance, come give me a good-night hug.”

“I don’t know if I can do this.”

They were perched together about half-way up the cliff face, Keith having flown there and Shiro having climbed. That had been the easy part – Shiro and his religious push-ups meant his upper body strength was fine, despite the long months of being grounded. But now that they were here, overlooking the vast empty space that was the ocean.

“You’ll be fine,” said Keith. He had his own wings folded very tight to his back, so he didn’t accidentally catch any updraft and get blown off the rock before he was ready. Shiro had his back pressed to the cliff too, hunkered down on a narrow lip of rock.

“You need to fly to get those muscles back in shape,” said Keith – or rather, he shouted because the wind was howling up here – “You can’t do practice exercises on the ground forever!”

Shiro shot him a squinty-eyed look full of resentment.

“Thanks for that, Keith,” he said, “I know what to do. We all took physio!”

“I’ll come over there and push you,” said Keith. “I’ll do it!”

“Don’t come any closer!” shouted Shiro, sounding panicked. He tried edging away from Keith, but they were both occupying the only ledge of rock in the immediate vicinity. Keith gritted his teeth and shuffled towards his right. Shiro tried to knock him off balance with his left wing, but stumbled when the wind caught.

Keith stuck out his foot, and caught Shiro’s ankle.

“– Keith, no!” said Shiro, “There’s not enough - We have to wait for the next - “

There was a piercing whistle from down below them, and they both peered over their toes to see two flickering silhouettes in the water. Lance and Hunk, wondering what was taking so long, probably.

“Shiro, you want to fly. So fucking fly!”

Shiro looked frozen, eyes big in his face, knuckles white on the rock.

Taking a deep breath, Keith lunged sideways, grabbing Shiro’s arm and using the momentum to
throw them both from the cliff. Keith immediately snapped his wings out to full breadth, letting the air catch and lift him like a hook yanking on his shoulder blades.

“*FUCK -!*” yelled Shiro, half tumbling. He was flapping like a chick, a little panicked – but then a warm gust of air caught under his huge broad wings, and it seemed to steady him, give him enough time to spread out his wings.

And then Shiro was soaring, arching up until they were at the same level, effortless above the ocean. He was laughing too, loud and a little hysterical – but his smile was clear, even at this distance.

Keith whooped with delight and relief, banking to his side so he could fly over and around Shiro.

“See?” he called, “*See? You’re okay!*”

“I’m flying!” said Shiro, as they coasted along the edge of the cliff, riding on the easy sweep of air, “Oh god. Keith! It feels amazing! It feels .... I can’t believe it, I thought I’d never – it feels *amazing!* ”

Shiro rose a little higher, and they flew like that in tandem, Shiro’s wing casting a half shadow over the back of Keith as they glided. Keith felt like his heart was going to burst from his chest, and he couldn’t stop smiling or laughing, it filled his lungs full to burst, until it hurt.

He watched Shiro testing out his wings, banking left in a gentle half-sweep. He only had to beat those huge wings a few times before he was back at the same height, an albatross coming home. Keith flew a little harder to catch up, beating his wings in their full width so he rose straight up like a peregrine before a dive.

From above, Shiro’s white feathers stood out against the dark grey and black of his wings. Keith kept pace, flying headlong against the wind until he was right above Shiro. Then he tucked his wings close and dove.

Shiro made a very satisfying *eep* noise when Keith rocketed past him like a bullet.

“So long, pigeon!” Keith called back over his shoulder.

A moment later, a shadow gained on him. It was Shiro, wings loosely to his back, turning in the air as he paired in on the dive. His grin was infectious and huge, and Keith could see all of his teeth.

“Hi,” he said as they drew level.

Keith made a rude gesture with his hand.

“You really wanna play chicken with a peregrine, Shiro?”

They had been very high up, but the ocean was drawing closer, a huge mass of blue.

“I’m sorry, *kestrel Keith,* ” said Shiro, “what was that? Couldn’t hear you over the sound of my wing-span.”

“You’re recovering from an injury!” yelled Keith, “Pull out now!”

“You pull out now!” said Shiro.

They both continued to rocket towards the ocean.
“Do you really want Lance to fish you out again?” said Keith, voice hoarse from all the yelling, “Because he will have to do that.”

“Stop trying to psych me out, Keith,” said Shiro over the roaring wind.

Vaguely, Keith could hear dolphin whistles and clicks which meant that Lance and Hunk were very confused about what was going on – but there was no way he was going to lose to Shiro. Not when it was the latter’s first time flying in a year. No. Not on. Keith Kogane was no chicken.

“What are you doing?” Lance screamed.

They were close enough to hear him now, and Keith could see he was leaping into the air as high as he could go, and yelling as fast as he could on the way down. Beside him, Hunk was swimming in tight worried circles, flashing gold and orange.

Keith looked to his right.

Shiro looked to his left.

They eyed each other with narrowed eyes. Keith counted beneath his breath, gauging the distance.

They both pulled out of the dive simultaneously, snapping out their wings and nearly knocking the other right out of the air. There was a huge whump whump of air as Shiro’s wings caught on the wind, beating down on the water so that the waves crashed back. Keith had it harder – his wings were simply smaller – and he had to flap frantically out of the dive, dipping up and down violently with each beat of his wings.

“You’re boots are getting wet Keith!” shouted Shiro triumphantly from a few metres above Keith’s head. Keith swore.

“Are not!” he yelled back, struggling to gain height. He got tossed to the left by a stray gust of sea-wind, but made it quickly back to where Shiro was circling.

They were both panting, out of breath, and grinning hugely.

“You guys are stressing me out!” yelled Hunk, popping out of the ocean, “I’m not going to help you if you fall in!”

“You’re gonna get cramps tonight,” said Keith, watching Shiro glide.

He looked, for the first time since Keith had found him, truly at peace.

“Worth it,” said Shiro.

Keith flew a little closer.

“Yeah... it is,” said Keith.

Neither of them came back down to earth for a very long time.

When Pidge returns a day later, it’s Shiro who flies her down from the top of the cliff; Keith
following with the luggage. By the time they touched down on a flat rocky outcrop, Pidge had clearly been talking non stop on the slow descent down.

“... so happy! I know it’s a scary feeling, Matt always hated moulting season when he couldn’t fly, he would hide in his room *all day* and dropped feathers everywhere. And you look just the same as before! Except the white bits, obviously .”

Lance, who was lying on a nearby rock, was giving Shiro an appraising once-over.

“Shiro. I don’t weigh much more than Pidge, right?”

Hunk, who was half in the water and half leaning on the edge of the rock, frowned.

“Uh, you’re like, at least two times heavier than Pidge. Pidge doesn’t have a tail. Or as much muscle.”

Lance waved his hand, turning over onto his back. The sun reflected on his tail, iridescent blue. He looked beautiful; too-bright. Keith thought he might never get used to it.

“Whatever,” Lance was saying, oblivious, “Shiro. Does this mean you can carry me? I want to fly again but Keith says no.”

“Shiro has wider wingspan, and broader wings,” said Pidge, adjusting her glasses, “He can control his descent better, so he can carry me. But I’m pretty light.”

“He can’t control it *better,* ” said Keith, crossing his arms, “It’s just he can slow down. That’s all.”

“Uh, hello,” said Lance, “I don’t’ care how fast we come down, I just want to fly again. Shiro, *please? *”

Shiro rubbed the back of his head.

“I don’t know how we’d get you high enough for me to get in the air in the first place,” he said, “I mean just now it’ was just a circling descent. Keith could probably do it.”

“Yes,” said Keith testily, “But you wanted to, even though you don’t have any fucking flight boots on Shiro. ”

“I’m fine!” said Shiro, “I’ve done it before.”

“Not after a year on the ground,” said Keith, “And you call *me* reckless.”

“Everyone calls you reckless,” said Pidge, “Everyone. All the time. Really.”

“She’s not lying,” agreed Shiro happily.

“I’m sorry,” said Keith, making an expression of mock surprise, “Did you want me to help massage your dumb wing cramps next time, or do you want to do it yourself?”

“Stop fighting…” said Hunk, yawning. “Seriously. Pidge, how was your trip?”

Pidge’s eyes were sparkling behind her glasses. She dumped her bag onto the rock and sat down where she stood, undoing the leather buckles with clear excitement.

“Alright. Alright, so I have *so much* to tell you,” she said. She pulled out a bundle of wrapping that turned out to be about ten inches thick. Eventually she got to the middle and held up a rock roughly
a quarter of a fist. It glowed a little, even in the sun, but was purple-pink instead of the usual belmeran blue.

Both Lance and Hunk seemed to perk up, heads tilting, silhouettes very still all of a sudden. Keith was reminded of snakes spotting prey.

Pidge looked as if she might explode from excitement.

“It sounds different,” said Lance, leaning closer.

He made a soft enquiring clicking noise, as if talking to the rock, ears still cocked, neck extended. Hunk seemed to be sniffing at the pink crystal, eyebrows furrowed in concentration. Keith glanced at Shiro, who shrugged. Neither of them could hear anything.

“It used to be a belmeran crystal,” said Pidge, “Mined in land, not the species we find at sea. We compared it to a sample Hunk and Lance found me, and it’s definitely been altered. We know that the Galra have been trying to refine the crystals for more energy, since they’re almost out.”

“Most of the mines are dead now,” said Shiro, and Keith nodded.

“Exactly,” said Pidge, “And they can’t really get to the ones at the bottom of the sea, right?”

“Or the ones at home,” said Keith, “We’d kill them first.”

“Right,” said Pidge, “So this isn’t new. But I haven’t been able to grab a sample until now. Apparently they managed to ambush a shipment. New trade route.”

“Can I touch it?” said Lance, “It’s humming.”

“Oh you can touch it alright,” said Pidge. “You’re going to help me run some tests.”

Keith and Shiro were told on no uncertain terms to Wait Outside while the Pidge and the two merman went into the cave where it was quieter and stiller to run the tests. For good measure, Keith and Shiro went for a circle around the cliffs for a good half hour.

By the time they returned, the sun was a lot lower in the sky, and they waited tentatively at the edge of the lake. When neither of them leaped into the water, they made their way into the cool interior of the cavern. At one end they could see a cluster of light, the sound of splashing and excited voices.

“So,” said Shiro, plopping down next to Pidge. The pink crystal was nowhere to be seen. “How did it go –”

“It exploded!” said Pidge, waving her arms, “We ran the same test as before, to see what was actually different right, asides from the colour, of course, and –”

“And it was the lowest frequency,” said Hunk, “Not even loud. And it just straight up started vibrating really hard.”

– so we got Lance to go one step up, so a bit higher than that time Keith tried to take a swim –”

“Hang on, it wasn’t just me,” protested Keith.

“And it just exploded. Shattered. Look!” said Pidge, holding out a cloth and entirely ignoring
Keith. On the dark cloth, they could see razor sharp shards of pale pink crystal. They seemed duller than before, no longer glowing.

“Actually that was my spare. The bit we were testing just exploded everywhere. So bad news is… no more sample,” said Pidge, “But good news is that we know the galra crystals are way more brittle. They’ve got a bit more energy output than the natural belmeran crystals, right Hunk?”

“Right,” said Hunk, “Not that much more. But any straight currents then yeah.”

“But they’re way more fragile and we think probably don’t last as long. But we need two side by side to really measure that long term.”

“That sounds - exciting, Pidge,” said Shiro, “But how does it have to do with anything?”

Pidge wrapped the shards away in her soft cloth and stretched.

“It means that my refinement method – well, actually the Merfolk method – is still better,” she said. “And also now I know that that particular piece of crystal was not from an old human or galra mine. It’s Avian. Too porous to be from the ocean or in the mountains. It was part of a much larger cluster.”

Keith felt his blood run cold.

“That’s impossible,” he said, “None of the Avian strongholds have fallen. We’re fine!”

“I mean it could be the refinement process that made it so brittle,” said Hunk, “we still don’t know what they did, exactly.”

“We need more samples, to see what they’re doing to the crystals,” said Pidge, “But we also need to take them back home. If the Galra are somehow getting their hands on Avian crystals…”

“How would they even reach us,” said Shiro, “We are literally miles up in the air!”

“I don’t know,” said Pidge, “But I can’t go back there as a human. Not after the war started. None of us can get in contact with anyone at the Garrison or at the Council. We need you guys to do it.”

Keith’s blood felt cold.

“Who is ‘we’,” he said.

“The Resistance,” said Pidge, “There’s heaps of us. Haven’t you been listening? Anyway, I told them about you and so now we have a way to get help! Something fishy is going on, and we need to find out for certain.”

Lance cleared his throat.

Pidge blinked, then made a face.

“Oh, sorry. No offence, guys.”

Lance pouted, but shrugged.

Keith held up his hand.

“Wait. Hold up. You told them about Shiro? About us? Here?”
Pidge raised her eyebrows.

“Well I didn’t tell them exactly where we were, but it’s not like they - “

Keith felt anger boiling up again, souring his throat.

“You do know that the galra know about Shiro, right?” he said, voice rising uncontrollably, “how can you go blabbing about where we are hiding to a bunch of strangers - !”

“They’re not strangers,” said Pidge, flushing, “They’re working against Zarkon and the empire! And anyway, I didn’t tell them exactly where we were, I just said we Avians on our side now who can help and - “

“Oh did you,” said Keith, “And what, we’re just going to be good little messenger doves, are we? Delivering exploding packages? I guess if anyone gets shot on sight it won’t be one of them.”

Pidge jabbed a finger in his direction, mouth thin and white with emotion.

“You’re the one who said you wanted Shiro to go home. This is just a – a detour, we just need you to take one or two of us back with you so we can talk to the Council about what’s happening – !”

“How can you trust them so blindly?” said Keith, “they know where you come from, you’ve been doing this like clockwork. They must know this part of the cliffs, they know the people in the towns and fishing villages – if there’s even one traitor, we’re all done for! Lance, Hunk, Shiro...all of us!”

“I trust them because they tried to help me, wings or not!” said Pidge, leaping to her feet, “They didn’t treat me like a … like a liability, like I was disabled.”

Lance was leaning up, trying to pat Pidge’s ankle.

“Pidgey,” he said, cooing low in his throat. It was the same soothing noise that had snapped Shiro out of a panic attack, “Pidge, it’s not –”

She kicked at the rocks, and Lance drew back, looking hurt. It just made Keith angrier.

“Don’t try that trick on me,” said Pidge. Then she turned back to Keith, eyes alight and wet.

“They tried to help me look for Matt and Dad, even when the Garrison turned their backs on us!” She whirled to face Shiro, who recoiled like her finger was a gun.

“Iverson said you had failed to see the ambush,” said Pidge, “Said that that’s how Matt got shot out of the sky. Said they sent out recon and retrieval but we couldn't be sure. Couldn’t follow. Didn’t know where you were. Then after, they didn’t want mum to go anywhere because knew too much. Didn’t want any of us to go anywhere. Sitting ducks, they said. No wings, no worth.”

“Pidge,” said Shiro, reaching out to hold her but she shoved him away.

“Do you think I’d need your help if I could fly?” shouted Pidge, her voice and her anger felt hard enough to shatter rock. And although she stood her ground, and her chin raised high – Keith could see her hands shaking.

“If I had wings,” she said, “I would have found them by now. Not sitting in a fucking cave.”

“Pidge,” said Hunk sharply, and it wasn’t a purely human voice, “You’re not being fair. Shiro was injured, and you didn’t have enough information to go on anyway.”
“Pidge opened her mouth, but Keith beat her to it, feeling like someone had replaced his lungs with slate.

“If you blame Shiro again,” he said, quietly, “I’m out.”

“Keith,” said Shiro, “Look, everyone...let’s just...let’s have something to eat and calm down, okay? Let’s –”

“I don’t need you,” said Pidge venomously, holding Keith’s furious gaze, “Shiro will help me. Won’t you, Shiro?”

“Of course we’ll help,” said Shiro, voice low and imploring. His wings were draped low and unintimidating. He glanced at Keith, “We’ll both help. We want to find your brother and father just as much as you Katie. I just don’t know if a Resistance group is going to have those same priorities.”

Keith felt like he wanted to gauge his own eyes out. He tugged at his own hair, unsure what to do with his hands.

“Oh my god,” he said, “How can you be so naive? It’s been a year and they haven’t been able to track anything down for you. Meanwhile they’ve got you running tests on galra and belmeran crystals, developing more powerful crystals. They’ve been using you Pidge. They’re just keeping you around.”

“Guys, please,” said Hunk, but no one was listening.

“The Kerberos mission was about new crystal species,” said Pidge, “I told them about the mission and I’m just helping out in return for them helping me – “

“Right,” said Keith dryly, “And what have they accomplished so far for you? Did they get you any leads on your brother? Did they find Shiro? Did they know Shiro was even alive?”

Pidge looked away.

“Did you even ask?”

“Keith,” said Shiro, “That’s enough.”

“No,” said Keith, “Pidge, I get that you’re upset. But you’re thinking of no one but yourself. I’m not going to let Shiro fly back inland and straight into god knows what, when he is safe right now and we don’t even know if going will accomplish anything.”

Pidge shook her head.

“Once we figure out where the Galra are getting their crystals from, we’ll have more information! We’ll know why they sabotaged the Kerberos mission, and what they want with my brother and father,” said Pidge, “Matt was on the refinement project for years, how do you think I got into it? Maybe The Galra’s got him...maybe they’ve got him working on something similar, but just trapped and... we’re just sitting around when we could be rescuing him!”

Keith could see Shiro getting visibly upset; his wings drawn tighter and tighter.

“Until they have some solid leads,” said Keith, “there’s no point getting ourselves killed.”

“...I think Keith is right,” Lance piped up tentatively, “maybe if –”
“Of course you think Keef is right,” said Pidge, voice dripping with disdain.

“Okay, seriously,” said Hunk, looking pissed off too. He was holding Lance’s hand; Lance who looked like he wanted to dive back into the water. “Don’t say anything else. No! Pidge. I said, don’t say anything you’re going to regret. We all want to help you but we have to be careful. And don’t take this out on Lance.”

Pidge snapped her mouth shut.

There was a long, awful silence.

“If we need to take the crystal samples back to the Council, in order to get new leads on Matt and your father, then that’s what we’ll do,” said Shiro, “But if we can’t convince someone from the Council to meet with them, there’s nothing I or Keith can do. Avian, or not.”

Pidge opened her mouth to protest, but Shiro plowed on.

“Listen to me. We’ll give it our best shot, but – it might be best if no one else tags along. It’ll be hard enough to get into the city during lock down… I don’t want anyone being hurt.”

“They really want to meet with the Council,” said Pidge, “Form an alliance. Said it’ll be easier to organise raids that way.”

“Would the Council meet with humans?” said Shiro, “Most are on Zarkon’s side, or under his rule.”

“They’re not human,” said Pidge.

Keith’s eyes almost bugged out of his head.

“You want the Council to meet with Galra ?!” he exclaimed, “Are you insane? ”

Pidge glared at him.


Both Keith and Shiro stared at her.

“…No way,” said Keith, “All the centaurs were killed off years ago. Decades. Before any of us were born.”

“Not these ones,” said Pidge. “

“…What’s a centaur?” asked Lance.

“They’re like people,” said Shiro, “But with four legs; like horses.”

Lance and Hunk still looked a bit confused.

“Horses are animals with four legs,” Keith supplied helpfully. He paused. “And a tail.”

Lance’s looked more confused, not less.

“Why do they need four legs and a tail?” he said.

“And two arms,” said Shiro.
“Six. Six and a tail...” said Lance. He looked down at his own hands. “I only have two and a tail.”

“Can we focus?” said Pidge, “Alteans are still around, and they can help us find my family! But they need our help too. Your help.”

“I don’t see why them being Altean would make the Council more friendly. I doubt anyone would believe us in the first place. No one has seen a centaur.” said Keith.

“Avians have always had a good history with the Alteans,” said Shiro thoughtfully, “I’m pretty sure the treaties still stand with all the centaurs. It’s just that we thought they’re all…”

“Dead,” said Keith bluntly.

“For decades,” said Shiro. He draped a wing carefully over Keith’s. Keith let him. “Our parents’ time.”

“They did start the war,” said Keith, examining his favourite knife so he didn’t have to look at anyone. “With the Galra. We were at a truce. But because of the treaty we had to help. If anything, they owe us. Not really in a position to be calling on favours, are they?”

“The Galra killed their entire clan because the Council didn’t want Avian blood spilled,” said Pidge hotly, “Allura said it was a massacre.”

“It was,” said Keith in, slapping his blade back into its sheath. He felt sick to his stomach. “My mom died in one of those. She was on an aid mission.”

Silence.

It was like someone else had spoken those words; leaving Keith suddenly cold.

He held onto the hilt of his blade, feeling very exposed.

Shiro brought his wings in, with Keith swaddled beneath his arch. He pulled Keith close, looping an arm beneath his wings when Keith tried to pull away. Keith let himself breathe in the soft dry smell of Shiro’s wings, squeezing his eyes shut. He wished fervently that he could just disappear. He felt very foolish.

Keith pulled his wings up, hunching over. He could barely remember what his mother looked like.

Shiro was rubbing circles on his back, tight and small.

Vacantly, Keith realised they had moved without him realising; Shiro had shuffled them away from the group and was talking in a low steady voice that no doubt still carried.

“...eith? Hey, buddy. It’s okay. She didn’t mean it like that. It’s okay.”

Keith rubbed his eyes. His hair was stuck all over his face; his feathers ruffled from having been under Shiro’s own.

“I’m fine,” he said, “I think I’m going to fly for a bit.”

Shiro’s face was open and earnest, and Keith was afraid that whatever he said next would sever the last thread of self control and composure that he possessed.

“I’ll come with you,” said Shiro, “We’ll go gliding for a bit. The sun is almost down, no one will see us.”
Keith put a hand on Shiro’s shoulder, lingering, before pushing himself back. He shook his head.

“I just need to be by myself for bit,” said Keith, not looking Shiro in the eye.

In his periphery, he could see Pidge sitting cross legged by the water. Hunk was sitting by her, arm around her shoulders.

“I’ll come” said Keith at last. “You know I won’t leave you. If you think this is a lead worth pursuing, I’ll come. But I won’t risk your life for theirs. I won’t.”

This time, when he pulled away – Shiro let him go.

Keith could see Lance’s silhouette in the water; a silvery blue shadow that followed him quietly as he made his way out of the cavern. The only sound was the gurgle-swish of the water as they parted briefly about his tail fin. Sometimes Keith could see the outline of an exposed shoulder; the arch of a hip dipping into dark blue scales.

Lance followed him without a word, kept pace until they were out in the open ocean.

The sun was halfway over the horizon, and the waves crashing along the rocks were cold now. Keith stopped; bereft. Beside him, Lance slid out of the water, not quite pulling himself out of the ocean, but rested on his elbows. He was a gentle hanging apostrophe, waiting for someone to speak.

Keith’s vision blurred, a little. Furiously, he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

“I’m sorry about your mom,” said Lance after a long while. “She sounds really brave.”

Keith let out an aborted noise, not quite a laugh, not really a sob. Lance leaned across, slowly, and Keith felt his hand touch his ankle.

“Do you want me to go away?” said Lance.

Keith shook his head.

“Okay,” said Lance, pushing himself up a little more. “The tide is coming in though. You should move to a higher bit of rock or you’ll get wet.”

“Don’t care,” said Keith; and his voice broke on the second word. Defiantly – though of what he could not be sure – he slid down against the cliff wall so that he was sitting, knees touching Lance’s arms. He was still wearing his flight boots, and the blades scraped harshly against the stone.

There wasn’t much room, but Keith hooked his wings over them to shield Lance and himself from the worst of the gusting wind. He realised, belatedly, that he wasn’t wearing his gloves.

“I can’t actually remember her that well,” said Keith after a moment. Something was squeezing his chest, pulling from him words he did not know he had. “I was about six? I remember the flower pouches she made for all the drawers in our house. And she had red wings. Red and black.”

“Like yours,” said Lance, running the back of his hand along one of Keith’s pinions.

“But softer,” said Keith. “Or – I don’t know. I don’t really remember. I just know one time she was late coming home. I had...had this calendar I drew up. And I’d mark off the days because I had to
stay with people I didn’t like and she said she’d bring me strawberries when she got home.”

Lance was humming low in his throat again, patting Keith’s wing in small repeated gestures. Keith felt a strange calm in the midst of panic, a reel playing behind his eyelids, sharp and too-bright.

“Told them twenty three days to tell me she wasn’t coming home, ever.”

“Keith,” said Lance, pushing himself further out of the water on one wrist, the other coming up to cup the side of Keith’s face. Keith leaned into it, the coolness of Lance’s hand, the salt and the sting of it. When Lance began to slide back into the water, he grabbed Lance’s wrist reflexively. Lance came obligingly, hoisting himself up onto the rock so he could pull Keith into his arms. In their new position, Keith’s boot was half in the water, but he didn’t care.

“They didn’t bother telling me that Shiro wasn’t com – they didn’t tell –”

Lance crooned, fretting. He moved to pat Keith’s hair, eyes wide with concern. Keith felt wrung dry, like it was all spilling out.

“I found out with everyone else at the Garrison,” he said, “they just – I couldn’t just wait and hope and…”

Keith took a huge shuddering breath.

“Maybe they can come meet us out here,” said Lance, “Shiro doesn’t have to go inland. There’s lots of ways. Pidge has been really worried, and she’s – she doesn’t like being told no, not with her plans.” Lance touched Keith’s nose again, gently, “Hunk and I will help! Somehow. We can help. Maybe you can stay here while they send out an envoy or something. A …”

Suddenly Lance trailed off. Then his head snapped around, a jerky-sharp motion that had Keith tensing. Lance was staring at something over his shoulder, in the water. But there was nothing there; just the waves and shadows.

“Lance?” said Keith.

Then out of nowhere, something dragged Lance backwards into the water. Lance shrieked, his tail sweeping up and around as he disappeared beneath the surface.

“Lance!” Keith shouted, going for his knife.

But then Lance was back up again, still thrashing because –

Keith leaped to his feet, sliding and skidding on the rock, wings out for balance.

It was another mer; with long hair and a huge serpentine tail. Lance and the newcomer were screaming at each other, a series of rapid fire whistle-shrieks and clicks too fast for Keith to follow. They disappeared back under water, only to reappear again, Lance’s tail whipping through the water as he struggled in the stranger’s grasp.

“Lance!” Keith shouted again. He tried aim for a throw - perhaps he could get one good hit in with his knife - but he knew he would not last a second in the water.


A huge silver-grey tail came sweeping up on the rock, and Keith narrowly avoided being knocked off his feet. He swore, scanning the terrain desperately for a way to get to higher ground. Maybe he
could help from the air, maybe –

But before he could do anything, the new merfolk was suddenly there, darting out like a snake and snatching. Her claws caught Keith’s left leg and he fell hard, the deja vu making him yell with panic. He struck out with the knife blindly, but missed. He tried slashing it into stone but it was too wet, too fast – his wings scraped against rock, flailing and flapping.

“No, no, no Merida! Merida, no!”

Abruptly the grip on his leg let go as Lance launched himself across his vision. The stranger...a mer maid, Keith realised, just grabbed Lance by the upper arm, throwing him back into the sea.

She turned back to him, and Keith felt his entire body freeze up with some primal panic that all birds must feel when confronted with something from the ocean.

The mermaid was easily twice or three times as big as Lance – her shoulders were broad, her tail thick with armour-like scales. She had long grey hair, braided over her shoulder, and sharp cheekbones that looked nothing human. She stared at Keith with deep-set reptilian eyes, and when she opened her mouth to shriek, it was with a jaw that seemed to extend and unhinge at the same time.


She was holding some kind of spear, and she brought it down whip-cord fast. Keith flung himself to the right, and it barely missed the meat of his wing, coming down on a long feather instead. It quivered, the blade at the tip sharper than the rock.

“Merida! He’s my friend,” Lance was pleading, tugging at the mermaid and clawing at her arm. She didn’t seem to really notice. “Please. Please, just let me explain –”

“You can explain when we get home,” said the mermaid, flinging Lance back again when he tried to swim towards Keith, “For now I’ll deal with this intruder.”

“No,” said Lance, latching onto her middle, “Merida, no, I’ve known him for ages, I saved him, Merida!”

The mermaid leaned in close to Keith, who held his knife protectively in front of his own throat. But he hesitated. Lance clearly knew this woman. He didn’t want to hurt someone by mistake.

“Tell me what you’re doing here,” she said, looming over him like an omen, “Tell me!”

“Lance saved us from drowning,” said Keith, “I was looking for my friend, we –”

Something whistled through the air and the mermaid jerked backwards. It was Shiro and Pidge, with Hunk close by. Shiro also had a long knife, but it was Pidge … Pidge was holding some kind of miniature crossbow.

“You’re not hurting him,” she said, putting a new notch into the contraption and pointing it at the mermaid.

Lance was beside himself.

“No, no one shoot. No one shoot!” he said, waving his arms, “This is my sister!”

“Your sister?” yelled Shiro and Keith simultaneously.
“Hunk!” said Merida, whipping her head around. Hunk recoiled, eyes very wide.

“Uh,” he said.

“Come here,” said Merida, voice low and threatening, “Come here right now. Away from those bipeds. Hunk!”

“Merida, they’re my friends. They’re not a threat. I promise! Merida let go of me!”

But the mermaid merely held onto Lance. She was so much bigger that she was effectively hoisting his entire torso out of the water.

“I cannot believe this is what you’ve been doing,” she said, shaking her brother so furiously that Lance looked like a ragdoll, “This! What do you two think you are playing at! Do you know how dangerous this is? Do you know there’s a fucking war going on?”

“Meri –”

The noise that the mermaid made caused both Keith and Shiro to cover their ears in pain. They couldn’t understand what she, Lance or Hunk were saying, but Lance was holding onto her weapon with both hands and refusing to let go. Her own grip on Lance’s arm was drawing blood.

“Hey!” Keith shouted, heedless of his own danger, “Let go. You’re hurting him!”

They stopped screaming and Merida turned her alien eyes on Keith. When she spoke again, her voice sounded like the crystals being slowly compressed.

“You will never come here again,” she said slowly. She turned her eyes to each of them in turn – Pidge, Shiro, and back to Keith. “You will leave here.”

“Lance saved my life,” Shiro shouted, “We are in his debt, we mean no harm –!”

“Then you will go!” roared the mermaid, “You’re putting all of us in danger. You’re not welcome here!”

“No, don’t go,” said Lance, “Merida just listen, they’re our friends, they’ve never done anything bad, Merida please!”

“If you ever come back here again,” she said, “We will kill you.”

She turned to look at Hunk.

“Come with me if you know what’s good for you.”

And then she was gone in a huge crash of waves, taking Lance with her.

Hunk looked utterly terrified.

“I’ll be back,” he said desperately, “I’ll be back, okay? Pidge? You’ll be safe in the cave. Just – I’ll be back. I promise. Everything will be fine.”

“Wait!” said Shiro.

– then Hunk was gone as well.
Keith did not have a calendar this time.

But he counted the days all the same.

“We’ve got to go,” said Shiro gently at the end of the fifth day, “We’ll come back.”

“We’ll definitely come back,” said Pidge.

Keith rolled up the paper in his hand, careful not to smudge the graphite. Taking one of the bottles they had set aside for the flowers, he pushed the letter into the glass, corking it firmly to keep the damp out. Then he set it in between the folds of their blankets, up where it was dry enough not to get swept into the lake, but close enough to reach from the edge. Beside this, he lay down his mother’s knife.

Then Keith stood, brushing the sand from his hands.

It felt as if he was leaving something more behind.

“Okay,” he said, "I'm coming."

It takes almost a full cycle of the moon before Lance was able to sneak out successfully.

He swam carefully in the blackest of the water, having scrubbed his tail with mud and seaweed to hide the shine of his scales. His heart was in his throat, beating so loudly he was sure everyone could hear him.

He almost expected sentries near the lake: but he made it past the mouth of the cavern. He streaked into the lake, tail beating in tight strokes, coming up from the depths and swimming straight up.

Lance could see some light at the surface. Excitement made his stomach churn. A fire? No, it wasn’t yellow enough. Of course it wasn’t a fire, he thought. They were probably asleep; the fire would be out. The lamps might have been covered up and –

He broke the surface as quietly as he could, swimming the last few strokes to the edge of the rocks where the camp was. He brushed the water impatiently from his eyes, pushing himself out of the water.

The sandy rock-bed was empty.

There was a stack of bedding and blankets tucked up higher, but no lamp. No fire.

Lance swam forwards, the water rippling out around his chest.

“Keith?” he called.

Keith? Keith? Keith?

“...Pidge? Shiro?”
But there was no one there.

Chapter End Notes

...well that was a 14K chapter haha.. I know I said I would update more frequently over the summer than I have been doing, so hopefully this big double chapter makes up for a bit a little. Thank you to everyone who left me a comment last chapter. It sounds so dumb and trite but tbh your comments are sometimes all that's keeping me from just walking into traffic. I'm struggling rly hard in rl rn. x__x

Please please leave me a comment if you have any feedback, suggestions or crit. I'm a bit worried about Pidge's characterisation and...pacing lmao I feel like i'm getting worse?!

I'm sorry for those who followed me on twitter/tumblr & got a face full of my depression stuff. I've got tags you can blacklist. Also let me know if you guys want another live-stream/writing session, or live-prompting.

I am working on some backstory (Keith's parents!) and other stories set in the Watercast universe. If you want to keep up with those, please subscribe/bookmark the series itself!
Chapter Summary

Loneliness is confronting, even when it is quiet. Lance deals with the fallout with his family; and Keith learns exactly where his loyalties lie.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

:i:

"The sky is one whole, the water another.  
And between those two infinities,  
the soul of man is in loneliness."
- Henryk Sienkiewicz

:i:

Lance couldn’t remember much from the actual delegation ceremony.

He remembered slices of the night with startling clarity; all the faces and scents sharpened like the glare of the sun. He remembered the southern delegation - a pod of about twenty - remembered the unfamiliar furl of their tail fins, the curious bright reds and blacks and oranges. Remembered the sound of their voices, unfamiliar though still warm enough for the Belmeran crystals to glow in turn.

But names and words slipped right out of his mind. Lance recalled spending most of the evening on auto-pilot, picking up food when Corinna nudged him, mimicking his sisters when they were introduced, one by one. He kept his eyes mostly to his own tail-fin, chest tight and nervous. His mother had given him a concerned curl of her tail when she passed by that evening, but had been too busy with her guests to talk. As it turned out, it wouldn’t be another few nights before her Majesty was informed of the incident.

Lance had felt far too sick to eat. He kept replaying the events of that afternoon over and over in his mind. He thought of Keith, wings wet from the water, face pale with an expression that Lance didn’t want to name. Of Pidge with her crossbow, and Shiro...Shiro, who probably still needed time to get used to those big, big wings. *Had they already left? Had Merida already sent guards up to the cave?*

Scenario after scenario, each more awful than the last. Eventually, Lance begged off sick, and escaped the night’s festivities.

Merida hadn’t spoken to him. But someone must have said something to *someone* ... because when Lance peeked out from his chambers in the early hours of the morning, there were guards outside their rooms.

And those guards did not leave.
The journey itself had been long and arduous.

It transported Keith back to those months of fruitless searching, the anxiety and constant paranoia a low thrumming sound in his veins. Somehow, he had managed to forget what that felt like; their long languid days by the sea having washed the terror away. When the wind grew, the sound of the leaves almost passed for waves; and Keith caught himself chasing the phantom scent of salt.

He had flown mostly by night, back then, with the clouds and the darkness as good as cover as any. With Pidge, however, they had to walk. They walked whenever they could; making their way through the forest route by day and the open roads by night. Asides from brief moments in the air to spot for any Galran road blocks, Keith had never walked for such a sustained length of time. He had the raw skin and blisters to show for it too.

But as they neared the rendezvous point, the worry became an unbearable itch beneath his skin.

As if reading his thoughts, Shiro knocked wings with him.

“I won’t get lost, you know,” he said lightly. “Hasn’t been that long.”

Keith shuffled his wings closer to his back, looking determinedly ahead. The soft glow of Pidge’s diffused crystal light was throwing his depth perception right off.

Shiro sighed.

“There’s only two of us.”

“I said fine,” said Keith flatly, “Why are we talking about this when all of us know no one is going to agree with me?”

Shiro sighed again.

“I don’t like the idea of splitting up either,” he said, “But if we want this to go smoothly, the Garrison will need prior warning.”

Keith snorted.

“Yeah, just enough warning to throw you in detention. The best way is to get these Alteans and bring them straight to the front door. Force a meeting straight to the top.”

“Alteans can’t fly.”

“...I knew that.”

There was a long pause, broken up only by the sound of crunching twigs and their footsteps.

“Still safer together,” said Keith. “Arrive in a group.”

“And get shot on sight,” said Shiro.

Keith rubbed his eyes with the back of one sleeve.
“Now it’s just you who gets shot. Awesome plan. They won’t even recognise your markings, now that you look like...”

Keith waved a hand at Shiro’s broad flight feathers, which were silver-white even in the dim light. Absently, Keith was grateful for the lack of rain over the past few days.

“I did a rotation through this out-post. It’ll be okay,” said Shiro, “... you , on the other hand...you’re probably on a no-fly list somewhere.”

“Probably,” Keith muttered.

The trees grew all the way to the ledge of the valley; fanning the curve of it like eyelashes. Pidge had come to a stop, tucking her lamp in the undergrowth to dim the light. There was a small steep drop, before the ledge sloped in a gentle incline into depths of the valley. Distantly, Keith could hear the gurgle of a hidden stream or river. East.

“We’re here,” said Pidge.

Keith opened his wings a little, getting a feel for the air. Beside him, Shiro was doing the same. Pidge set down her huge backpack with a relieved oomph , rolling her shoulders.

“Easy spot,” said Shiro, ever the optimist. “Won’t be hard to get a good landing.”

“Make sure you get some proper boots first,” said Keith, throat tight and dry. He quickly folded his arms across his chest. Shiro pushed him backwards with the back of his wing, affectionate, and Keith spluttered - a mouthful of feathers.

“Four days,” said Pidge, “And we’ll be back here every sun down. Or Keith will.”

Keith nodded.

“It might take more than four days,” said Shiro, unstrapping his backpack. The flight wouldn’t take more than a few hours; and speed was everything. “But I’ll try my best.”

“How long until they get here?” said Keith, looking around them uneasily. They were exposed here. It was an easily defensible position for both Shiro and Keith, who could both take to the air if anyone tried an ambush. But Pidge would be stuck.

“Not long,” said Pidge, rummaging in her backpack and coming up with a small flat wooden thing. It was a flute; not unlike the one Lance and Hunk had made them - but made of wood, not bone. The thought of Lance made Keith’s lungs hurt; and he unconsciously palmed the glass bottle beneath his shirt. The fabric was too dark for the Belmeran crystals to shine through, but it was still warm and comforting.

“You guys might want to cover your ears,” she said, “Centaurs don’t have as good a hearing as you.”

Shooting each other a mutual worried look, Shiro and Keith clamped their hands over their ears. Pidge blew; fingers pressing out a quick pattern on the stem. The sound was less shrill than the bone flutes - it made a distinctly bird-like trill. A pause. Then Pidge played it again. After a moment, she gave them the thumbs up.

“Now what?” said Shiro.
“Won’t be long,” said Pidge. “I didn’t want to take us right down into the valley. They’ll meet us up here.”

“Wouldn’t that thing signal to all the galra stationed around here?” said Keith, eyeing the flute dubiously.

Pidge rolled her eyes.

“Don’t use it often enough for that to happen,” she said. “Plus. No Galra around these parts. Valley is full of juniberry.”

“I didn’t know they were still growing in the wild,” said Shiro, eyes wide, “That’s amazing.”

“Well,” said Pidge, looking very smug, “I wouldn’t call these *wild*. They’ve had a lot of help from us. But yeah. I tip all our arrows with them.”

“I thought they were only poisonous to Galra if ingested,” said Keith, peering over the ledge into the valley. He’ll have to make room in his pack while he was here…

“Oh no,” said Pidge happily, “The leaves and the thorns have paralytic properties. Not usually enough to cause death though. But enough to stop them so we can be the cause of death.”

“Nice,” said Keith.

Pidge squinted at him.

“Avians aren’t totally immune,” she said, “Don’t go putting any in your mouth. They’re hallucinogenic.”

“I wasn’t going to *eat* any,” Keith protested.

“Hallucinogenic means you’ll get hallucinations.”

“You’ll get hallucinations!”

“Guys,” hushed Shiro.

Everyone went quiet. Shiro had his head cocked to the side, wings held half spread - an instinctive move for flight. Keith held his breath, listening. And over the sound of the trees, Keith could hear it too.

*Hooves.*

A moment later, two figures emerged out of the valley; easily making their way up the slope and then *leaping* sideways so they were suddenly above the lip of the cliff. Keith and Shiro having backed away to make room. Keith realised, too late, his own wings were out, feathers spread, shoulders tense.

To his left, Shiro’s eyes were very big.

“*Pidge!*” one of the centaurs exclaimed, and promptly lifted Pidge off her feet in a hug.

Keith could only stare.

He had only ever seen centaurs in books before; as drawings or paintings. There were a few statues and sculptures; but he had always thought the size and scale of them were exaggerated. War
memorials. Keith hadn’t expected them to be...so tall.

They were easily head and shoulders taller than Shiro. And whilst Avians generally ran closer to slim and light-boned, the two Alteans were broad chested, and looked as if they could ax down one of the trees around them in one swoop. Despite the chill of the night air, they were clothed lightly in short sleeves, and some kind of non-reflective armour which was slung over their chest. Keith couldn’t see where skin met fur, but there were definitely hooves. Four legs. A tail. Muscles that heaved with the exertion.

“...so worried,” the male centaur was saying, dropping a wriggling Pidge back to the ground, “just glad you’re okay. And you brought friends! My word. It’s been a long time since we’ve met with the winged-folk, hasn’t it?”

“This is Shiro and Keith,” said Pidge, massaging her ribs. “Guys, this is Coran and Allura.”

“Her majesty Princess Allura of the Alteans,” said Coran.

He had orange-red hair, and his body was a warm chestnut to match. Keith noticed the holsters across his shoulders and hips; the hilts of knives there. Suddenly, Keith was a lot less happy about having his back to the forest instead of the sky.

Shiro nudged him hard with his elbow, and when Keith glanced at him, it was to see Shiro dropping into a forty-five degree bow from the waist, wings loose by his sides. Reluctantly, Keith bowed too - though it was more of an inclined head. He kept the gaze of the woman - Allura - the entire time.

She seemed unimpressed, but mirrored the bow in a curious motion - bending one knee and extending the other so her entire body curved forwards, then back up again. Beside her, Coran did the same.

“She’s told us about you,” she said, tossing back her silver-grey hair. Her body was grey too, a pale colour that reflected the moon. She did not wear a crown; but had a thick loop of hair braided atop her head. Her legs were stained dark with mud and something dark purple.

“He has,” said Keith flatly.

He got another elbow to the stomach from Shiro. Allura ignored him.

“I’m very grateful that you’ve agreed to be our envoy,” she said. “The Cause is also very grateful.”

“We’re grateful for the opportunity for an alliance,” said Shiro, finally winching in his wings. His eyes were still too big for his face. “And to see that the centaurs have survived, contrary to all the news.”

“Well,” said Allura, “Survive is a strong word. As far as I know, only Coran and I are left.”

“But there might be other centaurs, right? Other clans?”

She turned her luminous eyes on him.

“There might be,” she agreed.

“The night is short,” said Coran, “If you’re making the flight, we should hurry.”

“Shiro’s going to go,” said Pidge, “and arrange for the rendezvous back here.”
Allura stepped forwards, and handed Shiro a small parcel.

“A letter, in my stead,” she explained, “And my father’s seal. I have the other. It’s the only proof I can send with you. Do not lose it.”

“I won’t,” said Shiro solemnly.

She smiled at him then; the image of a Queen.

“Thank you. There is also a few vials of distilled juniberry. Shatters upon impact.”

Shiro nodded again.

Keith couldn’t control himself any further.

“I think I should go with you,” he blurted out, “It’s safer. I’m not needed here.”

“Keith - “

“We need you for the rendezvous,” said Pidge, “And to scout! I thought you said it was fine.”

“I don’t care about that,” said Keith, feeling like his ears were buzzing. He turned to Shiro, imploring. “Let me come with you.”

“Keith, I’ll be fine,” said Shiro. He was tucking the parcel securely next to his knife.

“Shiro - “

But Shiro just pulled him into a brief, tight hug - one arm wrapped roughly across Keith’s wings.

“I’ll be - “

Keith almost punched him across the face. He dug his nails into Shiro’s right wing instead.

“Don’t. Don’t say it.”

“...I won’t stop until I get there,” said Shiro, “I’ll keep flying. It’ll be okay.”

And with a final nod to the two Alteans, he took two quick steps towards the lip of the valley, spread his wings...and jumped. In a few beats of his broad wings, Shiro was pulled upwards, as if inexorably to the sky. Keith watched, breath in his throat as Shiro ascended rapidly.

All too soon, he could have passed for the shadow of a hawk. And then, he was swallowed by the clouds.

Staying on the ground had never felt quite so lonely.

---

After the fourth day of no one dragging him off to his mother - and no word or visit from Merida - Lance had had enough.

He had spent first two days alternating between hiding curled up in his bed and half heartedly trying to escape. It was no use though: he seemed to have been assigned bodyguards, who weren’t
moving on after each shift. There was always someone there, and Lance wanted to break things.

He wondered if all his sisters knew what happened; because when Corinna had visited, she had just said “oh Lance,” and wrapped him up in a hug. He had refused to answer any of her questions, but did cry into her hair. He wanted to see Hunk, but his friend had been banned from visiting. To keep them both out of trouble, apparently.

Lance had hid in his bed after that, tail curled up around himself in misery. But now he felt too claustrophobic. He wasn’t used to being inside all day. He missed the sky.

“I’m going to swim with the dolphins,” he announced, satchel slung over one shoulder.

He stared at the two mermaids outside his door.

“They’re close, so I’m not going anywhere far. Anyway. I don’t care what Merida says.”

The two mermaids glanced at each other.

“You’re allowed to go outside,” one of them replied, “We’re just here for safety.”

Lance gave her a very unimpressed look.

“Whatever,” he said, sweeping his door shut with the flat of his tail, “You can come with me for my safety, but all I’m doing is fishing with Mia. Bye.”

And with as much haughtiness as he could muster, he swam away. (When he looked back, he noticed that one of the mermaid guard had disappeared).

He hadn’t lied though: the pod was very close to the city today, having fun herding a new shoal of sharp-finned fish that had come in for the bloom of shrimp. Their cheerful clicking and squealing could be heard all the way from the other side of the city, echoing gently between the stone and crystal.

As Lance came near, he whistled his own call - and two of the dolphins came peeling away from the group, grey bellied and clicking furiously. Lance laughed despite himself, speeding forwards to meet them. They collided, turning and tumbling through the water, the two dolphins bopping him with their flippers and tail.

“Oh Toastie,” said Lance, “You’re so big now! So big!” he rubbed the dolphins belly as he rolled over. Mia was chattering away, nosing at Lance’s tail.

“Did you miss me? I missed you,” he placed both hands on either side of Mia’s beak, as if squishing her cheeks. She blew a large bubble at him, and Lance spluttered. “Mia! Okay, okay.”

She bopped his shoulder, and Toast mimicked his mother. The baby dolphin was almost her size now, and slowly gaining a lighter colour like the rest of his family. But he was still softer and smaller, playing Mia’s shadow. Lance was relieved to see him looking fat around the middle; it meant a good season, and that they’d be back. He had been worried about the bigger fishing boats.

“I interrupted lunch,” said Lance, letting them herd him into the midst of the pod. One of the other dolphins swam over, and swung a half bitten fish in Lance’s direction. Lance whistled his thanks, but let Toastie bite the free meal out of the water. He twisted, careful with his tail as the pod moved. He was longer than the average dolphin, but he had been swimming with them for years: and they were used to him.
Something tight and awful that had been tied to his ribs over the last few days seemed to loosen, just a little bit. They twisted as a group, circling the fish around one of the buildings. It was almost instinctive; the flow and push of water and sound. Lance whipped out a hand: and with the help of Mia who was flanking his back, speared a giant silver bellied tuna straight through.

Lance unsheathed the small knife he always carried, and was just hacking off the head for Toastie to play with when the dolphins seemed to scatter, then regroup. Mia poked him hard in the small of his back.

“Ow,” said Lance, propelling himself around with a sweep of his tail, “What is...oh! Hello.”

It was one of the visiting merfolk; a merman with a bright red and white tail. His fins flared in the water as he drew to a stop, a respectful distance from the still-circling dolphins. He had ink hair, like the rest of the delegation, and dark skin. It lay in stark contrast with the silver-white scales at his hip. Lance felt awfully plain in comparison.

“Hello,” said the merman, arching his neck. It was a rather formal gesture of respect; exposing the gills.

Feeling awkward, Lance quickly did the same. He was suddenly aware that he was holding a decapitated fish and a scrappy home-made knife.

“That was a fast catch, your highness,” said the merman, “Lance, right?”

Lance nodded. He tried desperately to recall a name, but couldn’t. He blushed, embarrassed.

“Sorry,” he said, “I - um - you’re...?”

The merman didn’t seem offended; he just looked amused.

“Izra,” he said, “We met at the banquet, but did not talk. You disappeared rather early.”

Toastie was making overtures at the fish again, and Lance quickly sliced it for her; busying himself so he didn’t have to look at the other merfolk. He could feel Izra watching him.

“I was tired,” said Lance.

“Oh,” Izra continued blithely. “I hope we didn’t offend you somehow, for you to be so absent?”

Izra came closer. The dolphins, apparently having deemed him acceptable, mostly ignored him. Lance was very confused. Izra was smiling, but Lance couldn't tell whether it was a positive or negative smile. This was why he never went to court.

“Not offended,” said Lance quickly, “No - I haven’t been feeling well.”

Izra’s smile faded a little at the corners.

“Oh,” he said, “I hope you’re better now? That was some lovely acrobatics over there.”

Izra gestured at the dolphins, who were playing with each other now all their bellies were full. Lance noticed that Toastie and Mia kept chirruping at him, and he made an reassuring noise back.

“You were watching?” Lance blurted, “I mean - thank you. Uh.”

“You’re welcome,” said Izra. “But if you’re ill...”
“No. No I mean - I’m not sick,” said Lance, rambling a little. “I was just. Upset. Something awful happened right before your family arrived. I’m sorry I was rude. My sisters usually handle all the political stuff, I’m not very...necessary to have around.”

He laughed, awkwardly. Unbidden, Lance thought back to the events by the cave, and his stomach hollowed out. Something must have shown on his face, because Izra came even closer, looking concerned. Lance could feel the touch of his tail fins, sand-soft against his tail.

Izra was a little broader in the shoulders, a little bigger. Curiously, all the mermen were like that in the delegation, as few as they were. In contrast, the mermaids were a good full fin shorter than Lance’s sisters - but also sported the distinctive warm colours.

“I find that hard to believe,” said Izra, “But I’m sorry to hear. I hope it wasn't anything too terrible?”

Lance thought of Keith on his back, of Shiro in the water, of Pidge’s panicked voice. His heartbeat picked up in a rush, and Lance quickly pressed the palm of his hands to his eyes to hide his face. He twisted away from the waist, feeling humiliated and awful…he wanted to hide in Keith’s wings, warm and soft and so quietly their’s ...

“I’m sorry,” said Izra, sounding a little alarmed, “I shouldn't have pushed. Lance? I’m sorry, I overswam...I’ll go....”

Lance shook his head vigorously, eyes still covered. He was crying in front of a stranger. No wonder no one wanted him around for the important things.

There was a hand on his elbow. He could feel Izra’s tail against his own; and impulsively, Lance allowed his own tail to twist; a brief squeezing hug. He pulled a few deep drags of water through his gills, and slowly let his hands dropped. His cheeks felt hot with humiliation, but even that was a vague, numb sensation.

“I’m sorry,” said Izra again, looking very guilty. “Are you sure you don’t want me to go?”

Lance swallowed, remembering his manners.

“No. No, of course not. It’s fine. Did you come for something in particular? Or just..“ Lance waved a hand vaguely around them.

“No, nothing in particular,” said Izra. “Just seeing more of the city. It’s really quite different to what it’s like, at home. But really, I was hoping to float into you.”

Lance blinked.

“Me?”

“We didn’t get to talk at the banquet,” said Izra. “And then you disappeared.”

Lance waited. When it became apparent that Izra was waiting for some kind of answer, Lance scrunched his nose, confused.

“...so?”

“...so that’s very mysterious,” said Izra, smiling again. He was teasing, thought Lance, with dawning incredulity, he’s flirting with me.
Lance didn’t know what to do. Izra’s smile widened.

“And. Well, you could accuse me of being awfully shallow, but you have very beautiful scales, your highness.”

Lance choked on a bubble.

“I - I’m -?” his gills flittered as he coughed.

Izra raised an eyebrow.

“What?” said Izra, colour rising in his cheeks.

“I’m blue,” said Lance, brandishing his tail. “I mean...it’s not a very special colour.”

Izra tilted his head. He brought his fins up in an arch, so that the wide fin bloomed like coral. Up close, Lance could see the translucent red-white that was actually pale pinks and a lovely burnished copper colour.

“Would you say red and white is prettier?” said Izra.

Lance nodded.

“I’ve never seen such bright colours,” he said, a little enviously, “And never red-red. Not in patterns, either.”

Izra flashed him a bit of teeth, expression pleased.

“So you think I’m pretty, then?”

Lance stared, wide eyed. He wasn’t sure whether he was hallucinating the entire exchange, it was so utterly unfamiliar. No one had ever said things like this to him before. No one: mermaid or mermen… Sure, Lance had been complimented on his scales, on the colour of his eyes - but that was all in front of his mother, mostly. No one had shown any kind of genuine interest, and Lance had been okay with letting Hunk scoop all the attention at social gatherings.

Izra seemed to take pity on him.

“I did see a few other mermen with blue in the last few days,” said Izra, “It’s really not a common colour at home. But I still think yours is the most beautiful.”

Lance stared at him.

“The water is blue too,” he felt the need to point out.

Izra just laughed.

“I made quite the fool of myself at dinner, staring, you know. I had hoped to strike up conversation with you afterwards... but you didn’t notice me at all.”

“...What,” said Lance.

“My sisters gave me grief about it all night,” said Izra, “But that’s sisters for you, right?”

“Right,” echoed Lance.
He let himself flow backwards on a swell of water, and Izra followed with a bare flick of his beautiful tail. He looked like a bloom of corals, a bright spot of colour. From behind him, Toast and Mia can streaking over, clicking low in their throats. The pod was moving on for the afternoon.

Toast came straight to Lance, rolling over in the water in a flurry of flippers as he grinned at Lance upside down. Lance grinned back and obliging gave the dolphin more tummy rubs, while Mia swam circles around the flair of Izra’s tail fin, curious.

“They really like you,” said Izra, as Mia passed him over in favour of rubbing her beak against Lance’s back, propelling him this way and that in the water. Lance tried to smack her with his tail but just ended up over-rotating.

“Yeah, I’ve known these ones for a long time,” said Lance, smiling, “Mia and I were buddies when I was younger. And I was there when she gave birth to this little guy - “ he tickled Toast under the chin, “ - right? What a good boy!”

“That’s amazing,” said Izra, hands hovering as if he wanted to pat too, “She must trust you a lot.”

Lance whistled, giving Toast a nudge towards the other merman. He turned, tummy up, and stared at Izra with bright eyes.

“Go on,” said Lance, pushing Mia’s beak away from his own face, “Toastie likes it. Use your nails.”

Izra did as instructed, running the rough side of his knuckles and nails along the younger dolphins belly. Toastie made a full body wriggle, almost smacking Izra in the face with his still-soft fluke. Then, at Mia’s insistent whistling, they turned, looped and sped off to join the rest of the pod.

Lance wanted to follow, but reluctantly turned back. He was brought up short with how close Izra was; their fins touching.

“Sorry,” said Lance, carefully, “What were you saying before?”

Izra tilted his head; his loose dark hair a halo above him.

“Nothing important,” he said, smiling. “Sisters. Though...speaking of the shark…”

Lance turned to where Izra was pointing; and sure enough, Corinna was swimming towards them like a sleek grey shadow. Even from this distance, he could tell it was her. Lance felt the pit of his stomach drop.

“...you don’t look too happy to see her,” said Izra, touching Lance’s elbow once more, “Shall I run a distraction?”

Lance blinked at him, surprised.

“You’re being way too helpful,” he said, tilted his head. “Why’s that?”

Izra laughed, colour returning to his face.

“Maybe I’m just trying to get into your good books,” he said, “So? Should I? We’ve got about five seconds before she’s close enough to hear…”

Lance blew out a bubble and shook his head.
“No, it’s. I think I know what this is about. Better just...get it over with.”

Izra nodded, mock solemn.

“I see. Hello your highness!” he turned to face Corinna, who a circlet on her head still - which meant she must have come from the palace directly. Izra inclined his head, and tucked his tail behind him. He did not, Lance noticed, bare his neck.

“Lord Chulanont,” said Corinna. “Afternoon.”

She was eyeing them a little strangely, giving Lance some intentional eyebrows. Lance stared back at her, confused. She seemed to give up as the silence dragged on, and Izra showed no signs of making himself scarce.

“Mom wants to talk to you,” said Corinna, addressing Lance directly.

Lance went to fold his arms across his chest - and only then realised that Izra still had his hand on his elbow. He folded his arms anyway, and tried to ignore Rina’s judgmental stare.

“Right now?” he said.

“She doesn’t exactly have a lot of free time right now,” said Corinna.

“Good thing you knew exactly where to find me then,” said Lance, stubbornly not moving.

He could see Izra looking from Corinna to Lance and then back again, expression carefully mild. Corinna sighed, and flicked her loose hair over her shoulder. She wasn’t quite as tall as Merida, but she was still much bigger than Lance and Izra put together.

“Merida has already talked to her. She wants to talk to you know, okay? Just you. It’ll be okay.”

Lance slumped.

“Fine,” he said, tugging his satchel more firmly onto his shoulder. He turned to Izra.

“I.. um…” said Lance. Nice, he thought, very eloquent.

“You’ll excuse us,” said Corinna, nodding at the merman, “This really can’t wait. But we can escort you back to the palace?”

“That would be lovely.”

They swam mostly abreast. Lance and Izra hadn’t been far from city centre, and soon they were making their way through the clusters of crystal arches, the light brighter together. Someone called to them, and the sound made Izra turn smoothly in the water.

A smaller merman was swimming towards them. He looked young; barely out of guppyhood. Curiously, his tail was a glossy black. Absently, Lance wondered if all warm water guppies had such dark scales, and whether they all faded to bright colours like Izra’s.

“Izzy!” the merboy was calling, tail wiggling furiously.

Izra’s face lit up at the sight of him.

“I hope i’ll see you at dinner, Lance?” he said to Lance, distracted.
Lance nodded automatically.

He watched as Izra pushed off from the nearest wall to meet whoever the boy was, sliding through the gap in the archways with much more grace than the guppy was managing. Lance must have been staring, because Corinna curled her tail around his waist and tugged. Lance let himself be propelled towards the palace entrance, trailing Corinna with dread in his fins.

“Well,” she said, breaking the silence, “I’m glad you’re making new friends.”

Lance glared at her.

“Well since Hunk has been banned from hanging out with me - “

Corinna rubbed her face with one hand.

“Hasn’t been banned. Merida just thought you two shouldn’t be joined at the hip all the time. I mean, look where that got us.”

Lance clenched his teeth.

They carried on in silence. Lance made it almost a minute before he gave in.

“...is she really angry?” he asked in a small voice.

“Merida?”

Lance slapped his tail fin angrily against the sand.

“Mom, obviously. I don’t care about Merida. I hate her.”

Corinna let out a breath.

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

All too soon, they were outside one of smaller rooms. Lance was relieved: the throne room always made him nervous, even when empty. He always felt like he was doing something wrong, in there. The guard to the chambers rolled the door open as they approached. Corinna gave Lance an encouraging little push.

And then it was just Lance and his mother.

The door slid shut behind him, making Lance’s tail twitch.

Lance’s mother was sitting, tail curled loosely in a smooth shell nest. Her hair was par braided, partly loose in a still cloud behind her. She put down the wafer thin tablet she had been examining when Lance came in.

“Oh Lance,” she sighed.

Lance immediately teared up, feeling his throat constrict and his heart beat faster. She looked so disappointed and tired he just wanted to swim away and hide under a mossy rock. He thought perhaps he could keep a calm face, maybe she would yell a little bit - but … his whole face scrunched up involuntarily.
“Sweetheart,” said his mom, sweeping over in one stroke of her tail and enveloping him in her arms and tail fin. Lance hugged her back, feeling the anxious wait of the past few days break loose of his ribs like a thousand wriggling fish. He cried into her shoulder, gills working overtime.

She was patting his back, and vaguely he registers them curling up together in the shell seat. Her long, long tail came right around, covering him with her fin like a translucent blanket.

“Shh,” she said, “Darling, come on.”

“You’re angry with me,” said Lance, words garbled and voice wavery, “R-rina said Merida already talked to you.”

“She did,” said mom, “and I am angry. But I’m also very relieved you’re alright.”

Lance looked resolutely at his own tail. His mother waited patiently, her hand rubbing soothingly along his arm.

“I want to hear what you have to say for yourself.”

Lance shuddered.

“You already talked to Merid-”

“Yes, yes,” said mom, waving a hand, “the prosecution counsel has finished it's submissions. She told me that she found you and Hunk with two Avians and a human girl in that giant lake of yours. Now I want to know why ,”

Lance took a deep breath, taking in his mother’s familiar scent. He still couldn’t look her in the eyes though, and so told the story to his tail-fin. And once he started, he couldn’t stop.

He told her about the night he and Hunk ship watching in the storm; of finding Shiro drowning in the water. He omitted most of Keith’s stabby tendencies, but told her of the way he stayed for his friend. Of the way he stayed, even though the ocean terrified him. Keith had stayed, and now …

Lance sniffled, trying to hold his voice together. It was threading apart, like cloth in the sea and foam on the sand.

“We took turns helping and staying up at the lake,” he said, “Shiro - the one that escaped the ship - the Galra had cut his feathers off. So they couldn’t have flown away, mom. They were trapped. If we didn’t help he’d have drowned.”

Lance hoped that appealing to his mother’s hatred of the Galra would make her sympathetic for Shiro and Keith, and judging by the expression on her face, Lance was right. He plowed on.

“But he got sick, so that’s why we were up there so much. He got really sick and it was too cold. But Keith managed to get some medicine and Shiro got better but feathers take a long time to grow. Much longer than chipped scales.”

Lance wiped his eyes with heel of his hand.

“We couldn’t let them starve, so we kept bringing them fish and stuff. I promise we were just going to do it until Shiro got better, until they could fly home. But the Galra had cut all the flight feathers off and they had to first come out and then took ages to come back in. They kept him like that for over a year , it was awful.”
“They’re getting more and more brazen,” said his mother, eyes sharp as stone. “What about the human girl?”

Lance gulped.

“She’s...she’s Shiro’s friend’s sister.”

Lance’s mother raised one eyebrow and stared at him, calmly waiting. Lance crumpled under the pressure.

“She’s a friend. Hunk and I found her on the beach looking for Belmeran crystal bits.”

“And when was this?”

Lance hugged his tail fin, heart in his throat.

“Lance.”

“...a summer ago,” he mumbled.

His mother’s hand tightened on his arm, and Lance flinched - but she just let out a very long sigh, and went back to rubbing his scales.

“Alright. What happened next.”

“We just. We were waiting for Shiro to get better. And he did! All his feathers came back in and he started flying and he was so happy. But ...but then Merida found us. And...yeah.”

There was a very long pause.

“Indeed,” said his mother, shifting in the shell seat. “Is that all?”

Lance nodded miserably.

“And you were never intending to tell me any of this, were you? Corinna said you didn’t even confide in her.”

Lance shrugged, but his mother put a finger under his chin to meet her gaze. He swallowed hard.

“No,” he said, finally.

“Lance...”

“Well you’d have stopped me!” said Lance in a sudden rush of anger, “You’d have stopped me from visiting and then Shiro and Keith and Pidge would have been trapped by themselves; Avians can’t swim, mother! He couldn't fly and they needed us and they’re my friends and -”

“And you might have been seen by any passing ship and we might have been besieged by more Galran ships the next morning!” the Queen thundered - and it was the Queen talking now, not his mother. Lance could see it in the set of her jaw, the reflection of his own face in her eyes.

“We were careful, Hunk and I always - we - “

“We were lounging about that cave entrance like some siren out for a bait when Merida found you,” said the Queen, shaking Lance a little by the shoulders, “You - you foolish boy! You can’t trust - ”
“Why not?” interrupted Lance, frustration in his throat and his heart in his lungs, “They’re just like us, they’re - Avians aren’t scary at all, mom, they’re fluffy and they’re just scared of the water and...and jelly fish! They’re - ”

“ - and do not lie to me, you were friends with that human long before any of your reasons were necessities!”

“And I was fine! See? Everything’s fine. We were careful, mom, I promise, I was so careful - “

“...was a mistake letting you go to the surface all the time, but we thought the the Bay was safe and it would be alright. I looked the other way. You did not really think we bought those stories you and Hunk fed us, did you? I turned a blind eye because it made you happy. But I never dreamt you were being so reckless - “

“... they’re just humans with wings, they’re against the Galra too. And you know, mom, maybe if we talked to the Galra, not the ones in the city, Pidge says there are lots that aren’t with the Emperor...maybe...maybe not all of them -”

As soon as those words left his mouth, Lance knew he had crossed a line. His mother’s face went white as bone.

“ I thought you’d understand how dangerous Galran ships are after what happened to your father! ” the Queen shouted.

Lance jerked back like he had been slapped across the face. Immediately, the fire in his mother’s face seemed to go out. She slumped back in her seat, pulling Lance close to her, tucking his head beneath her chin. Lance went willingly, but when he looked down, he saw that his hands were shaking.

She stroked his hair; kissed the top of his head.

“At least you did not lie to me now,” she said, after a long while.

Lance looked up, questioning.

“Your story matches Hunk’s.”

“...You already talked to Hunk?” asked Lance.

His mother snorted.

“Of course I did. Before you two could corroborate any details, of course.”

Suddenly, Hunk’s enforced absence in the past few days made a lot more sense.

“Oh,” he said.

“He also told me that your...avian friends were back to flying now,” she said.

Lance nodded, picking at the edge of one of his scales.

“Good,” she said. “They can take care of themselves then.”

Lance stared at her.

“I want you to stay home for while,” she said, still brushing his hair, “Don’t go to the surface. Stay
close to the city. There’s been more ship sightings from our scouts up north, and I want - “

“But mom,” said Lance, panicking, “I - “

“No,” she said with awful finality, “I want you here where it’s safe.”

Lance felt himself tear up again, and he clawed at the feeling in his chest.

“You can’t keep me inside forever,” he protested.

“Darling, please. Don’t be dramatic. Just close to home - you can spend your time with Hunk or your sisters, just not - “

“You promised!”

“Yes I did,” said his mother, “I let you go wherever you liked, and you lied to me.”

Lance could feel everything trickling through his fingers, out of control.

“At least let me go and tell my friends. Mom, let me go back up, just to the cave and - ”

“Not with so much activity going on,” said his mother firmly, “Maybe later.”

“But...”

“I said no, Lance!”

A moment of ringing silence. At the expression on his face, Lance’s mother softened.

“You said yourself that they could fly now.”

Mutely, Lance nodded.

“Well then you’ve done a very good thing,” she said, “A very kind thing. They owe you their lives.”

She rubbed the soft scales on his cheek.

“But birds belong in the sky, sweetheart. You can’t keep them in that cavern of yours like the rest of your things.”

Lance felt a burn behind his eyes, and he blinked rapidly.

“Promise that no one will hurt my friends,” he said, “Mom, please. Just while they’re here. They’re still recovering.”

A pause.

“I promise,” said the Queen.

Lance nodded, numb.

“...Can I go find Hunk now?”

There was a long, long silence. Finally, his mother breathed out.

“Yes baby,” she said, “be back for dinner, alright? We have guests.”
Lance nodded, not trusting himself to speak anymore. Then, untangling himself from the warmth of his mother’s embrace, he fled.

Keith had underestimated the dread he would feel in Shiro’s absence.

It was a pulling, tugging thing, shrinking the size of his lungs. As he followed the two centaurs - Pidge riding on Coran’s back - down into the valley, the fear became a ringing, buzzing mess in his ears. All he could think of was the last time - the last time Shiro had left, he had never come back.

In the end, he didn’t even make it back to the village.

The sky was dark with clouds, spiked with moonlight. Keith felt like he was going to suffocate in the thick shadows here on the ground. He stumbled on something, and his wings snapped out automatically for balance. He hit trees on both sides, and that of room to manoeuvre only fueled his claustrophobia. He pawed at his own chest, trying to loosen the fist around his neck.

Faintly, in the back of his mind, Keith realised he was having a panic attack.

“...Keith? Keith!”

Why couldn’t he breathe?

“What’s wrong with him?” said Coran, in hushed tones, “Did he fall?”

“Keith, hey,” it was Pidge, hand on Keith’s arm. She sounded calm, and Keith tried to focus on her voice. “ - breathe. Come on, it’s okay. That’s it, you can do it. Keith?”

Something was glowing. It took far too long for Keith to realise that in his clumsy motions, Lance’s necklace had fallen out from his shirt; and the little bottle of Belmeran crystals were glowing, amplified by the dark. He clutched at it, trying to breathe through his mouth.

Another hand on his shoulder. Keith knocked it off with his wing, turning blindly.

Someone shifted to his right, and he had enough awareness left to realise it was Allura; kneeling down until her legs were folded beneath her. She was holding something out - a flask of water.

Keith’s wings shuddered with the force of his lungs, and he tucked them as close to himself as possible. He didn’t take her flask. He scrambled upright.

“I can’t,” said Keith, words tasting strange in his mouth, “I just got him back. I’m sorry.”

He squeezed Pidge’s hand hard, desperate, in apology.

“Keith? What’s going on?”

“I have to go after him,” said Keith. “I can’t... I can’t. ”

Pidge tried to hold onto his hand, and failing that, tried to grab the tail of his feathers. Keith easily pulled out of her grip.

“We need to talk first,” said Allura, “We’ve waited a long time for -”
"I’ll be back," said Keith, voice hoarse. He couldn’t take his eyes off the sky. “You’ll have your alliance then.”

"Keith - ! “

“I’m sorry Pidge,” said Keith.

There was never any doubt where Keith’s loyalties lay. And it was not in in any side of any war.

Lance had never really kept time before.

He had always liked to follow the warmth of the sun and the pull of the moon, but he never realised just how much time he and Hunk used to spend up on the surface...until now. He had hoped, what with the delegation’s presence and the daily festivities that his family would relax eventually. But it seemed that every time he or Hunk strayed a little too far from the city, a sentry would float by - or one of Lance’s sisters would mysteriously appear.

He still hadn’t spoken with Merida.

Even at formal events, Lance studiously avoided his eldest sister, seating himself as far away as possible and shamelessly using Izra as a shield whenever Merida or his mother looked his way.

If Izra knew what Lance was doing, he never said anything. In return, Lance had spent a good two days showing him around the city; and was introduced to Izra’s siblings in the evenings. They spent almost the entire week together; and it was the longest time that Lance had spent at court for a while. They whittled away an entire afternoon the next day playing hide and seek in the royal gardens with Izra’s younger cousins, who all seemed equally fascinated with Lance’s shiny scales.

“We can’t fault them for their good taste,” Izra had said, eyes crinkled in a smile.

Lance was grateful for the distraction: he was so exhausted afterwards he slept, dreamless.

“...Lance?”

Lance blinked himself out of his thoughts, turning to face Hunk.

“Uh, sorry. What was that?”

“I said do you want to go check out the old ship wreck, that little one past the gardens,” said Hunk patiently. “We haven’t gone exploring down there for a while.”

Lance shrugged, listless.

“We’ve already look at that one,” he said, pretending to be engrossed in smoothing out his tail fin, “And they’re all the same anyway.”

Hunk frowned.

“I think it’s big enough to have a galley,” he said, clearly still trying valiantly to cheer Lance up, “And you know what that means…”
“...”

“...spoons,” Hunk finished, lamely.

Lance stared out over the city, the sprawling architecture of crystal and rocks. Perhaps he had simply gotten used to the sun, but things felt so muted now. This far from the sky, the water was grey more than blue.

“I think I’m done with spoons,” said Lance.

Hunk face crumpled, and he swam closer to intertwine their tails. Lance allowed it. Hunk gave the best of hugs - second only to his mom.

“Come on,” said Hunk, “this’ll all blow over and then we can go back up to the lake again... and it’ll be okay! I mean, you know what Pidge is like. She’s not going to stay away just because some mermaid told her to.”

“Mmhm,” said Lance. He thought of Pidge and her fierce, determined face; the way she would flare like spilled fire at the mention of her family. He wasn’t so sure that she would come back, if that were a choice she’d have to make. He didn’t want to think about the avians at all.

“Well, do you want to go fishing instead?” said Hunk, “Jellyfish season.”

Lance pulled away.

“Actually, I think I might just. Go for a swim around the edge of town,” he said, feeling a guilty at the slump in Hunk’s shoulders. “...want to be by myself for a bit.”

“...okay,” said Hunk, after a pause. He had clearly decided not to push it, and that just made Lance feel worse. He was a crap friend.

“I’ll come find you later,” said Lance quickly, “I just want to clear my head.”

“It’s okay,” said Hunk, “I might hang out at the library. I want to check out some maps. Come find me once you’re back.”

With a parting squeeze, they went their separate ways - Lance deeper into the dip of the ocean floor, and Hunk back to the city proper.

Lance swam aimlessly for a little while, letting the current carry him around the curving perimeter of his home.

He knew this area of the ocean like the veins of his own tail: he and Hunk used to play in the valley all the time, pretending they were out alone in the vast vast water. The dip meant you were a little out of sight of the buildings, but still close enough to be home for dinner.

Shipwrecks were often swept here by the ocean’s kind hand, where they were slowly submerged in their sandy graves. Lance swam between the hulking curves of a ship’s hull, and past another tall spiking ships-mast that had, miraculously, survived. Lance swam a little higher, so that he was skimming the top of the masthead, looking down. From here, he could see the shape of the ship, its skeleton still outlined above the sand like the carcass of giant beast. He could see the metal railings, completely covered in moss and shell life; could see the cracks in the deck where fish flickered in and out.
Idly, he wondered if this was what the world looked like as an avian, soaring above it all. Lance spread his arms out to either side, drifting.

He thought of Keith, and soft down on the inside of his wings and the deep red of his feathers. Keith had always seemed so weightless, up in the air...a beautiful, effortless silhouette. He was much more graceful in the air than on the ground, and Lance knew first hand how big those wings were. He supposed merfolk weren’t much more elegant on land, either. But flying seemed...so difficult. When Lance had watched Keith fly, he was always too busy marvelling at the mere fact; too distracted by the way Keith would laugh when he was airborne. It was effervescent.

Lance wondered if Shiro had been all that had tethered Keith to the ground...to the cave; to Lance’s little lake of treasures.

And now that Shiro was free again, Lance couldn't think of a reason Keith would come back to earth.

Lance turned in the water, too upset to continue the illusion.

Distantly, he could hear the tenor of whale song, a low soothing note that vibrated through the water like a breeze. Lance tilted towards it, feeling the sound tug beneath his ribs and pull. He couldn’t see the whale, but it was close - likely passing through. Lance listened hard for a response, but there was none. Just a lone whale then, coming in his direction. He felt desperate for some unspoken thing, and Lance sang back, a single sustained note in lieu of crying.

The whale replied, a soft enquiring thing, curious at the not-whale. Lance swam blindly towards the song, taking water through his gills with huge heaves of his chest. He sang, mostly to himself, a trickling melody that went nowhere. It wove a little messily around the whalesong, but Lance didn’t care. He closed his eyes and let his arms float loose.

He had sung the same song a hundred times before, but always quietly, always to himself. He sang it as a lullaby to Mia; to the birds that came very close to sea and then left, moments later. He sang it to the crystals which glowed and glowed; to empty caves and still lakes. He sang it with whales, letting their sonorous bass vibrate through his very bones until it completely drowned him out.

But now, Lance sang with the burning strain of his lungs, too high pitched to be whale song but low enough for the melody to travel. His voice would be hoarse tomorrow, but he didn’t care. Lance pushed himself through the water, arching his back to make a full circle with his tail; throwing his head back in a back spin. It was a dance he had seen countless times growing up; always done in pairs.

A moment later, the great shadow of the whale came into view, huge and serene. It was a young whale, Lance could tell, but still big. It seemed to have had a safe journey all the way up north, with very little notches in its fluke or its fins. They matched notes for a moment, several octaves apart - and the great whale turned slowly onto its back. Lance swam closer, fighting against the slip stream until he could hold onto one flipper.

They swam like that for a few bars, drifting up and down the registers until the whale turned back around, opening its huge mouth in a yawning smile.

Lance kept singing, calling, calling ; stretching out his tail above him. He paused at all the right
places; keeping pace to one side of a dance made for two. He could do it by heart now; counting the empty beats with the thump of his own heart. Lance had sung it by himself so many times that he had almost forgotten what it was meant to be like to get a response.

But then he got one.

Someone was singing back: a voice too high to be whalesong. Lance spun around in the water, so startled that the next note choked low in his throat. But then practice and memory kicked into autopilot, and Lance sang the reply, swimming over the shoulder of the whale to see - Izra.

The merman was a bloom of colour against the grey of the water, the red and white of his tail mesmerizingly bright even away from the crystal light. Izra sang a gentle curve of a note, swimming in clear view of the whale in greeting, before cresting towards Lance.

Lance could only stare, wide eyed, twisting his head to follow as Izra circled him, his tail fin close enough to touch. Lance realised he was holding a note low in his throat, a hum that was a little shaky given how long he’d been singing. Izra drifted closer, also humming, alternating between a sixth and a stepping seventh. It was hypnotic, and Lance felt his own inhales and exhales sync to match the resolving cadence.

They circled each other like this for a little while, following the shadow of the whale, blue red and white. Izra held out a hand, and Lance mirrored the gesture - palm to palm, pulse to pulse. They pressed the back of their hands together, then the palms, a dance.

Finally, Lance ran out of breath.

Izra was very close now; his pupils barely ringed by pale brown. What a curious colour for eyes, thought Lance. Kept his gaze, and slowly, very deliberately, brought Lance’s hand up to his own cheek. He pressed a kiss, feather light, to the scales at the inside of Lance’s wrist.

Lance was frozen, hyper aware of Izra’s wrist in his own hand. When he didn’t move, Izra moved for him, like a strung thing. Held his own hand out, wrist open. The scales there were white, like a patch of moonlight.

You’ve always dreamed about this, came a voice at the back of his mind, what are you waiting for! Do you want to be by yourself forever?

Lance pressed the flat of his cheek to Izra’s hand, then pulled back quickly, heart thumping. He risked a glance at Izra’s face, wondering if he had offended him. But Izra was smiling, a little wry twist to the side of his mouth.

“Too soon?” he asked, half teasing, half serious. He still hadn’t let go of Lance’s hand.

“I’ve known you for a week,” Lance said, flustered.

“And it’s been a lovely week,” said Izra, still smiling.

Lance blinked, rapidly.

“Well the thing is, it’s - I’ve never actually - I mean - no one’s ever...“

There was a flash of surprise across Izra’s face, quickly replaced by a fond expression.
“Their loss,” said Izra.

He lay Lance’s hand across his own chest, palm splayed, just above the heart. When he began singing again, Lance could feel the vibrations all the way down his fingers.

It wasn’t quite as warm as the sun, but it almost felt the same.

Keith caught up with Shiro just before dawn, by which time his lungs were on fire and his muscles screaming at him to stop. His build meant he was a naturally faster flier than Shiro, but could not coast or glide as easily - he burned out more quickly. Distance wise, it worked out to be about the same, but he wondered, absentely, if the time spent lounging about the cave had made him unfit.

Keith's back hurt, but the sight of Shiro’s silhouette gave him the last burst of adrenaline that he needed to swoop upwards, coming from below so Shiro could see him coming.

“... Keith?” shouted Shiro. Keith couldn't see his expression but he assumed it was pissed off. He shrugged, because he knew Shiro could see.

“Keith what hell are you doing here?” Shiro shouted above the wind, the words broken up between each of Keith’s wing-beats. Shiro was tiring too, Keith could hear it.

“Making sure you’re okay,” Keith yelled back, “We’re almost there now, so it’s too late.”

“For - Keith!”

With an irritated gesture, Shiro banked to the right. Keith followed suit, letting himself lose altitude gradually. They were close now; coming up to the Avian town with their backs to the sun - a vulnerable and therefore peaceful entry. Trust Shiro to take the open-arm approach, thought Keith uncharitably, but they coasted along the edge of the coast, and no one came out to meet them with firearms.

It was strange: after so long away, the familiar sight of home drew an uneasy displaced sensation in Keiths’ stomach. Not that this was home; but it looked very similar in the dawn light. It towered above the rest of the landscape, seemingly defying gravity; a floating city tethered only by a looming burst of crystal formations that made up the core of its base. It rose out of the sea, leaving the surface of the water far, far below. It was smaller than the main city where Keith and Shiro trained, but it was still a formidable sight.

It was also the closest to the Altean base, and Shiro had chosen for its advantageous view over the coast.

*Less likely to be spooked,* he had said, examining Pidge’s map, *They’ll see us coming from a mile away. And won’t shoot us.*

So far, Shiro’s plan seemed to be holding true.

“You leave the talking to me,” said Shiro, banking even lower.

Keith gestured in the affirmative, lungs hurting too much for him to talk. He watched carefully as Shiro descended, flying as close as he could - it would be a hard landing without proper boots, and
it wouldn’t do for Shiro to shatter his knees as soon as he hit the ground. As it was, Keith tucked his own wings close, risking a hard landing himself to stay close to Shiro.

He could see people approaching; and a quick glance told Keith there were three of them - one keeping height, the other two descending rapidly to meet them.

Shiro’s wings were flung out wide, his broad flight-feathers parted as he beat in huge strokes, buffeting Keith. Shiro landed with little grace, stumbling to his knees and then dragged back by the force of his own wings. But he seemed alright, clambering to his feet just moments later. The two avian guards came to a skidding halt either side of Shiro; but they did not wear the garrison colours. Both were clothed in light grey. Military. The one with sleek raven wings was holding gun of some kind, and it was trained on Shiro. Keith’s blood went cold.

“Identify yourself,” the other calling to Shiro, her light brown wings half aloft as she ran towards Shiro, who had both hands held up in surrender.

“And you!” she shouted at Keith, “Land! Land now.”

The raven didn’t lower his gun.

With a sharp twist from the hip, Keith snapped his wings shut and dropped like a bullet. The raven guard barely managed to fling himself to the side before Keith was on him, swinging his arm out with the hilt of his knife.

“Drop the gun,” he shouted, trying to pin the guard down with his knee. The raven was bigger though, taller - and he managed to half flip them around, hooking a knee across Keith’s right wing in an alarming display of flexibility. Someone else was shouting - the third guard - and Shiro was yelling at Keith to step down.

“Takeshi Shirogane,” Shiro was saying desperately, “Ex-Garrison, Flock seven, mission Kerberos - we went down a year ago, that’s my friend, Keith stop!”

“Ex-Garrison? Where are your tags?”

“I - “

“Drop your fucking gun!” said Keith, trying in vain to elbow the Raven in the face, trying to make him drop the gun. Someone grabbed onto Keith’s right wing and yanked hard backwards, and Keith went with the force of it, unable to pull back without hurting himself. The raven took the opportunity to grab his gun, which had landed half a wings-breadth to their right. Keith tried to wrench himself free, but before he could, the Raven shot him point blank in the wing.

There was a strange delay between his senses. Weirdly, his wing didn’t hurt at all - barely a sharp sting. His vision blurred first, but he could hear Shiro screaming for him.

“...o, NO, Keith! Jesus Christ, you - oh god, Keith!”

“Zatk’nis!” swore the raven, “It’s just a fucking tranq, calm down! Do you see any fucking blood? I don’t think so!”

“...A - a tranquiliser? But …. “

“...ou didn’t think we would shoot a fellow avian did you? What is…”

“...two doing at…”
Keith tried to sit up, tried to fight against the hands on his wing, holding him down. The voices above him were blurring too, out of focus. He tried to speak, tried to twist his head so he could see if Shiro was okay, if ...

All he could see was blue. It could have been the sky.

It could have been the ocean.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry again for the wait, I had a very bad writers block and had a lot of bad luck in RL sigh. Thank you so so so much for taking the time to leave comments and being so generous with your encouragement. I read every single comment (often multiple times) they mean a lot to me and really is my only solace. So thank you for being so supportive, and do feel free to say any criticism or suggestions. I again struggled with pacing and transitions here, and i'm worried it's too choppy? so feedback is great.

10 points to anyone who knows who the little guppy is ;3 I listened to this song and this song on repeat whilst writing the Lance bits, so if you want some feeling for Lance's songs, try listening to those (they're non-lyrical). The next chapter won't be as far away, i've sorted all the plot holes! Unrelatedly, i've had suggestions for a watercast zine... any thoughts?? chat to me on tumblr or twitter.

I'll also be posting the victuuri fic that's set in the watercast universe (totally unrelated plot, however), so if you're in YOI, keep an eye out!

Prone has released the 3rd chapter of the watercast podfic!! please give it a listen and give him some love!
Chapter Summary

Things coalesce. Keith learns that he is far over his head as the politics of war extends its long, long hand. Lance learns that no good deed goes unpunished. Small acts of kindness and affection have unintended, and awful repercussions.

(Warning for some graphic descriptions of violence, as tagged).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"The only two things you can truly depend upon are gravity and greed."
- Jack Palance

:i:

The night that Izra and the delegation leaves, the moon hangs heavy and tired above the lip of the horizon. It pulls, inexorable, as if the lack of clouds and rain had sucked all the air away.

They were close enough to the surface for the moonlight to be a thick, silver thing. It reflected off Izra’s white scales, almost too bright. The rest of the delegation had begun to peel away, formalities observed and promises given.

“Perhaps in the winter, you could come,” he said, holding both of Lance’s wrists in his hands.

Around the ocean breathed in a sigh, swelling. Lance let himself be pulled up, then down, and they circled each other very slowly. Something tight in his chest uncurled a little as he stared at Izra’s earnest expression.

“I thought you said it was very warm all year round,” said Lance.

“It is,” said Izra, “But corals are very beautiful in winter - ”

Lance brightened.

“I do want to see corals,” he said, “And you said the crystal formations are different! What - “

Izra’s eyes were crinkled; teeth visible in his smile.

“- almost as beautiful as you,” he continued, as if Lance hadn’t interrupted.

Reflexively, Lance made to pull his hands away, something painful clawing up his throat and behind his eyes. He felt himself flushing all the way up to his gills when Izra didn’t let go. Their fins swirled below them, a blur of colour.

“I think - “ the words were hard to dislodge from behind his teeth, but Lance tried, averting his
eyes. *Think of your manners*, he thought desperately, *think of all those boring etiquette lessons.*

“You know how I - you’re much more…”

Lance waved a hand at Izra’s tail.

Izra looked a little exasperated.

“You told me you were waiting,” he said, after a moment, “but for what?”

Somewhere behind their shoulders, a call. Izra twisted around, cutting the mermaid off with a sharp reply. He turned back to Lance, eyes searching.

“I have to go,” he said, looping his fin around the end of Lance’s tail, “But I have something for you.”

Izra reached into the satchel at his side, pulling out a bundle of cord. He unravelled it to reveal a fragment of something polished and glowing. It shone with more than reflected moonlight, a pale pink. It looked like a smaller piece of the larger sample of Belmeran crystal that the delegation had given his mother - though Lance supposed it wasn’t *Belmeran*. This one set in a gun-metal notch that was smooth and unrustsed, despite the water. There was an inscription on the smooth face of the crystal; careful etchings of the family crest.

Izra held it out, and wordlessly Lance let him loop it over his head. It sat on his chest, next to his own crystal, his mother’s scale, Shiro’s tags and a small, golden spoon.

*Souvenirs of affection.*

Lance supposed he was good at collecting those, if he wasn’t quite as good as keeping the people attached to them.

Izra paused, the pad of his thumb lingering over Shiro’s tag, before pulling away.

“I don’t have anything for you,” said Lance, flustered.

Izra let out a stream of bubbles in his laughter.

“That’s alright,” he said, “You can give me something when you visit.”

“Oh, okay,” said Lance automatically.

They stared at eachother for another long moment. Izra looked as if he was searching for something in Lance’s expression. Lance wasn’t sure if he found what he was looking for.

“You’re - “ Izra waved a hand, smile wry in the corners of his lips. He looked a little embarrassed. “Are you always this mysterious? You never gave me an answer. You never give me any answers, actually.”

Lance’s gills gulped in water too fast and he choked out a laugh.

“I’m really not,” he said. “I’m blue.”

In his periphery, he could feel his sisters watching, too polite to interrupt. Most of Izra’s family were flickers of red and white in the water - they were very close to the surface now.

Izra’s eyes were violet, like the pressed flowers in Lance’s book.
The merman rolled those violet eyes.

“Lance,” said Izra, full of easy affection as if they had been courting for years, instead of weeks. It made something fall in inside Lance’s lungs, hitting every rib on the way down,

“That’s still not an - “

In a flash of impulse, Lance leaned forwards to kiss the patch of silver scales on Izra’s cheek. Lance saw pupils go wide...and that was all the warning he got before there was a hand cupping the back of his skull, another in the dip of his back; and Izra was kissing him full on the mouth.

It felt like someone had struck him hard somewhere behind the eyes, and Lance instinctively brought his hands up behind Izra’s back as their momentum turned them in a gentle arch; backwards and downwards away from the moon.

Their noses weren’t touching, but the proximity made every nerve under Lance’s skin buzz tight and hot. He could feel the fine faint outlines of each of the scales on Izra’s back, the diamond divots of his spine.

A sharp call, like a dolphin whistle.

“Izra, let’s go!”

They jerked apart, both a little dazed.

“Alright, I’m coming!” shouted Izra.

“Oh my god - “ said Lance, hand over his mouth, “I’m - “

“I wish I could stay,” said Izra, “But we have time. I’ve got to go now.”

“IZRA .”

“They’re all waiting for you,” said Lance.

Izra squeezed Lance’s tail, a full bodied hug.

“Don’t forget me,” he said.

And then he untangled their fins and with a twist from the shoulders, was streaking away to where a few of the delegation were still waiting.
The night that Izra and the delegation left, the moon hung heavy and tired above the lip of the horizon. It pulled, inexorable.

And for the second time in as many months, Lance could not follow.

Keith wakes on the ebbing crest of nausea.

He had always been a light sleeper - and the events of the past year had only made this worse, not better. Usually he woke within a few seconds at most; often with a start; heart pounding from an unremembered dream.

But now...it felt like he was fighting a fog that clung to his face, a little suffocating. His hearing came back first, the quiet echo of an enclosed space, then the smell of cold stone and metal - clean, without dirt wet salt. The air was cool on his face, and there was a dull throb behind his eyes but not on his skull. His mouth was very dry, and it was hard to swallow.

When Keith tried to move, he found his arms tied behind him, bracketing his wings down.

The chair was bolted to the floor. Someone had taken his flight boots, and he was barefoot - the
stone slabs freezing cold. The cuffs were tight; one set digging into his wrists, the other just above his elbows.

It was another few long minutes before Keith could open his eyes - and he immediately shut them again with a grimace. There was a light shining directly into his face.

Keith swallowed hard, and cracked his eyes open again.

He was a plain, rectangular room. Across from him was a narrow table - also bolted to the floor. Two chairs. A large glossy-black window which he knew was one-way.

Shiro was nowhere to be seen, and Keith felt his heart trip over itself, beating faster in his ears.

*Steady, thought Keith. Patience.*

He tried to count the gaps between his own heart beats, but just became more and more irritated that the voice of his conscience had decided to become Shiro at his most sanctimonious. Shiro, who was no doubt holed up somewhere, in need of Keith to bust him out because he never listened to Keith’s ideas.

The door banged open, and it took every ounce of control in Keith not to flinch backwards.

The first avian who entered was a man sporting a receding hairline and a suit. His wings were light brown and sloped back to a taper. He carried himself like one of the military, but was clothed like a bureaucrat. Keith gave him a flat, unimpressed stare.

*Steady….steady.*

The second man who entered, though - Keith couldn’t quite school away the surprise on his face.

It was Iverson.

“Well,” said Iverson, as both men sat down with scrapes of metal and stone. “If it isn’t the prodigal son.”

Keith said nothing.

The other man slid a folder onto the table, propped against his lap. He opened it, movements unhurried and languid.

“Good to see you’re finally awake,” he said, and his accent was distinctly *not* Federation. “How are you feeling?”

Keith rolled his eyes, and rattled his cuffs. He didn’t flinch away from the man’s gaze, even as he slowly raised both eyebrows.

A long pause.

The man looked down at his folder.

“You’ve been gone for...I think a little over a year now, Mister Kogane. Is that correct?”

Keith shrugged.

“I’ve lost my calendar,” said Keith, flatly, “What does that little piece of paper tell you?”

Iverson snorted, and Keith couldn’t help but stare at him. Iverson looked like he had aged more than the year since Keith had last seen him, his pinons paling near the quills.
“Well over a year, it would seem,” the man continued, “disappeared three days into your suspension, one semester to go until you would have graduated. Top of your class. I’ve seen your old flight scores, very impressive.”

He flipped a page over, hands moving as if scanning the words. His eyes, didn’t move quite as fast.

Keith didn’t say anything.

“But you left in the middle of the night; and no one sees tail nor feather from you for two weeks...until you managed to sell some stolen Garrison equipment for Galran currency.”

Keith tensed; then tried to smooth out his reaction. Judging by the tilt of the man’s mouth, it didn’t go unnoticed.

“Two weeks,” he continued. “Not too bad, for someone who is still a ward of the state.”

A pause.

“Your mother would have been proud.”

Keith twitched in his seat, wings flicking reflexively.

“Who are you?’ he said, trying his hardest to keep his tone flat and disinterested. His heart had picked up in his chest at the mention of his mom. Keith glared at Iverson, which was a much more familiar ground for him.

“And what’s a Brit doing running your show? I thought this was a Garrison outpost. *Federation* outpost.”

Iverson slapped a hand onto the table.

“You insolent boy,” he said, voice that same irritated growl. He was using the exact same tone as he would anytime Keith disobeyed flight plays - which was almost all the time.

The other avian made an impatient gesture.

“You can call me Mallory,” he said, “And as a matter of fact, you would...normally not be within my jurisdiction. But things change.”

“Am I actually being detained for anything?” said Keith, “My wings are cramping.”

“That depends on how much you cooperate in next half hour, cadet,” said Iverson.

Keith gave him a grin with all his teeth.

“Not under your jurisdiction anymore, sir;” he said, “I dropped out, remember?”

Iverson looked like he was two seconds away from popping a vessel. Mallory merely sighed.

“Let’s get back to this. Where we we...” he said, tapping the folder in front of him. “...ah yes. Pawning Garrison property off for Galran currency. Next thing we hear, Kestrel sightings over Galran cities down south. Twice just outside the capital.”

Keith tried to keep his face clear, but Mallory was watching him with a sharp, knowing gaze.

“What exactly have you been doing for the past year, Keith?”
“I was looking for Shiro,” said Keith, without missing a beat. “Where is he? I want to see him.”

“Ah. Your friend,” said Mallory. He ignored Keith’s question. “Where did you find him? We were under the impression that the Kerberos crew had been caught by Galran patrols.”

Keith twisted his wrists. He wanted to stretch out his wings; the discomfort of having them cramped in was edging towards a painful ache, and he couldn’t help himself. He could feel Mallory’s eyes on every shift he made, and Keith took a deep breath. Let it out again. He thought about the still lake, the deep drop of its throat and the cavernous ceiling. He thought about Lance, and all the secrets and treasures hidden in that lake. It would be easy to tell the truth.

“I found him up north,” lied Keith, “They were in transit along the White Railroad. It was easy to attack from above. I waited for two nights for cloud cover; after they had refueled.”

Mallory sat back in his chair, wings the picture of languid confidence. He surveyed Keith for a long moment, face mild and blank.

“I see,” he said. “And how did you know where your friend was being held? Or even alive, for that matter. The Garrison presumed them dead.”

Something ugly flared up inside Keith, a flame he thought he had put out.

“They gave up the search too early. They were incompetent. Didn’t want to keep looking. I left the Garrison because they gave up,” said Keith, wings knocking against his own elbows with his anger, “Because what’s a few avians for the war effort, right? Who cares if a few fliers die, when you can sit at home in your - “ Keith gave Mallory a disgusted look, “ - leather shoes and heavy coats, like some - “

“That’s enough, Kogane!” said Iverson. “Teams much better equipped than you had searched for weeks. You jeopardised the armistice with your reckless one-man mission, breaching no-fly zones, cavorting with Galran and humans - “

“I didn’t cavort -”

“The fact of the matter is,” said Mallory, voice icy, “we are...extremely surprised at your abilities to locate your friend. Did you manage to find the others?”

Keith swallowed.

“No,” he said. “We were going to keep looking.”

“You still haven’t said how you managed to locate your friend.”

Keith stared at the table.

“Time and sheer dumb luck, I suppose. There aren’t exactly that many Avians living amongst the Grounded. Or hanging around Galra. Soldiers talk, especially when they’re tired and bored in the middle of the night. I just waited.”

“I see,” said Mallory. His tone was pleasant mild again, but he was still studying Keith’s face; gaze like a brand. “So you’re fluent in Galran?”

Keith looked up, thrown off by the question.

“Sort of,” he said, frowning. “I can understand it okay. Can’t really speak it that well.”
“Which dialect?” said Mallory.

“Uh, just. Capital. Most of the verbs are the same.”

“Interesting,” said Mallory, “Not a common talent, around these parts. Iverson?”

“Basic script, for tactical purposes,” grunted Iverson, “A lot of political pressure against it. You’d know better than I.”

“Mmmh,” said Mallory, toying with the edge of Keith’s paper folder.

“Your mother was Sillan*, I thought.”

“Yes...” said Keith.

“That’s not very close to the Galran Capital. Where abouts did you grow up?”

Keith stared at him, confused.

“Hesperia. Federation islands. Shouldn’t this all be in my file?”

“Oh, it is,” said Mallory easily, “I’m simply curious.”

Keith shifted uneasily. He wasn’t quite sure how, but he felt as if he had made a mistake; said a little too much.

“We’d like you to record down as much as you can remember,” said Mallory, changing track abruptly. “Any intel you might have come across, however insignificant.”

“I want to see Shiro,” said Keith.

“It would help us locate the others, if they’re still alive,” said Mallory.

“Fine,” said Keith, “But I want to see Shiro. Now.”

“We’re not finished here,” Mallory said, shuffling his wings with a roll of his shoulders. “I want to know who you spoke to, on the ground. Avians? Humans? ...Galra?”

“I didn’t write down everyone’s contact details,” said Keith, as scathingly as he could, “I - mostly just strangers in the outlying villages. There were rumours about avians being made to fight in the arena. Those are open to the public, even for humans. Travellers talk.”

“Which villages?” pressed Mallory, “Surely someone would have questioned your presence. Wings are not exactly easy to hide.”

“They don’t care as much, away from the Capital,” said Keith.

Steady, he thought, holding onto the sound of Shiro’s exasperated tone, steady Keith.

“So you talked to humans then? In Galran territory?”

“I was just following Shiro’s trial, so yes,” said Keith, voice tight, “I guess so. I asked about recent Galra envoys. News about the arena. They like to make an example of people, so it’s not… it’s not a secret.”

“You want me to believe that no one turned you in to the nearest patrols?” said Mallory, “For over
a year?"

“Well obviously.,” said Keith, rolling his eyes, “I’m still here. I didn’t stay in one place for very long. I’m not incompetent. .”

“No,” said Mallory, “But you must have been harboured. You must have had help. Who was it?”

Keith shook his head.

“No one in particular. I didn’t sleep in buildings if I could help it.”

“Humans or avian?” said Mallory.

“I told you,” said Keith, “It was mostly human villages! I met a few avians who didn’t move back after the treaty thing, but that’s it.”

“How did you know where they were? And that you could trust them?” asked Mallory.

“I didn’t!” said Keith, “I just - there’s a lot of anti-Galran sentiment, okay? I just. Took a risk.”

“Must have been a very scary thing for someone your age,” said Mallory, “Leaving home like this? Where did you go first? Someone must have helped you.”

Keith stared at him.

“I lay low because I knew the Garrison would be out for me. Then I went to the Kerberos site. Started from there.”

Mallory sighed.

“Alright. I think that’s enough for today.”

He pushed his chair back, standing up. After a beat, Iverson did the same. Keith couldn't help the frisson of anxiety that shuddered through his ribs. The two men were already to the door.

“Wait,” said Keith, hating the plea in his own voice. “I want to see Shiro. Where is he?”

“He’s fine,” said Iverson. “We had a chat to him yesterday.”

Yesterday, thought Keith, alarmed. How long had it been?

“I have a right to talk to someone,” said Keith, “I can nominate someone. And that someone is Shiro. I know my rights. You can’t keep me here for more than 48 hours.”

The corner of Mallory’s lips twisted upwards; amused.

“Oh, I think you’ll find that we can keep you here as long as we want,” he said.

At first, Keith counted the beat of his heart between the inhale and exhales of his breathing.

It kept him calm for at least an hour or two - perhaps a little more? - before the cramp in his wings became so distracting that not even reciting Shiro’s favourite made-up proverbs was helping. The
long fast flight to catch up with Shiro, followed by the hard landing and being knocked out… his muscles had already been screaming at him for rest and a good stretch. Keith wasn’t sure how long he had been sitting in this chair, wings tucked close, before he woke up. But right now his wings were spasming against his arms periodically with cramps that made him grit his teeth, toes curled in a futile effort to fight the sensation.

It came in unexpected waves, and Keith ended up trying to hold himself as still as possible because any twitch of his shoulders or his head could set off another bout of cramps. At some point, a stranger came in with a can of water and a straw. He ignored Keith’s questions, and Keith quickly gave up in favour of water.

That had felt barely half an hour ago, but going by the ache in his wing-blades and the empty pain in his stomach, it had probably been more than a few hours.

Keith closed his eyes against the artificial light, carefully tilting his head back to stretch his neck. The light left a red-glow imprint on the back of his eyelids, and Keith squeezed them shut.

His chest felt foggy, and he was exhausted. Every time Keith dozed off, he would be woken by the spasming pain through one of his wings, and the harsh clack of the cuffs against the chair. It had happened so many times now that Keith had lost count. He let out a harsh breath, tugging frustratedly at his bindings. He couldn’t really feel his feet; they had long since gone numb against the freezing stone floor. Night time, then. Or perhaps early morning.

Keith winced again, shifting his wings in the confines of his own arms.

*Stupid Shiro and his stupid plans!*

He breathed out slowly through his mouth.

Shiro would be alright. He was a Garrison hero. He’d be okay. And it was still miles better than landing in Galra hands. Avian bases were safe. Shiro would be okay.

Keith stared at his blurry reflection in the metal of the table. It didn’t look very comforted.

Some indeterminate time later, Keith jerked back to the present at the sound of the door opening - the metal click as loud as a gunshot after so long with only his breathing for company. He had missed the sound of the approaching footsteps, and Keith felt unguarded, eyes stinging and dry.

It was Mallory.

“Where’s Iverson?” said Keith, voice rough with exhaustion. He coughed to clear it; but coughed again. The air was dry and cold.

“Good morning,” said Mallory, pulling out the chair. He had the folder with him again. “The Commander is otherwise preoccupied. And I thought you’d speak easier without his presence.”

Keith stared at him. He wondered if the man actually thought Keith was buying into any of this.

“I don’t know what more you want me to say,” said Keith, trying to hide the a pained wince with more words, “I left the Garrison to look for Shiro because no one else would. Found him a year later. Now we’re back because the Alteans have things to say to you. Or someone. Someone up top.
Has anyone chased that up yet? It’s urgent.”

“Yes,” said Mallory. “Don’t concern yourself; your friend has been quite forthcoming. What I want to know from you is how you managed to find Shiro, get him out alive...and avoid anyone gossiping about it.”

Keith let out a groan of frustration.

“I told you yesterday, it was just a lot of time spent waiting and following up dead ends,” he said.

“Have you managed to remember any names, while you were resting?” said Mallory.

Keith stared at him.

“You want me to snitch out citizens,” said Keith, raising both eyebrows, “people who are on our side? So you can...what, recruit them?”

“No,” said Mallory, irritation colouring his voice, “I want to know exactly what you know, and what you’ve told them. Because unless you’ve forgotten, Keith, there’s a war going on - “

“I thought there was a peace treaty,” said Keith, coolly.

Mallory leaned back in his chair.

There was a very long pause.

“Were they your mother’s friends?” he asked.

Keith blinked.

“No,” he said, bewildered, “What? What has this got to do with - ”

“Your mother was privy to a lot of things,” said Mallory, wings still relaxed - but Keith could see the tension in his shoulders, and the stillness in his hands. He felt sick to his stomach, blindsided.

“She had a lot of contacts, both here and in Ruthenia*,” Mallory said, watching Keith’s face, “a lot of friends in the Capital, from her assignments with the Embassy.”

“My mother’s dead,” said Keith. He was grateful that his voice did not shake, because he his hands were shivering with the thud of his heart. “She’s been dead for ten years.”

“But the same could not be said for her friends,” said Mallory. “Though of course, she was an exceptional agent.”

“I don’t know any of the - “

“I’m sure you can understand that allegiances change. People change. Especially during...times such as these. Ten years is a long time. We don’t know if we can trust our old allies, not when they sit in the Emperor’s pocket.”

Mallory had run out of patience. Keith thought these things were dragged out, like rope frayed over a long time. But something must be urgent. He could feel the tension, like condensation, cool against his palm. He didn’t know whether it was the lack of sleep or the constant tugging pain in his wings, but he was finding it exceedingly hard to concentrate...let alone keep his expression blank.
“I don’t have any contacts,” said Keith, “I was - what makes you think she - I was ten.”

Mallory’s expression flickered, like a ripple across water; there and gone.

“She never left you anything? You never met anyone? She never spoke about - ”

Keith jerked in his seat, cuffs clacking hard; metal against metal.

“No, she didn’t tell me anything! She didn’t leave me...s-she” Keith shouted, “I didn’t even know she was dead until they’d already emptied the fucking house!”

Mallory tilted his head, very slightly. Keith was reminded of the falcons they kept at the garrison, to help with flight techniques. The man looked very much like one of those birds now; waiting for the right moment.

To his horror, Keith’s eyes were burning.

_Calm down_, thought Keith, furiously, _steady_. _Steady, Keith._

“Alright,” said Mallory, “So you followed leads from… incidental Galra and traveller stories… to the White Railroad. Is that correct?”

Keith felt out of breath, skin cold and clammy. His right wing was twitching uncontrollably against his elbow, unable to stretch out the cramp that seized the main cluster of muscles along his back. He was aware of Mallory waiting for his answer.

“Yes.”

“Where abouts? Inland?”

“Heading to the capital,” said Keith.

Mallory considered him for a long moment. Then he reached into an inside pocket of his jacket, and drew out a small bottle half filled with Belmeran crystals. Keith felt his blood freeze.

“Then where on earth did you get this?”

In the days afterwards, the ocean felt bigger and emptier than Lance had ever cared to imagine it.

Something in his demeanour over the past few months must have changed, because their tell-tale shadow guards hung back as the days passed; no one came to tell Hunk or Lance to go back to the palace before the sun was up.

They were mostly left to their own devices, but Lance noticed Hunk watching him sometimes, when he thought Lance wasn’t looking.

They were revisiting one of their old haunts today, a well explored shipwreck that still had all its windows intact. Lance was examining the pictures painted on the side of a water jug that somehow had been overlooked the last few times they’d been here. It was an animal of some kind, and he was trying to decide whether the extra sticky-out bit was a fifth leg or a tail when Hunk hit his head on the inside of a cupboard and something _thwumped._
“Hunk?” said Lance, putting the vase down and poking Hunk’s yellow-gold tail, which was still protruding from the doors.

“...I’m fine!” came Hunk’s muffled voice.

He made a thumping wriggle and came free of the doors, holding a small polished disk. Curiously, Lance leaned over his friend’s shoulder.

“What’s that?” he asked. This was much more interesting than vases.

Hunk twisted his tail around so he could use his fins to better wipe the surface of the disk clean.

Lance made a disgusted noise.

“Hunk, don’t do that you’ll get your fins all gungy!” he said, pulling at Hunk’s massive hands, “All my conditioners are wasted on you!”

“Eh,” said Hunk, who had never appreciated Lance’s efforts, “Oh look I think this is a crystal disk! Wow, I didn’t think they had them this early, this wreck is at least...what, ten years? It’s been here forever and I’m pretty sure the galra didn’t make these until recently…”

“What’s on it?”

Hunk was tilting the disk backwards and forwards.

“We could give it to Pidge to try see,” he said, “These don’t get scratched up that easy so it should be fine. The metal underneath is all tarnished though…”

Hunk wrapped the disk up in a cloth and tucked it in his satchel - the one he always took when they went exploring.

At the mention of Pidge, Lance frowned.

“Do you really think they’ll be back soon?” he said listlessly, picking up the vase and then putting it down again.

Hunk nodded vigorously. Lance wasn’t sure if the cheerful confidence was for him or for the both of them.

“Definitely.” he said, “And anyway we have heaps of mechanical readers back in the cave right? I’m pretty sure we fixed one and Pidge would have let it there. It’s pretty heavy.”

Lance felt something visceral rear up at the thought of his cave; his lake. His.

“Let’s go and see now!” he said, tugging on Hunk’s arm, “Come on! If we swim down past the canyon no one will notice us until we’re around the cove.”

He pushed off from the wall of the ship and tucked his elbows neatly to his sides, rocketing out of the window with the ease of practice. He could hear Hunk cursing behind him before his friend emerged through a larger opening.

“Lance, we’re not supposed to anymore,” called Hunk, “Lance!”

Lance did a tight loop in the water so he was staring at Hunk upside down.

“SHHH,” he said, “I’m sick of being here, and no one is baby sitting me right now. Let’s go, I
want to feel the sun.”

Hunk’s face was the picture of indecision.

Lance sighed.

“I don’t want to run into Rina again, she keeps wanting to have a ‘chat’. So I don’t want to go back yet. Come on Hunk…”

“I don’t know…” said Hunk, eyes flickering around them as if a guard from the palace would pop up behind a rock at any moment.

“Let’s just go real quick, check the disk out and see what’s on it, and then we can come back,” Lance wheedled, “Super quick. Like, half an hour, tops. Don’t you miss jumping?”

Hunk cast his eyes to the heavens and groaned.

“But you have to come back when I say so,” he said, “None of the ‘ten more minutes’ bullshit okay - oi, Lance!”

“Yes, fine, fine!” Lance threw over his shoulder, already pumping his tail as hard as he could go.

He looped through a rock formation, aiming for shadows that signalled a sharp drop in the ocean floor. They usually took a faster route around the other side of the wreck, but this way was better hidden - his heart was thrumming in his chest, and he felt excited for the first time in weeks.

Behind him, Hunk was a blur of gold scales, and they followed the canyon all the way to shore, before surging up and around the jagged rock columns that reached all the way to the surface.

Lance could feel the water flowing through his gills, fast and sharp. He kept his eyes fixed on the sheen of light far above them, hugging the ocean floor so as to stir up the mud and cover the flicker of his scales. They swam in silence for about fifteen minutes, keeping to each other's silhouettes in the water.

And then -

And then.

Then they were past the curve of the cove, and as soon as the shelf of rock loomed behind them, Lance was streaking for the surface of the water, arms outstretched to a sharp arrow point. He could feel the shift around him as he grew closer, the water becoming so much warmer, until -

He broke the surface with huge, airless gasp - for a moment his gills were open, as if the sunlight that blinded his eyes had also frozen him in mid-leap, a statue to sink to the bottom of the ocean. But then his lungs heaved, and the air hit the back of his throat.

The moment seemed to last forever; the speed of his leap, the air on his skin. Lance could see the cliffs and the sky and the clouds through the film of his eyelids.

And then he reentered the water with a whoop of joy.

Beside him, Hunk had also broken the water, and he was smiling.

“Aww,” he said, “I forgot how warm it is up here!”

Lance splashed his tail, laughing. It felt a little hysterical; the air tasted pale on his tongue, effervescent.
“It’s such a nice day,” he said, “I want to sunbathe!”

Hunk poked him sharply in the shoulder.

“Nope,” he said, “Someone might still see us. Come on, let’s go find the disk player.”

Blinking the water from his eyes, Lance followed Hunk in the familiar path to their cave. They ducked a little behind the columns of stone, just to see if there had been any guards posted outside. But when no one came to stop them, they made their way through the mouth of the cave and into the embrace of the lake.

Lance swam ahead, pulling up sharply at shelf of rock where Shiro, Keith and Pidge used to camp out. He broke the surface of the water with barely a splash, pulling himself up on his elbows, heart in his throat.

But a quick look around showed him that the cave was just as deserted as it had been two weeks ago.

Lance felt the tempo of his heart slow in stuttering phrases, his breathing twice as loud in the echo of the cavern. It was very quiet.

He lowered himself back in the water, and turned - only to see Hunk watching him.

“Well,” said Lance, voice a little high with false bravado, “I mean it hasn’t been that long, right?”

“Travel on land takes a long time,” Hunk agreed. “...do you still want to check out this disk?”

Lance bobbed closer, trying to ignore the urge to keep searching the cave.

“Yeah,” he said, “we hardly ever find any - I can’t believe we missed this one...”

Hunk was making a beeline to a low sandy shelf, and he handed the disk to Lance to hold while he propelled himself onto the bank so he could reach the instruments they kept out above the tide-line. There was the sound of wood and metal scraping on stone, and then a clattering crash.

“Hunk….” said Lance, trying to see over Hunk’s flailing tail fin.

“Everything’s fine! Okay - ugh, we need to dry this off my hands got the needle wet - “

Hunk pulled the boxy contraption from the crate, and managed to shift himself back along the sand and then back into the water - all the while holding it above his head. Lance knew from experience how much that thing weighed too, and he followed dutifully with the disk. Hunk set the machine carefully onto the rock ledge, on top of the folded blankets that were still there. It was a polished thing, set in a beautiful hard wood case that had miraculously survived until Hunk and Lance rescued it from the water. It opened to reveal a trumpet, out of which the recording could be played. There was a very tiny crystal needle, and an even tinier crystal battery inside the machine. Pidge had almost cried tears of joy when they repaired it.

Hunk wiped down the plate of the machine with the corner of a blanket, drying his hands before holding a palm out for the disk.

Lance pulled himself out the water again, sitting on the ledge before giving Hunk the disk. He pushed the blankets out of the way behind him so he wouldn’t get them completely damp, and something clinked and scraped against stone; muffled.
He was so overtaken by deja vu that for a moment, Lance felt transported.

“What?”

Lance blinked.

Hunk was lowering the disk into the round sunken dish at the centre of the machine.

“What do you want to do the honours?”

Lance nodded and carefully set the needle down to the middle of the disk. Hunk checked the battery; the glow of blue soft against his face before they turned the thing on. The disk began to spin, steady and smooth.

There was a very long pause, and both Hunk and Lance leaned in towards the mouth of the machine.

Then, the strands of something familiar - music. It was music. Lance couldn’t quite remember the instrument and he had never seen a real working one, but he had heard it before, on another similar disk that Pidge had later used to -

It was music.

It flared like fire, great ebb and swells of it, the notes becoming a little distorted through the echoes of the cavern. But it filled every gap the water couldn’t reach, leaving behind a flicker of something after each bar. The rhythm was like the tide too, gentle and soft but relentless. Lance couldn’t understand the words, but the voices were warm, a rush of blood behind his scales. It soared in its high notes, as if trying to reach the ceiling that neither Hunk nor Lance could see.

Lance realised he was holding his breath - too scared to interrupt the music, even as the first piece faded to a stop and the echoes seeped slowly back into the water.

“Do you think this is from the Galra?” whispered Lance, shy of the silence.

Hunk’s eyes were round with wonder, and he peered side-ways at the disk, still spinning in its cradle. After a few more breaths, the second song began, this time a fast crescendo of bell-notes that wasn’t like any bell that Lance had heard before. He wanted desperately to see the people making the music, he wanted to listen to it in the flesh, he wanted -

“I don’t think it’s Galra, but I’d have to compare it…” said Hunk, “Might be Avian? Keith and Shiro would be able to tell us, probably.”

“What do you think an avian music disk was doing on an Galran ship?” breathed Lance.

“...no idea,” said Hunk, very quietly.

They lay there for a very long time, listening to the music soak the air. The next piece was an overwhelming symphony of something that sounded a little like pipes and sea-flutes, but some notes ran so deep Lance felt as if it was vibrating the marrow of his bones. He listened with his mouth parted, tasting the air as if he could discern the flavour of each note, the strange sounds of things he wasn’t sure he had ever heard before. Some were sharp, like a bow plucked tight, and others were so warm it was a hypnotising.

When the disk finally stopped playing, they both lay there. He could hear the music still bouncing between the rocks and the hanging stalactites in the yawning cavern roof. Some notes lingered, a
sheen on the water.

“I want to listen to that again,” said Lance.

Hunk sat up, hand about to readjust the needle before he suddenly jerked it away.

“Oh shit,” they both said in unison.

Hunk paled.

“What time is it?”

As it turned out they hadn’t been much longer than half an hour, but the sun was slightly lower in the sky when they emerged from the cave.

They swam close to the surface, reluctant to lose their freedom so soon. And that’s why when they rounded the corner of the cove, they immediately saw the ship.

It was floating a little way just beyond the sharp rocks, but it was very close - closer than even the smaller fishing boats liked to sail. It was mermaid territory, after all, and so the ships were usually far off silhouettes, keeping clear.

“Aren’t they worried about the rocks?” said Hunk, as they swam a little closer, keeping under the water but still shallow enough to see.

“Not sure,” said Lance, turning to his back so he could see better. The shadow of the ship hung heavy and dark, its round belly tapering off to sharp ends. It looked as if it had propellers, sunk into the tail end of the ship, but Lance wasn’t sure. Through the water, the sunlight made it hard to see the top of the boat, which was a little larger than most of the human fishing vessels, but...

Then, abruptly, Lance realised why the ship was sailing so close to the rocks.

There was someone in the water.

Lance could see the shape of them now, a smaller flailing silhouette just beyond the shadow of the boat. Blood rushed to his head, and Lance felt his heart beat rachet up. The deja vu tasted coppery sweet at the back of his mouth.

“Oh no,” he said, “Hunk, someone’s drowning!”

“Wait - Lance!”

But Lance was already streaking forwards, a few hard pumps of his tail brought him just beneath the struggling shadow. He angled himself directly upwards, and between one breath and the next he was breaking the surface just behind the stranger.

They screamed, high pitched and shrill, twisting in the water to face him with a flail of their arm.

“Hey - hey! ” said Lance, “It’s okay, it’s okay!”

He was regretting his decision to avoid splashing; his sudden appearance had clearly scared the living daylights out of....
It was a human girl; older than Pidge perhaps. She was staring at Lance with huge, terrified eyes, and had long flaxen hair. She had stopped splashing around, but she was still pushing desperately at the water as if she could somehow heave herself out of it.

“Calm down,” said Lance, holding up both his hands where she could see him, “I’m - I’m going to help you okay, just help you float.”

She was making incoherent gaspy noises, but she nodded - and as soon as Lance put his hands under her arms, she threw them around his neck, clutching hard.

Then she screamed again, right in his ear.

“*What-*” said Lance, flinching away, ear ringing...only to find that she had merely spotted Hunk, who was floating just behind them.

“There’s - two - two - “ she was stammering.

“That’s Hunk,” said Lance, quickly, “He’s my friend. I’m Lance. What’s your name?”

“Nyma,” she said, and then added, “Don’t eat me!”

Lance rolled his eyes.

“Not this again,” said Hunk.

“We’re not going to eat you,” said Lance, “I’m just helping...see?”

She was still holding on to his shoulders in a vice like grip. He could feel her shivering non stop, even though she still felt very warm.

“I lost my net,” she said between chattering teeth, “and harness broke.”

There was a shout from somewhere near the top of the ship.

“Nyma! Oh my god, Nyma!”

“Lance, they’re going to see us!” hissed Hunk, tugging at Lance’s arm. The motion dipped them further into the water, and Nyma shrieked, elbowing Lance in the neck as she tried to climb higher on his torso.

“Ouch - hey - hey stop moving - I’m just - hey calm down!”

“Rolo, help!”

“I’m - “ Lance slapped Hunk with his tail beneath the water. He tried to see past Nyma’s curtain of hair which was sticking to his face. “Calm down, I’ll swim you close okay? Just stop kicking me!”

“S-sorry,” said Nyma.

“Lance, just let them lower down a rope or something - “

“Don’t let go of me!” said Nyma, hysteria clear in her voice. Her nails were digging into Lance’s arm, “Oh my god, oh my god- “

“I won’t let go,” said Lance as soothingly as he could, “Hunk - stop it. Stay here, she’s freaking out.”
“Lance, I - “

But Lance brought his tail up and propelled both he and Nyma swiftly through the water. It took barely three sweeps of his tail to bring them into the shadow of the ship, which looked a lot taller up close than it did just seconds ago.

“I’ve got her,” called Lance to whoever was up there. At least she didn’t have wings, he thought, humans were a lot lighter in water.

“Hang on!” someone called back.

“You’re going to be okay,” said Lance. “You shouldn’t fish this close to the rocks, you know…”

“I can’t - I can’t believe - “ Nyma was still staring at Lance. Perhaps because they were so close to the ship now, but he thought some of the terror had faded from her eyes and there was something sharply curious in that gaze. Her voice though, still shook when she spoke.

“I thought you were going to eat me I - I panicked - “

“Nyma! Nyma can you climb up?”

“The step is broken!” Nyma called out shakily, “Rolo! Get me out!”

“Okay,” came the other voice, “I’m - hang on! Hang on.”

A few tail lengths away, Hunk hovered, peering upwards. Lance followed his gaze, but the sun was a sharp shadow behind the deck of the ship. There came the harsh clatter of metal and then something dropped over the edge of the ship, coming down with the periodic sound of rope being loosened.

Then the ropes were within reach, a complicated looking mess of hooks and loops.

“Can you - can you bring us a little bit closer?” said Nyma, one arm still hooked around the back of Lance’s neck, “I don’t - don’t let go of me please - “

“It’s okay,” said Lance, bobbing them closer to the side of the boat “it’s going to be okay”.

They were almost touching the side now, and he could see the barnacles sticking to the metal plating. It was thick and smooth, like a military ship.

Nyma was reaching out with her free hand, and Lance held her up by the waist, keeping them both aloft by his tail. Finally, she caught the rope, tugging them both closer. She was trying to climb up higher so she could hook one leg into the loop, and Lance hoisted her up by the hip.

“Thank you,” she breathed, still holding on to him. “Thank you. I’m sorry.”

Lance had a split second of confusion, before she threw a second rope around his neck.

“Now!” she shouted, and suddenly Lance was being yanked out of the water like a fish on a hook, the rope digging sharp like a knife across his throat where it caught under his jaw. The sense of swooping vertigo was a lurching sickness, totally different to leaping out of the water.

Lance clawed frantically at the rope, letting out a breathless screech of fright when the momentum of the pull swung him hard into the side of the ship. Each jerk upwards was like a garotte, and his gills were already burning.
He could hear Hunk screaming his name, more people shouting - before Lance was being pulled bodily over the edge of the railing and onto the deck with a jarring thud.

He only had a disorienting view of boots, legs and the looming faces of seven, no eight, Galra and humans - before someone lunged at his face.

Lance let out a wordless cry, voice still choked by the noose. He swept his tail hard across the deck, cutting the legs from out under a few of the Galra so they fell, hard. Lance pulled desperately at the rope around his neck, and just managed to loosen it before someone else yanked on it hard and jerking Lance across the slippery deck.

“Who has the goddamn harness!” someone was shouting.

Someone had the other end of his noose, but Lance lashed his tail out, whip-cord fast, and another Galra went down. He saw the barrel end of a gun, but no one was shooting - just shouting at each other in the chaos.

One of the Galra came closer. Lance slapped them so hard with the brunt of his tail that they went crashing into the side of the deck and did not get back up.

Lance tried to scream, tried to call because if you’re in trouble just scream, scream as loud as you can - we will here you no matter where you are, but he had no breath in his lungs.

Another Galra made a grab for his face; one hand free, the other holding a mess of leather cords and something that reflected the sunlight.

A gag.

Lance felt all his blood go cold, and when they reached for his face, he hissed, showing all his teeth and snapped forwards despite the rope around his neck, mouth open and biting.

The galra screamed, a wet gurgling sound. Lance could taste blood in his mouth. They were clutching at their throat too, and their eyes met for a frozen moment. Then the galra crumpled.

Lance had torn out their throat.

There was red all over the deck, and Lance twisted, trying to wrench some give in the rope, making snapping bites whenever someone came closer.

“Fucking animal,” someone spat, “Someone get a hold of that tail!”

“Fuck you,” Lance spat. It was red. “Fuck you, fuck you -“

He saw the Galra closing in again, and his heart was so loud it was all he could hear; the rush in his ears. And for once, it wasn’t the wind or the sea. It was terror.

“Head out, head out - we need to get back to shore -“

“Get those engines up!”

“ Someone pin it down!”

Lance slapped his tail again in warning, sweeping it violently to the left, making someone crash into a crate. He swept it back -

Someone lunged forwards. There was a flash of white-silver, and Lance finally found enough
breath to scream as the sword speared him through the tail fin, pinning him to the deck.

Immediately, all the Galra clamped their hands over their ears.

“The harness!” someone shouted again, “Before he sings - get the fucking gag!”

Lance opened his mouth to do just that, struggling for air, too scared to pull on his tail - and a Galra promptly hit him hard across the back of the head.

Stars explode behind his eyes, and Lance choked, crying out when his head cracked hard on the deck. He retched, empty, cheek pressed against the wooden boards.

Noises came to him, strange and echoey, as if filtered. His hands wouldn’t obey him. His tail spasmed wetly, speared.

“...smaller than we expected,” someone was saying.

“I don’t want to see anything bigger, holy shit -”

Hands on his arms, on his tail. A wrenching pain when someone pulled the blade from his fin. Lance heaved, feeling like he was going to throw up. The knife had missed the muscle of his tail, but had sliced through the flesh between the fins and the tip.

It made a wet schhhhlick sound as it was removed, tearing down the fin, and Lance shuddered, whole body twitching. Someone had their hand across the bottom of his jaw, there were hands everywhere, touching him, hot like brands -

Lance thrashed weakly, whining high at the back of his throat when someone pressed down across the bridge of his nose. The sensation was overwhelming and he whited out for a few long stutters -

When Lance could see again, someone was sitting on his tail. There was the pressure of a boot on his back as they turned him around onto his stomach.

“...yeah just cut it shorter, we can tie it off.”

“Don't want it getting loose though, do we?”

There was something on Lance’s face, and looped under his jaw. The Galra weren’t looking him in the eyes, and Lance tried to hiss, but someone pressed painfully on his cheek, forcing him to open his mouth. Immediately there was something metallic pushed between his teeth, before it was pulled tight behind his head.

When Lance tried to open his mouth, he found he couldn’t. Every attempt pulled at the strip of leather across his nose, which made his eyes roll back with the pain of it. He shuddered, swallowing bile.

“There, that should do it - god, they’re just as savage as the stories go, aren’t they?”

He lay, dazed, the back of his head oozing blood as they pulled his tail up behind his back, careless about his torn fin. They were tying it to his hands, Lance realised. The bind was too tight, digging into the soft scales around his wrists.

Belatedly, he realised the noose was gone from his neck. His gills were raw with it, and from this angle he could only shiver as he watched the boots thump.

Lance shuddered, his heart still racing. He felt cold. He had never felt this cold before.
“...you didn’t have to hit him that hard,” came Nyma’s voice, “god, look at him,”

“Your part is done,” came another voice, “So everything you say from now on is more trouble than you’re worth.”

“We kept our end of the deal,” someone protested. Rolo. “You owe us safe passage back to - “

“Yes, and you’d do well to make sure your sister doesn’t change my mind.”

Lance could feel the heat of a body behind him, getting closer. He flinched. A hand gripped him by the elbow and turned him onto his side. It was one of the Galra; taller than the rest, with huge broad shoulders and a strange metal arm. He leaned in, eyes sharp and curious.

Lance hissed through his gag, doing his best not to pull on the harness.

“At least the emperor will be happy with us,” the Galra said. He hooked one finger around the trinkets around Lance’s neck, lifting them up to examine. The Galra’s eyes widened, and before Lance could react, he gave the necklaces a sharp yank, ripping them right from his neck.

Lance made a noise, high in his throat.

“Well, well, ” said the Galra, holding the pink crystal up to the sun, “Aren’t you a well-travelled one?”

Lance could only stare, sick to his stomach as the galra thumbed over the scale and the other crystal. He paused at Shiro’s tag. He looked back at Lance, and his gaze was sharp; the change in his demeanour palpable.

For the first time, Lance realised that one of his eyes was clouded milky white. There were parallel scars, streaked across from forehead to cheek. It was eerie.

“Who would have thought...” he said, “Seems like we have some mutual friends.”

Lance couldn’t breathe. He stared from the tag to the galra, and then back again. The galran ship. Shiro. That night in the water. The storm.

“I wonder...did you find this floating somewhere? Or did you devour a convenient corpse ?”

Lance made a desperate sound, pulling at his hands. He wanted to scream but the gag dug harsh into his mouth. He twisted against the binding on his tail, and the Galra just laughed, pocketing Lance’s trinkets.
The Galra opened his mouth as if to speak again - but was interrupted by a haunting shriek that sent everyone except the humans stumbling.

“Why don’t these things fucking work! ” someone shouted, “They said it would block out the -”

“Commander Sendak, Commander, we’re under attack!”

“There’s more of them, there’s - “

“ - the bombs, ready them - “

Another shriek, and the sound sent relief sparking down Lance’s spine. Rina . He tried to call back, but his mouth shut and his gills above water, he could only manage a muffled whistling. The ship, large it was, rocked suddenly.

“I thought you said the hull was - “

“It’s fine, keeping loading!”

The deck shook as everyone ran to their stations; the thump of heavy machinery making the wooden boards shudder. Lance tried to turn around, to sit up and see what was going on. He
couldn’t see the ocean, but the ship made a deep rumbling noise...and Lance realised that they had been moving; the ship was moving.

His sister’s voice, more hollow and angry than Lance had ever heard. It cut through the Galra’s voices and the ship’s engine.

“Give him back to us.”

“They’re going to down the ship if you don’t get us out of here, or give them what they want!” Rolo was screaming.

The tallest Galra - Sendak - had his back to Lance, braced on the railing.

“Come get him,” called Sendak, loading a rifle against his shoulder. Lance screeched behind his gag as the gun went off - but there was no answering shriek of pain. Missed.

“Give him back and perhaps we will not drown every last one of you!”

It was Merida. Meri was here. It was going to be alright.

The ship rocked again, hard left, as if it had been hit by something far below. Sendak cursed, boots sliding on the deck.

“Hull is holding,” someone called, “But we can’t go much faster - “

“- we need to out pace them for god’s sake they’re just fish!”

“- be going anywhere if the propellor goes out you fucking i-”

Another lurch of the ship. Sendak fired three more shots in quick succession, and Lance flinched hard with each one. He couldn’t hear...he couldn’t be sure -

“You come to our waters, and you dare? I will not ask again.”

On the other side of ship, other Galra were stationed, rifles on shoulders. The fired into the water, and Lance could hear the sound of something that wasn’t a bullet; it sizzled like flames and smelled of burned sand. He twisted on his hip, just in time to see the grey arc of a mermaid leap above the line of the deck and drag one of the galra right over the railings with a scream.

The other men shouted in panic, leaping as one away from the edge of the ship.

“Fuck - fuck, get me out of here, I - “

“You bunch of spineless fools, ” said Sendak, but he was looking shocked around the eyes too.

“Where is he?” roared Merida, and this time, even Nyma and Rolo clamped their hands over their ears, eyes screwed shut.

Sendak threw down his rifle. His gaze met Lance’s in the melee, and he suddenly strode forwards; one, two steps - and then he was wrenching Lance off the deck by the back of his gag, the straps pulling hard against the bridge of Lance’s nose and the edge of his mouth.

Lance’s vision went white, like a sun flare.

He was barely aware of being hauled to the edge of the boat, but his vision seeped back to him in a painful snap when Sendak let go of the harness, in favour of slamming Lance’s neck against the
Lance hung there, neck bared. The metal edge of the railing dug into the back of his arms as Sendak pushed him up.

The horizon was a pale tilted line, the sky was down and the sea was up. At this angle he still couldn’t see his sisters, but apparently they could see him...because all of a sudden there was utter silence.

Something warm and wet trickled into his gills, and Lance coughed. The world still sounded very far away, and he couldn’t smell anything at all. He felt like he was dreaming, everything narrowed down to the throbbing pain on his face.

“I don’t think so,” said Sendak, “How about this: you give us safe passage to port, and I won’t start cutting bits off?”

“You cannot win, Galra,” spat Merida, “You hurt him and we drown you all, slowly. Or we rip you to pieces, like your friend here. The only way you will live - you give him back to us. Now!”

Lance could hear the smile in Sendak’s voice. He tried to twist out from under the Galra’s knife, and Sendak stomped a boot down hard on Lance’s injured tail fin.

Lance screamed, the noise high and thready behind the awful gag. He tried to bite back the sound, to swallow it back, but it hurt so much and he found himself struggling for the next inhale, chest heaving.

Rina was screaming too.

“ - stop, you fucking monster, stop, Lance -!”

“YOU FOOLS,” someone shouted, another mermaid, voice hollow as the water, “Merida, just kill them!”

Sendak made an impatient gesture with his free hand, the knife jostling against Lance’s chin. Lance could barely feel it. All he could think of was that the sky had never looked quite so pale before.

Something made a sharp spluttering sound, and then there was a bright hot heat close to Lance’s face.

For a fleeting moment, it was a soft warmth … and then then the heat burned, scarlet hot against
Lance thrashed, rubbing his wrists raw, trying to keep the flame in sight. The searing pain was overwhelming, worse than the harness across his nose.

He screamed again, choking against the metal bit between his teeth, gills open wide and gasping.

"Stop," thought Lance, *Meri! Rina! Someone, anyone -*

"How about this," said Sendak triumphantly, "Every uninterrupted mile is another minute that I *don't* hold this to his pretty face."

Lance couldn't stop screaming, the sound raw and dry between his lungs and his mouth.

The mermaids hissed, it rose like a crescendo, rash and scuttling.

The Galra just laughed. He took the fire away from Lance's face, but held it aloft. Lance could see it now, a little silver-capsuled box, not much bigger than a ring case. The plume of flame flickered wildly with the sea wind, but did not go out.

He coughed behind the bit of the gag.

"Sound fair?"

Without waiting for an answer, Sendak pulled Lance backwards, throwing him carelessly to the deck. Having no hands to brace himself from the fall, Lance hit the deck hard on his front, the breath leaving him in a woosh.

"Is the coffin ready?" asked Sendak, picking up his rifle again.

"Yes sir."

"If you see any one of them get close - or try *anything* - start lighting the oil bombs," said Sendak.

"Yes sir."

Two of the Galra came forwards. They hesitated a little in front of lance, but under Sendak’s glare, one quickly grabbed him by the bound wrists, the other his tail. Together they lifted him off the deck, and Lance flinched. They flinched with him.

"F*ck - this - it feels so weird - "

"Just shut up!"

They carried lance towards a dark door way, before shuffling awkwardly downwards. His burned cheek scraped against something and Lance thought he was going to throw up.

"Don’t - hold his tail higher, it’s slipping - !"

"It feels so weird!" the Galra repeated, "It’s ...I thought it would be slimier?"

"Shut the f*ck up Haxus!"

"Hey! I did not sign up for this either."

They were in the belly of the ship. There were low lamps hung, but the two Galra had their hands
full and was knocking into every other corner. Finally, one of them set his tail down, and with a heaving drag, pulled a dark canvas cloth off a huge….

Lance stared.

It was shaped a little like his treasure chests, except longer and made entirely of glass. It was filled to the brim with water, and when Thaxus lifted the latches for the lid, it sloshed, still and stale. Something clicked in lance’s brain, and he jerked violently, trying to free himself from the Galra’s grasp.

“Shit - little help here!”

Thaxus swore, letting go of the lid and grabbing Lance by the tail. Bound as he was, Lance couldn’t do much except plead with his eyes, trying to force words past the bit in his mouth.

The two Galra ignored him, heaving and cursing as they lifted him just high enough. Lance hit the water with a splash, and immediately sunk. In the confusion, he swallowed a mouthful of water the wrong way, gasping for air before his tired gills opened with painful flickers.

Suddenly, all Lance could hear was the sound of his own ragged breathing echoed back to him ten-fold inside the confines of the tank. It wasn’t like the echoes of the cavern, or the tunnels below the lake. It vibrated strangely, and the scratched glass reflected his own eyes back at him, blurred and blue and panicked.

Lance surged upwards, trying to sit up, trying to get enough space to break the glass, anything - but the tank was too narrow, and he could barely turn onto his back. The glass made a skin-prickling squeal as Lance’s tail scraped hard against it. He hissed with pain when he knocked his cheek against the glass on the other side; the burn already a steady presence of pain, made worse by the harness across his nose.

He caught the gaze of one of the Galra, who froze, staring. Lance made a pitiful noise, widening his eyes as much as he could, pleading, begging -

Thaxus slammed the lid shut with an almighty bang, cutting off the noises from the ship.

The water sloshed against the top of the tank, hollow as glass ships in their bottles.

It sounded absolutely nothing like the sea.

*Ruthenia and Silla are the avian equivalents of Russia and Korea. Avian geography is not the same as RL geography, and so I used a latinised & historical version of the country's names. I haven't had a chance to really explain avian geography maybe i can if people are keen.*

First off, thank you so so much to onesmolhurt for her stunning illustrations i’m so honoured (we chatted re plot when i was writing!) Please visit her tumblr full set of art & leave her lots of love please!!!!
Secondly, oh god it's been so long, and so many shitty crap has happened in RL...but as long as i don't fail, i've officially finished with law school! which is not the end of my problems but. I have a bit of a break now and I PROMISE (for reals) to update the next chapter within the next 2 weeks or so!

I've been looking forward to writing this chapter for a long time, usually I never get to write the exciting bits of my fic cus i get too busy and they remain WIPs... I found keith's scenes really really hard to write, and I don't know if i pulled off the flow and the tension well with such a dialogue heavy scene. ANY FEEDBACK CRIT is super appreciated... this is meant to be an exciting chapter and I hope you guys enjoyed it ahh, please let me know any thoughts pls!! Please.

Re Lance and Izra, I really want to show the tensions and conflicting nature of affection and love. it's not a straight path and no one is omniscient. I wanted to show lance as a 3D character with his insecurities, flaws...and of course, his very very kind heart.

Thank you again to those who helped me out when my laptop died before exams. You're literally the reason why i could keep updating. If you wanna support me see more snippets and art etc, please visit my tumblr or twitter

PS: the Victuuri avian fic chapter 1 is almost finished. I will update a link here when it's up.
PPS: man, remember my merm fic writing days all the way back in hetalia with cosu/abubu? Yeahhh man.
Chapter Summary

Keith and Shiro are in way over their head, and become key pawns in an ugly political game. Lance learns the facets of cruelty, and finds unexpected kindness in unlikely places.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Loyalty is a fine quality, but in excess, it fills political graveyards.”
- Neil Kinnock

:i:

The next time the door opened, Mallory was flanked by two other avians - both wearing plain grey uniforms.

Keith had lost count of the days. He straightened in his chair when the two Avians came close, and he pulled away reflexively. The guards ignored him. One of them reached behind Keith to unchain the cuff from the chair; but left his hands and wings bound. Keith wanted to cry, but his eyes felt as dry as his throat.

“Come on,” one of the guard said, “Up.”

When Keith didn’t move, the guard made an irritated noise before grabbing Keith by the upper arm and pulling him bodily from his seat.

Keith’s legs, aching and cold from being forced to sit for such a long time, buckled. Blood rushed to his feet; Keith could barely feel the edge of the table when it knocked into his leg. His hands felt numb too, his bones hollow. He blinked hard, head spinning with the rush standing.

From the doorway, a tsk .

“Do hurry up,” said Mallory.

Keith spared him a glare, but did not speak. He hadn’t said a word since they confronted him with the crystals and Lance’s scale.

There hadn’t been anything he could say.

“If you won’t walk, you’ll be dragged,” said Mallory. “Whether you want your dignity intact is up to you.”

Keith managed three steps before his knees gave out again. His skin felt like someone else’s; the floor freezing cold. He couldn't keep up - and after stumbling once, twice, his two guards didn’t
pause to break their stride, merely tightened their hold on Keith’s arms and dragged him down the stone corridor.

They went up a flight of stairs; the back of Keith’s wings cushioning his legs as he hit the edge of every step.

Keith was too tired for pride. But not too tired to count the number of turns they made, or notice the fresh cold air beginning to seep through. Very quickly, they were climbing another set of stairs. Keith let his head hang back, and winced when a set of doors swung open against the stone.

Light flooded his field of vision as the guards dropped Keith unceremoniously to the floor with a thump. He groaned, pushing with his knees to roll over onto his side and get his weight off his cramped wings.

“Keith!”

Keith jerked his head up, just in time to see Shiro fall to his knees beside him, wings half spread, blocking out the rest of the room. He pulled Keith into a sitting position, and then proceeded the squeeze the air from his lungs with a hug.

Relief was like a shot of adrenaline, and suddenly Keith felt wide awake, breath sharp and clear.

He yanked desperately at his cuffs.

“Shiro,” said Keith - the word came out as a croak and was immediately followed by a coughing fit.

“ - you’re okay,” said Keith, “I’m - I was worried you were...your shitty plan - “

“Easy,” said Shiro. His expression was flat and grim, and it took a moment for Keith to realise it wasn’t directed at him. Keith tucked his face into the curve of Shiro’s neck, pressing his eyes closed. His heart was going a mile a minute, a painful lump in his throat.

“Can someone please get these off?,” Shiro was saying, “I cannot believe this, you agreed that Keith was loyal!”

“Oh he’s loyal alright,” came Mallory’s voice, “Just not to the Queen or Federation. Which makes him utterly useless to me.”

“Well, Mallory,” said someone else, out of sight, “How convenient it is then that we do not all kneel to Queen or Federation.”

Footsteps. Then someone yanked at Keith’s wrists, and he hissed as it twisted his elbow. The cuff came off with a metallic clack.

“Fuck,” said Keith, pulling his hands forwards and snapping his wings out.

He cursed again when his right wing spasmed when he tried to winch it back in, feathers scraping across the floor. “Shit.”

“Hey,” said Shiro quietly, reaching around under Keith’s wing to rub the aching space between his shoulder blades, “Easy. It’s gonna hurt for a while. I’ll give you a massage later.”

“Fuck your massages, Shiro,” said Keith, eyes still closed. He swallowed back a laugh. “You and your shitty plans.”
“The delegation is still waiting,” came an unfamiliar voice. Ruthenian accent.

“Yes,” said Mallory. “Unfortunately, Mr Kogane, you appear to play an indispensible role in this whole operation. But before we proceed, the council wants to hear first hand what happened when you made ...mermish contact.”

Keith tensed. He lifted his head to meet Mallory’s gaze, before glancing back uncertainly at Shiro. He hesitated, Lance’s smiling face floating to the forefront of his mind.

“...I don’t know what you - “

Shiro cut him off with a shake of the head.

“I’ve told them what happened,” said Shiro calmly. “They want to hear your side of it.”

“You told -!”

“I had no choice!” said Shiro, “so you can tell them the truth, Keith.”

“The truth about what?” said Keith.

He looked around the room, at the seven silhouettes against the broad arching windows. The sense of *déjà vu* was unnerving.

“The Alteans are asking for a mutual assurance treaty,” said Shiro quickly, “But it’s not - it won’t really work without reinforcements from the coast. ”

“The...wait, the Alteans? You’ve met with them already?”

Shiro shook his head.

“It was in the missive. The council is still deliberating. They wanted to wait until your...testimony.”

Keith glanced at the Avians around them.

“...How long has it been?” he said.

“Almost a week,” said Shiro, voice grim. His arm tightened around Keith’s shoulders. “I was really worried about you. If I knew they’d been keeping you cuffed like that I - ”

“A week...” said Keith. *Had it really been that long?*

Then Shiro’s second sentence sunk in.

It startled a laugh from Keith, incredulity sweet at the back of his mouth. He raised his eyebrows at Mallory in what he hoped was a highly contemptuous look.

“Reinforcements from the coast...you lot want *merfolk help?*” he said.

“ ‘Want’ is a optimistic word,” said Mallory testily, “Given that no one in the Alliance had made successful contact with any merfolk for decades. Until you two - or so you’d have us believe.”

“The boy did have fresh mermaid scales and a deep-sea strain of crystal,” said another council member. “The lab has confirmed it isn’t from inland.”

“He could have stolen them,” said the Ruthenian woman with a wave of her hand.
“From whom, exactly? The only specimens we have are either prospected powder or artefacts from Nippon. I doubt Zarkon himself has many, given how fast their rigs are destroyed out there.”

“It’s hardly evidence that -”

“I didn’t steal them,” said Keith.

Everyone turned to look at him, jaws turning in eerie synchrony. They looked like the birds of prey their plumage claimed to be, eyes shadowed and gleaming.

Keith swallowed hard.

“They were given to me,” he said, “By a merman.”

Silence; save for the soft shift of feathers.

“Start from the beginning,” she said.

They kept the tank covered in heavy black cloth.

Everything glowed a faint blue-green, the glass reflecting colour and luminescence of his scales - but the refraction was disorienting in the small space. Every breath and movement was made loud with claustrophobia. The water tasted like rust through his gag.

At one point, the whole tank had jolted - and Lance thought he could feel the vibrations of some deep explosion shuddering through the glass. It happened a few times in quick succession, making the water slosh loudly against the lid.

A shrieking call, long and sustained.

Lance tried pressing the top of his head against the glass; pushing with his hip as his tail - but the tank was too narrow, and he had no proper leverage with his tail bent and hands tied. He tried screaming again, but could only make a fraction of the volume of his normal calls, trapped behind the gag at the back of his throat. And every time he took a breath underwater, his gills hurt, raw from the fire.

Eventually, Lance had slumped, exhausted against the sloping side of the mermaid coffin, chest heaving.

He had waited, and waited.

At some point, the ship seemed to grow still. The deep throbbed whirr of its propellers slowed in the great skeleton, the humming vibration gentling through the glass.

Then came the unmistakable sound of footsteps, heavy and hurried.

Without taking off the heavy cover, Lance felt the glass tank being lifted, tilting violently on one
edge for a moment and throwing him bodily into the glass. The top of his head cracked hard against the lid, and Lance cried out behind his gag when he was tossed back in the other direction as the tank righted itself, the side of his face whacking the opposite side of the coffin with a splash. The glass pressed cold and rough against the burn on his cheek, and Lance’s vision went white with pain.

“... careful!”

“If that breaks and - no, more to your side. No, your other side!”

“Fuck!”

The uneven rocking motion of the water, and the way his elbows kept hitting the glass told Lance that he was probably being carried. Hope swelled in his chest. Perhaps the Galra were surrendering? Lance squinted, trying to discern the change in light through the tiny holes and gaps in the fabric. The cloth muffled the noises and scents, but he thought he could hear the wind better now.

Arching his hip, Lance thumped hard against the bottom of his tank. Then he did it again, ignoring the strain in his cuffed arms. And again. Harder.

“Hey,” someone said, thumping the lid of the tank and making Lance flinch instinctively, “Stop that!”

The water splashed up against the lid, tilting again. Lance coughed. It was difficult to breathe properly when the water wasn’t quite high enough for him to use his gills, but also wasn’t low enough for him to breathe easily through his nose.

He threw himself bodily against the glass again, but asides from some heartfelt swearing, the Galra ignored him. Panic sat cold in Lance’s stomach. He had no doubt that every minute he was here, he was getting further and further away from the sea.

Away from help.

Twisting desperately against his bindings, Lance peered at the lid; at the metal-wood fastenings that held down each hinge. Maybe if he could get into the right position, he could wear down the fastenings with his teeth. He’d have to get the gag off his face first though.

The mere thought of pulling against the harness across his face and nose made Lance shake with the memory of the sensation.

The tank jolted again as it was set down heavily on a hard surface. The cloth bunched up along the sides, letting in patches of light and colour; dirt and wood and metal.

Lance jerked in fright when a loud motor-sound thrummed to life right beneath him. They were moving again, he could feel it through the water he was suspended in; he could see the light and the shadows slide past. No, he thought, adrenaline making him light headed, no!

Lance tried calling out behind the gag again; throwing his shoulder as hard as he could into the side of the tank. He screamed, even though the gag pressed down on his tongue and made him want to throw up. The sound was a pitiful shriek, but he held himself above the waterline and screamed.

Someone thumped hard on the lid again, swearing in Galran.
Lance thumped back as hard as he could.

“Don’t use your gun, it’s made of glass dumbass! Do you want it to break?”

“I want it to shut the fuck up. Gives me a headache.”

Lance made a high pitched, whistling screech at the back of his throat in response.

Another thump. Then a hand was ripping away the cloth. The sunlight made Lance flinch; hissing at the faces peering down at him.

“Yeah,” said one of the Galra, “Not so cheeky now are you?”

Lance glared at him from behind a closed set of eyelids. Then he made a sudden movement towards the glass, teeth bared. All four galra jerked backwards, and Lance felt a small flicker of triumph. The closest Galra’s face contorted with rage. He moved to hit the glass again, holding up the butt of his gun - but was stopped mid-strike by a huge hand on his arm.

It was Sendak.

“It’s a three day journey to the palace,” said the Galra, voice clear despite the glass and water. “If the glass breaks and this thing dies en route…”

All four guards gulped visibly.

Sendak turned back to Lance, who hissed at him with bravery he didn’t feel. The galra seemed to consider him for a moment, eyes cold and amused. He leaned close to the glass, where Lance’s face was.

“No one knows much about merfolk,” said the commander. “Tell me...how long does a mermaid usually last when stranded on land?”

Lance stared back, breath shallow in his chest. Galra had different eyes, he realised; pupil slitted not round.

“Drying out must be a slow death,” Sendak continued, a claw tapping softly against the glass. “Maybe you’d make it to the capital. Maybe not. But I wouldn’t bet on it. Would you?”

Lance couldn’t breathe. The glass felt too warm against his back, the sun too sharp on his skin. He didn’t remember moving, but he was pressed up against the opposite side of the tank now, as far away from Sendak as was physically possible.

The Galra laughed. Then he pulled the heavy cloth back over the tank in one fluid motion.

For a long time, Lance was too scared to move.

Eventually, they stopped for the night.

It had been dark for some time now, and they had stopped once briefly a few hours before. The water had grown uncomfortably warm under the sun and the heavy cloth, the stale stink of it clogging Lance’s gills and throat. He had pressed his face right up close to the lid, chasing the faint whistle of fresh air between the glass. Judging by the lapse in time and gaps in his memory, Lance must have passed out from the heat a few times.
At least now, with the sun gone, the temperature was a little cooler.

Through the water and the glass, Lance listened to the sounds of people walking around; the sound of metal striking metal, and the distinctive crackle of fire somewhere to his left. The sound of laughter above the background hum of voices. The constant shuffling presence of two guards on either side of his tank.

A little while later, Lance caught the the familiar smoky scent of something being cooked. It made his stomach churn a little with hunger, but the pain of his burns and the rip in his tailfin pushed hunger to the back of his mind.

Lance had smelled this scent many times in the cave. Pidge used to grill the fish and squid that Hunk and Lance brought her. Keith would come back with lots of different things: meats that Lance hadn’t smelled or eaten before; deep red flesh that let off a strong aroma and dripped oils into the crackling fire, fat rabbits with soft fur, and even other birds. Keith seemed to delight in Lance’s curiosity, and kept bringing him new things to try even after the Strawberry Allergy Incident. Everytime Lance proclaimed a new favourite food, Keith would get an endearing sort of flush to his cheeks to match the red of his feathers. Keith got fluffy when he was pleased, and he would shoot fond glances when he thought Lance wasn’t looking. Lance had pretended to like a lot of strange food for those glances.

The shout of laughter brought him back to the present, and Lance let out a sob against the glass, squeezing his eyes shut at the memory.

It felt like a lifetime ago.

“Here’s dinner Throk. Hey...should we feed it?”

The guards had been joined by two of their friends. The smell of food was stronger now, seasoned with something Lance didn’t recognise.

“And get your arm ripped off?” a scoff. “No thank you.”

“We’ll get our heads ripped off anyway if it dies from hunger....”

The sound of drink hitting the bottom of a cup. The click-clack of something metallic being unfastened, and then a thump that jolted up the tank. Lance tensed in the water, uncertain.

“Oh please, it’s just three days. It’ll be fine.”

“Still...”

“It hasn’t made any noises for a while. Should we check on it?”

“I want a closer look.”

“Oi, watch that beer.”

The sound of jostling, and then the cloth was being lifted from one end of Lance’s tank. From this angle, Lance couldn’t see the Galra properly, but they lifted more of the cloth away and he realised that he was in some kind of...box. They had opened the door on the other end, letting the night air rush in. Lance watched them warily.

They seemed to gape right back, their slitted pupils wide in the shadows.
“By goddess,” said one Galra, leaning closer, “it’s glowing.”

His friend pressed a hand up against the glass, and Lance realised that, in the darkness, some of his scales were letting off a soft green-blue glow as if they were under the sea. They lit the now murky water in a soft green-blue; paler than they would have been without the moonlight and firelight.

With a scraping tug, the Galra pulled the tank further out of its confines, the cloth falling away a little more. Lance had nowhere he could hide, but he twisted against the glass so he could keep his eyes on them. He bared his teeth, but the Galra, emboldened perhaps by Sendak’s earlier demonstration, ignored him.

“...I didn’t know they glowed. Look at its eyes.”

“Unnatural, innit?”

“Sort of pretty though.”

A smack across the head.

“To make shoes out of maybe,” said one of the guards, “Those scales - brighter than them dyes, yeah?”

“Are you stupid? You know how much mermaid scales will go for on the market? For medicine and that. We’d never have to work again in our lives.”

Lance listened in horror, watching the four Galra stare at him with calculating interest. The panic that had been dulled by the sheer anxiety of time bubbled to the surface as their words swirled around his head. They were going to skin him alive for his scales. Lance felt sick and out of breath.

A galra rapped his knuckles against the glass, and they all laughed uproariously when Lance flinched away.

“Is that what Zarkon wants it for, you think?” said one of the guards.

“Who knows. I hope we get a bonus though.”

“We’ve been at sea for what, three months now? I want a fucking bonus.”

“Still. Didn’t think I’d ever see a mer up close. And live to tell the tale!”

“I don’t think you’d live for very long if the tale was told,” came Sendak’s voice from behind the group. “Soldier.”

All four guards jumped away from the tank, straightening up hastily.

“Commander!”

“Sir, we -“

They fell silent with a look.

“This mission is not for gossip,” said Sendak. “I’d hate to have to tie up any loose ends.”

“Yes sir.”
“Of course, sir.”

“Good,” said Sendak. “Leave me.”

The four Galra guards left without a word, shuffling off towards the fire and the rest of the party. Sendak watched them go for a moment, before setting down a bowl of food next to Lance’s tank and settling down to sit next to it. He was tall, even sitting down. Taller than Shiro, and he cast a long shadow across the base of the tank. He picked up his bowl of food again, and began to eat.

Nerves strung tight, Lance watched him from the other side of the tank.

After a long moment, Sendak turned to him, eyes a pale yellow.

“What are you hungry?”

Lance didn’t answer.

The Galra smirked, holding up a piece of food. He ate it, slowly, eyes on Lance the whole time.

“I suppose you’d try to tear my veins out if I came close enough,” said Sendak conversationally. “Or scream your pretty head off.”

He continued to eat. The smell was making Lance’s nose twitch.

“I understand the appeal. Though you wouldn’t last very long without us.”

Lance bared his teeth, and hissed even though he was sure Sendak couldn’t hear him from behind the glass.

“I’d rather die now than be skinned to make you rich.”

Sendak’s smile broadened into a horrible grin. In the light of the moon, his canines were sharper than those of avians and humans; longer too. Not quite the jaw of a mermaid, but it split along his mouth and reminded Lance of a shark.

“There’s all sorts of things here on land,” said Sendak, dipping bread into his bowl. “You’re not the top of the food chain anymore. You wouldn’t die from dehydration. Something else would get you first.”

Lance shuddered involuntarily.

Sendak set down his bowl and moved closer, ignoring the way Lance pressed himself back to the bottom of the tank. The murky water hurt; gritty and awful through his gills. But all Lance could hear was the pounding of his own heart, and the disorienting absence of the ocean’s breathing. It was too quiet and too loud, all at once.

He watched Sendak’s hand hover over the latch on the lid; the way his sharp nails curved in claws over the wood. Tap. Tap. Tap. Pause. Tap. Tap. Tap.

A soft laugh.

“Perhaps not tonight, then,” said Sendak.

Then he pulled the cloth back over the tank.
“I won’t do it.”

It took almost two days for Keith to recover from his detention and the spasming wing-cramps had kept him up most of the first night. Shiro had stayed up with him, pressing down hard on the twitching wing joints when they started to shake, massaging with the flat of his palm until the pain slowly ebbed. Keith had pressed his face into his pillow to hide his tears, because it fucking hurt.

They had locked him up, threatened him - and then had the gall to get Shiro to drop the bomb. Keith had fumed into his feathers for hours, sitting cross legged on the window-sill in their shared room in the barracks. They had both pretended not to hear the guard changing shifts in the corridor outside.

“It’s the only way to prove you’re loyal,” Shiro had said. “We need them to trust us.”

“Do we?” Keith had replied.

“They’ll clear your record! Don’t you want to go back home?”

Keith was silent.

“If they’re so worried about me defecting, why don’t they just send the both of us? Or just you. They trust you - “

Shiro had cut him off with a flat look.

“They don’t trust me. That’s the whole point Keith. They don’t trust me, and they don’t trust you - but they don’t want to throw one of their own away in the case of an ambush - “

“You are one of their own! You nearly died for...for all of this!”

“I know. Keith, I know. But they also thought I was dead for a year. And now we come back with an Altean request for a meeting; and up until recently they thought the Alteans had all been dead as well. They don’t trust any of this, Keith. But they do trust that you’ll...toe the line, if I was here. Mallory said as much.”

“Coming back here was a mistake. We could have found the Holts on our own.”

Shiro looked wrecked.

“I...we need help.”

“And you think these bastards will actually -”

“Keith. Please. ”

And Keith had never been good at saying no to Shiro.

Mallory smiled a thin, satisfied smile when they appeared on the ramparts the next evening.

It was just before sun down, and the sky was grey with cloud. Perfect undercover flying conditions.
Two other council members were with them, their long coats dark against the stone. Several sparrow-winged guards stood along the perimeter; and a soft yellow light spilled from the watch tower. The guards who accompanied them up the stairs fell back a little - but Keith noticed that one stood very close to Shiro.

“I’m glad you saw reason,” said Mallory.

Keith didn’t bother replying. His new clothes felt uncomfortable; the collar too high on his neck. It was better than what he had been wearing; the fabric light but insulating. It shifted easily against his skin; as all flying uniforms had to be - but covered more of his back and his arms. He wore his old boots though, the familiar tension and give to the metal blades a comfort against his heel.

Another falcon stood beside Mallory. She was a little taller than Keith, but her wings matched Keith’s own pattern and stature. Keith blinked: they were both Kestrels. She gave Keith a smile, her shock of red hair cut short and held back with flight goggles. She carried a long range rifle on her side, and several knives strapped to her thighs.

“This is Lieutenant Babicheva,” said Mallory. “She’ll be your flight partner. She has everything you need.”

Keith gave her a nod.

“Call me Mila,” said the Kestrel, holding out her hand.

Keith didn’t take it.

“Is that gun for me or the Galra?” he said, flatly.

Shiro made an exasperated noise from behind him. Mallory looked like he was resisting the urge to roll his eyes.

“Hopefully it will be for neither ,” he said. “Babicheva. You have your orders.”

Mila made a two fingered salute with her right hand.

“Da ser,” she said.

“Kogane. If the rendezvous is successful, you’re to return here at full speed. Mila will take the Alteans to the meeting point.”

“Fine,” said Keith, striding towards the open platform, “Lets get on with it then.”

“Keith -!” came Shiro’s voice.

And Keith turned, unbidden to see Shiro standing there, looking lost. The guard had his hand on Shiro’s arm, a warning.

“Be careful,” said Shiro.

Keith nodded. Mila was watching them with shrewd, amber eyes. Then she pulled the goggles over her face.

“After you,” she said, gesturing at the open air.

Taking a breath, Keith snapped out his wings and walked off the ledge.
Over the course of the next day, the sun seemed only to get hotter and hotter.

Perhaps it was the dark, heavy cloth. Perhaps it was the thick glass. Whatever it was, the water grew so warm that Lance felt like he was in some fevered nightmare. It was foggy with sand and staleness, and a good third of the water had simply evaporated, leaving Lance chest and shoulders bare. The surface of the glass was caked with the heat, and he could barely breathe.

Lance dozed, fading in and out of consciousness against the corner of the tank.

He’d long since given up trying to catch the guard’s attention. If he thumped on the glass, the most he got was a thump in reply and nothing more than the shudder of the tank as the vehicle moved on.

Time seemed to stretch, slow and viscous.

Lance kept jerking awake when the tank jolted over uneven ground. His tail fin was hurting awfully, a stabbing ache. The dirty water probably didn’t help, he thought wildly, it was going to get infected.

He made a soft noise with his throat; a plaintive sound. Having the gag in for so long was beginning to hurt his teeth and his jaw, which ached from being kept open. Everything felt too dry, and it was starting to hurt to even take air through his mouth. Lance made the noise again, soft and pitiful. If only someone would just inch open the lid, and then he could breathe.

He coughed into the gag, and whimpered.

A thump on his lid.

“Quiet,” said a guard.

Lance made the noise again. It was hard, without the use of his tongue. He pressed the un-hurt side of his face against the glass, eyes closed. Forget dehydration, thought Lance. He was going to die from suffocation instead. The air was heavy and hot, clogging up his gills. He couldn't breathe.

Finally, they seemed to come to a stop. Someone flipped over one side of the cloth, and Lance didn’t even have the energy to flinch away from the sunlight.

“...doesn’t look too well, does it?”

“Maybe it’s faking it?”

“I don’t know…”

Lance whimpered again, half hiccuping noises. Shadows fell across his tank and he pushed his forehead against the top of the lid, face angled to the edge where it met the body of the coffin.

“Half the water is gone already.”

“What on earth is going on here,” said Sendak, “Why have we stopped?”

“Commander,” said Lance’s guard, “we were worried something was wrong with it.”
“Hmm.”

Sendak leaned close, and through his first pair of eyelids, Lance could see the Galra considering him.

_Tap. Tap. Tap. Pause. Tap._

Lance’s breath was a faint patch of fog on the glass. He tried to plead to those yellow eyes. _Can’t breathe. Can’t breathe. Can’t breathe._

He made a high pitched desperate sound when Sendak made to move away. _Please, just open the lid a little. Just a little._

“I think it’s having trouble with the heat sir,” said another guard, coming into Lance’s field of vision. He was a full head shorter than Sendak, and had a young face. He also looked extremely nervous.

“The heat, Lieutenant?”

“Y-yes, Commander,” said the younger Galra, swallowing visibly, “It’s...the gills are opening a lot even though he’s not under water. And I think it’s probably cooler in the ocean with the Um. Water and all.”

_Tap. Tap. Tap._

“An expert on Merfolk, are you, Lieutenant?”

The galra blanched.

“No sir! I mean, Commander. No, Commander Sendak.”

“Why don’t you help it out? Give it some air.”

“Commander?”

Sendak was smiling his shark smile again. Lance could see the white of his teeth, and taste the salt of his malice.

“Crack the lid open. Go on.”

“...I - I don’t know if - “

“That’s an order, Lieutenant.”

Lance could see the naked fear on the younger Galra’s face, even through the glass and the fog of delirium. He felt a swell of pity for him, and blinked slowly in an attempt to be reassuring. It didn’t seem to work: the Lieutenant’s hands were shaking as he fumbled with the first lock on the lid.

“Just one will do,” said Sendak pleasantly. “Go on. Crack it open a little.”

“C-Commander - “

“I said do it!”

The young Galra shut his eyes and, using the hilt of a small hunting knife, wedged open one end of the lid.
As soon as it was open, there was a rush of cooler air, and Lance gasped, back arching towards the gap and the air oh god, oh god, thank god. The gag made it hard to breathe, but he gulped desperately, chest heaving as he pressed his uninjured cheek as close as he could to the gap between the lid and the wall of the tank. The Lieutenant made a yelp of fright, jerking both his hands away - but he left the knife there, still holding the lid open.

His wide eyes met Lance’s, and they stared at each other as Lance continued to heave for breath, eyelids flickering shut with each inhale.

The Galra flinched when Sendak slapped a huge hand on his shoulder.

“There,” said the commander, grin still wide, “Harmless.”

He pulled the knife out by the blade, and the lid thudded back shut, making Lance flinch. He exhaled slowly, letting himself sink back down a little into the water in defeat. His wrists protested; the skin and scales there long since rubbed raw. It bled, sluggishly, every time Lance moved.

Sendak refastened the latch, hand lingering for a moment on the glass.

“One of you can inch it open once every hour or so. We’re not stopping until nightfall.”

There was a chorus of affirmatives, and with a sinking heart, Lance watched as someone reached for the cloth again. As it was pulled over his tank, he noticed that the young galra Lieutenant was still staring at him with wide, sympathetic eyes.

That night, Sendak set Lance’s trinkets down on the lid of his tank.

The soft glow from the belmeran crystal and Izra’s crystal were twin points of light through the dirty glass: blue and pink. Lance watched as Sendak settled down next to his tank, leaning on the glass so he was eye to eye with Lance above.

The Galra hooked one finger through the necklace chains and picked out Shiro’s tag, dangling it above Lance’s face.

“I know you can understand me,” said Sendak. He set down his drink on the other side of the glass. “You can nod for yes, and shake your head for no. Nod if you can hear me now.”

Lance stayed perfectly still.

Sendak’s eyes narrowed.

“Nod of you can hear,” he repeated.

Lance did not move.

Then, without warning, Sendak slammed a hand on the edge of the lid, making Lance jerk back in fright.

“Answer me!”

Lance hissed, baring his teeth.

“How did you come to have this?,” said Sendak, still brandishing the tag. “Did you find it on a corpse in the sea? Nod, if they were dead. Shake your head if you found no one.”
Lance looked at the tag, then back at Sendak. He stayed very still.

Sendak’s fingers clenched over the tag, and his face contorted with a vicious anger. And then all of a sudden, it smoothed over again, like someone wiping away marks in the sand. It was unsettling to watch.

“If you tell me, I’ll open this lid,” said Sendak. “You must be desperate for some fresh air. Maybe some water. How does that sound?”

*Water. Fresh Air.*

Lance hated himself for it, but he nodded very slowly.

Sendak took a sip of his drink, and unhurriedly shifted the cup to the ground. Then, to Lance’s great surprise, he undid both latches of the lid and swung the entire thing open.

The cool night air hit Lance in a huge gust, and he surged towards it. Water splashed up against the sides of the tank as he pulled on his tail, trying to sit up - back curving against the glass as he breathed in through his mouth and nose in great lungfuls. With each new breath, his head seemed a little clearer, even as the wind stung the burn on his cheek.

When he came back to himself, Lance noticed that the Galra commander was raking his eyes over Lance’s tail, lingering at the soft shine where the scales glowed of their own volition; at the scales on Lance’s stomach and collarbones. Lance had never felt quite so vulnerable, and he wished he could curl up and hide somehow. Instead, he tilted his chin up defiantly and stared Sendak in the strange, yellow eyes.

The galra smiled.

“There. That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Lance stared around them. Being in the tank had left him with a limited window of vision. But sitting up, he could see *out* - and they seemed to be surrounded by tall vegetation, so tall they disappeared into the shadows of the sky. All around was the sound of...it wasn’t the rhythmic crash of waves at the surface of the ocean, but it came in great sighs and gusts, soft like a million drops of applause. If Lance closed his eyes very tightly, it almost sounded like water. Lance had never heard such a sound before, and he turned his head, trying see what was making the noise. It seemed to come from all around them, *above* them.

His eyes snapped back to Sendak when the galra moved, and something glinted in front of Lance’s face.

Shiro’s silver tags.

“Did you find these with their owner?”

Lance stared at the tags, panicked. He considered lying out-right. But in the end, he nodded.

Sendak stilled.

“Were they alive, when you found them?”

Carefully, Lance shook his head.

Sendak seemed to relax.
“I thought so. Ate him, did you?” without waiting for an answer, the galra tossed the tag into the air, and caught it again, before pocketing it carelessly. “I suppose it would have been an easy meal. Straight out of the sky.”

Sendak chuckled darkly to himself, and Lance had to exercise every bit of self control not to lash out - gag be damned. There was no doubt, now, that this was one of the Galra that had hurt Shiro and made him jump from that ship. The universe had strange whims, thought Lance. Back in the cave, watching Shiro sweat out his fever, Lance had day dreamed about drowning the Galra that had mangled Shiro’s wing. He had fancied making them pay for hurting his friend.

And now, here he was.

Maybe it was the heat or the long periods without proper air, but Lance realised he must have zoned out. Because he didn’t seen the galra reaching for him, or moving, or anything - until he was being dragged upright by the strap of his gag. It pulled sideways across the bridge of his nose, and he let out a shrill cry of pain. Immediately, Sendak’s had dropped to Lance’s throat - and his voice was cut off by the squeeze and prick of five, pointed claws.

Lance froze, eyes wide, panting through the bit in his mouth.

Sendak was very close now, and his good eye glowed a little, Lance realised - they reflected the light, slitted pupil blown wide as he scented Lance’s hair. Lance flinched, confused, eyes flickering between the Galra’s sharp canine teeth and his cold, curious eyes.

“I don’t think anyone has caught a mer man live like this before,” said Sendak.

Lance could feel the prick of nails and the rough pad of fingers against his throat. He made an involuntary, gurgling noise and felt the hand tighten - before Sendak went back to stroking the lip of each gill with the pad of his thumb. Lance shuddered in his grip, the sensation grossly intimate. He thought he was going to shake right out of his skin.

“Most sightings are of mermaids. All our specimens are mermaids...what little we have. It’s so rare to catch one alive ...they’re usually dead by the time you get them in an aquarium. In any case, they don’t live for very long afterwards.”

There was a white buzzing noise in Lance’s ears. He didn’t know what to do, but he was too scared to struggle. Around and above him, the strange rustling waves sighed huge sad sighs, and it felt as if he was in some alien place. He had nowhere to go. He would dry out and die long before he reached the sea.

He felt his eyes burn with tell-tale tears, and he blinked them back furiously. One escaped, and slid slowly, painfully across the burned patch of scales on his cheek.

Sendak’s eyes followed the tear track with avid fascination.

He was still stroking Lance’s gills, almost absently.

“The Druids have all the specimens. If I wasn’t so close to the Emperor himself…”

A pause.

“I’ve seen them. They were dull and grey and monstrous. Not like you.”

He turned Lance’s face to the side, so that his injured cheek was facing up. Lance felt like he was going to pass out any minute from hyperventilation. His pulse fluttered, guppy fast against the grip
around his throat.

A hand, touching the edges of his burned scales. They were raw and soft, oozing liquid. Lance flinched violently with his entire body when Sendak pressed down, tail splashing spasmodically in the water.

*Please stop,* he tried to say behind his gag, *please stop it!*

But only muffled sounds came out, thin and reedy.

“*Pity,*” said Sendak. “Such a pretty colour. So blue. Like a jewel, aren’t you? Do all mermen glow like this?”

The galra took his hand away from the burn mark, instead running his free hand over the other patches of scales on Lance’s collarbone; his elbow, his naval. He was tracing the pattern of luminescence, weak in the moonlight and away from water, but still strong enough to cast a soft glow against the Galra’s skin.

Lance tried to pull away, but he had nowhere to go except up against the glass.

Sendak ran his hand along the larger scales on Lance’s hip, digging his claw along the edge of each tessellated scale on his tail. Lance pulled against his cuffs, suddenly terrified that Sendak was going to start pulling them out, one by one. A particularly hard motion of his tail made the dirty water slosh up on the side of the tank, splashing the Galra.

Sendak didn’t even look up - just backhanded Lance, hard and vicious across the face.

The force of it might have broken Lance’s neck against the sharp lip of the tank, if Sendak hadn’t had his throat in such a tight grip. As it was, Lance gasped from the blow, struggling against the gag in his mouth, breaths coming in quick rapid whimpers that he couldn’t contain.

He was rapidly losing everything to fear: his self control, his dignity - everything. Lance didn’t even care - he just wanted it to *stop.* He needed water.

Sendak ran his free hand down the length of Lance’s tail, up over the curve where he had been tied. He turned Lance easily to his side, and ran the thinning membrane of Lance’s tail fin between his fingers, fanning them out. It pulled at the tear, and Lance spasmed weakly in the water.

“You can almost see right through it,” said Sendak, still running his hands over the tail fin. “So thin and delicate. Does it hurt?”

Sendak passed thumb and forefinger over the seam of the tear, and laughed low in his throat at the sound that Lance made.

The galra turned him back over by the neck, lifting Lance out of the water. For a long moment, Sendak just stared at him, thumb pressed hard against the soft underside of Lance’s jaw, tilting his head back. Sendak seemed drawn to the movement of his gills.

“I must admit,” said Sendak, “I’m curious to see whether the stories about your singing have any truth to them. No one has heard a Siren and lived. Maybe it’s just an old wives tale.”

Sendak traced the edge of the gag with a sharp nail, pressing over Lance’s lip, pushing it back to examine his teeth.

“Do you want this off?”
Lance stared at him, heart still beating too hard inside his ribs. He couldn't nod - not with the way Sendak had him by the throat. He made a pleading noise instead.

Tilting his face to the side and baring his neck, Sendak continued to stare. The scrutiny was fraying Lance’s nerves down to the edges.

And then, Sendak pressed his free hand over Lance's nose and mouth.

For a second, Lance was merely confused. He stared up at the galra, blinking rapidly. And then he tried to inhale - and found that he couldn't. He tried to twist free, but the hand around his throat just tightened, holding him still, neck arched over the lip of his tank.

Lance began to struggle, the lack of air making him jerk against the glass, confused and scared. *Oh god, he was going to die.* He whined, high pitched at the back of his throat - but Sendak didn't let go. He was still staring, eyes hungry and fascinated, as if he was waiting for something to happen.

Lance’s vision was becoming grey and spotted.

He felt his gills open wide, fluttering frantically in the air, trying to pull in water that wasn't there, *trying to breathe* -

Lance felt Sendak’s thumb press along the gills as they opened, felt his nails scrape along the soft scales there as they opened and shut, opened and shut - he shuddered at the heat of it, choking against the gag in his mouth.

Then Sendak dropped him back in the water.

Lance heaved in a desperate breath through his mouth and nose; coughing harshly against the glass. He had tears in his eyes, and he twisted on his shoulder, trying to keep Sendak in his line of sight. The galra was smiling with all of his teeth, genuine delight written clear across his face.

“I could feel you trying to breathe,” said the Galra in hushed, almost reverent tones, “even though you knew you couldn't. They opened anyway. They feel soft.”

Lance could only stare, frozen. Above them, the moon was grey and white through the clouds.

The galra examined his hands, pressing the tips of his index and thumb together in an absent, circular motion.

Lance could still feel a phantom grip around his throat, stroking the lips of his scales.

“Sleep well.”

Sendak slammed the lid shut.

Near dawn, there was a commotion on the other side of the camp site. The voices were too far away for Lance to hear clearly through the glass, but they sharpened when someone came running over to report to Sendak. They spoke in low, fast tones, but Lance caught a few words which made him jerk into full wakefulness.

*Sighting...avians...west...*

Lance felt his own breathing quicken.
In his mind’s eye, he saw Keith and Shiro’s silhouettes, perhaps flying over the forest. Hope surged in his chest, painful and exhilarating. Lance strained to hear more, holding himself very still in the water. He kept his eyes fixed on the cloth and the specks of light, watching for any movement.

“..very far north of us, Commander,” someone was saying, “we can’t be sure they are Avians until we hear back from the patrols up there.”

“Eastbound, though?”

“Yes sir.”

“It should be nothing, but be on the alert. Have archers ride front and back.”

“Yes commander.”

Sendak moved away then. And shortly after, the engine roared to life, drowning out most of the voices. But still, Lance pressed his ear to the glass, holding his breath so it would not echo in the tank. He thought of Keith, searching for Shiro all those long months. He thought of Keith, flying like a sea-swift - a wisp of a bullet through the low hanging cave entrance. Perhaps they had already gone back to the ocean, and found out all about what had happened. Perhaps Keith was looking right now.

Lance waited, and waited; still and quiet in his tank; hands tense in their cuffs.

Hours went by.

There were no more shouts about Avians.

To avoid being tracked from the air, they landed a few miles from the rendezvous point just before sunrise, and proceeded the rest of the way on foot - something that Mila was not happy about as they hacked their way through the undergrowth. She kept up a constant muttering of Ruthenian curse words.

“Ambush,” she said, wings tucked tight to her back as they walked, “We’re sitting ducks out here like this.”

“We can’t land on top of the meeting point,” said Keith testily.

“I know that,” said Mila, pulling a piece of twig out of her feathers and tossing it, “But if they catch us - we’re not out running anyone.”

“They won’t catch us,” said Keith, not bothering to look behind him. “We’re right between the trade route and the river. No one comes this way.”

“I fucking hate trees,” said Mila, hacking at one with her knife out of sheer frustration. Her hair was sticking to the side of her face from the heat - even down here in the shade of the trees. Keith shook out his feathers a little in the space between two huge evergreens, loosening his wings.

They trudged onwards.

To Mila’s credit, she barely seemed out of breath. If she felt any ache in her wings after their
speedy night-long flight, she didn’t show it. The only sign of exertion was the sweat on her hairline.

They were nearing the meeting point now - the trees were slowly beginning to thin; the ground sloping up towards what Keith knew was the lip of the valley.

“Military brat, were you?” said Mila.

There was a *shing!* as she loped off the end of an offending branch.

“Yeah,” said Keith shortly.

“I can tell,” said Mila. She paused. “You fly like a goose. Flat.”

Keith almost tripped over a divot in the ground.

“I do *not,*” he said, shuffling his feathers.

“Dive like one too,” said Mila cheerfully, warming to the topic. She herself had done a neat triple spin when they dove, and then a two point turn when she pulled up to land neatly on her heels. In Keith’s opinion it was all utterly unnecessary.

He could feel her gaze on the back of his neck, and didn’t bother answering, just stomped onwards. They must be nearly there - and judging by the position of the sun, whoever was waiting there wouldn’t be waiting for much longer.

A long minute of silence passed.

“Why did you join the military then?” she said, “A patriot? Us Kestrels are good fliers you know. Elegant. Competing is more fun.”

Keith snorted.

“No money,” he said, shortly.

“Ah,” said Mila.

It had been so long since Keith had spoken with another avian - at least, one who didn’t want to keep him in a cell. It felt a little awkward.

“Did you compete?” he asked after a moment.

They were almost wingtip to wingtip now, the trees having thinned in the place of long, rough grass.

“Mmmhm,” said Mila, “Got drafted like everyone else a few years ago.”

Keith raised an eyebrow over his shoulder.

“Moved up fast then,” he said.

“Family,” she said, shrugging.

“Oh.”

Quickly, the sky drew close - the clouds had thinned overnight, leaving the sun to warm the air;
heavy and yellow. Before they broke free of the trees, there was the sound of gasping - and then Pidge came barrelling towards them.

“Keith! You’re so many days late, we got so worried that - ” She broke off, skidding to a hasty stop at the sight of Mila.

“Where’s Shiro?”

“Busy being leverage,” said Keith, rubbing his face with one hand. Behind Pidge came the silhouette of Coran. Keith could feel Mila tense beside him, the movement small but clear through her wings. They were half spread, an instinctive reaction for flight. Her eyes were big.

Clearly, despite the briefing, she had not been prepared to actually meet a live centaur.

“Oh look,” said Coran, as friendly as ever, “Keith has brought a new friend. Do you have an answer from the council?”

“The council agrees to send a delegation to meet with you,” said Mila formally, straightening up. She tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. “They wish to discuss the terms of the treaty in person - but insist on meeting the Princess. We are expected at a stronghold in two days hence. If you’re agreeable, Keith will return with the news.”

Coran considered them, expression pleasant and friendly. Keith found him very difficult to read. Perhaps it was because, on the ground, Centaurs stood so much taller than Avians did. It was disconcerting.

“Very well,” said Coran. “We leave at sunset. For now, the Princess would like to speak with both of you.”

By the next day, only one third of the water was left in the tank. It barely covered half of Lance’s tail, and was a dusty grey-green colour. It sloshed, loud and empty in the tank as the vehicle moved inexorably onwards, leaving Lance in a dry, blury heat haze.

His throat hurt every time he tried to swallow - and his lips had become so dry overnight that the gag had split the edge of them. Every now and then, he could taste the salt-copper of his own blood. He hadn’t eaten in over two days now, and there was an insistent pain in his abdomen.

It seemed that no one was brave enough to remove his gag.

Lance wished he could just have some water.

Instead, he concentrated on breathing as shallowly as he could through his nose. Without the water, the tank felt even warmer than the day before, and Lance thought he could feel the air disappearing like sand in an hour glass. He felt like he had to ration it, somehow.

He had lost the feeling in his fingers too; having gone a little numb from the palm down. He couldn’t turn enough to see them, but he could feel the rope cuffs digging five tight grooves into his skin and scales. Every now and then, he would turn himself onto his shoulder so that his wrists and fin were above the water; but Lance could never hold this position for long since the water had become too dirty to breathe in, and the way it splashed over his gills made him cough for long,
agonising minutes every time the tank jolted.

Instead, he spent most of his time pressed close to the lid of the tank, waiting for someone to crack it open.

Ever since that first time, the same young Galra Lieutenant had been sent in to crack open the glass lid. To Lance’s relief, he seemed to do this on the dot, which meant Lance could count the passage of time more easily. And when the door of the vehicle opened this time, Lance didn’t bother opening his eyes. It hurt to blink - everything was too dry. So he kept the first layer of his eyes closed, watching the Galra approach.

There wasn’t much space in the vehicle, and he kneeled down next to the tank as he always did. Except this time, he glanced carefully at the closed door of the vehicle, before quickly undoing both latches of the lid. Lance tensed, going still in the water.

“It’s okay,” said the Galra in hushed tones, lifting the lid quietly “I’m not going to hurt you.”

The rush of air was a relief as always, and Lance gulped in a huge breath, pressing himself further up on the glass. But he kept his eyes on the Galra, wary of his hands when they disappeared into his jacket. He pulled out a large flat silver flask, and shook it a little.

“Don’t have much time,” said the Lieutenant, “But I’m going to - I...I brought you some water?”

Lance stared at him.

Brown-yellow eyes stared back.

“Um,” said the Galra, “Maybe I can just. Tip it - “

Lance shook his head, and when the Galra looked confused, he scraped the side of the gag against the glass in frustration. The Galra made a noise of comprehension.

“Oh - oh right, of course. Uh. If I take that off, do you promise not to bite me?”

Just the thought of having the awful thing off his face and off his nose made Lance nod his head frantically. He made encouraging clicking noises at the back of his throat, but it turned quickly into a cough.

“Okay,” said the Galra, glancing nervously at the door, “Okay. Right. I’ll have to put it back on right after though.”

Lance nodded again.

Anything. Anything. Please.

With fumbling hands, the Galra set down his flask on the edge of the tank, before reaching to Lance’s face. Lance obligingly bowed his head so they could get at the straps at the back and under his jaw. The Galra made quick work of them, loosening it enough that they could slide it free of Lance’s mouth.

Lance pulled in a gasp of breath, stretching and rotating his jaw with a groan.

“Thank you,” he said - and was shocked by how hoarse his voice was; thin as the air in the tank, “Thank you.”
When he looked back at the Galra, the Lieutenant was staring at his mouth. Lance quickly hid his teeth, glancing hopefully at the flask of water.

“You’re welcome,” he said, uncapping the flask and holding up to Lance.

“I’m sorry,” said the Galra, “I don’t think we have time to undo your hands. I’ll help you drink?”

Lance tilted his head back, and the Galra carefully held the flask to Lance’s mouth.

The first taste of water almost made Lance burst into tears. It was cool and clean; not the ocean but rain water, and it felt glorious going down his throat. He pushed at the mouth of the flask, and the Galra tipped it a little higher so Lance could gulp it down, throat working in long draws. After a few long moments, he tipped it back the other way to let Lance breathe.

“Could you - my eyes?” said Lance.

“Over your eyes?” said the Galra.

Lance nodded.

“Okay,” he said, “Here.”

Carefully, he tipped the rest of the flask over Lance’s eyes and the bridge of his nose. Lance let out a sigh of relief, the cool water running over his eyelid. He flicked them open, and felt the water splash onto his forehead when the Galra jerked in surprise.

“Sorry,” he whispered, “Sorry - I - “

The water dripped, one, two … then it stopped. The Galra capped the flask.

“I’ll come back with more,” he promised, “And some food later tonight. I’m sorry - you must be hungry.”

“It’s okay,” said Lance, still luxuriating in being free of the gag, “Thank you.”

The Galra looked conflicted, eyebrows drawn tight above his pale eyes.

“I have to put the harness back on. I’m sorry.”

Lance nodded reluctantly, and bent his neck forwards again. The Galra fumbled the straps this time. Lance could feel his hands shaking, ever so slightly.

“What’s your name?” asked the Galra.

Lance’s gaze jerked up in surprise.

“...Lance,” he said. “What’s your’s?”

“Zojas,” said the Galra.

Lance nodded.

“Thank you Zojas,” he said quietly.

Then he opened his mouth for the gag.
Over the course of the day, Zojas returned twice more with full flasks of water.

He also left more give in the harness around Lance’s gag, so it wasn’t strapped tight over his nose. It hurt a little less, and despite the ache of hunger and the dryness of the air, Lance dozed off a few times, face pressed against the glass.

They didn’t have time to talk, but the water meant Lance could blink and swallow without wanting to cry.

The hour before nightfall, Zojas came back with a tiny bottle of something that smelled strongly of herbs. It was pungent and sharp, and made Lance’s nose twitch.

“It’s for your - “ Zojas gestured at the burn on Lance’s cheek. Perhaps it was the dirty water or the lack of fresh air, but the wound was still wet and awful. “We use it for burns and cuts and stuff - it - it tingles a bit - “

Lance nodded his assent - because what had he to lose, now? - and Zojas carefully dipped a finger in the jar before dabbing the strong smelling paste on Lance’s cheek. It stung at first, sharp and harsh, making Lance’s eyes water.

He hissed, involuntarily, and Zojas jerked his hand away. The movement made Lance jerk backwards as well, and they stared at eachother for a moment, mirror pulses thrumming fast beneath their throats.

Lance leaned forwards again, and Zojas applied more of the transparent paste to Lance’s cheek. Now the first sting was over, it did feel a little tingly. Lance thought back to the poultice they gave Shiro, to help with his infection. If Merfolk herbs helped avians, he hoped that Galra medicine could work on merfolk too. And if it was poisonous, Lance prayed it would work quickly and save him the agony.

By the sounds of the chatter around them, and the way they kept going even after sundown, Lance gathered that they were nearing the city walls.

He was desperate to get out of the awful dirty water, but even with the drink that Zojas had been sneaking him, Lance could still feel the dryness of his scales and the tightness across his skin. His gills hurt, both from the cut and the lack of proper water.

Lance wondered how many other mermaids and mermen had died on routes like this.

When they finally stopped to rest, it wasn’t in midst of trees. Lance saw strange structures, straight out of the illustrations he kept in the cave - tall walls, pale stone. He glimpsed it between a small tear in the cloth over his tank. They were in a town now. And those were buildings.

Distantly, Lance felt curiosity pushing faintly at the walls of his dread and panic.

When Sendak came to visit, he was smiling.

“Almost there, little fish,” he said, setting down a flask of something amber and sweet smelling. He pulled up one corner of the tank and left the rest covered.
“Got to be careful now,” said the Commander, “Civilians. Wouldn’t want to cause a panic. Or any rumours.”

Lance didn’t move, just watched as the Galra took a long sip from his drink.

“I was worried you’d die on the way here, you know,” said Sendak after a moment of silence. “A few days without food is usually fine. But you never know with animals.”

Still, Lance made no move. He didn’t want to provoke Sendak into anything. He just lay there, temple against the glass.

“That witch had better be grateful,” said Sendak, seemingly to himself, “sending us off on these fanciful missions when there’s a war to be won. But she has the Emperor's’ ear. Disgusting.”

“She hasn’t said as much, but we know what this is for. Don’t you want to know what you’re for?”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Old wives’ tales, that’s what you’re for,” said Sendak, with a snort of derision. “And when it doesn’t work, I’m sure the witch will have other uses for you. Or if not, those pretty scales should fetch a pretty price to match.”

A smile, pale and cold like the moon.

“How I’d love to be there to watch you writhe .”

Lance couldn’t move.

He prayed that Sendak wouldn’t open his tank, prayed that he would just keep talking and drinking and then go away. He didn’t know who he was pleading too, but it became a repetitive buzz in his ears, louder than the sound of his rapid, shallow breaths in the glass coffin. Please, please, please, please.

Sendak drank again, slow and languid. His eyes never left Lance, burning a trail up and down his tail, lingering on his neck and his eyes and his bound fin. But eventually, Sendak pulled the cloth over the tank. The sound of him clambering to his feet, heavy and loud. The thud of the door. The click of the lock.

Lance breathed out.

Lance wasn’t sure how long he was out - but he was woken by the sound of the door opening. He tensed instinctively - but relaxed in his bonds when a familiar hand pulled off the cloth with a sweeping tug, followed by the click-switch sound of the latches being undone. Lance shifted on his shoulder, and when Zojas lifted the heavy glass lid, Lance sat up with a grateful noise.

He could smell the fresh water and something else -

“I brought you some food,” said Zojas in a low whisper. “Everyone else is still asleep. Quickly.”

Zojas undid Lance’s gag, sliding the bit out of his mouth and the straps down under his jaw. The young Galra looked as if he himself had not slept a single wink; there were shadows under his eyes and his hair stuck up messily around his ears.

He helped Lance drink some water, before holding up bread with some kind of sliced meat. It
smelled seasoned and salted, and made Lance sneeze.

Zojas looked worried

“I...don’t know what Mermaids - sorry, I mean Mermen eat. Of course you don’t eat bread, I - maybe just the meat? ”

“I can eat bread.” said Lance, mouth watering at the thought of any kind of food, “But not much. What meat is it?”

“Lamb,” said Zojas, “it’s herbed though. I couldn’t get any fresh rations, I’m sorry.”

Lance shook his head. He wasn’t sure what ‘lamb’ was, but it was probably fine. He didn’t care.

“That’s okay. I’m. Not picky right now.”

Zojas laughed, a whispery quiet sound.

“Sorry. Yeah. Right. Okay, well.”

He held up a piece of the meat to Lance’s mouth, and Lance gulped it back. It tasted of some herb he had not had before, but tasted delicious anyway. Lance’s stomach was screaming at him for more food, and he quickly ate another piece of it, barely bothering to chew.

Zojas wetted the bread with some water before feeding that to Lance as well.

Chewing felt strange, the motion of his jaw aching after being held open by the gag for so long.

“Can you have a bit more?” said Zojas, holding up the last few pieces of lamb, “Here I’ll break it into - ”

Zojas broke off suddenly, ears and face swivelling to stare out the back of the vehicle. Then all the blood drained out of his slim face, and he dropped the food with a curse.

“Shit,” said the Galra, and now Lance could hear the footsteps too. He shrank down into the tank so Zojas could pull the lid back down - but it was too late.

“Well this is touching,” said Sendak.

Zojas was a statue, his hand still on the lid. Lance could almost hear his heartbeat, racing in tandem to his own. The young Galra was terrified.

“Sir - !” he said, “Commander Sendak, I was just - I - “

Sendak raised one eyebrow.

“Just... what, Lieutenant?”

Zojas still hadn’t moved. His knuckles were white on the lid. Behind Sendak, move of the Galra had appeared, casting long shadows on the ground in the early morning light. Lance felt sick with panic; his blood cold with it.

“He needed food and water, sir,” said Zojas, and to his credit, his voice held steady. “I was concerned he wouldn’t make it to the capital and our orders were to bring him in alive and - “

“I’m well aware of what the orders are, Lieutenant,” said Sendak serenely. “The fish was also
“I - “

“Are you questioning me?”

Zojas wet his lips.

“No, Commander.”

Sendak nodded.

“Seize him.”

Immediately, two of the Galra moved to drag Zojas out of the vehicle. Zojas had to let go of the lid as they grabbed him by the arms, and it slammed down with a resounding crack.

Zojas was struggling against his two peers, even as they pulled him bodily out of the vehicle and onto the ground. When he tried to get back up, they forced him to his knees.

“No, sir, please - he was dying - Commander, I had to - sir!”

Lance pushed the lid back open with the top of his head, ignoring the strain in his arms.

“Stop!” he shouted, “Stop it!”

All of the Galra turned to him as one, and Lance felt a surge of satisfaction at the naked fear in their faces. But when the two Galra didn’t let Zojas go, Lance pulled in a shaky breath.

“I’ll scream,” he said, voice ringing clear despite the knives in his throat. “I’ll sing.”

For a split second, Sendak looked shocked. But between one blink and the next, he pulled the gun from his holster and pressed it to Zojas’ forehead.

Lance froze, mouth half open.

“You were saying?” said Sendak, grinning triumphantly.

Lance looked from Zojas to Sendak, eyes tracing the gun.

“Someone put the gag back on that thing,” said Sendak, gun not waverin. “If you make a single noise…”

There was a click of the safety.

One of the Galra climbed into the vehicle, and with nervous hands, wrenched the gag back into Lance’s mouth. Lance let him, unable to look away from Zojas’ pale face. His hair was purple in the sunlight, like the dry lavenders between the pages of Lance’s books.

When the strap of the harness was pulled tight over Lance’s nose, Lance made a sharp noise of pain, neck jerking back with the force of it. The Galra shoved him unceremoniously into the tank and shut the lid. Lance twisted, desperate to see out of the glass. With the lid shut, all the noises became muffled - but they were close enough for Lance to hear every word.

“- not what it looks like,” Zojas was saying.
“Really,” said Sendak, voice cold. “Because I’ll tell you what it looks like. It looks like you were trying to help it escape. Had ambitious of riches, did you? Going to sell it on the blackmarket and run off to a life of luxury?”

“No!” said Zojas, “Commander, I was just trying to help. He hadn’t eaten in three days, no water, I - ”

“The Empire doesn’t take kindly to thieves or traitors - “

“Commander, you must believe, me; Lance was - “

“Lance?” said Sendak.

Sendak turned to the tank then, staring at the merman with his good eye. His expression was inscrutable, but there was something ugly in the set of his mouth and the pinch of his nose. Sendak turned back to his Lieutenant, and Lance could see the flash of his teeth. He was smiling.

Zojas gave Lance a desperate, terrified look. His eyes flicked immediately back to his superior, but the damage was done.

“Oh, I see how it is,” said Sendak, with that same, cold nonchalance.

There was a bang .

And Zojas disappeared from view as he crumpled to the ground.

Lance screamed. He screamed and screamed, but no sound came out of his throat.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Did you think I was going to let him live?”

Tap.

A laugh.

“To be honest, so did I. But I had to set an example. Soldiers have no business getting soft. ”

Tap. Tap.

“...Had to stop the thought right there, in his head. Things like that tend to spread, you see. Maybe you were hoping he’d help you escape.”

More laughter.

“Oh, why so upset, little fish? You tore out the throat of one of my men with barely a blink.”


“You killed Lieutenant Zojas too. Just not with your teeth.”
The journey passed strangely, after that.

Despite the warmth and the absence of anyone cracking open the lid, Lance found himself shivering hard against the glass. Logically, he knew he was probably in shock - but it was difficult to hold any clear thoughts. He was unable to stop replaying the moment over and over in his head; those wide pale eyes seared into memory.

Lance sobbed against the gag in his mouth, coughing with the force of it.

_Zojas was dead._

He had been the only person to show Lance a shred of kindness, and he had died for it.

True to Sendak’s word, the engines slowed to a stop before the heat of the sun had gone down. Lance felt the vibrations quieten through the glass, but for a long, long time, nothing else happened. He counted the seconds between each of his breaths, trying to space them out and slow his own frayed heartbeat. It was getting hard to breathe at all, really.

He closed his eyes.

Some time passed before he heard approaching footsteps and low, murmuring voices. Then the door to the vehicle was flung open. They dragged the tank slowly out, without lifting the covering cloth. Lance could see hands - four sets of them - and then he was lifted with a jolt. The water splashed, hollow, and the movement whacked his elbows on the bottom of the tank.

Through the glass below him, Lance could see the pattern of stones pass as they moved. They were smooth and shiny, even through the dirty water; placed in a dizzying pattern that seemed to pull and shrink as they moved. It made Lance feel a little sick, so he closed his eyes and pressed his face against the glass.

Snippets of conversation reached his ears.

“... _careful_!”

“...drop...witch will probably…”

“...shut up…”

Something that glowed a bright vibrant purple cast a colourful shadow beneath the tank for a brief moment, visible even through closed eyes. The sound of a heavy door opening and closing.

And then the tank was being slid loudly onto a metal platform, the wrought iron criss crossing like spider silk. It juddered all through the glass. And then the soldiers retreated, their footsteps loud and echoing across the metal floor. Then, somewhere to his side, an unfamiliar _clip-clop-clip_ noise.

The cloth was ripped away without ceremony.

Lance flinched reflexively - but realised belatedly that the light was a dim shade of that same
purple; and did not hurt his eyes when he flicked one set of eyelids open cautiously.

“What on earth - he is absolutely filthy! What in the name of the Emperor was Commander Sendak thinking, keeping such a specimen in this condition?”

A woman with long white-grey hair was standing above his tank, arms folded and face set in an expression of displeasure. She was wearing loose fitting clothes, and she had bracelets that flashed gold in the purple light. But what was most striking about her was her body - which was...

Lance blinked in confusion, the surprise momentarily pulling him out of his fear and shock.

She had four legs, furred in the same colour as her grey hair. She stood taller than anyone he had seen, even Sendak, and when she shifted to walk around his tank, Lance could see that her feet was what made the *clip clop* noises.

From far below them, a voice answered her:

“The tank is ready.”

“Good, fetch me Commander Sendak. I wanted to examine it before hand, but it might be too dehydrated. It won’t do for it to die *now*. We will let it rest.”

“Yes mistress.”

The woman turned back to Lance, head tilted. He looked back warily.

“Poor thing,” she said, though her face betrayed absolutely no emotion, “Don’t worry. You’ll be much more comfortable soon.”

And now that he listened, Lance could hear the tell-tale sound of water. It sounded strange, and had too many echoes...but it was water.

Behind them, the door opened once more, and there was the sound of heavy footsteps across the metal floor. A second pair, barely there, followed further away.

“Yes, Haggar?”

“Commander Sendak,” said the woman, “What were the orders for this mission?”

A pause.

“To retrieve a mermaid.”

“A merfolk specimen, yes,” said Haggar. “Specifically, a *live* specimen. You are fortunate that this one has not wasted away! Absolutely pathetic. If it had died, the Emperor would have been *most* displeased.”

Lance dared not looked Sendak in the eye. The Galra commander was standing just off the his periphery.

“He’s alive, isn’t he?” said Sendak.

“ Barely,” said Haggar. “Now, I want him in the tank to recover before we examine him further. Open the lid.”

There was a tense moment of silence. Then Sendak seemed to acquiesce, unlatching the lid with
two practiced movements, before carelessly throwing back the lid. It clattered, the sound loud as a
gunshot in the huge space. Lance flinched violently away, but Sendak didn’t give him any time -
simply grabbed him by the throat and the back of his arms where his hands were tied to his tail.

Lance let out a wail of pain as the gag pulled sharply on his face, retching against the bit in his
mouth.

“... careful!”

“We wouldn’t want it to get loose, Haggar,” said Sendak, voice full of malice as he carried Lance
towards the water. “This one ate a man alive, you know.”

“Well clearly you should have fed it ten more of your worthless men - it looks half starved.”

The water was very close now - it glowed, somehow, a bright clear blue. Lance could smell it, even
through the white noise centered at the front of his face. It smelled a little like the sea, but wrong
somehow. He gasped in the scent and moisture, eyes blinking rapidly as he was put down on his
side.

“Cut those ropes,” said Haggar, “Attach these instead.”

Lance couldn’t see behind him - Sendak had him pressed to the floor with one knee between his
shoulders. But he felt the sawing motion of a knife between his bonds. A moment later, his tail was
finally free, flopping straight for the first time in over three days. It spasmed wetly on the metal
grates, and the blood suddenly rushed to the aching muscles, making Lance whine with pain. He
could feel something rigid but not metallic being attached tightly just above the fin of his tail. Once
the ropes were free of his bleeding wrists, the same was attached there.

His face hurt, where it was pressed against the metal floor. He could the see the rest of the room
from here - a huge tall space. There were on an elevated area, and he could the see the curved side
of a huge glass tank that stretched from their level all the way down to the floor.

Another figure, blurry from this angle, walked across his vision - and Lance jerked hard against
Sendak’s grip.

Wings.

That person had wings!

“Be still!” said Sendak.

He stood up, removing his weight from Lance’s back and pulling him upright by the throat. Lance
choked.

“I said be careful!” said Haggar.

“With all respect,” said Sendak, kicking Lance’s tail towards the edge of the tank, “This is the only
way to make sure it does not escape.”

There was a splash as Lance’s tail fin dipped into the water. And oh, it was cool and wet and oh
god, Lance twisted as best he could in Sendak’s grip, careless of the way the Galra’s nails scraped
along his gills. He needed the water.

“Drop it,” came the second voice again, “Come on - drop it now!”
Sendak let go.

All at once, Lance fell with a huge splash. Whatever had been attached to his tail pulled him down with its weight, affixed as it was to the bottom of the tank. The water swallowed Lance in a single embrace, and suddenly he could breathe properly again.

Lance pulled in huge gulps of water through his mouth, even past the gag, his gills opened wide as he gasped and gasped and gasped. Lance twisted in the water, eyes fully open for the first time in days. The cool water felt so good against his tail, he wanted to sob. Lance knocked into the side of the glass as he sank, and slammed the gag against it again with a noise of frustration.

“Hey,” came a muffled voice, “Hey calm down, it’s okay.”

The cuff on his hands pulled him up short abruptly, drawing his shoulders up uncomfortably if he sank too low. Looking up wildly, Lance realised his handcuffs were attached to the top of the tank. He pulled on them, but it was strong. Then he saw a shadow pass across the top of the tank.

For a moment, he didn’t know what it was.

Then it hit him. It was a lid. It was the lid of the tank.

No, not again, no!

Desperate, Lance pumped his tail hard, trying to reach the surface. But the length of binding around his tail kept him in the middle of the tank. Panicked, Lance tried to reach down to get the thing loose, bending as much as he could from the waist, twisting his tail this way and that. He yelled from behind the gag, the noise causing a curtain of bubbles to swirl around his tail in a rush of white. But Lance couldn’t reach. He was trapped.

Someone was tapping urgently on the glass.

“Hey. Hey!”

Lance rushed towards the figure, teeth bare and hissing. At that moment, he didn’t care anymore.

But Lance froze, inches away from the glass.

Because there, on the other side, was Pidge.

No, that wasn’t Pidge.

...Pidge wasn’t quite this tall.

And Pidge didn’t have wings.

Lance blinked hard, teeth retracting in his shock. Pulling distractedly at his new bonds, he floated as close as he could to the wall of the tank. The curve of it was gentle enough not to distort the silhouette on the other side, but Lance could see the shock in his own eyes, luminous and alien reflected on both sides.

The Avian pressed a palm to the glass, carefully, slowly, so as not to startle.

“Hey, that’s it,” said the Matthew Holt, “It’s okay. Shhh. It’s okay.”
BOOM. Matt!! Also...Keith doesn't realise just how close he was... TT____TT Did people find Mila's cameo okay, or too jarring? I hope the addition of another (brief) OC isn't too annoying either. I kinda got unexpectedly attached to him in a very short time...oops...

Sorry for the long wait again guys, even though I was on break, a lot of shit happened inc me being very sick for a few weeks. I'm going to try my best to get the next chapters out more quickly. I had really bad writer's block and got a bit sad re some of the reactions to last chapter but I think i'm over the block now!! This chapter was SO HARD to write haha, it was like squeezing blood from a stone but I think in the end it's actually better paced than some of my other ones?! Thanks v much for Jas, Karovie & Jen for beta/holding my hand! You can blame Jas for Zojas actually :3

If you have any crit, suggestions or anything at all, please leave a comment!! I really really appreciate you guys commenting. It really helps especially with writing big chapters, and i really treasure it. thank you... you guys are all that keeps me going often!!! If you wanna help me out even more, pls visit my twitter or tumblr!

PS: from this chapter onwards, a really fitting song is this one, which is in the Fic Soundtrack! I think it's especially suitable for the later scenes in this chapter...and Zojas too.. my poor sweet Galra baby.
Chapter Summary

Lance discovers a few more layers of the power struggle at the heart of the empire, and what Matt has been doing all this time. Keith finally finds out about everything.

Chapter Notes

TW: There's no graphic torture or anything, but Haggar does hurt Lance for science, and Keith has a panic attack kinda moment near the end of the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"We can never be gods, after all. But we can become something less than human with frightening ease."
- N.K. Jemisin

:i:

Perhaps it had been the way that Lance had initially calmed at Matt’s approach. Perhaps it had been the way the merman had followed the Avian’s movements across the room with his eyes, and followed the path of his hand on the other side of the glass. Or maybe all the galra and humans present had heard the whispers of merfolk viciousness, and simply didn't want to get their hands bitten off.

Whatever it was, Matt was tasked with feeding Lance at the end of the day.

“You can see most of its ribs,” said Haggar, as she paced around Lance’s tank, “incompetent, these soldiers.”

She had done this a lot over the course of the afternoon; paced and stared, her eyes possessing an almost frenetic glow. Whether it was from the water or something else, Lance couldn’t tell. Her hooves made soft *clip clop clip clop* noises on the smooth stone.

The door at the far end of the room thumped open, and one of the humans came back in wheeling something heavy. At once, Lance could smell the scent of cold blood and *fish*. There was a huge tray of it, silver-bellied fish lay out on a bed of ice. Matt went to meet them, and Lance could see the full breadth of his wings from the tank.

The feathers were the same colour as his hair, growing darker-brown towards the pinions. There were spots of white and cream across the lower half, and when half folded against his back like this, Matt’s wings looked about the same size as Keith’s. Unlike Keith’s slim, sharp silhouette however, Matt’s wings were rounder, softer... like birds with their winter coats.

The tips of his feathers trailed the ground, the ends rounded and complete. It was nothing like the hacked-torn mess that Shiro’s clipped wing had been.
That storm felt like a lifetime ago.

Lance didn’t know what to think.

The Galra were securing devices over their ears. Dampeners. The humans were doing the same. They all wore similar clothing; long black robes secured at the elbows when working. They had hoods too, but their heights easily gave them away. Someone handed a pair of dampeners to Matt.

“...unclear range, given Sendak’s reports,” Haggar was saying, “So better to have you lot leave the room while Matthew feeds it.”

“Will you not need any assistance restraining it?”

Haggar stared at Lance for a long moment, head tilted.

“No,” she said at long last. “Mei has the sedative.”

“It may not act fast enough,” said the Galra.

Haggar raised an eyebrow. She tapped the glass with the pad of her finger, soft, no sound - but Lance jerked backwards anyway. She smiled then, showing teeth.

“I think we will be fine. It’s just a precaution. In anycase, I think it knows that if it screams, it won’t get fed.”

She held Lance’s gaze as she continued.

“Even if we’re all bleeding out of our ears, it needs us to stay alive. We will be fine.”

The Galra inclined his head - and then the three left the room, robes trailing behind him.

Matt pushed the tray of dead fish closer to the tank. Beside him, a human girl was holding what looked like the skeleton of a gun. Instead of a metal barrel it housed a small glass capsule of something faintly green. The tip of the gun glinted with the silver tip of a needle. She seemed to be slotting another glass vial into the back of the gun; it clinked, soft and demur.

Matt picked up the first tray, quickly rounding the side of the tank to ascend the stairs to the metal balcony that made up the second level of the room. Lance could feel the faint vibrations that came through the water with each step Matt took on the metal lattice, closer and closer to the top opening of the tank. Even with it shut, Lance could smell the fish. It had been dead for a few hours now, the blood watery and thin. But the scent made Lance’s mouth water anyway, and his stomach gurgling painfully.

Matt set the tray down.

Lance could hear his footsteps as he descended the stairs again to retrieve the second tray.

It wasn’t until they were unlatching the top of his tank that Lance realised what had seemed so strange about Matt.

He had been using the stairs.

Lance remembered the way that Keith would simply jump down from rock ledges - even for short distances, he wouldn’t bother climbing or using any of the footholds. He’d jump out, wings snapping open for a brief moment...just long enough for him to seem weightless, as if he’d never touch the ground. Lance had seen Keith do this many times, jumping from the top of the cliff ledge
that hugged the rim of the cave, skimming so close to the rocks that Lance would hold his breath, heart hammering with anticipation -

The metal staircase sounded hollow with every touch. Matthew Holt reached the bottom of the stairs, one hand on the railing, walking as if he had no wings at all.

Lance stared at him, a leaden weight of dread cold and ominous in his lungs.

This time, when Matt returned back up the stairs, Mei followed with her gun. Lance watched, apprehensive, as the top of the tank was unlatched with a huge groan-hiss of metal and water. A great mechanical arm raised the lid; and there was a corresponding yank to Lance’s cuffs.

He jerked against them on reflex, panicked, but was pulled slowly and inexorably upwards through the water. The way his hands had been bound behind his back meant he couldn’t really use his tail to do anything - he was forced to bend forwards, pulling his entire weight between his shoulders.

Moving only hurt more, and Lance hissed as the cuffs dug into his wrists, still bloody and raw from the journey. The machine stopped with a lurch, leaving Lance’s chest and head above the water but the rest of him submerged. He twisted his tail, but the the length of rope around his tail had less give now. His arms hurt, and he made an pleading click-whistle noise at the back of his throat, instinct clamouring over his good sense.

And then Matt was there, crouched close, knees at the edge of the water.

“Easy,” Matt was saying, a shaky smile on his face, “easy now.”

A tray of fish was on the ground next to him, and Lance could just see Mei’s knees in his periphery.

His eyes darted back to Matt, so close...close enough to touch ... Lance looked frantically around for the centaur woman, but could barely make her out on the level below. Her voice though, rang clear.

“Don’t get any funny ideas,” she said, “We’re just looking after you. Had these caught fresh, you know. You sing, and I can guarantee that you’ll starve. And no one wants to see that.”

Up close, Matt looked much older than Pidge.

They had the same nose, the same sharp mouth and the same almond eyes. Their hair looked similar too, like a nest of leaves, Hunk always said. But that was where the resemblance ended.

Matthew was taller than Pidge by perhaps a head, and broader in the shoulders. He had a thinness about his face that made him look tired. It was as if his eyes were set a little deeper, somehow; the edges of his jaw thrown in sharp relief by light of the water. The way he held his wings reminded Lance of Keith, when they first met - tense and uncertain. Lance could see the raised marks of a scar, pink and shiny, that ran from his collarbone and disappeared under his clothes.

When he smiled though, Matt looked a lot like his sister.

He held up both hands, palm up.

“Hey there. I’m going to take your gag out, okay? So we can get you some food. You have to promise not to scream, alright? I can’t - if you knock us out we can’t feed you. I need you to work with me here. Okay? Nod, if you understand.”
Lance nodded frantically.

Matt visibly steeled himself, taking a deep breath and letting it out again. He clenched and unclenched his fists. Then he slowly, very slowly, reached across the water to Lance.

Lance stayed very, very still as Matt first undid the latch around the back of his head, then the one underneath his jaw. Then Matt lifted the harness across the crown and then the metal bit was out, there was nothing pressing down across his nose and Lance was -

Lance threw back his head, mouth open to take in huge slow heaves of air. His mouth hurt from the gag, but to be free of the harness and the awful press of the leather against his face and nose - Lance felt suddenly lighter. He shook his head vigorously, working his jaw with his new found freedom, unhinging it and then setting it back again with a satisfying click of bone-on-bone.

When he lowered his head again, Matt was staring at him with huge eyes, mouth a little slack.

The avian was still holding the harness, hands frozen, half retracted across the water.

And Lance realised - he could scream. Lance could scream, and they’d be on the floor before that sedative could stop him. Maybe he could scream loud enough to hurt the Galra guards standing outside, and then Matt could get him free of these bindings and they could both escape, they could both get out of here and …

Over the arch of Matt’s wing, Lance could see the barrel of Mei’s sedative gun.

She had it raised, pointed at Lance. Although her shadow was steady, there was the faintest tremor in her hands.

Suddenly Lance was back in that glass coffin, suffocating under the heat and the weight of his seizing heart. All he could see was Zoljas: his pale eyes; the soft sound of him hitting the ground.

And this time, Lance dared not make a sound.

Pidge, Coran and Allura arrived the rendezvous with Mila; a soaring islet that was connected to the mainland via a thin ribbon of sand and rock which disappeared periodically beneath the tide. It would be another two weeks before Keith even saw them again.

He thought he was going to drown in the molasses that was the pace of things.

In the meantime, Keith and Shiro had been given rooms in the barracks close by, where there was an endless rotation of soldiers who could keep an eye on them. Mallory had not come back to interrogate either of them, and they had been mostly left to their own devices. Whenever Keith had tried to get some answers out of the guards or their barrack-mates, they were ignored.

Shiro had disappeared a few times, and returned with very little answers.

“They wanted to know what I knew about Kerberos,” Shiro had explained when Keith asked him what took so long. “Research side, I mean. Which I wasn’t really involved in. Turns out that Pidge is being tight lipped about it all. Mallory thinks she knows more than she’s letting on.”

Keith snorted.
“I tried to tell her not to come with,” he said. “But Mila stuck to me like glue. Mallory’s orders, probably.”

“Mmmhm, maybe.” said Shiro, pensive. “But I don't think she's one of his.”

But as time wore on, the reason for Pidge’s obstinacy became more clear. And so did Mallory’s frustrations.

“She’s been refusing to do anything until they organise a raid for Matt and Sam,” said Shiro one evening after dinner, “Digging her heels in. The raid has basically no chance of succeeding without air support, even if Allura and Coran’s Galra contacts really pull through. But there’s nothing in it for Mallory or the Council right now, unless…”

“…unless the Alteans can provide ground cover?” said Keith, dubiously.

Shiro made a face.

“I don’t think so. Coran and Allura said they were the only ones left, right? If their rebel forces were strong enough to provide blockades on the ground, why did they wait so long to approach the Council?”

“They didn’t have us,” Keith pointed out.

Shiro carded his fingers through the curve of his own wing, distracted.

“Something doesn’t add up,” he said, “I’m. Just reading between the lines here. I couldn’t talk to Pidge properly.”

Keith shuffled his wings, stretching out the left one and holding it for a minute, before switching to his right. The strong wind up here felt good on his feathers at least.

“Did you see her?” he asked.

Shiro nodded.

“She looked okay. She’s got Allura and Coran. I don’t think Mallory would risk a diplomatic incident.”

Keith snorted again, thinking back to the cold cell and the heavy cuffs around his arms. Shiro was right. Pidge had the political clout of the last heir to the Altean dynasty standing behind her now. Keith had nothing but a debt to the state and Shiro.

To pass the time, Shiro and Keith would fly drills in the small communal arena, lapping lazy dives past the windows of the stone-buildings of the military complex. The familiarity was still so jarring after the flat, horizontal-ness of human architecture and the feeling of flying solo that Keith kept looking over his shoulder.

It was re-learning how to accommodate another wing when he turned, hugging the cliff face, toe first, pulling out of his dives with a three quarter twist instead of a clumsy half-

But he had missed the way Shiro smiled after a good race. And Shiro would smile now, panting when they landed, eyes bright, wings glorious.

Keith had never been very good at reading body language, and he felt as if something had been turned on just behind his eyes, a sharp painful hyper-awareness that made his feathers stiff with
anxiety. Perhaps it was the sudden presence of so many other wings; shadows that would fall across from above. If Shiro noticed, he didn’t say anything - just slung a wing across Keith’s shoulders every now and then, warm and heavy.

Still, something kept humming just beneath his skin, insistent and uncomfortable. The sea reminded him of the cave, and the sound of the waves crashing against the rocks far, far below sounded like a reminder.

Keith slept badly.

In the barracks, the other avians mostly gave the two of them a wide berth. Sometimes Keith caught glimpses of recognition in stranger’s faces; a pause in their step; a hushed conversation. It wasn’t that unusual, given that Shiro had been the Garrison’s poster boy for almost three years. Or perhaps they had all been briefed already, because no one approached them to chat.

When Keith had left the garrison, he hadn’t let himself think much about returning home. But he had thought about returning with Shiro, thought about it in between the long moments of the past year.

He hadn’t thought it would feel quite so cold.

They were still sitting on the flight promenade when Mila came to fetch them. Her hair glowed red, backlit by the sun, and her flight boots made a loud *schiiing!* noise as she landed gracefully, scraping to a smooth standstill in front of them.

“Gentlemen,” she said with a mock bow, “Your presence has been requested.”

Keith folded his arms.

“What for?” he said.

“Just a chat,” said Mila. She was running a finger absently up and down the length of a gun, holstered on her thigh.

“We’ll come,” said Shiro, standing up and dusting off his wings.

“And that’s why you’re my favourite,” said Mila, winking at Shiro. She turned to Keith. “The Alteans requested you both be present. Amazing, right? I’ve never even seen one before this whole thing. It was a pain making sure they arrived unseen, let me tell you that much.”

“Fine,” said Keith, “If it means we’ll get some answers, then fine.”

“Oh I didn’t say *that*,” said Mila.

Mila led them down to one of the lower-lying buildings on the islet. For a moment, Keith was puzzled why the Council wasn’t in their usual city hall, positioned at the top of the citadel. As they walked across a narrow stone archway, he belatedly realised that none of those buildings would have been accessible to anyone without a pair of wings.

They entered a squat, octagonal room facing the sea. A huge circular table took up the centre of the room, and on top of it was a large map of the coast. The sun glittered off the tiny brass placeholders,
like chess pieces on a board.

Before the door had even closed, Pidge was on her feet. She looked as if she wanted to bolt into Shiro’s arms for a hug, but held herself in check. Next to her were the imposing silhouettes of Coran and Allura. Their legs were curled up neatly so that they were at waist height to the table. Someone had brought in thick luxurious rugs for the two, but even on the ground, they were still head and shoulders taller than the council members seated around the table.

“There you are!” said Coran cheerfully, “Good, good. Come on, come on.”

Hesitantly, Shiro took the seat next to Pidge, and Keith the one over.

He felt very out of place.

Mallory seemed to think so too. He looked tired and pissed off.

“These are extenuating circumstances,” he said, glaring at Keith. “If anything were to leave this room, a prison sentence will be the least of your worries, Kogane. Understood?”

Keith raised an eyebrow. He opened his mouth to retort, but Shiro stepped hard on his foot. Keith cursed instead, and settled reluctantly into his seat.

“Miss Holt insists that you two will be instrumental if we are to speak to the merfolk on agreeable terms. Her Highness - “ Mallory inclined his head at Allura in deference, “…Unfortunately agree.”

“I do,” said Allura, “The mermen in question are firm friends with Keith and Shiro. And Pi - Miss Holt, of course. They’d hardly look favourably upon us if you turned up, uninvited, descending from the sky.”

“Historically, that has not worked out, no,” said the Ruthenian councilwoman dryly.

“Especially given the report this morning,” said a man to the right of Mallory. He had jet black feathers, glossy with blue shine. He was flipping through a massive stack of papers in front of him. “Another Galran cargo ship sunk off the coast. Two fishing vessels just west of Il’ara. That makes it three cargo ships this week alone. Supplies from up the coast has all but dried up along the main route going to the capital. I don’t think the Merfolk are in a negotiating mood right now, are they?”

“The question is, why now?” said another council member, but he was interrupted by his neighbour.

“No, I want to know how they’re doing it. Those ships are massive. Nothing we’ve thrown at them in the air has been powerful enough to sink one. And as far as I know, gunpowder still doesn’t work underwater.”

Mallory made a derisive noise into his cup.

“Perhaps we should just let them get along with it,” he said, “At this rate, give them another month and the fleet will be halved.”

“There’s already a shortage in the immediate ports. Pity we can’t starve Zarkon out of his city, given our current reliance on some of the imports…”

“Well maybe whatever is going on, the merfolk already in the right mood for it,” said the Ruthenian councilwoman. She was eyeing the map critically. “We’ve never been able to achieve a proper blockade - the Galra just take everything down the coast or across the strait. But if the
Merfolk cut them off here, and here…”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” said Mallory, “no one has managed to even speak with a merfolk for decades. Not in any official capacity anyway - village rumours do not count.”

There was a collective rustling of feathers around the table. Pidge was brimming with impatience, practically vibrating in her seat when the council turned to her, Shiro and Keith.

“How certain are we that an audience will be granted at all? Even if your...friends...came to talk, what influence could they possibly - “

“It’ll be fine,” Pidge interrupted. “I have a call whistle. They’ll hear. And once we talk to them, it’ll be fine.”

Mallory looked like he was barely holding back the urge to roll his eyes.

“Miss Holt,” he said, “I’m sure the bonds of friendship that you have developed with these merfolk are...profound. But there’s a difference between having a friendly chat with vicious, unpredictable sirens and negotiating a war alliance.”

Pidge flushed at the patronisation - Keith could feel her indignation pouring off her shoulders. She opened her mouth to speak, but Mallory continued over her.

“And I’m sure I don’t need to remind you that no one will be carrying out an air raid on the capital - or any other Galra strong hold - until we have reinforcements from the coast. Why do you think the stalemate exists, girl? Ten years, we’ve been at this - “

“Now hang on a minute,” said Coran. “The raid was not contingent upon the outcome of merfolk negotiations. The promise had been access, and the cooperation of Galran rebel intelligence - ”

“That is for another discussion,” said a councilwoman sharply. “The Galra are not to be trusted.”

“Be that as it may,” said Mallory, “the fact remains that merfolk are highly volatile. What’s this report about - “ he pulled a particular piece of paper towards him, knocking over a tiny brass ship on the map. “… decapitated heads turning up on the docks every morning...good lord.”

“Galran heads, mostly,” another council member agreed.

“I don’t see how you expect us to jump head first into conflict when we don’t even know if the merfolk will help us?”

“We do know!” snapped Pidge, “I’m telling you! The merfolk will help us, they’re already helping us, the ships, everything, don’t you see?”

Mallory looked as if to interrupt again and Pidge leapt to her feet, slapping aside Shiro’s hand when he reached to calm her.

“No, let me finish,” she said, colour still high on her cheeks. “I know we’ll get to talk to the right people.”

She flung a hand out, and Keith was taken aback to see a finger pointing at him. It was shaking, and there was something like guilt in her face.

“One of them is in love with Keith,” she said.

This time, Mallory did roll his eyes. He slapped his paper down onto the table in exasperation.
“Miss Holt, honestly, this foolishness - “

“- he’s in love with Keith,” said Pidge, voice rising, “and his mother is the Queen!”

What?

There was utter silence.

Keith was staring at Pidge, and the only thing that stopped him from exclaiming his disbelief was Shiro’s hand on his wrist, bruising tight.

Mallory leaned back in his seat, wings sloped.

“Well,” he said slowly, “This changes things.”

The water tasted different.

Lance couldn’t quite put his finger on it...only that it felt strangely light, as if each draw through his gills was less somehow. He longed to stretch, to twist his tail and race through open water. Perhaps it was the temperature, or the way fresh water was pumped in from near the top of the tank every few hours. Whatever it was, it made Lance feel foggy, unbalanced and vaguely nauseous.

The last part probably had more to do with the number of times they had drawn his blood over the past few days.

Initially they had merely lifted him a little way out of the tank - close enough that Matt could reach his shoulder with a thin sharp needle. Lance had thrashed on instinct, heart in his throat, confused as to what they were going to do, trying to get away. And despite the binding on his tail, he could remember the way the glass had sounded when the wooden cuff banged against it: a ringing, hollow sound like some sunken bell.

That had scared them; the humans and the galra. He could smell it.

But then Lance had taken in Matt’s face, his palms up, eyes darting frantically from every person present. One of the Galra had rushed up the stairs, shouting. Matt’s eyes flickered like a spinning coin, amber in the pale violet glow of the crystal lamps ( “Stop - you’ll panic him even more! Stop, shit - everyone be quiet!” ). Lance could see the ever present gun, held back up again. Matt’s voice saying hey, it’s alright, easy now - easy does it. And really, there had never been any choice.

Lance let Matthew draw his blood.

It filled the vial, slow and dark. His arms were so numb from being bound, it barely hurt at all, though the muscle began to ache the second, third, fourth time Matt had to draw blood.

Lance’s tank stood at the centre of the room, up against one wall and ringed from the top by the second metal-lattice level. From this vantage point, he could see almost the whole hall, and the doors at one end. He watched them: the humans, the cloaked galra, Haggar and Matt. They came and went - even Matthew - siphoning Lance’s blood into smaller vials, putting them through unfamiliar machines and under familiar lenses.

There were several cylinders on a silver desk, each containing a shard of softly glowing crystal.
Haggar and Matt would spend a lot of time in front of these, hunched over papers, fiddling with lenses that refracted light through Lance’s tank. When Matt was at the table, his wings fell like a cloak, the feathers half on the ground around his chair. He would stay like that for hours on end, pen in hand.

He looked very much like Pidge, in those moments. If Lance breathed slowly, he could almost pretend they were back in the lake, Pidge illuminated by huge Belmeran crystal lamps, her lips pressed into a thin line of concentration.

*Help me!* Lance wanted to scream, *stop sitting there and help me!*

But of course he couldn’t. And Matt had yet to be left alone; there was always someone else.

They’d fill some of the cylinders with blood; diluted pale and some so dark that the crystal glow was a ruby wine-spill across the paper. Days passed like this, marked by the numerous clocks on the walls. Their voices travelled, muddied by the tiles and the metal and glass everywhere, but still audible. He lost words and phrases, here and there - but Lance tried to listen as carefully as he could.

“...maybe a longer cycle? But these have been in for over 72 ‘pheebs. Will … “

“...keep them running.”

“Seems - yeah fine. Fine, I will.”

Parts of the conversation would often float in and out like his consciousness, and Lance wasn’t sure if it was the water, the glass, or his own delirium.

In any case, as the days went by, Matt and Haggar sounded increasingly frustrated. Whatever they were doing with Lance’s blood, it wasn’t working.

At one point, late into the evening of the third day, Matt had thrown down his pen in irritation.

“You want another phase of *what?* ” he had said, his voice loud and echoing across the flagstones.

No one else ever seemed to raise their voices to Haggar like that.

“- e can’t be sure. All our archives emphasize the presence of blood.”

“...oes that even make any sense? … As if the merfolk would go around bleeding all over their mines? You’re going to kill him if we draw any more today.”

Haggar had made a snarling noise, and drew back from the table. She paced, restlessly, back and forth in front of Lance’s tank. She would stare at him when she went past, her eyes unseeing. *Clip, clop, clip, clop* went her hooves.

“...just needs more time,” she said, waving a hand at the row of glowing crystals. “Keep the existing trials going for now.”

One of the human scientists nodded wordlessly in acquiescence, turning her back to Lance so she could adjust something atop the vials. Beside her, Matt let out a harsh sigh, hand in his hair. He stretched out one wing, shaking out the feathers.

The movement reminded Lance so viscerally of Keith that he felt a sudden, physical pain somewhere between his ribs. He turned away from the glass.
“Might be an extraction, rather than just...” Matt broke off, flipping a piece of paper over. “I’ll look into it tomorrow.”

Haggar was still staring at Lance. He felt as if she was running over his skin slowly with the blunt edge of a knife, and closed both his eyelids.

“Perhaps there’s some truth to his delusions,” she said, almost to herself.

“Oh for - “ Matt turned on his seat, “you cannot be serious.”

“Some legends are rooted in truth. Obtain samples first thing tomorrow.”

Matt looked as if he was going to say something else, but changed his mind, shuffling his wings closer to his back. His profile was lit by the purple and blue glow behind him, curling over the line of his neck. He looked exhausted.

There was a long moment of silence.

“I’m surprised he’s stayed away this long,” said the Avian.

Haggar snorted.

“I told his Majesty that trials needed conducting first. He has been relentless ever since Sendak made his report, the fool.”

With a jolt, Lance realised they must be talking about Emperor Zarkon.

There was a human saying that Pidge liked: of speaking and devils. And, as if summoned, it was not Matt who first walked into the room the next morning. It was Haggar and a Galra that Lance had not seen before...but who could have only been the Emperor.

He was tall - almost taller than Haggar at full height; and strangely broad in the shoulders. He wore a heavy cape about his shoulders, and walked with a slow gait which favoured one side. As they drew close, Lance couldn’t help but stare, blinking warily.

The Emperor’s eyes were almost firefly-yellow, slitted pupils dark and set in a face so lined with age he looked to be half carved from stone. His crown hung nearly over his brow, a circlet with sharp edges, like the way his canines jutted every so slightly over the lip. Unlike merfolk teeth, they were curved, like a reminder.

He came right up to the glass, eyes bright, and placed one huge hand there.

Lance could see the tips of his clawed nails, sharpened to precise points. He couldn’t look away, remembering the feel of Sendak’s fingers around his throat. He stayed very still, suspended in the water.

“A lot smaller, than the others,” said Zarkon after an eternity of silence. His voice was low and rough. “I must say, I am impressed. A child?”

“It’s unclear, sire,” said Haggar, coming to stand beside Zarkon. “We think it may be the male of the species.”

Zarkon didn’t respond; didn’t look away from Lance.

“Have you harvested the tears?” he said.
Lance flinched, looking from Zarkon to Haggar and then back again. *Harvest?* Apparently the movement wasn’t lost on the Galra, who smiled, slow and faint at the corner of his mouth.

“It *understands,* ” he said, sounding almost amused. “Well?”

Haggar cleared her throat.

“Not yet, Sire,” she said, inclining her head, “We - “

“Why not?” demanded the Emperor.

“We have to run some critical tests,” said Haggar, looking back up. Her mouth was pressed in a displeased line. “There’s no telling what might happen.”

“You’ve had three days,” said Zarkon. “Does it work, or does it not?”

Haggar’s expression remained flat, but Lance noticed a twitch in her hind leg.

“The tests have not concluded - “

“You have the crystals, you have a live merfolk. Test it out on any of the prisoners we have awaiting trial.”

“Sire - “

Zarkon slammed a fist against the glass, making Lance flinch bodily away.

“I want an answer. If it does not work, what use do I have of him? Of this?” he made an expansive gesture at the room, the tables, the crystals.

The ‘of you?’ hung silent and unsaid, heavy as a noose.

For a long moment, Lance could only hear the echoing gurgle of water in his tank and the sound of his own breathing. Then Haggar took a step away, tilting her head. Her grey-white hair fell over her shoulder, obscuring her face from view.

“Yes, sire.”

“Good.” said Zarkon.

And without another word, he turned and swept out of the room.

Haggar remained where she was, motionless and staring at the doors long after they had closed.

Lance did not have to wait long to find out what ‘harvesting tears’ involved.

They lifted him fully out of the tank this time, and he tried not to thrash as the strain across his chest and behind his shoulders screamed at him with the weight and movement. Lance knew it would only make it worse. If nothing else, he was learning very fast that things could *always* get worse.

It took three galra and Matt to carry him to a long flat surface that reflected the ceiling lights. One
held Lance firmly by the bindings on his arms, while the other had a tight grip on his tail. Matt was supporting his head, one hand hooked through the back of Lance’s gag.

Lance could tell that they weren’t quite sure what to make of his limp acquiescence - but each time it happened, and no one got their fingers ripped off... they looked a marginally less inclined to shoot him at the slightest flinch.

Lance wanted to tell them that they had nothing to worry about.

He wanted to tell Matt that Pidge was looking for him, that she was so smart, so brilliant ...and if anyone would help them escape, it would be her. He wanted to tell him that Pidge missed him so much, and that Shiro did too. He wanted to tell them that they needn’t hold his tail so tight, because it had been feeling stiff and achey...and that Lance didn’t know if he could swipe it with any great strength anyway. He wanted to tell them there was some wrong with the water, that it didn’t breathe right.

Lance wanted to ask Matt whether his father was here too. He wanted to ask why they hadn’t escaped yet, because Pidge would cry about them at night in her sleep, and a year was a long time not to give up.

He wanted...

They strapped him down to the table with broad buckled-strips, from his chest and stomach all the way down to the tip of his tail. The surface felt cool against Lance’s back, metallic against the scales on his shoulder blades and his tailbone. They strapped his hands down too, and the sudden rush of blood to his fingers made him twitch...but he kept his teeth away.

There were bright lights shining right at him from several points above. Lance wanted to shut both his eyelids; the light hurt - but he was too scared to lose sight of the silhouettes around him.

They didn’t take his gag off. They attached it to something curved and metallic, set into the top of the table, which stopped him from being able to turn his head. Matt was patting his hair, like one would an animal ready to bolt.

Lance must have zoned out for a second, because he was having trouble piecing the conversation around him.

“Well,” Matt was saying, “We don’t know if there’s the same physiological response. Makes sense to work our way from the least harmful stimulant.”

“Do we know if Merfolk actually have the ducts?”

The scrape of something across the floor. Several faces, leaned in across Lance. He tried to breathe as slowly as he could through his nose, but his heart hammered as someone touched his uninjured cheek. They were holding a tiny pin-light, and Lance flinched when they shone it sideways across his right eye.

“It appears to have two sets of eyelids - see the rim here, Haggar?”

“Interesting.”

“...much thinner than the outer layer.”

Lance jerked reflexively when the hand came closer to his eye, trying and failing to turn against the binding on his head.
Matt was pushing the Galra away, impatient.

“Let me, he’s used to me. That and you’ll perforate something with those claws.”

“We don’t know if it’s a male - “

“Oh, shut up Ylvik.”

“Pass me the - yes. That one.”

Matt was back to patting Lance’s hair again, his thumb moving across the crown of his head over and over. Then he held out a thin glass tube under Lance’s nose. For a moment, nothing happened - then Lance accidentally took a breath and twitched, blinking his outer lids hard.

“Shhh, shh,” said Matt, still holding the tube close to Lance’s nose.

Lance tried to hold his breath in, but there was no water for his gills to work in. Matt was patient, even as the figures around Lance’s table shifted.

Another inhale. Lance huffed out a breath through his nose at the smell. It was unlike anything he had smelled before, but he didn’t like it.

“No sign,” said a faceless voice.

“We need to get that second lid open somehow,” said the Galra who first spoke. Nekit.

“Try the other extract,” said Haggar. She came close, bending over Lance. Carefully, she placed the nail of her thumb at the edge of Lance’s eye.

Lance felt like he was going to pass out with how fast his heart was beating.

“Open,” she said, nudging at the rim of his eyelid.

Lance tried to shake his head, but she just followed the minute motion with her hand. Matt was holding another glass tube beneath his nose, but Lance couldn’t think past the press of Haggar’s fingernail at his eye.

“Don’t hurt him - “ said Matt.

“I will do whatever is necessary,” Haggar snapped. “Now, open your eyes. ”

Lance opened his eyes.

The light was literally blinding - for a long moment all he could see a white wash, grey in the corners that went abruptly foggy when he looked desperately down, away from the lights, away. He blinked rapidly, heaving for breath in panic - but Haggar didn’t touch his eye or do anything else.

Lance couldn’t see her face, backlit as she was, but he knew she was staring at him.

“The legends do say it’s very hard to get a mermaid to cry,” someone said near Lance’s tail.

They switched to another vial. This time, Lance sneezed, teeth digging into the bar of the gag.

“Maybe because they don’t have fucking tear ducts,” said Matt, not even flinching. “None of the other aquatic mammals do.”
“They don’t have double eyelids either, Holt.”

“Point.”

Haggar snorted.

“Alright,” she said, “Enough.”

She tilted her head, and studied him for another long moment. Her face was still blurry, like Lance had been staring up into the sky on a too-sunny day.

Then she pressed the sharp edge of her nail straight into the soft still-healing burn mark on his cheek bone.

Lance couldn’t stop himself - he jerked against his bindings at the pain, letting out a shriek as she dug in, her other hand wrapped tight around his neck to keep him still. The gag muffled the sound of Lance’s scream, but there was an answering clatter as both of the galra scientists jolted away from the table.

Matt let out shout of pain, clapping his hands over his ears.

A glass-something shattered in a shower of tinkling shards.

At the sight of Matt’s pained expression, Lance’s next scream choked on his inhale. He gasped wetly into the gag with the effort of not screaming, biting down, trying not to make a sound, trying...

Haggar’s hands remained quite steady as she swiped her nail again through the wound, and Lance hissed, over and over with each heaving breath, eyes blinking rapidly. They were wet.

“One of you imbeciles pass me the stopper!” Haggar shouted, and one of the humans - who also seemed unaffected by Lance’s voice - hastily passed something over across Lance’s torso.

Haggar didn’t move her nail - just pressed it harder against the soft flesh, making Lance choke again on his own tongue. Pain and panic made his thoughts foggy; he was saying please, please, please against the bit in his mouth, even though no one could understand him.

Faintly, as if happening to someone else, Lance could feel the edge of something cool and smooth being pressed against the corner of each eye. He couldn’t see what they were, but after a moment, the sensation disappeared. So did Haggar’s hand from his cheek.

Lance immediately squeezed his eyes shut, still heaving for breath.

“...not bad.”


The sound of furniture being moved. Feathers against stone. Harsh breathing.

“Fine - “ said Matt, voice a little shaky, “I’m fine. Some warning next time, Jesus .”

“It didn’t affect the rest of us… I guess the gag design wasn't totally useless...?”

“...audible range...different for human ears....”

“...teresting,” came Haggar’s voice, “And a success. The old methods do work best, after all.”
She no longer sounded impatient. She sounded manic with excitement. It made Lance shudder in the confines of his bonds.

“Mei, we should collect more tears while we have got it secured. Four q’inlets full, if we can. You lot can get denser dampeners. Then I want scale and membrane samples.”

One of the Galra spoke, voice lower than the rest. Ulaz.

“Perhaps we should let it rest. Dehydration -”

Haggar waved an impatient hand. She had already turned back to Lance.

“It’s been a bare varga. It’ll survive for a bit longer. I don’t want the hassle of moving him if he’s going to put up a fuss next time.”

She shifted on her hooves, and Lance could hear the sound of glass being moved around. He was breathing in rapid fire gulps, but his vision was still blurred...from the lights or from his terror, Lance couldn't be sure.

“And one of you can go move a detainee into isolation. Don't care who. Preferably galra. We must test this while it's fresh.”

She turned to the room at large, eyes wide.

To Lance, she looked quite mad.

“Well? Go! ”.

They began pulling Lance out of the tank every day.

Sometimes it was only for a short time, where they’d study specific parts of his tail with lenses, glasses and very small silver instruments. Other times, it would be for hours. They’d put him back only at the end of the night, when Matt would feed him while the others continued their work or started cleaning up.

The numb-ache in his tail didn’t get better. It got worse.

Haggar wasn’t always present - and when she was elsewhere, another person would be tasked with ‘harvesting the tears’. Lance built up a slow portrait of each of his companions this way: Ylvik still hesitated to go anywhere near Lance’s face, whilst the humans copied Haggar’s method of aggravating his burn mark. Ulaz would pinch the sensitive skin near Lance’s scale clusters, which made him tear up with a jolt, but hurt a lot less afterwards. Matt...Matt kept patting his hair.

Lance never saw the people they’d been testing his tears on. He wasn’t sure what they were trying to achieve, but whatever it was, judging by the tone of conversation around the laboratory... it wasn’t going all that well. Haggar would often return from a period of absence in a fit of temper, hooves loud on the stone and hands shaking, every so slightly.

“It was never going to work!” she would spit, when it was just her Galra scientists and Matt.

She did not trust the humans, Lance noticed, often sending them out of the room whenever the
Emperor visited.

“We are toiling for the whims of a fool!” she’d hiss to Lance as she paced up and down the long room, “I have more important research to do, we are on the brink of discoveries that would change the face of this empire - and yet!”

This went on, day by slow, awful day. Until one evening, it was just Matt, Ulaz and Mei in the lab. A fresh tray of fish had been delivered by one of the guards, and Ulaz was slotting thin glass trays of samples back in their casings.

“You two can go,” called Matt from where he was washing his hands, “I’ll feed and lock up.”

Ulaz nodded at the avian, but Mei looked hesitant.

“You don’t want someone uh... with less acute hearing around when you take of his gag? I mean, just in case?”

It might have been a trick of the light, but Lance thought he saw Ulaz and Matt share a quick, flickering glance. Matt shrugged.

“Nah, it’ll be okay. He hasn’t tried anything up until now. And even if I get knocked out... it’s not like he’s going anywhere.”

Mei still looked conflicted.

Ulaz snapped the lid of the casing shut with twin clicks of metal-on-metal.

“Haggar’s away for another two days, at most,” said Ulaz in his deep, steady voice, “You’d want to make the most of it, to see your mother.”

Mei’s shoulder slumped, and she ran a hand through her hair.

“Yeah,” she said, “I - just gotta do the rest of the -”

Matt stretched both his wings, movement languid, though Lance could see the tension in the line of his shoulders.

“I can finish the write up,” he said, nudging the table with his right wing, “You go on.”

“I’ll take this to his Majesty,” said Ulaz.

“Aww, Ulaz, why do you dibs all the best tasks?” said Matt, voice so flat you could have laid a carpet on it, “So unfair. I’m telling Haggar when she comes back.”

Ulaz made a curious expression, showing his sharp canines and the flat of his ears. Matthew's mouth twitched in the ghost of a smirk. He pushed back his chair with a scrape and stretched, fanning out his wings as far as they could go.

Lance watched as the girl and Ulaz left the room shortly one after another.

And then it was just Matt and the quiet glow of the crystal lamps.

There was a moment when Matt did nothing except stare at the door from his seat. Then his entire frame seem to slump, wings sliding out across the flagstones as he bent forwards, head between his knees, arms over his head. He stayed like that for long, quiet minutes. Lance could see his shoulders and wings rise and fall with the effort of breathing.
Lance made an enquiring noise through the gag, a muffled tapering whistle.

Matt looked up at the sound.

“Ah,” he said, voice a little hoarse, “Sorry buddy. I should feed you first, eh?”

He shuffled his wings, pulling them loosely to his back as he stood and made his way up the stairs and across the metal balcony. The smell of the fish grew stronger the click-clunk of a lever unlocked the top of the tank in a rush of oxygen. By now, the strain in his arms was a familiar one as the bindings on his wrist was pulled upwards with the lid. Lance couldn’t help the way his heart began to race.

*Finally.* He’d been waiting so long.

Matt was still talking. He often did this under his breath, even when there were others in the room. Now, however, Lance could talk back.

“...don’t know whether it makes a difference, being fresh water. There’s been a bit of a shortage, from down south. Bad hauls.”

The Avian was doing his best to fillet a piece of silver-bellied thing with what Lance recognised was a surgical knife. He was very good at it.

“I guess we just gotta do the best with what we have,” said Matt, laying out four fish fillets on a steel tray and throwing the bones and heads into one pile. Lance wanted to tell him that this was a waste of time, merfolk didn't need their dinners to be de-boned.

Lance must have made some kind of impatient noise, because Matt gave him a wry smile.

“Yeah, I know buddy. I know you’re hungry. Sorry.”

Lance wrinkled his nose, trying to widen his eyes as much as he could. Matt put down his knife, shuffling closer from where he was kneeling on the edge of the balcony.

“Let’s get that harness off,” he said quietly, “You gonna let me do it, yeah? You’ve had a bad day. It’s always a bad day.”

Lance inclined his head, as he had done every evening before this. Matt made quick work of the buckles, loosening the ones next to his cheek and under his jaw so he could lift it over Lance’s head.

As soon as Lance was free, he said what he had been desperate to say since the first day he was put into this awful tank:

“Matt.”

Matthew froze, still holding Lance’s gag.

“Matt,” said Lance, and it was as if he was speaking with someone else's voice. It didn’t sound like his own. “Pidge is looking for you. Katie ...your sister is looking for you.”

The avian had gone white, lips bloodless with shock. He stared at Lance, eyes as blank as the dead fish by his knees.

Lance swallowed, blinking nervously.
“Matt?”

Matt dropped the gag, chin jerking up as if snapping out of a trance. He fell backwards onto his heel, sitting down in a clumsy  
*foomp* of his wings to either side of him. He hadn’t taken his eyes off Lance.

When Matt spoke, his voice was a whisper.

“H-how do you...how do you know Pidge?”

Something passed over his face, and Matt’s hands and wings began to shake as his breath became shallow in his throat. His eyes were amber, held still in time.

“Did she - *oh god,* what was… is she okay? Is...did she drown? *Oh god,* Pidge - “

Lance’s eyes widened.

“No, She’s fine! She’s fine - we’re...she’s my friend.”

Lance tried to lean forwards, but was pulled up short by the cuffs on his wrists. They made a loud, hollow sound against each link.

“...Your friend?” said Matt, disbelief written large on his face.

“She’s been looking for you,” said Lance in a rush, “She’s going to be so happy you’re okay! She. She was doing experiments and science things down by the beach and that’s how we became friends.”

“ - science things? W-”

“You have to escape. *We* have to escape. Where’s your dad? Is he okay? Is he here? Shiro said the last time he saw you, you guys were together, and that - “

“Wait!” cried Matt, throwing up both palms. They were still shaking, and Lance was worried he was going to keel over with how rapid his breathing was. “Shiro? He’s - he’s alive? Y-you… how?”

Oh, it felt like a lifetime ago.

“I saved him from drowning,” said Lance, quietly.

Matt stared, and stared and stared. Then slowly, the tension seemed to drain from his shoulders, into his wings. He slumped where he sat, thin boots almost touching the water.

“He’s alive,” said Matt, as if to himself. Then, louder. “He’s *alive.* They... *t-they said* ... it’s been - I thought, maybe...”

Matt’s voice cracked and splintered. He covered his face with his hands, wings drawing close about himself as he sobbed. The sound came in cough and splutters from his chest, and Lance felt helpless as the avian cried and cried and cried. Matt was holding himself tightly, hands on his elbows, as if his ribs were too thin and worn to contain his grief and he was trying to keep them from shattering completely.

Lance could see the wetness slowly staining Matt’s sleeves; could smell the salt from his tears and the aborted noises behind his hands. Up here, the pale violet from the lamps cast Matthew’s hands in marble corpse. There were numbers and letters, inked into the inside of his arm.
Lance didn't know what to do. After another few long minutes, he made a worried, cooing noise at the back of his throat.

When there was no reaction, he did it again, louder.

Matt twitched a little. And gradually, his crying subsided. His breaths, still shaky, slowed and evened out. He lowered his hands from his face. His eyes were rimmed red, but there was a small smile at the edge of his lips.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and his voice was stronger now. “That was a lot. I’ve - I can’t believe it.”

He took a deep breath, then let it out again.

“Please. Tell me everything,” said Matt, “One at a time. How exactly did you meet my sister?”

Lance pulled at the cuffs on his wrist.

“Before we start...can you get me out of these?” he looked hopefully from Matt to the fish, then back to Matt again.

“Oh god - sorry! Yes. I. Here.”

Matt made short work of the cuffs, and for the first time in what felt like years, Lance could move his arms freely. He twisted back into the water, stretching his arms and hands as the blood rushed back to his joints in a hot stinging wave. Where the cuffs had been, there were two thick bands of discoloration about his wrists. The skin was red and broken, rubbed raw as the flaking scales on the underside of his wrist that covered his veins. There was a thinner rim of angry red, where the edge of the cuff had broken skin over and over.

When Lance touched a patch of scales on his tail that had been irritating him, they flaked off completely, leaving behind raw painful skin. It hurt; the water hurt. Lance felt sick, just looking at the dead scales.

He had to force himself to resurface.

Matt was leaning, hands right on the edge of the tank now. The water refracted the light on his face, and he looked more alive than he had done since Lance met him.

Matt pushed the pile of fish and assorted dead sea animals closer to Lance, metal scraping metal.

“Here,” he said.

Gratefully, Lance picked up an entire fish, unhinged his jaw, and ate it in two bites and one swallow. He clicked his jaws, letting his teeth out (even though the soft fish hardly needed it) and began stuffing his face. He had almost gotten used to the lack of food - merfolk could go a while without meals if necessary - but now that it was there, Lance found his stomach hurting with hunger. He could feel Matt’s eyes on him too, eager and impatient, but the avian didn’t interrupt, letting Lance eat his way through almost the entire tray.

Once his stomach felt a little better, Lance paused. There was only one fish left on the tray, and a sad looking half-eel. He looked up at Matt, who didn’t seem to have moved.

“So,” said Lance, resting his chin on his folded hands, propped up on the edge of his tank. “I have some questions too. But you can go first.”
Matt looked taken aback, but seemed to rally himself in an instant. He nodded.

“My sister. How do you know her? You said she was...running experiments?”

“Near our home, yeah,” said Lance, “she was diving for crystals and stuff by herself. That’s how we - Hunk and me -”

Matt’s eyes almost bugged out of his head.

“Diving for -” he exclaimed, “in the sea? Where? What the hell!”

Lance tilted his head.

“I dunno many human place names… Keith says it’s pretty far from home though? Opposite coast, he said.”

“Keith?” said Matt, “as in Keith - the angry baby sparrow that follows Shiro around everywhere... that Keith?”

“Um,” said Lance. He wasn’t sure what a sparrow was, but he was fairly certain Keith wouldn't like it. The description sounded accurate though.

“Sorry,” said Matt, “Sorry I - this is a lot to take in. Pidge. You said she was diving by herself. And you...became friends? Just like that?”

Lance eyed him.

“Are you surprised we didn’t eat her for lunch?” he said, voice flat.

Matt’s ears went red.

“I - no, I - I mean...that is - I don’t mean any offence -“

Lance rolled his eyes. He gestured at the tank around him, and the cuff still on his tale.

“We’re not the monsters around here,” he said.

Matt didn’t have anything to say to that.

“Anyway,” said Lance, “Pidge told us she was looking for you and your dad. She’s been looking for a long time and she’s going to be so happy that you’re okay. Is your dad okay? I…” Lance swallowed nervously, “I haven’t seen him around.”

There was a long moment’s pause.

“He’s in another facility,” said Matt, expression blank. “There’s...this isn’t the only lab.”

“Oh,” said Lance.

“They said if I didn’t cooperate, they’d kill him,” said Matt, dully. “I expect they told him the same thing.”

Lance felt something in his heart clench tight.

“We...we can rescue him too, right?” said Lance, “Once we get a message to Pidge somehow...we can get help, and rescue your dad as well.”
Matt began to laugh. The sound was too loud, compared to their hushed conversation, and it made Lance flinch. But Matt didn’t stop - he just laughed, and laughed. Then, just as abruptly, it seemed to die in his throat.

“My sister. What was she doing? You said she was by herself?”

Lance nodded, wary.

“Oh my god, mum would be worried to death. I can’t believe ...it’s not like Katie has wings!”

“She stayed with us a lot,” said Lance, “She would go to a nearby village sometimes. And travel around. But she would stay with us mostly. She was researching Balmeran crystals. We helped with her inventions and research! Well, my buddy Hunk mostly...he’s really smart and really good with biped machines and things. Smarter than me anyway. But I helped with the singing and crystal tuning and stuff! Pidge said I was really - ”

“Singing?” said Matt, sharply. But before Lance could answer, he held up a hand, looking at the door and around the lab. Then he lowered his voice. “What kind of singing? Can you describe what the experiments were like?”

Lance looked nervously at the door too.

“Um,” he said, “mostly she’d get me to sing certain notes? Sometimes above water, sometimes under water. It’d made the crystals glow differently. I think one even changed colour, a bit. She said I was really good at it, though. The crystals were better, after. For powering lamps and stuff. We’d bring her smaller shards from home to work with and ...Matt?”

Matt had gone very still.

“No,” he breathed, “Oh Pidge.”

“What?” said Lance. “What’s wrong?”

“How many people know about this?” asked Matt. He reached out as if to grab Lance by the shoulder, but froze when Lance jerked back into the water. They stared at each other, Lance floating in the centre of his tank, Matt leaning right over the edge.

“Does Shiro and Keith know? Anyone else? Are you friends with any other humans or avians?”

“I...Shiro and Keith know...they were there,” said Lance, “I don’t know about anyone else. Matt...you have to breathe.”

Matt looked like he was going to hyperventilate.

“You mustn’t tell anyone about this,” he said, voice barely above a whisper, eyes wild, “Especially not Haggar. Or anyone. Anyone who asks - please, no matter what they do or what they say, you can’t tell them about this!”

Lance could only nod.

“Okay,” he said.

“Promise me!”

“I promise!” said Lance, scared by the urgency, “I promise. But why?”
“It’s the whole reason you’re here,” said Matt, eyes darting again to the door of the lab, “The whole reason Haggar’s been looking for merfolk subjects. It’s the reason why we were even...I don’t know how much Shiro told you about the Kerberos Mission?”

“Not that much,” said Lance, carefully.

Matt was looking at Lance as if he was seeing through him.

“We were researching different kinds of crystal refinement,” he said after a long pause. “I mean...it’s sort of what everyone is doing. Dad’s spent his whole life on it. Basically all the available crystal that can be safely mined has been mined, right? Galra territory to begin with, mostly. So they’re not exactly running out tomorrow but. Well.”

Matt waved a hand at the violet lamps around the lab.

“There’s a chemical synthesis that helps, but it’s. Pretty toxic. Haggar refined the process from a naturally recurring one since that also occurs at the bottom of the sea. Not the same once you replicate it on land. And really not an easy process to run back home, the air pressure isn’t right that high up. And we don’t have that many sea-level labs left, what with the Galra being in control of everything. Had to figure out another way.”

“What has that go to do with us?” said Lance.

“Well,” said Matt, “we realised that deep-ocean crystal strains was much more efficient with energy conversion and output. We get samples, sometimes, that wash up on shore. It’s not a new discovery, we just didn’t know why.

It’s fascinating! Because not all deep-sea crystals have those properties. Only the ones from specific areas. It’s been hard to pinpoint since you don’t get many humans willing to dive that deep, and all the coastal villages are..... Zarkon’s forces are everywhere. But we had to get the samples from Whitecap and figure out why the crystals were so different, there. I guess my sister followed the trail.”

Lance floated slowly back towards Matt.

“...did you figure out why they were different?” he asked.

“Dad and I had a hypothesis,” said Matt, “But we never managed to prove it.”

“Prove...?” said Lance, splashing the water a little impatiently.

“We realised that all the places where the samples displayed the optimal characteristics had one thing in common: they were all centered around well known areas of merfolk sightings. Areas like Whitecap bay. We thought it must have had something to do with the merfolk, then, but we didn’t know what it was exactly.”

Matt’s face broke out into a smile, and he rubbed his eyes with the heel of one hand.

His expression was so fond, it broke Lance’s heart.

“But Pidge figured it out. She - “ Matt shook his head, still smiling. “I have the smartest baby sister in the whole world. She figured it out! Dad and I were working on the notes for Kerberos...but we were captured a few days after we landed.”

Something heavy dropped in the pit of Lance’s stomach.
“If you were captured,” he said, horrified, “ Doesn’t that mean the Galra already know about this?”

Matt shook his head.

“No, luckily...dad and I burned our notes the day before.”

At Lance’s confused expression, Matt made a dry sort of noise.

“Look at us. Look what happened to you. You don’t think Haggar is the only one who wants merfolk specimens, do you? That the Galra are the only ones who are after this information? Everyone wants this. Everyone fucking wants this.”

Matt gestured at the lab below them; at the instruments and the scalpel and the table that Lance had been strapped on to be dissected. Lance shivered in the water.

“Dad knew that if the Garrison found out about our research - if any of the black coats found out, this would happen. We’d be back at war with the merfolk as well as the galra. So he burned the maps and our personal notes.”

Matt shifted on his legs, crossing them to sit more comfortably in front of Lance.

“So...Haggar knows it’s something to do with merfolk. There’s no other reason to be down in Whitecap bay with a bunch of crystal samples and scopes. We couldn’t hide that. But she doesn’t have any more specificity. And we can’t let her know. You can’t tell her.”

Lance gripped the edge of his tank. Fear was clogging his gills, making his head fuzzy. All he could think about was pain, the press of nails against his eye; Sendak’s smooth voice in his ear; the smell of fire on his skin.

“I don’t want to tell her,” said Lance, and his voice was unsteady, “But what if...what if she...”

“You can’t tell her,” repeated Matthew, looking panicked, “You can’t. Please, you can’t. As soon as she finds out, it’s all over. If what Pidge...if what you said is true, they’ll hunt you guys down. It’ll never end.”

“They’re already hunting us down!” said Lance, panicked too, “How do you think I got here?!”

He pushed away from the tank, sinking back into the water. It didn’t make Lance feel that much safer, but it was instinct, at this point.

“You let her...you let them experiment on me,” said Lance, tears clouding his eyes, “You let them strap me down and - and you knew. You knew it was pointless. And you helped them - “

“I’m sorry,” said Matt, words tumbling into one another, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry -”

“I was scared they would hurt you!” cried Lance, “And you just let her do all those things to me when you know it was...stalling for time? I - ”

“ They’ll kill my dad!” Matthew burst out, hands like claws on his own neck. His eyes were wide in his pale face, haunted. “They’ll kill him as soon as he’s not needed, please, you can’t, please! They’ll kill me too. Right now they need us alive, and so t-they -fuck. Fuck!”

Matt slammed a fist down in his own lap, wiping angry tears from his eyes, raking one hand distractedly through his own hair. The galran lamps gave them a faint purple sheen, and for a startling moment, Lance was reminded of Zojas and his lavender hair.
He had begged too.

Matt was shuffling his wings, extending them slightly out, then drawing them tight back in. It was a familiar, anxious gesture, and it made the roaring anger and panic in Lance’s own head dull a little.

Matt was just scared. He was as scared and trapped as Lance was.

Slowly, carefully, Lance touched Matt’s hand on the side of the tank. The Avian looked up with a jolt, but did not pull away. His eyes were wet, wings hunched. His skin ran hot.

“I won’t tell her,” said Lance, very quietly, “I’ll try. I promise I’ll try. But it hurts, and I don’t know how long I…”

Lance looked down at his own knuckles, unable to find the rest of the words. He touched the burn mark on his face with tentative fingers, and hissed at the still-sharp pain of it. He wondered, absently, if the scales would grow back. He hoped they would. He could remember the feel of Keith, pressing the pad of his fingers there, tracing the pattern of them on Lance’s face with soft lips and softer words.

Lance squeezed his eyes shut against the memory.

Wordlessly, Matt turned his palm up so he could squeeze Lance’s hand, their fingers interlaced.

“I’ve been trying to keep her off the right track,” said Matt after a long while, “with the research.”

Lance opened one set of eyelids, vision still fogged by the harsh light from earlier that day.

“Is that...what the blood was for?” he asked, “and my scales?”

Matt let out a long breath.

“Sort of. The Galra and the Alteans have got their own...theories. I just try not to correct them.”

Lance shuddered. He wondered how many of those theories he could survive.

“You said they … you said this was for the crystals?” said Lance.

Matt nodded.

“Then why are they testing my tears on people?”

To Lance’s surprise, Matt let out a loud ha! of derision. The sound was like a gunshot in the silent hall, and they both twitched; wary.

“The fucking tears,” said Matt, letting out another harsh breath of not-laughter. “God. That has nothing to do with the crystals. Or science. And it drives Haggar absolutely crazy.”

Lance tilted his head, confused.

Matt leaned in closer, brows raised, contempt etched into every line of his expression.

“There’s an old galra legend: they say that mermaid tears can be used in a ritual for quintessence transference.”

Lance must have still looked confused, because Matt made a face.
“To transfer the life force from one being to another,” he said, waving his hands, “so the _key to immortality_. Ever lasting life. The cure of all ailment. The water of youth.”

Lance’s eyes widened.

“So one person _dies_?” he said.

“Supposedly,” said Matt, shrugging. “Equal exchange is a big thing in fairy tales.”

“...I don’t think any of this is actually true,” said Lance doubtfully.

Mathew did laugh this time, showing his teeth.

“Of _course_ it’s not true! Though it’s good to get some confirmation from the source, _ha_. No. Look. None of us believe this shit. It’s a fairytale.”

“...then why - ?”

Matt gave Lance a dead-eyed stare, steady and flat.

“Because _his majesty_ thinks it’s true,” he said.

Lance stared.

“Zarkon...?”

Matt nodded.

“Galra tend to live longer than humans and avians, but Zarkon is old - even for Galra,” said Matt in a low voice. “And he isn’t doing so great. Very ill. Haggar has him on all sorts of medicines. Ulaz says it’s been going on for years. Long before I got here anyway.”

Matt shuffled his wings, stretching them a little to either side of him.

“Anyway, it’s been getting worse I think. He’s getting really impatient. And desperate. You’d have to be pretty desperate to resort to a sailor’s legend, I think.”

Lance blinked slow and horrified.

“So that’s why...that’s why the galra were at sea, trying to...”


“But it doesn’t work,” said Lance, feeling sick, “The - it’s just a _story_. What happens when he finds out? Is he going to just kill me?”

Matt shook his head, an ugly smirk at the edge of his teeth.

“He’s not going to find out,” said Matt. “Haggar has too much riding on this. We’ll probably have to substitute the medication somehow. But he won’t find out.”

Lance frowned.

“But won’t he notice if the other person doesn’t die?” asked Lance.

The avian gave him that same, flat, steady stare. It made Lance curl his tail, nervous.
“They will die,” said Matt calmly. “Poison, probably.”

Lance felt sick to his stomach.

“Oh,” he said in a very small voice.

There was a long, long pause. The conversation had not gone the way Lance thought it might have, and he felt lost again, hopeless.

“...Will they keep hurting me then,” said Lance, “For the tears?”

Matt pressed one hand to his face, bowed tight over his knees.

“I... maybe. If you could cry on command, that would save you a lot of pain,” he said. Matt let out a coughing sob, dry in his chest. Perhaps he had run out of tears, too. “Maybe Haggar will dispense with that part of the farce. I’ll try to talk to her - it’s… it’s in her interests to keep you healthy as far as possible. I...I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Lance traced a sea-shell pattern on the back of Matt’s hand.

“It’s okay,” he lied, voice tight in his own throat. “It’s not your fault.”

Matt clutched at his hand.

“I didn’t ask for your name,” said the avian.

Lance managed a smile.

“It’s Lance.”

“Lance,” said Matt, voice raw. “Thank you for saving Shiro. And thank you for looking after my sister.”

Lance wrapped his fingers carefully around Matt’s wrist.

“Pidge will find us,” said Lance, trying his best to suppress the wobble in his own voice, “She’ll find us and...and she’ll have help. She knows Alteans. And Shiro and Keith and all the other avians. They’ll help us escape soon. I know they will.”

Matt gave him a weak smile and squeezed back.

But Lance could tell that he did not believe a single word.

Politics, Keith was learning, moved at a glacial pace.

It took almost another month before the council and the Alteans came to an agreement on how to approach the merfolk; during which time Keith and Shiro were forbidden to leave. It hadn’t been said in so many words, but it was made plain by the avians who would shadow them whenever they left the barracks.

Mila had laughed uproariously the first time she heard Keith complain about the indecision.
“You think this is slow?” she had said, swinging her legs as they sat eating lunch on the edge of the parapets, “For the council, this is practically lightning speed.”

“What’s the point of having unchecked power if you can’t be efficient about it?” Keith had replied, and taken out his frustrations by slicing his sandwich viciously in half with his knife.

He had been feeling...off ever since Pidge’s outburst in the council room. It was the same sensation as an unexpected warm current; it threw you, pulling at your shoulders like a rush of adrenaline, and then dissipating as fast as it came, leaving you to drop. Keith felt like a very small pawn - and the knowledge that Pidge had been keeping things from him...it stung. He felt used.

The first thing Keith had said to Shiro when they were alone was:

“Did you know? About Lance.”

“I didn’t know about him being a prince,” Shiro had said. “But I did know he was in love with you.”

Keith felt all his feathers slowly stand on end, and he busied himself patting them back down instead of looking Shiro in the eye.

“I don’t know if that’s true,” said Keith after a long pause, “We. I mean… we never said.”

Shiro snorted.

Keith buried his face in his hands.

“Don’t laugh at me,” he mumbled through his fingers, “Ugh. Go away.”

“You two would literally nap in the sand for hours,” said Shiro, sounding amused, “he gave you sand baths, Keith!”

Keith yelped and tried to smack Shiro across the mouth with the top of his wing to shut him up.

“Not so loud !” he hissed.

“I’m just saying,” said Shiro, holding up his hands, “No one was being very subtle.”

Keith stared out over the city.

“I just...” Keith swallowed hard. “Maybe...It could have been anyone. Any avian. You know?”

He looked at Shiro.

“What if it was just because we were the first ones he met and it’s...what if it was just...”

Keith extended his left wing, tilting it to the wind so that it slid under his down feathers, cool on his skin.

Beside him, Shiro let out a slow breath. He shuffled out his left wing, extending it so that it wrapped warm and heavy across Keith’s shoulders.

“Hey,” said Shiro quietly, “Hey. That’s not fair to Lance. We could say the same in reverse, right? Do you like him just because you’ve never met any merfolk before?”

“No ,” said Keith, pulling his own wings tighter to his back.
“So you’re not just head over wings for some tail,” said Shiro, waggling his eyebrows comically. Keith felt his entire face go red, and he shoved Shiro hard.

“Shut up!”

But Shiro wasn’t done yet.

“Sleeping with the fishes - “ said Shiro, ducking Keith’s elbow with a burst of laughter.

“One more word,” Keith hissed, trying to pin Shiro down by the wing and failing.

“Aww, you still get so fluffy when you’re embarrassed,” said Shiro, pulling Keith close with one wing and grabbing him by the neck with his free hand to ruffle Keith’s hair. Keith squawked in indignation and they fell off their seats in a flurry of feathers. Keith managed to get the upper hand by kneeling Shiro ruthlessly in the groin, but was promptly knocked onto his butt with a well placed wingtip to the face.

They ended up where they started, feathers a little messier, face a little flushed. It was the calmest Keith had felt for weeks, and his chest ached with it. He missed the sea, he realised. Up here, it was a distant mass of blue, deceptively smooth. Keith missed the salt edged wind and the ever steady breathing of the water. He missed the whistling dolphin calls, and the soft blue-green glow of scales in dark, still lakes.

He missed Lance.

Shiro nudged Keith’s shoulder.

“Don’t be too angry at Pidge, okay?” he said.

Keith looked away.

“She lied,” said Keith. Because it was easier than saying Lance lied. All that time, and he had said nothing.

Shiro sighed.

“Maybe she thought we already knew. It’s not like the topic really came up.”

“She used us,” said Keith, finally looking Shiro in the eyes, “She used me. You know that, right?”

Shiro looked pained.

“Keith...don’t say that.”

Keith shut his mouth.

He looked down at his hands, turning over his palm. Lance had liked to run his finger tip between the valley of each of Keith’s fingers, tracing their outlines over and over. The lack of webbing fascinated him. He’d worry over Keith’s soft nails.

“Like guppy scales,” said Lance, rubbing the blunt edge of Keith’s thumbnail, “not very protective.”

“They’re fine,” Keith had said.
“Baby scales and blunt teeth,” said Lance, shaking his head. He was smiling so wide his eyes were crinkled with happiness. “Soft Keef. It’s okay. I’ll protect you from big bad sharks.”

Hesitantly, Shiro pulled him into another hug. Keith let him, lowering his wings so he could fit better underneath the arch of Shiro’s own. Shiro been doing that a lot lately, and Keith was grateful for it; grateful for the heavy weight of Shiro’s wings and the familiar scent of his feathers. Even though avian cities were meant to be the safest for them, Keith felt more isolated here than he ever had in that sea cave.

“I just…” Keith took a deep breath, “I feel like we’re wasting so much time.”

“I know,” said Shiro. “Trust me, I know.”

“We should be out there, trying to find them, trying to get to the capital - not. Not sitting around - “

“Keith, I know,” said Shiro, and his voice cracked a little over the last word. He took a shuddering inhale, and Keith thought he could hear the air rattling his lungs, skin paper thin.

He rested his head against Shiro’s shoulder, and felt Shiro press his face against Keith’s hair.

“I’m sorry,” said Keith into the fabric of Shiro’s shirt, “I... I guess being here makes me antsy.”

“Me too,” said Shiro. “But we can’t do this by ourselves.”

“I found you by myself,” said Keith, but his tone was petulant.

Shiro hummed, the sound vibrating through his chest.

“Well. I don’t know,” he said, “I think Lance helped.”

Keith pulled away to give Shiro the stink eye.

“You know what I mean.”

Shiro smiled at him.

“Yeah. I know.”

Keith looked away.

“I hope he’s okay.”

“I’m sure he is,” said Shiro soothingly.

“Just thought we’d be back by now.”

“Well, I think you’ve just been promoted to diplomatic status,” said Shiro, “So we’ll be seeing Lance and Hunk again. Just. Not the way we originally planned.”

“I hope Mallory comes with us so Merida can drag him straight down to hell,” said Keith.

Shiro had laughed and laughed and laughed.
As it turned out though, Mallory wasn’t coming with them.

Instead, the envoy consisted of four other avians, in addition to Mila. Ostensibly, they were there on behalf of the council to begin possible negotiations...but Keith was fairly sure you only needed one person to do the talking. The rest were probably just there to make sure that Keith and Shiro didn’t do anything suspicious. Or run away. Or something. Mallory had made it plain that if it weren’t for the Alteans, Keith at least would have found himself looking at the inside of a cell.

“Well it’s not like the council speaks with one voice,” Shiro had said, when Keith voiced his suspicions the night after meeting their would-be flightmates. “They probably just don’t trust each other.”

“I don’t trust them not to shoot us in the back,” said Keith darkly.

Shiro had given him an exaggerated slow-shrug, and went back to eating his soup.

Keith supposed that was fair enough. Shiro had suffered much worse than being shot in the back. And even if they were being shuffled out of the city to be executed, there wasn’t much they could do about it. At least out there, it would be easier for Keith to stab someone else in the back before he was inevitably shot out of the sky.

The plan was a relatively simple one: Pidge would travel ahead, aided by Resistance members, and rendezvous with the avians near the bay before heading down to the water under the cover of night fall. The Alteans would stay behind in the avian stronghold, as there was no way for them to travel that close to the coast without risking discovery. The Council would then deliberate after the envoy returned - hopefully with a favourable answer.

Keith had been extremely reluctant to lead everyone straight to Lance’s hide-out. But Pidge had pointed out that it was the one place guaranteed to have mermaid surveillance after the circumstances of their departure. And Keith knew she was right. But he still felt as if they were betraying something precious; a safe, treasured place. Those months spent at the sea-lake now seemed ...otherworldly; a coveted thing. Strangers felt like a violation.

In the end, it took them three nights of flying to get to Whitecap Bay.

Despite the risk of being spotted, they flew in a loose vic formation with Shiro taking first lead and rotating out near sunrise. They were always flanked by two others of the group and never left to coast without a tail: Natalya was always a pale shadow in Keith’s periphery, feathers an owl-grey sweep to match her silver hair; Barton never took the lead, hanging slightly above them, the long-scope of his gun strapped in easy reach under his broad hawk-wings.

Keith hated flying under anyone he did not trust…which, admittedly, was everyone except Shiro. If anything were to happen, Shiro would have a hard time outmanoeuvring the rest of the envoy. He could perhaps out-pace their Corvid (a raven by the name of Arthur, whose severe silhouette was as sharp as the line of his mouth) from sheer stamina alone, but he wouldn’t get very far before Barton was on him.

And while Keith probably could out-fly their company, he was also hyper-aware that they had paired him with two other falcons: Mila and a peregrine named Acxa. And trying to out-dive a peregrine was never good news.
Miraculously, they cleared the coastline with the fourth sunrise without any incidents.

The sea air was sharp in Keith’s lungs as they banked close to the cliff edge, looping low and slow across the water to make their presence clear. Shiro was first to land, skidding neatly to a stop just outside the cave entrance, sweeping his wings high to avoid the jagged outcrop in one, smooth practiced motion. The others followed, Arthur and Mila tucking in their wings to drop down next to Shiro, while Natalya and Barton - whose wingspans were broader, came to perch on unsteady outcrops further up the cliff.

Acxa kept close to Keith as he pressed as low to the water as he dared, letting his shadow skim the petal waves, scanning the water as he flew. He ignored her for the most part; heart beating fast from something other than exertion.

Impatient, Keith made another curving loop, wings so close to the water he could almost feel the cold spray. He followed the line where the water bled from sea-glass to ink, waiting for the telltale flash of blue scales.

Then Keith saw a movement in the shadow of the rocks: a steel-grey flash of something not-quite metallic. From this height, it was hard to tell precisely, but the size of the silhouette wasn’t quite right.

It wasn’t Lance.

It was a mermaid with long chalk hair. And before Keith could shout anything, she slipped back into the water and vanished.

Acxa whistled sharply, and Keith followed her back to the others, snapping his wings out to slow his descent. It was an easy landing, the familiarity an ache in his chest. Home. Any moment now, Lance and Hunk would appear, their colourful tales preceded only by the long, snaking ripples that came to the surface before them.

“Any sign?” said Shiro.

Keith shook his head.

“Not Lance,” he said, “But someone saw us. Mermaid.”

“Looked pretty big,” said Acxa, “Must have been a mermaid.”

Shiro patted him on the elbow and Keith bit back his disappointment: they had been gone for a long time, and it was unreasonable to think Lance would be up here just waiting for the right moment to greet them.

“Where’s Pidge?” asked Keith.

“I think something must have held them up,” said Shiro, brow furrowed, “Cavern’s empty.”

“They might have had to lie low,” said Arthur, “Grounded routes must be crawling with Galra. Can we contact the merfolk without her?”

“Well they know we’re here now,” said Acxa. She turned to Shiro and Keith, eyebrow raised, wings folded close against the harsh sea wind. “You said you could call on them?”

Shiro nodded, pulling out the small bone-whistle that Lance and Hunk had gifted them with months ago. He held it out to Keith.
“Do the honours?” said Shiro, expression wry.

Wordlessly, Keith took the whistle and clambered down the rock ledge to a lower outcrop. The water washed over the slick rock, dark and glittering.

Distantly, he heard Natalya’s heavy accent: “Is he getting in the ocean?”

Keith rolled his eyes, held the whistle between his teeth and knelt down close to the water. Immediately he was half soaked to his knees, but there wasn’t much he could do about that. The whistle had to be blown under water. He probably looked like a goose, wings half spread to avoid as much of the spray as possible, back bent forwards, balanced precariously.

Taking a deep breath, Keith shut his eyes, submerged his face in the bitter-salt-sea and blew. He blew until his breath ran out, and then he came up for air in a gasp, coughing at the taste of the water. His hair stuck to his face, wet and cold.

For a long time, no one spoke as they waited. ...And waited.

No one appeared.

“I think you should do it again,” said Mila cheerfully, “Get your whole head under, nice and wet.”

“Fuck off,” said Keith, shooting her a glare over his shoulder - but he did it again.

They waited some more, watching the sun slowly inch across the sky.

Nothing.

“Are you sure that thing works?” asked Barton, who had not actually spoken to Keith in two days. When Keith squinted in his direction, he realised the avian was cleaning his rifle.

“It does,” Shiro answered for him. “We just have to be patient.”

“I’m going to do rounds,” said Mila, ‘might get their attention again.”

And with that, she took a running leap, back-flipping off the ledge and into the air with a neat twist of her hips. They watched her soar out across the bay, dust-red wings clearly outlined in the sky.

“Show off,” said Natalya.

Arthur huffed out a breath, his own wings a spill of black against the rock.

“Good thing no Galra ships are out here right now,” he said dryly, “We might as well be waving a giant flag.”

They kept waiting.

Keith tried the whistle again. But when nothing happened, he climbed back onto the ledge to sit with Shiro, trying to tamper the growing sense of dread that was filling the pit of his stomach. Lance and Hunk had never kept them waiting this long before. Something was wrong. And judging by the frown on Shiro’s face, the absence of merfolk was making him anxious too.

They waited almost a full hour.
Keith could feel the gaze of the other avians burning into the back of his neck. They waited mostly in silence, but the weight of doubt and scepticism was evident in Arthur’s sharp eyebrows and the way Barton was slowly and fastidiously cleaning his gun. They took turns making sweeps of the rocks that jutted like shark teeth from the ocean, hoping to spot another mermaid.

It was Acxa who first saw them, her short-sharp whistle making them all jolt to attention: gentle peaks in the water that rippled in a way that could only signal the arrival of merfolk. Keith jumped to his feet, and behind him, he saw Natalya and Mila both reach for their weapons, wings half spread.

The ripples were very close now - close enough for Keith to see the blurry shapes of the merfolk, long and sinuous. They broke the surface just as Acxa returned to land, her boots ringing sharp and long as they scored against the stone.

“Are we safe here?” Mila was saying, “High enough? Keith!”

Keith only had eyes for the water. He couldn’t breathe.

Seven heads broke the surface, so quietly there was no sound beyond the sea. They stopped in the shadow of the cliffs, but far enough so they were out of reach.

There were six mermaids, huge and terrifying, and at the furthest end -

“Hunk!” cried Shiro.

The mermaids turned to Hunk then, their words intelligible. Keith saw Hunk nod, and one of the mermaids broke from the group, coming closer.

“You two I know,” she said, in that inhuman voice. She looked from Shiro to Keith, then to the avians behind them. Suddenly, Keith recognised her as the mermaid that had confronted them all those weeks ago. Lance’s sister. Merida.

She was holding a long, unfamiliar weapon in one hand.

“Who are these other trespassers?”

But Keith had more pressing questions on his mind.

“Where’s Lance?” he demanded.

Before Merida could answer, Keith was roughly pushed aside, pulled back by Mila and blocked by the edge of Arthur’s wing.

“We are an envoy from the Council,” said Arthur. His voice carried far enough across the water for the mermaids to still. They rose and fell gently with the water. “We come only to seek an audience with your Queen. We’ve long since been united by a common interest against the Galra, and the Council wishes to extend negotiations for an alliance.”

Merida considered Arthur for a long moment, before nodding once, almost imperceptibly. Behind her, one of the mermaids slipped silently back under the surface.

“Do you speak on behalf of the council?” said Merida.

“No,” said Arthur, inclining his head, “Only to broker the negotiations. We have heard reports of your impressive attacks against the Galra in the past few weeks and - “
His words were cut off by a harsh, shrieking laugh. All the avians flinched backwards. The mermaids were hissing, a low, awful sound. Keith could see Merida’s teeth, sharp and horrifying as she threw back her head.

“We do not attack the Galra for your cause, Avian,” she said, rising out of the water, “Do not mistake our wrath for your quarrels.”

The mermaids were closer now, ringing the Avians in. Keith could see the flat, undisguised fear in all their faces. Barton had his finger on the trigger; Natalya’s hands were at her holsters and both Aexa and Mila had blades in their hands. One of the mermaids made a sharp, darting motion when Arthur’s hand twitched towards his hip, and he froze. His expression was impassive, but Keith could read the lines of his wings too clearly.

Corvid or not, he was barely suppressing the urge to bolt.

Keith couldn’t be quiet any longer.

“Where’s Lance?” he shouted across the water, “- Mila, let go of me! - I want to talk to him. We mean no harm. Where is he? Hunk? Hunk!”

At this, Hunk let out a sobbing wail, which was drowned out by Merida’s fury.

“Mean no harm?” she said, surging forwards. Her voice grew to a half-scream, “Mean no harm?!”

She made to swipe at Keith’s ankle.

“Keith!” yelled Shiro, pulling Keith bodily by an arm across the chest. But Merida had jerked backwards, her powerful tail-fin slapping on the rock: Mila had swung her blade out, the sharp edge glinting in the sun, just shy Merida’s hand.

The mermaids’ hissing rose to a feather-rising pitch, coming closer and closer, their teeth bared. Not for the first time, Keith realised just how big they were. He tried to exhale slowly.

“I just want to talk to him,” said Keith.

Merida drew herself up out of the water, ignoring Mila’s sword. She fixed her slitted pupils on Keith, teeth bared.

“You cannot speak with Lance,” she said, as if every word were etched painfully into stone, “because the Galra took him.”

Keith felt like someone had struck him hard in the chest.

He tried drawing breath, but the ocean had drained all the air away, leaving only the roaring sound in his ears and the rapid-fire gasp of something vivid just behind his eyes. Everything was suddenly hyper-sharp, too bright, too much.

Distantly, he could feel Shiro’s hand on his shoulders. He could hear his name Keith, Keith, look at me. Breathe. Breathe with me. Keith!

Curiously, he could still hear the sound of Hunk weeping inconsolably underneath the noise of the water, of Arthur and Mila, of the mermaids, of an impassive voice saying, with impossible calm:
'...due to an human error. With regret, we must inform you that the team is presumed dead’.

The air was empty.

*The Galra took him.*

Someone else was saying the word ‘*no*’ over and over.

It took a few long minutes before Keith realised that voice was his own. He could barely recognise it.

“Keith,” Shiro was still saying. He had one arm under Keith’s wings, the other gripping him tightly by the arm, propping Keith upright because his legs had given out. Keith couldn’t remember when he had fallen.


“...no, it can’t - he - ” said Keith, staring from Merida to Hunk and then back again. “How - ?”

This time, it was Hunk who spoke, swimming fast to the rock ledge and reaching for Keith’s hand. His face was scrunched up with grief.

“We thought they were drowning,” said Hunk, hoarse, “we came up to the cave to see if you guys were back yet and when we came out, there was a ship and... it - it looked just like a fishing vessel, it was...we thought - ”

Hunk broke off into sobs.

“There was a girl in the water, she was struggling and...Lance thought...he went to help and it was a trap, and they took him, *they used a fire-lighter* and - It’s been weeks and weeks, you have to help, please, you have to look for him, you have to help!”

Keith felt like he was going to be sick.

“...Weeks?” he repeated, voice cracking on the word.

*Weeks.* While Keith was sitting, bored and useless up in the sky.

How was a merman meant to survive on land for so long?

“When exactly did this happen?” asked Shiro. Keith could feel his hand shaking where his fingers dug into Keith’s skin. Shiro’s face was white, and he looked like he was going to be sick as well.

“The day past the last new moon,” said Merida, voice low and hollow.

And all Keith could think of, in the overwhelming scream of panic in his head, was: *it was so much time.* Something hot and desperate flared behind his throat, choking him.

“How could you let this happen?” he shouted, trying to pull out of Shiro’s grip so he could get to Hunk and *shake him,* “You were there, and you just - *how could you let this happen?*”

Hunk was crying in earnest now.

“I don’t know,” he said, “don’t know!”

But Keith could not control the panic in his chest. It was bursting free of his ribs, puncturing his
lungs. He was heaving for breath, but it came short and shallow, making Keith gag. All he could see was Lance in that storm, a drowned Shiro on his chest; Lance with careful eyes, laying out blankets for them to sleep on; Lance humming a quiet lullaby in a soft, still lake; Lance -

" - you just let him go and what, stood back to watch? You know what he’s like! You could have stopped him ...How could you just let this happen? How could you let this fucking happen? You were right there! You were right there! "

Keith didn’t realise he was screaming until Shiro forcibly pressed Keith’s face into his own shoulder; wing heavy across Keith’s back, holding him in as Keith struggled, desperate.

“Get him under control ,” Arthur was hissing, voice strung tight like a bow. “Knock him out if you have to!”

Before Keith reply, there was a piercing shriek . It sent all the Avians lurching to their feet, stumbling. Shiro let go of Keith to clamp his hands across his ears, face screwed up with pain.

Keith looked out over the silence, and saw the reason for the sudden stillness.

Another mermaid had arrived.

She had long grey hair and wore what appeared to be flat-silver armour. Sitting across her crown was a twisted band set with pale blue crystals.

She floated close to the rock-ledge, and the other Mermaids came with her, their weapons glittering in the water. She looked around at the Avians - at the way Barton had his gun trained on her, the way Natalya and Acxa were circling above, and Mila’s long blade - and her lip curled.

She turned slowly to Arthur, who - to his credit - still had not drawn the gun that Keith could see strapped to the small of his back.

“I was told,” she said, voice the colour of slate, “that the avians had come begging for an alliance. But perhaps they have come begging for a fight instead.”

Arthur swallowed hard.

“We have word from the Alteans,” he said, “And the council wishes to talk with Your Majesty. To discuss something that could be mutually beneficial -”

He stopped when the mermaid - the Queen; Lance’s mother - held up one hand.

“The Galra took one of mine,” she said, “And none shall leave my waters alive so long as I am Queen.”

She turned her gaze on Keith and Shiro. Her expression betrayed nothing, but Keith felt as if she had pinned him down by the wing, like a butterfly open on glass. She had him by the throat with a tilt of her head; the guilt sour and bitter at the back of Keith’s throat. Then she blinked and her gaze returned to Arthur.

No one dared move.

“Bring back my son,” said the Queen, “then we talk.”

Chapter End Notes
17K chapter... *falls down the stairs*, my longest yet omg pls lemme know what you think if you have time!!

A lot of plot + critical info + and emotional stuff happened so I really hope it came off tense and exciting to read but I don't know if i managed? I rewrote the last line like 500 times and there's still something wrong with it. It feels weird because i've been chomping to write some of this chapter's scenes since like, the very start of Watercast...and it felt like I didn't do them justice now that I was finally writing them? Sigh. :( Though: *eyeball emoji* what's Acxa doing with our Keef?

As usual, criticism is really welcome! Thank you so much for keeping with this giant story this far in, it means so much you guys really keep me going >...< There's some cute merlance coming and i'll try do a giveaway soon!

I've had Matt characterised (kinda as an OC) long before season 4, but what do you think? How did you guys find the new season?! I enjoyed being able to reveal some key info for once haha, Lance is such a unreliable narrator (poor baby). Also I can't wait to finally introduce Lotor next chapter and write more emotional Keith. Pls come squee with me on tumblr or twitter! Thanks heaps to onesmolhurt and asterein for letting me bounce ideas and Karovie + hapsky for beta help!

PS: i've been getting comments here asking re how to support me. I can't provide direct links here on AO3 due to it being non-profit, so please visit my tumblr for more info! Thank you so much again for taking the time to comment and chat to me.
Chapter Summary

Keith finds himself played at every turn. Pidge arrives with Resistance intel that starts an avalanche. No one trusts anyone. Meanwhile, Lotor appears to be playing by his own rules - and Lance is running out of time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Are we not all desperate, one way or another?"
- Taylor Caldwell

By nightfall, Pidge still had not arrived and the avians were forced to retreat inside the sea cave for shelter.

They were not alone: A few of the mermaids stayed with them, silent and watchful. Keith could see the glimmering shadow of them in the water, two close to the surface; a grey-silver reminder. No doubt the others were nearby, out of sight. Ever so often, one of the mermaids would disappear between one blink at the next - only for another to reappear on the other side of the rocks.

Keith felt as if the stillness was going to carve out a hole in his lungs.

There was a hollow buzzing behind his eyes that he could not dislodge. It vibrated, humming hollow and making his hands and wings shake, even after Keith had shouted himself hoarse. He had demanded that they fly out straight away, for for him to go alone - to do anything except staying so fucking still. When that hadn’t worked, Keith had begged. He had volunteered himself, offered to do recon alone. Wasn’t he expendable? They needed to go now, instead of wasting more time when Lance could be suffering at the hands of the Galra...when they could be doing anything to him...when they could....

The possibilities were driving him mad. Keith had taken one look at Shiro’s white feathers; the blunt scar across his face - and promptly retched over the stones. He had heaved until nothing came up, Shiro’s hand in his hair and holding back his wing, worried and pale.

Arthur might as well have been sculpted from stone; expression impassive; calm now that the mermaids had left. He flat out refused for them to split up, or go anywhere until they had intel...and more importantly, the blessing from the council.

If it hadn’t been for Shiro’s restraining arm, Keith would have landed a punch across Arthur’s face. Breathing was a conscious effort.

“We don’t know where they took him,” Shiro had said, wing curving around them, trying to shield Keith from the others. His heart was beating steady underneath Keith’s palm, and he tried to focus on that. Words felt foreign.
“We can’t just fly into this blind. It won’t do Lance any good if we get caught on the way, right? We have to wait, and -”

“‘Wait?’” Keith had echoed. The word tasted like the bile at the back of his throat, sharp and acrid. He couldn’t get rid of it. “Wait while they - while they...Shiro, they cut off your -!”

Keith tried to pull back when Shiro pressed his face to his shoulder: he didn’t need comfort, he needed to do something. But in the end, he squeezed his eyes shut and breathed in the scent of Shiro’s shirt; his starched collar; the familiar warmth of his wings.

They might already be too late. They were probably too late. And this time, there would be no miracle waiting in the water. There would be no helpful stranger with sea-glass eyes, no fire made from well loved books, freely given.

Regret was wild feeling. It coloured the world in vivid focus.

Keith realised, now, that he should never have left. He had been too complacent, lulled by waves that had made each day pass so very slow and warm. Stupid. He should have known. How could he had been so greedy; so calm? He should have known. Fate was not going to be kind to Keith a second time. They were going to be too late.

He didn’t realise he had been repeating himself out loud until Shiro’s words filtered back into his consciousness.

“ - not too late. Keith, don’t say that. Don’t say that. We’ll find him. Keith, breathe. We’ll find him, I promise. I’m here.”

Keith didn’t know who Shiro was trying to convince.

He wanted to cry, but the presence of the other Avians felt like hot brands on the back of his neck. Mila was determinedly averting her gaze, but Natalya had not looked away, her gaze assessing as the sound of Barton cleaning his gun.

That had been hours ago.

Now, it was fast getting dark and cold.

Despite Keith’s protests, there wasn’t anywhere else for them to nest for the night, except Lance’s cave. They couldn’t go above ground and risk running into humans or Galra - and the wet sea wind meant staying out on the cliffs was out of the question.

The route around the lake was familiar by now, and both Keith and Shiro could navigate it by touch, albeit a little clumsily, without the help of Lance and Hunk’s huge Belmeran lamps. They led the way inside. The others all had their own torches, but it was still faintly satisfying to hear the sound of violent splashing interspersed with heartfelt swearing.

The space echoed; a hungry, cavernous abyss. Out of the corner of his eye, Keith could see the water ripple gently. Someone had followed them in.

“Why are we fucking walking ?” muttered Barton, voice made loud by the wet stone.

“Because it’s dark as shit,” spat Natalya, who had taken an unfortunate half dip in the water with her left wing and was making her displeasure obvious, “How would we land? Splat.”

“Rather splat than this,” said Barton, “Fuck, my downs are wet..”
“Same…” came Acxa’s voice from the back of the queue.

“Free pneumonia for everybody,” said Mila cheerfully.

There was the sound of someone’s wing whipping out for balance, and someone else losing their footing for the tenth time in as many minutes.

“Everyone shut up,” said Arthur.

Eventually all of them made it to the other side of the lake.

Watching the avians clamber over the flat rock ledges to higher ground, Keith couldn’t shake the sinking feeling in his stomach that they were violating a secret. This was Lance’s sanctuary, and these were strangers.

In the dim light, he could make out the shape of Lance’s treasure trove. The shallow water still glowed faintly, and gold and silver cutlery reflected the light like snow. Someone had removed the lamps though, and none of the huge Balmeran crystals were in sight. There was, however, a huge antique gramophone that Keith had never seen before - and he felt his heart lurch painfully behind his ribs.

Natalya made to rifle through a nearby trunk.

“Hey!” snapped Keith, “Don’t touch that.”

Natalya turned to him, ghost pale and eyebrow raised.

“...It’s just spoons,” she said, but didn’t lower her hand again.

“He’s got a point,” said Barton, jerking a thumb at the water, “Don’t want to make anyone angry, do we?”

Natalya rolled her eyes and folded her wings closer to her shoulders.

“I’d like to see them try,” she said, even as she stepped carefully higher onto the rocks.

Mila snorted.

“I wouldn’t,” she said. “But it’s freezing. You think we’ll be okay using these?” she pointed at the neat piles of blankets. Keith realised, belatedly, there were a few scattered feathers around, caught on the edges of the cloth and between rock. His own feathers, and Shiro’s too.

“It should be okay,” said Shiro, bending to shake out a thick heavy woollen blanket. He glanced at Keith. “We just have to be respectful.”

“They gave you sanctuary here,” said Arthur, surveying the caskets and trunks. He drew his toe carefully across the stone and the remnants of fire ash. It wasn’t a question.

“Yes,” said Shiro, calmly, “He saved my life.”

Behind them, Barton and Natalya were heaping out blankets and setting down their bags for the night, higher up on a rock shelf. Mila was poking at the sizeable stack of wood that had been leftover by Shiro and Keith months ago, picking out the ones that were drier in the centre.

To Keith’s left, Acxa was staring hard out across the lake, light held aloft.
“I’ll take first watch,” she said to Arthur, “I think two of us at once.”

Arthur nodded, wings shifting ever so slightly.

“They’re not going to attack us in the night,” said Keith, flatly.

“I don’t trust you, and I don’t trust them,” said Natalya from her perch, “I’ll take second.”

Keith scowled, but he was distracted when Axca let out a surprised noise, wings snapping out for balance as she stepped on something and almost lost her footing. That something made an ominous crunch against the stones.

“Fuck,” she said, wings spread - one more step and she would have falling backwards into the lake. She kicked at the blanket over which she had tripped, bending down to see what it was.

Keith’s breath froze in his throat.

“Oh look,” said Axca, folding her wings back in relief, “A message in a bottle! And a knife. Weird I -”

Keith made a lunge for them. Reflexively, Axca dodged out of his path, blocking him with the back of one arm. Keith tried to kick her legs out from under her, and had to jerk backwards to avoid a wing-tip to the eye.

“Give that!” he said, voice echoing off the walls.

Someone grabbed him by the wing, but not before he managed to snatch the bottle - and the blade tied to it clumsily with twine - out of Axca’s hands. The peregrine looked pissed off.

“What the hell!” she said, her wings flaring.

Everyone was staring at Keith now. Shiro didn’t let go of his wing-arch, and Keith shook himself free, face red.

“It’s private,” Keith managed to spit out, clutching the cracked bottle in his hand. The handle of his mother’s blade was familiar under the pad of his thumb. It calmed him, a little.

Axca held up both her hands, brows raised.

“Alright,” she said, “don’t leave it lying around then.”

“It wasn’t...I...” Keith hunched his wings around himself, “Don’t touch anything else.”

“What Keith means is,” said Shiro, slowly and deliberately, “The merfolk are very possessive over their things. So we should try disturb as little as possible.”

Axca nodded once, but her gaze was curious now, lingering on Keith. Arthur looked like this was not at all what he imagined signing up for. He ran a hand through his dark hair, features pale and pinched.

“Let’s get set up for the night. I’ll take last watch with Shirogane. Mila, you and Keith.”

“Sure,” said Shiro easily.

He tugged at Keith’s elbow, and Keith followed, stooping to grab an extra blanket and carpet for their bedding. They put them up against the wall, as far from the others as they could. Beside the
water, Barton had managed to start a small fire, and the burst of warm light set shadows leaking upwards; thin and smokey.

Keith sat down on the edge of his bedding, shuffling his wings so they hooked above his head, a small tent of privacy. Shiro folded his blanket several times before sitting down next to him.

“Hey,” he said softly, “Everything okay?”

Keith sucked at the edge of his thumb, where it had found a small cut thanks to the broken bottle.

“Yeah” he said, because his heart was pounding and he could not find more words for the squeezing anxiety inside him. Instead, he busied himself with his hands. He put his knife down carefully in his lap, before tapping the glass on the rock, dislodging some shards until he could pull the piece of paper out.

The letter felt dry as the day Keith wrote it. He held it up to the light. Keith couldn’t tell if it had been damp before, and simply dried out after. There didn’t seem to be any patches of damp on the paper at all, no smudges in the graphite. The words looked the same; painfully short and as felt as inadequate now as it did when he penned them.

His face still felt hot with embarrassment, but now....

Perhaps Lance had read the letter, and put it back into the bottle for safe keeping. They had been gone for so long that it had probably dried out in the intervening time. Perhaps he had read the letter, and waited for Keith to keep his word. Waited, and waited, and waited.

Or perhaps Lance had not read the letter at all.

Keith pressed the heel of a hand to his eyes; hard to stem the hot rush of tears. His own words blurred in front of him, and he could remember writing it, remembered thinking: *please be here when I come back, please don’t leave, please be here, don’t forget me, please -*

But instead, it had been Keith who had left. And now...well.

Keith felt the shadow across his face as Shiro shifted, wings loose and half spread to block Keith from view.

“Hey,” said Shiro, so quiet that the sound barely caught in the feathers of their wings, “we’ll find him. Keith, hey. Shhhh. It’s okay.”

And hand on his wing. Keith was terrified of making a sound, and let himself be pulled close. He clutched the handle of the knife. That too, felt dry.

Keith let out a small, choked sob.

“What if he - “

“You found me,” said Shiro fiercely, cheek pressed to Keith’s hair, wings tucked close, “*You found me,* and we’ll find Lance and he’s going to be okay. He’s going to be alright. *I’m* here this time. We’ll do it together. Keith - “

“We shouldn’t have left,” said Keith, “If we had been here, this wouldn’t have fucking happened. We - “

“Stop it,” said Shiro, “don’t say that. We’ll find him.”
“You promise?” Keith blurted out, and then immediately regretted. He tried to pull away, ashamed, but Shiro held him firm. His silence, however, was answer enough.

For long, empty minutes, they sat there. The fire crackled behind the silhouette of Shiro’s wings. Keith could hear the others talking, their voices a strange echoing murmur. The smell of warm food being cooked; water boiling against metal. Someone laughed, quiet and short. The sound of a spoon hitting the bottom of a mug. Shiro smelled of woodsmoke and salt.

The water lapped at the rock, soft against the whistle-howl of the wind at the mouth of the lake.

“Please don’t make a liar of me,” said Shiro finally, voice very quiet.

Keith squeezed his eyes shut.

Later, he would tuck the letter carefully beneath the flames; watch it curl upon itself like the rush of autumn Autumn arriving too fast.

For now, Keith held it in his hand, and it was heavy.

---

Lance,

I can’t say things in detail here on the off chance that someone finds this -- but we have to go talk to Pidge’s friends. I don’t want to leave b — Given what’s happened, it might be good for us to be away for a bit. Let things cool down.

I hope things will be okay with your sister. I’m sorry things turned out this way. I hope you and Hunk are not in too much trouble. I need to see y

I didn’t want to leave without saying anything, but we have to go while there’s cloud cover. I’m sorry. We should be back in a week or two, but I don’t know for sure. But I we will be back as soon as possible. Even if it takes longer, we will come back. I’ll bring you some of that jam or honey you like so much, so you better be h—The moon is almost gone right now, and should be dark tomorrow to fly.

This is my mother’s blade that I showed you before.

Please keep it safe while I’m gone.

Yours,

Keith.

---

Two more days passed without any sign of Pidge.
Keith could not sleep. He could barely keep food down; the inertia was making him nauseas. And he was not the only one: the other Avians were getting antsy too. They took turns flying low across the bay and the surrounding clifftops, on the hour, every hour. But aside from a sighting of a Galra cargo ship far away, there was nothing.

When Keith tried to leave in the middle of the night, he was confronted with the quiet but deliberate shhclick of a gun.

Barton’s voice floated across the water.

“How about we don’t do that,” he said, sounding perfectly alert and very much bored.

Keith’s heart sank. He hadn’t really thought it would work - but he still felt sick to his stomach.

“I needed some air,” he gritted out.

“Oh I’ll bet,” said Barton, amusement clear in his voice.

“He did bet, actually,” came another voice. Axca. “And lost. He thought you’d have tried to sneak out earlier.”

Keith wanted to punch something. Instead, he set his bag down with a resigned breath.

The peregrine stepped into Keith’s line of sight. Her blankets were still heaped near the wall of the cavern - strategically, Keith realised now, to make it appear as if she was curled up there. Further to the left, Shiro was miraculously still asleep - exhausted from his watch. Barton was nowhere to be seen, and Keith clenched his fingers around his blade to calm down.

“Didn’t you want some air?” said Axca, raising an eyebrow.

Their wings were almost touching, and Keith tried and failed to suppress a shiver.

“Come on then,” she said, gesturing at the entrance of the cave with the tip of one wing. Keith had no choice but to walk in front of her.

The tide was out, making the path back outside easier to navigate in the dark. The water was ink black, almost indistinguishable from the slick dark stone. They walked the perimeter of the lake in silence, and the sea wind was still a harsh rush against their feathers despite the calm waters. Keith clambered onto a higher ledge, flat and wide enough to sit on. Axca followed close, as if she expected him to make a dash for it.

Instead, Keith crossed his legs and pulled out his knife. He began cleaning the surface of the blade carefully with scrap piece of cloth. Despite the time it had spent in a sea cave saturated in water and salt, the blade was still mirror smooth, a deep dark slate.

Keith caught a glimpse of his own gaze, reflected in the slope of the blade and the curve of the moon. Ashamed, he looked away.

For almost ten minutes, neither of them spoke. Eventually, Axca pulled her wings close and sat down next to Keith.

Keith ignored her.

“Did the mermaids give you that?” she asked, after a long while.

“No,” said Keith, not looking up.
“Did you steal it?”

“No!” said Keith. He glared at her. “I’m not in the mood to chat,” he gritted out.

Axca tilted her head, expression as mild and blank as the lake water.

“It’s not every day you see a luxite blade,” she said, “very rare. Just curious, that’s all.”

Keith clutched the handle of the knife, heart suddenly in his throat. He wanted to look down at it again, but was almost too afraid to take his eyes off the peregrine, in case she tried to snatch his blade away. Moments passed in silence. She merely just sat there, shoulders and wings sloped in a relaxed line, face half hidden by shadow.

For an instant, Keith was reminded of his mother, and her hands soft around his own; her wings seemed so much bigger when he was younger. They had felt like a curtain against the world, safe and warm.

*This is very precious, ptyenyetz,* she would say, *stroking the curve of his wings, it will be yours when you’re a bit older.*

“Luxite?” said Keith, and he hated how uncertain he sounded.

Axca turned her head very slightly.

“I think so,” she said. She offered a hand, palm up. “I can check.”

Keith looked at her hand. His hesitation was obvious, and she huffed out a laugh. With sheer force of will, he lay the blade across her palm, breath solid in his throat as she picked it up carefully, holding it to the moonlight. The surface of the blade was onyx dark, and their eyes stared back at them, ink stained.

Almost carelessly, she plucked a small soft down feather from the inside of her wing. Laying it across the edge of the blade, Axca blew on it, like a kiss.

The feather slid across the blade, split neatly down the quill.

Axca held the blade out back to Keith, who took it with a slow exhale of relief.

“Luxite,” she said, shuffling her wings, “You can tell straight away.”

“Oh,” said Keith, dumbly.

“You didn’t know?”

Keith felt his ears grow hot with embarrassment.

“I - it was a. Family thing.”

“Mmhm,” said Axca, “You don’t have an accent though. Or look it.”

“Which accent?” asked Keith.

“Ruthenian,” said Axca, “well, further south really. Mamoran region. Luxite is found almost exclusively in those mountains.”

“Oh,” said Keith, shifting his own wings under her gaze, “I... I think my mom was there a lot, for
work."

Axca looked like she was about to ask something else, but they were interrupted by a soft but sharp whistle across the water: three short bursts, then two long notes. Keith jerked his head towards the sound, squinting in the dark, while beside him, Axca had leapt to her feet, gun drawn.

“Wait!” said Keith, flinging out his wing in front of her, “That’s Pidge.”

Axca didn’t lower her gun.

“You sure?”

There was a dark silhouette on the water, rapidly drawing closer. Too rapidly to have been propelled by human oars alone. It was the familiar shape of Pidge’s dinghy, but even in the soft moonlight, Keith could see there was more than one person in the boat.

“No,” said Keith, knife in hand, “I’m not.”

Axca was already climbing to higher ground, wings snapping out to counter the slippery rock. Keith followed suit, making his own sharp call to wake Shiro - though he had no doubt Shiro was awake already.

And sure enough, he could hear the sound of others approaching the mouth of the lake, just as the boat drew close enough that it crossed the wavering point where the water colour shifted. And then he heard Pidge’s voice, whipped away from the wind but just audible at this distance:

“...uys, it’s me. It’s Pidge!”

“And the other?” called Arthur’s voice from just below them.

“Resistance!” yelled Pidge, “With me! He’s a friend.”

They were close enough that Keith could see Pidge’s face now; her companion wore a dark hood that covered their face, and sat behind her in the small narrow boat. Whoever it was, they loomed over her, even sitting down, backs bowed and oars tucked in as the boat moved under the arch of the cave entrance.

Keith could also see the tell-tale silver in the water, sweeping in and out of sight just under the boat in sleek ripples of water. Mermaids.

“Let’s go,” said Axca, jerking her head at Keith. She made him descend first, and followed him and Arthur back into the shelter of the cave on foot. At the far end, Keith could see the glow of lamps and two warm oil lights - someone must have found them in Lance’s stash - which back-lit the boat as it streaked across lake.

The boat arrived at the bank before they did. By the time Keith, Axca and Arthur made it to the other side, the mermaids had surfaced from the water, silver grey. They emitted some kind of glow in the darkness of the cave; not bright like the bioluminescent blue of Lance’s scales and eyes, but a grey-white sheen that cast the water in silver. There were three of them, still and silent, heads just visible above the waterline. All three were armed, and Keith recognised the one closest to the shore as Merida.

Shiro swept Pidge into a hug that hid her behind his wings.

“- so worried,” he was saying, over and over, “I was so worried. I’m glad you’re okay.”
“What happened?” Arthur demanded. His weapons were holstered, in deference to the merfolk, but his shoulders were tense. He gestured at Pidge’s companion, who was climbing out of the boat after her. When they stood, they stood head and shoulders above Shiro - taller than any human Keith had ever met. Arthur’s hand twitched towards his gun.

“And who is this?”

“Patrols changed on the roads,” Pidge said, dropping a heavy bag onto the ground, “We had to lay low for a few nights. Couldn’t get here without a proper...disguise.”

“Answer the question,” said Arthur, terse, “We have a lot to discuss.”

“Yes,” said Natalya from behind Shiro, “You. Take off that hood before I shoot it off.”

The owl was perched a little higher on the rock ledge, and her pale wings and hair stark against the stone. Barton, Keith noticed, had disappeared again.

“I said it wasn’t safe for me to get here without a proper disguise,” said Pidge, voice a little shrill, “so Regris was sent to help me. Don’t shoot him. Everyone put your weapons away.”

There was the distinct click of a safety; loud in the sudden quiet.

“I won’t ask again,” said Natalya.

“Seriously - !” Pidge protested, pushing her way free of Shiro’s protective embrace. Her companion held out a gloved hand, and Keith froze as he noticed there was only four fingers.

“It is fine,” came a steady voice, “I am part of the Resistance. We are allies, in this.”

And the stranger lowered his hood.

He wore a mask that covered his entire face, save for the mouth and eyes. But even then, there was no mistaking him for human. He had dark purple fur instead of smooth skin, and his eyes glowed a cat-like yellow in the darkness of the cavern, pupils slitted vertically, reflecting the glow of lamp light.

The mermaids were the first to recover. Merida hissed, a whiplash sound that made everyone take a hasty step back from the water’s edge.

“Galra!” she shouted.

Keith felt like his feathers were all standing on end, and before he knew what he was doing, he had pushed Shiro bodily backwards, away from the Galra beside Pidge.

Natalya and Mila both swore in Ruthenian, and Keith was amazed that Regris wasn’t lying on the ground with five bullet wounds to the head already.

“Everyone calm down!” Pidge shouted right back, shifting as she tried to put herself in front of Regris. Even Arthur had his gun out now; everyone’s barrels trained on the tall figure.

Regris had both hands palm-up, placating. His tail - Keith could not help staring - curled around one ankle, twitching and feline.

“I am on your side,” he said, voice as blank as his mask.

Keith glanced at Shiro, who was also staring at the newcomer, face very pale. His feathers were
standing on end.

“Shiro,” said Keith, nudging him with the edge of his wing, unwilling to turn his back on the Galra, even for a moment, “Shiro?”

“I’m fine,” Shiro said, but he sounded off, as if someone had hit him hard in the stomach. “Pidge…”

“You have some nerve, girl,” said Merida. Her voice was calm but her face looked alien in her fury. She was holding a long, spear-like blade, which glowed a familiar blue. Balmeran crystal. It was hypnotising. “Spitting on our good will like this.”

“He’s part of the Resistance,” said Pidge, waving her arms, “working against Zarkon - they’ve been allies with us this whole time, they’ve helped me get to the coast before, and Princess Allura - ”

“Is no princess of mine!” spat Merida, “We have no allies with the Galra. Not after what happened to Lance. How dare you!”

“Maybe we should hear him out,” said Shiro.

“Wait,” said Pidge, eyebrows scrunching in confusion, “What do you mean ‘what happened to Lance’...where is...”

Her eyes widened as her voice trailed off. Her eyes went from Shiro to Keith, then to the mermaids in the water. Pidge pressed a hand to her mouth, staring at Regris. They shared a look of mutual shock, and Keith frowned.

“...oh god...” said Pidge, “You don’t think it was...”

“Was what?” said Keith, knuckles white on his blade.

“Lance was taken by a Galra ship almost two months ago,” said Shiro, voice remarkably steady. Pidge looked like she was going to throw up.

“No - no, that’s... no... “ she stared up at the Galra, seemingly for help, “We didn’t think that it would - ”

“We received news from our undercover agents in Zarkon’s palace that they had managed to capture one of the merfolk,” said Regris, “A merman, or a child. But I do not know much more. It had come with the news of increased disturbance along the coast, and the changing of patrols and heightened security. That’s why I was needed to accompany Pidge - it would have been impossible for her to cross the town borders without a Galra present.”

“Wait - wait, you’re saying Lance is at the palace? Are you sure?,” said Keith, heart pounding with the static in his ears, “In the capitol?”

The Galra turned his face to him; two pale yellow eyes in a sea of black.

“The last I know of it was a week ago,” said Regris.

“Are you certain it’s him?” said Shiro, “You don’t have any other identifying information?”

“We would have heard, if anyone else had been taken,” said Merida, cold as ice, “All our ambassadors have reported back in and we are patrolling the coast. It can be no one else.”
Pidge let out muffled moan of horror.

“How convenient,” said Arthur, eyes narrowed and mouth thin, “the Alteans come looking for air support to attack the capitol, in return for naval power. It just so happens that the merfolk won’t engage unless we attack the Zarkon’s stronghold to retrieve a hostage - and we are supposed to trust a Galra on this?”

Keith looked around at the faces assembled there, frantic.

It was clear that Pidge, at least, trusted this Galra. Perhaps she had little reason not to: after all, if they had been harbouring her for the past year, she trusted them enough to use them. War made unlikely bedfellows, it seemed...and if the Alteans could ally with Galra...

Keith wished he could rip the mask from Regris’ face.

It wasn’t the first time he had acted on intel Keith did not fully trust. It was not the first time he had acted on Galra chatter, even. If nothing else, his long, lonely search for the Kerberos team had taught Keith that trust and desperation went hand in hand. And right now, trust was a luxury that he could not afford... that Lance could not afford.

Keith had not realised his wings were already half spread, until there was a hand at his wrist, anchoring.

It was Shiro.

“We shouldn’t be too hasty,” he said, voice low. “Keith, patience - “

“Lance doesn’t have time for patience,” said Keith. His hands were shaking. He couldn’t stop looking at Shiro’s pinions, the grey-white line where they had been shorn off. “We have a lead, let’s go .”

The cavern exploded with voices.

“No,” said Arthur flatly.

“It is not that easy,” said Regris, “Infiltrating the palace outright would be impossible - “

“We can work out a plan once we get close enough!” shouted Keith, trying to shake off Shiro’s grip, “Lance has been there for weeks , who knows what they’ve been doing to him, we need to go now!”

“If you go now it’ll be suicide - “

“How unsurprising that you would be so eager to acton Galra intel, Kogane -”

“What the fuck is that meant to mean?”

“Listen - “

“How are we even taking this seriously right now, you’re mad if you think- “

“Absolutely out of the question - !“

One of the mermaids made a sort of whistling noise that made every avian jerk backwards, words cut off mid sentence. There was a harsh clatter as someone dropped their weapon. Regris actually clamped both his hands over his ears, bowing over with pain.
Merida had risen out of the water to the waist, hair plastered to her back, ghostly.

“I’m certain I do not have to remind you of our agreement,” she said, her eyes going from one avian to the other.

Keith had had enough. The sudden news of Lance’s whereabouts, no matter how tenuous, had ignited a flame of hope in his lungs that he’d been trying his best to stamp out.

It hurt now, the brighter it burned.

“We should go immediately, while the sun is still down,” he said, sheathing his blade and turning to Shiro and Pidge, “It’s not a short flight to the capital. Regris - “

Keith turned to the Galra, but found himself facing the barrel of Arthur’s gun.

“No one is going anywhere until I speak with the council,” said the raven.

“Stop it,” said Pidge, trying to push her way between Keith and the gun, “What’s wrong with you - “

The galra yanked her bodily out of harm's way, and neither Keith nor Shiro objected.

“I thought you wanted an alliance,” said Keith, gesturing to the mermaids with one wing, “let me go and fulfil our end of the bargain and maybe you’ll have one!”

“The Federation must still honour the terms of the cease-fire - “ Arthur began.

“Which violates the treaty you had with the Alteans!” interrupted Pidge from somewhere behind Regris’ elbow.

Arthur shot her a murderous look.

“Be quiet, child ,” he said, “The whole city is under a no-fly zone, we will be shot out of the sky - “

“No, you be quiet,” said Keith, heedless of the gun which was still pointed at his face. “Lance doesn’t have time. We need to go now if we want to retrieve something more than a corpse!”

“Keith ,” said Shiro, eyes wide.

“I won’t waste any more time while Lance could be...could be…” Keith couldn’t finish the sentence, his vision sharpening in points and blurring on the edges.

“We will return to the council with haste and decide a plan then,” said Arthur, addressing the mermaids more than Keith, “We will send a Retrieval team if the intel seems trustworthy - “

“He’s part of the Resistance,” yelled Pidge, having freed herself from Regris’ elbow, “He’s been working with us, with the Alteans this whole time, are you stupid?”

“Okay,” came Natalya’s lilting accent, “I’ve had enough.”

She pointed her gun at Shiro, and tilted her head at Keith. Her eyes were full of mirth.

“You come back with us, or I shoot him. He can stay here as collateral.”

“What, no!” said Keith, jerking his wings in so he could push himself in front of Shiro - but was stopped by the the click of Arthur’s gun.
“Keith,” said Shiro, voice pulled tight as a piano wire, “it’s okay. Maybe it’s better to go back first - if we fly fast - “

“No,” said Keith, eyes darting between Natalya and Shiro, “We can’t afford - just let me go, if nothing else - “

“Sorry,” said Natalya, not sounding sorry at all, “Can’t do that. Boss said not to let you out of my sight.”

She smiled, all teeth.

“And I wouldn’t try flying out that way if I were you. Barton’s got your back covered.”

Beside Arthur, Mila and Axca had not spoken a word, but their hands were on their weapons too. Keith could hear nothing but the roaring in his ears, like the entire ocean was storming behind his eyes. His hands felt cold, and his heart too tight. He looked at Shiro, desperate and trapped.

“If he’s dead,” said Merida, voice cutting through the tension like a blade, “my Queen will not be so friendly.”

“If we send in this child,” said Arthur, equally coldly, “Your prince might as well be dead already. We will return to the council.”

He looked at Keith, eyes flat in the dim light.

“Are you going to come quietly?”

Keith looked from Shiro’s pale face to the silver barrel of Natalya’s gun; realised that from the moment they left this lake, they had never been anything but pieces to be played. He had never felt so powerless or trapped, here, in a place that had once been their sanctuary.

Keith tucked his wings close to his back, and it felt like defeat.

It was hard to tell the passage of time without ocean currents or the sun.

Lance could only measure the days by the long, long hours that stretched, thick and viscose between his daily meals. Matt had somehow convinced Haggar and the rest of the scientists that Lance was perfectly docile without his gag. They still put it on him when they strapped him down to the table - or wanted to look at his teeth. But otherwise he was rid of the awful harness while inside his tank, which meant Lance didn’t have to fight the constant fog of sensation that came from a leather strap pressing against his nose and cheeks.

It could be worse, he’d tell himself, whenever they put Lance back on the operation table.

A few days ago, they had carefully strapped down his right hand and methodically clipped off the ends of all his claws. His fingertips were blunt now, and if you ignored the translucent web between the digits, it could have almost passed as a human hand. A few days later, they did the same to his other hand. Lance had thought studiously of the narrow transport tank and Sendak’s low rough voice; of the heat and the dry air in his throat, in his nose, the sharp itching sting in his gills. The noise a claw made, on glass.
That night, Lance had a strange fevered dream about someone clipping the nails from Sendak’s hand. The outline of them was bigger than any avian or human, blocking out all the light when he pressed it to the glass above Lance’s face. But without the curved claws...they looked less Galra. And when Lance followed the line of that arm, upwards, he realised the hand actually belonged to Shiro, who was staring down at him with a blank sort of curiosity. And then Shiro tapped his smooth, gentle hands against the glass of Lance’s tank - and the noise it made was that of a claw. _Tap, tap, tap -_

Lance had woken with a half scream, water choking in his throat.

The lab had been empty, and Lance had not told Matt about the dream. The only evidence it left behind was a few shattered vials on the desk.

No, Lance was grateful for being rid of the harness - even though that meant it was getting harder and harder to ignore the pain of his tail every day. It _ached_. At first, it was an painful sensation just beneath his scales, a thousand needle-point itches where it met the skin on his hip. He’d twist his tail against the tank, rubbing it against the glass for any kind of relief.

One of the scientists would always thump the tall curved glass when he did that, but Lance was getting desperate. It was a constant hurt. Sometimes his entire tail would seize up, as if something was trying to split his bones down the middle, muscle spasming. Lance didn’t know whether it was from the lack of movement or something else, but he was going slowly insane with nothing to focus on except the pain of his tail, and the blurred voices and faces through the glass.

A few times, he thought he’d hear a familiar voice: Hunk, calling his name. But when Lance jerked towards the glass, it was to the reflection of his own hopeful face.

Absently, Lance wished that they’d blindfold him so he didn’t have to see himself at every turn. He looked ugly and grotesque. The way the scientists would stare at him, unblinking and passive, didn’t help either.

His scales had all but turned the pale colour of water, as if they were slowly being bleached. Whenever he twisted or bumped up against the glass, parts would flake off like silver dust under the lilac lamps.

After one particularly awful muscle seizure, Matt had stomped up the steel ladder and depressed the valve keeping the top of the tank sealed. As always, the rush of air was a relief, and Lance tried to pull himself up via the cuffs to his wrists, gasping.

“- aeration still not sufficient?” one of the galra was saying, scribbling something down on his pad of paper, “We’ve increased the cycles to three times per varga.”

“How is it that he’s still deteriorating?” said Haggar, clearly frustrated, “We’ve calibrated the salinity of the water to almost exactly to our samples…”

“The water is probably still too warm,” said Matt, from where he was perched on top near the lip of Lance’s tank. He was checking the machine afixed there, wings hunched over himself. “I’m going to turn this up and keep the lid off.”

None of the galra in the room looked happy about this, ears twitching back against their heads as one. It was almost funny to watch.

“Maybe we need to put the gag back on then,” said one of them, “It’s - “
“He’s plenty docile!” said Matt, impatient, “I’ve been giving him a harmless strain of sedative with his meals. He’s been fine for weeks, hasn’t he?”

“Nevertheless we -“

“He’s no good as a control if he starts getting sick,” said Ulaz, in his calm baritone, “And I’m concerned with how thin he is.”

“Maybe we should feed him more often?"

“No, he’s been throwing it up.”

Of all the Galra present, Ulaz looked like Zoljas the most, face pale purple, hair short. He was also one of the few that didn’t refer to Lance as an ‘it’; and he never tapped on the glass.

“I suppose he isn’t going anywhere,” said Haggar. “Leave that gap then, but no higher. We’ll monitor its condition. It may be something to do with the light, low as it is. Cover him up when we are done. Let’s see if that improves anything.”

“But the presence of eumelanin in his human skin tone suggests frequent exposure?” said Mei, who was standing very close to the bottom of the tank.

“It may have something to do with the diet instead,” said Ulaz, studying a notebook in his hands and looking back at Lance. “Perhaps the fresh water fish is doing some harm after all.”

“Maybe we need to take him back to the sea,” said Matt, coming down the stairs.

Haggar rounded on him.

“Are you out of your mind,” she hissed.

“Not - I - at the research centre - " Matt held up both hands, “We can keep him in a bay or something, just in his natural environment! There are plenty of… I mean, what use is he to us if he is dead? Look at him!”

Haggar looked exhausted, but the fire in her eyes was a glow brighter than anything else in the lab.

“He’ll be more useful to me dead, than loose in the ocean,” she said.

Her words felt like a cold, heavy stone in the pit of Lance’s stomach. He could hear no lie in them. She pointed one long finger at Matt.

“Do you think we’re fishing up merfolk every other week? No. He will be useful to me as long as he is here, however long that may be. Which, incidentally, is a measure of your own longevity, Matthew Holt. Do not forget your place.”

Matt stood, frozen, wings still trailing on the steps of the staircase. Lance could barely breathe, his blood humming with anxiety. But then, Haggar lowered her hand.

“In any case, the Emperor would hardly allow it. He’s still asking for the merman to be moved to his apartments. Ridiculous. As if we don’t have enough to deal with.”

She passed a hand over her face. It was a brief gesture of weakness, and then it was gone.

“This specimen is more valuable than any single one of you,” she said, voice carved out of steel.
They found a heavy dark cloth, long enough to cover almost the entire length of the glass and went around the circumference of the tank on a railing so that the cloth could be pulled aside. The fabric was thick enough that it blocked out all light, so the only illumination was from the top of the tank where the lid would be left unsealed.

Lance didn’t know whether he liked this or not.

On one hand, the darkness was definitely easier on his eyes. He could sleep better - as much as one could sleep with their hands and tail bound. On the other hand, it made his heart race whenever Lance heard something he could not see; he flinched everytime the door opened, or someone spoke suddenly, too loud or too close.

So when the door opened in the middle of the night, Lance jerked awake from an uneasy doze.

He could not be sure what time it was...but it must have been at least an hour or so after Matt had left after giving Lance his food. Too late for any of the scientists to be visiting. The only person who had ever come by in the dead of night was Haggar - but her footsteps was always distinctive.

Lance held his breath, straining to listen.

A pause. Then the door closed with barely a sound. Soft footsteps, almost inaudible above the loud gurgle of water and the pumps that churned constantly at the base of the tank. If Lance had not been so attuned to the sound of the metal latches in the doors, he might not have noticed the newcomer at all. He strained against his cuffs on instinct, body tense. Matt would have said something by now, to settle Lance’s nerves. This was someone else.

What could they want?

The footsteps stopped.

A pale hand appeared at the edge of the curtains. Lance had a moment to notice that they were slim hands, maybe too small to be galra, though the nails were curved and pointed…. He couldn't tell if the skin was lavender or just reflecting the colour of the lamps...

Then the hand pulled back the curtains.

“**Oh,**” said the stranger.

Lance shied away from the glass and the blurry silhouette, blinking rapidly to clear his eyesight. The sudden light, as dim as it was, made Lance squeeze both eyelids shut on instinct, so it was a long moment before he could see properly.

The silhouette moved.

Lance’s late night visitor was almost certainly Galra. He was shorter and more slim than the other Galra Lance had met, but he stood much taller than Matt or any of the humans in the lab. Curiously, he had long, white-silver hair, naked pointed ears and no fur on his face.

He certainly looked the most *human* of any Galra…Admittedly, Lance had not met *that* many - but everyone he had seen so far had been varying levels of fluffy. Even Ulaz had soft fur at the nape of his neck and ears.
This Galra stared up at Lance with wide, yellow eyes. *Galran yellow.* Like some of the others, his pupils were slitted, set in irises the colour of water. But Lance had never quite gotten used to the pale-yellow sclera; and he had had plenty of time to observe up close on the operation table. No merfolk had such eye colouring. It was mesmerising; difficult to look away. In the darkness, they appeared luminous.

Perhaps the sentiment was shared, because the stranger’s gaze never left Lance, even as he began walking very slowly around the tank, pulling the curtains open with him as he went. He had the same look of wonder on his face as Matt had done when he first saw Lance; but painted yellow, his gaze felt like a brand on Lance’s skin. He was openly rapturous with fascination and disbelief, and that expression made his features positively glow in the refracted light.

Lance could hear the sound of his own heart, beating faster with nervous anxiety. He twisted against his cuffs, trying to keep the Galra in his line of sight as he rounded the tank behind Lance and then around to his left.

“...So it was true,” said the Galra, so quietly it could have only been for himself. “Look at you... *magnificent.*”

He was very close to the glass now, face tilted up, hair a sheen of silver. Lance stared back, uncertain.

“Beautiful,” he said, eyes flickering all over Lance’s tail as he moved around the tank.

“Hello,” he said, softly, pressing the tips of his fingers to the glass, “Hello there.”

Even suspended by his hands in the water, their faces were close enough that Lance could see the way the Galra’s pupils pinned and expanded; a little distorted through the curve of the glass. Lance just blinked, too wary to make any noise or movement.

“I know you can understand me,” said the Galra, “I’m not here to hurt you.”

Lance suppressed a snort, but just barely.

“I just want to talk,” the Galra said, and he had a smooth tenor voice, mild as you please. He held his hands out, palms up - the same gesture that Shiro had made, all those months ago. But this was not Shiro. And Lance was not himself. He dared not make a sound, pulling his tail away in a slow arch when the Galra’s eyes fell to his tattered fins.

“My name is Lotor,” said his visitor, “What’s your name?”

Lance didn’t answer, heart still thudding in his throat. Confusion was a lead weight at the pit of his stomach, and he just wanted this new person - this Lotor - to go away.

His silence didn’t seem to bother the galra all that much. Lotor appeared content to just stare at Lance, eyes bright with the water, breath so close it misted the glass a little. He walked around the tank, over and over, just staring.

Eventually, some indiscriminate time later, Lotor stepped back from the glass.

“Perhaps tomorrow, then,” said Lotor.

And with clear reluctance, he drew the curtains back around the tank. Lotor gave Lance one last lingering glance, eyes tracing the line of the merman’s tail; hand on the curtains. Then he turned on his heels, leaving as he came: quiet as a shadow.
It was a long time before Lance fell asleep that night.

Lance asked Matt about Lotor the next evening, and watched as all the blood drained out of the avian’s face.

“Lotor?” he said, knuckles white on his knees, “Are you absolutely sure?”

Lance swallowed hard.

“Long white hair? No fur on his face?” he offered, “Yellow eyes.”

“Altean ears, right?” said Matt.

At Lance’s confusion, he made an impatient noise at the back of his throat.

“Altean,” he said, gesturing at his own ears in a pinching motion, “Like Haggar.”

Lance’s eyes widened.

“Oh,” he said, “Yes. Yes, that. He doesn’t look - he looks different. But still taller than you and Mei. Who is he?”

Matt glanced at the door, wings tense against his back. He was clutching the fillet knife like a talisman, and Lance placed a hand on his wrist, worried.

“Matt?”

“He’s Zarkon’s son.”

Lance recoiled back into the water.

“What?” he said, “He’s - what - “

“What did he say to you?” said Matt, voice as hushed as he could make it, “What did he want? Did you say anything? Fuck, I’ve got to tell the others that he’s back in the city. Shit. Shit.”

“I didn’t say anything!” said Lance, panicked now, “I didn’t - I just pretended I didn’t understand what he was saying, but he was pretty convinced that I could…”

“What did he say, exactly?” asked Matt.

Lance looked away.

“Just…. He said he wasn’t here to hurt me…and he asked for my name. That’s it.”

“Are you sure?” pressed Matt, eyes frantic, “Think, did he say anything else? Was there anyone else with him?”

Lance shook his head.

“No he - he came in after you left. And just. Stared at me and asked for my name. Then he left. I didn’t say anything to him…”

“I suppose he was bound to hear about you, eventually,” Matt muttered beneath his breath, “but he’s. It’s not good news. It’s never good news when Lotor is back in town. Shit.”
Lance floated back to the edge of the tank. He took another piece of the fish and ate it, ravenous. They tasted very much dead and stale, but he wasn’t going to be picky.

“If he’s Zarkon’s son…” said Lance, “Doesn’t he live in the palace?”

Matt shook his head.

“Illegitimate heir. Prince Lotor. He doesn’t usually hang around, but he has spies everywhere. The Resistance keeps an eye on him, but he must have just come back. This is not good.”

Lance stared at Matt.

“The Resistance?”

Matt’s hand stilled, where he was wiping his blade clean. It was a moment before he looked Lance in the eye.

“Yes.”

“Like Pidge’s friends?” said Lance, tentatively.

Matt laughed, a short hoarse sound.

“Sort of. Lots of people are unhappy with the Emperor.”

Matt looked uneasily towards the doors again, silent and still at the far end of the lab. Lance turned to look as well, nervous and hyper aware that guards for said Emperor stood there, just beyond the walls.

“Do you know them?” asked Lance, heart in his throat, “Do you - do you think they could help us esca - “

“We shouldn't talk about it,” Matt interrupted, “The less you know, the better.”

Disappointed, Lance sank a little back into the water.

He nodded, minutely.

“Just be careful,” said Matt, after a long pause, “if Lotor comes back...talk to him. See if you can find out what he wants.”

Lance’s eyes widened in alarm.

“...You want me to talk to him?” he said, feeling a little sick at the very thought, “But … but what if ….”

“He probably had someone on Sendak’s crew,” said Matt, “if he knows. We need to find out what he knows, and why he’s here. If he’s around, then some of his general’s must be here too. I’ve got to alert the others.”

“Okay,” said Lance, feeling very small.

“Don’t tell him anything about Pidge. Or the crystals. Remember.”

Lance stared at the glass, irritation bubbling up in his chest.
“I know,” he snapped, “I won’t.”

There was another long, awkward silence. Wordlessly, Lance held out his hands for the cuffs, and just as silently, Matt fastened them back on his wrists.

“Be careful, if he comes back,” Matt said again, voice stilted, “I... by all accounts he’s...tricky. Don’t say more than you have to. Get him to talk.”

Lance nodded.

“...I have to go,” said Matt, uneasily.

“It’s okay,” said Lance.

It almost didn’t feel like a lie.

True to his word, Lotor returned - and he kept returning; always in the dead of night, when no one else was around. Sometimes he’d stay only for a few brief minutes, other times he would just to stand and watch, bright and intent. He always tread quietly, hair loose on his back, hands clasped behind him.

“Hello, Blue,” he’d say, reaching for the curtains, “Won’t you give me your name?”

And every night, Lance would ignore him.

Then, something changed.

“Hello, Blue,” said Lotor one night.

He was wearing a dark cloak which went all the way down to his ankles, and his hair was slick back with damp. He looked like he had been in the rain. Lance missed the rain.

Lotor was also carrying a large silver case in his right hand.

“I have something for you,” he said, sweeping his hair over his shoulder and letting the curtain fall closed again. Lance followed the sound of Lotor’s footsteps, turning in the water as Lotor ascended the metal staircase. He was coming closer, a hand on the railing given away by the soft shhh of skin against metal. As Lotor approached the top of the tank, Lance drew back as far as his cuffs would allow, eyes never leaving the Galra. He came to a stop at the edge of the balcony, where the lip of the tank was bolted to curved steel brackets.

The sound of Lance’s own breaths felt awfully loud.

Lotor set the case down, clicking it open with a flourish as he knelt to almost eye level.

Lance’s nostrils flared.

Live tuna.

“Salt water fish,” said Lotor, pushing the case slightly towards the tank.

Inside the case, Lance could hear the tuna splashing and slapping its tail against the sides of its container. The sound was awful and hollow, and Lance wondered if he had sounded like just the same inside that glass coffin. It was hard to look away.
With a flick of his wrists, Lotor produced two slim silver knives, which he promptly stabbed into the fish in three rapid movements. The smell of fresh blood spilled on the air, shattering the moment and making Lance twitch from waist to tail.

“I thought this might be more to your taste,” said Lotor, and he was closer than he had ever been, face lit from below by the water. Close enough to touch.

“I was told that fresh-water fish was making you sick.”

Lotor laid out the large tuna near the lip of the tank, and began slicing it into smaller pieces; the knives sliding through the flesh like a tail fin through waves. The fish stared back at Lance with blank silver-white eyes, gills gape, mouth torn. The smell of the cool blood was almost too much; it made Lance salivate, and his teeth drop a little in his mouth. He made a soft, hissing noise at the sensation, and quickly stopped when Lotor smiled.

“Would you like some?” he asked, still in that mild, calm voice.

Lotor’s eyes, however, looked frenetic; he was staring at Lance’s face with fire-hot intensity, gaze flickering down to his gills and mouth every other moment, as if the Galra could not help himself.

The smell of the freshly killed fish was almost intoxicating, and even though Lance had just eaten a few hours ago, he felt his stomach churn with want. And he knew this was what this Lotor wanted - they all wanted something, after all: Lance would have to admit to understanding Lotor, in order to eat. Perhaps Lance could get it without speaking… maybe if he just….

Lotor transferred a piece of fish to his fingers and held it out, wrist up, as if he had nothing to fear at all.

Lance stared at him, then at the fish, heart beating wildly behind his ribs. He leaned forwards, towards the fish. His cuffs clinked gently in the water. Lance kept his eyes on Lotor, even as he drifted closer to the glass edge. For a wild moment, he had a vision of himself snapping forwards and tearing the veins from the Galra’s wrist - he could do it. He could do it. To rip back some dignity; the gall of this Galra - prince or not - to think Lance would eat from his hand like some... like some pet. His skin was as smooth and paper thin as any human. It would be so easy. *Just one bite, and…*.

Then Lotor pulled his hand away.

“Your name, first,” he said, lips twitching up at the corners, “Seems only fair, wouldn’t you say?”

And the thing was, thought Lance, he had not much besides from his dignity left to give. He pulled in a long drag through his gills, the waterline lapping around the bridge of his nose. Then he rose a little in the water, so that his mouth was clear.

“Lance,” he said.

The smile on Lotor’s face widened in earnest, showing the white of his teeth.

“Lance,” he repeated, and the word sounded different on his tongue, “will you rip off my hand if I feed you?”

Lance shook his head.

Lotor raised both eyebrows.
“And do merfolk keep their word?”

“Do galra?” snapped Lance - and then braced himself for retaliation.

But Lotor only laughed, a quiet sound like stones dropped into a lake. He held out the fish again, wrist bare like a promise.

Lance stared at him, a little incredulous. Slowly, carefully, he inched forwards in the water. He moved to take the fish.

“No,” said Lotor, “Open your mouth. I want to see your teeth.”

*Find out what he wants*, Matt had said. Swallowing down his pride, Lance opened his mouth wider, and watched as Lotor’s pupils narrowed into slitted focus. The Galra leaned across the water, hands remarkably still, and placed the fish in Lance’s mouth.

Lance jerked his chin back, snapping his jaw shut to swallow the food and sinking back into the water.

When he looked back, Lotor had another piece of tuna in his fingers.

“Tell me. Is it common for merfolk, to have such blue scales? Or does it run in the family.”

It becomes an unwanted nightly ritual.

Unwanted, because it meant that Lance was barely sleeping. He began drifting in and out of consciousness during the day, never for very long at a time. It was harder to concentrate; harder to filter the voices from the constant loud gurgle of the water in his tank.

But despite his best efforts to keep his guard up, Lance found the initial rush of fear and anticipation fade away with each successive visit. He even began looking forward to them, because Lotor always came with something from the sea for Lance to eat.

“Not easy, you know,” Lotor had said, when Lance asked, “The merfolk are exceptionally blood thirsty at the moment.”

“...What do you mean?” said Lance, carefully.

Lotor didn’t answer immediately, just stared at Lance with a considering look. He was sitting cross legged on the balcony, hands loose on his ankles, close to the water.

“Every ship that isn’t a cargo liner is likely to get drowned,” said Lotor, examining his own cuticles, “fishing vessels torn to pieces. Even some of the military ships have encountered...issues. Perhaps you have something to do with it?”

Lance blinked, nervous.

“I don’t know,” he said when it became clear that Lotor was waiting for an answer, “I’ve been...here.”

“Mmmh,” said Lotor, “The soldiers have started to talk.”

“Oh?” said Lance.

“They’re saying we must have done something to anger the sea,” said Lotor, eyes gleaming, “it
was bad luck, to take one of her children. They’re saying we’ve been cursed, and it won’t stop until we return what we took. Or kill you.”

Lance stayed very, very still in the water.

Lotor was smiling now. He smiled often, teeth sharp on his lip; like small fangs.

“Which one is it, do you think?”

Lance stared back. He wished his hands were free, even if it was so he could hide deeper in the tank. His shoulders felt stiff and numb, and his fingers had long since gone cold.

“We don’t curse anyone,” he said, eventually, “That’s just...that’s just a story.”

“Sendak’s men seem to think it’s true,” said Lotor, and his grin widened when Lance visibly flinched at Sendak’s name. “Oh, you remember the Commander! A foul lapdog, isn’t he?”

Lance’s confusion must have been evident on his face because Lotor was looking very smug.

“You left quite an impression on everyone. And fear makes people talk.”

“I was defending myself,” said Lance.

“Of course,” said Lotor, voice heavy with exaggerated sincerity, “And they were fools to have underestimated you.”

Lance looked around at the tank pointedly, and jerked his head towards the cuffs on his wrists, still bound tight above his head. The cord ran through the top of the suspended lid, and linked down to the control panel set into the balcony beside Lotor.

“I don’t think they did,” said Lance, wry.

Lotor’s expression was solemn. It felt like a mockery.

“They treated you like some kind of dumb animal, and got their just rewards,” he said. “Makes me wonder what is in store for your captors now. Maybe - “

Lance rolled his eyes, exhausted. Perhaps the sleep deprivation was making him braver, but in that moment, he could not care. He thumped the end of his tail against the bottom of the tank in frustration.

“What do you want?” Lance interrupted.

For a moment, Lotor did not answer, eyes as steady as the moon.

Then, in one swift gesture, he switched the lever connected to Lance’s bindings. They fell in a slick rapid click-click-click, free-falling through the mechanism housed in the tank’s lid, and Lance yelped as he splashed, sinking into the water with the weight of the chains.

With a sharp tug, Lotor pulled Lance closer to the edge of the tank by the slack in his bindings. For a second, Lance thrashed, confused. The glass shook as the thick of his tail smacked against the glass - but suddenly his hands were free, he propelled himself himself backwards in a single push - his hands were free! Lance’s back hit the other side of the tank with a dull thump, almost as loud as the sound of his heart.

He stared at Lotor with wide, breathless eyes. The lamps behind cast an eerie halo about his silver
hair; the colour of his skin was lavender, the third flower that Keith had brought him to press, safe and sound. Lance clutched at his own wrists, the blood rushing back into his fingers. When he let go, there were shell-thin scales, pale and flakey, on the pads of his fingertips.

Lotor had unlocked his cuffs.

“Trust,” he said.

——

Lotor kept visiting; always with pretty words and fresh live food. When Lance asked him why he went to all the trouble, Lotor would usually raise one pale eyebrow and say, haughty:

“Because I said I would. And I keep my word.”

He was full of non-answers like this. Sometimes Lotor would visit in a bad mood and barely speak; letting Lance eat by himself while Lotor watched. Other times, Lotor liked to exchange food for conversation, and would ask Lance question after question, and would insist on feeding him from his own hands. But he would always uncuff Lance’s hands, becoming bolder when Lance never made any move to attack him.

Lotor liked to lament loudly at the flaking scales in the water, eyes as shiny as the inside of a pearl. Lance thought the galra quite liked the sound of his own voice.

“I would have liked to see you in the wild,” Lotor said, one night, “You’re already such a stunning colour. I can’t imagine you in full bloom. Beautiful.”

Lance never quite knew how to respond to Lotor when he got like this, so he just sank a little further back into the water, blinking against the shine of the lamps.

“You said your scales were usually bluer,” said Lotor. “Bluer than this.”

Lance nodded warily.

“Changes with the season and the heat and stuff,” he said. “I’m disgusting now. The water is...wrong.”

Lotor’s brows drew tight over his eyes.

“And you’ve told the druids this?”

Lance shrugged.

“I don’t think they can do much about it,” he said, swishing the water through his fingertips. “It’s not the sea.”

“...No,” said Lotor, “I suppose it isn’t.”

Throwing caution to the wind, Lance swam to the edge of the tank, close enough that he could rest his hand on the metal bracketing by Lotor’s feet. To the Galra’s credit, he did not move at all - though his pupils dilated, dark in a sea of yellow.

“Why do you keep sneaking in,” said Lance, tilting his head, “...dead of morning. You’re Galra, aren’t you?”

Something ugly flashed across Lotor’s expression for a moment, but it was so fleeting it could have been the water-light. Instead, his lips curled.
“Not all Galra are welcome in my father’s palace,” he said, voice noticeably cooler than before.

Feigning confusion, Lance tilted his head a little more.

“Your father?” he asked, trying to ignore the thudding of his heart.

He was sure that Lotor could smell his anxiety, or at least hear the way that his blood was trying to dissolve his ribs. But if he did, Lotor made no sign of it; just stared at Lance, steady and shrewd. It was a long moment before he spoke.

“Emperor Zarkon is my father,” said Lotor, “though that means very little to him.”

Lance had to feign his surprise. He sank back into the water, blinking rapidly.

“I…” he swallowed, static buzzing in his ears as Lance tried to think of what to say next, “so you’re Prince Lotor - ?”

Lotor snorted, making a sharp wave of the hand. Lance fell quiet.

“To those who matter, I suppose,” he said, “But no, I am no Prince. That’s why I must ‘sneak in’…as you so aptly put it.”

Keep him talking.

“…I don’t understand,” said Lance, tentative. He widened his eyes and tucked away his teeth behind his lips, in the hopes of looking more harmless, “If the Emperor is your father…”

“My mother was not Galra,” said Lotor sharply, “And that makes me unfit to be anything except a bastard. Blood is worth everything, here. Therefore, I am worth nothing.”

He is…tricky, Matt had said. But Lance felt something in his chest compress with sympathy.

“You’re not,” said Lance quietly, “Worth nothing, I mean.”

“No,” said Lotor, leaning forwards, “To you, I’m worth a nightly meal at least, yes?”

Lance tilted his chin up.

“Maybe,” he said, “But that’s because you haven’t given me reason to think otherwise.”

Lotor’s lips curled at this.

“You’ve got a lot of spirit, despite being so far away from home,” he said, brushing his hair back over his shoulder.

Lance gave him a blank look. His tail hurt and he just wanted to sleep.

“What do you want from me,” said Lance, “And don’t say trust. I don’t trust you.”

“Don’t you?” said Lotor, thoughtfully, “You’ve eaten from my hand for weeks now. Had plenty of opportunity to hurt me, but you’ve chosen otherwise. Is that not trust?”

Lance bared his teeth.

“I will never trust a Galra,” he hissed.

Lotor raised both eyebrows.
“Not even those who are working against the Emperor? Your captors?”

Lance froze, teeth sliding back into his gums. For a long moment, neither of them moved. Was it possible that Lotor was working against Zarkon?

*That’s what he wants you to think*, said a voice in his head.

There was an echoing sort of panic at the base of his neck, slow and quiet, but building like a scream. Lance felt sick with indecision and doubt. Surely Matt would have told Lance if Lotor was working with the Resistance. Why else would he have warned him against this galra in particular? Maybe Lance could ask him about it again, next time they managed to talk.

*But would Matt tell you?* the same voice said, *he didn’t want to talk about the Resistance at all. Perhaps it is he who does not trust you.*

Lance and Lotor stared at each other, the mere inches of water between them a chasm.

“Think on it,” said Lotor, and he was smiling.

---

Keith and Shiro were escorted, essentially at gunpoint, all the way back to headquarters.

It took them just under four nights to fly, risking the glare of the sun to fly in the yawn of dusk and sunrise. They had Axca above Keith and Natalya flanking his left, while Barton shadowed Shiro. Mila had been dispatched to escort Pidge and Regris, making their way back on foot.

As soon as they had landed, Keith and Shiro had been forcibly separated.

Keith had been thoroughly searched and his mother’s luxite blade taken from him. Then he was promptly thrown into a holding room in the main council chambers.

It was not the bare-concrete cell that he had been kept in before, and nor was he tied down. But the window was barred and locked...and while the room itself was furnished with a bed (and actual pillows and blankets) and a small wooden table, the door itself had a glass panel through which Keith could see two guards at all hours. There was a small bathroom adjoining the room, and all in all it was quite comfortable...but also utterly useless, unless Keith resorted to attacking the next avian with the taps from the sink.

He got two meals a day, and a large jug of fresh water.

It was absolute hell.

It was as if Keith could feel the slow drip of every minute passing, each second longer than an hour. He paced the room, then tried meditating his heart rate back to normal. But nothing he did eased the clenching panic around his lungs. He felt as he did, when Shiro went missing - sleepless and terrified. But this time, the awful gnawing guilt and panic was worse, because they knew where Lance was. They knew, yet he was trapped here, between politics and god knows what else.

It drove Keith mad with nightmares.

(He kept reaching for his mother’s knife, a talisman - but coming up empty handed. No amount of threats and yelling through the door did any good.)
On the third day, the door opened as usual around lunch time. Keith was sitting, cross legged on
the bed, stretching his wings in an effort to calm himself when the door banged open. But instead
of food, there was a lot of shouting and swearing.

Someone was thrown bodily into his room in a flurry of feathers and long hair.

The door slammed shut. The avian - a girl with long dark hair and pointed grey-swallow wings -
launched herself straight back up, slamming the door with both fists and pressing her face right up
to the glass.

“Fuck you, fuck you, pieces of shit, I know you can hear me!”

When there was no response from the other side of the door, she shrieked in fury, trying to punch
through the glass with her elbow. She wasn’t tall enough for it, and opted to kick instead. It would
have made a ruckus, except that they had taken her flight boots and she was as barefoot as Keith.

Keith could only watch, slightly wide-eyed, as she continued to try punching through the glass
with her elbow. Her hair was tied in a loose knot at the back of her head, and the underside of her
wings were white, her crest and pinions tipped with dark blue feathers. She wasn’t wearing any
kind of uniform that Keith recognised.

For the first time in days, he was more perplexed than terrified.

“Let me out, I want to talk to my lawyer,” she was shouting, “My uncle will have your head! Let
me out!”

“Um...” said Keith.

She whirled around at the sound, and they stared at each other, both wide eyed. Her wings were
moving out-in, out-in as she heaved for breath. She brushed damp hair from her face with one
impatient hand.

“Who the hell are you?” she demanded.

There a bruise across her cheek, darkening along her jaw. Her eyes were the same colour as the
blue of her feathers.

“...Keith,” said Keith, pulling his own wings closer to his back.

“What are you doing here?” she said, giving him a once over. “To keep an eye on me?”

“No,” said Keith, bewildered.

She gave him a ‘well, then what?’ glare, both eyebrows raised. She looked perhaps the same age as
Keith, but carried herself with the confidence of someone who either came from money, or knew
her way around a fist.

“Council put me here,” said Keith, at last, “few days. You?”

“Council put me here,” said Keith, at last, “few days. You?”

Her eyes narrowed, and she crossed her arms across her chest.

“Same, I guess,” she said, voice wavering a little. “My uncle disappeared. They came and got
me...”

To Keith’s horror, her eyes began tearing up, and she seemed to hunch over, wings trailing the
ground. Definitely a civilian, he thought. She wiped at her face with her sleeve, and Keith prayed
that she wasn’t going to start crying.
She started crying.

“Uh…. “ said Keith, jumping up from the bed. He could feel his own feathers puff out, standing on end.

“Ah....um, would you like to sit down… whatever your name is…”

“K-Katerina,” said the swallow, voice muffled by her hair and her hands.

“Yeah...okay,” said Keith, hands hovering, “That’s a nice name?”
She cried harder.

Shiro always said he was never very good with emotions, but Keith liked to think that even Shiro wouldn’t know what to do with a crying stranger, whilst being held in detention.

“I just - I don’t know what happened to him,” she said, through her tears, “I think he’s in trouble? I don’t know, they just - they said I’d have to wait and...I don’t know what’s going on!”

She buried her face in her hands again, her sobs making her wings shiver. They were much slimmer than the falcons that usually made up the Garrison classes, tapered to a neat cross around her ankles. She was a pretty picture of misery, and Keith didn’t know what to do. He hated when people cried, himself most of all.

Keith shot a panicked look towards the door, but neither of the guards had moved an inch. He cleared his throat, and patted her gingerly on the edge of one wing, towards the bed.

“Maybe you want to sit down and - “

“I don’t want to fucking sit down!” she snapped, eyes bright and hair all over the place.

Keith flattened himself against the wall as she advanced on him, finger in his face. Her shirt was thin...definitely too thin for the late autumn weather, and the top few buttons were loose. Keith wasn’t sure where to look, and kept his eyes determinedly up . Unfortunately that meant staring her right in the blotchy, tear-stained face.

“I want you to help me get out so I can find my uncle!”

“We’re in the middle of the building,” said Keith, addressing a point above her left shoulder, “That’s a courtyard, out that window. Even if you got out, you wouldn’t get very far. Why do you think I’m still here?”

“I don’t know,” said Katerina, voice rising in pitch and tinged with hysteria, “I don’t know, I just want to go home!”

“I don’t know,” said Katerina, voice rising in pitch and tinged with hysteria, “I don’t know, I just want to go home!”

“I don’t know,” said Keith, wincing as she started sobbing again, “Okay, let’s - sit down. Just calm down, okay?”

He nudged her away from him with his fingers, and then directed her to sit on the edge of the only bed in the room. She sat, her wings half spread behind and beside her. Keith fetched the water jug - almost all gone now - and poured her the rest into a glass. He held it out wordlessly, and she took it with both hands.

A few long moments passed, and eventually her sobs wore down to hiccups. She stared at her
hands with red-rimmed eyes, while Keith sat on the table.

“Thanks,” she said, eventually. “Sorry. That was embarrassing.”

“It’s fine,” said Keith, rubbing the back of his neck, awkward.

He smoothed out his down feathers to give his hands something to do.

“He’s my only family,” said Katerina, hiccuping into the glass, “I just. They cooked up this fraud case and it’s...I don’t know what to do.”

Keith kept silent, and for a long while, neither of them said anything. Slowly, she seemed to compose herself. She set the glass down on the floor and re-tied her hair, tucking the stray strands behind her ear. Her face was still blotchy, but she had stopped crying, and her breathing was steadier.

“So,” she said, “You’re in here as leverage too, then?”

Keith shrugged. He thought of Shiro, probably stuck in some other room. He thought of Lance, alone with no way to escape.

“I guess,” said Keith, “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay,” she said.

“There’s - the bathroom,” said Keith, gesturing, “if you need.”

Katherine looked over, then back at Keith.

“There’s no door,” she said, arching one eyebrow.

Keith felt his ears go red.

“I won’t look,” he said.

She gave him a side-eye, but didn’t reply. Keith floundered for something else to say.

“They come with food twice a day but. Missed one round this time. Hopefully they’ll be back as usual in a few hours.”

“Let’s hope,” she said, glancing at the door.

Keith exhaled through his mouth, puffing out his cheeks.

“I’m...I’m just going to do some - exercises. Over here,” said Keith, moving as close to the other side of the room as possible.

With that, he turned his back on his new companion, pressing his palms to the cool stone to begin his push-ups.

They did end up getting food - apparently one advantage of being political leverage was that one had to be alive and kept in moderate health - and they ate mostly in silence.

After dinner, Katerina insisted on bathing, and Keith spent forty-five awkward minutes facing the
bed and counting cracks on the wall. He rushed through his own routine, feeling self conscious and wrong-footed, alone with a stranger in such close proximity.

But things became really awkward when neither of them could keep awake any longer.

“You can take the bed,” said Keith, because even exhausted, he still had manners.

“Why,” said Katerina.

Keith frowned, confused.

“What do you mean, why, just take the bed. I can sleep like this, it’s fine.”

He sat down a little harder than he’d meant to, and winced. The stone was cool against his wings and shoulder blades. Keith tried to wedge himself more comfortably against the door, which was at least made of wood, and less cold. He was regretting it already, but perhaps this had been the plan all along. Put two prisoners together until they drove each other crazy.

Katerina squinted at him from where she was perched on the bed.

“We can share,” she said, “it’s cold anyway.”

“I’m fine here,” said Keith, voice going a little high with panic.

“You’ll catch a cold, and then I’ll get a cold, and then I’ll kill you,” said Katerina, punching the pillow into a better shape.

“The bed is too small,” said Keith, waving his hand, “Just...just go to sleep, will you?”

Katerina crossed her arms.

“Is it because I’m a girl?” she said.

“No?” said Keith, “Yes - I mean, just. Go to sleep!”

Katerina grabbed the blanket and threw the pillow at Keith. Keith caught it, and watched with bewilderment as she pulled the blanket off the bed completely and moved to put it on the floor.

“What are you doing?” said Keith.

“Sleeping here,” she said, “You take the bed.”

Keith made a noise of utter frustration.

“Why are - so we’re both sleeping on the floor now?”

“No, you’re sleeping on the bed,” she said, folding the blanket.

“...What is wrong with you?” said Keith, grabbing at his own hair. He missed Shiro something fierce. Shiro would know what to do.

“We can both sleep on the fucking bed, or I’m going to sleep on the floor!” she shouted.

Ten minutes later, they were both squashed onto the bed.

“There’s not enough room,” Keith muttered.
It was a standard avian bed; shaped like a large seed pod and dipping in the middle to allow the wings to curve naturally without straining one’s back. It wasn’t quite big enough for two, but since neither of them had big wingspans, they managed to fit in the divot of the bed by facing each other, with wings tucked behind them and the blanket on top.

In Keith’s opinion, they were much, much too close.

She turned and he got a mouthful of her hair. Keith spluttered.

“Sorry,” she said, shifting against him to get more comfortable. “At least we’re not freezing now.”

Keith lifted his hips so he could pull his wing further out, letting it poke above the blankets, pressed against the wall of the bed. He told himself this was infinitely better than sleeping on the floor - and given how little Katerina was wearing, he didn’t think she was going to stab him with a concealed knife in his sleep. He hoped.

She tuck her cheek against his shoulder, and Keith was hyper-aware of her bare thigh pressed against his leg, the unfamiliar scent of her feathers and her hair. After a few long seconds, Keith realised he was holding his breath, chest still, almost vibrating with nerves.

Keith tried to exhale slowly, tilting his head back on the pillow to hide his face in the crook of his own wing.

He did not sleep.

Lance started to lose time.

He found himself zoning out: sometimes, minutes would last for hours, and at other times, hours would pass in a blink. The days melted together, viscous, the nights disjointed and filled with Lotor’s yellow eyes. The muscle cramps in his tail got worse, and often Lance would be in excruciating pain for long, awful pulls of breath, trying to stay still, trying not to move.

His scales felt paper thin, edges flaky and raw. Every time they pulled him out of the tank, it felt like someone was scraping his skin over slowly with the edge of a knife.

When it got really bad, Lance could press his face against the glass, pressing against the sensitive nerves on his nose for a spark of white, anything to dull the other sensations for a brief moment.

The emperor himself had started to visit. He would stride in unannounced during the day (much to Haggar’s irritation), and would not do much more than stand in front of Lance’s tank, staring at him as if the merman might vanish at any moment.

Once or twice, they brought in an unfortunate victim for the ‘ritual’, and Lance would have to listen to the sounds of them choking to death. Whatever poison Haggar had settled on - it worked quickly.

They kept the curtain drawn most of the day now, for which Lance was grateful. They only drew it aside to make observations, or to take him out of the tank.

But the lack of sight meant that it took Lance a little while to notice that Matt failed to show up one day.
At first, he didn’t think much of it. Lance had long since started to tune out the voices in the lab, especially when the pain narrowed his focus to the gurgle of the tank. But as the long hours wore on, the absence of Matt’s voice became a niggling whisper at the back of his mind.

He could hear the humans talking; could hear Haggar’s distinctive rasp every now and then. He could hear the Galra scientists too, their voices a little lower than everyone else. But no Matt Holt.

When they pulled him from his tank, Lance squinted against the light. It was harsher now that he spent most of the time in blanketed darkness. But even as they strapped him down to the operating table, he couldn’t see wings anywhere. The worry in his chest hummed louder, and Lance received a swift threat of the taser for thrashing around on the table.

**What happened to Matt?**

The avian remained missing the whole day, and when it came time to give Lance his meal, it was Ulaz who volunteered for the job. Even after so long, no one else seemed particularly keen to come near Lance when he wasn’t tied down. Lance was just glad they weren’t leaving him to go hungry...or to eat on Lotor’s whims.

He watched Ulaz ascend the metal stairs swiftly, carrying the now-familiar case of fish as if it barely weighed anything. He stood head, chest and shoulders higher than Matt, and when he knelt down next to the rim of the tank, it was with a curious folding of limbs.

Ulaz laid out the fish for Lance at a respectful distance, and Lance ate them with difficulty, forcing himself to swallow past the lump in his throat. He waited until the lab had emptied out, before resting his bound hands on the lip of the tank.

“Where’s Matt?” he asked, voice rough with disuse.

Ulaz’s head jerked as if slapped, eyes wide with surprise. It was the first time that Lance had spoken to him, and there was a flicker of fear on his face.

“He is unwell,” said the galra after a moment, “Resting.”

Lance shrank back into the water.

“Oh,” said Lance, “Is he… is he going to be okay? Do you have medicine for avians here?”

Ulaz surveyed him with his pale yellow eyes, expression inscrutable.

“He will recover,” said the galra. Then he closed the now empty case, and left without another word.

Matt didn’t turn up the next day either.

Lance was beside himself with worry. Ulaz fed him twice more, and he could barely concentrate when Lotor came to see him. And so when Lance heard Matt’s voice on the other side of the curtains, at first he thought he was hallucinating.

“...can do it,” Matt was saying, “not like this is the first time.”

There was something off with his voice, but Lance couldn’t quite put his finger on it. The words
sounded less clear, edges swollen and slurred.

“I’ve been feeding him just fine,” came Ulaz’ voice, “You should be resting.”

A snort, followed by a wince.

“It’s okay. Better not break routine for much longer.”

A pause.

“Alright.”

“Thanks doc.”

“You know, I’m an actual doctor.”

A groan, and a huff of laughter. Then the sound of footsteps receding. The close of the door.

“Fuck,” said Matt into the silence, “Should have gotten him to carry this up for me.”

Lance tugged at his cuffs, impatient. He tried to see over the edge of the tank, but his tail hurt too much to propel himself properly - not with the cuff above his fins as well.

“Matt?” he said, hopefully.

“Yeah - yeah, hey, I’m here,” came Matt’s voice, a lot closer to the tank this time, “Just give me a sec, okay?”

The familiar sound of latches being popped, and then the smell of fish and the wet slip-slap as Matt transferred them to something that rang metallic. Heavy footsteps, slow and uneven. Feathers dragging on the staircase. Lance frowned.

“Are you okay?” he called, “Matt?”

“Y-yeah, just,” said Matt, voice strained and thin, “...just a sec.”

Lance listened, heart pounding, as the avian’s footsteps stopped every few moments. Finally, his legs came into view, face obscured by a large flat tray he was holding in one hand. His other hand was gripping the railing, white knuckled.

“Hey,” said Matt, lowering the plate of fish and letting it drop onto the floor with a clang, “...I’m back.”

And his face -

Lance’s breath froze in his throat.

The avian moved as if every joint hurt, slow and stilted. Lance could hear his breath stuttering every few moments, shallow and painful. Matt set the tray down next to the water’s edge, wings notched close around his shoulders. With a groan, he sat, back against the casing of the machines, wings half spread, legs stretched out across the balcony. Matthew let his head thunk back against the machine, chin tilted towards Lance.

He was smiling, a twist at the edge of his mouth.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” he said.
Lance stared at him, and it wasn’t until Matt leaned forwards towards him that Lance realised he
had been pulling at his cuffs so hard they were rattling the lid of the tank. Matt unlocked them with
practiced ease, then sat back down with a pained wheeze of breath.

Lance put both hands on the edge of the tank, eyes wide.

“What happened?” he demanded, “You’re - you’re not okay - “

Both of Matt’s eyes were blackened. One was so swollen it was closed, the skin puffy and an ugly
purple colour. There was barely an inch of skin that wasn’t bruised, the left side of his face a mass
of dark blue-black, spreading all the way down to his jaw. Lance could smell blood, dry and
sluggish, and he knew the injuries continued under the collar of Matt’s shirt. He looked like he had
been beaten within an inch of his life.

One of Matt’s wrists was wrapped in stiff bandage, and Lance could see where a few feathers had
been bent or yanked out, blood crusting the soft down. He recognised the irregular straight lines at
the edge of the broad feathers, had seen it when he pulled Shiro out of the ocean all those months
ago.

Someone had taken a knife to Matt’s flight feathers.

And from the way Matt was holding himself, hand against his chest, back bowed...Lance guessed
there was something wrong with his ribs too.

“Here,” said Matt, trying to slice through a fish with one and a half hands, “You must be hungry.
I’m sorry that I just disappeared like that - “

Lance made an angry clicking noise at the back of his throat.

“I’m not hungry, I’m worried about you!” he shouted, all the fear and worry of the past few days
making his voice louder than he had meant it to.

Matt flinched, and Lance shrank back into the water, guilt rising fast and cold around his gills.

“...sorry,” said Lance, blinking rapidly, “I just...you look awful. “

“Occupational hazard,” said Matt, after a long moment, “Comes from being the only avian in the
middle of all these galra, eh?”

Lance made a strangled noise, eyes flickering over the bruises on Matt’s face and the blood on his
wings. His throat was tight with fear, as if Sendak’s hand was still wrapped around his gills. Lance
looked to the closed door, at the far end of the lab, heart pounding.

“Did they...why did they do this to you? I thought they needed you to help with research...“ said
Lance, “I thought they needed you - “

“Oh, it was just some guards,” said Matt, waving a hand. He was acting much calmer than Lance
felt, head tilted back against the metal sheeting. Lance could see the divots of finger-shaped bruises
there too, like someone had held the avian down and squeezed.

“All that pent up anger, frustration and racism,” Matt continued, nonchalant, “Had to go
somewhere. I’m just the easiest target. Can’t exactly get the drop on them... So.”

Lance stared at him.
“It doesn’t happen *that* often,” said Matt, “Haggar gets mad, when I can’t...contribute efficiently. Last time this happened, I think someone got whipped for it. But no one thinks about that when tempers run high.”

Matt blinked at him with his one good eye.

“Hey. It’s okay. Shouldn’t have mouthed off, but…” he shrugged - then winced, coughing shallowly. The coughing got worse, and Matt curled over, hand clutching the base of his ribs.

“*F-fuck ,*” he said, and there was red at the corner of his mouth, “hurts like a piece of -”

The last word was lost between Matt’s gritted teeth. He banged the back of his head against the machine console behind him, hard, eyes squeezed shut and entire face scrunched up.

Lance wanted to cry. It felt like someone was pulling his heart slowly through his chest, and he couldn’t bear it.

“Matt…” he said, reaching for the avian’s bandaged hand, “*Matt.*”

“...s’fine,” said Matt, eyes still shut, “Just gimme a sec, I...it’ll go away in a bit -”

Carefully, gently, Lance laid his hand on Matt’s arm, just above the line of the bandage. The water seemed to glow a translucent blue, and if Lance closed his eyes, it was almost as if he was back in his lake.

He hummed, low in his throat, the same cooing sound that he knew would calm Pidge after a bout of crying. Lance coughed a few times, not having sung for so long, but let the sound skim low over the water. He grew more confident as he sang, the notes washing close to his lungs like an easy memory; the same melody for Shiro to soothe his nightmares when the fire burned low, a low soft sound deep in his chest.

“I’ve been away... a year and a day. You recognize love after the fact...you did what you did, and that was that...”

Lance sang quiet, letting the sound hum through his fingertips where his hand still rested on Matt’s skin, feeling his own gills flutter, the words smooth in his mouth like a familiar prayer.

Matt was staring at him now, his breathing evening out in time with gentle push and pull of Lance’s voice. It was still pained and laboured, but gradually the rhythm matched the swell and ebb of each note.

Gradually, the line of his wings loosened to a gentle slope, feathers spread like a shadow on the balcony. His gaze never left Lance’s face, pupil blown wide in his one good eye.

“I would say that I’m sorry, if it would do any good. But to never regret means you have to forget...and I don't think that I could...”

Lance pulled himself as close as he dared, resting his weight on his elbows, headless of the cuff still heavy and tight around his tail.

He let the sound build inside him, a vibrating hum that echoed through his fingers. His voice echoed like rain on the surface of the water, bouncing back from the curved glass. It made him sound hollow, like the curve of Keith’s bones when he said *you’re so beautiful; you’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.*
It sounded like sand, rushing between their fingers.

And when Lance reached up for Matt’s face, the Avian leaned over the water without hesitation. His features smoothed out at Lance’s touch, and Lance lay his palm over a bruise, his thumb resting lightly on Matt’s swollen eye.

“Cold,” he said, a whisper “...feels nice.”

Lance just hummed in response, a little tuneless, a wandering melody.

“Looking back now, I only wish I had been kinder. Did I ever know love, did I ever know love...or could I have been blinder?”

He held the tears back behind his eyes, blinking them away into the water so he could watch as Matt’s breathing evened out, chest rising and falling in time with Lance’s own breathing. He was very close to the water now, one wing tucked beside his hip, the other loose like a blanket. Matt was leaning in to Lance’s hand as if he could chase the source his voice right into the water.

Gently, Lance guided him so Matt was resting on his back, lying half curled on the balcony. He was pliant as Lance tucked his bandaged hand safe across his chest, where it wouldn’t get wet.

When Lance made to let go, Matt gripped the merman’s wrist with his good hand, pupils as dark as the sea. Lances brushed his own cheek briefly against the arch of Matt’s wing, the feathers impossibly soft, and the avian sighed, tension leaving his shoulders.

Lance closed his eyes against the lavender light, and sang and sang until Matt lay still against the lip of the water, sleeping at last. Then Lance tucked himself carefully under the shadow of one loose wing, close enough so that he could touch the down feathers as it lay over his head. The nostalgia hurt like a real, viceral ache.

He let himself cry and cry until his own voice petered out.

Neither of them noticed the figure slipping quietly out of the room.

Don’t say words that you don’t mean,
When I’m gone, please speak well of me.
The next time Lotor visited, he did not want to trade trust for food.

Instead, he stared at Lance with fever-bright eyes: it was the expression of someone who knew a secret, and was holding it tight in his fist.

“I heard you,” he said, covetous, “I heard you. The siren stories are true then...does anyone else know?”

Lance felt his heart sink. Lotor’s smile widened at his silence.

“Of course not,” he said, tilting his head, “now why is that, I wonder?”

You can’t let her know, you can’t tell her!

Lance felt like he was going to be sick.

“Please,” said Lance, eyes darting to be door and around the empty lab, “...please don't say anything.”

Lotor just stared at him, unblinking. He looked flushed with triumph, fingers twitching ever so slightly at his sides. He leaned close, eagerness etched into the lines of his smirk.

“Sing for me,” said Lotor.

It was not a request.

Chapter End Notes

eep, 16.8K...another overly long chap *cries* I hope it makes up for the delays a little... Happy New Years everyone! Thank you for staying with me, i love you guys so much. You keep me going through hard RL stuff, you really do. Thank you!!
Please let me know what you think if you have time!!

The song that Lance is singing to Matt is on the fic soundtrack. I found this chapter really hard to write, both pacing and characterisation wise... I'm not sure how Lotor came across and whether the Keith bits were very choppy? I was so excited to write Lotor but now that i"ve done it i don't know if he just feels flat. bleh... did you guys find it weirdly rushed in places, esp at the end? There are so many people with so many ulterior motives that it was kinda hard to keep track of it all and have it bleed through... I hope it didn't just feel like a mess (which I'm sure is what Keith feels like, poor keefer). asdlkj ugh sorry, this chapter stressed me out. I hope it was exciting at least for the Lance bits... Maybe it's my law depression stuff but i'm just. I feel like this was a shit chapter and I just kept wanting to delete the whole stupid fic
PS: And Katerina is not a 'filler' OC. There's more plot where that is concerned huehuehue. Also, Re gris is a Blade of Mamora member, as in canon! we will meet more blades later, and also... next chapter is the RESCUE!!!!!

Thank you so much for reading...wow, we are in 2018. Seriously, every comment and message i read multiple times, it means so much and I already know that you guys are going to be my one silver lining in my shitty RL this year (staring my grad job in a awful group). ilu guys. Come squee on twitter or tumblrl!! ♥ Thank you asterein & Karovie for beta.
Arc 1 - Part 13

Chapter Summary

Regrets, reunions, rescue. Kind deeds have unexpected consequences, cruel deeds are resurrected, and Keith and Shiro find more than just Lance.

Chapter Notes

now with an amazing illustration by soylante + some amendments I promised

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"What you're willing to sacrifice is the measurement of how you love."
- J.P Smith

:i:

The days passed slowly; the sun wearing groves of shadows into the walls.

Keith thought his heart would give out from the stress and anxiety at any moment. It came in waves, a sickly cold sensation that would leave his lungs short on breath.

At night, Keith lay awake, unable to sleep and unwilling to succumb to the nightmares that had begun to etch themselves into the back of his eyelids. Some nights, he would dream of flying in that storm, looking for Shiro...only this time, Lance wasn’t there. He dreamed of flying and flying, desperate, soaked to the skin, searching, searching. Shiro’s face, pale bone, eyes glassy and glazed, dead in the water. Sometimes, it was Lance’s face, wide and staring behind a glass tank. Other times, it was the sound of someone singing; echoing across the surface of a disembodied lake.

Keith could never fall back asleep after that.

Katerina absolutely did not help. They had exhausted most of the safe topics of conversation, and the unsaid things yawned like a chasm between them. She had been fairly forthcoming about her own life, and had told Keith a lot about her family. Her eyes had gotten very wet when Keith told her that his mother was dead, but it wasn’t like there was much else he could tell her. She had a cousin in the Garrison, and liked watching competitive figure flying.

"My uncle got us amazing seats last season,” she had told Keith over another bland dinner. She turned shy, eyes fixed on her plate. “Maybe once we get out we can go together.”

“Yeah,” said Keith, because he could not think of anything less attainable than walking out of here and attending flight shows.

“Some of my favourite fliers are Kestrels,” said Katerina, turning the spoon in between her fingers.
She gave Keith an appraising look under her eyelashes, her gaze sweeping across the pattern on his feathers.

Keith shuffled them, self conscious.

“Did you compete? Varsity?”

Keith shook his head.

“Not really. Didn’t have money for the coaching fees.”

Katerina pouted, eyebrows drawing together.

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

Keith shrugged.

“Was on a Garrison scholarship,” he said, “couldn’t just. Go do whatever I wanted.”

“That’s so unfair,” she said, pushing her plate away.

“It was okay,” said Keith, “I mean. I had issues with fostering. And no one wanted to sponsor me so. My mom left some money but I’m not old enough to -”

Katerina flung her arms around his neck, pulling Keith into a tight hug. For a moment, all he could see was the dark curtain of her hair, and the shiny blue-black at the arch of her wings. Her face was pressed against his neck, and she seemed genuinely overcome with empathy. That, or she just cried a lot, thought Keith, whole body vibrating with nerves.

“I’m so sorry,” she had said, “I can’t imagine living without my family.”

Keith blinked hard, the image of Shiro, Matt, Lance and Hunk floating to the forefront of his mind. He tried to shrug again, but couldn’t quite make it.

Katerina stroked his hair, and Keith felt goosebumps all along his arm.

“I miss my mom too,” she said. “Do you remember much about yours?”

Keith felt his heart clench.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he said.

“Keith,” said Katerina, and there was so much pity in her voice that it made Keith flush hot with shame. He wished desperately to be alone. He wished they had never come back here. If they hadn’t left that cave, maybe Lance would be safe, and Shiro would be here and…

“What about your dad?” said Katerina, quietly, “Do you think that - “

“I said I don’t want to talk about it!” snapped Keith, pulling out of her embrace.

This time, she let him go.

Sometimes, the guards would escort Katerina out of their room for hours at a time, and she would come back, lips pressed tight and refusing to talk. And while Keith appreciated the extra warmth at
night, he did *not* appreciate waking up to someone running their fingers through his feathers.

He flung himself out of the bed in an ungainly mess of limbs and wings, all his soft down feathers standing on end.

“What - “ yelled Keith, all composure out the window, “you - what - “

Katerina sat up on the bed, expression distinctly put out. She crossed her arms in front of her in a way which made Keith advert his eyes with alarm.

“I was just being nice,” she said, both eyebrows slowly inching towards her hairline. “Your wings are a mess.”

Keith pulled said wings close to his back, feeling a hot flush rising underneath his chin. It was true he hadn’t been grooming, but he had more important things on his mind. That, and he was far too embarrassed to do it in front of a stranger.

“You can’t just…” he waved a hand, incredulous, “…without asking - !”

“I thought it might make you feel better!” said Katerina, voice rising. She threw up her hands, “It’s been almost two weeks since I’ve been stuck here. I don’t think you’ve even dust washed.”

Keith picked himself off the floor, wincing as he felt a bruise on his hip forming.

“Well maybe if I slept on the floor like I suggested - “

“It’s been even longer for you,” Katerina barrelled on, holding herself tighter around the elbows, “and I just - you’re always so hunched and I *know* you don’t like me, but at least I’m trying not to be a total *jerk* about it.”

Her voice wobbled, and she tucked a strand of hair behind her ears.

“I can’t get reach all the way around the back, so I know I am hideous right now. I was going to ask you to help me groom, after...but I guess not.”

There was a long, awkward stretch of silence.

Keith was rooted to the cold stone floor. Briefly, he considered bolting for the bathroom, but couldn’t force himself to move. He rubbed his face with the heel of his hand.

“You’re not hideous,” said Keith, words stilted.

Katerina glared at him. Despite what she said, her feathers were neat and glossy, and as smooth as her hair.

“If you don’t take care of yourself, you can get mould,” she said. There was a pause. “Or bugs.”

Keith snapped his wings out on reflex.

“I do not have bugs!” he said, face very red.

“How should I know?” said Katerina, leaping up from the bed, “We’re sharing a bed, I have a right to check!”

Keith’s eyes felt like they were going to bulge right out of his face, and he did a half-step and pivot turn to avoid Katerina’s hands.
“Well I can sleep on the floor, like I said,” shouted Keith, slightly panicked.

“Why won’t you just let me help you, you...you stupid sparrow!”

“Because I don’t need any help!” roared Keith, flattening himself on the opposite wall to the bed.

“You just don’t want to groom me,” Katerina yelled back, “You think I’m hideous and you’d rather freeze to death than even return a fucking hug!”

Keith pulled at his own face in exasperation, trying to claw back some semblance of normalcy.

“I don’t think you’re ugly,” he said, “okay? I’ll - help you if you turn around but I don’t need you to do me.”

“Nevermind,” snapped Katerina, and she stormed off into the bathroom.

They didn’t speak for the rest of the day, and when the guards came to take Katerina, she tried to kick one man between the legs.

When she returned the next morning, Katerina had a black eye and a blooming bruise across her jaw.

Keith felt a swell of anger rush through his chest, and he threw himself at the door after the guards. He managed to grab one of them by the hand and twisted as hard as he could. The guard let out a shout, and his partner tried to pull him through the door. Keith hung on.

“Hey!” he yelled, “Hey! What did you do to her? You’re hitting civilians now?”

“Let go you little piece of -”

“Fucking coward -“

Taking a different tact, the second guard opened the door, jerking it into Keith’s shoulder in an attempt to dislodge him. Keith turned, trying to elbow the new guard in the nose, still holding on to the other guy’s wrist. The second guard hit Keith viciously across the temple with the butt of a gun, sending Keith crashing to the floor. His vision burst white with pain.

Someone kicked him hard in the stomach, and Keith heaved, retching. Then they kicked again, stomping down on his wing when he tried to get up.

“- really getting on my nerves you brat,” the guard was saying, punctuating each word with a kick.

Keith couldn’t breathe. He had his arm across his face, trying to protect himself as his head rang from the blow. He could hear Katerina screaming blue murder, and the harsh slap of skin on skin.

The door closed with a resounding bang.

Despite the pain, Keith leapt straight back up, and managed to spit right in the avian’s face as he glared at them through gap in the door. The guard let out a shriek of disgust, pulling away from view.

“You’ll want to behave if you want any fucking food, Kogane!” shouted his partner, then, to his comrade: “Jesus stop yelling you baby.”
A clatter of metal on metal, and the grate window was slammed shut too.

Keith was heaving with adrenaline, still furious. He whirled around towards Katerina, and the room spun a little more than it usually did.

_Oww. His head._

Katerina was staring at him with big blue eyes, face pale. At least the bruising wasn’t so bad that she couldn’t open her eyelid.

Then she started giggling.

“Hey,” said Keith, half opening his wings to steady himself. He stepped closer, trying to see the state of her injuries. “Um, are you okay?”

Katerina was still staring at him.

“Are _you_ okay?”

He winced but still managed a shrug.

“We don’t have any ice,” said Keith, “but you should probably put cold water on that eye.”

He cast around the room, looking for something to soak in water. In the end, he walked slowly to the bed and began stripping off one of the pillow cases.

“Here,” he said, straightening up, “Let’s take a look at your - “

He stopped, because the Swallow was suddenly very close, much closer than before. Her wings brushed his, and Keith sat back on the bed, off balance.

“You spat in his face,” said Katerina.

“...Uh,” said Keith, clutching the pillow case. “Your bruises are gonna - “

“But you didn’t manage to break his nose.”

She was very close now. Keith leaned back, but she followed, chin tilted, wings half notched.

“That’s good enough, I suppose,” said Katerina.

“...Uh,” said Keith, clutching the pillow case. “Your bruises are gonna - “

“Wait -” said Keith, gasping the word out, eyes scrunching shut at the sensation.

“Shh,” she said, a hot exhale against his throat, “It’s okay. Thank you for standing up for me.”
Keith tried to turn, tried to ease out from under the arch of her wing but Katerina ran a thumb across his cheek, fingers fanning down to find the feathers at the nape of his neck, tucked away into his hairline. She followed with her mouth, pressing kisses into the arch of Keith’s throat.

“No, I don’t - unnhhh!”

With her other hand, Katerina had dug the tip of her fingers down the length of Keith’s coracoid, cutting off his protest with a groan...it felt so good. For a moment, Keith could only stare at her, the thin slope of her nose, the shape of her mouth, breath coming short and sharp at the tip of his tongue. But the shape of her eyes were wrong, and so was the shade of blue. His vision seemed to sharpen to a point, then blow out.

In a rush of cold panic, Keith forcibly jerked away before she could reach his bare shoulder blades, wing snapping out and hitting the wall.

When she reached for him, Keith grabbed her by the wrist.

“I can’t,” he said, voice a little hoarse, “Sorry.”

Something passed over Katerina’s face, a brief flash of cold disdain...but it was gone so quickly that it might have been merely the light. She blinked, sitting back slowly on her heels.

Keith let go of her hand.

“Are you sure I’m not ugly,” said Katerina, after a very long moment.

Keith buried his face in his hands.

“It’s not you,” he mumbled, desperately wishing she would vanish when he next looked up, “I don’t - it’s -”

“Some pretty starling?”

“No!” said Keith, perhaps a little louder than he’d meant to. He lowered his voice again, “I’m - no.”

“It’s not like they’d know,” said Katerina through her eyelashes. Her bruise was almost the colour of her wings, blue and painful. She leaned in towards him but Keith hunched back into the cocoon of his own wings, and she stopped. Slowly, she folded her wings behind her, careful and prim like everything else about her.

“Keith,” she started.

But Keith shook his head. He clambered off the bed, still clutching the now crumpled pillow case in one hand.

“Let’s get that bruise cooled down,” he said, determinedly not looking at her. “It’ll swell.”

Without waiting, Keith walked into the bathroom, taking his time to soak the pillow case in the cold running tap water. When he returned, Katerina was still sitting there, cross legged. She let him press the damp folded cloth to her face, eyes open and appraising even as Keith stared at his own hands to avoid eye contact.

“You’re a strange one, Keith,” said Katerina eventually.

Keith shrugged with his wings.
“I’m sorry,” he said again.

Keith could still feel her hands, phantom fingers on the bone of his wings. He thought of Lance, carefully slotting shells and flowers between the soft spaces of Keith’s heart.

Lance’s hands had always been a little on the cooler side, even after a long day in the sun. He loved pouring hot dry sand through Keith’s feathers, and would be meticulous in his grooming. He’d slide long thin fingers through the wing, thumb and forefinger pressed like matching lips of a seashell, scraping Keith’s pinions clean; often lulling them both into contented doze. Sometimes Lance would press hard along the bone, eyes crinkling when Keith arched into the sensation. The feeling now was so...abruptly similar that Keith had lost his breath...and now that he’d found it again, it hurt viciously.

The guards came for Katerina in the morning.

This time, she did not come back.

The first time Lance sang for Lotor, the galra almost fell into the tank.

It was a jarring moment of deja vu. Lance had choked out a hysterical laugh when Lotor’s hand slipped from the rim of the glass, sending his torso pitching over the edge. Lotor had pulled himself back at the last minute with a full bodied jerk, landing flat on his arse.

His eyes were wild, as if snapping out of a daze.

Lance had launched himself backwards too, terrified of retribution. They were both frozen there, like screams layered across a sewn-shut mouth, Lance’s back pressed against the glass, Lotor uncharacteristically graceless. Lance cringed, waited for the fury to set in, the knife to come out, for the shouting....but Lotor only stared at merman, chest heaving as if he had forgotten to breathe for a very long time.

In the end, Lotor didn’t say anything at all. Lance saw the tremor in his hands as he left.

But if Lance thought Lotor had been spooked, or perhaps appeased now that he had heard a Siren...well, he was wrong. And despite that very first incident, Lotor began visiting more and more often - until he would appear in the wee hours of morning, face hidden in a heavy druid’s cloak, expression eager and hungry.

Lotor’s frequent presence did not go unnoticed by Matt or Ulaz.

“But what the fuck does he want? ” hissed Matt, running a hand repeatedly through his wing, agitated. He rubbed his eyes. “There must be something that he said.”

Lance shook his head. Only his eyes were above the waterline, but he surfaced reluctantly, guilt and fear twisting his stomach serpentine.

“I don’t know,” he lied, “He just. Stares a lot.”

Matt looked at him for a long moment, his stare uncharacteristically blank.
“He hasn’t hurt you, has he?” asked the avian, shifting his wings. Lance couldn’t look away from where the feathers had been shorn off; one wing unbalanced against the other. Lance knew it affected Matt, and he had started tilting his right wing when he sat, to try even up the weight. He kept stumbling or tripping up and down the stairs.

“No,” said Lance, “...it’s fine. I just haven’t been able to sleep.”

“Try talk to him more, okay?” said Matt, exhausted, “Try figure out - “

“What he wants, yeah,” finished Lance dully. “Sorry.”

Another pause.

“I’ll try take turns with Ulaz staying late,” said Matt at last, “Maybe it’ll keep him away if we just stall. I don’t like him being here. There’s too much at stake.”

“Oh, Lance,” said Lance, because there was nothing else he could say. He was trapped here, the colour bleaching out of his tail with every passing day.

But despite their best efforts, Lotor was not deterred. Perhaps it was Lance’s acquiescence, or lack of hostility and violence even while Lotor in his most intoxicated state. After all, Lance had not so much as scratched Lotor. And so the galra would sit right on the tank’s edge, face alight with the water glow, back against the metal plating and railings. Lance didn’t know whether it was trust, or arrogance, or carelessness.

“Please sing,” he would ask, as if it was possible for Lance to refuse.

And then Lotor would sigh, his entire body growing lax as soon as Lance opened his mouth. He reminded Lance of the small pale flowers on the cliff at home, curled and reaching towards the sun. Keith had looked very much like this, back in the cave, expression open and sweet.

The resemblance hurt, and the thoughts came easy, unbidden; like the phantom whispers of a sea longing for the shore. They said: *it would be so easy... all Lance would have to do is pull*. One tug, and he could drown the prince in his own tank.

Sometimes, watching Lotor’s sharp gaze smooth out and glaze over, Lance wondered if the galra would even notice.

*It would be so easy.*

But Lance would never be free, then. And Pidge and Matt would be in danger.

And so Lance sang, as he was asked.

To begin with, it was difficult simply because of the constant fear clogging his throat. An awful buzzing would overcome his senses, and Lance would sink back into the stale water, gills seizing and choking. He had never had trouble singing before, but it felt *so wrong* to be singing with such dread, and not to someone he loved.

“Come now,” Lotor had said, “I’m not hard to please. Something small will do.”

He had smiled, teeth very white.

“After all, what’s another secret between the two of us?”

Lance wanted to cry. His eyes hurt all the time now, a constant ache punctured by stinging pain.
behind his lids. Lance had plucked the first nursery rhyme he could think of in a panic, and forced the melody from below his gills. His voice was felt paper thin, unsteady as he tried to keep quiet.

But Lotor didn’t seem to mind.

On the contrary, he had drawn in closer and closer, face growing slack and trancelike. He was utterly heedless of the water, the rhythm of his breathing slowing to match the notes of the song. Up close, Lotor’s yellow eyes seemed to glow like merfolk, his pupils bleeding wide and dark.

The effect of his voice was so profound, so sudden...

Lance felt, for the briefest of moments, powerful.

It didn’t seem to matter what melodies Lance sang; they all seemed to have the same effect.

Night after night, the tension would seep out of Lotor’s silhouette, and the sharp guarded expression would fade from his features. Lotor never fell asleep, like the avians had done, but his breathing would slow until he was drawing long deep breaths, lips parted and eyes blown.

He didn’t seem able to look away from Lance at all - and when Lance closed his own eyes, Lotor’s yellow gaze was burned there.

“What does it feel like?” Lance had asked after many nights. He had lost count, by then. Everything hurt.

Lance’s voice was hoarse, but he was grateful for the food that Lotor always brought as a reward. It didn’t matter that Lance couldn’t keep it down; his stomach hurt with hunger.

Lotor was still lax against the tank, one hand trailing idly in the water, eyes half lidded with loose contentment. He was always like this, after a long song.

The corner of his lips curled, and it was almost a smile.

“It feels good,” said Lotor, after a pause.

Lance came a little closer, placing the remainder of the bones on the plate and folding his arms on the edge of the glass.

“What do you mean?” he asked, curious despite the situation.

Lotor blinked at him, then his eyebrows furrowed to a point.

“I don’t quite know...” he said, and then appeared surprised at his own honesty. “It feels...intoxicating. But peaceful. Like I’m falling, but never hitting the ground. It’s a rush, of sorts, I suppose.”

Lance rested his cheek on the back of his own wrist.

“I can’t remember much when you’re singing,” Lotor confessed, “and these days I can’t sleep unless I - “

He stopped.

It was a moment before Lotor seemed to collect himself, blinking rapidly and pulling his long hair
behind his shoulders.

“Surely you know the effect you have,” said the galra. “People say siren song is the preferred method of hunting, for merfolk.”

Once upon a time, Lance might have been offended, or tried to persuade Lotor otherwise. But he couldn’t remember what it felt like to be that person anymore. Instead, he gave the barest of shrugs.

“I’ve never sung to a Galra before,” said Lance, looking away. “Wouldn’t know.”

“Do all mermish voices sound like yours?” asked Lotor, eyes regaining some of this customary sharpness.

Lance sank a little back into the water.

“Maybe to you,” he said, carefully. “But I don’t think so.”

Lotor tilted his head, hair a curtain of silver.

“Is that why you want to keep it a secret from Haggar?”

At once, any small tendrils of calm or ease that existed vanished from Lance’s veins. The air felt suddenly very harsh, and he withdrew into the centre of the tank with a flinch.

“You promised,” Lance whispered, “You promised you wouldn’t say anything if I did what you wanted, I’ve -”

Lotor held up a hand and Lance felt his voice stutter against the back of his throat, like bile.

“Calm yourself, I haven’t told her,” he said. “I’d imagine you would live out the rest of your days on that operating table, if she knew.”

Lance felt sick.

“Or not,” mused Lotor, glancing at his nails, “my father is very adamant that you remain alive.”

He looked back at Lance.

“But you must know it’s a matter of time,” said Lotor, still in that same nonchalant voice, “She might figure it out for herself. Or maybe that avian will say something.”

“He won’t,” said Lance loudly.

Lotor just smirked.

Lance felt a sudden, desperate urge to tear into the galra’s throat with his teeth.

“If Haggar is going to cut me into little pieces,” said Lance, voice hoarse from his singing but no less cold, “Why should I sing for you every night? Doesn’t matter to me, right?”

That wiped the smirk off Lotor’s face.

He made an aborted movement, arm flashing out towards Lance as if he was going to grab him by the shoulder. Lance jerked himself backwards, hissing with all his teeth. Lotor froze.

It didn’t matter that it was a bluff. There was no way Lance would willingly jeopardise Matt’s life
or Pidge’s for that matter. But Lotor didn’t know that.

Now there was something like panic in the edge of his eyes.

“No, it does matter,” said Lotor, eyes flickering from one point of Lance’s face to another, “You wouldn’t be so scared, otherwise. There’s something else here. What is it?”

But Lance had had enough.

“If you don’t tell her, maybe I die a little later,” said Lance, “If you do tell her, maybe I’ll die on that table. Either way, I won’t be here to sing for you.”

“I can make sure you don’t die,” Lotor started, but Lance interrupted him with a harsh choke of laughter. The sound was untidy around the edges, echoing hollow and awful off the water and glass. It trailed off into hoarse coughing, and it took a few seconds before Lance could find his breath again.

But a few seconds was enough time for his sudden flare of reckless despair to bleed out.

“No, you can’t,” said Lance, very quietly.

“I can,” said Lotor, and he did look manic now, “I can get you out of here.”

Lance breathed out very slowly through his gills. He looked at Lotor, at his pale face and his clenched hands. He thought of Matt, and the network of rebels he refused to speak about.

He tried to think of home, and it felt like another life. Lance couldn’t remember how long he’d been here.

“No,” Lance said again, “You can’t.”

“Not all are loyal here,” Lotor started, voice hushed but charged, “We have been waiting for the right time. Your arrival might be the catalyst for it all. There are things happening right now that will change the course of history. Change this war. And when the tide turns...”

Lance looked at him, tired.

“Okay,” he said.

Lotor stared back at him. Neither spoke for almost a minute.

“Don’t you understand?” Lotor said, leaning forwards, “We are on the same side, Blue, you and I - you have just as much power over me.”

Lance shook his head, but Lotor pressed on.

“You haven’t told Haggar that I’ve been visiting. You could have. It’s been months. Why not?”

“Because then I would starve,” said Lance, glaring up at Lotor, “Don’t pretend this is - what do you think we... I am trapped here!”

“It will take time to arrange for your escape,” said Lotor, still in that same, fervent voice. “But you must not let Haggar know about my visits. If she finds out, I can’t help you. I won’t let you die here.”

Lance felt, for the first time, truly alarmed at the possibility that his singing has had such an effect
on this stranger - a stranger who could leave Lance to die, if he wanted, and Lance would be able to do nothing. Lotor’s promises hung there, heavy in the space between them. A muscle seized on his left side, and Lance’s tail thumped hard on the glass, forcing him into a full bodied shiver.

“You don’t trust me,” said Lotor, at long last.

Lance said nothing. He felt like he was someone else, detached and observing from somewhere far away. It took Lance a long moment to read Lotor’s expression.

It was fear.

“Will you sing for me tomorrow?” asked Lotor.

Lance closed his eyes and let the water close over his face. He did not come back up.

Lotor is gone for three days, and in that span of time, Zarkon killed five galra prisoners on the tiles in front of Lance’s tank.

The guards dragged in a sixth galra on the fourth morning. Lance could hear him begging as soon as the gag came off, voice barely muffled by the thick curtain that hung heavy against the glass.

“ - is in two weeks, just ask the officer who -”

The sound of a fist meeting flesh; someone gagging.

“Be quiet,” said Haggar, sounding utterly disinterested.

“But my hearing was - “

“Permanently postponed,” said Ulaz, “Haggar, the Emperor will be here soon.”

“I thought we increased the dosage yesterday,” said Haggar testily, “this is getting out of hand.”

“I couldn’t persuade him otherwise,” said Ulaz.

“Not sure if it’s safe at this frequency,” came Matt’s voice from somewhere on the other side of the tank, “maybe he’s building up a resistance to it?”

“...what are you going to do to me?” the Galra was saying, “Please, it was just an accident! I - is that an Avian - ”

“I said be quiet! ” hissed Haggar.

The sound of glass being moved; footsteps. Then the door thumping open at the far end of the room. Lance twitched in the water. A hush descended on the room, as it did every time Zarkon entered.

“Is it ready?” said the Emperor, footsteps slow.

A flurry of moment; the sound of long robes on cold flagstones. Lance could still hear the other Galra’s rushed, panicky breathing.

“Yes, sire,” said Haggar at last, “But it’s been less than half a quintent. I would advise - “

“I need more,” interrupted Zarkon, “The effects are weak.”
“Sire - “

“Perhaps we have been going about this the wrong way,” said Zarkon, as if Ulaz hadn’t spoken at all, “Perhaps...we need someone younger.”

There was a moment of utter silence. No one moved.

“Well,” said Zarkon, “This will do, for now.”

Scuffling.

“No, I want it to be fresh. Fetch it.”

“Emperor, I don’t think it’s wise to move it too often, it could be dangerous.”

“Nonsense, doctor,” said Zarkon, “You’ve been successful so far, yes?”

“Yes,” said Ulaz, “But - “

“Then do it again. It must be fresh.”

“It is not as easy as that, sire,” said Haggar, voice placating but edged with frustration, “It takes time to distill and -”

“The Ritual speaks nothing of distillation,” said Zarkon, moving towards the tank. With one sweeping hand, he pulled it aside, and Lance flinched at the light, “Perhaps that is why it has not been working as it should, Haggar. Do not make me repeat myself.”

Footsteps on the stairs, and when Lance looked up, it was to see Ulaz and another galra assistant armed with usual tranquilizer gun. Wordlessly, Ulaz turned to the control panel next to the railings. A moment later, the lid of the tank lifted higher from where it hung unsealed, high enough so that Ulaz could lean forwards across the water. And even though they had done this many times before, he still hesitated before taking Lance by both arms and lifting him bodily out of the tank.

The water sluiced off, splashing harsh and wet as Lance was pulled from the tank. He let out a shout of pain as the weight of chains tying his tail to the bottom of the tank grew taut, just before it was detached. The other galra gave a full body jerk at the sound, but Ulaz flung up a hand to stop him pulling the trigger.

“It’s fine! Steady.”

Out of the water, his tail flopped heavy and crooked on the metal latticework that made up the balcony. It hurt, the muscles seizing as all the blood rushed in a different direction. Lance didn’t know whether it was his prolonged confinement and lack of space to swim, but he realised, as he was lifted, that he couldn’t quite feel the tip of his tail where it dragged along the edge of each step. He could feel the pressure of Ulaz’s arms where they dug into the middle of his tail, and Lance could feel the fine soft fur on Ulaz’s arms where it was warm under Lance’s waist. But he couldn’t feel the floor, or Ulaz’ robes where they were pressed close.

Lance caught a glimpse of the galra prisoner that was still kneeling on the floor. The man’s eyes were huge in his face, shocked as he followed the wet trail of Lance’s tail-fin as Ulaz crossed the room.

The air was coarse against the inside of his throat, and Lance coughed. He let out a hurt noise when his back touched the cool metal table, but he did not resist when Ulaz strapped his arms and head
“Shhh, shhh,” he was saying.

Zarkon’s shadow fell across Lance’s vision, and he flinched backwards, even as Ulaz pulled fastened a strip of leather across Lance’s crown.

“Don’t let me stop you, Doctor,” said Zarkon.

They had it down to an art now. All they had to do was keep Lance’s eyes open and the tears would come. It wasn’t so much a pain response as an environmental one. From this angle, Zarkon looked like a skeleton, the violet crystal light casting hollow circles under his eyes. His gaze, however, was clear - and they were fixed on the small bottle that Ulaz had pressed to the corner of Lance’s eye.

His vision flickered, white and lilac, as Ulaz brought the sharp edge of his nail up near the bridge of Lance’s nose.

Then it was all over, and they were drawing back, away from the operating table. The sound of Haggar’s hooves were loud in the silence; the only sound besides the prisoner’s terrified breaths.

“Drink this, then you are free to go,” said Haggar.

“What - “

“Your Emperor commands it.”

“No, what will it do to me? What - “

With one swift hand, Haggar grabbed the galra by the throat and jaw. In her other hand, she held a clear crystal glass. Lance looked away.

“Sire,” said Haggar, deferential.

A pause. And then Zarkon gave a mighty exhale, satisfied.

Then came the awful, gurgling sound of someone choking to death. There was a soft clop of hooves and then the a bodily thump as Haggar let the galra prisoner drop to the floor. Lance knew, from all the other times, what juniberry poison looked like. He knew the body did not twitch for very long, but it leached the colour from the lips like ink in the ocean.

“Extremely deadly for Galra,” Matt had said, “acts fast, which is what we need. Would be almost instantaneous if you ate one in the wild.”

He had held up a clear vial of something that refracted the light just a little too slowly to be water.

“We’ve had to alter it a little to make it look like water,” said Matt.

“Would it kill merfolk too?” Lance had asked in morbid curiosity.

Matt had frowned.

“Not sure,” he had said, placing the prepared vial in a metal tray. There was an entire row behind it, sitting and glinting quietly in the flower-petal light.

“It’s not like we’ve tested it on mermaids. This version will kill humans pretty fast, though. Avians
too, probably. Though if we eat the berries we usually just get sick and have hallucinations. Or something. I’ve never seen a sample of juniberry until I...got here. Doesn’t grow that high up.”

“How do you feel, Your Majesty?” asked Haggar.

“Better,” said Zarkon, and he did sound stronger, steadier. He always did, after whatever medicine the Druids and Haggar gave him. “I can feel his quintessence coursing through me. Let us hope it lasts longer than the rest.”

“Of course,” said Haggar, “We will monitor closely.”

“Yes,” said Zarkon, footsteps coming a little closer. “And put that back into the water, before it dies. I think the tears must be harvested fresh, Haggar. We will conduct the Ritual here, from now on.”

A stiff moment of silence.

“Yes, my Emperor.”

It did not last longer.

Zarkon returned merely two days later, full of rage and fear. In his anger, he swept a table’s worth of glass and metal off the table; where it all shattered in a cascade of wasted time. Papers went everywhere, and the human scientists scattered with them, terrified.

“If you do not bring me someone worth having,” he roared, “I will take each and every worthless soul in this palace, starting with you!”

“Sire,” Haggar said, trying to reason with him, her voice calm and soothing as it rarely was, “Perhaps the Ritual is not as effective as the legends say. Let me send my Druids to search for other solutions. There must - “

Something else smashed, and this time, there was a yelp of pain.

“I need more quintessence,” said Zarkon, voice a thousand threads, all barely strung together. “You said this would work, Haggar.”

“Yes, Sire,” said Haggar, “But we are just scratching the surface of crystal synthesis. There is more energy stored in one shard of those ocean crystals than -”

She cut off abruptly.

“I gave you a task,” said Zarkon, slowly. “So far, the lore has held true. Do not doubt me again.”

The next time Zarkon came to the lab, he brought someone else with him.

They already had Lance laid out on the table - Zarkon insisted on overseeing the harvesting. The lamplight in his face made Lance dizzy, and even with his eyes shut, his vision was foggy. He turned his head blindly at the sound of the doors opening, but didn’t open his eyes until there was collective intake of breath around him.

Then, a voice spoke up, full of shock and wonder. The voice was higher and smaller than everyone else’s, clear as bell.
It was a child’s voice.

“Is that a mermaid!” she said.

Lance felt something awful and cold twist in his gut.

“Yes,” said Zarkon, “It is.”

“Wow! Can I touch her tail?”

“Of course you can,” said Zarkon, and he sounded almost indulgent, “It’s quite safe.”

Lance could see Ulaz’ face, silhouetted against the purple lamp light. His eyes were wide with shock, and his usual expression of blank indifference had slipped. The other galra looked tense as well, and Mei had her hands over her mouth.

He couldn’t feel her touching him, but he could hear the sound of something wet swishing on the damp flagstones. She was patting his tail fin.

“Ew, it’s cold!” said the girl, “Up? Up? Wanna see!”

She came into Lance’s line of sight, briefly - it was a Galra child, pale purple skin and two fluffy ears too big for her head. She had round yellow eyes set under a tuft of purple hair that had been braided back. Her mouth was a little moue of curiosity, before she was lowered down to the floor again.

“Pretty,” she said, “Shiny...why is it tied down?”

Lance felt very sick.

“No,” said Matt, somewhere to the left. Then, more loudly, “No, you can’t.”

There was a dramatic gasp from somewhere below the table.

“Birdy -!”

“What,” said Zarkon, voice deceptively calm, “Did you say?”

Matt came closer. Oh Matt, thought Lance, you can’t change anything, you don’t have any power, please just stay quiet -

“You can’t do this,” he said, and there was no weakness to his voice, just anger. “She’s - she’s a baby - “

Three quick footsteps, and then the sound of a hand hitting skin; like a gunshot. Matt went down hard with a cry of pain, crashing into one of tables. The Galra child let out a shriek of fright. Lance could hear her being gathered up by Ulaz, a chorus of soft hushes and fabric rustling. Lance jerked towards the sound of Matt’s breathing, harsh and laboured. He pulled against his restraints, but they only dug into his bone, cold and unyielding as the air around him.

“You’ve grown bold since I last saw you,” Zarkon was saying, “Maybe you need to be reminded of your place.”

A choking cough, gasping high and reedy.

Then, Ulaz’s voice.
“Sire,” he said, “Who is this kit?”

“Quite irrelevant,” said Zarkon.

“We do not know how the Ritual would work with children,” Ulaz pressed, “I don’t think it is better for us to conduct trials on other - “

“The Ritual is quite clear,” interrupted Zarkon, “…all the years they might have lived. I believe I have found the flaw in your experiments all along.”

Ulaz looked stricken.

“But Sire - “

“You will do as I command!” Zarkon shouted, the echo whipping off the glass and steel like a physical blow. Everyone flinched.

Lance squeezed his eyes shut. He thought his ribs would surely shatter under the strain of his heart breaking. He could still hear the little girl’s soft breathing, snuffling into Ulaz’s neck. There was a long, long awful silence. Ulaz did not move. No one moved. Even Haggar seemed hesitant.

“My good doctor,” said Zarkon, voice abruptly returning to its low quiet rumble. It sounded like the roll of a storm, just before it broke on land.

“…Have you lost your nerve?”

Lance couldn’t bear to look.

“No, Emperor,” said Ulaz.

---

For those who seek eternal youth,
There’s but one unforgiving truth:
What Time has taken, you shall find
She’s rarely pleased to change her mind.

To appease her: bring two glasses made
From crystals cut by Luxite blade.
And fill them both with waters found
Where they have slept beneath the ground.

To one glass add a Mermaid’s tear,
And drink from this without a fear.
But as it’s Time unfairly earned;
You must give something in return.

So find another living soul
To pay the debt that you now owe.
And if they drink, they freely give
you all the years they might have lived.
A week after Katerina left, they came for Keith.

Unlike last time, Keith was well enough to walk on his own two legs. But it didn’t shake the uncomfortable sense of déjà vu as they marched him down several long flights of stairs, each holding one of Keith’s arms in a vice like grip. He didn’t even bother asking where they were going.

Stairs. That in itself was a little unusual - it meant they were in one of the state buildings, if it was built for humans as well as avians. As they passed a set of wide double doors, Keith recognised one of the guards - and gave him a wide, toothy grin. The guard scowled heavily, wings bristling.

They crossed the expansive hall and proceeded through a much smaller door; down a further corridor and then stopped in front of a nondescript door. The guard on Keith’s right knocked, three raps with his knuckle.

A pause.

Then the door swung inwards, and Keith was shoved unceremoniously between his wings. He stumbled, wings snapping out for balance but hitting the door frame painfully. He half turned to glare at the guard - but was distracted by the sound of wood on stone, scraping, and someone’s relieved shout.

“Keith!”

Shiro almost upended his chair, rushing towards him with his arms held out. Keith fell into them, heart in his throat. Shiro enveloped him in his arms and wings, and Keith clutched back, hands fisting in the back of Shiro’s shirt. He buried his face in Shiro’s collar, cheek pressed to the heart beat beneath the warm skin, relief flooding like adrenaline.

“Shiro,” said Keith, voice muffled by clothing, “You’re okay.”

Shiro was running one broad hand up and down the length of Keith’s back, like he used to do every time Keith had a nightmare.

Arthur’s voice spoke up from behind Shiro’s broad shoulder.

“As touching as this is, now that he’s here, we can brief him in,” he said.

Keith pulled back reluctantly.

“I’m so sorry,” said Shiro, hushed and hurried. His eyes were darting all over Keith’s face, gaze hard as it fell on the fading bruises. “I’m sorry Keith. I tried to get you out of there sooner, but it’s been - I’ve been kept in the dark too.”

He ran the soft pad of his thumb across the arch of Keith’s cheek, where the bruise was still yellow and purple. Shiro’s gaze was hard and furious, at odds with his steady hand.

“Are you alright?” he asked, “Who did this?”

“It’s okay,” said Keith, hand still bunched in Shiro’s shirt. He noticed it was not the shirt that Shiro was wearing before - this was military issue. Shiro was in field uniform. His hand was still on Keith’s face, and Keith brushed it away...only to be bracketed in by Shiro’s wing.

“I’m fine, Shiro. What’s going on?”
Arthur coughed behind them, but Shiro didn’t let go of Keith’s arm. He looked as tired as Keith felt, eyes rimmed with worry.

“I thought - I thought maybe they’d - “

“Takashi,” said Keith, very quietly, “Hey. It’s okay. I’m here.”

Shiro pressed his forehead against Keith’s, just for a moment, before turning back to the table. His wings were spread just above and behind Keith, like a shelter. Keith leaned back into it, feeling suddenly naked in front of the appraising gaze of the room.

Neither Pidge or the Alteans were here. And judging by uniforms, none of the avians present were council members - everyone was dressed in the pale dove-grey that of field ops; holster tucked under their wings. Axca, Natalya and Barton were there, sitting around a table which supported a large scale model of Zarkon’s capital. There were several people that Keith did not recognise, but almost everyone in the room was a falcon or hawk, with the exception of Arthur, Shiro and two figures with broad eagle wings standing along the opposite wall.

Regris was the only non-avian there, and even whilst seated, he towered over the rest of them.

Shiro ushered him to one of the seats opposite, and Keith took it with apprehension.

“How was the holiday?” asked Natalya, sugar sweet.

Shiro clamped a hand down on Keith’s arm, but Keith ignored her. He stared at the large building at the centre of the city, its shape familiar from hours of his own research. He didn’t dare let himself hope, but his lungs hurt with the very idea. He looked up at Arthur.

“Are we doing a raid, then?” asked Keith.

Arthur stared back at him, gaze as steady and dark as the colour of his wings.

“Yes,” said the raven.

“How do we know he’s still alive?” said Keith, and he was surprised at how steady his own voice sounded. It was as if someone else was sitting in his flesh, carved from a shell as thin as porcelain.

“Resistance intelligence says so,” said Shiro, hand still a anchoring weight on Keith’s wrist, “The Council finally cleared an extraction mission.”

Keith blinked, hard.

It’s been weeks and weeks, Hunk had said. How long has it been now? With a sick, sinking feeling, Keith realised he had lost count. Maybe it was the lack of sleep from the persistent nightmares, maybe it was the lack of flight, but in that moment, he could not remember. Keith felt like he was going to throw up.

Oh god, Lance. Please forgive me.

“We have several people inside the palace,” said Regris. “The mer lives. We would have heard otherwise.”

Keith stared at him, then at Arthur.

“But how recently would we have heard? Why have we been sitting around like ducks all this time -“
A squeeze from Shiro’s fingers, and Keith took a deep breath, cutting himself off. Arthur cocked his head, slim face a mask of disinterest. Keith wondered if it was a raven thing, or just a bureaucrat thing, because the glitter of his eyes made Keith’s feathers stand on end.

“It’s a risk we’re willing to take, at this point,” said Arthur, “the stakes are too high. We will attempt a direct extraction. Keith, Stephan and I will take point. Barton - long range. Natalya and Christopher will take primary fire support but will run diversions with Axca and Shiro along here and here if necessary. Draw attention away from the drop. The rest of us will join Keith once the target is acquired.”

Arthur shifted so he could point at the model building with the pointed end of a long, slim blade.

“Regris has supplied us with the blueprints of the palace,” Arthur continued, “most of the structure is underground, as we know. But here - and here - are high enough to support a jump start.”

“Our men will bring the mer up to you, it’s impossible for an avian to enter lower levels undetected,” said Regris, “we have a doctor who has direct access. He will help us. But the window is very short. You must be at the rendezvous when we get up there, or we will be trapped.”

“Wouldn’t be easier with less people?” said Keith, frowning, “There are no blind spots approaching that tower. Or any side of the building.”

“And how do you suppose we airlift a fully grown mermaid without at least three of us?” said one of the avians that Keith didn’t recognise. He had tawny eagle wings, and a blockish face.

“We need extra wings, and fire defence,” said Arthur, waving a hand. “There’s no high vantage point so we will have to go in fast and get out even faster. Keith is the smallest - he’ll be able to get the drop on the first sentry. The rest of us will split and draw fire away from him by pretending to make landing here and here.”

“Wait, someone should shadow Keith,” said Shiro, eyebrows drawn in.

“We’ve been through this,” said Arthur, “he has to go unnoticed. Barton will keep him covered.”

“Fine,” said Keith, impatient, “Give me my knife back.”

“You’ll get something with better range,” said Arthur dismissively.

“I want my knife back,” said Keith, sitting up straighter.

Arthur stared him down.

“Think of it as insurance,” he said, after a long pause. “If we get return successfully, you’ll get your weapon back. Fair?”

Keith gritted his teeth. Think of Lance, said a strained voice in his mind, nothing else matters right now. You’re running out of time. He’s running out of time.

“Fine,” spat Keith, “Then give me a gun.”

Arthur stretched his wings.

“You’ll have everything you need,” said the raven, “Calm yourself. Now, let’s run through this carefully. Regris, run us through the sentry routes again.”
They separated him and Shiro again, after the briefing.

They ignored Shiro’s protests and dragged Keith bodily away, back up the stairs and back to solitary. It had almost come to blows, but Keith had allowed himself be pulled out of the room before they could draw any weapons on Shiro. He barely managed to hold it together before the guards slammed shut the door and Keith let himself collapse on the floor, back against cold stone walls, wings shivering violently with something that was clawing up his throat.

He held his head between his knees and squeezed his eyes shut.

*It’s going to be fine. You’re going to get him out of there. You couldn’t have done it alone. You couldn’t. Calm down. Calm the fuck down.*

All he could hear was the sound of his own rasping breath, too loud, too shallow, too much -

*Get it together, Kogane.*

He pressed his hands on either side of his head, gasping. His eyes were wet, and there was a loud buzzing in his ears. He couldn’t think. He wanted Shiro to tell him what to do, to tell him what to do if they were too late -

*Stop it.*

Keith let out a gasping sob. He tried to muffle the sound by burying his face in the crook of his own arm, but he knew they could hear him. They could hear everything.

He folded his wings desperately closer, notching it in front of his face to shield himself. It was hard to breathe.
That evening, Keith was taken out of his room again but this time it wasn’t quite as far - just a large tiled washroom. When he entered, though he skidded to a halt at the sight of both Natalya and Axca, and a few other avians. Both Axca and Natalya were on reclined chairs, wings flung out. The others were holding brushes, and the air smelt of something chemical. The guards were snickering quietly to his either side.

It took a moment for all the pieces to click together.

Keith tried to back peddle out of the room - only to be pushed bodily back.

“Uh - “ he said, looking around.

“Don’t panic,” said Axca, “It’s just dye.”

Natalya’s murderous scowl turned into an unsettling smile when she saw Keith.

“Oh good,” she said, “Someone else is suffering.”

“I don’t need dye,” said Keith flatly, turning to storm out of the bathroom. He found himself seated by an avian lady a full head shorter than him and brandishing a broad metal brush.

“Stay,” she said, glaring at him from less than an inch away.

Keith stayed.

“Standard procedure,” said Axca, as Keith was poked and prodded until he spread his wings.

“Don’t worry, it’s not permanent.”

The air felt cold against his warm inner feathers, and he winced as his right wing was pulled out even further, spreading the pinions.

“Should be permanent,” said the lady, applying the dye to a thin piece of foil and then slapping that onto Keith’s wing with little ceremony. Keith twitched, but the woman’s grip on his metacarpus was like a clamp.

“Stop squirming, or you’ll be patchy,” she said. “If it was permanent we wouldn’t have to do this every time.”

“But why - “ said Keith.

“Camouflage, obviously,” said Natalya, sulkily, “though what’s the point? I’ve killed plenty of people without my wings being three shades darker. It’s going to start staining my roots. Ugh.”

“Oh,” said Keith, looking between the owl and the peregrine, “But we’re not that brightly coloured - “

“Like I said,” said Axca, “Standard protocol.”

“But what about the eagles?” said Keith, wrinkling his nose. The dye smelt very strong. He hoped he wasn’t going to smell like this forever.

“Who knows,” said Natalya, “You’ll see how ugly everyone is tomorrow.”

“Right…” said Keith, feeling like he had stepped into someone else’s. He was brought back to earth by a hard pull on his wing, which he had been unconsciously attempting to winch in. His colorist was not happy.
“Boy, if you do not stop squirming,” she said, “I will pour this over your head.”

Keith gulped.

At noon, they gave him his food on the usual steel tray, and Keith felt a new wave of panic: had they decided to leave him behind, after all? But as the sun began to set, the guards opened the hatch in the door and tossed a bundle of something soft inside. New clothes and a holster, but no weapons.

Keith dressed quickly in the bathroom, splashing water on his face and avoiding the gaze of his reflection. He ruffled out his wings, stretching them with slow rolls of his shoulders. It had been a while since he flew, and they were twitchy. He prayed he didn’t get any cramping. He prayed they would be fast enough. His thoughts were a litany of please, please, please and it was hard to keep his wings still.

Please let him still be alive. Please let him still be alive. Please let it not be too late. Please -

Keith paced the length of the small room, eyeing the window and the locked door in turns. He found himself flinching hard towards the door whenever someone’s voice filtered in; or the sound of footsteps. But they passed.

What felt like an age later, there was a pair of long-fall boots waiting for him, and a pair of gloves - both military issue.

There was also Arthur, holding a gun and a set of blades in the doorway.

“Well,” he said, one arm behind his back, the other dangling the weapons out like bait. He was dressed in ops uniform too, slate grey with a high collar.

Keith hesitated, before taking them wordlessly and strapping the knives in: two on his thigh, one at his ankle, and another standard issue that wrapped around his forearm. He activated the mechanism with a flick of his wrist and jerk of the thumb. The blade slid, whisper fast, across the palm of his gloves and past his fingers.

Satisfied, Keith slid the knife back onto his wrist, before taking the gun.

Arthur had flight goggles around his neck, and gloves that went all the way to his elbows. Even at a first glance, Keith could see he was armed to the teeth.

“Worried I’ll run?” asked Keith dryly, holstering the gun. It weighed almost as much as his heart, a solid unyielding thing against his ribs.

“No,” said Arthur, voice mild, “not yet.”

“I might still stab you in your sleep,” said Keith, smiling with his teeth.

Arthur’s eyebrows twitched, ever so slightly.

“No you won’t,” he said, turning his back as if to make the point, “You’re a liability, not a threat. Now come.”

Once more, they flew at night, above the clouds and beneath the moon.
It wasn’t until that first morning, after a long and exhausting battle against the wind that Keith finally got to talk to Shiro in private. Though perhaps ‘private’ was stretching the definition a little. Both Axca and Arthur were close by, and Stephen, Barton and Natalya were not far either.

The group had split, hunkering down a few miles away from each other. They were seeking refuge on the steep slopes of a ravine where they would be alerted to anyone approaching from above or below. It wasn’t the fastest route to the capital, but it was their best bet to approach without being ambushed or spotted days in advance. Keith knew that they would have to do the last stretch of flight above flat ground, and that was going to be a tough race against the dawn. But for now the strategy was to stick close to the ravine and the rivers and hope that between the mist and the cloud cover, they would be mostly safe.

Shiro and Keith laid out their sleeping things head to head - there wasn’t enough room on the flat ledge to fit them side by side. Asides from food, a day’s worth of water and weaponry, the bedding was all they carried. The ground was cold and damp, even when Keith tried his best to cocoon himself in his own wings.

His back and chest hurt like an ice-burn, strained from the lack of breaks.

“Hey,” said Shiro, as astute as ever, “Cramps?”

“I’m fine,” said Keith, shortly. He glanced at the rest of the group, who were also getting ready to sleep. Axca was taking first watch though, and all of them were within earshot.

Shiro followed the line of his gaze and sighed.

“It’s not going to help if you collapse from muscle cramps tomorrow,” he said, “Come on, scoot over, I’ll help.”

Keith rubbed his face hard. Then wordlessly, he turned to extend one wing out. He felt Shiro move closer, and then there was a pair of warm hands on the back of his wing, massaging the shoulder-blade and bunched muscles around it. Keith curled up over his folded knees, burying his face in the crook of his arm as Shiro worked the worst of the knots from Keith’s left wing.

“Thanks,” said Keith, turning his face so his cheek rested on his arm. “I’ll do you too.”

“Okay,” said Shiro, easily.

Neither of them spoke for a little while.

The sun rose steadily, and the wind smelt of winter. Keith could hear the sound of water rushing against stone, somewhere. Far below them, a few spotted deer picked their way through long grass and sharp stone.

“It’s going to be okay,” said Shiro, “We’re going to get there.”

“Not soon enough,” said Keith, clenching and unclenching his hand, “We should be flying out of formation. Then we could fly during the day and cover more sky - we’re wasting time right now. Time that Lance doesn’t have.”

Shiro let out a huff of breath. It was warm against the back of Keith’s neck, and he stretched his wing out further, so he could smooth down a few crooked pinions.

“Keith we … I don’t think that’s an option,” said Shiro, “notice how closely they shadow you? And Barton hasn’t let me fall behind him the whole day. Not a lot of trust there.”
“I don’t trust them either,” said Keith, not bothering to keep his voice down.

Shiro poked him hard under the wing-blade, and Keith jerked, ticklish.

“Oi,” he said, trying to turn - but failing as Shiro held him still by the curve of his right wing. Keith shuffled his wings, but obediently held it out to be worked over. It felt good; and having Shiro there was much better than being locked in a room by himself. Even if it meant sleeping on hard stone and dirt.

Shiro sighed.

“It would be too risky flying in broad daylight anyway,” he said.

Keith made an non committal noise.

“I flew during the day,” he said, “When I was looking for you. High enough and it's fine.”

Shiro’s hands stilled in his feathers for a moment, before resuming their repetitive motions.

“Just promise me you won’t do anything rash.”

Keith snorted, wing twitching. Shiro pulled his long flight feathers over Keith’s face, half to make him splutter, half to hug him. Keith just sneezed, getting soft down in his face.

“What do you mean, rash,” he said, voice muffled by the mass of feathers pressed on his face, “Shiro, cut it out!”

“Like breaking formation and getting shot in the back,” said Shiro.

“If they are going to shoot me at on first offence, why would they even let me come,” said Keith, rubbing his eyes with the heel of his hand, “It doesn’t make any sense. Thought they’d leave me in that room forever.”

Shiro kept his wings notched above their heads, giving them a small semblance of privacy. Keith was grateful for it.

“They kicked me out of the talks,” Shiro confided, voice barely above a whisper, “But I heard things from Pidge and Allura before they left ahead of us. I think the naval blockades are starting to affect Avain trade and supplies. Otherwise I’m sure the Council would have been quite happy to let the mermaids starve Zarkon’s army to death.”

Keith stared at the blades on his boots.

“Right,” he said, slowly, “Doesn’t explain why we’re here though.”

Shiro looked pensive.

“I don’t know,” he said, clasping Keith’s free hand for a moment, squeezing. “Whatever the reasoning - just be careful, okay?”

Keith squeezed back, not trusting himself to tell the truth. Instead, he rested his forehead against Shiro’s shoulder, tucking his wings as tightly as they would lie against his back. He was too big to fit under Shiro’s wing-span, but the shadow was long enough to cover them both. Around them, the wind brushed against the lips of the gorge, like a lover leaving a warm bed. If he tried hard enough, the rush of air through the trees in the valley almost sounded like ocean waves.
In that viceral moment, Keith missed the sea at his back, the sand on his cheek, and Lance’s skin beneath his hand.

He wanted to ask whether Shiro believed Regris, that Lance was still alive. But Keith didn’t know if he could bear to hear the answer.

The sun rose a little higher in the sky, and Keith closed his eyes against the trickle of time between his fingers.

Despite Zarkon’s sporadic visits and Haggar’s increasingly nocturnal hours, Lotor still managed to return.

Each time he visited, he’d come fever eyed and pale as paper-pressed lavender. There were dark shadows underneath his eyes, and sometimes blood on his teeth.

Lotor looked at Lance like he was looking for the sun.

“Please,” he’d say.

They had stopped pretending it was about the food; or about keeping secrets. There had not been any more threats since their last conversation. Lance suspected that Lotor was running out of leverage, because Lance was clearly running out of time. At any rate, he could barely keep the food down.

When Lance sang, Lotor’s entire body would sink into a palpable sigh of relief, like the sails of a ship being let down after a hard storm. He took each utterance like a benediction, and Lance found himself filled with pity.

He thought, absently, that they were both prisoners in this: Lance by the tank and Lotor by some uncontrollable desperation.

“I think you cast some kind of thrall on me,” said Lotor, once, “The stories…they…”

“Magic isn’t real,” Lance said, gently.

“But the stories were right,” Lotor insisted.

Stories. Keith and Shiro had stories about the merfolk too, and they had been scared of him -scared of being eaten, or hunted for sport. But Keith had been curious too: of mermaid kisses and ocean blessings. He had looked so wondrously happy when Lance kissed him. Just in case.

In the end, it didn’t matter whether stories were true or not.

It mattered who believed.

Looking at Lotor now, Lance wondered if Keith would have eventually been like this...unable to sleep without the sound of mer song, abandoning all reason and good sense. He thought of Keith, eyes half lidded with the warmth of the sun; hours spent humming idly by the ocean. Keith, loose limbed and smiling, wings half buried in the sand. Keith, lying so close to the water without a trace fear. They had been like sky and the sea; and where their skin touched, the horizon.
Looking back now, Lance wasn’t sure it had been trust...love...or just some physical reaction to his singing. When he was alone, the thought drove Lance mad with guilt.

“Thank you,” Lotor would say, slumped against the cold railings. His voice would slur, as if coming out of a deep sleep. “Please, one more?”

“The guards will change shifts soon,” Lance might say.

“Then let them find me,” Lotor would reply.

Sometimes, other people would visit the laboratory during the night - Galra in recognisable commander uniforms, faces solemn but eyes wide in front of Lance’s tank. They were usually accompanied by Ulaz or Matt, and Lance wondered if they were resistance members. He didn’t dare ask Matt; whose bruises were still visible and ribs were still bandaged.

No, Lance would think, staring back at strange faces and stranger voices, it wasn’t worth it.

Once, Lance asked Lotor to bring him some honey.

The galra had looked genuinely perplexed.

“How - have you had it before?”

Lance shrugged, not wanting to divulge anything else. Eventually, Lotor had promised to bring him some honey. For a few days, Lance forgot about it - until Lotor turned up one night with a small glass jar. It was golden in the water-light, warm amber yellow.

For the first time since his capture, Lance felt his heart surge with something close to hope.

“You got it!” he said, rushing to the edge of his tank.

Lotor flushed, colour high in his cheeks.

“Of course,” he said, bending down smoothly to his knees, “I did promise.”

Lance held out his hand impatiently for the jar. And after a moment of clear hesitation, Lotor passed it over. Carefully, Lance untwisted the glass lid, and the sugary smell instantly made him think of Pidge and Hunk and the sun on the rocks. For a long minute, Lance just stared at the jar in his hands, nose flared and mouth open. He knew his own pupils were probably blown wide.

Heart beating fast, Lance dipped his pinky finger into the jar and brought it to his mouth.

It tasted exactly how he remembered.

Lance didn’t realise he was crying until Lotor shifted where he sat. Then he saw that his own hands were shaking, knuckles white on the jar.

“What’s wrong?” said Lotor.

Lance couldn’t speak for a very long time, sobs climbing the inside of his throat like fingernails on a raw wound. His vision was blurred with tears, and he held the jar very tightly. The tank seemed to magnify the sound of his grief, and Lance felt stripped bare in front of this galra, this prince. He
missed Hunk. He missed his sisters. He missed Pidge.

He felt very alone.

“Blue,” said Lotor, hand out as if to offer comfort.

Lance placed the jar in Lotor’s palm. It felt like he was giving up the last of something. Or perhaps just giving up.

“I think,” said Lance, voice hoarse and unsteady, “I made a mistake. It was something else, not honey.”

Lotor frowned.

“What was it? I’m sure I can find it here in the city.”

“I don’t think you can,” said Lance.

Other times, Lance would ask Lotor for cheap promises. It was reassuring, when he broke them. A reminder not to trust.

“How long?” he’d ask, resting his cheek on folded wrists. It hurt too much to sit out of the tank. “How long until you can get me out of here?”

“That’s not much longer,” replied Lotor, eyes big and earnest. He was very good at lying, Lance thought. They had killed three children already. “My generals need a little more time. Every piece must be in its place. Not long now, Blue.”

And Lance would blink, slow and tired.

“Okay,” he would say.

Because Lotor was right. There probably wasn’t much time left. Lance could feel it; he found himself drifting in and out of consciousness with alarming frequency. The muscle spasms in his tail had gotten a little better, but his movement was always painful and sluggish. He felt light headed, even in water, and it hurt to breathe too deeply through his throat.

That, and the fact that Haggar seemed more frustrated than ever. She had begun questioning him; Lance strapped to the operating table for hours at a time. She seemed tireless, her zeal relentless. It was frightening, because Lance didn’t know how long he could last like this.

“I know you’ve spoken before,” said Haggar, again and again, “I know you can understand. If you tell me what I need to know, then you can go home.”

Lance refused, every time.

When Haggar brought out a small, thin firelighter, Lance allowed himself to cry. He heaved with panicked breaths, jerking hard against the metal bands around his arms and head. The firelighter was a strange instrument, long and pointed with a blue-white flame. It made air around it waver, and when Haggar brought it close to Lance’s face, he almost hyperventilated from sheer terror.

He could feel Sendak’s claws around his neck, and Lance whined, high pitched and pleading at the back of his throat.
“How do you cultivate the crystals?” asked Haggar, letting the flame drift slowly down the line of Lance’s neck. It was so close it burned his bare skin, even without touching. It *hurt*.

Lance had pulled so hard at the restraints that the table creaked.

“What do you do with them? *Tell me* .”

Lance squeezed his eyes shut.

She lowered the flame to a patch of scales just beneath his jaw, and Lance shrieked. Something exploded in a shower of glass and crystal, and Haggar hit him hard across the temple, stunning Lance into silence. He could hear himself whimpering, sounds he couldn't control, scouring his throat like bile.

“What’s the use of being un-gagged, if you won’t speak?” said Haggar with a *tsk*. “You’re really trying my patience today.”

She made a sharp motion with her hand.

“Ulaz.”

A shift of shadows, a tall silhouette. A familiar pressure at the base of his jaw; then the gag was being pulled tight into his mouth and around his nose. Lance retched, throat dry and painful. He couldn't take his eyes off the flame, even though it was too bright, *too bright*, the rest of his vision tunneling and blurring.

“Haggar, we’d have to monitor for infection, this is not practical - “ Ulaz began.

Haggar waved him off.

“It will talk,” she said, “everyone talks, eventually.”

Lance didn’t talk.

But he did scream.

The plan had been to fly nights, and only over cloud cover.

It would have taken them almost a week - but thick blankets of condensation and morning fog meant they had made better progress than expected. They had stuck close to the mountain ranges, hugging the steep canyon gorges where the updraft was relatively steady. Every now and then they had to fly higher above the clouds to avoid the galra watch-towers. Once they were close to the capital, they would make the agreed signal to their land-bound counterparts, before making the raid on the palace itself. But right now there was miles and miles of farmland between them and their rendezvous, flat open plains dotted with small houses.

And that’s how the flock found themselves amidst a truly violent thunderstorm.

It was the second night after they began their cross country flight. The fortuitous cloud cover had
come back to bite them all in their collective asses.

They had begun flying earlier than usual, just before nightfall. The cloud cover had been so dark it hid them with ease, though at the cost of being frozen cold. Keith could barely feel his fingers or toes despite his thudding heart, and he was sure the blade of his boots had iced over. Even with his high collar and a naturally high core temperatures, every bit of exposed skin was numb.

Still, it was better to try out-race an incoming storm, rather than be trapped behind it without any advantageous geography. It would set them back a few days at least, with no guess as to how long it would take to pass. It would be dangerous without a safe vantage point to rest.

But in their haste, they were now trapped amidst the storm.

In the span of half an hour, the winds had gone from howling to downright violent. It buffeted Keith and his smaller companions in every direction with angry gusts and pushes so unpredictable that Keith could barely keep himself aloft, let alone in a straight line.

Even the eagles and steadier fliers were having trouble, unable to find a steady draft. Their bigger wing spans and heavier builds meant they weren’t constantly scrabbling for lift, but it was a close thing. They were barely keep formation, everyone struggling to stay together. The rain had intensified too, a horizontal hail that soaked their clothes in seconds and was steadily sinking into Keith’s feathers like frostbite. Every beat of his wings grew heavier and heavier, his shoulders numb with cold.

Every breath was a harsh, gasping inhale. Keith felt like his heart was going to burst with the exhaustion and strain, and for the first time since his flight over the sea, he was scared for himself. His flight goggles was blurred with rainwater, and he wiped it desperately, shoulder muscles screaming. He didn’t know how long he could last - but there was no vantage point to land on...nothing but flat grey farmland.

“Shiro?” Keith shouted, flapping as hard as he could, “Shiro!”

Someone made a sharp call signal: three whistling jabs that was swallowed almost immediately by the noise of the wind. Keith banked towards the noise on instinct, trying to follow the rest of the flock. Keith could barely make out the shape of Shiro’s wings amidst the blurring grey of everyone else’s silhouette.

Another call, with a distant answer.

He couldn’t see with the rain and the blurry glasses. With a curse of frustration, Keith pulled his flight goggles off ….and immediately flinched from a blast of freezing wind and water straight to the face. He threw up a hand to protect his eyes, squinting through the storm.

Then, all around them, a deep rumble of sound that seemed to roll through every inch of their bones. It lasted for several elongated moments, so deep it shook the very air he was breathing and stuttered the rhythm of Keith’s heart.

Thunder.

Shit. Every baby avian knew about storms - namely, if you were flying and it started thundering: land. Land, before you got fried. Or worse - burned and grounded. But there was nowhere to land, and Keith couldn’t see where Arthur or Mila or any of the others had gone. They were deep into Galra territory now, and Keith didn’t want to risk a landing in the middle of nowhere, by himself. Not when there was no chance of him taking flight again while the rain continued.
Around him was howling grey and invisible shatters of ice. The air was sharp with something that lined the edges of his lungs, ozone and water. Keith tried keeping his wings spread against the jerking buffets of wind, trying to stay steady, trying -

Then the air seemed to go still for a split second, before exploding in a burst of white, crackling with needle-sharp heat too close, too close:

*Lightning.*

Keith whistled again, another call for help. Someone whistled back, but Keith couldn't pinpoint which direction the sound was coming from.

“- eith? Keith!”

Someone was screaming his name, and Keith turned, because that was *Shiro’s voice* - only to be promptly flipped over twice by a strong gust of air. Keith went wingtip over wingtip, and yelled out, panicking in earnest. But muscle memory kicked in; snapping his wings in, weathering the drop and then snapping out again to reorient himself.

“Shiro?” Keith shouted, wings working double time to get himself back up.

There was a buzzing in his ears from the thunder and lightning; his vision still blurred by water and the light. He couldn’t see anyone else around, couldn't *hear them*. Another rumble, deep and throaty. Keith looked frantically through the streaking grey, blood as cold as his skin, eyes flickering everywhere he could, shouting himself hoarse. He put his hands to his mouth to make the distress signal, but the whistle-call was snatched up by the brust of another lightning strike, this time a little further away but just as bright. It illuminated the ground below them, grey and awash with water. The houses looked tiny, like blots of ink on an old, old page.

Then Shiro appeared to Keith’s left, a ghost in his black-white wings. Relief flooded Keith’s veins like a hot rush of alcohol, and he worked his wings desperately, trying to stay level. Shiro looked equally relieved. He was shouting something, and Keith could see his mouth moving, but couldn't anything above the raging storm around them. The other avian appeared to come to the same realisation, and brought his hands up for a few jerky signals.

*SHELTER. FOLLOW. FORTY-FIVE DOWN. TWO O’CLOCK.*

Keith held up his own hand in the affirmative.

They dove in unison.

It was a difficult descent. Normally in such adverse weather conditions, Keith favoured a sharp, fast dive...get it over with and deal with the ground when he arrived. But he didn’t want to lose sight of Shiro, who wouldn’t be able to keep up. And in any case, Keith wasn’t very confident that he would be able to get enough lift to stop himself from slamming face first into the ground; the wind was too unpredictable, and his wings felt like they were coated in lead.

As they dropped well below cloud cover, Keith saw the blurry shapes of the other avians. All of them were battling the wind. Keith squinted through the rain and realised they were converging on a large wooden structure, some kind of storage facility perhaps square and squat with a sloping roof that came up to a point that ran all the way along the length of the building. Another burst of lightning illuminated the structure - they were close now, and Keith gritted his teeth and held out his wings to slow his descent. The roof was high enough that if they needed to, they could theoretically fly off again if they encountered hostiles. Keith didn’t really want to try it.
Another flash of light, followed by a far too long pause before the crack of thunder. Keith barely shut his eyes on time, and even then his vision was white out with the echoes of his own veins. He blinked, rapidly, gasping for breath. He had lost height in that moment, steady, steady -

Distantly, Keith hoped that everyone was inside and too busy hiding from the deluge to notice a veritable flock of avians converging in one place.

**Closer.**

Beside him, Shiro lurched sideways, pulled off course by a relentless rush of wind. It caught him under one wing but not the other, and jerked Shiro to the left as if someone had shot him through the wing.

“Shiro!” yelled Keith, alarmed.

**Closer....**

“I’m fine!” Shiro shouted, his voice carrying through the rain now that they were out of clouds, “I’m fine - Keith, **Keith watch your step!**”

Keith braced himself, curving forwards and angling his boots to compensate for the slope of the roof. It wasn’t the first time he’d landed like this - it wasn’t even the worst or trickiest landing he’s had to make in training. But in his exhaustion and eagerness to get to shelter, Keith had forgotten about his iced-over long-fall boots.

And instead of stopping his slide down, the curved blades skidded, sparking on the metal... and slid straight through the tin roofing like butter.

Keith let out a cry of panic as he slid down the slope of the roof, his stomach lurching to his throat as he snapped out his wings to try slow down. When that didn’t work, he twisted from the waist, trying to get a hold onto something, anything, gloved hand scrabbling at the rain-slick tiles…

….only to be yanked to a stop by a vice-grip on his arm.

**Shiro.**

“Jesus!” said Shiro, who was holding onto the top of the roof with his left hand and Keith in his right. His chest was heaving, eyes wide with panic - but his hand was warm and steady. He had Keith by the forearm, and his thumb met his index finger.

“Iced over,” said Keith, teeth chattering, heart somewhere in his mouth. “Fuck. **Fuck.**”

Shiro hauled him back up, and Keith had to tuck his wings in as tight as he could to avoid being blown right off the roof. The building was taller than he originally thought - rising some two or three stories off the ground. There were no other structures nearby except a smudged grey shape that could be a little farm house in the next paddock over. It was hard to tell in the rain.

Two more thuds, then another. Then:

“**There’s a sky light!”**

Arthur was prising open a smooth latched panel in the room, waving at them to come over. Beside him, Natalya had drawn her gun. She activated the torch on her wrist, tucked her wings in, and promptly dropped into the darkness.
Shiro and Keith made their way over carefully on the slippery tiles, the blades on their boots forcing them to more or less crawl on their hands and knees. Keith hoped there was no one below them because (a) they would definitely hear all the feather-raising screeches that the blades were making against the roof tiles, and (b) they were probably going to be shot point-blank by Natalya.

Above them, another rumble of thunder.

Then a distinct whistle-signal from inside:

**All clear.**

“Thank the lord,” said Arthur, who tucked his own gun away and dropped himself into the skylight as well. One by one, the crew climbed into in for shelter, and it was almost Keith’s turn when there was another heavy thud and then a yelp of fright. Axca had finally landed…and made the same mistaken calculation as Keith had done. She flashed by them in a blur of feathers, boots scoring deep horrendous gouges in the roof tiles as she tried frantically to find her balance.

One of the eagles lunged to catch her, but half-slipped and had to grab onto the top of the roof to save himself as he lost his footing.

“Fuck!”

“Someone get - “

“Shit, Axca!”

She was going straight for the edge; and she was heavier than Keith, her wings a little longer and she wasn’t going to be able to make the air before she hit the ground -

Keith whipped out the longest knife in his belt, ignored Shiro’s shout of ‘Keith, NO!’ and jumped after the peregrine. He had less than a second before she went over the edge, and Keith made a mad slashing stab into the space between two tiles, felt his knife hit home just as he grabbed onto Axca’s shoulder holster. The leather burned against his palm as her weight pulled her in the other direction, but he clenched his fist as hard as he could, holding on. The sudden change of momentum was like coming unexpectedly out of a dive, and almost pulled Keith’s shoulder right out of his socket.

He cried out in pain, echoed by Axca’s voice. The screech of her boots came to a stop, barely an inch from the edge of the roof.

They stared at each other for a shocked moment, two falcons in a storm. Keith’s hair was plastered to his face, but he could see the peregrine’s wide, pale eyes. Her wings were dark with water, and they were almost mirror images of disbelief. Then Axca was pulling out her own blade and climbing bodily back onto the roof.

As soon as he was within arm’s reach, Shiro pulled Keith bodily towards him and practically stuffed him into the skylight. He had the decency to wait until they had found their footing - there was a two story drop to some kind of wooden platform - and waited until they pulled their boots free of the floor where the blades had lodged themselves, before rounding on Keith with a hysterical expression.

“What the hell was that!” said Shiro, shaking his shoulders. His hands felt warm, even through Keith’s jacket. The shaking was warming him up too, and Keith wouldn’t complain except he felt like his entire spine was loose. His wings were shaking. Everything was shaking.
“What the hell!” Shiro hissed again, face very close, “You could have - you’re not big enough to anchor anyone. You’re not big enough! Jesus, Keith, you - don’t do that again. I thought I was having a heart attack, don’t do that.”

Behind them, Axca and Barton dropped through the hatch, the latter closing it with a sharp _snap_ that cut off the worst of the howling wind. They could hear the rain belting against the walls and echoing off the thin metal roof, but suddenly everything was a lot calmer. They looked at each other, chests and wings heaving with adrenaline and exhaustion, all of them soaked.

Shiro was still patting Keith down as if looking for broken bones.

“She was going to go over the edge,” said Keith...except his words sort of got mangled between his tongue and his teeth. His lips were frozen, and everything was coming out a little slurred.

Shiro stripped off one glove and framed the side of Keith’s face, wincing.

“You’re like an icicle,” he said, very quietly, “I just…”

His eyes were still wide, and Keith realised he had scared him. Really scared him. He reached forwards for a hug, wings going lax, and Shiro pulled him in, clutching Keith and squeezing.

“Please don’t do that again,” he said, breath almost too hot against Keith’s scalp.

It wasn’t actually a particularly warm or comfortable hug. Both of them were soggy, and their clothing squelched wet and disgusting between them. Keith didn’t even want to think about his feathers right now, but they weighed heavy with water, half-washed wax and exhaustion. Still, neither of them let go for a long minute, taking what comfort they could.

Keith’s first instincts had been right: they had found themselves a storage house. It was a barn, dusty with hay and cobwebs. It had clearly been built to store more than it was housing; the whole second floor that ringed the sides of the walls were probably meant to store more hay or dried grains; up away from the damp. Given how it was late autumn, Keith wondered absently if this farm hadn’t had a good yield. Almost the entire second storey was empty, save for a few almost-empty barrels of grains.

They weren’t alone in the barn though. There were three cows in a little fenced off area, and a gentle tempered horse that had neighed in alarm when they dropped in, but was now quite content to sniff at Barton’s fingers. In the opposite side of the first floor were stacks of medium sized bales of hay, a couple of rusting barrels filled with late autumn fruit and several wooden boxes. The animals had water and food, freshly filled.

“We can’t stay for long,” Arthur had said, shaking out his wings, “Someone is going to check in the morning.”

“Well we can’t exactly go out there,” said Natalya. “We’ll get fried by lightning.”

“No one will be coming out to check this place if it keeps raining as hard as it is,” said Axca, who hadn’t said anything further to Keith but had given him a long considering look across the width of the barn, “We’ll take turns keeping watch and…”

“Climb out of the skylight if anyone comes? I’m sure that’s gonna go well,” said one of the eagles who had lain himself flat across an entire hay bale in the attempt to dry his wings. Keith felt distinctly resentful since there wasn’t quite enough hay bales to go around, and neither Shiro nor
him managed to snatch one.

“We could kill them before they got too close,” said Natalya, mimicking her sniper rifle with her fingers. She blew kisses from said fingers to Arthur when he rolled his eyes.

“It’ll draw far too much attention to ourselves,” said Arthur, who had been running his fingernails across the same flight feather for the past five minutes, “last resort.”

“They’ll know it’s avians if you keep moulting like that,” said Natalya, batting her eyelashes, Arthur gave her a poisonous look. It didn’t quite have the same effect when his hair was plastered to his head and curling at the edges. He just looked like a particularly sulky shadow.

“Anyway, the buildings are pretty far apart around here, it’ll probably be a day or two until anyone notices. We’ll be gone by then. “


“Galra are easy to hit,” Natalya continued, getting some of her cheer back, “So tall. And big. And generally stupid.”

“What the hell,” said one of the other avians, “they're fast!”

“I never said we had to snipe them off one by one,” said Natalya, widening her eyes, “Hello? Explosives.”

“Jesus.”

“Might not be galra,” said Keith. He was talking to Shiro, but his voice carried in the sudden lull, and everyone turned to him.

“Does it matter?” said Stephen, “A snitch is a snitch.”

“Could be human,” said Keith, folding his arms, “Could be someone sympathetic.”

Several people snorted, but Keith noticed Axca was not one of them. She was cleaning her gun with an impassive expression, though she twitched under the weight of his gaze. Keith looked away.

“We’ll deal with it when we deal with it,” said Arthur after a long while, “We can’t do shit all until we’ve recovered. We’ll rest and then wait out this storm.”

They laid out their wet belongings on the wooden support beams and the dry hay, and stripped down to their undergarments to dry. Everyone was exhausted and bedraggled, dignity set aside in favour of spreading out their wings as far as possible. Keith and Shiro had initially tried to scrape the water-repelling wax off, where it had half soaked into the softer under feathers, but eventually gave up.

“You’d think with all the money they get they would develop something a bit better,” said Shiro. He was basically pouting as Keith went over the worst of the clumped wax with the corner of his soaked shirt. “I have big wings. That’s a lot of surface area!”

“Oh my god Shiro, every time...” said Keith.

Shiro pouted, looking pathetic under his white forelock.
“You missed a bit,” he said, shifting one wing helpfully right into Keith’s face.

Keith spat out a mouthful of feathers and slapped Shiro promptly with the wet shirt.

Drying was a very slow process, and after some half hearted arguments, they covered up the small square windows and made a fire in the centre of the barn to cook and warm up with. They ate mostly in silence, too tired and battered from the storm to keep talking.

The animals didn’t like the fire to begin with - the cows moo’ed non stop and they had to physically restrain Natalya from shooting them (“Does no one here want a steak? It’s just standing there!” and Barton’s disembodied voice “I would like a steak.”). But they calmed eventually. They probably had a nice owner, thought Keith, or else they’d be more easily spooked or less relaxed. As it was, the most annoying thing about them was the smell.

Shiro and Keith sat as close to the fire as possible, turning and angling their wings every 10 minutes or so. When it came time to sleep, they pulled out armfuls of hay to use as meagre bedding, and made their way up the unsteady wooden stairs to the balcony.

Even in a confined space, most of them had gravitated naturally to the second floor.

“Everything hurts,” Keith said, groaning as he lay down gingerly on the hay. His muscles felt weak and liquid, but he knew he was going to be woken up by at least one seizing fit.

“It’s been a really hard few days,” said Shiro, “And the storm is just bad luck. Do you want me to massage?”

Keith shook his head.

“You need to sleep,” he said, shuffling over so Shiro could fit himself onto the hay. Their wings were still damp but the down feathers had dried out somewhat, and they were no longer shivering. Outside, the wind howled like wolves in the snow, a strange cadence of low moans and whistling. The rain thundered, onwards; louder now without the crackle of the fire. A thunder crack, and the horse snuffled, shifting uneasily in her stall.

Shiro ran his hand over Keith’s shoulder, checking it over for bruising. He’d done this three times already, but Keith let him. It felt nice, not to be alone.

“Thanks for saving me, before,” said Keith.

“You owe me one,” said Shiro, mustering up crooked smile. He propped his left wing so it lay across them both, an extra barrier against the storm.

Keith frowned.

“No I don’t, I fished you out of the sea.”

“Actually I think Lance fished me out of the sea,” said Shiro.

The levity drained out of the conversation as quickly as it had come. Keith closed his eyes. Shiro’s hand on his shoulder stilled; warm and dry and familiar.

“He’s going to be okay,” said Shiro, barely above a whisper. “We’re almost there.”

“Almost there,” Keith repeated.

The storm sounded like the sea, sobbing for something lost.
Keith had taken second shift, and so he was woken in the morning by Shiro shaking him urgently.

“Someone’s here,” he hissed, and Keith jerked upright, heart ratcheting up so fast it made him feel dizzy.

“What?” he said, grabbing his boots and pulling them on. He spluttered when Shiro tossed him his shirt, but pulled that on too, turning to let Shiro do the buckles and buttons. One part of his mind registered that the sound of rain had eased a little, although it was still coming down strong.

Weak light filtered through the skylights, grey and watered down. Morning.

“Do not engage,” Arthur was saying, a hushed whisper-shout. Barton and Natalya were both wedged up in the skylights; everyone else was manning a window.

“He’s close,” said Natalya, tense. “Appears to be alone.”

Keith and Shiro were crouched, back to the wall. But Keith knew it was a futile attempt: Galra had great eyesight in the dark. And there was no hiding an entire flock of full-grown avians.

“It makes no fucking difference,” Arthur hissed, “A dead body is a dead body. We talk first.”

“But -”

“We have no choice!”

And they didn’t. Because a split second later, there the door of the barn swung inwards, and a long shadow spilled into the room. It was followed by a galra.

He was tall, like most galra were, with broad shoulders and a head of pale purple fur topped with two cat-like ears. It was harder to tell beneath the fur, but there were lines on his face and Keith thought perhaps this galra was old; older than other galra’s he’s seen. There was a mild stoop to his spine and he had a crutch under one arm. In his other, he carried a bunch of yellow flowers, wrapped in paper and string.

For a single moment, everyone was utterly still; suspended in almost comedic shock.

They simply stared at each other. The galra was the picture of surprise; his yellow eyes wide and his mouth open. His pupils darted around the barn, taking in the avians that were perched all around him, the dull shine of gun barrels and knives. Everyone held their breaths.

The galra dropped his flowers, and the moment was shattered.

Axca fell to the ground behind him and despite their size difference, had the galra pinned to his knees before he could fully turn around.

Stephen kicked the crutches out of reach as Arthur dropped to the first floor as well. Neither Barton nor Natalya left their posts at the skylights, guns still drawn. Keith made to go closer, but Shiro held him back, wings held over Keith as if he could shield him from view. When Keith looked more carefully at Shiro’s face, it was blank.

“Shiro?” Keith whispered.

The grip on his arm only tightened, and he winced.
“Shiro, hey,” said Keith, putting one hand on Shiro’s chest, “it’s okay.”

“Clear. No weapons,” called Axca.

The galra wasn’t even struggling, Keith noticed. It would have made him uneasy, except there was something almost resigned in the galra’s expression. He held both his hands up with Axca nudged him, palms empty. His only had four fingers, and they were tipped with claws. Beside him, Shiro twitched.

“...Keith?” said Shiro, voice hoarse.

“Yeah,” said Keith, breathing out in a rush, “I’m here.”

The grip on his arm loosened, but Shiro didn’t let go.

“Don’t go down,” he said, tense, “Safer up here.”

“Okay,” said Keith, clutching the hilt of his knife, “okay.”

“If anyone else comes, go to the roof and fly,” said Shiro, still not taking his eyes from the Galra near the door. “Promise me, Keith.”

“It’s going to be - “

“Promise me!”

Alarmed at the tone of his voice, Keith just nodded.


The galra was still staring at them with big, wide eyes. He couldn’t seem to help himself, his gaze jumping from one avian to another. Chances are, he probably hadn’t seen an Avian up close for a long time.

Stephen cocked his gun.

“He asked you a question,” said the eagle.

“No,” said the Galra, voice dry with shock but not frail or weak. “Just me.”

“Because we’d have to shoot them, if you were lying,” said Arthur.

“Just me,” the Galra repeated. He made no motions to move, or stand up - even though his knee must be hurting. He was leaning heavily on one hand, while still keeping the other held up, palms open; defeated.

“You’re… you’re avians,” he blurted out, “I - you’re - “

“That’s right,” said Stephen, “Who are you gonna tell, grandpa?”

The galra looked from Stephen’s smirking face to Axca’s gun and Arthur’s dark wings. He seemed to slump, and Keith felt a flicker of pity. This galra didn’t seem like military. He was probably just some unlucky farmer on the outskirts of a small agricultural town. And now he was probably going to die.

“No one,” he said, “Not going to tell anyone.”
“Really,” said Arthur, raising a thin eyebrow, “I know for a fact that you lot get paid out for avian sightings. Even more if you hand them over to the State. What’s stopping us from tying loose ends?”

“Nothing,” said the galra. He was so calm, it was starting to unnerve everyone. His voice was steady, tired and resigned. “The nearest town is half a day away on horseback.”

“No one’s gonna notice a dead farmer,” finished Arthur.

The galra shrugged.

“People might ask questions, later. I’m meant to go in today to deliver some milk and things. But I guess that can’t be helped now.”

Arthur stared at him, brows furrowing.

“You’re very calm,” Axca observed, “What do you do?”

The galra flicked her a glance.

“I have a few fruit trees, a few cows, and land I can’t maintain. I’m a farmer, ma’am.”

“Never got drafted?”

Something twisted across the galra’s face, there and gone.

But he just said:

“Bad leg, ma’am.”

“What are the flower’s for, old man?” asked Stephen, making to kick the flowers with his boot.

The galra, who up until now had been the picture of cooperation, lunged forwards towards the bouquet - only to be stopped by the sharp click-click of several guns. Even Keith lurched, about to shove Shiro behind him. The galra froze, hands outstretched towards the flowers.

“Don’t - “ he said, faced screwed up.

But at Arthur’s nod, Stephen had already picked up the fallen bouquet. He sliced through the string and unwrapped the paper, rapidly rifling through the stems.

“Just flowers,” he said, looking surprised.

He made to drop them, but with reflexes that Keith hadn’t expected, the Galra snatched up the blooms before they could hit the floor. His hands were clenched around the paper, claws poking points in the now-wrinkled surface. Several small yellow petals fell to the barn floor, and he picked at them with aborted movements, fingers a little too big for the tiny petals. They stained the dusty floor like sunlight.

“They’re for my son,” he said, as if each word hurt coming out.

Arthur’s wings twitched outwards very slightly; *fight or flight*.

“I thought you said there was no one else around,” he demanded, “if - “

“He’s dead,” the galra interrupted. “He - I visit him every - To give him his favourite fl…”
He breathed in a shaking breath, and his entire frame shuddered with grief. His words seemed too painful to finish.

"I was going to give him fresh flowers. Noticed the roof was all torn up. Thought maybe the storm had gotten something broken. Came to check on the animals."

A long pause.

"I’m sorry for your loss," said Arthur, face unreadable. “But we need to know whether you’ll go running to the nearest sentry - “

The galra jerked, face contorting cracking paint on a canvas. His mouth worked, as if he wanted to say something. He had sharp teeth, Keith noticed, canines that jutted; carnivores. But in that moment, the galra looked nothing like the predator he was.

“I won’t,” he said, “But if you want to kill me and make certain, I can’t stop you.”

“You seem awfully keen to die today,” said Stephen, crossing his arms.

The galra glared at him with bright, wet eyes, face livid. Keith felt like he was witnessing something too raw to be held, but he couldn’t look away.

The galra pointed at a window with one unsteady hand.

“My boy was only nineteen," he said, voice cracking on the second word, “He was nineteen and he’d been with the troops for three years, first to sign up, first to go, never a toe out of line, never took extra time off, went to the navy when he was told to; he was loyal, he gave his heart - “

The man took a shuddering inhale.

“They didn’t even give me a body to bury,” said the galra, voice rising with emotion, “They shot him f-for having some basic decency and they burned his - they told me he had died at sea but they burned - ! ...they didn’t even give me a body to bury! My only child!”

He was shouting now, clutching the flowers to his chest. He didn’t move to attack anyone; only curled forwards on his knees, as if in prayer. But his eyes were bereaved; bright and wet and hollow. His voice was scraped raw, sobs rising in his throat.

“They killed my baby boy, then they lied to me, they lied to me! They burned his body like you heathens and I had to...I had to...his friend came back to town with an envelope of ashes...and y-you think I’m going to run to the nearest Sentry to collect money? How dare you! HE WAS MY ONLY CHILD.”

The galra choked out a sob, pressed his free hand to his face. His ears were flat on his head, and his shoulders shook with the force of his grief.

It lasted only a moment, but it was painful to watch. Keith felt sick.

When he spoke again, it was like everything had drained into the ground.

“The emperor can go to hell,” he said, dully. “I don’t care what you lot are doing. If you clean up you can stay here until the rain passes. If you are going to kill me, I ask you do it quickly.”

There was a long, long moment of silence. It was tinged with disbelief, but no one said anything. Even Arthur looked a little disarmed, lips pressed thin. Stephen had stepped back completely, eyes
and gun lowered. Axca hadn’t moved from her spot by the door. The others were all quiet, like the statues before the war.

“You would be missed in town, if we were to kill you,” said Arthur finally, “You’re expected, you said.”

The galra gave him a flat look.

“Yes.”

Arthur considered him. Then, to Keith’s utter amazement, he walked three paces over and picked up the fallen crutch. Then he held it out to the galra, who stared at Arthur as if he had gone mad.

“Well?” said Arthur.

The galra took the crutch, and slowly straightened to his feet. He was still holding his flowers. The paper was crumpled by his grip, and a few yellow petals had fallen to the dirt, but he still cradled them against his shirt.

“We’ll be gone by the time anyone returns,” said Arthur, “But if we discover you’ve told anyone about what you've seen today, the consequences will not be...confined. You might wish to enter your grave early, but I’m sure your neighbours do not.”

The galra didn’t answer. He looked at them with his tired yellow eyes, and his gaze lingered on Keith’s face. He shook his head a little, and looked impossibly sad.

“So young,” he said.

Then he looked back at Arthur.

“Well,” he said, with the false cheer of someone who had merely been discussing the weather, “Is that all?”

Arthur blinked at him, lost for words.

“Then I better get going. You children take care now. Good day.”

The galra turned slowly towards the doors, each movement stiff and slowed by a pronounced limp. He leaned heavily on his crutch, and his mare snorted in greeting, pawing the ground in confusion at her owner’s departure. Axca opened the door for him, wings tucked respectfully back. The rain had washed the world grey.

And then he was gone.

By the time the rain had lightened enough for them to leave, it was almost dusk.

From the roof of the barn, Keith noticed what he had missed in the storm earlier: there, not far from the edge of the paddock, stood a two rows of fruit trees. And beside that, two headstones set almost into the gentle slope of a hill. He could see a spot of yellow at the base of one, and faded lilac at the base of the other.

He wondered who else the galra had had to bury.
They left, taking jumping leaps from the roof. They had a rendezvous to make; and a lot of land to cover.

And it wasn’t until later that Keith noticed that two of their number had stayed behind.

Lance began losing his voice.

He could still speak; but when he sang, he couldn’t hit most of the notes. It was like his voice had dwindled, shrinking until it was something small and thin at the base of his throat, instead of a comforting weight within his lungs and an anchor beneath his heart. His voice would peter out unexpectedly, cracking or thinning to nothing when he reached for it - and when this first happened, he thought it must have been the fire-lighter and the screaming from the day before.

But it never recovered.

And then talking started to hurt too.

“I’m sorry,” he said, barely a minute into Lotor’s visit. The words came out like a whisper, dry and worn; barely there. “I’m sorry. I don’t think I can sing today.”

Lotor’s eyes were creased at the edges, wide and a little manic. Lance watched him apprehensively for retribution, eyes lingering on the tense line of the galra’s jaw, the clench of his teeth and the twitch of his hands.

“I understand,” Lotor after a very long moment. His fists were clenched at the edge of the tank, shoulders tense. “What do you need? Is there some kind of medicine I can bring? There must be something.”

Lance shrugged, dunking his head back in the water in an attempt to soothe his own throat and mouth. It didn’t help much.

“I need to go home,” he said, “The sea. Need the sea.”

Lotor made a frustrated noise, hand in his long silver hair.

“I know, I know,” he said, “but you must hold on. I’ll get you out here soon. There’s been a set back ...but any day now. You have to be strong.”

Lance wasn’t really listening. He picked at the fish in the tray, forcing himself to eat a pale grey slice of it. He coughed, shaking his head.

“I mean it,” said Lotor, reaching for Lance’s hand, “things have been set into motion. I promise you.”

Lance drew back in the water, unwilling to play along. He was tired, and he felt sick all the time, and he was not in the mood for games anymore. Lotor sighed, but sat back on the metal floor.

“Perhaps there’s someone you can meet,” he said, “Someone working with us. Someone you can trust.”

Lance blinked, tilting his head.

“One of the Resistance?” he asked, a small flare of hope rekindling behind his ribs. He snuffed it out before it could start to burn. “No, don’t tell me. Safer. I don’t want her to know.”
There was something strange on Lotor’s face, a dip between his brows as if he couldn’t quite puzzle Lance out - even after all their hours together. Lance let him stare, closing his own eyes and resting his forehead against the lip of the glass.

“Very well,” said Lotor, “I’ll see you soon, Blue.”

Lance watches three more people die in front of his tank before Lotor finally returns.

When Lotor did return, he brought someone with him - a tall hooded figure, wearing Druid clothing that dragged across the stone floor. It sounded like whispering conversation through the curtain, and Lance heard it long before Lotor’s hand appeared at the edge of the long cloth. Lance peered at him through the glass, looking from Lotor’s familiar features to -

His companion dropped the hood, and Lance jerked hard against his restraints, a gasp escaping his mouth in a cascade of bubbles.

For a light headed moment, he thought he was hallucinating, because that was a mermaid, and how on earth did -! A mermaid. A mermaid! Lance knocked against the glass, desperate to get closer.

....She wasn’t a mermaid.

But she wasn’t galra either.

“This is Narti,” said Lotor, sounding very far away. Lance didn’t spare him a glance.

Lance pressed one hand as best he could against the glass, heart beating so fast he couldn’t even hear the water over the sound of his veins. His tail thumped, heavy and clumsy against the tank like a drum.

Narti raised a hand to match him, and there were scales on her knuckles, just like his; and small webbing between her fingers, just like his. He tried to make a questioning noise, tried to speak to her in mermish - but that part of his voice had truly gone, and all that came out was a whisper-click-cough.

Lance felt panicked, and he hit the glass again, scared if this figment of his imagination did not look at him… she might disappear at any moment. He tried to call to her, an aborted dolphin-like whistle, but that was barely there.

The water splashed with his movements, sloshing over the top.

Narti twitched towards the sound, ear very close to the glass. There were scales on her face too, grey-silver, and the very faint outlines of gills on her throat. It didn’t look anything like normal gills, but they were there, like pink parallel scars. Her eyes, Lance realised, were a little too big for her head, bigger than galra eyes. But they were white and still, even while she blinked with her outer lid. She made a clicking noise at the back of his throat, and Lance thought he was going to pass out from sheer confusion and excitement.

He tapped the glass with his nails, twisting against the binding on his wrists.

“Wait a moment,” said Lotor, “Just a moment - here.”
Impatiently, Lance waited for him and Narti to ascend the staircase and make their way around to the top of the tank. By the time they were there, he was vibrating, breathing loud in his own ears.

“How?” he said, barely audible, “How!”

They knelt at the edge of the water, and once his hands were free, Lance leant on the glass, so close he could feel Narti’s breath on his face.

“When I said I was an ally, I meant it,” said Lotor.

“How?” asked Lance again, eyes big and thoughts whirling in his mind. “How was this possible? How was this possible?”

Narti raised her hands to him, and Lance stayed very still as she touched his shoulders. Her fingers were warm, but not as warm as avains or galra. He coughed when she brushed up against his gills, and Narti froze for a very long time, the pad of her thumb on the edge of one fluttering thing.

“It’s okay,” said Lance, “it’s okay - who are you?”

She touched his face carefully, skirting around the sensitive nose area and barely touching his lips. She touched his hair, wet with the water, traced the shape of his ears and paused at each patch of scales on his face. Her thumb pressed against the divot in his jaw, where he would unhinge, and followed the curve of his bones. Lance flinched, hissing involuntarily when she touched the fragile raw edges of a burn, and Narti whipped her hand back so fast she knocked into Lotor.

“Easy,” said Lotor, hand at her elbow, “He’s hurt, that’s all.”

Narti made a few quick gestures, finger curled over a flat palm; hands flickering in signs. Amazingly, Lance could catch some of the words, but he couldn’t be sure if they were coincidences or misreadings. Lance could only stare at her, confused and hopeful all at once.

“Who are you?” he asked. “...are you like me? Were you like me?”

Narti was shaking her head, one hand pressed to her face.

It took a long moment before Lance realised that she was crying.

Slowly, careful as to splash as much as possible, he reached out and took her other wrist in his own. Their hands were still clasped, and Lance was too scared to let go. She leaned forwards so she
could open her palm and continue to sign.

“She said... everyone thought it might have been a mutation, some kind of illness,” said Lotor, “The blindness and such like. A freak. She never thought she would meet a merfolk.”

“You’re not a freak,” said Lance, in mermish. He coughed and stumbled over the sounds, throat raw and scraped, but he ran her hand over the matching scales on his own wrists, “You’re like me. You’re like me. See?”

Lance coughed again, wheezing painfully with each word. But he didn’t care, right now.

“How is this possible?”

“I don’t know,” Lotor translated, “I have been trying to find out all my life. Not even the druids knew. I was hoping a mer could tell me.”

Lance choked on a sob, and when she touched his cheek with one trembling hand, he leaned into it. Her eyes were flickering, white like the moon.

“Someone will know,” said Lance, desperate to comfort her, “Mum will know someone - I’ll…”

Except they were never going to be able to ask, because Lance was going to die in this tank. He was never going to see the sky; never going to hug his mother around the tail; never going to play chase with his sisters; never be hugged so tightly by Hunk Jesu Lance you stress me out, do you always have to be so sneaky?; he was never going to see Pidge finish her engine experiments; never hear Shiro laugh; never see Keith -

He was going to die in this tank.

Lance let out a sob; unable to contain the wild surge of desperation in his chest. He wanted to go home. He wanted to go home.

“We will get you out of here,” said the Prince, as earnest as can be. His face was like the blank page of a book, deceptively alluring. “Do you believe me now? I’ve always been on your side.”

Narti still had her hands on his face, reverent. Her eyes were unseeing, but they laid him bare. She had the same grey-silver scales on her nose as Corinna and Merida, broader than the ones on Lance’s own features. They spanned her skin like an armour of stars.

“Just keep our secrets for a bit longer,” said Lotor. “I swear I’ll get you out of here.”

And Lance did not know whether Lotor was driven to desperation by the loss of Lance’s singing, a genuine devotion to Narti, or something more sinister. But it did not matter in that moment.

Because for the first time, Lanced believed him.

Keith had never flown this close to the capital before.

It was a notorious no-fly zone. The palace itself sat on a gentle incline, and surrounding terrain had been gradually flattened by the expansion of the city until there was no natural high points for an ambush to take place. Over the past decades, every tall building in the city eventually installed
avian-ready firepower, or was within shooting range of a neighbouring structure. There was no safe landing spots, which made it impossible to attack from above when flying alone.

There were sentries everywhere, and rumours about galra long-range rifles.

So they had to approach directly from above - high, high above - in the dead of night.

The air was thin up here, even for avians. Keith could feel his heart working overtime in tandem with his wings, lungs stretched smooth to the edges of every rib. All his senses felt sharpened at this altitude, even though it was pitch black and overcast.

He squinted downwards, at the map of lights that was the galran city. Given the Galra had better night vision, they were at a disadvantage - but the avians were banking on the element of surprise. They had far superior long-sight than Galra, and for once, cloud cover was on their side. The moon was a faint imprint in the sea of grey, and the mist from the surrounding hills hung heavy around the shoulders of the city.

No one should see them coming until it was too late.

The plan was relatively simple. The avians had begun climbing altitude from miles away, so that when they were over the city itself, they would be far too high to be brought down by conventional weaponry. The height would also mask their size; crucial because they could not afford to raise any alarms before they were in position. The flock would split up, and wait. When everything was ready, their galra allies inside the palace would send the signal. Then the fastest divers would all take point simultaneously, with Axca and the others running decoys while Keith went for the drop site.

The familiarity of the orders was almost jarring, and Keith felt as if he had been transported back to the Garrison training lectures. The fastest divers always go first; and are always the ones at most risk. You cover them from above so they can do their job. They must disable the weaponry so that the other avians have time to attack. If the point fails, no one lands. You abort. You do not attempt retrieval.

If Keith had any doubts about why they brought him along, it was settled in the knowledge that he was utterly expendable.

Tilting his head, Keith stretched his wings completely flat, shoulders rolling with each movement of the wind so he could maintain his hover. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the distinctive black-white band of Shiro’s wings. They were too far to talk, but it was still reassuring to know that Shiro was nearby. Shiro, who would look at the tense line of Keith’s impatience and say fondly, patience yields focus, because Shiro loved sounding like an old hen.

The inaction felt strange now, especially with the Palace beneath their wings. They were so close, Lance was so close...to do nothing felt like a betrayal. But rationally Keith knew they had to wait. There was no way for them to blend in on the ground; and absolutely no way they could hope to get back into the air even if they managed to retrieve Lance personally. All he could do was wait and trust that Regris and the Resistance was going to come through.

“Do you think the Council actually trusts them?” Shiro had asked Axca two nights ago.

The peregrine glanced at Arthur, who was cleaning his guns near the fire.

“No,” she said, “But I think they believe we all have...overlapping priorities. For now, anyway.”

“Naval support,” Keith supplied.
Axca looked at him. They had still not spoken about what happened on the roof, and Keith wondered if she felt threatened by what happened. He wondered if any of them would have done the same, for him. The thought did not leave a pleasant aftertaste in his mouth.

“Exactly,” she had said, “the ocean’s allegiance will turn the tide in this war.”

It wasn’t clear how long they’d have to wait.

There were too many variables out of their control, but each of them were strong fliers. They were ready to wait it out; flying in a formation that minimise the stress of unexpected wind rushes for the smaller avians like Keith. They held steady; mere shadows in between the clouds; waiting. It could be hours, yet.

Which was why when the signal came, it caught them all unawares.

Keith jerked towards the flare of light, heart stopping.

Had it been a mistake? No, there it was again, a rapid blink-code of green light.

“It’s too soon,” he breathed, squinting in the darkness, then shouted “this can’t be right - it’s too soon!”

Someone appeared on his left, a dark shadow coming to a halt with one swoop of the wing. Arthur.

“That’s the signal, go!”

Keith went.

Flipping himself vertical, Keith snapped his wings shut, pulling them tight to his back along with his hands to his chest. He shot towards earth like a bullet, the sharp taper of his wing-tip crossed at his ankles so his entire body was like a tear-drop. Keith could feel the rush of air over his feathers, too fast to cut through his outer primaries. He was falling, faster and faster, cutting through the clouds; blood was loud his ears, and the exhilaration hot in his veins.

Steady...

Keith could feel the seconds in between the beat of his own heart, suspended and slow. It was the only way to gauge the distance and speed of a fall - it was far too difficult to go by sight. Even with flight goggles, Keith was going too fast to see anything accurately. It was down to muscle memory and his nerve, to not pull out early.

The palace loomed, like the shadow of a sky descending.

Steady...

Keith flipped, pulling his knees up and using the momentum to somersault over so that his feet - and his long fall boots - were in position for landing. In the same moment, he snapped out his wings just as he completed the full turn, and the crack of air catching underneath his wings was a whoomp that jerked him momentarily upwards, slowing his descent. He pulled out his gun, still falling.

The palace was very close now, and Keith squinted at the shape of the building, heart beating rabbit fast. He could see the silhouette of sentries on the towers on either side, but his drop zone was clear - just as promised.
There was a shout of alarm from his left, and Keith banked hard into the shadow of the nearest wall. He had to make the landing quickly, before they saw exactly where he had gone.

Keith spared a glance around and up, confused.

*Where was Arthur and Stephen? Had Keith misjudged the location?*

He looked back at the line of windows, and the shape of the terrace just beyond the corner of the inner courtyard. No, he was certain this was right. Keith hesitated, gasping for breath. He felt exposed and spooked, wings too loud in the still night air. There was no sign of Lance. They were probably waiting for him before coming out into the open.

*Where - ?*

Keith only had just enough time to register a silver flash in the corner of his eye before he was knocked off balance by a hot searing pain across the arch of his right wing.

He screamed, almost crashing into the wall as he tried desperately to regain height. The pain spasmed across his nerves like fire, making his wing snap uncontrollably.

"*Shit -!*"

Panicked, Keith gritted his teeth and beat down both wings as hard as he could, trying to fly through the pain - but he was imbalanced, one wing weaker than the other. He had flipped half over in the air with the momentum of the bullet, and now Keith was falling too fast to reorient. He twisted from the hip, beating his wings desperately as he heard the sharp *crack* of another bullet hitting the stone behind him.

Distantly, someone was screaming his name.

Keith hit the ground, miraculously on his feet, the blade of his boots screeching like nails on a chalkboard as he skidded hard across slippery flagstone, crashing into a low balustrade. His injured wing crumpled between his shoulder and the stone, and Keith let out another involuntary scream, vision going white as his feathers scraped across the edge of something sharp.

He could hear rapid footsteps, people yelling - and he shot blindly, whipping off his flight goggles with his other hand. Keith pushed himself upright, metal blades loud against the stone with each unsteady step. He had to get out of here - but where was Lance? His eyes darted desperately into the shadows of the nearest doorway.

"We got one - *we got one!*"

Keith snarled, baring his teeth at the three galra in front of him, firing another shot. There was a blur as the galra moved, faster than Keith expected, faster than he'd seen anyone move. Keith felt himself being backed into a corner as four other galra appeared on his other side.

*Trapped.*

"Someone get Commander Sendak!"

One galra made a grab for him, and Keith fired again, close range. His gun went off with a *bang* and a spark of fire, but to his shock, the Galra just kept coming. Keith whipped out a knife just in time to slice *up* across the Galra’s arm. The man jerked backwards with a shout, and Keith made a lunge for the edge of the battlement, *if he could just reach it* and -
There was another gunshot, but instead of a searing impact, something lashed around Keith’s legs and lower body, whicipord sharp. It bound one of his wings tight against his arm and chest, and Keith cried out as he crashed to the ground, chin bouncing off the stone with such force it left blood his mouth and a ringing in his ears.

He choked, mouth filled with copper.

Keith felt his gun spin out of his hand, but he still had his knife. The galra converged on him, and Keith kicked, lashing out with the blade in his hand and the blades on his flight boots. He felt his left foot hit something... and Keith jerked it upwards from the ankle. Someone screeched, and Keith felt a moment of vicious triumph before someone else stomped down hard on his free wing, pinning him effectively to the ground.

The galra’s grin was full of teeth, sharp like a wild cat.

“Stay still or I’ll give you a matching bullet in that one too, you filthy - “

The crack of a gun-shot. The galra fell back, eyes glazing over instantly in death as a huge shadow descended.

“Get off him!” shouted Shiro, silhouetted against the sky like some avenging angel.

Keith felt a lurch of hope, but it was quickly overcome by panic - even as Shiro promptly decapitated another Galra with a curve-thrown blade. The soldier went down, gurgling and clutching at his throat even as the others scrambled to face the new threat.

“The Champion!” someone screamed, “It’s the - “

“Just shoot him!”

“Champion?!”

There were more galra now - reinforcement had arrived. And the ones pinning Keith down did not let go. They used the momentary distraction to grab both of Keith’s wrists and twist them up and behind, cuffing them tight so that his free wing was pinned at the waist. Keith twisted, snarling with all his teeth, trying to stab his captors with the blade of his boots. His wings jerked fruitlessly against their bonds.

“Shiro!” screamed Keith, “Get out of here! What are you doing?”

He was far too close. Far too close.

Someone sank their claws into Keith’s injured wing, and it tore a sound from his throat, high pitched and pathetic. Shiro’s head whipped in his direction, eyes wide as he took in the sight of Keith, pinned underneath three Galra soldiers. They dug their fingers into his feathers near the gunshot sound and pulled.

Keith jerked like he had been electrocuted.

“Keith!” Shiro shouted, raising his gun, “Don’t fucking touch him, don’t you fucking touch him!”

“No...” said Keith, trying to see the sky, “Shiro, just leave!”

He could feel blood, warm on his chin. Another gun-shot, followed by screaming. Heavy footsteps,
and a resounding bang that Keith could not see. It made the stone shudder beneath his cold skin. *No, no, no this wasn’t happening. He wasn’t losing Shiro a second time.*

Another galra went flying to the ground, blood all over the side of his neck. More gunfire. Keith saw someone pull out strange, overweight shot-gun. He only had a split second of confusion before something came exploding out of the barrel, spinning like a spiderweb. Keith’s eyes went wide.

“Shiro, watch out!” he shouted.

Someone slapped Keith hard across the face to shut him up, and Keith lost sight for a few moments. But he still heard the awful sound of Shiro’s crying out, and then the heavy crash-thump amidst the galra’s shouts. The sound of wings slapping on stone, feathers dragging.

*No, no, no, no -*

The shriek of metal against metal, and someone went crashing into another, clutching their leg and screaming.

“Just shoot him, just *shoot him before he kills us all!*” another galra was yelling, “He’s the fucking Champion he’s gonna - “

Keith tilted his head, desperate, just in time to see Shiro take a bite out of someone’s exposed wrist as they reached to pull on his bindings. There was a spray of blood, and a shriek. Both Shiro’s wings were wrapped up in the metal net, but he was straining against it, chest heaving as he made another swipe with his boots, cutting the legs out from another galra. Everyone had their guns out, but no one was shooting.

“Keith,” said Shiro, trying to get to him, “Keith - !”

He looked absolutely feral, the whites of his eyes almost reflective in the darkness; stark in a sea of glowing yellows. Shiro had broken formation to save Keith. *Do not attempt retrieval.* It was Keith’s fault, and now they were both trapped.

Someone yanked Keith upright by his hair, claws digging into his scalp. Then there was the cold jab of a gun beneath his chin.

“Stop struggling, or I’ll shoot your friend here,” said the Galra at Keith’s back, “I said I’ll shoot!”

“No, no, no,” said Keith, twisting and pulling against the huge hand that was essentially holding his entire head, “No, fuck you, *fuck you*, Shiro, just go - !”

The galra holding the gun jabbed it harder against the soft underside of Keith’s jaw, choking his words behind his tongue. At this angle, all Keith could see was a sliver of sky and the reflection on the soldier’s armour. Someone was holding down his legs, and he could hear and feel the yank-pull of a knife as they cut the laces on his boots and dragged them off his feet.

Then, Shiro’s voice, resigned and hoarse.

“Alright,” he said, “I’ll come quietly, j-just let him go.”

Something wild and cold surged up inside Keith, and he struggled despite the gun.

*Please, not again.*

“No,” he choked out, “Shiro, *no - “*
There was a thump, and then the sound of Shiro grunting in pain. The galra holding Keith lessened the pressure of the gun somewhat, but held his head in place. Keith could see Shiro now, hands bound behind him and great wings pinned to his shoulders by the wire netting. They made quick work of his boots, and soon he was barefoot too.

“Let him go,” Shiro repeated, “I’m the one you want. Just let him go. He’s - “

Shiro broke off suddenly, eyes fixed on something behind Keith’s shoulder.

“I don’t think you’re in a position to be making demands,” came a deep, smooth voice, “Champion.”

Shiro went corpse pale as all the blood drained from his face.

Keith had never seen Shiro look so utterly terrified. He was frozen on his knees, eyes too big. Even with the dim light, Keith could see from the tremor of his wings that Shiro had started to shake. Keith felt hot anger burn through his throat: Shiro recognised the newcomer, there was no doubt he had hurt Shiro before for him to react so badly. Keith was going to to kill him.

With the galra still holding him by the hair and neck, Keith could not turn. But he felt the huge shadow of someone coming closer; footfalls heavy to match their height.

“Commander Sendak,” said one of the soldiers respectfully, “Apologies for the disturbance. But you were right - they did come. We wanted to alert you right away, sir.”

He and two others were holding onto Shiro, weapons drawn. Even with the avian tied up, none of the galra seemed at ease. But at the sight of their superior, they seemed bolstered. Keith couldn’t think above the rush of white noise in his ears. His skin felt hot and cold all at once.

They knew you were coming.

“Good call, officer,” said Sendak. “I must say...I’m impressed you managed to subdue the Champion.”

Sendak was huge, even for a galra: a full head taller than everyone present; more than head and shoulders taller than Shiro and twice as broad. He only had one yellow eye; and a strange mechanical arm. His teeth gleamed when he smiled. It was an awful, triumphant expression.

Where were the rest of the flock? thought Keith desperately.

“Thank you, Commander,” said the soldier. He gestured at Keith. “Seems attached to that one. Stopped fighting once we threatened him. Called him Keith, sir.”

Sendak’s singular eye turned to Keith, before swivelling back to Shiro.

“Is that right?” he said, as if savouring every word, “Well. I’m glad to see you did not drown, like we all thought you did.”

He hunkered down so he was leaning over Shiro, who was glaring at him, teeth clenched. But Keith did not miss Shiro’s full-bodied flinch backwards, when Sendak reached for his face.

Sendak didn’t miss it either. He laughed, and grabbed Shiro by the jaw, claws digging pin-points into skin. He leaned very close, so they were almost touching.

“I have the most curious story,” he said, voice silky, “It seems that a little fish lied to me about you
cavorting with mermaids. Would you happen to know anything about that?"

Keith lurched forwards.

“Get your hands off him!” he shouted, furious, “You - “

Keith’s captor yanked him back, swapping out the grip on Keith’s head for a fist around the throat.

“Be quiet and show some respect!” the galra spat.

Keith gasped as the hand squeezed, choking the air right from his mouth. With his own hands bound, Keith could only wheeze, vision going spotty with alarming speed. He tried to inhale, but all he could manage was a quiet shallow whine as the galra shook him roughly by the neck like a misbehaving kitten.

Keith’s vision narrowed, shifting out of focus like a telescope left in a quiet, ocean lake.

“Please,” he heard Shiro saying, begging, “I’ll do whatever you want, I’ll tell you everything, just - please let him go. He’s got nothing to do with this. Let him go...please stop. Please stop, you’re going to kill him!”

A few people laughed, and the galra holding Keith just lifted him a little higher, the edge of one sharp claw digging into soft flesh. Without his knees to hold his weight, Keith twisted weakly in his grasp, pulling at the cuffs around his wrists.

Had the sky always been so grey? It was hard to think.

“Useless once they’re on the ground, aren’t they?” someone said.

There was a hand on his wing, curious but not gentle. Keith couldn’t even pull away.

“Think they’re so much better than us,” said someone else.

Shiro sounded like his lungs were being shredded.

“You’re going to kill him,” he said, words tumbling into each other, “Please stop. Oh god, Keith, I - please, please stop. I’ll do anything - “

Sendak looked from Shiro to Keith. He made a sharp motion with his head, and the galra holding Keith let go of his neck.

Keith coughed as all the air rushed back into his lungs and he dropped to his knees painfully. He heaved in a long desperate breath, hiccuping on the next exhale.

Sendak’s gaze slid back to Shiro; to the way his eyes were fixed on Keith, red-rimmed and panicky. There was something focused and fire-hot in the way the commander was watching Shiro’s every reaction; eye gleaming. With his mechanical hand, he ran the claws through Shiro’s exposed soft under-feathers. Shiro looked like he was trying to hunch over and make himself as small as possible, but he couldn’t pull away in his bonds.

Sendak’s flesh hand was still wrapped around Shiro’s jaw and throat. It was huge; big enough to snap Shiro’s neck between thumb and forefinger. Instead, the galra pressed a claw to the edge of Shiro’s bottom lip. It came away red with blood.

Keith felt like he was going to be sick.
“Grew back nicely, didn’t they?” said Sendak, still stroking Shiro’s feathers. “Maybe I’ll even let you keep them this time. If you behave.”

Shiro squeezed his eyes shut. He was still shaking, his wings shuddering with each breath. He nodded, a rapid jerking movement, jaw clenched.

There was a long pause.

Sendak pulled away; and Shiro’s entire body seemed to collapse like his strings had been cut. Sendak hauled him up by the arm, and Shiro staggered, unsteady due to his cuffed ankles.

Sendak gestured at Keith.

“Bring him down to the holding cells,” he said.

Shiro’s face whipped around.

“No,” he cried, “I said I’d cooperate - “

“Do you take me for a fool, Champion?” said Sendak, “You’ve always worked best with some incentive. He’s your incentive. Give me any trouble and I’ll have his wings permanently clipped.”

Shiro looked terrified. He opened his mouth to reply, but whatever he said was lost as Sendak manhandled him bodily through a stone doorway.

Keith was pulled to his feet too, and they dragged him after their Commander.

“Try anything,” said one of the soldiers behind him, “and I’ll cut out your ankles.”

“Fuck you ,” said Keith.

The galra just laughed, and continued to pull him forwards. Their longer legs meant longer strides, and each step was larger than what Keith was used to. He couldn’t keep up, and they simply dragged him, barely bothering to keep him upright as they pushed him down the stairs.

Keith tried to keep track of his surroundings, but they were descending quickly. The stairs evened out into a long corridor, and Keith could see the bowed curve of Shiro’s back as he was almost carried along.

It was dark, inside - there were pale lilac torches lining the walls, but they were much higher up and glowed softly. Keith wondered if galra eyesight was such that they didn’t need much artificial light at all, but to him, the place was swathed in shadow. They descended another flight of stairs, and Keith was reminded forcibly of his time with the avian Council. He might have found the deja vu funny, if he wasn’t scared out of his mind.

How had everything gone wrong so quickly?

It was as if it had all been a trap from the start.

They turned the sixth corner, and suddenly the staircase widened outwards in a sweeping curve. Everything was made of glossy, dark stone. The walls ran straight up into a high vaulted ceiling, shot through with marbling of gold and white. Three identical staircases surrounded the room, the centre leading to a tall gothic double door. Smaller doors stood behind the foot of each staircase. There were armoured soldiers standing on every corner, their faces hidden behind dark grey visors. Every step they took echoed.
They were in an atrium of some kind, but instead of a glass ceiling, there was a huge chandelier dominating the space. It was made of small crystals orbiting a huge crystal in the centre. It glowed a deep, beautiful lavender, and bathed the entire room in purple light.

They were almost at the bottom of the stairs when there was a shout.

“Commander Sendak!” came a voice, strong and not at all deferential, “What is going on here?”

Sendak came to a stop, still holding Shiro fast in his hands. Sendak was so broad that for a moment, the new comer was hidden from view - but Keith’s sentries came to a stop behind Sendak and Keith could see that they had been met by trio of Galra: one two guards and one galra whose uniform mirrored Sendak’s own.

Another commander then.

“Thace,” said Sendak, voice curling with the edge of his lips. “What a surprise. I thought you had been called away.”

“You thought wrongly,” said Thace, curt. “There’s a Code A. Did you think I would not know about it?”

He was a fair bit shorter than Sendak, but they had the same ears, and a head of dark purple fur. Thace had a slimmer face, but he barely tilted his head to look Sendak in the eye.

“I merely thought you had other places to be,” said Sendak, menace underlying every cordial word, “you seem to be running errands quite often these days. I must have been misinformed.”

The gold on their lapels glinted in the soft light. Thace frowned at Shiro, eyes flickering over the assembled party. When his gaze landed on Keith, he seemed to freeze, eyes widening with shock and recognition. Thace made an small, aborted movement, as if he was going to reach towards Keith...but then he stilled, eyes still fixed on Keith’s face.

Keith stared back, confused.

Thace’s eyes slid reluctantly back to Sendak and Shiro.

“You appear to be misinformed about many things, Sendak,” said Thace, “You said the Champion was dead.”

Sendak bared his teeth at this, displeasure evident in every line of his stance. His claws dug into Shiro’s shoulder, and the avian flinched. Shiro kept turning, wings shifting in their bindings, trying to see Keith. But Sendak held him too tightly. His feet were barely touching the ground.

“Yes, an unfortunate...misunderstanding,” said Sendak.

“One I’m sure Haggar and his Majesty would be most interested in hearing,” said Thace.

“Indeed,” Sendak gritted through his teeth, “I was about to escort them to the holding cells. So if you’ll be so kind as to let us get on with it.”

Thace waved a hand.

“I’ll take it from here,” he said.

There was a stillness in the air; dangerous. Keith didn’t know what was going on, but he wondered, suddenly, if Thace was their plant.
The galra around him shifted, not so subtly reaching for their weapons.

“I don’t think so,” said Sendak. “I have experience with the Champion, I don’t think you could...handle one such as him. Dangerous, you know.”

“I’ve reports that there may be others coming,” said Thace, “You should ready the Guard.”

“The Champion is mine,” said Sendak, his composure slipping between the flash of his fangs. “How long do you want us to stand here in this goddamn hall - “

Sendak was cut off mid-sentence by a deep, echoing thunk as one of the doors swung open slowly outwards. The assembled galra all turned, ears swivelling. Footsteps. A heavily cloaked figure emerged from the doorway, his shadow falling long as an ink-spill across the dark marble floor.

“It’s true, then,” he said, in a voice as rough the cliffs.

“Your Majesty,” said Sendak and Thace, almost simultaneously.

The galra came towards them, slowly, each step a solid thump, thump, thump. There was a hunch to his shoulders, and he wore a full suit of armour and a half visor. There was a crown of crystal atop his head. He moved as if the world stood still.

Keith felt like his heart was going to escape the confines of his ribs.

“An act of war?” said Emperor Zarkon, coming to a stop in front of Sendak and Thace. He was flanked by his own retinue of guards, half a dozen of them, and two figures cloaked entirely in black. Their robes fell to the floor like water, hoods obscuring their face entirely. Like the other galra, Zarkon’s eyes were pupiless, and they lingered on Shiro.

“Back from the dead,” said Zarkon, almost musingly, “and yet you were so sure when you reported to me last, Commander Sendak.”

“My intelligence was ...mistaken,” said Sendak, bowing his head, “But my men recaptured him - and a companion.”

Emperor Zarkon tilted his head, movement languid and slow.

Keith could not believe he was in the presence of a man who had held a conflict so tightly in his fists that it had never had a chance to flicker out. This was him. This was the tyrant. This man was the reason Allura and Coran were the last of their nation. This was the reason his mother had never come home; the reason why Shiro had suffered for a long, awful year. The reason that Lance was gone.

Keith had never thought he’d ever meet Zarkon, and he was numb now. With his hands, wings and feet bound, he was useless.

He couldn’t feel his arms properly, due to the vice-like grip of his captors, and he could not think much more beyond the awful, sick waves of realisation that he had delivered Shiro back into the hands of his worst nightmare.

Zarkon seemed almost like a hallucination, a caricature.

“I have questions that can wait,” said the Emperor, “You are lucky your men captured them alive, Commanders. I have ...more pressing uses for avians.”
Thace’s expression was impassive, but Sendak looked displeased.

“Sire,” he said, “Surely the Champion would do well to return to the arena. It would make a good point to - “

Zarkon cut him off with a mere twitch of a hand.

“The Champion can serve the Empire in better ways,” he said.

The Emperor surveyed them for a long moment, eyes unblinking. Then he turned on his heels, almost carelessly.

“Bring them both to Haggar.”

Some ugly flashed across Sendak’s features, just as Thace’s eyes widened almost imperceptibly, ears going flat. But neither could compare to the quiet moan of horror that came from Shiro - Keith had never heard him like this, eyes blown and face chalk white. Shiro dug in his heels on the smooth stone floor, leaning back and struggling as Sendak made to follow Zarkon. His bare feet slid on the stone, barely any resistance at all.

“No, no, nonononono,” Shiro was saying, words slurred as if he was half dreaming, “please, no, not her, please - “

Sendak lifted the avian bodily off the floor and marched them after Zarkon, despite Shiro’s increasing distress.

“What’s going on?” said Keith, also trying to find his footing, “Who is - “

“Move!” Hissed the Galra holding Keith, and he was wrenched along, feet scrabbling for purchase as they followed Sendak and Zarkon through the heavy metal doors.

Thace strode alongside them, shoulders stiff and face impassive. His eyes flickered to Keith once or twice, but it was difficult to tell with Galra; Keith found the lack of pupils difficult to read.

Ahead of them, Shiro was still struggling, but his movements were sluggish, and Keith could hear the shallow frantic breathing. He was having a panic attack.

“Shiro!” he called, “Hey - hey you need to let him down, he can’t breathe - “

“If you don’t be quiet,” said one of the galra to Keith’s left, “I’ll finish what I started.”

Keith spat at him. It landed, and the galra let out a noise of disgust, before grabbing Keith by the throat.

“You little piece of - “

There was a crack of sound, and the galra let go, leaving Keith gasping. He thought he might never be able to swallow again; every inhale was like breathing in broken glass.

“I don’t think you want to be responsible for damaging him,” said Thace. He wasn’t looking at Keith, but he had an arm out, having struck the soldier across the head. “The Emperor has uses. Did you not hear?”

The soldier glowered.

“Yes, Commander.”
They marched onwards, down several more flights of stairs, working their way deeper into the bowels of the palace. Everywhere the walls were lined with lilac crystal light; sometimes clustered in a large hanging chandelier but never much brighter. They passed various galra, who stopped to bow at Zarkon and stare at the two avians. They whispered amongst themselves, and every now and then Keith would catch the word ‘Champion’. There was no way they were getting out of this. There was too many galra, and they were too far down. Even if they could overcome all the guards, they still wouldn’t be high enough to take flight. They were grounded.

Everyone became a blur of yellow eyes, brighter than the lamps, unblinking and silent. If Keith could break hold and cause enough commotion… could that buy Shiro enough time to get higher up?

He glanced at Thace; the Commander’s profile backlit by the purple lamplight.

There was something familiar about his features that Keith couldn’t quite place.

He winced as his injured wing was jostled, and realised they had finally come to a stop before a tall vaulted doorway. Shiro had stopped struggling, but he was staring up at the door with such a stricken expression that Keith felt his heart stutter, adrenaline sour on his tongue.

The guards opened the door for Zarkon, who strode forwards, followed by Sendak and Shiro. The room was huge, more than two storeys high and lined with glass cases and rows of metal tables. Metal staircases led up to a long second storey balcony that spanned the length of the room, with more tall glass shelves and capsules of liquid. Near the other end of the lab was some kind of huge, pillar structure, swathed in cloth. It glowed curiously blue from the opening on the second storey.

The two galra holding Keith upright made to follow - but was stopped by Thace.

“You don’t have clearance to enter,” he said, “I’ll take it from here.”

“We don’t take orders from you - “ one of the started, but the other jerked his elbow against his companion.

“Commander Sendak has other instructions,” said one Galra.

Thace raised an eyebrow.

“You don’t have clearance to enter the laboratories,” he repeated, “If you want to go ahead and interrupt your Emperor, I’m sure Commander Sendak would be glad to take your queries. After Haggar has...enlisted you for other duties, I’m sure.”

“I - “

They were cut off by a ringing shout. Shiro.

“Matt?!”

“Shiro - ?”

Zarkon’s voice was thundr amidst the crash of glass and clattering metal on metal. Something went flying to the floor, knocked by a sweeping wing-tip.

“Get him out of here. Everyone out!”

“No, no - Matt - oh god, you’re alive, oh god - “
“No, let go of me - !”

A woman’s voice, sharp as a whip crack.

“Be careful with that, you imbecile!”

Then two galra was shouldering past them, tall and hooded - not dressed in the standard soldier’s armour. And in between them was Matthew Holt, eyes frantic as he tried desperately to turn back to the room, to Shiro, wings snapping out in an effort to get free. He looked older than Keith remembered; face gaunt, sharp where it had been soft; a fading blue-yellow bruise high across his cheek.

“Shiro! Shiro - Ma’am listen to me, listen to me, it won’t doesn’t work on Avians, it won’t work on Avians - “

One of the galra grabbed Matthew by the arch of one wing and twisted back, making him cry out.

Shiro made a noise like he had been shot.

“No, Matt!”

“Don’t make me break this,” they said, pushing Matt through the door, “Didn’t enjoy it so much last time, did you?”

In the melee, Matt’s gaze found Keith, and they stared at each other in one, helpless suspended moment. Matt’s eyes went even wider, mouth open in surprise.

“Keith?”

And then he was being rushed past in a mess of feathers and dark robes, through the doorway and out of sight. Thace grabbed Keith by both arms, and used the distraction to wrench him from his guards. To Keith’s confusion, the galra made to pull them away from the doors, but Zarkon’s ringing voice stopped them.

“Bring him here, Commander Thace,” said the Emperor.

Keith pulled ineffectually at Thace’s arms. For a moment, the commander didn’t move, frozen next to the doorway. Then he pulled Keith with him towards the centre of the room, the doors finally swinging shut behind them with a resounding bang. Keith noticed that Sendak’s guards did not attempt to follow them in.

Shiro was kneeling by Sendak’s feet. The commander had one huge hand on Shiro’s head, palm covering his entire crown with the tips of his claws resting dangerously close to Shiro’s eyes. Beside them was Zarkon and…

Keith blinked hard.

“You’re Altean?” he said, staring at the centaur woman standing next to Zarkon. She had long pale hair that hung limp around her shoulders, and her eyes were fixed on Shiro. She spared Keith a glance.

“Be silent,” she said.

Keith ignored her.

“What are you doing, working for Zarkon?” he said, voice rising, “Did you betray - “
Thace clamped one hand over Keith’s mouth.

“Quiet,” he hissed, “Are you mad?”

“As I was saying, Sire,” said the centaur - who presumably was Haggar - “this is an unprecedented opportunity. We would be able to fine tune the weapons we are developing if we have live Avian test subjects. The Champion in particular - “

“He is worth more in the arena and in propaganda,” interrupted Sendak, “he won’t last long on your operating table, Witch, and it would be a waste to even - “

“I’m not sure you want to finish that sentence, Commander Sendak,” said Haggar, rear hoof striking the floor in irritation.

The noise echoed, and it made Keith realise that something else was making a deep, irregular thumping sound. He frowned, eyes darting all over the lab. None of the galra and present were moving; their yellow eyes watching intently.

Thump.

The sound was almost hollow, but too deep for it, as if someone was hitting the base of a huge, soft drum. It was erratic, and Keith couldn’t pin it down.

“Well it’s convenient that we have a spare,” Sendak was saying, gesturing at Keith with his spare hand, “Someone fresh for your experiments, Haggar.”

His words seemed to snap Shiro out of his panic attack.

“**No!**” he said, pulling at his restraints, “no, I’ll do it, I’ll do it - I’m “

Sendak dug in his claws, and Shiro fell quiet, shivering as two parallel drops of blood slid down the side of his face where the claws punctured skin. The colour was shocking, somehow, in the desaturated air.

“Do not damage him further,” said Zarkon, “I think there’s no one better than the Champion to take part in the Ritual, is there, Haggar?”

A moment of deafening silence.

Then there was a loud thump-thump-thump, and Keith flinched. It was coming from the two-storey pillar to their left, and now that they were closer, Keith could hear the unmistakable sound of water sloshing. His heart sank, cold and awful. He looked at Shiro and the realisation seemed to dawn on them both at the same time.

Could it be -

“Are you sure that is wise, sire?” said Sendak, “The Champion is valuable as an asset of - “

“The Champion has never lost a game,” said Zarkon, “His quintessence shall surely be more powerful than the other worthless souls we have used. Perhaps he will satisfy the exchange once and for all.”

“What Ritual - “ said Keith, but his voice was once again muffled by Thace’s hand. He tried to bite down, but his teeth did nothing to the thick glove. Thace shook him by the nape - it was an bizarre mix of gentle and panicked.
“Don’t,” he hissed.

The thumping behind them only increased. There was a loud splash as water sloshed over the top of the cylinder and slapped down hard on the flagstones.

“A most ancient rite,” said Zarkon, as if indulging Keith, “To transfer his life force to me. What better way to serve your Emperor?”

Keith felt cold all over. Everything suddenly slotted into place: Lance’s kidnapping; the talk of quintessence, of a ritual...of fairy tale stories and rhymes told in the rain. Keith could remember Lance, half giggling, smile very soft. They say if a mermaid kisses you... you’ll never drown at sea. You’re blessed. A ritual. Mermaid’s blood or mermaid tears. Lance, tilting his head in the sand, eyes crinkled with fondness.

_I don’t think magic is real, Keef. But...just in case._

Keith stared at Zarkon, half expecting someone to start laughing. But no one laughed.

Shiro was glaring up at the Galra towering over him, lips pulled back in a snarl.

“You’re not my Emper- ah!”

He broke off as Zarkon slapped him hard across the face. Keith flinched.

“Sire,” said Thace, “Avians do not live as long as Galra - or even humans. I can go fetch you a galra prisoner from the cells -“

“I do not want a galran sacrifice,” said Zarkon slowly, eyes burning, voice rising in volume, “I will have the Champion!”

He turned to Haggar.

“You would deny me?” he said.

The centaur did not move, her face as still as marble. It only seemed to enrage Zarkon further, and he flung back his coat, glaring at the galra present. He rounded on one of the cloaked figures standing to his left: a galra with a thin face and a pale stripe of fur down his forehead and nose. To the man’s credit, he did not flinch at all.

“Doctor,” said Zarkon, voice quiet and freezing cold, “It needs to be fresh.”

The galra looked to Haggar, as if seeking permission, and Zarkon’s face contorted.

“You obey me,” he roared, “Not her! You swore loyalty to me, and you will do as I command!”

“Fetch the tears, Ulaz,” said Haggar, “I’ll prepare the water.”

“Very well,” said the doctor, moving towards the closest staircase. He paused by a small glass case, picking out a few instruments. Shiro’s eyes were trained on him, like prey watching an approaching shadow. His face was slack with resignation and terror.

Keith felt like his lungs were going to burst.

“Shall I take this one down to the cells?” said Thace calmly, “There’s a possibility of a second raid, Sire, and it may be prudent to hold a hostage.”
Zarkon did not fully turn - he was watching Ulaz make his way across the metal balcony. His eyes flicked briefly over Keith and Thace, and he gestured with one hand.

“Fine,” he said.

“No!” said Keith, voice cracking - but his words were muffled by Thace’s glove. He dug in his heels, twisting from the hip even as Thace tried to haul him backwards.

They were both momentarily distracted by a huge splash, and Keith turned in time to see the top of the strange pillar lift, pulled upwards by a series of chains and links clinking towards where Ulaz was standing. It was attached to something; a thinner chain that came out of the water like the anchor of some invisible ship. And on the other end of that chain was -

Shiro made a wordless shout of horror.

Keith’s cry of “Lance!” was stifled by Thace’s hand, but he threw himself forwards, unthinking, desperate. The commander wrapped one arm across Keith’s chest and held him fast, cursing as Keith jabbed him hard in the groin with the point of his elbow.

“Stay still, you stupid boy!” Thace hissed.

But Keith couldn't look away.

Because there was Lance, being pulled out of the water by the wrists. He hung there, arms stretched above his head, skin almost grey under the crystal lamp light. Keith could count every rib on Lance’s chest; the bones of his wrists and elbows stark in the glow of the water-light.

It was like seeing a ghost.

Keith could feel the sudden weight of all that time - all that time spent waiting and waiting and waiting. It crushed the breath from him, his lungs going shallow behind Thace’s glove.

Lance’s eyes darted to Keith and Shiro, and there was such panic in his expression that Keith struggled harder against Thace’s grip.

Lance was pulled onto the balcony with a wet thump, his tail mostly still in the water. But Keith could see the tip of his waist where it met the edge of the tank, and there was no blue there - his scales had been bleached grey and pale. There were more thumps as Lance struggled, tail hitting the glass over, and over, and over. That was what had been making the noise, Keith realised, Lance must have recognised their voices, even though he couldn’t see them.

The doctor crouched over Lance, hiding his face from view.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” said Zarkon, walking up to the tank and pulling the curtain aside, “Have you seen one up close?”

Keith made an angry, furious noise and tried to bite Thace through the hand again. They were hurting Lance, they were hurting him and Keith couldn't do anything -

Lance’s body jerked weakly against the metal grating; and then Ulaz was straightening, pulling Lance up just enough to tip him back into the water. Lance was mouthing something, and he made to grab Ulaz by the ankles. But he was dislodged easily and the weight of whatever was tying him down drew him back into the water with a slither of chains and a huge splash. Lance fell back into the tank, and Keith could see where his tail was tethered now, a thick band around his tailfin.
Lance thrashed, and there was a deep thump as he slapped his tail against the glass. Then he threw his shoulder against it, mouth open in a snarl.

“Oh for god's sake,” said Haggar, “Lower the lid.”

Ulaz, who was holding something small and fragile in his hand, paused atop the stairs.

“The oxygen levels will - “

“It will survive for half an hour,” said Haggar, “But I will not be interrupted.”

Inclining his head, Ulaz pressed something on a control panel, and the cylinder - the lid of the tank, Keith realised - was lowered. The thumping grew more desperate, but there was a hiss and a thunk. The sound of splashing was suddenly sealed off.

Thace had almost gotten Keith to the door now. He could see Shiro, still kneeling on the floor; Ulaz returning back down the stairs to where Zarkn was waiting with eager, gleaming eyes. They were running out of time.

Keith went abruptly limp, letting all his wait collapse drag him sideways. Thace made a grunt of surprise, and his hand covering Keith’s mouth slipped as he tried to keep Keith upright. Keith promptly elbowed him in the face and threw himself forwards.

“Stop!” he shouted, staggering with his chained ankles, “Stop - take me! Take me instead - “

“Keith, no,” said Shiro, eyes wild, “No, don’t listen to him - “

“I’m younger,” Keith shouted, locking eyes with Zarkon, “I’m younger, I have more years to give - that’s what you want, right? It has to be willing. The ritual only works if it’s willing. I’ll do it.”

“Keith, shut up!” said Shiro; to Sendak and Zarkon, he said, “Don’t hurt him, I’m willing - “

“It has to be a life freely given,” said Keith, “It has to be a choice, you didn’t give him a choice - I’m making mine.”

“Keith, no ,” said Shiro, almost a moan, “Please, I - “

Thace wrenched Keith back by the shoulder.

“Apologies, sire,” he said, a little out of breath, “I’ll - “

Zarkon held up one hand.

“No, let him speak,” he said, coming closer to Keith. He was so tall that Keith had to crane his neck back, heart in his throat. “You know about the the Ritual of Life?”

Lance was frantic in the tank, throwing himself again and again at the glass. His eyes were huge, he was mouthing desperately at Keith: don’t do this, don’t do this, don’t ... and Keith felt like he might cry.

I’m sorry, I love you, I’m sorry but I can’t let Shiro die, I can’t lose him twice, I can’t -

“Not much,” said Keith, “But I know enough. I’ll drink if you let him live.”

“You need him as a hostage,” said Shiro, “You need - “
“I won’t be any leverage,” said Keith, as loud as he could, trying to drown out Shiro’s words. His mind was spinning, full of teeth and flashing yellow eyes, “They filled my gun with blanks. You can check if you don’t believe me. They gave me blanks. They set me up, but Shiro was never meant to be captured. They’ll negotiate for him. They won’t for me.”

“Bait for what, exactly?” said Sendak, eyes narrowed.

“I don’t know,” said Keith, honestly. His voice was threadbare and he didn’t know if his resolution could carry him much further. “I’ll do whatever you want, j-just don’t hurt Shiro.”

Zarkon considered him for a moment, eyes burning into Keith’s. There was almost a tilt to the edge of his mouth.

“You have spirit,” he said, “I admire that. Very well, I will honour your death wish. Give me the chalices.”

Wordlessly, Haggar passed them over. They were wide-brimmed glasses that glowed a solid, deep blue. They seemed like solid balmeran crystals, hollowed in precise, faceted cuts to hold water. They were beautiful, and illuminated Zarkon’s face like a skeleton.

“And the tear,” said Zarkon, holding out the glasses.

The doctor took them, and carefully set them out on the table. He tipped a thin, delicate bottle over the mouth of one glass, and then took another larger bottle from a locked case. He filled both glasses with the clear liquid, mouth moving rapidly over words that Keith could not read.

There was another deep, resounding thump from the tank, and the muffled sound of splashing. Keith forced himself not to look.

Ulaz passed one glass to Zarkon, and the other he held out to Thace, who moved to take it.

“No,” said Zarkon, “Let the boy do it. It must be willing.”

“Sire, he might attack if -”

“He will not,” said Zarkon, almost serene, “if he does, break Champion’s wing at the joint.”

Keith felt like he was going to throw up.

“No - no, don’t, I said I’ll do it.”

“There,” said Zarkon, “He’s given his word. Now, Commander Thace. My patience runs thin.”

His cuffs came free with a quiet click. Keith pulled his arms in front of him, massaging his wrists. He had managed to break skin, pulling against the metal edges and it stained his sleeve in a ring of rust.

“Keith,” said Shiro, voice torn up and eyes wet, “Please. Please, no - “

“I’m sorry,” said Keith.

He took the glass.

“Keith!”

“To your health,” said Zarkon. His eyes were fixed on where Keith’s hand curled over the crystal
“We must drink together.”

Keith nodded, numb. It was as if he was watching someone else move his hands; someone else in another life.

It was hard to breathe through the static in his ears. Distantly, Keith could hear Shiro, begging, pleading with him... oh Shiro. He didn’t dare look, because Keith knew he would not be strong enough to follow through if he did. He tried to take a deep breath, for strength. But it ached, a sharp pain in his ribs. He could hear Lance too, thumping desperately on the glass, Lance whom he had failed. Keith stared resolutely at Zarkon, and dared not look away. Keith could save one of them. He had to. Afterall, it was his fault.

They raised their glasses together. The crystal was cool on his lip, and heavy in his hands. The water smelt of nothing but sounded like rain.

Keith drank.

There was an awful wail, rising to a shrieking, piercing scream.

Everything in the room exploded in glass and crystal.

Lance screamed, and screamed, and screamed.

He felt the glass around him crack, and then a split second later the whole thing exploded outwards in giant jagged shards, the water collapsing like a thunderclap and rushing out in a wave that sent things flying into the walls. The sudden loss of water meant Lance dropped, yanking him painfully from the wrists. He gasped, the full weight of his body and tail pulling his ribs tight against his skin, cutting off his breaths. Lance swung with the momentum of the rushing water, tail hitting the jagged remainders of the glass. He could feel it slicing into him as he struggled, but the sensation was almost numbing compared to the roaring in his ears.

Lance hadn’t realised he still had a voice; it had dwindled down to a bare whisper over the past week and he had drifted with it, in and out of consciousness.

But the sight of Keith drinking from that glass -

Brave, beautiful, stupid Keith...

Something uncontrollable had torn through Lance, and he had screamed, the sound collapsing into a sob with the last of the shattered glass. He hung now, wrists still chained to the top of his broken tank, sobbing half silent tears. His entire chest hurt, but he couldn’t seem to stop his racing heart. He wailed in grief, in denial, voice coming out as a thin hiccuping whine and choking coughs. His vision was clouded with tears, but Lance could still make out blurry shapes.

Most of the galra were on the ground, some unconscious, others clutching their ears and making awful, twitching movements. Sendak, who had been standing closest to the tank when it exploded, lay slumped against an upturned desk, blood and water matting his fur. The two humans seemed fine, and had been injured more from the explosion than the sound. They were moving around
awkwardly, patting the air around them as if blind: every single crystal lamp in the lab had shattered.

Zarkon lay prone on the ground.

His helmet and crown had fallen during the explosion, and lay a few hands breadth away. His face was turned towards Lance, eyes half lidde. He was twitching, mouth slack, shoulders shaking as he convulsed on the ground. It was almost as if ...

Haggar was staggering to her feet, disoriented but by far the most coherent of everyone present. Her hair and fur was soaked, but her eyes were clear. They were not, however, as good as galran eyesight in the dark. So it took a moment before they fell on Zarkon. When they did, her entire face contorted in disbelief.

“*No!*” she screamed, making as if to move towards her Emperor. Her hooves slipped on the wet flagstone, and she fell hard, crashing into a heavy metal stand. “*No, no!*”

Lance stared for a frozen moment, uncomprehending.

And then he inhaled sharply, arched his neck, desperate to see, eyes scanning the room - heart stuttering with the last thread of hope -

And there was Keith lying amidst the broken glass. One of the galra commanders - Thace - was at his back, a onyx-black blade in his hand, making quick work of the netting around Keith’s wings and the cuffs on his ankles and wrists. Keith was groaning, but he was moving, Thace’s arm around his shoulder, *sitting up* - Keith was *alive*!

Lance thought his heart actually stopped as all the air in the room rushed towards his head. He choked on an aborted sob, relief heavy on his tongue.

He opened his mouth to call out to Keith - but his voice was truly gone now; all that issued came out was a faint wheeze of breath. Nevertheless, Keith’s head whipped towards him.

“Lance!” he shouted.

To his right, Ulaz - who had fresh scars from the exploding glass and crystals, was helping Shiro with his bindings, pulling them both to their feet. Ulaz...who always wore sound protection despite Lance’s sustained docility, was the steadiest on his feet.

“Keith?” Shiro was calling, squinting through the darkness, “Oh god, Keith? Answer me!”

“I’m fine!” Keith shouted back.

A sob of relief.

“*You have to go,*” Thace was saying to Keith, “*Listen to me, quickly, I can get you out of here - “

“*Not without Lance,*” Keith shouted, stumbling his way towards the tank. He had blood on his ears, and Lance realised that everyone was shouting because they had all been partially deafened by the scream.

“No,” mouthed Lance, shaking his head for good measure, “*Go - just go! Take Shiro and go!*”

But Keith wasn’t to be deterred. He crashed his way towards the tank, wings half out, face pale but eyes bright.
“Lance! Oh god, Lance, are you okay?” To Thace, he yelled, “how do we get him down?”

“There’s no time!” said Thace, grabbing for Keith’s shoulder, but Keith shook him off.

“I said I’m not leaving without him!”

Ulaz bounded pushed past them, reaching for Lance’s tail-fin and unlocking the cuff with three, practiced twists of the wrists. He made to rush up the stairs to undo the handcuffs, but Thace made a grunt of frustration and pulled out his gun.

“Close your eyes,” he said, and promptly shot through the chain attached above Lance’s head.

Lance shrieked, a silent noise of fear, as the tether snapped and he fell...only to be caught by Ulaz inches before Lance was impaled on the broken glass. Even so, the breath was knocked out of him, and Lance could only gasp as he was pulled out of the wreckage of the tank, tail fin tearing as it sliced clear across shards still standing in the tank base.

“Be careful!” hissed Keith, pushing Thace aside and reaching for Lance as if he could carry the merman by himself.

Lance let out a choked, hysterical laugh.

And then, after all this time...there he was; pulling Lance into his arms in an awkward, desperate embrace.

“I’m sorry,” Keith was saying, voice cracked as the glass at their feet, “I’m sorry we took so long...I was so scared you’d be - oh god, Lance, Lance - “

Lance clutched back, looping one arm around Keith’s neck so he could press his cheek against Keith’s, and oh god, it had been so long. Lance could not be sure this wasn’t some hallucination, but Keith’s skin was as warm as he remembered, his hair soft and fluffy beneath Lance’s cold fingers. He smelt of the sun and rain.

“Keith,” he said, but it came out only in the shape of his lips. Keith seemed to understand though, and let out a sharp exhale of laughter, equally hysterical, his eyes crinkling at the edges as they stared at each other in giddy disbelief, nose to nose, cheek to cheek.

You’re alive, Lance mouthed, pressing a hand to Keith’s face. He brushed back the damp hair plastered to his forehead; hair that was a bit longer than the last time they saw each other.


“We need to go,” said Thace, face pale and tense, “now.”

“He’s right” said Shiro, pulling at Keith’s shoulder, “I’ll carry Lance.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Shiro,” said Ulaz, “I’ll carry him. The drop point is still open. We’ve been made, but it’s our only chance to get you two out - “

“I’m sorry,” said Shiro, and he was squinting in the darkness, “Do I know you?”

“I’ll take them,” hissed Thace, “You’re needed here - “

“Don’t be fucking stupid,” said Ulaz, snarling with all his teeth, “She knows it was me - “

“We don’t have time,” said Shiro, and as if confirming his point, Haggar’s voice cut through the
“Doctor,” she called, “What did they offer you?”

“She can’t see,” hissed Thace, “we need to go now!”

“Are you conscious? Oh how allegiances change. I will have you pay for this.”

Ulaz cursed.

“Fine,” he said, shifting so he could press Lance’s shoulder against Shiro. “Shiro, you take him. I’ll go first and get rid of any obstacles for you. Keith, you’ll follow.”

“Put your arm around my neck,” said Shiro, inclining his head so Lance could hook his elbow over his neck. “That’s right. We’ll get you out of here. It’s going to be alright.”

*Shiro, mouth Lance as clearly as he could, *Please just leave me. Just go. Take Keith and go.*

Shiro just smiled, tense but genuine. He shifted his arms underneath Lance’s tail and behind his torso, holding him more firmly. Lance slapped him hard on the shoulder to try get his attention.

*Leave me!* He said, as loudly as he could. It merely wheezed, pathetic and incomprehensible between this teeth.

“Don’t talk,” Shiro whispered, tucking Lance beneath his chin, “just hold on, okay? We’re going to get you out.”

Distantly, there were loud, echoing bangs. Someone was trying to get in through the door.

“You can’t hide forever!” said Haggar, and they could hear her moving around, her hooves slipping and clicking on the stone. Her bulk was working against her now, as she couldn’t see the bodies on the floor. She swore, as something else went crashing to the ground.

“Somebody light the lamps!” she screeched.

Thace passed Keith a pistol and a long, arm-length blade.

“I’ll be right behind you,” he said, “Keep your wings tucked tight.”

Keith gave him a bewildered look, but took the weapons. Now was not the time for debating.

“Now!” hissed Ulaz, and they all ran for the doors.

Lance heard Haggar yell after them, her hooves scrabbling on the ground. But the Galra were faster, guiding the two Avians through the darkness and clear of the debris on the floor. Lance could only hang on, cheek pressed to Shiro’s shoulder, trying to make himself as small as possible.

Ulaz unlocked the door, and threw something out. A second later, there was a shout of alarm, and then smoke began to billow in from the crack between the door.

“Go!” shouted Thace, and then they were out, Shiro sprinting after Ulaz, who was clearing their path with the aid of surprise and two silver handguns.

Lance couldn't keep track - he could feel every step shuddering through Shiro’s frame, and he could feel the unsteadiness when they turned a corner. Shiro must still be feeling the effects of the scream, and it was affecting his balance - he was clearly trying to use his wings to compensate, but
he had to keep them tight to his back as they ran. All Lance could see was the blur of walls and the curve of Shiro’s feathers. Sometimes he caught a glimpse of Keith’s face, or a flash of a blade, but it was a disorienting blur of chaos.

Someone threw another smoke bomb, and Lance coughed, accidentally inhaling it as Shiro tore through a line of guards with Ulaz just in front.

“Fuck!” said Shiro, stumbling.

Lance yelped as he slid, the numbness in his tail meaning he couldn’t move - but Shiro quickly regained his grip.

“Shiro!” shouted Keith.

“It’s fine,” said Shiro, out of breath, “Just nicked my left. It’s fine.”

They tore their way up a flight of stairs, and then there was a shout.

“Hey - oi! This way!”

It was Matt.

“Matt?!” hissed Shiro.

“For the love of - “ Ulaz began, but Matt dragged them all through a nondescript doorway.

“Shut up and follow me,” said Matt, “Servants’ corridor.”

There was a crash of armour in the hallway behind them, and both galra and avian shared one, wide eyed stare. They needed no more prompting.

Their new route was a lot narrower than before, and Lance could see Shiro struggling with his wing-span. They scraped along the walls, and he had to climb the staircase almost sideways. His breath was coming hard and fast, laboured. Lance squeezed his eyes shut, listening to the sound of Shiro’s heart beat.

His tail was scraping each staircase, but Lance couldn’t really feel it - not even when someone stepped on a fin and it tore the length of the vein. There was no time. There was no time.

“Here, here,” said Matt, unlocking another door that stood precariously halfway up the staircase, “Go, go, go!”

They had to stoop to get through, with Ulaz and Thace bent almost double, but it opened up into a drafty corridor that seemed to run parallel to the parapets. They were inside the walls themselves, Lance realised with a jolt. He could smell the wind.

They climbed the steep staircase up, Shiro grunting every time they knocked into the rough stone. He kept Lance shielded with his arms or his wings, but Lance winced with him every time. He caught Keith’s eye briefly over Shiro’s shoulder, and Keith gave him a grin, there and gone.

If Lance had any breath left, he would be laughing.

Abruptly, they came to a stop - there was a shout of surprise up ahead, and Ulaz’s snarl.

“Wait!” called Shiro, “No, he’s with us!”
“Oh thank fuck,” came a stranger’s voice, “Oh and you have Holt. Where’s your father?”

“Don’t know,” snapped Matt, “who the fuck are you?”

“Is that Arthur?” came Keith’s voice, “Where the hell have you been?!”

“Airforce,” said the stranger, “And fending off bullets you - is that - “

“Yes,” said Shiro, “Can we go?!”

They went, scrambling up the stairs which had transitioned into slim, metal ladder-steps.. until it finally opened out onto a roof.

It was easy to see why there were no sentries here - the surface of the roof was so steep that one could barely stand upright. And since the door could only be opened from the inside, it was almost impossible to break in without the distance for leverage on the outside. The narrow strip of flat-rock that ran along the length of the roof was so thin that it would be difficult to land, even for the smallest of avians.

But it served as a perfectly fine jumping spot.

The wind howled, whipping their hair and faces as Shiro emerged through the trap door.

Lance squeezed his eyes shut, breathing coming short and shallow. Shiro had to pass him up first, with Matt and the strange avian pulling Lance up and out of the way before Shiro could come through, wings shuffling and twisted so they would fit. Once Shiro was out, he crouched on the sloped roof for a second to catch his breath, and then pulled Matt into a hug. Lance looked away, feeling like he was intruding on something intimate as Shiro ran a hand through Matt’s hair, eyes wet and bright.

“I thought - “

Matt was smiling, and there were tears running down his face.

Lance had never seen him smile like that.

“I know,” he was saying into the divot of Shiro’s mouth, “I know. God I thought you had died - Shiro. Takashi.”

Lance turned to the trap door, heart hammering with anxiety until Keith’s head emerged from the opening. He pulled himself out smoothly, slim wings posing less of an obstacle than Shiro’s broad ones, and he offered a hand to Thace, who was next. But Thace shook his head.

“I’m going to have to head back down and make sure no one gets up here before you’re gone,” said the Galra.

“What?” said Keith, voice whipped away on the wind.

“Come on,” said Shiro, hooking one arm beneath Lance’s shoulders, “Let’s get you into the carrier.”

Matt was on his other side, shuffling along so he could help with Lance’s tail. It was going to be tricky getting him to the other side of the roof, but Lance could see the silhouette of three more Avians, waiting for them. The raven - Arthur - stooped to help as well. But Lance craned his head worriedly, because Keith was still standing by the trap door.
Keith, he mouthed, Keith!

Shiro followed his gaze.

“Keith,” he called, “Come on, let’s go!”

“Coming!” said Keith, and he turned - only to be stopped by Thace’s hands on either side of his face.

“Keith,” said the Galra, voice cracking with something heavy and desperate. His eyes darted all over Keith’s face, as if he was searching for something, or perhaps merely committing it to memory. “Ptyenyetz, you’re turning twenty this Autumn, aren’t you?”

Keith looked bewildered, lips pale.

“What?” he said, “Yes, but how - “

“Keith, come on!” called Shiro again. They were inching their way along the edge of the parapet, and Lance could barely bring himself to look. It was a very long way down.

“I’ve gotta go,” he heard Keith say.

“Brother,” said Ulaz, crouching down next to the trap door, “there’s no time.”

Keith disappeared over Shiro’s shoulder as he shifted Lance more firmly against his shoulder, but not before Lance saw Thace press something into Keith’s inner breast pocket, and a kiss to his hair.

“I’ll hold them off,” he said, and then he was gone.

Keith look lost, his eyes blinking against the sound of the wind.

“May the wind be at your back,” said Ulaz, solemn, and then he was gone too.

It took them a good few minutes to carry Lance all the way to the edge of the roof, and by then they could hear the distant shouting and the flare of torch light.

The avians at the end of the parapet were vibrating with tension, though they stared at Lance with big, incredulous eyes.

“Holy hell,” one of them said, “It’s really true.”

“I’m going to lower you into here, okay?” said Shiro, voice low and soothing, “we use it to carry injured flock. It’s really safe.”

Lance gave the strange, flimsy looking stretcher one glance and shook his head, heart beating butterfly fast in his chest. It looked far too unwieldy to be airborne, and they needed to go, they need to go now.

Just GO, he tried to shout, frustration crawling up his skin, go!

But they were already lowering him into the thing, Shiro and Matt each grabbing either side of Lance’s shoulders. The other Avians looked hesitant, their eyes wary and fixed on Lance’s mouth. He snorted, and flash his teeth at them. One of the men flinched back, alarmed.

Shiro went to strap Lance’s hand into a fabric tie and Lance hissed, wrenching his arm away.
“Oh for - just knock him out if you have to!” said an Avian, “We’re going to get shot out of the sky real fucking soon if we don’t move!”

Panic roared in Lance’s ears, and he was shaking his head, clawing away from the straps -

Then suddenly Keith was there, Keith with his kind eyes and careful hands. He notched his wings so the other avians were momentarily lost from sight. They were grey. Why were they grey?

“Hey, hey,” said Keith, grabbing Lance’s wrists, “Lance. It’s just to keep you steady while we fly. To keep you safe. I’ll be right below you. Do you trust me?”

Lance stared at him.

He had dreamed of Keith often, trapped in his tank. Seeing him so close was like a sudden wash of a storm. Lance found himself nodding, even as his lungs screamed at him in panic.

*Keef,* he mouthed.

“Yeah,” said Keith, “I’ll be right here. Okay?”

Carefully, he helped Lance strap himself in, tucking in his tail into the stretcher as well. It was a little too long - the thing hadn’t been designed for a mer, but the straps were tight enough that Lance was not going to slip out. He hoped.

The avians either side of the stretcher were stepping into complicated looking harnesses, flight goggles already in place. They had long rifles tucked close to their backs, and several guns at their thigh and ankles.

Behind Keith, Shiro and Matt were standing closer to the edge of the parapet.

“What do you mean you’re not coming with us?” said Shiro, shouting to be heard above the wind.

Keith whipped around.

“Wait, what?”

“I can’t come,” said Matt, “I’m telling you Shiro, you have to go!”

But Shiro was shaking his head, face set and determined.

“No,” he said, “You’re coming. Wherever your father is, we’ll look for him, but you’re coming with us, now - “

“I can’t fucking fly, Shiro!” screamed Matt, face blotched with emotion and the tracks of his tears, “I can’t fucking fly and you only have enough wings to spare for one evacuation so just go!”

Lance felt cold all over.

How had they not planned for this? How had Matt never planned for this? *How?*

Shiro looked as if he had been slapped.

“No,” he muttered, “No, there must be a way - “

He looked at Keith, then at Arthur. When no one spoke, he scanned the faces around him with growing desperation.
“Do we not have a spare?” he shouted, “Jesus, why don’t we -”

“Even if we had a spare, we don’t have enough people,” said one of the avians, “We can’t carry two Grounded and fight off the artillery all at once! We will all get shot out of the sky!”

“Guys we have to go,” said another.

“Leave me,” Lance tried to say, pushing at the soft fabric of his carrier, but Matt beat him to it.

“You are not leaving him here,” he said, pointing at Lance, “He has to go. If Haggar gets her hands on him, it’s all over. He has to get out of here, now. Pidge will explain.”

“Hold on a minute - “ said Arthur.

Shiro grabbed Matt by the shoulders.

“I’m not leaving you behind a second time - “ he shouted.

“You can and you will!” screamed Matt, “This is bigger than the two of us. You have to go!”

“They clipped your wings,” said Arthur, “Didn’t they? Show me.”

Matt rounded on him.

“Yes they fucking clipped my wings,” he spat, “They did that the first night I got here. Shiro, just go, i’m begging you - “

“We can string something up,” said Keith, looking around, “I’ll take one side and Shiro can take the other. No one else has to be at risk - “

“Don’t be stupid, Kogane, you’re flying one winged already - “

In a bare flicker of movement, Arthur had his gun out, and Lance barely had time to try shout a warning before Shiro was tackling Matt to the roof, just as the gun went off with a bang. It clipped the stone behind them, which exploded in a sharp crack of debris.

“Fuck!” said Keith, going for his own gun, “You - “

Arthur shot again, heedless of Shiro’s snarling face and this time it went through Matt’s shoulder. Matt screamed, and Lance jerked in his bindings.

“Move, Shiro,” said Arthur, voice flat, “I apologise but I have orders to - “

Another shot, and Arthur jerked back.

A second shot went straight through the centre of his head

He dropped in a flurry of black feathers, and the shooter bounded across Lance’s vision in a flash of white-grey. She crouched over the dead avian for a brief second, hands moving flicker-fast and relieving him of all the contents of his pockets and holsters as her companions watched, frozen.

“Natalya,” said Keith, clearly shaken, “Why did…”

The woman straightened.

She had a head of white-silver hair, tied back tight into a braid. When she smiled, she looked a
“I have orders too, Kogane,” she said. She looked down at Matt, who was still crouched beneath Shiro’s wing, breathing hard and splattered with blood.

“Lucky for you, hmm,” she said, “keep your head down for now. We’ll be back for you. Probably.”

She strode back to Lance’s side, and her gaze lingered on him. She winked.

“Right boys,” said Natalya, “I spy with my little eye, quite a few ugly galra running across the rooftop there, so I’m taking point. Let’s go.”

And with that, she flung herself off the edge of the roof. With a snap of her wings, she flew upwards in a rush, and the two avians holding onto Lance’s stretcher also got ready. They had broad wings, like Shiro’s.

Lance reached out for Keith instinctively, whining high in his throat with fear. The wind whistled in response.

“I’ll be right underneath you,” said Keith, leaning over the stretcher and grabbing Lance’s hand. He squeezed, hard. “You’ll be okay. Trust me.”

Lance nodded, even though he very much wanted to scream instead. The avians were checking the buckles, and Keith was holding the end of the stretcher steady, wings half out. They were still that strange brown-grey colour, and Lance wheezed a question, confused. When had Keith gone grey?

It seemed, in that moment, the most pressing of questions.

Perhaps he was dreaming still, thought Lance, and it was simply a lapse of memory. He knew, in his heart, that Keith had red feathers; burnished in the sun and copper under rain. This Keith was grey, with a spot of red high on his right wing. Perhaps Lance was going blind, after all. He was forgetting what colours were like, when not lit under lilac crystals.

Perhaps he had simply forgotten, and this was not Keith at all.

“Lance, breathe,” said Keith, “You’ll be okay. I promise. I’ll be right here. I have to let go now though, alright?”

_No, Lance wanted to say, no, I don’t want to wake up yet._

But Lance nodded, because it made Keith smile. He let go of Keith’s hand.

The last thing he saw before the sky swallowed the whole was Keith’s face, watching after him, hair tousled by the wind. And behind him, the silhouette of Matthew Holt pushing Shiro bodily from the edge of the roof.

They flew, and Lance watched the hulking shadow of the palace drop away, smaller and smaller. He saw Shiro circling the top of the roof, once, twice. Saw the blur of bronze that was Matthew Holt, moving across the line of the horizon. There was the sound of gunfire, delicate as splintering of glass.

Then Matt disappeared from view, and Shiro circled one last time.

Soon, it was just the sky.
this is the longest chapter i've ever written x__x (33.5K+) aflkj I usually never post such long chapters because I feel like even impactful and important stuff near the beginning will be forgotten by the time you got to the end. But I know everyone wanted to see klance and I did promise the reunion this chapter so I felt really bad... and so it's a super super long one. ❤️❤️ If you have time to leave any feedback, it would mean so much to me, esp on this chapter.❤️❤️

I hope it wasn't too messy and it was enjoyable rather than ... well, a mess.

It's. Just so much happened in this chapter that i've been building up to for the entire fic (and the past year or more). I can't believe we are here. There's more plot twists / big moments to come but this was. A milestone moment. I know it got a bit busy at the end, but I hope things felt emotional and not anticlimactic?

God I can't believe it's this long. I'm crying. I've lost so much blood haha. Thank you for reading and keeping with this long story... (PS: 3 guesses for who the grandpa galra is...)

Extra hugs and thanks to soylante and asterein for holding my hand and letting me scream + thank you Karovie & pterodotyl for beta & catching typos. I could not have done this without you guys.

alksdjfja I have. So much shit I couldn't fit into this chapter. Feel free to come squee with me on twitter or tumblr too. If you wanna support me, you can find links on my toombles!!
Chapter Summary

Lance and Keith find a bit of fragile peace after a very long time. But even amongst allies, there is betrayal. And eventually both time and injuries catch up and collect their dues.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Groundless hope, like unconditional love, is the only kind worth having."
- J.P. Barlow

:i:

At some point, Lance passed out.

He wasn’t sure when it happened. All Lance could remember was the colour of the night sky, the swooping motion of the stretcher; the sound of the wind rushing so fast and loud, it howled and howled and howled.

Lance remembered...the dry thin exhilaration that clung to his throat and lungs, and the sick sensation of his stomach rushing towards his throat everytime the Avians dipped or changed direction. Everything was sharp, like a dream freshly made. It left him fighting for air, numb and -

The next thing Lance knew, there was a seizing pain beneath his ribs and he was gasping.

" - come on, don’t do this, come on, come on - Lance! ”

Someone was holding him down by the shoulders, and there was a weight on his chest, his lungs burned and Lance panicked, flailing against the pressure. He squeezed his eyes against the pain, and all Lance could see was the pale lilac glow, etched between the lines of his veins. His tail jerked against a thick soft leather band as he thrashed blindly, and Lance realised he was still strapped down...he couldn't move and Haggar was going to be back any minute if he didn’t move, why did it hurt to breathe?

“Hey, it’s okay, you’re okay, Lance - “

“ Shit, he got me with his fucking nails -”

“Untie those, he’s just panicking - Lance, it’s okay. It’s okay. You’re okay - fuck, a little help here?!”

The events of the past few hours came rushing back like a wave to shore, and Lance keened, high in his throat. That had just been a dream. Everything had been a dream after all, because he was waking up now. He had done this before. Lance was going to open his eyes and be back on the cold steel table.
“Is he having some kind of seizure - ?”

Then a familiar voice; hoarse and warm, hands cupping the nape of his neck.

“Lance. Lance, it’s me. It’s Keith. Just breathe. Breathe with me. Come on. Come on. Don’t do this to me, please, not like this, not like this - breathe!”

With great effort, Lance opened his eyes.

His vision was strange; too sharp in the centre and blurred at the edges. He coughed, choking on each shuddering breath. Keith’s face pulled into focus a little more, eyes wide and red rimmed, bruises turning black along his face and neck. There was drying blood all over his nose and chin, and Lance thought he could taste the copper and salt. Keith’s hair was a little longer too, matted with blood at his nape. His pupils were blown in the dim light, and Keith looked he was seconds away from hysterics.

He was still the most beautiful thing Lance had ever seen.

“...Keith?” said Lance.

It came out as a hissing croak, barely a word, but Keith’s entire face crumpled at the sound.

“Yes,” he said, pulling Lance into a fierce embrace, cheek to cheek, pressed so tightly together Lance could feel Keith’s entire body shaking. His wings were pulled tight over their heads, a temporary shelter. Keith was crying, quiet and silent against Lance’s cheek. His tears felt hot, almost scalding as they trickled down the slope of Lance’s neck.

“I thought you - you - “

“What happened?” said Lance - or tried to say. His voice was torn to shreds, and he coughed again. Keith finally pulled back a little so they could look at each other, disbelief hanging thick between them. Lance realised he was crying too, and he blinked away the film of it.

“You weren’t breathing,” said Keith, resting their foreheads together, “We hadn’t been flying long, but I...we noticed you weren’t breathing and we couldn’t get a safe landing right away and I thought you’d - I thought...”

Keith’s sob broke the last of his words, his features pinched as he tried to hold the sound back. His wings were shaking too, Lance could see the shiver in the feathers all around them. He flinched when Keith bumped their noses together.

Keith pulled back, wincing apologetically.

Lance raised his free hand, halting Keith’s retreat with a bare touch to the jaw.

“I’m okay.” Lance mouthed, smiling - his heart hurt so badly, he could not stop smiling. “You’re alive. Keith - “

“Keith,” came a stranger’s voice from the other side of Keith’s pinions, “We have to go.”

Keith visibly tensed, still clutching Lance to him. But he winched back his wings, and Lance saw a little gathering of unfamiliar faces around them and -

“Shiro,” he mouthed, reaching out to the avian, relief washing over him so suddenly it made Lance feel loose limbed, “Shiro, you’re here.”
Shiro caught his hand in his own broad one, skin warm and touch careful.

“Hey,” he said, smiling so that his eyes crinkled. There were bruises on his face and neck too, and Lance realised belatedly that Shiro was barefoot. “Hey, you got us panicked for a moment there.”

“He’s not dead, hooray; we didn’t get this far and then fail to deliver the goods,” said one of the other Avians, who facing outwards and holding two pistols - clearly on watch. Her wings were hooked, half unfolded and tense. Her companions looked equally uneasy to be on the ground.

“Can we fucking go now?”

“We’ll need to fly low,” said Shiro, “He can’t cope with the altitude - “

“Fly low and get shot out of the sky?” retorted the woman with the silver hair, “If even one of us goes down, we might not make it all the way back, not carrying the merman.”

“He’s going to suffocate,” said Keith, still clutching Lance, “I can take left with Axca, we’ll be able to dodge more easily - “

“Kogane, you’re one wooden arrow away from falling like a rock,” said another Avian, “You are not going to carry the weight.”

Lance frowned at his words, nostrils flaring for the scent of blood. His own tail was numb and half soaked in it, but it was easy to tell the difference between merfolk blood and avian blood, which ran hot and smelled vastly different - fresh or otherwise. Lance squinted at Keith’s wings, and saw a dark patch of damp, soaked feathers that he hadn’t noticed before. It was half hidden near the joint of his right wing, but the the blood was so dark it was almost black. Lance’s eyes widened, and he made to reach for the wing - and Keith drew it back abruptly.

“I’m fine,” he said, though the aborted wince of pain made his own words ring hollow.

Lance stared, heart thudding hard.

“You’re bleeding,” he mouthed angrily.

“We need to go,” said Axca, “The patrols definitely saw us land. There’s only a few miles of wood between us and the mercantile route. We need to split up and rendezvous later. Run a decoy to buy more time.”

“We need to take that,” said Natalya, gesturing at Lance with one pistol impatiently, “and fly straight back to the citadel - “

“You mean the ocean,” snarled Keith, “He needs water!”

“Do you propose us just drop him into the sea?” hissed Natalya, wings snapping out behind her with a foompf, “What about sharks? He looks like a corpse!”

Keith looked like he was about to scream with frustration, eyes almost bugging out of his head. Lance felt an inappropriate urge to start giggling. He laid a hand on Keith’s wrist instead, and the touch seemed to snap Keith’s attention back to Lance. He turned his hand so they could collapse their palms together.

“I don’t think we can get to any of those places in one streak,” said Shiro, “Not flying at low altitude.”
“Especially if it rains,” said another, squinting up at the sky, “or if the wind blows back.”

“Could we put it in the river?” said one of the other Avians, “Maybe then it could swim back to the ocean in safety that way. The Galra don’t do well in rapids.”

Lance knew what a river was, although he’d never seen one himself. He shook his head, and when that didn’t grab anyone’s attention, he tugged Keith’s hand.

“Tail hurts,” he tried to say, “Can’t swim.”

Keith frowned.

“What?”

“Tail,” Lance tried again, but his voice was a bare wheeze. He made a snarl of frustration and the other avians visibly flinched backwards at the sight of his teeth. Lance didn’t care. He slapped Keith’s hand on his own tail, trying to communicate without words.

“*Can’t. Swim. Properly.*”

“I don’t - “

“GET DOWN,” shouted Shiro, throwing himself over Keith and Lance, wings fanning out in an instinctive protective arch - just as something over their head exploded in a shower of dirt and debris. Multiple screams; their location distorted by the dense forest; sound of wood cracking; the soft *thwack* of something sharp hitting a soft surface.

“Sentries!” someone shouted, and there was gunfire coming from all directions, people yelling, a sharp whistle-call cut short. There was the clash of metal on metal, rapid *th-thud, th-thuds*; the sound of Keith drawing a blade. He and Shiro were standing back to back, wing to wing with Lance shielded between them.

All Lance could see was feathers, but the chaos and screaming was close. Too close.

Lance pulled desperately at his bindings.

“We need to get him out of here!” Keith shouted, voice cracking and barely audible above the dig. A sudden shadow fell across him, and Lance barely had the time to shout a soundless warning before Keith was parrying the blow with the hilt of his blade, hand flashing to the holster beneath his wing -- then, too close, a *bang.*

Lance felt useless, the air too solid in his lungs He could smell blood; blood and earth and galran words.

A spray of dirt as Shiro stumbled, wings still half spread to cover Lance.

“No time to - get the harness!”

Lance looked up at a shift in the pale morning light, and saw that some of the Avians had taken flight and were firing from above; their wings huge in the space of the tiny clearing. Even as he watched, one of them jerked in the air, one wing snapping out-in-out as they twisted, a half turn -

And then they were crashing to the ground half a body width away in a huge cloud of dust. Shiro and Keith had no option but to roll out of the impact, pulling Lance desperately across the forest floor.
“Fuck!” someone was screaming, “Pull up, pull up - “

They were too close, Lance realised - they had to be close to pick off the Galra sentries without hurting the rest of the avians still on the ground, but being that close, it was easier for the Galra to shoot them out of the air. And if Keith and Shiro didn’t leave soon, didn’t fly soon…

Lance saw a flash of wide, white teeth, a grinning mouth and yellow eyes of a galra in uniform. He leaped across the space in two strides, a gap in the fighting.

“Bingo - “ he crowed -

Then he was bodily slammed to the ground by Shiro.

Keith fell to his knees beside Lance.

“Come on,” he said, frantically undoing the safety straps, “No time, we’ve gotta just - here, put your arms around my neck.”

Lance shook his head, trying his best to gesture GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE NOW. But Keith was too preoccupied with undoing the tail straps. Frustrated, Lance grabbed him by the collar, and Keith jerked, staring at him with wide eyes.

Go, mouthed Lance, gesturing at the sky, JUST GO.

“No after everything,” said Keith, turning back to his task, fingers making quick work of the last band, head bent in concentration, not looking up. Lance tried shaking him by the collar, but Keith’s jaw tightened in determination. And even in this moment, his profile made Lance’s heart swell painfully against the thin paper of his lungs.

“I’m not leaving you,” said Keith, undoing the last buckle, “Just hang on to me.”

Lance panicked, ready to push Keith off the lip of the gorge if he had to - but he saw the flash of metal, another Galra who had come up behind Keith, sword out. Keith couldn’t see him because the curve of his wing was blocking them from view.

Shiro shouted a warning, his voice cracking with naked fear.

“No, Keith!”

Lance saw Keith turn, head snapping up - but his wings were in the way, and he was turning too slowly -

Perhaps it was the cold that slowed time; viscous like honey on glass. Lance felt cold down to his very bones, a mindless horror and fury that screamed no, no, and the echo of Keith’s voice saying, not after everything. Not like this. Not again.

Lance launched himself forwards, twisting at the hip from instinct. Even without the full strength of his tail, the momentum and muscle memory was enough - he barrelled into Keith’s shoulder, knocking him out of the way of the blade.

And before it could land, Lance had opened his jaw and clamped it down on the galra’s forearm. The hard leather armour tore under mermish teeth, and Lance snapped his head to the right, pulling the Galra sideways and letting their own weight do the work. It was like killing a fish; and it would have killed him had Lance been high enough to get his throat. As it was, Lance’s teeth tore through the arm, straight to the bone, and the Galra shrieked, knife falling to the dirt even as he scrambled
backwards for a second weapon. Lance pushed himself up again, ready to leap upwards.

There was a *bang* and the Galra fell back, abruptly still. Lance whipped his head around, expecting to see Keith with a gun - but it was another Galra that bounded into Lance’s field of view. He bent to one knee, quickly checking the body the dead sentry. Then straightened, legs unfolding until he stood taller than all those around him; nodding at someone Lance could not see.

Where did the galra come from?

There was blood everywhere, scalding hot.

Lance shuddered, and falling to his elbow in the dirt, shivering hard. *What was going on?*

“Holy...that was...,” someone said, “I think I’m going to throw up.”

“Lance!”

Keith’s hands on his shoulders, pulling him off the ground - then Shiro was there too, trying to get an arm underneath Lance’s tail.

“Come on, arms around me, arms around my neck...that’s it, it’s going to be okay,” Shiro was saying, “Keith don’t be stupid you’re not strong enough.”

“Got blood,” Lance tried to say, looking at his hands and wiping at his mouth, “blood - your clothes - .” It was sticky and too hot, it was all he could smell - blood and dirt and something coying like rot. He kept trying to catch Keith’s gaze, kept expecting ...Lance wasn’t sure what he was expecting, but perhaps a flicker of disgust or horror. But Keith just smiled at him, tight and stressed, but his eyes were warm and relieved.

Lance wanted to cry, but his entire body felt numb in the aftermath of adrenaline.

In the end, it was Keith who helped hook one of Lance’s elbows over Shiro’s neck, and then he was being hoisted unsteadily off the ground. Lance clung on, trying to time his breaths to the beat of Shiro’s heart; he could feel it against his own skin, fast but steady. At this height, Lance couldn’t see much more than legs, feet and the lower sweep of wings. There were a lot more people in the clearing than there had been just ten minutes ago, humans and *galra* and -

Lance just stared.

It was - it was *half* a person from the torso up, but with four legs and -

Lance looked to Shiro, then Keith, then back at …

“Your highness,” said the newcomer, inclining his head briefly. It took a long moment before Lance realised the strange being was talking to *him*.

The huge bow slung over one shoulder and several more weapons holstered at his hip. Lance had to arch back to look at his face, he stood so tall. His fur matched his hair, and Lance couldn’t quite get used to how all the legs moved independently but in a strange sort of sync. A conversation from a lifetime ago floated to the front of his mind, hazy like the memory of summer.

Lance blinked rapidly as the centaur approached. He smelt of the earth and forest, and something Lance had never scented before. It was making his head hurt.

“We are relieved you’re alive. We must get you out of here quickly.”
“The sentries will be on the lookout for anything in the sky,” said one of the Galra, who was almost as tall as the centaurs. There were three Galra there, standing in a little isolated group of their own beside the humans and centaurs. They did not wear the sentries’ uniforms, but the colouring was close; a dark mud-grey that blended in with their surroundings. The Avians were all casting them dark, suspicious looks, hands on weapons, hostility blunt.

Lance noticed that they all carried blades onyx dark, unlike everyone else’s pale steel. There was something familiar about the look of them that he couldn’t place.

“We’ll split up,” said one of the Avians, “not ideal as we’re one down, but it’ll throw them off.”

“The closest Avian city is at least a few hours flight from here,” said one of the humans, “You’re not going to make it with that mer - “

“And what would a human know about flying,” spat Natalya, half spreading her white-silver wings, “keep your mouth to the dirt where you belong.”

“Hey! We just saved your fucking feathers, so a little gratitude?”

Lance heard one of the Galra snort in agreement. Even in the first light of morning, their eyes glowed a soft yellow in the shadow of the trees. One flicked his gaze towards Lance, unblinking, ears twitching and alert. Then he looked away, before Lance could react.

“We don’t have time,” said Keith, “Anywhere is safer than here. We should just fly straight to the coast.”

“In broad daylight?” said Axca, “At low altitude? That’s suicide.”

“So is standing here!” said Keith, throwing up his hands, “Every minute is a minute that Lance doesn’t fucking have!”

“The best way is for the avians to fly off, create a diversion,” said one of the centaurs, “We take the merman back to base - there’s a lake there - “

“You’re high if you think we’re handing the target over,” said Natalya, “I think you want to play this in your favour.”

“And I think you don’t have a choice,” said the centaur, one leg - hoof? - pawing the dirt impatiently.

“There will be more sentries here soon,” said one of the Galra, voice low and deep, “Either way, we need to move.”

Lance panicked, flailing his free hand until he caught onto Keith’s wrist.

“What - “ said Keith.

“Don’t leave,” Lance tried to say, “Don’t leave me with them.”

His voice was an inaudible wisp, but Keith seemed to catch on. He turned to the centaurs.

“We’re coming with you,” he said, hand warm in Lance’s. “We’ve met Princess Allura - we’ve been to one of your bases - “

“We know,” said the centaur.
“That one has a bullet wound,” said a galra, “Won’t be able to fly anyway. Same with the peregrine.”

“I don’t like the idea of bringing another avian - we can’t trust - “

“Well that or we leave her here to get captured and then she’ll talk, won’t she?”

Lance yanked on Keith’s hand, but Keith was determinedly looking the other way.

“The rest of you, go.”

“I am not leaving Kogane with Mallory’s puppet - “ said Natalya, baring her teeth. One of the galra snarled right back, and his set of fangs were much longer and sharper.

Distantly, the sound of a shout.

“Pizda ryulyu!” said Natalya, sheathing her gun, “Fine - we will head back to the citadel as planned and rendezvous at the coast.”

She glared at them, eyes a little wild.

“If you even think reneging, we will burn the entire fucking forest down,” she cocked her head at the Galra present, “I’m sure someone here can vouch for avian ballistics.”

“Careful,” said one of the Galra, who had not sheathed his knife.

Natalya spat, mouth twisted; an ugly sneer on her pretty face. And she made an aborted movement with her hand, and the two other Avians followed her to the lip of the gorge. Without a further word, they stepped off backwards, weapons still drawn. They dropped, disappearing for a split second before rising back up on huge spread wings. They rose until Lance could no longer see their faces.

Keith squeezed his hand, thumb pressed to the pulse at Lance’s upturned wrist.

“Alright,” said one of the Centaur, turning back to Keith, Shiro and Axca, “I don’t suppose any of you pigeons know how to ride?”

By the time they arrived in the valley, it was well into the afternoon.

Keith’s wings were in screaming in agony, but he was so exhausted; the numbness acted as some sort of anaesthetic that made a harrowing journey a little blurred at the edges. His arms felt frozen, locked in place around Vinar’s waist.

The centaurs were picking their way through thick long grass and bushes now, footsteps inaudible above the sound of wind and insects.

“Careful with your arms,” said Vinar, “some people have reactions even to the berry juice.”

“Thanks,” said Keith, voice hoarse from hours of silence.

Ahead of him, he could see the long slope of Lance’s tail and one limp arm. One of the centaurs had carried him all this way.

Easier, they had said, I can’t have two of you on my back.
They had to travel undetected; at one point had to actually out-run galra sentries, and it was already difficult with such a large group. The galra that travelled with them had gone on foot, while the humans had quietly disappeared into the woods to cover any trails.

Like the other Avians, Keith had had very little experience riding horses.

Between the strange violent gait, the erratic and gravity shifts that could never be anticipated...not to mention the constant need to hold his wings in tight to his back...Keith wasn’t sure how they made it, except that his wings hurt. He was sure he had at least twenty bald patches, given how the trees would scrape painful across his wings everytime they made a sharp turn or pulled under low hanging branches without warning.

More than once, Keith had almost been unseated by an abrupt brake or a large branch. And judging by the wide-eyed, thin-lipped expressions on Axca and Shiro’s faces, his fellow avians had not fared much better.

Keith worked his jaw lose from where he had been unconsciously clenching his teeth, and he blinked as they shifted out of the dense foliage and into direct sunlight.

Their last visit to the base felt like years ago. Keith recognised the silhouette of the low buildings as they moved past them, the tall grass giving sudden way to paved ground. The centaur’s hooves clicked on the stone as Vinar drew level with the centaur who was holding Lance. She had a long braid knotted at the base of her neck, and her shoulders were heaving with the strain of their run.

“He needs water,” she said, shifting Lance so that his head lolled limp against her shoulder. He was out cold, mouth parted for air, gills flittering with every exhale. They were shallow and rapid, thin as the skin pulled tight across his ribs.

Keith’s own lungs clenched, painful with an ever-present hum of terror.

“Lake first, Sala?” said Vinar.

“I’ll come with you,” said Keith. At their hesitation, he added, “He’s going to panic when he wakes up. I need to be there.”

“Very well,” said Sala, and she turned without another word, hooves kicking up small stones as she picked up speed.

Keith made to slide off Vinar’s back - but had to snap out one wing when he slid too far, too quickly, grabbing at the belt and Vinar’s arm with a undignified yelp. The centaur sighed forcefully, and yanked Keith back onto his back.

“Oh for goodness sake,” he said, gruff but not unkind, and took off after Sala.

The base was not large, but big enough that the lake was not immediately in view. It was deceptively big, sprawling the dip of the valley and into the forest around it. The buildings were half hidden by trees which sheltered the brown roofs and stone walls. They veered off the main pathway, circling around until they were running next to hem of the forest. The grass here was thick with tall stemmed tri-petal flowers, pale pink amongst the green. Their pollen was a sticky white-yellow, and it clung to the centaur’s fur as they raced by.

The ground sloped gently beneath them, and soon the lake came into view.

It was set into the valley like a gemstone on a ring, and Keith could see how it might be easily missed, even from the air. The ground rose steep on either side of the lake bank, and trees clustered
like lashes all along the rim of the basin. Even this late in the day, mist hugged the lake’s surface,
clinging close towards the centre and in the shadows where it was cool and crisp. In the sunlight,
the water was a deep emerald green. As they approached and came to a stop, Keith could see the
sand and the darting shadows of fish - the water was so clear their shadows almost seemed not their
own. Further in, the lake seemed to drop in colour, the pale sand falling away to something deeper.
The air was quiet save for the hush of the trees and insects; the sound of the water lapping at the
pebbles.

“This is what he needs,” said Vinar.

Beside them, Sala was carefully lowering herself closer to the ground. She rested on one bended
knee at the water’s edge, the other hoof stretched out for balance as she carefully placed Lance in
the water. His tail sank through the water, the torn fin fluttering with the movement like the plant
fronds that dotted the base of the lake.

“Can I let go?” she said, glancing back at Keith. She was still holding Lance, supporting his head
above the water. “He’s still unconscious...is it safe to submerge him?”

Keith tried to slide down: he swung his leg over Vinar’s back, but misjudged the angle and
promptly slipped and landed on the ground, wing first in a crumpled heap. He had a split moment
of gratefulness that he didn’t land on his injured wing, the sand and gravel crunching beneath his
palms. He pushed himself up, but his legs were numb from the long journey and the blood clearly
hadn’t quite arrived at his knees yet because they folded beneath him, sending him face first into
the dirt once more.

Vinar tutted above him.

“Birds,” he muttered, before Keith felt two strong hands lift him bodily upright by the base of his
wings, “Weak little legs aren’t they?”

Keith spared him a glare, but stumbled towards Lance and Sala, careless of the water soaking his
shoes and the bottom of his wings. Lance looked so still that Keith had to press two fingers to the
pulse beneath his jaw, just to check.

“You can let go,” he said to Sala, reaching to support Lance by the neck and shoulders, “he’ll
breathe better underwater I think.”

“But he’s unconscious,” said Sala, still frowning. She let him go though, and watched as Keith
pulled Lance further into the water, walking slowly backwards until he was waist deep. Perhaps it
was the water, but Lance felt like he weighed nothing at all, tail limp and floating in the shallows.

Carefully, Keith tipped Lance’s head back, lowering his arms so that the merman sank fully into
the water. It barely rippled as it closed over his face. For a moment, nothing happened.

Then all six of Lance’s gills flicked open as he gasped in a breath through his mouth, eyes
snapping open as well with the inhale. He jack-knifed, almost hitting Keith in the chin as he tried
to sit up, hands clutching at Keith’s shirt. Keith stumbled in the loose sand, but managed not to fall
backwards into the lake.

“Lance!” he said, one hand still curled behind Lance’s neck, even as the Merman made awful
choking noises, “Lance, it’s okay! We’re okay - we’re safe - breathe , breathe with me, come on - “

Lance looked wildly around him, eyes too big in his face: at Keith, at the two centaurs still
standing guard, and at the clear green water. He was blinking rapidly against the glare of the sun,
and Keith quickly angled Lance’s face into his shoulder, notching his wings on above them to block the light. His pinions were soaked, and the drip-drip-drip of the water was the only thing Keith could hear above the gasping.

Slowly, Lance’s breathing slowed.

“...Keith?” he said, voice barely louder than a whisper.

Keith tried to smile, eyes hot with tears.

“Hey,” he managed.

“Is everyone - Shiro - ?”

“Shiro’s okay,” said Keith, “we made it back to base. We came to the lake first…”

Lance nodded weakly, and Keith could feel the tension in his shoulders relax a little.

“Your wing?” said Lance, hand lifting towards the feathers above them. His knuckles brushed the inner feathers for a moment, before he let it fall back into the water with a small splash. “Smell blood.”

Keith winced.

“It’ll be fine, don’t worry about me,” he said, “I can get it patched up.”

Lance nodded again, closing his eyes.

“Is it still too bright?” asked Keith, stretching out his good wing further. It was actually nice to extend them again, but he ached all over, and every other minute a spasm would shake his wing. It was probably going to take a while for the cramps to work themselves out.

Lance didn’t answer, but he lay his hand on Keith’s throat, the pad of his fingers cool against the beat of his pulse. Keith startled, and Lance flinched away.

“Hey,” said Keith, “sorry - just cold, that’s all.”

“I thought you’d died,” said Lance, so quietly it could have just been a sigh. “Am I dreaming?”

“You should save your voice,” said Keith, his own voice hoarse with emotion. He felt like someone was squeezing his chest, and words were trapped between his throat and his lungs.

“Do you want to lie back down?”

Lance blinked at him, briefly, like he wanted to check Keith was still there.

“Matt?” he said, “Is he - ?”

Keith looked up at the centaurs. It was just Vinar now. Keith hadn’t noticed Sala leaving, but her companion was still there, keeping watch at a respectful distance.

“Matt couldn’t fly,” said Keith, trying to keep his voice even. He could remember the confusion on Shiro’s face, and then way Matt had pushed him off the top of that roof. “We didn’t have time to go back for him. And we didn’t have enough people to carry him out.”

Lance’s face crumpled, and he pressed his nose into Keith’s shirt, chest shaking. He was mouthing
something, but Keith couldn’t hear.

“Lance,” said Keith, at a loss, “Please, you need to be underwater.”

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. Lance had one hand pressed to the hollow of Keith’s throat, and Keith, for all his protests, did not want to let go either.

He looked at the shimmer of Lance’s tail, now a faded grey, and felt a hot flash of ugly anger at the obvious areas of injury and abuse. Huge patches of scales were missing or worn faint and thin, as if they had corroded away. There were healing scar-marks too, and missing pieces that had clearly been pulled out.

Keith recalled the long steel tables in the lab, and his pulse raced. The translucent tail fin was the worst, the remaining tatters floating gently with the inhale-exhale of the lake. There was a four inch vertical scar sitting at the base of the fin, and it was an awful red-blue colour.

He wanted to fly back and set the entire capital on fire. Or drag all those scientists to the ocean and let the mermaids have them.

But Lance was here now. And he was alive. Shiro was alive.

“I’m going to lower you back in the water, okay?” he said.

Lance stared at him, as if searching for something.

“I’ll stay right here,” said Keith, leaning into the hand at his jaw, “I can stay right here.”

“Wing,” said Lance, “Your wing.”

Keith shook his head.

“I’ll deal with it later.”

“Now,” said Lance, and there was a flicker of familiar obstinance in his expression that made Keith laugh. He hadn’t intended it, but the sound burst out, a little hysterical, and he hugged Lance as tight as he dared to without hurting him. Lance was frowning, but his thumb was tracing the edge of the laugh on Keith’s cut lip.

“Keith,” said Lance, insistent. “You’re hurt.”

“I don’t want to leave you alone,” Keith confessed, after the laughter had died down, dry at the back of his mouth, “I just - I’ll get Shiro first, okay?”

Lance let out a little huff of breath, but he nodded. He looked exhausted, and Keith was sure he didn’t look much better himself.

Carefully, he lowered the merman back into the water, which parted for him almost like a breath of relief. The lake was so clear it was like nothing at all, just flickers of the sky and Keith’s own reflection about his wrists. Lance visibly sighed as the lake closed over his face, neck tilting loose and eyes sliding shut. He drew a huge gulp of water through his mouth, gills opening and closing in tandem with the rise and fall of his chest.

Keith couldn’t look away.

Lance stared back at him through the surface of the water, the corners of his eyes crinkled, fond. Standing in the lake was different to standing in the ocean; there was no inexorable tug beneath his
waist - where the ocean pulled you in, the lake was gentler. But the water did move, tiny rocking motions that tugged at Lance, the weight of him and the film of his tailfin.

Keith’s wings were half soaked - he didn’t have the strength to keep them half up and half spread anymore, and his pinions - all the way up to past his first joint - was dragging in the water. It was cold, even as the sun warmed the back of his neck; so quiet that Keith thought he could stand there forever, counting Lance’s pulse against the pad of his thumb.

Lance pushed him towards the shore, eyes still slanted with his smile. Keith’s own face ached, the expression unfamiliar on his lips and in his chest.

GO, mouthed Lance, glancing up at the injured wing, please.

He pushed at Keith’s hand again, and made to draw away - but Keith held on, heart rocketing to the back of his throat. He looked behind him at the grassy line of the lake bank. Vinar was still there, quiet in the shadow of the trees. He saw Keith watching, and tilted his head. Behind him, a tail swished idly.

“I’ll get Shiro first,” said Keith, making no move to get up. He stared down at Lance through the lake, and the feeling of disbelief was palpable. Every lap of water against his skin washed away at his self control, leaving something raw and exposed.

Keith felt stripped bare, and the words came rushing out, bitter and choking:

“I’m - I just don’t want to leave you alone here. I don’t trust the...I - we shouldn’t have left. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. If we hadn’t left, before, then - ”

Lance moved, an awkward motion from the hip. His tail was still held so stiffly that Keith was worried there might be broken bones, and his movements were clumsy where they had once been fluid. He tucked his face close to where Keith was kneeling in the water, as if trying to curl around him.

Keith realised, belatedly, that Lance was trying to sit up.

“No - “ he said, hand hovering above the water, “Just - “

Lance made a frustrated sound, and then dug his elbow into the rough pebbled sand. His face broke the water, but only barely, eyelids flickering in the light and air. His other hand was still around Keith’s wrist, fingers wrapped tight despite the softness in his expression.

“Keith,” he said, voice so quiet Keith had to bow his neck to hear. Lance leaned upwards, and pressed the tip of his nose against Keith’s uninjured cheek. He could only manage the position for a moment, before letting himself fall back into the water. Keith caught him by the small of his back, and they held each other so tightly Keith could not tell whether it was his hands or Lance’s that was shaking. The guilt tasted like bile on Keith’s tongue.

“It’s not your fault,” said Lance.

He was still smiling but there were tears in his eyes and a tremble to his bottom lip, breaths broken and shuddering against Keith’s neck.

“It’s not your fault Keith, it’s not your fault - “

Keith didn't know when he had started crying in earnest, but once he started he could not stop - he could see the raised welts and missing patches of scales high on Lance’s cheekbone, where
someone had held a fire to his skin. Up close, the wound looked viciously wrong against the bright blue of Lance’s eyes. Keith could not recognise the noise coming from his throat, awful and hiccups, vision blurring violently with his own tears.

But then again, perhaps it was merely the water from the lake; hot from the sun and the stained from the salt of their regrets.

It felt surreal, to be together again.

It was the quiet, thought Lance, and the warmth of the sun. He could taste the salt on the corner of Keith’s lips, and the jump of his pulse. Lance had forgotten how hot Avians ran, but there he was, alive under the press of Lance’s hand. Lance had had dreams, just like this, but in all of them, they were laying in the ocean.

Keith smelled like rain and earth and blood, and Lance sank his free hand into his feathers, just to see if they were as soft as he remembered. The water from his hand made them clump, and Lance drew back guilty, even as Keith pressed his cheek to Lance’s temple, as if grieving.

Eventually, Keith’s sobbing breaths slowed, quietening until they matched the ripples of water that petaled around them. The lake water was a balm, cool and fresh - but Lance felt numb: every movement ached. Carefully, he rubbed away patches of dry blood where it clung beneath Keith’s chin and around his mouth. Lance rubbed away the blood at Keith’s hairline, and felt Keith shudder against the touch.

Neither of them could bring themselves to let go, despite the fact that Keith was getting utterly soaked and Lance was losing all feeling from the hip down given the way the hard pebbles pressed against bone. Lance could feel him shivering, a whole bodied thing that made his wings twitch.

“Keith,” said Lance, shifting so he could look Keith in the eye, “I think - “

...just in time to see Keith’s eyes roll back in their sockets. Lance’s throat barely managed a wheeze of surprise before Keith was pitching sideways, heavy and limp. His arms went abruptly lax, and Lance dropped deeper into the water, grabbing Keith by the shoulders to stop him from falling face first into the lake. Lance twisted clumsily from the hip, trying to curve his tail to prop himself up, but the motion sent a spasm of muscle pain all the way down the length of his tail and he gasped in a mouthful of water. Thankfully, Keith’s wings - which had gone out either side of him when he fainted - were big enough that they half propped him up in the shallow water. His eyes were closed, face very pale.

With a desperate push, Lance levered himself out of the water, trying to keep Keith upright over his shoulder. He could feel warm puffs of breath against his gills, and thought wildly of the night he had fished Shiro out of the ocean.

“Help!” Lance tried to shout at the centaur on the lake’s edge. His voice broke on the first letter, and he splashed irritably with his free hand, “Hey!”

He couldn’t really see over Keith’s wing, but he heard the sound of hooves thudding, and then huge splashing. A shadow slid over them, and then the centaur was there, easily lifting Keith out of the water.

“What happened?” he asked, arms hooked beneath Keith’s wingblades. It took some manoeuvring before he could turn Keith around, folding one wing so that the centaur could support the weight of the avian without putting too much strain on his ribs. Keith was out cold, limbs loose and wings
“He’s hurt,” said Lance, throat very tight, “please...there’s blood on his wing, I think it’s a bullet wound, please help him - “

“I will,” said the centaur very calmly, “we have doctors. I’ll take him back to base.”

He hoisted Keith beneath the wings and shoulders, hooking an elbow beneath the avian’s knees so that he was carrying Keith more securely with his wings falling over one arm, feathers dragging in the water. Keith’s face was slack where it lolled against the centaur’s shoulder, hair damp on his forehead. In the sunlight, the dark bruises around his neck were mottled purple and black.

Lance’s panic must have shown on his face because the centaur said, in an clear effort to offer comfort:

“He will be alright - if it was the wound, he should already be dead.”

Lance could feel his own expression crumple.

“Go,” he said, “just go!”

A brief nod, and then the centaur was splashing his way out of the lake, cantering through up the bank and through the long grass. Between one exhale and the next, both he and Keith were out of sight, with only the sound of his hooves to keep Lance company. And all too soon, those too were swallowed up by the wind and the trees.

Lance allowed himself to sink back into the lake, letting the slope of the bank and the gentle pull of the water to take him away from shore. He took long drags of water through his mouth, wrapping his arms around himself as his heart thudded painfully against his lungs, so hard he thought they might bruise too. He could hear the wind along the surface of the water, the insects buzzing and humming in the long grass, the birds’ trill through the rain-water wash of leaves against leaves. He could hear bubbles in the water, something deep and throaty in the heart of the lake - he could hear the movement of the fish and eels out of sight, too scared to come close to him. It was all around him, soaking into his skin and the raw open wounds of his scales - and Lance had forgotten what it sounded like, to not be inside a glass tank, he’d forgotten what silence was, absent the steady pump of water and air through metal pipes -

He curled in on himself, fingertips digging into the flesh of his elbows. He could hear the loud echoing sound of bubbles against glass; his own breathing magnified back like the gasps of a drowning man.

Lance squeezed his eyes shut, trying to count the seconds between his own breathing. He tried to focus on the sensation of his gills opening and closing, opening and closing...his body rocked with the lake - for it breathed too, a slow steady thing from deep within the rock and earth.

Just as slowly, Lance forced himself to let go, to uncurl and open his eyes. The sunlight wove ribbons in the water, a beautiful bright green-blue that sank richer and darker the deeper they went. He could smell the scent of the thick-bladed weeds that grew at the bottom of the lake, and see the small fish darting in silver-flecked oranges and teals.

Lance tried to swim forwards, and realised that even that sensation felt momentarily foreign. His tail wouldn’t bend quite right, the motion aborted about half way through a sweep from the hip. It felt stiff and painful, and he hoped - for the first time - that maybe it was just the result of long, long months inside a tank. Perhaps the lack of movement had made his muscles stiff and weak.
He ventured deeper into the lake, turning over carefully as he swam, trying to adjust for the
stiffness in his tail. It was still wonderful to feel the live-flowing water, to be able to open both
eyelids without wincing. Lance cupped a hand over his face, shielding his eyes from the sun as he
peered through the water. He tried, half heartedly, to snatch a fish, but his tail was giving him too
much trouble. Down here, he could listen to the throaty burble of water as it passed through some
crevasse - it sounded like an underground spring - and it was soothing against the scales on his
face.

Lance kept to the relative shallows of the lake, uncertain of his presence.

He called out, tentatively, but his voice was still hoarse and torn. He managed a few quiet
enquiring clicks and calls...but no matter how still and quiet he waited, there was no reply.

Lance thought of Narti, and the way the violet lamplight looked against the scales on her nose and
cheeks.

He called again, hopeful; voice bouncing off the pebbles and sand before dispersing like bubbles
against the surface of the lake.

Nothing.

There was a small flash of disappointment, but Lance was almost immediately distracted by the
sound of someone approaching the lake. He could hear the change of vibrations in the water, and
the distinctive crunch crunch of feet on pebbles and sand. Warily, Lance swam a little further into
the lake before coming up to the surface, letting the top of his head break the water with barely a
ripple.

His eyes widened at the figure on the beach, because he knew that silhouette -

“Pidge!” cried Lance, splashing in his haste to rise out of the water and catch Pidge’s attention.
His voice was still woefully weak, and he smacked a hand against the lake in frustration before
diving back and swimming towards the bank as fast as his aching tail would let him.

He hadn’t ventured too far away, and in no time at all, he was scraping up against the bottom of the
lake, the rough stones pinpricks of pain against the patches of missing scales. But Lance couldn’t
bring himself to care because Pidge was there, hair tied back but arms outstretched. She was
running into the water, face an expression of disbelief.

“Lance!” she shouted, “oh my god, it’s really you, it’s really you - !”

She practically threw herself into the lake, not waiting for Lance to sit up - just wrapped both arms
around his chest and pulled him upwards into an embrace. Her words were lost in the chaotic
splashing and Lance’s yelp of pain when a particularly sharp rock dug into a tear in his fin, but he
hugged her back, face pressed into her neck and the edge of her lopsided glasses.

“- I didn’t think, oh my god Lance, I’m... you’re okay, you’re okay, the chances were - I can’t
believe you’re here, I can’t believe it, when I saw Shiro and Keith I just - you’re here - “

There was a laugh somewhere in there, part hysterical, part relief - and Lance could feel it tickling
his own throat, eyes squinted against the sun. Pidge was hugging him so tight it was a little hard to
breathe, but Lance smoothed a hand down her back, disbelief making him light headed.

Finally, Pidge loosened her grip, settling on her knees and pulling back a little to stare at Lance
with wet eyes and cheeks red from smiling.
“Hey,” she said, straightening her glasses. She shifted a little so that Lance could lie more comfortably in the water, anchored in the shallows by her hand. There were tear tracks on her cheeks, and she was still holding onto him with warm, strong hands.

“Sorry about that… I’m... so happy you’re okay. I missed you so much, I - I was so scared you - ”

Lance made a hushing sound, almost out of habit.

“It’s okay,” he said, holding her wrist, “Pidge. It’s okay. I’m okay. I missed you too.”

Pidge made a noise, half between a wail and a laugh.

“When we found out that it was you I...I can’t believe it. You’re here. You’re here.”

Lance couldn't believe it either.

He tugged on her wrist, and Pidge sniffled.

“Pidge,” said Lance, “Matt - “

“I know,” she said, interrupting, “Shiro...I talked to Shiro and Keith already.”

Lance swallowed hard, but he had promised. He had promised and now he was here, and Matt was still trapped. He could not think about the possibility that Matthew Holt was dead. Not after all this time. Not after everything.

“Pidge, I told Matt about our tests,” said Lance, glancing around for any others. The forest was quiet and silent, but he was very aware that their companions could be lurking just out of sight. He looked back at Pidge, who had also tensed.

“What - “ she began, but Lance shook his head urgently.

“I told him about your crystal tests,” said Lance, voice barely above a whisper, “have you told anyone else about them? He said you must keep it a secret, he said no one else must know because Haggar - “

“Wait,” said Pidge, brows furrowing, “slow down...a secret?”

“Have you told anyone?” asked Lance urgently, “your brother made me swear never to tell because he thinks you’re right, he thinks you’re onto what Kerberos suspected...but whoever figured it out would have an edge in the ...Pidge?”

Pidge had gone ashen.

“Some Blade members know,” she said, hoarse, “Regris and a few others...they’ve been helping me a lot... but they’re members of the Resistance, they’re the ones who helped get you here, we can trust them.”

Lance stared at her, something tight and dreadful coiling in the pit of his stomach. He could see Matt’s face in Pidge’s expression like the reflection in a lake, the fear palpable in his eyes.

You mustn’t let anyone know, not Haggar, not Lotor, not any of the avians...not anyone - promise me. Promise me!

“Maybe...maybe they’re okay,” said Lance, hesitant, “I...Matt told me not to tell anyone, not even the Resistance. He said he wasn’t sure anyone could be trusted if they knew about - “
“Wait!” said Pidge, voice rising abruptly in volume before she glanced behind her. She crouched, lower and closer to the water.

“Matt knew the Blades? He was talking to them?”

Lance blinked at her, confused.

“The - ?”

“Blade of Mamora,” said Pidge, familiar impatience creeping into her tone, “The Resistance, whatever. They’ve got implants inside the castle, I know they have. Matt was in touch with them?”

“I…I think so,” said Lance, anxiety rising with the agitation on Pidge’s face, “Pidge, I don’t understand - “

“Do you know how long Matt had been at the palace?” Pidge demanded, “Do you know?”

Lance thought back, wracking his brain and forcing himself to think back through each long and dreadful night - the hours leaking into the next because there was no sun to mark the passage of day and no wind to tell the months with. But he could remember his conversations with Matt like spots of colour against a dark grey stone. They had often talked into the early hours of morning, after Matt had brought the fish up to the balcony. And Lance had clung to those conversations; to the only friendly face he knew.

“Over a year,” he said, “I… he wasn’t sure exactly when but he was transferred to Haggar's lab soon after Shiro was separated...Pidge, are you okay?”

Pidge shook her head, mouth pressed tight. She looked like she was about to bolt, her eyes darting around them, at the empty trees and the tall grass and the sunshine, warm and yellow.

“They knew all this time,” she said, “…they've been lying to me. They knew. They knew!”

She was trembling, jaw tight and eyes bright. Lance looked at her in alarm, heart racing in tandem. Who had lied?

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I...Matt just said…”

Pidge shook her head, and for a moment Lance thought she might shout at him. But she only held his hand in both of hers, visibly steadying herself.

“No, it’s not your fault, you haven't done anything wrong,” she said, steel creeping back into her voice like frost over earth. She was staring at her own face in the water, and Lance wondered if she knew how much she resembled her brother. She looked up at him, and her eyes were solemn.

“The galra that brought you here - they're part of the Blades. The Resistance. They have many names, it doesn’t matter. They’ve been helping the Alteans and centaurs for a long time now. They’ve been helping me ever since Matt and dad and Shiro…”

Her hands tightened on Lance’s, and Lance realised she was looking not at the water but at the scabbed over welts that ringed Lance’s wrists. Cuff marks.

“They told me they didn’t know where Matt was. They told me...there were rumours. That he was alive.”

She took a deep, unsteady breath.
“They lied to me. And now I think I know why.”

Lance felt very cold, and he shrank back into the water on instinct. Pidge caught his gaze and held it, amber eyes like the spark of a fire. There was something awful, carved into the set of her face, and it made Lance’s heart hurt.

“You can’t trust them,” she whispered, “Just...be careful. I need to tell Shiro and Keith about this. I don’t know what they want, but I won’t let them hurt you again.”

Pidge made to stand up, but Lance held on.

“Are you going to be safe?” he said, “...are you sure they lied? Maybe they just couldn’t get word out of the castle?”

There was a dry twist to the edge of Pidge’s mouth, and she looked suddenly much older than her fifteen years. She’d changed a lot in the past few months, thought Lance. They had all been different people, a lifetime ago.

“Oh they got word out alright,” she said, “no, they’ve been keeping this from me the whole time. I...did Matt - did you see my dad...?”

Lance shook his head, feeling awful.

Pidge took another breath, squeezing her eyes shut for a long minute. Beneath his thumb, her pulse was going a mile a minute, but her face was very still.

“He said to tell you that he loves you a lot,” said Lance, voice breaking into pieces on the back of his tongue, “He said to say - to your mom...and he was so proud of you, he was so excited when I told him about...you know.”

Pidge’s eyes were shining with tears.

“I know,” she said.

“He couldn’t fly out of there,” said Lance in a rush, the guilt was too much; crushing him. His bones felt brittle with the weight of it, and words were all he had.

“He couldn’t fly because they clipped his wings and we didn’t know and they didn’t have time and I - Shiro didn’t want to leave him, we didn’t want to leave him but the other Avians, they wouldn’t...they said we couldn’t and I wish they had taken him instead of me, Pidge, I wish it had been him that - “

“Shut up,” said Pidge, and she was crying now, teeth gritted, “it’s not - shut up!”

Lance flinched backwards, but was instead pulled into another crushing hug. Her hair obscured his vision, but he could hear the thump of their hearts, pressed tight and close.

After a moment, Pidge took off her glasses and wiped at her eyes with a furious fist.

“You’re my brother too,” she said, voice cracking on the words like sea glass over stones, “Lance, you’re ...I’ve been looking for Matt for so long and I wish...”

Pidge trailed off, and for a long, long time, she did not speak.

“I knew he was alive,” she said, “they all said that they’d be dead by now. But I knew.”
“We’ll go back for him,” said Lance, because he wanted desperately to believe that was true, “we will, now that the Avians know...or maybe the Resistance...right?”

Pidge snorted.

“We’ll see,” she said.

“They helped us escape,” said Lance, thinking back to Ulaz and the galra commander, “I don’t know for sure if they’re a ‘Blade’ but if it wasn’t for them, I think we’d be dead. Or prisoners.”

“They have vested interest in you,” she muttered, “Okay. Think, Pidge... think. Need to tell Shiro. I think we are safe for now, but I don’t like this. I don’t like not knowing... I don’t want any of you to become leverage.”

She held Lance by the shoulders.

“Don’t say anything about what we just talked about,” said Pidge, “just act as if you’re grateful and we’re all allies. Actually - no, can you swim to the deepest part of the lake? Stay in the middle, away from the shores. You’ll be safe there.”

Lance frowned, darting a look at the middle of the lake.

“Alright...” he said, “but... I’m worried about Keith. And Shiro. I want to see them...”

Pidge chewed the edge of her lip.

“You’ll be ok to approach if we’re here,” she said finally, “If I give you a warning whistle, don’t come up. They can’t get you if you’re in the middle of the lake. You’ll be okay.”

Lance felt sick. They were meant to be amongst friends here. They were meant to be safe, and he had handed Keith off to a stranger...and he had just gotten Keith back. Lance wanted to scream, but swallowed it back.

“Okay,” he said.

Pidge gave him another hard hug.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” she said again, words muffled against his hair, “I missed you.”

“I missed you too,” said Lance, quiet.

Pidge stood, wincing at her weak knees and the drip of water dragging down her clothes.

“I’m going to run back,” she said, “I need to make sure Shiro and Keith are alright. If you don’t see us, don’t come to the bank. Keep to the middle of the lake.”

She glanced at his tail, and her frown deepened.

“You’re okay to swim, right?”

“Sort of,” said Lance, because he didn’t want tell Pidge yet another lie. “Just...hurts. I’m sure I’ll be okay in a few days.”

Pidge was still staring at his tail.

“Right,” she said, distractedly. Then she stuck her hand in the water and licked her finger. It was
Lance’s turn to stare at her.


“What?” said Lance.

“I need to find Shiro,” she said, “you can’t stay here. Keep to the middle of the lake. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

And with that, Pidge waded out of the lake.

As soon as she was on hard earth, she began to run.

Keith was getting sick of waking disoriented.

It was almost a familiar routine now - the half-fogged *jerk* into consciousness followed by a dizzy rush of blood to the head as his heart-rate inevitably ratcheted up with panic of lapsed time and justified paranoia. This time was no different. He woke with a start, vision momentarily blinded by the sun. He was moving, his centre of gravity hanging somewhere between his clavicle and his knees, and Keith thought he might throw up.

“Wh - “ he said, coughing.

“Don’t move,” said a deep voice, right against him, “We’re almost there.”

It took another moment before Keith realised he was being carried, one wing folded tight against someone’s torso and the other flopping painfully over a steel-tight arm. He tried to sit up, tried to get his feet on the ground - and the centaur grunted, but did not stop moving.

“I don’t…” said Keith, trying to blink the bright halo of sun out of his vision, “Lance!”

“In the lake,” said the centaur, voice barely audible above the thud-click-thud of his hooves going from soft grass to dirt and stone, “Be still. You are injured.”

Keith struggled for breath; the position he was in meant the weight of his wings were pulled taught against his ribs and he just wanted to stand on his own two feet. He remembered kneeling in the water with Lance, soaked and cold but so warm under the sunlight. Then things got a little fogged -

“Keith!”

*Pidge?*

Then a much more familiar voice:

“Oh god - Keith?”

And then suddenly Shiro was there, face filling up the entirety of Keith’s vision, wings notched and half spread with worry, eyebrows slanted with panic. He slapped a hand onto Keith’s cheek, finger pressing to the pulse beneath Keith’s chin and his other hand patting frantically at Keith’s forehead.

“What’s wrong with him?” came Pidge’s voice, “Vinar?”

“He fainted in the lake,” said Vinar, “I think either blood loss or dehydration. Perhaps both. His wing needs looking at.”
“Keith, how many fingers am I holding up?” said Shiro, holding up a closed fist.

Keith groaned and shoved the fist out of his face.

“Seriously, there’s nothing wrong…” said Keith, “Let me down…”

“Oh jeez, he sounds drunk or something,” said Pidge. Keith couldn’t see her. Probably because the centaurs were all so tall. He wondered vaguely if Shiro had to stand on his toes to loom in the way he was doing.

Keith tried to shake his head, but Shiro’s hands stayed there, dry and calloused and comforting. Keith felt his eyes droop, and heard Shiro’s voice spike with renewed panic.

“Keith!” he said, “No, no, no, hey. Hey, you gotta stay awake for me, okay?”

“We need to get him inside,” said Vinar, and Keith didn’t like that because Shiro’s hand disappeared and they were moving again, the motion making him nauseas. He retched weakly, but nothing came up except the sour awful taste on the back of his throat. He could taste dry blood on his lips, and the sting of a cut.

“Oh shit look at that blood,” said Pidge, “I’m going to run ahead - “

“Yes - Keith, you’re going to be okay, just stay awake, you’re going to be okay - “

Keith felt his heart clench at the break in Shiro’s voice. He wanted to tell Shiro and Pidge that everything was fine, he just needed a breather and maybe a glass of water...but Keith must have dozed off because the next thing he knew, everything was darker and cooler and he was lying on his back with one wing stretched out.

He tried to winch it back in, but found it pinned by something. A flare of panic ignited in Keith’s lungs, and he tried to sit up, hand pawing clumsily at his wing -

“Hey!” said Shiro, hand on Keith’s wrist and the other on his shoulder, pushing him firmly back onto the bed, “Hey, it’s okay, it’s okay, Keith, breathe .”

“What’s going on - “ Keith slurred.

“It’s okay,” Shiro said again, voice hushed, “I’m here. Everything’s okay. Stay still, alright? We’re just patching up your wing.”

“What…?” said Keith, turning his face to peer at his outstretched wing.

There was a human there, hair tied back and bent over the joint of his wing while Pidge and another human held down Keith’s wing. There was a sharp sting of pain that made Keith flinch bodily all the way down to his shoulder, before he recognised the scent. They were cleaning his wound, and it felt awful to be pinned down.

“Stay still, that’s it, it’s going to be okay,” Shiro rambled, “thank god the bullet didn’t hit an artery. But you’ve lost a bit of blood and you’re...you need rest. Can you drink some water for me?”

“Yeah,” said Keith, “water sounds good.”

“There’s metal everywhere,” muttered the woman cleaning the wound, “I’m surprised you managed to fly. You’re lucky it didn’t sever a tendon. Brace - this is gonna hurt.”

Keith winced at a movement, hearing the soft clink of metal on metal as they dropped the pieces of
shrapnel into a small dish by the window. He could smell the sharp disinfectant smell. It reminded
him of Garrison hallways, a little - and his frequent visits after many scraps.

Shiro pressed a glass of water to the edge of Keith’s mouth, and helped him angle his head up enough to drink slowly. His hand was broad and warm against the back of Keith’s neck, and the cool water was a godsend going down his throat. He drank desperately, making a despondent noise when Shiro pulled away.

“Not so fast,” said Shiro, setting the glass down and wiping Keith’s chin and setting his head carefully back onto the pillow, “You’ll throw up again.”

Keith just nodded, feeling suddenly bone tired. He stared at the ceiling, and the rough wooden window sills. He tried his best to keep still as the medic snipped feathers away with a pair of sharp scissors, clearing the wound. A moment later, Keith almost yelled as something stinging and hot touched the injury. He let out an aborted shout of pain, before gritting his teeth so hard he could hear them creak.

“Easy, easy,” said the medic, her hands still and steady as she dabbed the wound clean, “it’ll numb the area for the stitches. You’re doing great.”

“It’s a clean shot,” said Pidge, “It’s going to be okay. Right?”

“If he keeps it still for the next few weeks, sure,” said the other medic, who was still holding down Keith’s wing by the bones. She had surprisingly strong hands. “There’s been some pretty bad tearing. You’ll need to take it easy.”

“We had to fly,” said Shiro, whose hand hadn’t left the top of Keith’s head. He seemed to be having trouble with touch deprivation, and Keith took comfort in the silhouette of his wings.

“I can’t say avians are...common around here,” said one of the medics.

As they promised, the pain faded to a harsh numb ache, even as Keith watched the woman prepare stitches and begin working on his wing. Her companion let go of Keith’s wing to Pidge, in favour of shining a bright white light for the medic and her work. It was almost a out-of-body experience, and only Shiro’s constant lull of quiet words kept Keith present.

“You’re alright,” he was saying, over and over, “it’s gonna be okay.”

“Lance...” said Keith, turning his face into the palm of Shiro’s hand, “He must be freaking out, I -

“I’ll go tell him you’re okay,” said Pidge from the foot of the bed, “Once Jun is done, I’ll go.”

“I want to go - “ Keith started, but was quickly shushed down by multiple voices around him.

“You will not be moving at all,” said the medic who hadn’t looked up from where she was pulling tidy stitches around the bullet wound, “at all.”

“He needs me - “ Keith protested.

“And you need to keep this dry and still, if you want to fly as normal!”

“Keith,” said Shiro, before Keith could reopen his mouth, “Just - rest, okay?”

Keith made a frustrated noise at the back of his throat, tilting his head into the pillow. Then he
turned to look at Shiro.

“Are you fine?” he asked, “Sendak - “

“I’m okay,” said Shiro hastily, “Just some bruises and cuts. Nothing major.”

Pidge snorted, and they both looked at her.

“What?” she said, “you needed stitches too.”

“Glass cuts,” amended Shiro, free hand hovering as if ready to push Keith back onto the bed. Keith glared at him, mutiny vibrating beneath his skin.

“Anything else?” he demanded, shooting a glance at Pidge.

“Shiro’s okay,” Pidge relented after a long pause, “I … you had us scared when Vinar came back with you like that, Keith.”

Shiro’s hand tightened around Keith’s wrist.

“Sorry,” said Keith.

“You’re both dehydrated and over-exhausted,” the medic interjected, “and there’s some pretty bad bruising - windpipes,” she nodded at their throats, “But this … could have been worse. Sorry about the feathers.”

Keith shook his head.

“That’s fine. They’ll grow back.”

“It’s honestly - I’ve never seen anyone push through an injury like this before,” the medic continued, not looking up from her work, “this is not a graze. I’m amazed blood loss didn’t get you - if not initially, then with tearing.”

“Maybe I’m just lucky,” said Keith, dryly.

“I don’t think avians fare well once you get a shot at them,” said the medic, “so yeah. You’re something.”

“But is he going to be okay?” asked Shiro.

The medic passed the scissors to her assistant and picked up a needle.

“If he rests. And I wouldn’t try flying on this for a while.”

“How long is a while?” asked Keith.

“How well do you want to fly?” the medic shot back, “hold still.”

He eyed Shiro, and then at the two women on his other side. Keith did not try to sit up.

“I’ll go tell Lance everything is okay,” said Pidge, sliding off the sheets. “No - you stay here, Shiro. Keep an eye on Keith.”

“Alright,” said Shiro, and Keith realised his friend still had not let go of his wrist, thumb pressed tight against Keith’s pulse.
With a further moment of hesitation, Pidge crossed the room and slipped out the door. The room was quiet then, save for the rustling sounds of bandages being put away and equipment being cleaned. Someone shut off the light, and the shadows rushed back like an embrace, soft and dark in the narrow space. The only light came from the windows, a little muted.

The sound of someone pouring water into a glass pulled Keith back, and he watched as the woman closest dissolved a paper sachet of something grey and powdery into a glass of water, stirring it with a thin long metal fork. She passed the water to Shiro, along with a few other sachets.

“Help him drink this,” she said, as her companion wheeled a metal table of first aid equipment past the bed, “every six hours. To fend off infection. Should help with the pain too.”

“Thank you,” said Shiro, reverent. He tucked the medication into an inner shirt pocket - when had Shiro put on a new shirt? - and it was only in that moment that Keith realised someone had undressed him too, and that he could feel the tell-tale pull of a bandage across his abdomen, and a few more along the side of his torso. He could smell the low-grade pungent scent of medication, and he sighed against his pillow.

“I don’t want to sit you up,” said Shiro gently, “but let’s see if you can drink this, yeah?”

“One go,” said Keith, gesturing with the hand that was still being held, “disgusting. One go.”

Shiro made an amused huff, eyes crinkling a little on the corners. It made Keith smile too, and something in his chest unwind a little. Shiro was alive. They had made it out of there, somehow. Shiro was alive.

“I don’t think sculling it would work while you’re lying down,” said Shiro, “Can’t have you choking to death after all the trouble we went through.”

“Hah,” said Keith, weakly.

He let himself be manoeuvred, digging one elbow into the mattress to help prop himself up a little. Now that his bullet would had been looked at and stitched up, it somehow hurt worse...every movement made Keith hyper-aware of the wound, and it would send a jolt of pain up his entire wing like a stab to the base of the neck.

“I can’t believe you just - “ Shiro was supporting the back of Keith’s head again and he held the glass to Keith’s mouth. Keith took a gulp - and then made a face at the awful taste of it.

“We’ve had enough close calls, lately,” Shiro finished finally, pausing to let Keith retch miserably over the bed, before continuing to down the medicine. “When Vinar came back with you...I really thought...”

Shiro was staring fixedly at the rim of the glass, and he looked exhausted.

“I don’t know what I thought,” he said, quietly. “Just... you’ve got to rest, now.”

“We have to get Lance home,” said Keith, downing the last of the liquid and coughing. He fell back onto the bed, bones heavier than they had ever felt. “He - he’s so thin, Shiro. We need to get him home...”

“And we can’t do that if you drop dead from an infection or blood loss,” said Shiro, voice rising, “I - I’ve seen people who never recover from injuries like this. They just - I don't’ want to see you grounded, Keith. I wouldn’t be able to forgive m- “
Shiro broke off, pressed his mouth to the back of his arm. Keith felt a frozen sort of alarm, both at the thought of never flying again, but also ....also because he had never seen Shiro like this before. One hand was still gripped tight around Keith’s wrist, hard enough to numb the tips of his fingers. Without warning, he let go, moving quickly around the bed to shift two spare pillows underneath Keith’s injured wing.

“You need to stay still and keep this above your heart,” he said, face blotchy but voice otherwise calm again, “and be still. You heard the doctor. Don’t risk tearing the stitches.”

“Okay,” said Keith, closing his eyes. He held out his free hand, palm up on the bed. After a long moment, Shiro took it.

“I’m sorry,” said Shiro, “I’m… “

A quiet laugh.

“I think we all need to sleep for a week.”

“Yeah,” said Keith, and he could feel the foggy unconscioussness just floating below his eyelids. His wing hurt, especially in the quiet of a house and the faded light of an early evening. It hurt something awful, and he could feel the ache of lying flat on the blade of both wings. Whether it was from the pressure or the marathon sprint-flight, Keith could feel the tight bow-strung strain of his wing muscles, the hard knots against his back and the occasional flash of cramping pain.

He longed to sit front to back with Shiro and groom.

Coming down from an adrenaline high was hard, and Keith shifted against the sheets, face scrunched up with discomfort.

“Are you cold?” said Shiro. The edge of the bed dipped a little as he sat down, and Keith could feel the air shift with the movement of wings, huge and expensive in the relative confines of the room.

“Just tired,” said Keith.

Shiro made a humming noise at the back of his throat, pulling the blanket further up so that it covered Keith’s shoulders.

“You should rest,” said Keith, “eat something.”

Shiro sighed.

“Maybe later,” he said, “I’m...I don’t know. It doesn’t feel safe. We don’t have good flight points, down here. Makes me antsy, I guess.”

Keith could empathise. The paranoia felt like a constant itch beneath his feathers, being surrounded on all sides by mountain and land. Avians weren’t used to settling in low lying areas - it went against instinct.

Before he could reply, there was a knock at the door of the room, and Shiro turned so fast he almost knocked a lamp over with the edge of his right wing. As it was, Keith’s face was smothered in the glossy black-white feathers as Shiro blocked him from view.

An unfamiliar voice from the doorway, low and deep. Galra.
“How is he doing?”

“Fine,” said Shiro, the line of his wings tense. They were half folded out, as if he could fly them both out of here - roof be damned.

“We apologise for interrupting your rest,” said the galra, “but there are some matters that cannot wait.”

A soft click as the door closed. Keith yanked none-too-gently on some of Shiro’s pinions, trying to shove him out of the way, but Shiro merely shuffled his wings so that it framed the bed.

“You’re right,” he said, “Keith needs to rest.”

“Shiro, jeez - “ said Keith, and wiped his hand against the grain of the quill, fast and quick over Shiro’s feathers. Shiro made a full bodied twitch and finally pulled his wings in, turning to shoot Keith a betrayed sort of look as his soft feathers stood on end, before slowly, slowly deflating.

Keith rolled his eyes.

“I’m Regris, and this is Vārok. We need to know what happened, back at the palace,” said the Galra. The two of them were still dressed in the same dark clothes they had been wearing when the Resistance members appeared in the forest to fight off the guards. Their eyes glowed yellow in the dim light of the room, and they their ears almost touched the ceiling.

They were strangers, wearing the faces of enemies.

“ We’d like to know what happened back at the palace,” said Shiro, voice just as tense as his wings. His hand had moved back to a firm weight around Keith’s forearm, as if Shiro had to reassure himself that Keith wasn’t going anywhere. “Want to explain why we were ambushed when your operatives were meant to meet us at the drop point?”

Regris didn’t move, but Keith noticed Vārok frowning.

“You were ambushed?” said Regris, “how?”

“What do you mean, how,” said Keith, trying his best to convey his incredulity even though his voice was coarse and raw, “I was shot by patrol who knew we were coming. Someone had tipped them off!”

Regris’ expression did not change, but he did blink, a flicker of yellow.

“Someone on your end, perhaps?” said Regris.

“They knew exactly where we were landing,” said Shiro, “your men were meant to bring Lance up there for us to fly out. Instead we were met by Sendak.”

“Commander Sendak?” said Vārok, speaking for the first time. His voice was not as low was Regris, and Keith thought perhaps he looked a little younger. He had a thick head of dark purple fur, and when he opened his mouth, his canines glinted in the quiet late afternoon sunlight.

“My friend was shot and we almost died,” said Shiro, voice rising with his impatience. “If all you’re going to do is parrot questions instead of giving me answers, you can leave. Keith needs to rest.”

“My apologies,” said Regris, a little stiffly, “But we are just as...shocked by the turn of events as
you were. What happened after you were captured? How did you escape?”

Keith opened his mouth to answer but stopped at the squeeze of Shiro’s hand around his arm. The motion was hidden by the blankets, but Keith glanced at Shiro out of the corner of his eye.

“Lance screamed,” said Shiro, tone still clipped and unfriendly, “It knocked most people out. Two of the galra there helped us to the roof and we got out.”

“Who - “

“We didn’t catch their names.”

There was a long moment of tense silence. Vārok met Keith’s gaze for a second and held it, pupils dark like a cat’s. Then he looked back to Shiro.

“I see,” said Regris, finally, “They were likely members of the Blade. Perhaps something happened and they could not meet you at the drop point without blowing their cover, but managed to assist your mission in any case.”

“Who was meant to meet us?” Shiro demanded.

Regris didn’t answer right away, his face flat and devoid of expression.

“We have many agents inside the palace,” Regris answered eventually, “someone - “

“Who?” repeated Shiro.

There was a tell-tale flick of Regris’ ears. Keith had watched enough galra to know that this one was annoyed, and trying not to show it.

“A doctor named Ulaz,” said Regris, just when Keith was about to say something to break up the awful silence and the twitch in Shiro’s jaw.

“Very little fur on his head. Stripe to his nose. Thin.”

“Face like a horse and fur like a peach,” added Vārok helpfully.

“...Vārok,” said Regris, exasperation creeping into that one word. They exchanged a weighted look that Keith couldn’t quite decipher, but it felt almost familial.

“Does that ring a bell?” asked Regris with a sigh.

“A very vague one,” said Shiro, voice still guarded... though some of the tension bled out of his shoulders. His grip loosened ever so slightly from Keith’s hand.

“They helped us carry Lance to the roof, and went back down to run interference so we had time to get away,” conceded Shiro, passing his free hand over his eyes and pressing the heel to the bridge of his nose. “I don’t ...I think the doctor’s cover is blown. I … Haggar seemed to suspect him.”

This time Regris’ ears went right down, and any amusement that had been in Vārok’s face vanished.

“Do you know for sure?”

“I heard her call out,” Keith offered, “it was dark. Lance had blown all the lamps.”
Regris leaned forwards, clawed hands coming to rest on the mattress. Shiro made an aborted movement forwards, and the galra drew back immediately. Everyone in the room eyed each other, wary.

“How could she have known?” pressed Regris, “What happened when you were captured?”

Shiro looked to Keith, then back to the two galra.

“They tried to poison me,” said Keith, “It was - a stupid ritual. Zarkon - “

“Emperor Zarkon was there?” demanded Vārok, wide eyed, “What the... are you sure?”

“Well unless it was some other asshole in a cloak and a crown,” said Keith. He saw Regris mouth ‘some other asshole’ to himself, eyebrows doing something complicated on a very feline face.

“Go on,” said Regris.

Keith looked to Shiro for assurance.

“Well,” he said, swallowing hard to clear his throat, “Ulaz was preparing the...potion. And I’m clearly not dead. So I think she put two and two together and...”

Regris was frowning, the expression a deep slash against his features. He seemed to be able to sense that Keith wasn’t telling the whole story. But all he said was:

“I see.”

Vārok looked visibly upset. The implications were clear...they probably would not be hearing from Ulaz or Thace anytime soon. The face of the galra commander floated to the front of Keith’s memory, vivid with adrenaline and fear. He could not shake the feeling that he had seen this galra’s face somewhere before...there was something familiar about the shape of his eyes, or the sound of his voice that Keith could not pin down. He wanted to ask Regris and Vārok whether they knew about Thace, but something in Shiros’ reluctance made Keith quiet.

“Now, about who might have - “

Regris’ cut himself off, both Galra’s ears swivelling suddenly towards the doorway. Keith hadn’t heard anything, but a split second later, there was another sharp knock - and this time, door opened without waiting for an answer.

It was Axca, looking remarkably well for someone who had been shot down at close range.

She looked from Shiro and Keith to the two Blades, gaze shrewd.

“Hello gentlemen,” she said, stepping into the room. She had to duck to fit her wings through the door frame.

Both Galra had straightened to their full height, and if Keith wasn’t mistaken, they were regarding Axca with some hostility.

“I thought you were injured,” said Regris, “Perhaps you should be lying down.”

“I came to check on my companions,” said Axca, side stepping Vārok and coming to stand at Keith’s bed. Keith was feeling distinctively at a disadvantage from his position on the bed, and the only reason he hadn’t sat up was because he knew Shiro would burst a vein from the stress. As it was, he could only huff from his pillow, wing out and blanket up.
“I’m fine,” said Keith. At Shiro’s death glare, he amended: “I will be fine. Soon.”

“That’s good,” said Axca, expression softening.

“You okay?” asked Shiro.

“It was a graze,” said Axca, “would have been worse if I hadn’t managed to flip. Fell mostly because of that, really.”

“Tree,” said Keith.

“Tree,” agreed Axca. “Fucking hate them.”

“Did you see the ambush?” said Regris to Axca, “You must have, being backup.”

“We were relying on your intel,” said Axca smoothly, “We could not tell which guards were yours and which were not. By the time we realised, it was too late.”

“And so you allowed your companions to be captured,” said Regris.

Axca narrowed her eyes.

“We could not get a clear shot without risking the rest of the flock, or Shiro and Keith,” she said, “I think the question here is why we were ambushed in the first place.”

“There must have been a leak,” said Regris steadily.

“Mmhm,” said Axca, “or one of yours decided that a merman was too valuable a bargaining chip to give up.”

Vārok took a step towards her, hand behind his back. From his position on the bed, Keith could see the blade there, a symmetrical short bullet-drop with a black wrapped hilt. He was struck again by the sense of familiarity, but this time he could place it. Keith blinked hard, staring.

Was that…?

“A Blade would never betray another,” hissed Vārok.

“I didn’t say that,” said Axca, raising a thin eyebrow, “I’m sure the Blade of Marmora would love a naval alliance.”

Vārok bared his teeth at that, fangs white and sharp as he made a deep, growling noise in his chest.

“You dare -”

“Two Blades sacrificed themselves to extract the mer and both of your fellow flock,” Regris interjected, “I suggest you not throw accusations where you cannot follow. Your Council had been reluctant allies from the beginning.”

“‘My’ council,” said Axca, “have nothing to gain from a dead merman.”

Vārok hadn’t stopped growling.

“Look,” Shiro started - but for the third time that hour, they were interrupted by the sound of running footsteps and the door slamming open. No one jumped, but Vārok’s whipped the knife from its sheath, and Keith caught sight of its onyx-black blade and deep violet inset. His heart leapt
to his throat, but then his attention was diverted to Pidge, who was breathing hard and looking furious.

“Out,” she said.

No one moved.

“I said out!” she near-shouted, “I need to talk to Shiro and Keith.”

“Pidge,” said Regris, looking alarmed, “did something happen - “

Pidge’s stare could have frozen fire to stone, and despite being the smallest person in the room, it was like she had brought the wind in with her. Even Axca had taken a step back.

“I need to talk to them,” said Pidge, voice clipped, “in private.”

Regris took a step forward, hand raised.

“If something happened we - “

“Nothing that can’t wait, I’m sure,” interrupted Shiro, standing up from the bed. He was shorter than the galra, but his wings were huge, arching well over his head on either side. Keith wanted to roll his eyes as Shiro puffed up, feathers rising ever so slightly along the back.

The two galra looked from Pidge to Shiro and then to Keith. Axca was the first to move, her own wings tucked close and relaxed. She strode purposefully to the door, and held it open.

“After you, gents,” she said, sweeping her pinions behind her.

“Pidge,” Regris tried again, “we need to speak with all of you about the extraction.“

“If you don’t get out,” said Pidge, and Keith had never heard her sound so cold, “I’m going to scream for Allura and Coran.”

Vārok sheathed his blade.

“We’ll be close if you need us,” he said, “Is the merman alright?”

“He’s fine,” said Pidge, shoulders almost vibrating, “I just really need to talk to Shiro and Keith. We can debrief later.”

Regris was still frowning, but he took a step back as well. He shot a yellow glare at Axca who was still standing by the open door. Very deliberately, Axca scraped a thin line on the wooden floorboard with the point of her boot-blade.

“Very well,” he said, “we’ll speak later. We should speak to the merman as well, if he’s well enough for it.”

Pidge just nodded, a jerky motion of her head. The two galra hesitated for a moment more, before they too, swept out of the room. Axca paused in the doorway.

“I’ll keep an eye on them,” she said, and then she too, was gone.

The door closed.

For a long minute, no one seemed even to breathe. Keith strained his ears for the sound of
footsteps. It was Shiro who went to the door and nudged it ajar, peering outside. He closed it again with a nod.

“Gone,” he said.

Pidge seemed to slump over, and she rushed at Shiro, burying her face in his stomach with a hug. Shiro caught her, looking alarmed.

“Pidge - what - !”

“Is Lance really okay?” demanded Keith, “what’s wrong? Why did you run back?”

It took a moment for Pidge to compose herself.

“Galra have good hearing,” she said, voice shaky, “better than you guys so - I don’t want to say to much here. What did they want? What did you - god, how could I have been so stupid - !”

“Hey,” said Shiro, hands on Pidge’s shoulders, “hey look at me. Breathe, Katie, breathe. Slow down. What happened?”

Pidge was hiccuping, eyes red rimmed. Keith tried to sit up, arm raised awkwardly - but both Shiro and Pidge made aborted movements as if to shove him back down. Keith let out a rush of exasperation.

“Lance is okay,” said Pidge, “He’s - I told him to stay in the deeper parts of the lake. Because we can’t trust the Blades. We can’t.”

Keith’s breath froze at the back of his throat. Shiro visibly tensed, eyes darting to the door. Both avians were listening as hard as they could, but there was nothing but sigh and creak of wood and stone around them, and the sound of distant activity beyond the walls. Pidge and Shiro moved closer towards the bed, Shiro’s left wing held out so that it draped across Pidge; a weighty shadow.

“What do you mean, we can’t trust them?” asked Shiro, very quietly, “Pidge...I thought you said - “

“I know,” said Pidge, and Keith could see where her nails were digging into the back of her hands, “I was talking to Lance, and he told me that Matt had been at the castle for almost as long as you’ve been gone. Over a year, Shiro.”

She looked from one avian to the other, lips pressed thin and jaw tight.

“They’ve known all this time and they lied to me. I don’t know why, not for sure.”

“But you’re certain they knew,” said Shiro, and he shared a look of dawning realisation with Keith, “that doctor. Ulaz?”

“They have spies everywhere,” said Pidge, “especially in the capital. We had regular news from them, even out here - Regris would tell me they were looking, that they - “

She took another deep, shuddering breath.

“They’ve been lying to me. They’ve been using me for my research. Dad and Matt’s research. Kerberos, Shiro. It all goes back to Kerberos.”

“Wait, they know about Kerberos?” asked Keith, “Are you talking about your experiments with the - “
He cut himself off, shooting a suspicious look at the closed door. Pidge nodded. She opened her mouth to speak, but Shiro held up his hand.

Tucking his wings closer to his back, Shiro side stepped the bed, walking to the wooden cabinet next to the wall. He pulled out drawers, and quickly found what he was looking for, returning with a pad of paper and a pencil, tilting his head to the door. Then he wrote:

*But they helped us.*

Pidge nodded frantically, taking the pencil and scrawling something before turning the page back to show Keith and Shiro.

*No replication without a merfolk. I think they want Lance.*

Keith almost shot out of bed, and it was a testament to Shiro’s lightning quick reflexes that he didn’t snap in his injured wing automatically. Pidge shoved the pad at him.

*We need to get him out of here!* Keith stabbed into the page.  

Shiro shook his head.

*We physically can’t. We need their help getting Lance to the ocean.*

Pidge was chewing her bottom lip, brow furrowed.

*I think confronting them now is bad. We are outnumbered. And Keith can’t fly.*

“I can so fly - “ said Keith, breaking the silence, but was promptly shushed.

*I CAN FL,* he wrote angrily onto the paper - so hard that there was tiny *snap* and the tip of the graphite broke off before he could finish the *Y*.

Shiro cast him a look of fond resignation and went to fetch another pencil.

*Y,* wrote Keith, then slapped the pad back onto the blankets.

*We keep a close eye on Lance, wrote Shiro, and make sure we get him to the ocean. Like they promised. There’s a treaty at stake here. Surely they have same incentives???

Both Shiro and Keith looked to Pidge, who shrugged. She took off her glasses and rubbed hard at her eyes, and Keith was reminded - not for the first time - how young she was, and how alone she must have been while Shiro and Keith were gone, and Lance was missing. In his search for Shiro, Keith had had countless days where he felt he had come so close… only to have failed. The feeling was still visceral in his chest, like staring at water cupped in one’s hands, waiting for a clear reflection of what might come - but unable to stop the water from trickling into dust.

He thought of Matt, pushing Shiro from the roof.

He thought of Lance, faded grey in a glowing tank; floating in a lake - waiting, waiting, *waiting.*

*I just don’t know what they want with Lance,* wrote Pidge, *I’m scared they want to take him back to Mamora.*

Shiro clasped a broad hand to Keith’s shoulder before he could make a sound.

*We won’t let that happen,* he wrote, *we won’t.*
You need to rest, Keith, wrote Pidge, jabbing a finger at Keith’s injured wing, Shiro and I will take turns at the lake with Lance. I don’t trust anyone.

“I want to see him,” said Keith, voice scratchy from the tight panic in his chest. They were so close...against all the odds.. They were so close that he felt terrified.

“If we splint my wing it’ll be fine,” he said, “I…”

He looked pleadingly from Shiro to Pidge then back to Shiro, who looked exhausted.

“I think you should keep it elevated like this for a few more hours at least,” said Shiro at last, “wing injuries are tricky. You know that. It might impact your flying for the rest of your life if you -”

“I don’t care!” said Keith, flinging out one hand, “I don’t - Lance could die if he doesn’t return to the ocean, he could - he could - I want to see him - “

“He wouldn’t want you to collapse,” said Pidge, climbing carefully onto the bed to sit next to Keith’s knee, “He was really scared for you. Said you just fainted.”

“I - “

“All I’m saying,” said Pidge, “is that Lance needs you to be okay. He’s going to kick up a fuss if we leave without you, which is what we’re gonna have to do if you don’t rest!”

“I can walk,” said Keith, “I - “

“This is galra country,” said Pidge, not unkindly, “you won’t make it very far.”

Keith pressed the heel of his hand between his eyes, willing himself not to cry. His heart felt too bruised for his lungs, and there wasn’t enough air in this low-ceiling room. He felt the overly familiar urge to take a running leap from a cliff; take refuge in an open sky.

“Just sleep for a little while,” said Shiro, “Then I’ll help splint your wing and you can go down to the lake.”

Keith squeezed his eyes shut. His wings were hurting - even the one that had not been shot clear through. There was a sharp unpredictable pain that would spasm across his wings or up near his wingblades, making his muscles seize with the hot flare-sting pain. And every time he shifted by accident, he could feel the stitches and the cold-burn of the wound.

He nodded, reluctantly sinking back into the pillows. Some of the tense lines seemed to go out of Shiro’s shoulders and wings at Keith’s acquiesce, and he offered up a wobbly smile.

“I’m scared,” said Pidge, so quietly the silence almost swallowed it whole.

“Me too,” said Shiro. He scooped one wing around Pidge again, and Pidge reached for Keith hand. They sat like that for a moment, holding vigil and clutching tight at each other's presence.

Keith said nothing.

His fear felt naked, hanging on his bare skin like the world’s most feeble gesture, and he wore it like an omission between the hollow of his ribs.

In the end, it was hunger that got the better of Keith.
Flying took a lot of energy - even for those who were built to fly. Amidst the fighting, betrayal and general panic, Keith had forgotten that it had been almost two days since he or Shiro ate - and that hunger was coming back to bite him in the form of crippling stomach cramps.

The Blades brought them giant bowls of steaming-hot stew and dense, stretchy sour-bread (both of which Keith devoured with such haste that he felt slightly ill afterwards), and both avians ate in ravenous silence for a good half hour, avoiding all attempts at interrogation by stuffing one cheek full of food at all times.

Keith thought he had never tasted anything so delicious.

Afterwards, with a bit more colour in his cheeks, Shiro dutifully splinted Keith’s wing on the condition that he stayed on his mountain of pillows and rested. It was clumsy first aid at best, but Keith knew he would not be able to sleep properly without seeing Lance again.

The thought of the time ticking by made him feel a sick...because Keith knew what it was like; to wait and hope, and be disappointed.

Even with that anxiety though, Keith fell asleep; body finally succumbing to the exhaustion and adrenaline crash that was long overdue. The combination of hot food and a warm, soft bed was too much, and Keith wasn’t sure how long he was out...but when he woke up, it was to a room lit yellow by oil-lamp and Shiro’s comforting silhouette next to his bed.

Keith groaned, pushing his head back into the pillow to work out the stiffness in his neck.

“Hey,” said Shiro, setting aside the pages he was reading, “how are you feeling?”

“...fine,” said Keith, groggy. He squinted at his friend. “Did you sleep at all?”

“A bit,” said Shiro - and when Keith’s squint did not ease up, made a rueful sort of noise, “a little, after Pidge came back.”

“I’ll keep first watch, later,” said Keith, “You need to sleep.”

He thought Shiro was going to argue, but after a moment’s pause, Shiro just nodded.

Coran was there this time, to help them down to the lake. He made a *tsk* noise when he saw the state of Keith’s wing, awkwardly stiff where the joint was strapped in place two bound wooden slates.

“Marion will be *very* cross if you wreck your stitches,” said the Altean, “we will go slow, okay? Now, hop on that stool over there and you can climb over.”

Feeling like he was being shamed a little, Keith climbed the stool. Coran side stepped closer, so that his orange flank was right there. He looked very tall, even from the stool.

“Now, over and on,” said Coran, encouragingly.

Shiro was standing on his other side, arms outstretched.

“I’ll pull you over,” he said, opening and closing his hand.

Keith stared.

“I can do it myself!” he spluttered, and threw a leg over Coran’s back. As it turned out, it was a good thing that Shiro was on the other side to grab onto that ankle, because as soon as Keith lifted
his other foot off the stool, he slid dangerously on the smooth fur. Unable to fling out his wings for balance, he just … kept sliding, and probably would have crushed his bad wing on the ground if Shiro hadn’t righted him with a hard yank on the ankle. He hung there, not quite upright, not quite horizontal, off the side of Coran’s hip.

“Oh dear,” said the centaur, “maybe you should go back to bed and try this again tomorrow.”

Grabbing the belt and hauling himself up, Keith huffed out a breath of irritation.

“Just - can we go?” said Keith, eyeing Shiro a little resentfully as he let go of Keith’s ankle to clamber onto the back of a small pony. It was much closer to the ground than Coran, which was a little unfair because Shiro had the added advantage of longer legs. The animal was absolutely dwarfed by Shiro’s wingspan too, and it would have been comical except that Keith knew he looked much more foolish with one wing crooked and the other held out for balance.

He pointed at the pony and Shiro’s smug expression.

“And why can’t I ride something like that?”

“Hmm,” said Coran, “I don’t think you’re quite there yet. Just hold on tight to my belt, alright?”

They made it down to the lake, eventually.

They weren’t alone either: someone had set up camp on the grassy bank, half hidden under the trees. There were three large tents, and another centaur - Vinar - was sitting on the ground, talking to two of the Blades. There was no open fire - to conspicuous - but they were all clustered around a few pale-blue lamps, and Pidge was eating from a steel-grey bowl. She was sitting against Vinar, and there was a blanket around her shoulders to ward off the night’s chill.

At the sight of Coran, Shiro and Keith, she leapt up, food forgotten.

“Hey,” said Shiro, pulling the pony up short and sliding off easily. Keith wavered uncertainty - and he was about to throw his leg back over so he could jump off with two feet pointing to the ground, but Coran, perhaps sensing a disaster waiting to happen, tapped him on the knee in warning.

“Careful now,” said the centaur, and he slowly lowered himself to the ground, legs folding neatly beneath his huge body.

Keith sighed and stepped off Coran’s back.

‘Uh,” he said, winching in his good wing, “Thanks…”

“No problem lad,” said Coran, “You avians aren’t very heavy at all. How’s that wing feeling? I can see a bit of red on that bandage.”

“Ugh, Keith, you really shouldn’t be moving that,” said Pidge, appearing at his elbow and peering up at the splint, “Shiro did a good job though.”

Shiro muttered something like a lot of past experience, but ran a soothing hand over the arch of Keith’s wing.

“Hurts but it’s fine,” said Keith, “Are we camping out here?”

“I thought it would stop you from stressing,” said Pidge, but her eyes flickered meaningfully to the
lake, and then the two Blades who were still sitting with Vinar. Even with the light of the lamp, their eyes glowed a solid yellow, catlike. Keith looked away.

“Where’s Lance?” he asked, shifting his good wing anxiously against his shoulder.

“He’s having a rest,” said Pidge, “come on.”

She pulled Keith down towards the bank. Shiro waved them on, hanging back to keep an eye on the rest of their companions. Exhaling, Keith turned and followed Pidge and her small hand-light all the way down to the water’s edge. Their footsteps crunched along the pebble-shore, so different to the soft sand by Lance’s cave. They came to a stop at a cluster of rocks around a huge willow tree, and Keith realised that there was a slim long boat there, tied to a tree root as thick as his thigh.

In the soft glow of the crystal lamp, the boat looked as if it was floating on air, the water beneath it clear as glass. It bobbed gently with the breathing of the lake, and there were two oars slotted along either side. There was a box set into the base of the dinghy and Pidge opened it to reveal some blankets, rough flour-sack cushions and a sealed box of crackers.

“I come out here to think, sometimes,” she explained, handing the rope to Keith. They pulled the boat in until it bumped against the gravel-sand, and Keith anchored it there with one foot.

“Easier to talk out there,” said Pidge.

Keith glanced at the group of silhouettes on the shore a little way behind them.

“Sound travels on water,” he said.

“Well I think I might sharpen my carving knife,” said Pidge, “slowly.”

Keith let out a snort of laughter. He stepped slowly into the boat, Pidge holding it steady as he crouched and tried to figure out how to tuck his wings behind him without disturbing the splint. In the end, he had to sit almost sideways in the boat, tucking his good wing in against the wooden side so as to leave his other wing loose.

He grasped the oars, pulling them from their bracket and sliding them into the water with a soft splash.

“You’re not coming?” he asked, watching Pidge knot the rope and throw it back into the boat.

“No,” said Pidge, and her expression was hard to read. It was soft, around the eyes, and she looked so different from the fierce betrayed figure in cavern that Keith couldn’t quite reconcile it. That had been a life-time ago, for all of them.

“Shiro and I have...we’ve both talked to Lance. I think he’d like to see you,” she shrugged, “give you a little privacy. It’s. he’s been through a lot.”

Keith swallowed hard.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Oh wait - you take this too,” said Pidge, stretching over with her hand-light. It was a little glass orb, topped and bottomed with metal brackets. Suspended in the middle was a speck of blue, and it seemed to be vibrating, like a blue-white flame. Curiously, however, the glass wasn’t the least bit warm when Keith held it.
“I made that,” said Pidge, a little smile cracking at the edge of her mouth, “Cool, huh?”

“It’s amazing,” said Keith, “I’ve only seen these with galran crystals.”

They both looked at the group on the lake bank, eyes finding each other simultaneously above the orb of light. Keith clipped it to the side of the boat, and it illuminated his hands like a confession.

“Okay,” said Pidge, “I’m gonna head back. Don’t fall in.”

And with that, she gave the dinghy a solid *push*, and Keith had to grab the oars out of the water as the boat slid across the mirror-surface with barely a wobble.

It took a beat for Keith to find his balance on the boat. It was hard rowing with one and a half strokes, when one elbow kept banging into the bone of his good wing. But he slowly got the hang of it, and carefully the little boat made its way across the lake.

All around him was the reflection of the moon and the grey clouds, blurry in contrast with the deep shadow of the surrounding valley. Keith could see himself in the water, the silhouette of his wings a dark shadow above the little orb light that shone bright where it refracted through the water. It out-shone the stars, which littered the water like salt on one’s clothes, sun dried and forgotten.

It was so quiet around him that all Keith could hear was the sound of his own breathing against the soft swish-gurgle of water as the oars slid in and out of the lake. The ripples lapped the edges of the boat as they moved further and further away from the shore.

The sound of water was a little hypnotic.

Occasionally, Keith would tense at a sudden soft splash or *plop* of water. He would freeze, looking around him at the dark expanse and it was like flashing back to a time when *water* meant *danger*; water meant death.

But now, water meant Lance, and Keith was not scared. Not of the lake.

He rowed like this for a little while, quiet and alone. Keith wasn’t sure if he was at the centre of the lake yet, but they had long lost sight of the bottom of the lake. It was dark now, deep and sightless in the night. He slid the oars back in their brackets, and for a long moment just stared at his own reflection in the water, the outline of his features barely shifting with the water. He blinked, and his reflection blinked back - perhaps a moment too late.

Keith shivered in, feathers lifting in the night breeze.

“Lance?” he called, tentative.

Nothing.

Keith shifted in the boat, tucking his good wing closer around himself. He waited for a few moments more. Just as he was beginning to wonder if he should shout a bit louder, he felt the water rock beneath the boat, like something bigger was coming to the surface. Keith gripped the side of the dinghy, heart flickering instinctively faster.

A bigger ripple, mirror-slick.

There was soft flash of bioluminescence, deep beneath the surface but becoming clearer and brighter with every moment until there was familiar silhouette circling the boat...once, twice...Keith leaned over the edge, tilting the boat, hands clutching at the wood. He squinted in the
darkness, trying to make out Lance’s shape in the water.

And then the boat dipped, gently, towards the other side so that it was level once more, and Keith jerked around, eyes wide and breath shallow.

It was Lance, chin resting on his folded wrists, arms hooked just on the edge of the boat so that he was anchored there like a dream after a long day.

If it wasn’t for the absence of waves, they could have been back at the ocean, back before Keith left - back before.

Keith realised, after a long minute, that he was staring. He coughed, throat very dry.

“Hey,” he said, still clutching his side of the boat.

Lance blinked at him, and his eyes shone like the crystal lamp, pale bright blue in the dark inky water. He was smiling, mouth curled, the very edge of the moon.

“Hey,” said Lance.

His voice was still a whisper of what it had been, but Keith thought - perhaps hoped - that it sounded a little clearer already. Keith forced himself to let go of the boat, and he leaned as much as he could towards Lance whilst still maintaining the balance of the boat.

“How are you feeling?” he said, hand hovering awkwardly, “I - have you eaten anything?”

Lance took Keith’s hand with a very fond look and put it between both of his own, before resting his cheek over the top.

“I’m okay,” said Lance, “there’s some very fat lazy trout in this lake.”

“Oh,” said Keith, dumbly.

“Caught them okay, even with my tail.”

Keith frowned, trying to lean even more to see the tail. Lance shooed him back, and Keith heard a twup-splash as the tail came up on the other side of the boat to compensate for weight change. The tail fin broke the surface, gossamer thin and shredded, before sinking back into the water.

“Just hurts,” said Lance, “moving hurts.”

Keith felt sick.

“Can we - there’s a doctor here, maybe if they took a look at it?”

But Lance was shaking his head.

“Not a merfolk doctor,” he said, “I think it’s just from not swimming. I haven’t swam for ages.”

He was still holding onto Keith’s hand, and Keith didn’t know what to do. They drank in each other's presence, and Keith curled his knees so he could sit more comfortably, one elbow resting on the edge of the boat. He shifted his good wing to lay further down, his injured wing propped up a little awkwardly to their left.

Lance’s luminous eyes were drawn to the splint, and his eyebrows went up in an expression of dismay.
“Oh no,” he breathed, “oh Keith - “

“It’s fine!” said Keith hurriedly, as Lance’s eyes welled up with tears, “it’s gonna be fine - the bullet missed the important bits It’s - that’s just for the stitches.”

“Will you be able to fly?” asked Lance, hoisting himself a little further out of the water, eyes fixed on the injury. His nose flared, scenting the air for blood, “oh Keith, I’m so sorry - “

Keith shook his head impatiently.

“No, I’m sorry for not coming sooner. Lance, I’m - “

“You couldn’t have done anything,” Lance interrupted, stroking the back of Keith’s hand with one thumb. His skin was cool and damp from the lake, and Keith clutched back, careful to avoid hurting the abraded skin around the wrists.

“Shiro told me what happened,” said Lance, “you couldn’t have done anything.”

“We wanted to come as soon as we found out,” said Keith, unable to keep his voice down, “they kept us locked in separate rooms, and then there was a storm and someone...someone wanted me dead, I think. We shouldn’t have gone back for help, we shouldn’t have trusted them, we should have just - just come for you, I’m sorry, I’m - “

“Shhhh,” said Lance, pushing himself out of the water for a brief moment to drop a kiss into Keith’s hair, before sighing and sinking back into the lake, “Keith. Keef. It’s okay.”

But it wasn’t okay, and Keith the words tearing up his throat as they came up; confessions he had to make - he knew, deep down, he was desperate for absolution. And now that Lance was here, beautiful and and alive...it was like a dam had broken, unable to withstand the weight of the guilt bursting at the seams of his lungs.

“You were there for so long,” said Keith, “and every day I just - it was driving me mad, I can’t...I was so scared, but they threatened to hurt Shiro if I didn’t - If I didn’t - “

“Keith,” said Lance, pulling at his hands, pulling him closer so they could lay their foreheads against each other, “Keith, Keith, it’s okay - “

“It’s not okay ,” Keith snarled, voice choked with regret and a million what-ifs; and a deep self loathing that was spitting like an oil fire, aimless and awful, “why aren’t you angry?! ”

“Because I love you!” shouted Lance, “because I love you and I’m just happy you’re alive you stupid bird!”

Lance had one hand at the nape of Keith’s neck, and they were still pressed together, nose to nose, skin on skin. Lance’s eyes were effervescent and furious.

“Do you know what it was like?” he said, voice half whisper, half hiss, “when I heard your voice... I thought I was still asleep. I thought, please, just let me stay for a little while longer. I don’t want to wake up yet. Please. And then I saw you and Shiro standing there - standing there - ! Just like I had hoped and hoped and hoped - “

Lance was crying now, chest shaking, but hand still clutching at Keith. The water around them shimmered, and the boat rocked like a lullaby.

“ - and then you drank that stupid fake potion,” said Lance, face scrunched up with grief, “and I
thought you *died*! That’s what happens to people who drink that stupid, *stupid* pointless, fake -!
They die. They die, they jerk on the floor like a fish with a hook through its body, they choke and they jerk around and their eyes roll up and they - “

“Lance,” said Keith, horrified, “Lance - “

But Lance’s own eyes had gone a little glazed, and he was shivering - Keith could feel the tremors where Lance was still clutching his neck, and he winced at the bite of torn nails.

“Do you know what that’s like?” Lance continued, “being right there and all you can do is watch, like you watched everyone else. Knowing it’s pointless, knowing you’re the reason why...if you had died, Keith, it would have been my fault. My fault.”

“Is this about Zarkon’s ritual?” said Keith, “Lance - “

“I wished so hard that I could see you all once last time,” said Lance, pressed his cheek to Keith’s, then the other side, then the side of their noses together, like he was mapping the contours of Keith’s face and committing it to memory, “I just wanted to see you. I wanted to go home. I want to go home.”

He thumbed the edge of a cut that ran from Keith’s cheekbone to his jaw, and his eyes darted again to the splint.

“But when you ...” Lance shuddered, “I rather die alone in that tank.”

Keith wanted to throw up.

“Don’t say that,” he whispered, “Don’t. You’re out now. We’re gonna get you home.”

Lance stared at him, eyes big and searching. It was like he was looking through Keith at someone else entirely, and Keith didn’t know what to do. He was frozen, useless.

“I kept thinking...” said Lance, very quietly, “if only you hadn’t come, *if only you hadn’t come* and maybe you’d be safe, maybe you’d be okay.”

“I am okay,” said Keith fiercely, “Lance, I’m okay and you’re going to be alright. And I’d always come. I’ll always come - I promised I’d be back, didn’t I?”

Lance blinked rapidly, but something about those words seemed to snap him out of the spiralling panic. His shoulders slumped a little, and the boat dipped with him as he sank back into the lake, all the way to his collarbones. Only the weight of Keith’s feet and wings kept them balanced, the water sloshing.

“...you never said anything about coming back,” said Lance, voice very small. “When I finally made it back to the cave, you were all gone.”

Something clenched hard around Keith’s heart.

“But ...but I left you a letter,” said Keith, “in a bottle.”

Lance looked confused.

“Oh,” he said, “I...I didn’t see it.”

“It was right near where we were sleeping,” said Keith, desperately, “I wrapped it up so it wouldn’t get wet. I left... left my mom’s blade with you.”
“Oh,” said Lance, and he looked very lost, “oh. I didn’t know. I just - I thought maybe you weren’t coming back.”

“How could you think - no, I - “ Keith waved his free hand, unable to articulate the cold wash of realisation that was sinking into his bones. In the end, he settled for dragging that hand down the length of his own face, and he sat back on his side for a moment, staring up at the sky.

“Fuck,” he said.

“You never said anything,” said Lance, and his voice was calmer now, if exhausted. There was the sound of sloshing water as Lance moved further up the boat, where Keith’s head was. “You never said anything. Before, I mean.”

“Before,” echoed Keith, reaching out and finding Lance’s hand on the edge of the boat. Lance smoothed the pad of his fingers down the length of Keith’s wrist, following the veins like the lines in a map, blue leading to blue, leading to home.

“I’m not good with words,” said Keith, stilted, “I - it just. It didn’t feel like I needed to say anything.”

There was a long moment of silence. Lance was watching him with steady eyes, and it occurred to Keith how still he was.

“It’s okay,” said Lance, and there was a quiet resignation in his voice, “you don’t need to.”

“No!” said Keith, and it came out more forcefully than intended. “No,” he said again, “I just...”

They lapsed into silence again.

“Of course I love you,” said Keith, the words a jumbled rush.

Lance’s expression didn’t change, but his eyes never left Keith’s face.

“Really?” he said.

“Yes?” said Keith, confused, heat flushing to his cheeks, “I mean - yes. Lance, I flew through a giant thunderstorm to get to you; I cradled you in my fucking arms and I thought we had been too late, I was so scared I - of course I love you.”

Lance looked away for a moment, and his hands shifted on the boat, as if he was about to turn and dive back into the water. Keith grabbed him by the forearm, desperate. Lance startled, looking for Keith’s hand to his face, wide-eyed. Keith withdrew his hand sharply.

“Sorry,” he said.

Lance shook his head minutely.

“It’s okay,” he said.

This conversation wasn’t going the way Keith expected, and it was causing his stomach to turn itself inside out.

“I missed you,” he said, “I missed you a lot.”

At last, something seemed to soften in Lance’s expression - even though it was still too calm, like the surface of the lake.
“I miss you too Keef,” Lance started, but Keith leaned forwards.

“No, I mean,” he stuttered, “I - I missed you. I missed you, and us, and the ocean and - I wasn’t scared, coming out here. I just - shit, I hate words. I hate...I’m doing this wrong. I just want you to be safe right now, we need to get you home - “

“You really don’t have to say anything,” said Lance, “Keith it’s okay.”

“No, but I love you , why are you looking at me like...like that?”

“Like what?” said Lance, and there was a tenor to his lip and a crease in the corners of his eyes.

“Like you don’t believe me,” said Keith, hoarse. Something cold was sinking to the bottom of his stomach, and he thought oh, this is what it feels like, to have had something and lost it.

“Is it because we left for so long? Is it because I left - ”

“No, no ,” said Lance, hand coming up to frame Keith’s face, “no, Keith.”

“...You just said you loved me,” said Keith, and the words tasted surreal in his mouth.

“I do love you,” said Lance, but he looked like he was confessing something awful.

They remained there, bracketed between the stars and the water, a thin in-between; their mirrored selves clutching at each other as if any moment, something would break the illusion in the lake.

“Do you remember when you walked into the lake,” said Lance, after a long while, “when I sang.”

Keith frowned.

“I mean, I don’t remember it. But apparently it happened. That was ages ago. Why?”

“I think my singing...I think merfolk singing affects avians and galra in strange ways,” said Lance, unable to hold Keith’s gaze. Reflexively, Keith reached for Lance’s hand, slowly. To his relief, Lance laced their fingers together.

“Okay,” said Keith, encouragingly. “What has that got anything to do with...us?”

“It makes people...act strange,” said Lance, still not meeting his gaze, “I don’t know. It just. This one galra reacted...he wanted me to sing all the time and he … I don’t know. I just think perhaps you shouldn’t be so sure. About how you feel.”

Keith felt his eyes bug out of his head.

“That’s - Lance we’ve been miles and miles apart for months and months,” he said, a small burst of hysterical laughter bubbling up his throat, “we - Lance, it’s not. I’m not hypnotized - “

“If you were, you wouldn’t know,” said Lance, and there was a little stubborn moue to his mouth.

“I have been knocked out and tranquilised multiple times,” said Keith, flatly, “I’m not hypnotised. Also I’m not Galra.”

Lance eyed him. His eyes were wet, but some of the awful doubt had faded from his face.

“I don’t know,” he said, and his thumb poked gently at the corner of Keith’s mouth, “you’ve got little fangs here.”
Keith made a face.

“I do not have fangs,” he said, running his tongue over the edge of his teeth.

“You do,” said Lance, “tiny baby ones.”

And to prove it, Lance leaned up and kissed him, a press of lips and teeth against Keith’s own. Keith chased the kiss over the edge of the water, and there was a violent rocking as the boat tipped.

“Ah!” said Lance, “No - your wing! You can’t get wet!”

“Fuck the wing,” said Keith, but he found himself being pushed back as Lance tried to heave himself over the edge of the boat. The dinghy rocked again, and Keith stuck out his good wing for balance.

It was clear from his stiff movements that Lance was in pain. Keith had seen him pull up on rocks much higher than this countless times, and it was always a smooth, fluid movement. He could see it in his mind’s eye now, the twist from the hip and the tail would whipcord through the water, propelling Lance up onto land. Now, Lance struggled, hip pressed on the edge of the wood while his tail slapped onto the side of the boat.

His face was pulled tight with discomfort, and Keith could see where the scales were rubbed thin or gone. It must hurt.

“Hey, no,” he said, “what are you doing?”

“Lie down,” said Lance.

Keith eyed the narrow boat.

“We could go back to shore and - “

“Everyone’s listening,” said Lance, “I don’t trust them. I just. I just want to be us, for a little bit. Help me over.”

Keith hesitated, but he grabbed Lance by the hips, not wanting to see him hurt himself in the attempt.

“I really think you should stay in the water,” said Keith, “You’ve - you don’t look so good.”

“I know I’m ugly right now,” snapped Lance, “I just miss - “

“Hey,” said Keith, “Don’t say that. I just want you to be safe. I’m just...I’m scared of you drying out.”

Lance exhaled.

“It’ll just be for a little bit,” he said after a moment, “I just. I’m so happy you’re alive, Keith. That’s all I ever wanted.”

Keith’s heart wasn’t going to survive the evening. It hurt, bruised blue like the water from where it was pressed tight against his ribs.

“Same,” he said, “I...I was really scared. I was scared we’d be too late.”

It took a lot of careful maneuvering and positioning of pillows until Keith could lie down. It was
surprisingly comfortable; the slope of the boat meant that his injured wing could be propped up without touching the water, and his good wing could be tucked to his side. The dinghy was narrow but long, and it was big enough for Lance to press himself along Keith’s uninjured side, body cushioned by the rough blanket until they were lying next to each other, Lance’s tail half draped into the water.

The water rocked them gently as they settled, and it felt like the lake was holding them in the palm of her hand. For the first time in a very long time, Keith felt safe.

Lance pressed a cool cheek against Keith’s neck, one arm slung across his chest, the other stroking the soft down feathers in reach. All Keith could see was the sky and the long glittering line of Lance’s tail, the sharp silhouette of his nose and the shape of his eyes.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” said Lance, tracing the words into Keith’s collarbone.

“I can’t believe it either,” said Keith.

The lulling of the water was soothing, and Keith found his eyes closing despite his desperate efforts to keep them open.

“I forgot how warm you are,” whispered Lance, “and soft.”

“I love you,” said Keith, just in case Lance forgot. He yawned, turning his face into the crown of Lance’s head. He smelled like fresh lake water; like stones somewhere deep underground. “I love you. I’m just...bad at it.”

He could feel Lance’s laughter as small huffs of breath against his neck. Lance nosed at the hollow of his throat, and Keith leaned back, shifting a little so he could spread out his good wing along the side of the boat. It shielded them, warm.

A small splash, in tandem with the rocking of the boat. Lance, keeping them steady.

They kissed each other, unhurried and careful under the moon. There were no reflections to witness them, but it felt more real for it. Keith pressed a hand to Lance’s side, and he could feel the jut of ribs and he swallowed his anger in favour of another kiss, then another, then two more - one for each eyelid.

At some point, in between the rocking of the boat and the sensation of fingers carding through his hair, Keith fell asleep.

They fell into a fragile routine in the coming days.

Lance refused to come to shore to talk to the galra. The Blades were reluctant to row out into the middle of the lake to confront him, and they reached a strange impasse where Pidge, Shiro and Keith camped out by the lake, while at least one blade member and a centaur would keep them company. They slept out in the open whilst the avians and Pidge slept in the tents, but they would take it in turns to keep watch on eachother.

It was difficult, along the civilian trade routes, the Blades said.

Patrols have been increased. Getting Lance and two avians out of the valley would be tricky.

“It would be better for us to transport him on our own,” one of the Blades suggested, “we can blend in much more easily, and it would just be a matter of hiding one merman instead of two
avains as well.”

“Not going to work,” said Keith, flatly.

The Blade had raised a thin, high eyebrow.

“Lance would not react well to being alone with strangers,” said Shiro smoothly, “Especially...given his recent ordeal.”

“Well perhaps if we could talk to him - “ said the Blade.

“You want to sit on a tiny boat in the middle of one of the deepest lakes on this continent...” said Pidge, not even looking up from her scrutiny of the map, “...and try convince a merman to sit in a tank of water, at the mercy of galra....after he was transported in captivity in a tank of water, at the mercy of galra.”

She whistled, and jabbed a pin into the map.

“Good luck my dudes,” she said, “I hope you know how to swim real fast.”

The conversation had not gone anywhere after that.

Keith spent a lot of time on the lake.

He would take the dinghy and row out to the centre, where the shore was very far away and it could just be him and Lance and the sky. They would sit for hours like this, Lance floating beside the boat or resting along the edge of it, rocking the dinghy rhythmically with his tail.

Sometimes, he would disappear abruptly into the water...only to return with a pinched, ashen face.

When asked, Lance would just say:

“Tail hurts,” and refused to say anything else.

“We’re trying to figure out a way to get you back to sea,” said Keith, and he knew his own voice was strained and desperate, “it’s almost a week on foot and just… there’s galra everywhere.”

“I know,” said Lance, “you can’t do anything about that.”

“I just - argh!” said Keith, frustration palatable in the air, “you need the ocean....have you been eating alright? You ...still look thin.”

Lance shrugged.

“I don't think fresh water fish sits well with me,” he said, “...I don’t know. I don’t feel very good. I think it’s just my tail. Hurts a lot.”

Keith pulled at his hair.

“We need to get you back. Maybe one of us can fly out to get help. Even if we fly low, it’s still safer than going by foot. You’ll have to be in a tank, and if anyone stops us, we’re fucked.”

Lance visibly shuddered at the word tank, and he shrank back into the water even though it was just the two of them and the wide open space.
“No tanks,” he said, voice very small.

“No tanks,” promised Keith, heart constricting into his throat, “I’m sorry.”

After so long apart, every moment together felt hyper vivid.

Lance didn’t join Keith in the boat again - his tail hurt too much to be out of the water - but Keith rowed out as soon as they were done discussing possible routes to the sea, rowed out to keep Lance company. It was peaceful, after everything, and it felt unbearably precious.

“Is there anything scary, down there?” he’d asked the next day.

Lance considered him.

“Just a few sleepy crocodiles,” he said, “with very flat snouts though.”

“Alligators?” said Keith, pulling his hand hastily out of the water. That had made Lance laugh, a half aborted noise that still made Keith warm all over. He leaned upwards and brushed their noses together.

“I might be clumsy right now,” said Lance, “but I’m still more than a match for any alligators. I’ll protect you.”

Something had changed between them that first night, shifted in some small but fundamental way and Keith could still hear the way Lance’s voice had broke in his grief. He could still hear the ringing scream and the shatter of glass; everything going bright, violent purple before snapping to black.

They didn’t talk about the rescue, or the people they left behind.

It felt too helpless, too soon.

Marion, the doctor, had not been happy that Keith was electing to camp down by the lake instead of sleeping in a proper bed. Keith wasn’t sure if it would have made a difference - he thought the crippling muscle seizures were more likely the result of flight-exhaustion than bullets anyway.

He and Shiro had taken to waking each-other up throughout the night with muscle seizures… and whilst neither were strangers to wing-cramps, this was the worst Keith had ever felt. Often it would happen without warning: a hot flare of pulling pain that would force a wing to snap out, the involuntary movement make Keith shout when it jerked against the stitches and splint. When Shiro was there, it was a little easier to bear - Shiro knew which muscles to press to stem the spasms, and it wasn’t the first time they had helped each other with a badly pulled wing.

Keith had a reputation for being a good diver - and that reputation came with its own costs.

Once, he had swept his wings back to sit down - and next thing he knew, Keith was hunched over at the door of his tent, trying to hold his own wing still as it shuddered. Keith didn’t realise he was crying out until Shiro had ran over from where he had been talking to Pidge and one of the centaurs, skidding to a stop, hands outstretched. He had fallen to his knees, pulling Keith bodily against him and pinning his good wing still. Shiro smelled of damp grass and dry sand, and Keith had to press his eyes shut against the bone of his shoulder.
His wing felt like it desperately needed to stretch *outwards*, but at the same time any movement made frissions of pain jolt up all the way down to his elbows.

“Hey, you’re okay,” Shiro was saying, warm and steady, “I’ve got you. I’ve got you. You’re gonna be okay.”

Keith’s jaw still ached from how hard he had clenched his teeth.

“S-sorry, it j-just keeps b-“

“Deep breaths, shh, *shh.*”

Shiro had ground the heel of his broad palm hard into the knot of muscle up near Keith’s wingblades; using the other to hold the joint still. It wasn’t a favour that Keith could quite return as Shiro’s wings were much wider and Keith’s hands had nowhere near the same amount of strength.

“Just breathe it out,” Shiro would say, words rounded with familiarity, “breathe it out - you’re gonna be okay. You’re gonna be okay.”

But Shiro wasn’t always there, and the the first time Lance witnessed a particularly bad episode, he had cried.

“Just gimme a minute,” Keith said, gritting his teeth so hard he could hear them grinding. It was his hurt wing this time, and he longed to stretch it out, to force the spasms to run its course...but of course it was still splinted. His wing jerked spasmodically against the wooden shaft it was bound to and Keith made a gutturals noise, ankle hitting the side of the boat as his whole body shuddered. His good wing snapped outwards in sympathy, and it made a *woosh-thwump* over the water.

“Oh god,” Lance was saying, panicked, “You need - you need Shiro, I’ll push you back ...Keith? Can I push - ?”

The thought of movement made Keith want to throw up, and he made a while noise of dissent.

“No, *no*, just...give me a minute...” said Keith, and he hunched over, pushing his head between his knees and hooking his elbow over the wing, careless of the way it messed up his feathers. It strained the muscle across his wing-blades, but it helped a little bit, even as the wing still shivered and jerked.

Recovery position that every avian knew.

His toes curled against the pain, and he could hear his own panting breaths, loud and choked off. He came up for breath, and saw that Lance’s eyes were very wide; expression panicked. He was looking around them wildly, half out of the water, arms straining.

He lay a hand on Keith’s forehead, and Keith whimpered at the cool sensation. He turned his face towards Lance’s hand, even as his wing continued to tremor.

“A minute - “ Keith stuttered, “…*f-fuck* it’s not usually this bad - I’m - “

His words were swallowed up by a grunt of pain.

Lance made a sympathetic noise, a half threaded note deep in his throat.

It petered out into a cough.
He made it again...and again - and it through the haze of pain and tears, it took Keith a moment to realise Lance was trying to sing. The merman coughed, hoarse and raw, followed by an angry splash of water.

The sound changed to a low crooning sound that Keith had heard before, back when Shiro had been sick and delirious with fever. He managed a few notes, and this close, it seemed to reverberate, making Keith sigh with relief, even for the briefest of moments.

But Lance’s voice was thin now, and he kept breaking into coughs.

“Don’t - you’ll hurt yourself,” Keith managed, “Just … I’ll be fine in a second.”

Lance made a clicking noise at him, frantic, followed by another aborted attempt at a humming tune. He managed a few moments more before it dissolved into coughing. Keith reached out, blindly, for Lance’s hand - but had to clench his fingers back into his own wing to stop it from moving.

It took longer than a second, but eventually the worst of the pain passed.

The paralysing-stinging sensation faded slowly from the tip of his wings down to his neck, shrinking to from the all consuming fire to a background noise of aches and a faint buzz, like pins and needles. It left his muscles feeling twitchy; tense and loose all once.

Groaning, Keith uncurled from his fetal position, shaking out his good wing and gingerly lifting his injured one. He wiped his eyes hastily on his sleeve, blinking. Lance was still there...but he looked absolutely devastated. His knuckles were white where they clutched the edge of the boat, and his face was pale.

“I’m sorry,” Lance said, voice thready, “I - I just wanted to help, I know it hurts less when I sing…”

His voice broke off into an awful sob.

“I just don’t want you to hurt anymore...and I can’t even - I can’t even -”

“No, it’s okay,” said Keith, “see I’m all fine, Lance, please don’t cry, you just need time to heal and - “

“I’m useless!” Lance shouted, but the words came out as a wheezing cough, “You’re in so much pain, and I can’t do anything…”

Keith felt like someone was shredding his heart into pieces.

“This is normal after big flights,” he tried to say, “happens to everyone. It’s normal. It goes away after a while.”

But Lance was inconsolable.

“You need Shiro,” he said, looking to shore, “You shouldn’t be out here. Shiro can help. I’ll push you as far as I can.”

“No,” Keith protested, flailing his hands, “Lance, your tail - “

But Lance was already ducking under the boat; the water churning and gurgling around the dinghy. After a moment, it wobbled, making Keith grab onto the side with a yelp. Slowly, it began making
its unsteady way towards the shore.

“Fuck,” said Keith, wiping his eyes with his hands, “fuck.”

Lance didn’t resurface that evening.

Eventually, Keith fell prey to sleep.

They had taken their dinner by the water’s edge, as they had done for the past few nights. The air was chilled with winter, but they had thick woollen blankets and hot soup in steaming steel containers. They couldn’t light any open fires, but the soft glow of lamp was more than enough.

They sat, huddled together, Shiro, Pidge, Keith and Coran. Vinar was close by, talking quietly with Axca and the two Blades whose yellow eyes were the next brightest thing in the dark hush of the surrounding forest. Shiro had one wing draped over Pidge for warmth, and the smaller human was barely visible above her swaddle of blankets. They had given both Keith and Shiro something for the pain; a mud-coloured powder medicine that tasted like vomit.

Occasionally, something would rustle in the tall grass, and Keith could see the galra’s ears flick in their direction.

But Keith was too distracted by Lance’s absence to really talk much. He kept looking out over the dark mirrored surface of the lake, watching for any sign of Lance: for any splash or flicker of scales. Shiro had to nudge him several times to finish his soup before it became too cold.

“He needs rest too,” said Shiro, the fourth time this happened, “or just some alone time to swim.”

Keith stared at the moon in the water, a puddle of silver-white.

“I should check on him,” he said, toeing the sand. The sound it made against his boot was very different to the soft crush of sea sand. He stood a little too fast, and the world seemed to blur a little before snapping back into focus. And when it did, Shiro was right there, face alarmed. He had one hand on Keith’s neck, and it took another long moment before Keith realised he was leaning.

“Yeah we are not going anywhere,” came Pidge’s voice from somewhere behind him, “he’ll be here in the morning, Keith.”

“You’re going to bed,” said Shiro, bundling Keith into his tent, “come on, you’re dead on your feet.”

Keith remembered protesting, but could not recall what he said.

(But I need to see if he’s okay -

*If you row out there you’ll drown, honestly, Keith.*)

He remembered Shiro helping him undress, checking on his splinted wing and piling the blankets more comfortably around the makeshift mattress. He felt like a fledgling again, clumsy and half awake. He remembered the weight of the wool, a little scratchy but very warm, heavy on his chest. Or perhaps that had been Shiro’s broad palm, measuring out each of his exhales like an old clockmaker with a treasured time-piece.

“I’ll take first watch,” he remembered Shiro saying, “Pidge will take second. You sleep, okay?”
And he must have fallen asleep, because he dreamed of a sunny cloudless sky and Lance with a tail as blue and as blinding as the sea.

_Oh Keef_, dream-Lance was saying, splashing them with salt spray with a flick of his iridescent fins, _why are you all grey now? I liked you better when you were red._

_It'll grow back red_, Keith had tried to explain, but dream-Lance just cocked his head, confused. Keith looked to where he was staring, and with a jolt, realised that his bullet wound had reopened and his blood was soaking the feathers a dark, damp red. It was barely the colour of rust -

- and suddenly Keith was falling, he was falling because he just got _shot_ and he was tumbling wing-tip over wing-tip, shouting as he fell, screaming for Shiro, for someone - trying desperately to spread his wings, to catch an updraft, anything, _anything_ -

Keith woke with a yell, jolting upright, heart pounding.

It was as if the wind was still screaming past his ears, and it took him several long moments to realise that the feather-raising sound wasn’t the leftover buzz of nightmare adrenaline. It was actual screaming.

Someone was screaming, a pale, shrieking, inhuman noise that rose and fell. Keith scrambled out of his blankets, stumbling out of his tent. Beside him, Shiro and Pidge were emerging from their tents too. One of the galra was trashing on the ground, clutching at his head, while the other had one hand pressed to his ear, eyes slitted with pain.

“What on god’s _earth_ - !” he was saying.

For a moment, Keith was disoriented, squinting into the darkness for the source of the noise. The awful screaming seemed to echo off the surface of the water, but it sounded much closer, it was…

...There was a dark shadow at the edge of the lake, a slim silhouette. It was familiar, but there was something _off_ about it...

Keith felt like someone had taken a hook to his ribs and _yanked_.

“Lance?” he shouted, breaking into a run, “Lance!”

The screaming had petered off, but Keith could still hear the aftertaste of it, brittle and fearful in the air. They had pitched their tents not far from the water, and so it took barely five breaths before Keith’s feet hit the pebble-sand. And he could see Lance now, half in the shallows, half out - and for a second, Keith thought the merman had accidentally beached himself. He was thrashing, body bent at the waist and the water splashing frantically, breaking the reflection of the moon into a thousand pieces.

Lance was still making that chilling sound, a wheezing-whimper that made all of Keith’s feather stand on end.

“Lance!” he shouted, crashing to his knees, wings half snapping out instinctively against the impact, “Lance - what - “

The words died in his throat. Keith felt his limbs freeze, hands stuttering to a halt, unable to comprehend what he was looking at.

Lance _keened_, and Keith could hear the ragged noise of his panicked breathing, his lips mouthing ‘_wake me up_’ and _no, please, no_’ over and over as Lance struggled in the water. It splashed and
churned with the scent of the lake and something rotting that made Keith gag. He reached out for Lance nevertheless, and the merman shrieked, flinching away but then immediately latching onto Keith’s wrists with hands of a man who had never drowned before.

“Please,” he was saying, gills opening and closing as if he was still underwater. And even though his luminous eyes were fixed on Keith’s, they were glazed and his words incoherent: “Keith, please, please, no, no, no, make it stop, make it stop - !”

There was shouting, somewhere behind them. Abruptly, Lance let go of Keith, body bent almost double and his hands scrabbling desperately at his tail…

….or at least what was left of it.

Because there, surrounded by silver-grey slough and the shredded remains of a tail-fin, was a pair of long, slender human legs.

Chapter End Notes

Ah I thought this chapter would be shorter but it's 24.7K. I hope this wasn't emotionally anticlimactic...because the journey to get here has been so long....both for Lance + Keith and me ;A; I can't believe it's been almost two years since we started Watercast. The story has been working to this emotional point for so long that I don't really know how it reads anymore. I feel like I haven't done it justice but i'ts been stressing me out so much i just had to write it and let it go. I really hope it was a satisfying emotional point...i've been wanting to write this plot moment for such a long time...

Thank you for still reading!! It means so much to me you're still here. ❤️ I'm really struggling in RL and it just keeps getting worse and worse and you guys / fic is only place I have. I can't believe this is almost over (at least Arc 1 anyway). I feel so bereaved already.

If you want to support me, please visit my tumblr ❤️❤️ plus I think This Bitter Earth from the Fic Soundtrack is extra appropriate for the end of this chapter alskdfja. Gosh i have so many outtakes and fluff I want to post. Please subscribe the Watercast Verse to get alerts!

Thank you to soylante + astereinn for holding my hand every step of the way. Thanks also to karovie + pterodoty! for beta help! ❤️ pls come talk to me about anything ahh. I hope the pseudo-science build up to this Plot Point has made it a good read!!! alskdfjalj.
"People say you don't know what you've got until it's gone. Truth is, you knew what you had, you just never thought you'd lose it." Lance is forced to leave something behind; Keith tries desperately to replace it in the only way he knows how.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Love is not a feeling of happiness, it is a willingness to sacrifice."
- Michael Novak

:i:

There was no mistaking what they were seeing.

The moonlight spilled silver and flat across the water, made too bright by the sound of Lance’s panicked breathing and the splash-churn of water as he pushed himself clumsily away from the edge of the lake, skin scraping on the rough sand and stone as he tried to move back into the lake.

“Holy...is that - “

“What the hell.”

Keith was frozen with shock, and in his periphery, he could see Pidge and Shiro and the others by their luminous eyes. Their shadows fell across Lance, who was still staring down at himself with wild blown pupils. Keith could smell where Lance had cut himself on the small sharp rocks, the scent of blood as sharp as the silhouette of unfamiliar ankles and knees in the clear water.

Lance was still making that awful, high-pitched wheezing sound, nails scoring the length of his own thighs - and Keith was wading into the lake before his brain caught up with his muscles.

“Lance,” he said, trying to pitch his voice low and calm, “hey, hey stop that, you’ll hurt yourself...”

Lance didn’t seem to hear him.

Keith frowned, reaching out automatically for Lance’s shoulder, for his wrist where his nails were digging, white knuckled into skin. Keith’s fingers barely breached the water -

“Lance, you h-”

There was a hot flare of pain as Lance whipped his head around, teeth bared in an open-mouthed hiss - bite that had Keith lurching backwards with a shout of alarm, snapping his hand back reflexively. He fell hard in the shallow water, heart hammering with something very close to fear.

“Keith!”
It was Shiro, hauling him bodily out of the water, one arm braced beneath the shoulder-blade of Keith’s injured wing. Keith stared at Lance, who was staring back at them with that same wild-eyed, unseeing stare; teeth silver-white and chest heaving. His pupils were slitted in the morning light, darting from Keith to Shiro, to the centaurs and galra that were standing around them.

“Oh shit,” someone said, “you’re bleeding - ?”

“I’m fine,” said Keith, curling his fingers, “I’m fine, stop it.”

He could feel the hot slide of blood along the edge of his palm and wrist, but it barely registered against the roaring static in his ears. His heart was still pounding against his ribs, just below his throat. Keith swallowed hard, willing his voice steady.

“Lance…” he tried again.

“Don’t touch me!” said Lance, the words barely audible between the hitch in his breath and he flailed again, chest deep in the lake. There was something deeply disturbing to seeing the merman so disoriented and clumsy in water, and Keith could not be sure if it wasn’t some exhaustion-induced nightmare. Lance’s words were interspersed with chatter-fast clicks, the lip of his gills opening and closing like the blur of hummingbird wings.

There was very little colour in his face.

“...don’t - oh god, what’s happening...wake me up, wake me up, w….I said stay back!”

Pidge froze on Keith’s other side.

“Lance, it’s going to be okay,” said Shiro, the smooth baritone of his voice cutting through the panic like balm, “everyone get back. I said get back! Give him some space.”

The centaurs had not come closer than the water’s edge, but the two Galra straightened where they were crouched, eyes barely blinking as they shifted backwards. The water lapped at the lake bank, like the pages of a book moved by the wind: back and forth, back and forth. Keith slowly clambered to his feet, good wing tucked tight to his back, his injured wing aching a little from the movement and adrenaline. For a heavy minute, no one said anything, the seconds punctuated only by the sound of Lance’s quiet panic.

“Lance,” Shiro repeated, “breathe. Lean back in the water if that’s easier - no one is going to come closer, okay? You’re gonna be alright. But you have to breathe. Can you do that for me?”

Even though the words weren’t for him, Keith felt his own heartbeat calm a fraction; muscle memory attuned to that voice like the ring of a tuning fork, struck hard and steady.

Lance was still staring at them, eyes big - but some of tension seemed to bleed out from the white-knuckled grip he had on his own knees. His knees. Keith couldn’t stop staring at the shadow of them in the water.

Jerkily, Lance nodded.

For a startling moment, Keith couldn’t remember whether his eyes were always so slitted in the daylight. Had he always looked...so alien?

“Great,” said Shiro, and his wings were tucked neatly behind him as well that way he did whenever Shiro was trying to look smaller than he was. “You’re doing great. Just breathe. Take your time, okay?”
Lance nodded again. The rest of his body was statue still.

Keith wasn’t sure how long they all stood there - half kneeling in the water, half out. The night air rustled their feathers, and he realised belatedly that Shiro was in his undershirt and it must be cold. His arm was steady beneath Keith’s wing, holding him up.

No one wanted to be the first to move.

Then,

“What’s happening?” said Lance, words strained. “Why - I don’t …” his eyes went from one face to the other, and he hunched over, deeper in the water.

“You should get out of the lake,” said Pidge quietly, “the water isn’t - “

“No!” said Lance, voice cracking, “no, no I need to wait, it’ll turn back if I say here, don’t make me- “

“No one is making you get out,” said Shiro sharply.

“It’s a fresh water lake,” said Pidge, voice rising a little with frustration, “it must be what caused the transformation in the first place, I told you the salinity of - “

“No,” said Lance, face crumpling, “no, no, I’m not leaving, I’m not going back on land, I’m -”

Pidge opened her mouth, no doubt to try to explain - but Shiro cut her off with an alarmed look.

“Lance, breathe.“

“Go away,” said Lance, “stop staring at me, stop staring at me!”

“Okay,” said Keith, feeling like someone was sanding away at his ribs. It hurt to breathe. “Okay we’ll go - we’ll be by the shore, okay, we won’t leave but - “

Lance let out a hissing wailing noise, and behind them, Regris let out a pained curse. Lance scrambled backwards, at the sound, teeth flashing past his lower-lip...but the merman must have hit a dip in the lake floor because there was a gasp before his head disappeared under water.

“Lance!” said Keith, launching himself forwards but found himself pulled up short by Shiro’s other arm across his chest.

“No, stop it - Pidge, you too, move back, we’re not helping here.”

“Shiro he has legs,” exclaimed Pidge, “ how do we know if anything else has chan-”

Lance’s head resurfaced, but he was bobbing up and down unsteadily, eyes wide with panic behind the film of his first set of eyelids. Then he disappeared again.

Everyone held their breaths, waiting. But when five minutes past with no sign of Lance, Shiro shifted his wings.

“Let’s get back to shore,” he said, quietly, “we’re just going to panic him like this. Fall back.”

“But - “ said Pidge.

“Are you going to drag him out of the water?” snapped Shiro, and there was a pallor to his skin that
made Pidge go quiet. Her eyes kept returning to the water, now blank and quiet.

Numbly, Keith did as he was told, slow awareness sinking like the chill of the night air against his skin and soaked clothes. Pidge followed him and Shiro as they splashed their way out of the shallows and stood there in a half semi circle, shivering and watching the surface of the lake.

“What. The. Fuck.” said one of the centaurs.

“Did you know this would happen?” Regris demanded, gaze falling on one avian to the other, “what in the name of -?”

“Have you heard of merfolk sprouting legs and running around on land?” Keith retorted, something hysterical bubbling inside his lungs. “Of course we didn’t fucking know.”

“Must be a survival mechanism,” said Pidge, wringing out the water from her trousers. Her voice shook a little, but whether it was from the cold or from the shock, Keith couldn’t tell. He traded a look of utter disbelief with Shiro, whose mouth was pressed into a hard line of worry.

“I’ve never heard of such a thing to happen,” said Vārok, “except fairy tales.”

“Well I’d imagine if a mermaid did manage to, she wouldn’t go around blabbing about it,” said the other centaur.

“Listen to yourself…” said her companion.

“I knew something would happen if we didn’t get him to the ocean quick enough,” said Pidge, turning to Shiro and Keith. Shiro still had one wing throw around her shoulders protectively, and Keith had a sudden wild and intense urge to dive under Shiro’s other wing as well. He resisted, tucking his good wing closer to his arm, which was goose-pimpling in the early morning breeze.

“This is a fresh springwater lake,” Pidge continued, clenching and unclenching her fists, “saltwater mammals and fresh water ones can’t usually survive in the wrong environment - “

“How does that explain - explain legs?” said Keith, “He’s - how does that even work?!"

“I don’t know!” said Pidge, pulling at her own hair in visible frustration, “I’m just guessing as much as you! There’s not exactly a lot of literature on merfolk, and I read up on a lot after meeting Lance and Hunk. But it makes a lot of sense, doesn’t it?” her voice trailed off into a thoughtful stream of muttering as she stared hard across the lake, as if she could see right through the water to where Lance was.

“If a mermaid gets stranded on land, makes sense the body would have some kind of...emergency metamorphosis so that the organism doesn’t starve to death. Or dry out... that must be the trigger. Heat and changing pressure, maybe? Most aquatic mammals dehydrate and die within a few hours on land..but Lance has been missing for weeks and weeks...”

“They were keeping him in a tank,” said Shiro very quietly, “a big one.”

“Was it fresh water?” asked Pidge, sharply.

Shiro looked at Keith, who wracked his brain. The details of their capture seemed at once vivid and also a blur of nausea.

“I can’t remember,” he said reluctantly.
“His tail didn’t look very good when I saw him,” said Pidge, voice barely above a whisper, “do you think…”

But Keith was doing the math in his head, and the more he thought about it, the colder his blood; frozen.

“...do you think it was the flight back that did it?” he said, words very hoarse in his mouth. They tasted like ash and the tang of dried blood, “what if…"

“There was no choice,” Shiro interrupted. “Keith.”

“How long did we fly for?” said Keith, feeling sick, “and then the journey overland...we took almost a day, it was --"

“We had no choice,” said Shiro firmly, “there wasn’t any other way.”

There might have been another way, said a small insidious voice at the back of Keith’s mind, as hushed as willow-whispers, leaf soft on the sand. There might have been...if you hadn’t gotten caught. But it’s too late now.

Pidge reached for Shiro’s hand, and he squeezed hers in return. Keith shuffled closer, wary of the Galran gaze at his back. Wordlessly, Shiro lifted his left wing for him.

You had the blank gun, said the voice, and Keith squeezed his eyes shut. If you hadn’t insisted on going, maybe there might have been another way.

A full day passed, and Lance did not resurface.

Keith let the altean doctor inspect the stitches around his bullet wound without fuss, and in return he stole two palm-length medical scalpels and a surgical knife from the trolley-cabinet when no one was looking. Then he stole a bigger knife from the kitchens which was roughly the size of his old blade. The weighting was all wrong, and it was blunt on one edge, but Keith hid it in between his wooden splints. He could sharpen the blunt edge later, and the smaller knives stashed comfortably against his calves, out of sight inside his boots.

Shiro caught him at it - because nothing Keith did ever went unnoticed by Shiro. That evening, when they returned to their tent, Keith braced himself for a telling off...only for Shiro to pull out three handguns.

They grinned at each other then, brothers in arms, their shadows overlapping in the oil-light.

Deftly, Shiro disassembled the cartridge on one-handed. And there, sitting on his palm, were bullets like gold coins.

“If it comes to it,” said Shiro, great wings hooked like a falcon’s over prey. Keith nodded.

“I’ll watch your back,” he said.

“I know you will,” said Shiro.

The weapons made Keith feel minutely better about being stuck on the ground; the uncomfortable buzz of tension itching under his feathers. He knew it was bothering Shiro as well, even though the other Avian didn’t complain. He paced, instead, the slope of his wings a dark glossy silhouette at night.
Keith caught some of the human and centaur resistance members staring at them whenever they thought the avians weren’t looking. Axca had taken to climbing trees and sitting on branches like some oversized crow, her eyes a curious pale yellow in the dark.

Wherever the galra were, she was not far away. Speaking of which...

“We need to talk,” said Regris, as the sun dipped rapidly behind the mountain-range on the second night after Lance’s transformation.

They were sitting outside of their tents, warm steel-bowls in hand. They shared a plate of hard dense bread between them, and a huge jug of slightly bitter sweet tea.

At Regris’ words, Pidge’s head snapped up. One of her cheeks bulged from the bread, but she squinted behind her glasses, suspicious. She had her knees folded almost to her chin, a large book by her calf and a sheaf of papers at her elbow. Tucked in her usual position underneath the crook of Shiro’s left wing, she looked like a demented pygmy owl.

She chewed, deliberately slow, not answering.

“What about,” Keith said, impatience winning out.

The galra turn his luminous eyes on Keith, unblinking. He really was tall, he and Vārok both. On earth, neither Shiro nor Keith stood a chance.

“What we’re going to do with his highness,” said Regris, gesturing at the water. “We need a new plan.”

“Why,” asked Keith, flatly, “we go with our old plan. Get Lance back to the ocean as fast as possible.”

A pause.

“I’m not sure that’s necessarily the wisest course of action right now,” said Regris, sounding like he was picking his words very carefully.

“Of course it’s the wisest course of action,” said Shiro calmly, “it’s our only course of action, unless you want him to die here.”

Keith made a strangled noise; it slipped out against his will. Vārok shot him a knowing sort of look.

“I’m not sure the merfolk would take kindly to...the latest developments,” said Regris.

Pidge had managed to swallow her giant mouthful of food.

“Uh, I’m pretty sure they would take even less kindly to not getting Lance back,” she said, “we’re going with Plan A.”

Impatience and something very close to contempt flashed across Regris’ face.

“They may very well blame us for the state that he is in,” said the galra, setting aside his food. Keith mirrored him quietly, wanting his hands free. Beside him, Shiro had gone still.

“If by us, you mean the Galra, then yeah, probably,” said Pidge, with an air of careful but dangerous nonchalance. Keith admired her resolve, but his own nerves were so on edge one could use it as a whetting stone.
“Look,” said Vārok, clearly uncomfortable with the tension, “there’s a lot at stake - the alliance - “

Keith stabbed his fork into a lumpy potato with vengeance, and the movement was not lost of Vārok, who winced.

“ - the *alliance* that we’ve been working so hard towards - “

“So hard that you didn’t bother turning up at the rendezvous,” said Pidge, not letting up. She pointed at Keith’s injured wing, “mmhm.”

“Pidge,” said Shiro, a warning edge to his tone.

Regris leaned forwards, using his height to loom over Pidge in his displeasure.

“How dare you,” he said, “the Blade have sacrificed - “

“You’re afraid they’re gonna shoot the messenger,” said Pidge, shrewdly, “you were all for it when the Avians were going to carry Lance there, but now that they can’t, now Lance has legs and you don’t know what his mom would do, you don’t want to become collateral. Well, tough titties, because - “

Regris’ lips pulled back into a snarl and his fangs were very white in the dark.

Before the galra could get up however, Keith shuffled his wings, tucking them far enough back so that the fire could reflect off the blade of his knife. He tilted his wrist so that the sliver of flame hit Regris in the left eye. Keith raised his eyebrow. He could see Regris’ eye twitching, and felt no small flicker of smug satisfaction when he blinked. Vārok snorted, ears swivelling.

“My Brothers gave their lives to save you,” said Regris at last, “they knew the cost, and willingly paid. The naval blockade is starving innocent people. We need to think carefully about possible Mermish retaliation before we risk any more civilians - “

“Innocent,” said Keith, “Lance is innocent. He paid.”

A beat.

“You’re a child,” said Regris, standing abruptly. Keith tensed, but the galra made no move to attack, only to glare at him with those deep yellow eyes. “I knew it was foolish to even-“

He broke himself off, eyes narrowed into slits.

“I have no patience to reason with a child,” he spat. And with that he turned and strode off into the forest. Vārok sighed heavily, ears twitching and swivelling in constant motion. It really did remind Keith of the cats back in the city.

“They were really close, I think,” said Vārok after a moment. Then, “we’re on your side, you know.”

“Are you?” challenged Pidge, just as Shiro asked “who?”

Vārok shrugged.

“Regris and the doctor,” he said. He seemed to study Keith’s face for a long time. “By all accounts he saved your life.”

Keith didn’t have an answer for that.
“I only met him a few times...but he was always at the capital so. He was nice, to the newbies.”

“We’re grateful for your assistance,” said Shiro, “without the Blade no doubt we would be still trapped in the Palace. But you have to understand that leaving Lance on land is not an option. The Queen was very clear.”

“Well, it’s all moot anyway if the merman doesn’t want to leave the lake,” said Regris, “it’s not like any of us can dive in there and convince him to come out if he doesn’t want to.”

“He needs time,” said Shiro, “it’s traumatic - “

“It’s going to be even more traumatic if his new legs start pruning and falling off,” muttered Pidge, turning a page in the book she was reading. There was some kind of anatomical diagram in there, ink blank and spidery. She bit the end of her pencil and made a little note on one of the margins.

Shiro looked a little queasy at her words, and he set down his bowl too.

“We need to get him back to the ocean,” said Keith, restless, “that’s the only way to turn him back right? Pidge?”

“Mmhm,” said Pidge, not meeting his eyes.

They drank their tea in silence.

It wasn’t until much later that Keith realised he hadn’t seen Axca all day.

For long hours, the thrum of panic filled Lance’s lungs with so much air he felt like how dead fish must feel, silver-bellied and floating like foam.

It was an untethering; like coming up for air and sunlight, and inadvertently leaving something much heavier behind.

Had it been worth it?

It seemed a lifetime ago, but Lance could still remember the exact weight of an avian in a storm; the shape of Matthew’s hand on the other side of glass; Keith saying taking that cup and saying I’m sorry. Lance had been so sure, then - and now there was nothing left of that conviction except the blue scales that clung stubbornly his hands, between his fingers, the like the blood beneath his nails.

The water felt different against his skin - in some strange indeterminate but jarring way that Lance could not put into words. He drifted in and out of sleep, half expecting to wake up choking on nothing. He dreamed of pulling water through his mouth to breathe, only to find that his gills had smoothed over, the seams melting into the flesh of his throat. His chest felt tight, lungs too thin for the confines of his ribs. More than once, he came into consciousness, and found himself much closer to the shimmering surface of the lake than he had been moments before.

He could not look at his legs, the bizarre motion of them in the water making his eyes prickle with panic.

Lance felt numb with it, alone in the turquoise, watching the sun travel slowly from left to right. He could hear voices, sometimes - sound travelled well across the mirror surface, and he could pick out the tenor of Shiro and Keith’s baritone, the low humming-purr that marked the galran voices;
Pidge’s clear words. The sound of someone pacing along the bank of the river, the soft crush of stone beneath thin bladed shoes.

Everything felt surreal: Lance’s thoughts in someone else’s body; a body in someone else’s place.

The water had never felt *cold* before, but it clung to him now. And it was another full day before Lance realised the word he had been looking for, unused because it had never been a need for it. *Wet.*

He didn’t know how long he stayed there, rocked by the rhythm of the water. There was no inexorable pull like at home, when the moon came up, it was as if she were a stranger, and Lance someone else’s child.

Lance curled up in the flowing weeds of the lake bed, clutching his own elbows. He could feel every grain and edge of the sand and rock against his legs, hyper-sensitive without his scales. He stared up at the silver film of the moonlight, the egg-shell shift of it in the water.

He must have lain like this for a long time, because when Lance next came back to himself, he was floating just beneath the surface of the water - and the sun was low against the lake, drowsy and blushing orange and red. And as the sunlight slowly sank into the blue, the blue of it filled Lance with a sudden, wild surge of grief.

He wanted to go home. He wanted to not be alone, trapped in a tank or a lake or in a body that he did not know. He *wanted*…

Swimming was clumsy, with his new legs. Lance couldn’t *move* the way he used to, even with a hurting tail - the new joint (knees, he remembered, *knees*) bent in one direction only, and Lance had to compensate by arching his back in tandem. The movements were slow and ugly and absentely, Lance was grateful no one could see him like this - so *wrong*, disjointed and a thing that did not belong here.

Lance’s feet (oh god, his *feet*) kicked against the rough lake bottom as he drew very close to the sloping banks of the lake, and for a long minute he flailed, elbows half in the pebbles, soles slipping on the moss-covered rocks. Lance gasped, coughing a little as his head and shoulders broke the surface.

The sun was very bright, and the water was clearer than he remembered it last. He could see the bright blue scales about his wrists, a ring of new still-soft scales that had grown in place of the injury. The sun was warm on his face, and Lance turned towards it, eyes closed. He pulled himself forwards with his hands, sweeping his tail back instinctively against the lake bank - only to hiss with pain his feet scraped against rock, a hard scrape along his left thigh.

He could hear raised voices now, the vibration of running feet - then the sound of splashing water.

And there, standing at the very edge, was Keith.

“…Lance?” he called, and Lance felt an answering rush of relief.

Keith sounded just the same as he always did, voice a little rough around the vowels, Lance’s name still the same shape made out between his lips. *Please*, thought Lance a little hysterically, thinking of the way Keith had lain by him on the sand, half his soul bared to the sea and half to the sky. He thought of the way Keith flew close to the water, the silhouette of him against the cliff-edge and the way his eyes would linger on the slope of Lance’s tail. He thought of the warm trace of a thumb, calloused from knives and gloves, running the length of a fanning tail-fin.
Please, thought Lance, pushing himself up on one hand, please still love me, I’m just the same, I’m the same, I’m the same.

“Hey,” said Lance, then coughed some more. He wasn’t sure if the word carried, but Keith was walking into the lake with slow careful steps.

The first time Keith had walked into a lake, he had almost drowned. Lance didn’t know what it said about this bird of his that Keith would keep returning to the water, to where he did not belong: stride as sure and steady as if he had always meant to be there, caught in between the horizon to meet Lance halfway.

There was no hesitation in the line of his mouth, the set of his jaw - Keith’s eyes were shadowed with exhaustion, but the corners of them were crinkled with hope, like the lilt at the end of a handwritten vowel, trailing after its consonant.

He knew, in a startling moment of understanding, that Keith would walk forever if it was asked of him. And Lance realised that watching Keith do it was going to break his heart.

In theory, it looked easy enough.

Lance had seen Pidge stand all the time - he’d seen Shiro and Keith do it, lifting their wings a little to get to their feet. It didn’t look all that difficult - bent legs, then push... but when Lance tucked his legs beside him and tried to push up onto his knees, the sensation of hard stone against new skin was so bizarre and painful he felt back into the water with an aborted cry.

A shadow fell over him as Keith splashed his way over, all previous tentativeness gone from his expression. There was something that looked awfully like pity in the pinch of his mouth though, and Lance felt at once humiliated and grateful to be on the receiving end of such a look. Keith’s wings were half spread behind him, shielding Lance from the sun and the eyes of their onlookers. His hands hovered, uncertain.

He was not wearing gloves.

“Hey yourself,” said Keith softly, somehow managing to smile and frown at the same time. His hair was a mess, pulled back into a loose ponytail. The scar on his cheek had healed over a little, but Lance could still smell the congealed blood. He was almost up to the waist in the water now, and he stumbled a little whenever the breeze caught beneath his wings.

Close behind was Shiro, and Lance could make out more figures along the grassy slope - Pidge, one of the Alteans, Galra. Lance wished they would advert their eyes.

“How...how are you feeling?” asked Keith, hand still outstretched.

“I want to go home,” Lance said in a rush, “I - I just want to go home. Have to get out of this lake.”

“We’ll get you home,” said Keith, and his words were steady as his hand, feathers as red as the blood they swore on, dried under a new day’s sun. He said the words as if they were already fact, as if it could be as easy now as it was back then.

“I promise,” said Keith.

“Okay,” said Lance, and took his hand.
The sun was bright, even filtered through the trees.

“Count of three?” said Keith.

Lance let out a huff of breath, eyes flicking from one face to the other. Then he nodded.

“Okay,” said Keith, wetting his lips against the dryness in his throat, “one...two…”

For a second, Keith wasn’t sure if he should try lifting Lance bodily out of the lake. He hesitated - he could see the shadow of Lance’s knees beneath the water. But Lance made the decision for him in sudden tense line of his shoulders, the moue of his mouth, one hand like a vice around Keith’s, the looping up so that one elbow was hooked around Keith’s neck. Keith spread his wings for balance, his free arm instinctively coming around to steady one hip.

“... three,” said Lance, an exhale right next to Keith’s ear, fingers damp on Keith’s collar. There was a splash as Lance pushed himself clumsily upwards, and Keith straightened with him, a half step back, locking his knees in anticipation for the loose weight of a second body. He could hear another splashing footstep behind him, barely mufflex exclamations - Pidge and Shiro.

But miraculously Lance didn’t fall.

Keith could feel the violent shivering through his splayed palm, but Lance was standing, leaning against the length of Keith’s front, thigh to thigh, chest to chest. He had Keith’s knife hand in a steel grip, and his breathing was coming in rapid-fire gasps, eyes huge in Keith’s periphery.

But still, Lance did not fall.

“Oh my god,” Lance was saying, over and over, “Oh my god - “

“You’re doing great,” said Keith, frozen in place, “wow, I’m - do they feel - ?”

Lance pulled back a little so they could see each other. He let go of Keith’s wrist in favour of gripping his shoulder instead, and Keith could only blink at him, lost for words. There was a smear of gunmetal silver across Lance’s cheek, below the hollow of his eyes. It was like someone had thumbed across the blue scales there, and wiped away the colour as an afterthought. It curved around the edge of his cheek, the burn mark raw on skin.

His eyes were still blue though, and for the first time since the palace, they were clear from pain.

“Keith,” said Lance, eyes crinkling with a smile, “Keef. I’m taller than you.”

Keith just stared at him. Then he made the mistake of glancing downwards - at the slope of long legs disappearing calf-deep into the water, the reflection of blue clustered scales around the back of Lance’s knees and along the side of his soft hip where it ran down the divot of his... - Keith forcibly dragged his gaze back to Lance’s face, feeling a hot flush rise around his ears.

Lance was still looking at him, the shape of eyes soft and fond. And even though the merman was the one standing naked, Keith felt like the one who had been stripped bare to the bone.

“Barely taller,” he managed, tongue clumsy and slow. “Do you...do you want me to carry...?”

“I can carry him,” came Shiro’s tentative voice from over Keith’s shoulder. They both jumped, the presence of their audience momentarily forgotten.

Lance bit his own lip, and Keith caught a flash of sharp canines.
“I can walk,” he said, drawing back his shoulders.

“Right…” said Keith, shrugging apologetically when Lance shot him a glare in reprimand for his dubious tone, “this is - it’s been - no one is going to think less of you if - ”

“I’ve seen all of you walk,” Lance interrupted, staring down at his knees, “it can’t be that hard.”

With some reluctance, Lance withdrew the arm that had been slung over Keith’s shoulders. He held onto both of Keith’s hand instead, their fingers wrapped around each others wrists.

“I’ll catch you,” said Keith, trying to be reassuring.

“I’m not a baby,” snapped Lance.

“I should hope not,” Keith retorted, “babies can’t walk.”

For some reason, this startled Lance, who squinted at Keith.

“Wait, what?” he said, “then how do they get around?”

Keith stared back.

“Um, you carry them,” he said, “can we - can we get you somewhere warmer first? You’re…”

“I’m not cold,” said Lance, impatiently. He was back to staring at his knees. He hadn’t moved.

“You’re naked,” said Keith, lost.

There was that familiar look again, a fond but you’re being an idiot sort of expression that Lance used to wear as a default.

“I’m always naked,” said Lance. Then, in an odd stilted voice; “the...bed feels weird. The stones.”

Keith looked down at the clear water, at the dark rocky lake-bed. He imagined walking on the stones in bare feet and winced with realisation. For someone who had always been protected by the thick armour of his scales, human soles must feel too soft, too sensitive.

“Does it hurt?” asked Keith, anxiously.

There was a pause, then Lance shook his head. He visibly steeled himself, taking a deep breath and holding it.

“I want to try,” said Lance, and Keith thought absently that, had the situation been reversed, he himself would not be carrying his nerve with half as much grace as Lance was doing.

He squeezed Lance’s wrists, reassuring himself of the pulse there and took an awkward step back in the water, wings still fanned out to preserve Lance’s modesty. He took another step back, and they were at arm’s length now.

Lance looked from his knees to Keith, then back again. His fingers tightened around Keith’s wrists.

“Oh, okay,” Lance muttered to himself, “one then the other. You can do this Lance. Come on you coward.”

He took another huge breath, and then lifted his right foot - an exaggerated movement from the hip and knees and Keith realised that Lace was trying to pull his foot free of the water for his step
forwards and grabbed for his shoulders to steady Lance when he slipped sideways, his left leg still ramrod straight where he had locked his knee.

“Shit!” said Keith, just as Lance yelped as Lance’s right foot splashed back into the water and his left heel sank into the pebbly rock.

If it hadn’t been for Keith’s reflexes, Lance would have ended up back in the water. As it was, Keith had him by the shoulders, and Lance was clawing his way back upright, nails digging into Keith’s shirt. He was blushing, an angry furrow between his eyes.

“Right,” said Shiro, who had come closer, “I think maybe I should - “

“No!” said Lance, “I can walk. I want to walk.”

“You’re already doing amazing,” said Shiro placatingly, “but it’s slippery - you might hurt yourself. There’s no rush to - “

“I. Want. To. Walk,” said Lance.

“Just shuffle,” said Keith, ignoring Shiro for once and sliding his hands back to Lance’s wrists, “walking through water is hard. Just shuffle, like this, see?”

He moved back, and saw Lance’s eyes track the way the water swirled around Keith’s trousers, like a stream around a stone.

“Okay,” said Lance, “got it.”

Carefully, he took hold of Keith’s hands once more, and after a moment’s hesitation, took a step forwards. He visibly winced when he put his foot back down, but immediately took another step. Keith matched him stride for stride, walking backwards towards the shore, wings still half spread in a protective arc.

“...it feels - weird,” said Lance, taking another step gingerly. He wobbled with each footfall, but he was walking like a newborn colt: wobbly but with rapidly growing confidence.

They made their way like that, as if Lance was leading them in a strange dance. They waded through the water, their reflections joined at the hands, swirled about until they were one silhouette. Keith half expected to see the familiar flash of blue scales, the sinuous curve of Lance’s tail-fin. It was surreal seeing him upright, seeing him standing.

The lake clung to Keith’s clothes, and suddenly they were at the edge, his boot heel hitting soft earth and grass. He stepped firmly onto land.

“Almost there,” he said, noticing Lance’s hesitation. They both stared at his feet, barely covered by a film of water. Ten long toes and human feet. Lance looked back over his shoulder, at the depths of the lake, then at where Keith’s feet were, the toes of his shoes barely touching the lapping water.

“Lance?” said Keith, heart thundering.

Lance shook his head, as if clearing some errant thought. Then he looked up at Keith, blinking with both his eyelids. And to Keith’s horror, Lance started to cry. He made no sound, but his face crumpled with tears, shoulders hunching forwards. But he held onto Keith’s hands.

“Keith,” said Lance, words barely audible, “what if this is the...what if I never change back?”
Keith didn’t know what to say. He took a step back into the water, but froze when Lance made an awful noise in his throat.

“We could stay here,” said Keith at last, mind churning. He looked for answers in Lance’s face, in Shiro’s dark careful eyes. He found none in either.

“Whatever you want,” Keith said, desperate to have Lance smile again, “you don’t have to decide today.”

“ Decide,” echoed Lance, still staring at the earth.

“Probably too late anyway,” he said, and stepped onto land.

As soon as Lance is standing with both his feet in the grass, Shiro promptly appear at the edge of Keith’s wings. He was holding a long cloak.

Lance was still standing tall, though Keith could see his legs shaking, toes curled in the dirt. Keith tried not to stare, but he couldn’t help tracing the blue scales that covered the entirety of Lance’s heel, sweeping up across the soft joints of his ankles and up around the back of his calves, extending all the way to the dip behind his knees. They were the same colour as his tail had been, but tightly tessellated and glittering like cut gems in the sun.

Lance turned to shiro, hands still around Keith’s wrists for balance.

“I’m not cold,” he repeated, glancing at the cloak.

“You’ve got goose pimples,” Keith pointed out, “and - and you should cover up.”

Lance glared at him, eyes still red rimmed.

“You think I’m hideous,” he said, a little accusingly, “you never asked me to cover up before.”

Keith tried to protest that they were all covered up, but the words devolved into a spluttering coughing fit at the back of his throat. Thankfully, Shiro voiced it for him.

“Well if that’s the case we’re all equally hideous,” Shiro said, holding up the cloak, “everyone has pants on. It’s - ah, because we don’t have scales. You’ll get dirt and branches and - stuff, everywhere. Um.”

Lance looked at the cloak, then at the way Keith was not-so-subtly holding out his right wing to block Lance from the view of the centaurs and Galra still hovering around them. Under the gaze of their attention, Lance visibly wilted. He reached for the cloak, and Shiro quickly swept it around his shoulders. It was long enough that it trailed past Lance’s knees, and Lance let go of one of Keith’s hands to feel the edge of the cloth. He made a face when Shiro fastened the collar around Lance’s neck.

“We should get the doctor to see him,” came Pidge’s voice from somewhere behind Keith’s wing. Keith winched it back hastily.

“...doctor?” said Lance, and his voice wavered more than his legs had. He looked to Shiro and Keith, uncertainty and fear evident in the set of his jaw.

“We’ll be with you the whole time,” said Shiro, coming around to Lance’s other side, “she helped
“with Keith’s wing.”

“Oh,” said Lance, eyes darting to Keith’s splint-less wing. “Okay.”

“How are you feeling?” asked Pidge, and Keith noticed she was wringing her hands, “Is - does anything hurt? Does it hurt to walk?”

Lance shook his head, and Keith thought of the careful, ginger way he took each step and knew that was not the whole truth. Before he could say anything however, Lance had let go of Keith to reach for an embrace. He almost lost his footing in the attempt, but Pidge rushed to meet him, hugging Lance tight around the middle.

“God,” she said, half laughter, half tears, “you’re so tall now. Taller than Keith!”

Lance’s arms were around her shoulders, face in her hair. He let out a laugh like a sob.

“Yeah,” he said, “Keef is the shortest now.”

“I - “ said Keith, bewildered, “Pidge is clearly still the shortest.”

Pidge gave him the finger behind Lance’s back, and for a moment, it was as if the events of the past few months had not happened at all: it was just the four of them, sitting atop the grassy cliff-top and listening to the thunder of the sea. The *deja vu* was like a punch to the gut, and it left Keith reeling, eyes hot and stinging.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Pidge was saying into Lance’s neck, “I’m - I was so scared.”

“Me too,” Lance whispered back, “me too.”

It was too quiet here, for the illusion to last, and Keith could see the galra shifting with impatience near the trees.

Lance seemed wilfully oblivious. When he let go of Pidge at last, it was to reach for Shiro. Keith saw his friend’s eyes widen with surprise before pulling Lance into a huge bear hug that lifted him from the ground, exposing the scaled-covered soles of Lance’s new feet. Even stained with mud, Keith could see that those scales were also a deep, rich blue. He noticed Pidge staring, and they exchanged a look behind Lance’s shoulder.

“Don’t go jumping off any ships, okay?” Lance was saying tearfully, “I can’t fish you out anymore.”

Shiro’s laugh was choked up too, wet with relief.

“It’s alright,” he said, “we’re gonna get you home, okay? And anyway, Keith and I can both swim now.”

“You can float,” said Pidge, “an important distinction.”

“Lance,” Keith interjected, “do you need to sit down?”

“No,” said Lance automatically, but when he turned to face Keith, it was with another dangerous wobble that would have sent him sprawling had Shiro not been holding him mid-hug. As it was, Shiro held Lance upright by the shoulders.

“Should we keep Lance close to the lake? Call for the doctor?”
“Oh shit, dehydration,” said Pidge.

“I don’t think I will need the lake,” said Lance, surprising them all to silence. He was staring at the water again, face as still as the surface, “that’s not what the stories say.”

There was a long pause. Then Lance glanced at each of them, as if he hadn’t realised time elapsing.

“I want to go home. How soon can we go?”

“As soon as we figure out a plan,” said Keith.

He saw Pidge and Shiro share a look.

“What?” said Keith.

Pidge made a face.

“We have a plan. It’s just that you’re not gonna like it.”

“…what,” Keith repeated.

“Doctor first,” said Pidge firmly, “then plan.”

“Fine,” said Keith through his teeth, “Lance needs to sit down or he’s going to have leg cramps later.”

“I’m standing just fine,” said Lance, and there was a trace of pride in his voice.

“Yes, you are,” Shiro agreed, “but Keith’s right - it’s your...first day using the muscles like this, you have to take it easy.”

They made their way slowly towards the centaur and Galra, Lance stubbornly putting one foot after another even though he made a full-body shudder when the grass became long about his ankles.

“Oh,” he said, wide eyed, “it feels...weird. Ticklish.”

“Your highness,” said Regris and Vārok, coming forwards and taking one knee in a gesture of respect that immediately made Keith’s hackles rise. They both stood swiftly, but Vārok kept his neck bared in deference. Lance’s expression was carefully blank, but Keith could feel his fingers tense around his own.

“We are glad to see you well,” said Regris, low voice rumbling like stones in a quarry, “it’s been a...surprising turn of events. We were all worried about you.”

“Mm,” said Lance, “yes. Legs now.”

“He should see a doctor,” said one of the centaurs, Vinar, “shall I fetch one?”

They all looked to Lance.

“I want to go home,” said Lance, “as soon as possible. So - I’ll go...to...” he waved a hand towards the thick of the trees.

“I’ll take you,” said Vinar, nodding.

“I can walk,” said Lance, exasperated.
“Nonsense,” said Vinar, “it’ll take you half the day to get there.”

“Okay, for real, it’s a long walk,” said Pidge before Lance could start arguing.

Lance was eyeing Vinar with a look of distrust. Keith knew he was sizing up the height between the ground and Vinar’s back.

“Your highness, we did carry you here in the first place,” said the centaur with a wry smile at the edge of his lips, “I won’t drop you.”

“Perhaps he could sit on one of our steeds,” offered Vārok, pointing towards four horses that were tethered in the shadow of the canopy. Keith and Shiro had each taken one down to the lake, and they were there as backup for a speedy departure. One of the mares, chestnut red with a star on her forehead, looked up as if sensing their contemplation.

Vinar was shooting Vārok a disgusted, outraged look. He stomped on the ground with one of his hind hooves, making Lance jump at the sound.

“You’re suggesting I am less reliable than a common horse?” he asked, voice calm but flinty edged.

Vārok shrugged, but his ears went flat.

“I mean it’s got a saddle,” he said mulishly.

“Vārok,” said Regris, then sighed.

“I’ll carry him,” said Shiro, “I can walk apace.”

“I can –” protested Keith, but the words died in his mouth at Shiro’s fond but disparaging look. Pidge snickered behind her hand.

Vinar rolled his eyes.

“Fine,” he said, holding out a hand to Pidge who clambered onto the centaur’s back with a practiced, if inelegant sprawl.

“Arm around my neck,” said Shiro, and Keith watched as Lance obeyed. Shiro wrapped the cloak carefully around Lance’s legs, before hooking one arm below his knees and lifting him bodily up. Lance made a surprised noise, but hung on.

“You okay?” said Keith, and Lance nodded.

In this position, Lance’s bare feet were at eye-level. Up close, Keith could see the way the scales wrapped every inch of the sole, the colour fading to dull silver between the toes and towards the top of the foot. The harder blue scales extended up Lance’s calves, and Keith wondered how far it went. Then blushed furiously, angry at himself for letting his thoughts stray when there were more urgent things.

“Should we wrap his feet?” asked Shiro, “juniberies.”

“Oh, shit,” said Keith, glancing around.

“Doesn’t work on merfolk,” said Lance, stopping them all in their tracks. Vinar and Vārok were both listening, while Regris had paused where he was getting the horses ready.
“Haggar tested it,” said Lance, and refused to say anymore.

It didn’t take them that long to reach the base - Shiro barely broke a sweat, and Keith rode the red mare, piling their clothes and smuggled weapons in two bags that were slung either side of Shiro’s saddle. Shiro’s horse followed behind them amicably, which at least put something in between them and the Galra bringing up the rear.

The whole walk back, Lance was looking around him with wide curious eyes, one hand cupped around his face to shade the sun. Keith made a note to get Lance a hood or some kind of goggles.

Lance craned his head back to see the tops of the trees, twisting and turning in Shiro’s arms so much that Shiro had to pause to adjust his hold several times. They almost all had a heart attacked when Lance let out an aborted shriek. It was a testament to Shiro’s reflexes that he didn’t drop Lance right there and then.

“Jesus - “ he said, staggering “what - “

“Sorry,” said Lance, contrite, “I think I saw a squirrel.”

“How do you know what a squirrel looks like?” asked Vārok with genuine interest, “I didn’t think they lived next to the sea - “

Regris cuffed the younger galra about the ears.

“ - your highness,” added Vārok.

Keith couldn’t see the expression Lance was wearing, but his tone was unimpressed.

“I read,” he said, flatly.

Vārok opened his mouth but Regris bet him to it.

“If the next words out of your mouth include ‘books’ and ‘the sea’ I will send you straight back home,” said Regris in a low growl.

They entered the base proper with little fanfare. Lance was still wearing an expression of wonderment as he took in the low-roofed houses, the little patches of green and the chickens pecking away in their yard. Those who saw them stared at Lance unabashedly, and when Lance noticed, he shrank back against Shiro’s shoulder.

Wordlessly, Shiro stretched his wings, letting them rest a little further around his shoulders, effectively shading Lance from view.

They quickly made their way inside the now-familiar building which served as the medical centre of the base. Pidge and Vinar had arrived ahead of them, and Marion was already standing behind a long polished metal table, laid out with gauze and other medical supplies. Lance - who clearly had no problem adjusting to the dimmer surroundings, blanched at the sight of the medical table.

“It’s okay,” said Shiro immediately, “we’ll be here the whole time - the whole time, unless you want us to step out.”
“No,” said Lance, and all the bravado from a few minutes earlier was gone, bled out of him like the blood in his face. He was staring at Marion with undisguised wariness.

“This is Marion,” said Pidge, “she’s one of the resident doctors here. Um.”

“Your highness,” said Marion, nodding curtly. To Shiro, she said, “put him on the bed here. He’ll be more comfortable.”

“Right,” said Shiro, but made no move until Lance nodded, almost imperceptibly. Keith hovered, unable to stop himself from glancing between Lance and the door, the windows - the other door down the end of the room. Regris was standing at that door, blending in with the shadows save for the reflective glow of his yellow eyes. Vārok was by the closest exit. Keith felt his skin prickle as he caught Pidge’s gaze and held it for a brief moment.

“Can everyone who is not Shiro and Keith and me leave the room,” said Pidge, loudly.

“Actually,” said Lance, in a very small voice, “can everyone….except Shiro wait outside.”

Keith blinked hard, and tried to quell the hurt that rose in response to the words. Lance wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“Wh - “

Shiro kicked him behind the eyeline of the bed, and Keith winced.

“Okay,” said Pidge, recovering much faster than Keith, “everyone who isn’t Shiro, out.”

“But I - “ Keith managed before he was being manhandled by Pidge right out the door. He forgot how strong she was - and by the slightly affronted look on Regris’ and Vārok’s faces, they had forgotten as well. Pidge shuffled them all out of the room with the force of her personality, and shut it behind them.

They stood in the corridor, frozen.

Keith wasn’t sure what had just happened.

“Why would - “ he tried, turning to Pidge.

Pidge just rolled her eyes at him.

“God, you’re so dense sometimes,” she said, “let’s move further away - Lance can hear everything, you know.”

“So can we,” Vārok complained, “this is pointless.”

“Go check the perimeter,” said Regris, “and then keep watch on the south side. Fifth window.”

“Yessir,” said Vārok, and slips out of the building without another word.

Keith shuffled his wings tighter against his back, glancing repeatedly at the door to Lance’s room. Why hadn’t Lance wanted him there? The rebuff felt abrupt and confusing, at odds with the raw plainness of their words in the water. Keith felt wrong footed, like he’d been flipped over in the air without warning.

Pidge was eyeing him with a pitying sort of expression.
“What?” Keith bit out, irritably.

“Don’t get your panties in a twist,” said Pidge, “he’s probably just feeling insecure. It’s...I mean it’s kinda traumatic right? A big change.”

“I thought he wanted us there,” said Keith, and winced at how pathetic he sounded. He risked a glance at Regris, who was wearing an expression of stone. A very unimpressed slab of granite, thought Keith uncharitably.

“He’s probably just embarrassed and stressed,” said Pidge, “I’d be too if I turned into a mermaid or something overnight.”

“But why would he be embarrassed in front of me and not Shiro?” said Keith.

“Shiro has a calm vibe going,” said Pidge, waving her hand vaguely.

“A… a calm vibe?” said Keith, squinting.

Regris snorted.

Keith ignored him.

“A dad vibe,” said Pidge, “he’s non-judgemental.”

“I wouldn't judge - “ protested Keith.

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” said Pidge, “Lance is probably closer to you so he doesn’t feel as comfortable right now. Give him space for half an hour, and then you can go back to being joined at the hands.”

Keith didn’t want to examine why Lance would feel so uncomfortable with him as to send him out of the room. An irrational, emotional part of him was flaring, hurt at the rejection after everything they’d been through, but Pidge’s matter-of-fact-ness was grounding. At least it was until she said:

“Maybe he doesn’t want you to see his new junk,” said Pidge.

Keith almost choked on his own spit.

“Wh - Pidge, you - “

“What?” said Pidge, adjusting her glasses, “merfolk don’t have the same anatomy. Maybe there’s been a big change. You know. Down there.”

Keith made a strangled noise when Pidge made a suggestive hand motion around her own crotch. There was a strange wheezing noise coming from Regris’ general direction, like a cat with a furball, but neither of them looked over.

“Did you see when he stood up?” asked Pidge, relentless.

“I’m - “ Keith was aware he was bright red in the face, “He was...it looked normal.”

Pidge raised an eyebrow.

“Oh really? What do you mean by normal?”

Keith wanted to sink into the floor. Pidge was smirking.
“Just..standard,” said Keith, “you know… normal shaped.”

“Uh huh,” said Pidge, “you know for the longest time I thought all avians had spikey peens or something, or none at all. I asked Matt about it.”

Keith covered his face with both hands.

“Wait. Back up. Was there a penis?”

“I - yes “

“Are you sure though.”

“Of course I’m -,” there was an odd buzzing in Keith’s ears, “I don’t know. I didn’t stare , that’s-! I wasn’t exactly thinking about - a-and I’m not talking about this.”

Pidge gave him a blunt look, both eyebrows raised to her hairline. She waved her hand expansively, gesturing to all of Keith.

“And you wonder why Lance wanted you out of the room. Honestly.”

“I - “

“Calm vibes.”

“Shut up.”

“I want to hear you say ‘penis’ out loud without blushing.”

“…”

“Mm. Weak.”

“This is not a funny situation,” said Keith, stuffing his hands into his pockets, “Lance is. Stressed. And we still have to get him to the sea without being shot at by Galra.”

“Of course it’s not funny,” said Pidge, her smile fading, “but if you kept all that up you’d have made Lance more stressed, not less.”

“Kept what up?” asked Keith.

“Looking so scared,” said Pidge. Then, “it’s going to be okay. One way or another.”

Keith scuffed his boots against the flagstone. He let out a long exhale, trying to loosen his wings. Pidge stepped closer and flicked thumb and third finger against the arch of Keith’s wing.

“Up,” she said.

Keith lifted his right wing - but before he could ask why, Pidge wrapped both arms around his middle and squeezed. Keith drew back instinctively in surprise, but hugged her back immediately. Pidge smelled like hard soap and the lake, graphite on her hands and on her neck.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she said, generous with her honesty in a way that was almost unrecognisable to the Katie Holt that had stood on the edge of that ocean lake.

The past few weeks had eroded her masks like hail on glass, leaving behind a Pidge that was
steady in a way she had not been: the sharp edges of her conviction sanded by trust misplaced. Keith had thought her frustratingly naïve before...but now he realised...for all Keith had been left behind by those that should have stayed, he had never had his trust betrayed.

He had Shiro: Shiro who came back for him, loyal to the last. And now he had Lance and Pidge.

Keith thought of the way the colour had been drained from Pidge’s face when she found out about the Blade’s omissions. He didn’t know whether he could carry himself with her composure, had he been similarly betrayed - to carry on, seated next to strangers who once were friends, to walk as a pawn would, while pretending to be a knight.

Keith knew he did not have the patience for it. He wasn’t sure if he had the courage, either.

They held each other for a long time, like siblings might have.

“It’s weird seeing you with grey feathers,” said Pidge, voice a little muffled by Keith’s shirt.

“It’ll wash out,” said Keith, “probably.”

“It’s ugly.”

Keith huffed.

“Thanks.”

There was a long minute of silence, broken by a sudden yelp from inside the room - followed by a clang. Immediately Keith lunged for the door, only to be half strangled when Pidge yanked him back by the shirt. There was a silent but furious scuffle before Pidge rapped hard on the door.

A pause. Muffled words.

“Come in,” came Shiro’s voice.

Pidge opened the door and shoved Keith inside unceremoniously, before shutting the door behind him with a crisp snap.

“Oh, it’s you,” said Marion, disinterested. She had Lance’s foot in one hand, half extended. There was bandage on his other leg, and the thin stain of a cut across the thigh was visible through the gauze.

“Is everything okay?” said Keith, edging slowly across the room.

He eyed Shiro, whose feathers were standing on end. Shiro didn’t meet his eyes.

“...Yeah,” said Lance, flexing his ankle, “apparently my nerves seem alright. And I have toes.”

“Rather more joints than I’m used to,” said the doctor, “but yes, toes.”

“Toe beans,” said Keith, and received a smile in return.

“Normal reflexes. Unusually soft joints,” said Marion, setting Lance’s foot down on the sheets, “remember your muscles might be remarkably well developed in this form, but you haven’t used them in the same way as we do. Do your stretches. Take things slowly.”

“I want to go home,” Lance repeated.
“Is it safe for him to travel?” asked Shiro, who was seated beside the bed on a wooden stool.

“Safe, probably,” said Marion, “Comfortable? No. You’ll need something for muscle strain and cramps. And he should go on horseback - ideally carriage but it will be too conspicuous.”

“What about water?” asked Keith, notching his wings behind his back and resting one hand on the windowsill, “it’s a few nights until the coast.”

Marion was checking Lance’s pulse, a stethoscope pressed to his ribs. It was a moment before she answered.

“I can’t be sure,” she said at last, “I think he should avoid direct sunlight or overheating, but it’s the middle of winter.”

A thought struck Keith.

“Pidge said something about the salinity of the water,” he began, but Marion shook her head.

“We’ve no real way of telling how his body is going to respond after the...change,” she said, eyes flickering down the length of Lance’s long legs. She was frowning. “I think unfortunately it’s going to be a bit of trial and error.”

“See if I puke,” said Lance, with a forced cheerfulness. When no one laughed, he sighed. “Can I have some of that water over there anyway?”

They all looked at Marion, who shrugged.

“A little at a time, I suppose. Tell someone if you feel sick. If anything hurts, tell us.”

“Okay,” said Lance quietly, and his eyes tracked Shiro as the avian poured out half a glass of water. They all watched as Lance wrapped long fingered hands about the glass, and then held their breaths as he drank it, throat working. He lowered the glass, and looked around at them.

“Tastes like rain and stones,” said Lance, “and mud.”

“Uh,” said Shiro, “we could boil it first...?”

Lance turned the glass in his hands.

Marion let out a breath and set her stethoscope on the metal bench.

“I think the best thing right now is for you to rest,” she said, “there’s...my knowledge is limited here, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” said Lance, smiling at her, “thank you.”

Marion just nodded.

“I’ve got cream here, for cut and old burns,” she said. She looked to Shiro, “I trust you can re-apply these in about six hours or so? Since the cut is on skin, we’ll try keep it dry - in the absence of sea water I think we err on the side of...landbound mammalian medical principles...”

“Of course,” said Shiro, taking the small amber bottle and a roll of gauze sealed in glass.

“Should we get him some spare clothes too?” said Keith.
Lance did not like trousers.

“It feels weird,” he said, grimacing and plucking at the fabric at his hip, “I can’t concentrate on anything when there’s - it feels scratchy.”

He made to pull off his pants.

“No - keep them on!” said Keith for what felt like the tenth time in as many minutes.

In those aforementioned minutes, Keith had gained the intimate knowledge of just how far up Lance’s thigh the blue scales ran. It spread along the vulnerable dips between bone, curving up from behind the knees and fading into skin, only to blossom out again to cover the naval and hipbones. The colour ranged from deep rich blue to warm skin-grey, and bore the texture of spilled oil-light.

Keith had to keep reshuffling his wings to smooth down his feathers.

Lance let out a groan of frustration and flomped back dramatically onto his pillows, splaying his legs so that his thighs were as far away from each other as physically possible. As it turned out, it was quite far. Unusually soft joints, Marion had said, but even in the short time they’ve witnessed them, Lance’s legs and hips just seemed to bend a lot further than was strictly natural.

“I hate them,” said Lance, “it feels awful. ...I’ll wear the cloak.”

“You need something more than a cloak,” said Pidge, who was sitting cross legged at the end of Lance’s bed. She had a notebook in her hands, and seemed to be taking notes every few minutes. In her other hand she held a half eaten sandwich.

“Why?” said Lance, sulkily, “I’m not cold.”

He made to pull off the pants again, and Keith slapped a hand over his own eyes.

“You can’t really use your arms properly with a cloak,” said Pidge, “and anyway, Keith is going to have a heart attack if you keep stripping.”

Keith shot her a betrayed look.

“That’s fine,” said Lance in the same mutinous tone, “I don’t care.”

“I’m going to go over to the corner,” said Keith, “and I’m going to stare at the wall until you make a decision.”

“Yes, go to the time-out corner, Keith,” said Pidge.

“I can’t believe you wear this every day,” Lance was saying, rubbing the fabric of his trousers in a very distracting way. “And yours are tight! I thought it was just because you lot get cold so easily. No one would choose to wear this.”

“It’s not - it’s not hygienic to go around naked!” Keith protested.

“Keith,” said Shiro, deadpan, “go to time-out.”

Keith spluttered.
“What’s a time-out corner?” asked Lance.

“It’s where Keith keeps his dignity when he’s not using it,” said Pidge helpfully.

Keith rubbed his temples with the heel of his hand. He could feel a migraine building behind his eyes.

“Maybe he could wear a robe instead,” suggested Shiro blithely, “or a dress? Something less restrictive around the legs.”

Lance sat up a little straighter.

“Do we have any robes or dresses?” asked Pidge, looking thoughtful, “now I think about it, I feel like I haven’t seen anyone wear anything like that around here. Bit impractical, I guess. I’ll go ask.”

And with that, she slipped off the duvet cover and ran out of the room.

“Can I take these off now?” asked Lance after a long moment of silence, “I’ll put on the cloak until Pidge comes back with a dress.”

Keith threw the duvet covers over Lance with a thwamp.

In the end, Lance decided on a grey-blue dress that was more or less a robe with a wrap around sash and a wide lapel collar. It was made of some fine-satin like material which cut across the chest. He seemed enamoured with exploring the texture of the cloth with the pad of his fingers, and quickly discarded the coarser fabric for fine cotton and satin.

Lance flatly refused to wear boots, whole body shuddering when they put one boot on his left leg.

“Nooo,” said Lance, whole face scrunched up with discomfort and his leg held out straight as if he was trying to get the shoe as far away from himself as possible, “it - ugh, it smells and it feels...too warm, so heavy - I want it off.”

“Does it hurt?” asked Pidge, “is it too tight?”

“Yes, too tight, take it off!” said Lance, who looked two seconds away from ripped the laces from the boot with his own teeth.

Eventually, they found some thick woven sandals (“I still hate it,” said Lance, “tight.”; “Tough titties,” said Pidge. “you’re not going outside without some shoes. The doctor said so.” ) and Lance insisted on walking himself outside.

“I can just bring the food back here,” said Keith, skin vibrating with nerves. Lance had one arm hooked through Keith’s, and was carefully making his way towards the door. Shiro was hovering just behind them.

“I want to see everything,” said Lance, “anyway, I’m getting the hang of this.”

“This is your second time walking, ever,” said Keith, dryly.

“And you’re doing great,” said Shiro, and when Keith turned to look at him, Shiro gave him crazy eyes and a sharp jerk of the chin. Keith made a face.
Lance was objectively ‘doing great’. They had barely been out of the water for eight hours, and already he seemed to be moving instinctively with his new limbs. Lance barely wobbled at all, even with such a drastic change to his centre of gravity and lack of water. He had certainly taken to walking much faster than Keith had taken to swimming.

When they stepped out of the door into the afternoon sun, Lance gasped, blinking rapidly. Quickly, Keith threw up one wing, extending the arch of it over Lance’s head and shoulders so that it shaded him from the light.

“Oh,” said Lance, looking up at the feathers, then back at Keith, “thanks.”

“No problem,” said Keith, clearing his throat. “Does - does it hurt your eyes?”

Lance hesitated.

“Not more than usual,” he said eventually.

Keith felt the back of Lance’s hand brush along the soft inside of his wing, and the sensation made his feathers stand on end.

“I keep forgetting how soft you are,” said Lance, and he was smiling again, swaying into Keith’s wing. He was remarkably steady on his feet, and Keith was reminded again of Pidge, the morning Lance shed his tail.

A survival mechanism.

Keith pulled his wing close to Lance’s shoulder, almost completely hiding him from view as they made their way slowly past the houses. The trees here were spaced further apart, but still loomed tall - and Lance stopped every few moments to crane his neck in wonderment. His nose was twitching almost constantly, and Keith recalled that Merfolk sense of smell was much greater than avians. He wondered what the forest smelled like to Lance, and whether he could smell the ice in the air, the suggestion of snow. Every time a bird flew between the branches, Lance would give a whole-bodied gasp, face snapping around to follow the movement.

“I thought there would be more leaves,” said Lance, after a moment, “or more green?”

“It’s winter,” said Keith, “a lot of trees out of the valley don’t have leaves at all, right now.”

“Oh right,” said Lance, still staring skywards, “...I like trees. Much taller in real life than they look in drawings...”

“These ones are pretty huge, yeah,” said Keith, looking around them.

“Do they get bigger?” asked Lance.

“Some do,” said Keith.

“Do avians live in trees?” asked Lance, eyes sparkling at the thought.

It was jarring to see him this way, the deja vu once again punching all the air from Keith’s lungs. It was like someone had taken a watch and wound it rapidly, and had it not been for the chill, it might have been last spring. That Lance had been full of curiosity and bright interest, and that Keith had never seen him cry.

“Keith?” said Lance, and Keith realised he had gone quiet. He cleared his throat, feeling suddenly
overwhelmed.

“Uh, no,” he said, “we - we live pretty high up, but not in trees.”

“A tree house would be cool,” said Lance, “I want to visit an avian house, high up.”

“I thought you were scared of heights,” said Keith, words coming out a little stilted.

“Mm,” said Lance, eyes speckled with the canopy, “and you were afraid of the ocean.”

Keith didn’t know what to say to that.

Lance said nothing either: just laced his fingers through Keith’s the crook of his elbow. Lance’s skin was cool and dry, the pattern of his scales like braille against Keith’s own hand.

And after all this time, he still smelled of the sea.

They had dinner inside, away from the cold.

It was more economical to cook together, and most of the base ate together. The wide room was filled with the smell of vegetable soup and thick, dense bread that had burned across the top. There was grilled fish today, and they were seated in a half circle - Shiro to Lance’s right and Keith to Lance’s left. Pidge was sitting across from them, cross legged, while Lance was sitting on top of three folded jackets, after shifting uncomfortably on the wooden chair for a few minutes. His long legs were tucked under the seat, as if it were still a tail, ankles crossed and feet extended. He was leaning into Keith’s shoulder, using his wings as a backrest; a comforting presence all along Keith’s side.

The others mostly left them alone out of respect, glancing curiously at Lance when they passed the group. There was a huddle of five galra across the room, and Keith spotted Regris’ distinctive ears among them.

Lance was picking at his soup and bread, having filled up on raw fish. He had torn a bread roll in half and was slowly gutting the soft insides with his fingers.

“Don’t eat too much carbs, you always get a stomach ache,” said Pidge through mouthful of her own bread. She dunked it into the soup and slurped loudly.

“Taste different to the bread you gave me before,” said Lance, licking at the burnt side.

“These ones are fresh out of the oven,” said Pidge, “if you don’t want that give it here - don’t lick it all over first, jeez.”

Lance dipped the bread into his soup bowl and stuck out his tongue. He had accidently burned it earlier when he went for the hot soup too fast, nose twitching. He didn’t seem overly fond of the vegetables.

Shiro gave a groan, stretching his arms. His wings stretched with them, the white pinions fanning out slowly with the pop of a joint. Keith winced at the sound, his own wings trailing on the floor behind his chair.

“Give that here then,” he said, holding his hand out for the soggy bread and soup that Lance was clearly just playing with at this point.

“Oh ew, that’s all cold now,” said Pidge.
Shiro shrugged, stuffing the bread into his mouth and proceeding to empty the bowl in two huge continuous swallows. He tipped the bowl all the way back, before slapping it triumphantly down onto the table with a clatter.

“Waste not want not,” he said, grinning.

No one seemed to begrudge them any food, but Keith knew that avian metabolism meant that he and Shiro was burning through food much faster than the humans or galra here at the base. The warmth and a full stomach was making him feel sleepy. He thought longingly of a proper bed - he and Shiro were used to sleeping on hard surfaces, but after the physical abuse they had gone through, sleeping on the lake bank had not helped with the bruises.

Lance was nursing a glass of water, eyes flicking idly from each of their faces with a quiet sort of intensity that suggested he couldn't quite believe they were all here.

In truth, Keith couldn’t quite believe it either.

“Maybe we should head back,” he said when Shiro yawned, shifting a little in his seat, great wings sweeping huge behind him all over the floor. The space was a little cramped, not built for wings.

“Lance?”

Keith half stretched his left wing, rolling his shoulders.

“I’m beat,” said Pidge, “too much excitement for one day.”

“Back...to the lake?” asked Lance, hesitant.

Keith blinked, glancing at Shiro.

“Oh - sure, if you want?”

Lance studied Keith’s face for a long moment, clearly searching for something.

“I don’t sink properly,” he said eventually, “…and I want to stay with you guys. I don’t think I can sleep by myself.”

“Okay,” said Keith, “we can always go back down to the lake if you can’t sleep.”

Lance smiled then, small and grateful. Keith smiled back, unable to stop himself.

Shiro got to his feet, pulling Pidge to hers with an exaggerated groan.

“Okay, let’s go, let’s go,” she said, “before it starts really raining. It’s dark as hell outside.”

Lance held onto Keith’s shoulder and got carefully to his feet. There was barely a tremor now; the body finding its balance much more quickly than it had just that morning. Lance shifted his weight a little, experimentally, from one foot to the other, still holding onto Keith.

“You good?” said Keith, shaking out his wings and tucking them against his shoulders.

“Yeah,” said Lance, stepping around his chair. He walked with his feet turned out, like a ballet dancer. Where he lacked the grace of one in his gait, there was something strangely hypnotic about the way he took his steps, from hips that were used to water and a tail.

Keith wrapped one wing around Lance as they headed out into the night air, and Lance gave him a
funny look.

“It’s really not that cold, Keef,” he said, but stayed very close nevertheless.

They made their way back to their quarters with no accidents. Pidge had had her own room, but since Shiro and Keith’s arrival, she had taken sleeping with them on a small wooden pallet on the floor, all her belongings clustered in a heap on one lower bunk while she slept on the top one.

From what Keith had seen, most of the rooms in the base housed bunk beds - but they were much too narrow for Shiro and Keith’s wings. The avians had taken over one of the larger sleeping quarters, Keith and Shiro commandeering a galra-sized bed. The washrooms were shared between a few bedrooms per house, and Keith knew for a fact that they were flanked by Vārok and Regris.

“I’ll get my shit off the bottom bunk,” Pidge was saying as they unlocked the door, “and Lance can take th- whoa!”

There was someone in their room, and Keith instinctively let go of Lance to go for his gun. Shiro was faster - before the door had even fully opened, he yanked Pidge bodily behind one wing and had his own gun pointed at the intruder before the doorknob hit the wall.

“Easy,” said Axca, “it’s just me.”

“Axca?” said Keith, just as Lance said, “who?”

Shiro didn’t lower his gun.

“Where have you been?” he said, voice very flat, “and what the hell are you doing in here?”

“I’m here because I wanted to talk to you without our....galran friends,” said Axca, “if you all shut the door I can answer the first question.”

“I don’t think so,” said Shiro, pistol steady in his hands, “Keith, lamps.”

Keith hit the switch near the door without taking his eyes of Axca. The glow of the lamp spilled over them, illuminating Axca who was standing with her back to the bunk bed. Her wings were damp with cloudwater, and her hair was slicked back from her face by the flight goggles sitting atop her head. She was still in flight boots.

“...who is this?” asked Lance again, trying to see over Shiro’s and Keith’s wings. Keith squeezed Lance’s wrist in silent warning, but Axca’s eyes snapped to the merman, bright with interest.

“I’m a friend,” she said. To Shiro, she said: “we need to talk before the galra crash this party. Shut the door, Pidge.”

“Lady, I don’t know you.”

“Guns and knives on the floor,” said Shiro, and Keith looked at him, nerves pulled taut at the wariness outlining every muscle in Shiro’s jaw.

Axca made an exasperated noise, but dropped two pistols to the floor. She pulled a long knife from her boot, unsheathed the blade at her hip and another from her ankle.

“There, now shut the door. This can’t wait.”

“Gloves,” said Keith, sharply.
Axca gave him a blank look. For a moment, Keith thought she might refuse, but then she unbuckled her gloves, setting them down on the window sill. Their long wrist guards betrayed the small blades hidden there. Keith knew for he wore the very same ones.

“I come with good news,” she said, “so I’d appreciate the gun out of my face, Shirogane.”

There was another tense pause, before Shiro lowered his gun. He stepped aside so the rest of them could enter the room. Keith was careful to keep Lance just behind him, shuffling them so they were facing Axca from the opposite side of the room, nearest the door.

“I saved your ass in that fight,” said Axca.

“And I saved yours on that roof,” said Keith, sharply.

Axca raised her eyebrow.

“You’d think me returning the favour would be a sign of trust.”

“You’ll forgive me for not trusting a Council’s agent,” said Shiro, flicking the safety back onto the gun and leaning back against the wall.

“Why break into our room?” said Pidge, suspiciously.

“I told you,” said Axca, “I needed to speak with all of you without your Galran babysitters.”

“So speak,” said Pidge, folding her arms across her chest. She crossed the room in two strides before anyone could stop her and started rifling through her belongings.

“I’m going to know if you touched anything,” she said, not turning around, “so start talking. I’ll let you all know if she’s done anything.”

Axca let out a long breath.

“We’ve missed you for a few days,” said Shiro, still in that calm tone that belied his hostility.

Axca opened her mouth to answer, but Shiro cut her off with a glare.

“Before you lie, the nearest avian city is too far for you to have visited and returned. So I want to know who you’ve been talking to, and whether there’s a raid coming for us right now.”

Axca’s expression was carefully blank, but Keith saw her hand twitch reflexively.

“I wasn’t speaking to any avians,” she said, “I was making arrangements with a few galran and human contacts of mine. Arrangements for you,” she added, jerking her chin in Lance’s direction.

“Arrangements?” demanded Keith, feeling his heart start to race.

“You’re not going to reach the coast without help,” said Axca, speaking softly and rapidly. She was talking directly to Lance now, eyes sloped in earnestness. “The Blade want to move on their own terms, not on yours, we know that. We’re landlocked and there are three towns between here and the nearest cliff edge - all of them Galran. There are patrol and sentry points on every major road. You’ll need to make the journey on horseback, and that means you need people to harbour you along the way, and someone to hand you fresh horses.”

“We can fly - “ Keith began, but Axca made an angry, sharp noise at the back of her throat.
“Even if we took turns, there’s no way we can fly him all the way to the sea - especially with your shit wing and my fucked shoulder,” she said.

“Even if we could fly, we would have to make at least one landing - and it’s going to be a hard exit to make; landscape isn’t in our favour. It’s too risky and there’s no hiding wings once we’re on the ground. Someone will see us land and we won’t have cover to leave.”

“Vārok and Regris suggested horseback already,” said Shiro, “they said they could get a carriage once we’re out of the valley. One of us can then stay inside with Lance.”

Axca ripped her goggles from her head with a derisive laugh.

“And when the patrols stop the carriage to check inside, what are you going to tell them?”

“The Blades have infiltrated the guard ranks, they have the schedules-”

“That’s relying on a lot of luck,” said Axca.

Quietly, Keith agreed with her - but the thought of leaving Lance with Galra to make the journey sea-ward was incomprehensible. The very thought made Keith cold with panic, and judging by how tightly Lance was holding his arm, Lance had no illusions about where this conversation was headed.

“And your plan doesn’t?” Pidge shot back, “who are these contacts of yours? How do we know we can trust them?”

“Because they aren’t galra,” said Axca, “they’re human. She works as a courier, and her cousin runs an inn. She makes rounds on these routes every day, she knows most of the guards and they know her. She can get you to the ocean and supply fresh mounts - and his highness will have a safe place to hide for the night.”

“A courier,” said Shiro, brows furrowed.

“Contracts with stables between here and Whitecap Bay,” said Axca, tilting her head, “she works for the Royal Postal Service, you see.”

“And we’re just supposed to trust her?” said Keith, “we could just take our chances with any guards that might stop us.”

“The Blades are only willing to let you stowaway in a clumsy carriage because they will give you over to the guard as soon as it’s convenient,” snarled Axca, “they’ll knock you out and leave you as collateral - “

“If they do,” said Lance, suddenly, “I’ll rip their throats open with my teeth.”

They all turned to stare at him, startled. Lance had been very quiet this entire time, but now he was shaking - whether from exhaustion or fury Keith couldn’t tell. Belatedly, he realised they had all been standing for longer than was probably sensible, given Lance’s new legs.

“You’re not the only creature with teeth around here,” said Axca.

“Let’s sit down,” Keith began, but Lance shot him a wild, blazing look that rooted him where he was.

“They can also just knock you out,” Axca added.
“Not before I knock them out first,” said Lance, “My voice is shit right now, but I can still scream. And Galra have very sensitive ears.”

There was a long pause.

“Duly noted,” said Axca.

“You still haven’t told us who this mysteriously convenient person is,” said Pidge.

Axca took a deep breath.

“She’s my sister.”

“Your sister - “ said Pidge.

“Of all people, I didn’t think you’d be surprised by mixed families,” said Axca dryly. “She’s not a blood sister, but she might as well be.”

“You’re not giving me any reason to trust her. Or you,” said Shiro, “try again.”

“I’ve been fighting alongside you both this whole time,” said Axca, mouth thin with displeasure, “I could have fucked off after that ambush, but I stayed here because you needed my help.”

Shiro’s expression was still frightfully mild.

“Or you stayed because Lance is leverage and you wanted to keep an eye on things,” he said, in the same tone one might use to discuss the weather.

At this, Lance swayed a little on his feet, and this time, Keith pulled him over to the bed and set him down on the covers. He caught Axca’s eyes flickering over to stare at Lance’s feet, the blue scales reflecting the lamp light like so many glass shards. Her eyes snapped back to Shiro, who was still watching her every movement, blank faced.

“And the Blades don’t want leverage?” said Axca at last, “how do you know you can trust them anymore than you can trust me? They’ve already betrayed you once.”

“How - how do you know about that?” said Pidge, face drained of colour.

There was flash of genuine surprise across Axca’s features, there and gone in a blink. She shuffled her wings, and it was like looking into a mirror. Keith had to resist the urge to do the same; a reflexive urge.

“I was talking about the ambush at the palace,” said Axca, “I was there.”

“Right,” said Pidge, the word barely a whisper.

“What were you talking about?”

Pidge said nothing, lips pale.

“We need to think this over,” said Shiro.

“Sure,” said Axca, “just know that - “

Abruptly, Lance flung out a hand. They all froze. Lance was turned towards the door. Then Keith heard the telltale shift in the corridor, of still air being momentarily displaced by the wind and rain
outside.

A moment later, there was a knock at the door.

They all looked at each other knowingly.

“Who is it?” said Pidge.

“Regris,” came a familiar voice, rumbling low enough to slip beneath the door like a threat. Without waiting to be invited in, the galra opened the door swiftly.

“Wrong room, Reg,” said Pidge, going for nonchalance and failing.

The galra wasn’t looking at her though - he was staring at Axca with pale yellow eyes, looking as if all his worst suspicions had been confirmed at once. The peregrine shifted every so slightly to rest her weight on the balls of her feet, balanced on her bladed shoes. All of a sudden, Keith realised that they hadn’t relieved Axca of all her weapons after all - she was still wearing her flight boots.

The thin curved blades glinted, like the rim of a tossed coin.

“Someone called in an avian sighting,” said Regris, “thought it might have been you.”

“Good guess,” said Axca, one hand on her hip, “we were just having a chat.”

“Indeed,” said Regris, looking at Pidge, then back to Axca, “I will speak you in a moment. For now I need a word with Pidge and his Highness.”

Regris moved, and Keith could see Vārok and another unfamiliar Galra standing just beyond the frame of the door. Lance shrunk further onto the bed, tense as a coiled spring.

“I think it’s getting a bit late, isn’t it?” said Shiro, “we can all talk in the morning.”

Regris turned his luminous eyes on the avian.

“Shiro, we must be prepared should anyone else have followed Axca here - “

“Don’t insult me,” said Axca, “I was well above cloud cover. And I can dive faster than most.”

“I do not trust - “

“I said it’s getting a bit late,” said Shiro, more loudly this time - and Keith realised that Shiro was still holding the gun. He could see Regris realising this at the same time.

“Very well,” he said, irritation clear in the flick of his ear, “I’ll speak with you all in the morning.”

He paused to incline his head to Lance, before sweeping out the door on silent feet.

Shiro held the door open and gestured at Axca wordlessly.

Axca shrugged

“Fine,” she said, and bent to retrieve her guns.

“You can have them back in the morning, we’ll bring them to breakfast,” said Shiro pleasantly.

Axca fixed him with a stone-heavy stare. Then she tucked her wings behind her and followed
Regris out the door without a further word. Shiro pushed the door shut as soon as she had gone, and for a long, drawn moment, no-one moved.

Then Shiro slumped onto the nearest bed, and Pidge let out a gust of breath like a bellow being piped. Beside Keith, Lance simply let himself fall sideways onto the pillow, legs loose and eyes wide.

“Oh my god,” said Pidge, flinging herself next to Shiro on the duvet, “fuck.”

“Christ,” Shiro agreed.

“I’ve never seen you so pissed off,” said Pidge, tilting her head to stare at Shiro upside down, “that was pretty badass.”

“You know they are probably all listening from the other side of this wall,” said Keith dryly.

“Well then they can take it up with Axca,” said Shiro, reaching down to undo the straps to his boots. He set it against the wall, and swept Axca’s numerous guns and knives towards it with his remaining boot, “right now it’s time for bed.”

“Oh yeah,” said Pidge, getting up again. She started throwing the things piled onto the bottom bunk onto her own bunk up top - two backpacks, a bundle of rolled up paper, a wooden case that rattled with pencils, rulers and ink.

“This is your bed, Lance,” said Pidge, “I’ll go grab a spare blanket after I brush my teeth.”

Lance blinked at her, still sitting very close to Keith.

“Okay,” he said.

“How are your legs feeling?” asked Shiro, starting on his left boot, “any aches?”

“It kind of hurts all over,” admitted Lance, stretching out both feet across the stone floor and rolling his ankles experimentally. His scales caught the light, the brightest splash of colour in the room.

“It’s not bad - it hurt worse, before.”

“I’ll get you something to soak your feet in,” said Shiro, rubbing the bridge of his nose, “it’s a pity we don’t have baths here, but warm water should help with muscle strain. It’s...are you feeling too dry, or dehydrated? Anything like that?”

“Everything feels dry,” said Lance, with a wry twist to the edge of his smile.

“We’ll just...have to get you to the ocean as fast as possible,” said Keith, nudging Lance with his shoulder, “your family would know what to do, right?”

Lance looked at him then, right in the eyes. Up close, it was like taking a breath of salt air and holding it in the lungs. Once again, it felt like Lance was searching for something in Keith’s expression - perhaps a sign of doubt. Keith forced himself not to look away.

“Maybe,” was all Lance said.

They got ready for sleep without another word, taking turns to go to the washroom in pairs. Shiro managed to find a bucket from somewhere, and returned with warm water and a towel for Lance. Lance sat on the edge of his bed with his hands clasped over his knees and his feet in the water. He
watched Keith and Shiro get ready with half closed eyes, a blanket around his shoulders. He watched as Pidge gathered up Axca’s weapons, checking the windows and wedging a chair beneath the handle of the door.

Keith pulled on his sleeping shirt to ward off the cold, and padded over to Lance as Shiro unhooked the lamp from beside the door and hung it beside the bunk bed instead, near Pidge.

“Hey,” said Keith, dipping his hand to the water. It was already cold. “Does the bed feel okay?”

Lance made a non-committal noise at the back of his throat.

“It’s. Different,” he said, releasing one knee to press his hand against the mattress. “I feel too heavy.”

Lance rubbed at his own ribs, as if trying to dispel a weight.

“We can still go back down to the lake,” said Keith, glancing at the door. He startled when Lance’s cool hand closed around his wrist. When he looked back, Lance wore a smile that did not reach his mouth; it sat at the very corner of his eyes, teetering between grief and acceptance.

“It’s too cold,” said Lance.

Keith frowned.

“You said you weren’t cold,” he said, “Di-”

Lance just shook his head. He pulled at the rough blanket at his elbows, and awkwardly pulled both legs from the water. He watched as Keith dried them with the towel, knees and ankles still pressed tightly together, as if they didn’t quite know how to be separate. The sight made Keith’s throat seal tight, days-old familiar guilt bubbling up in his stomach.

Lance turned on his hip, holding the blanket up so that he could lay his legs on the mattress. He was still wearing the dress, and it pooled on the cream-grey sheets like someone’s impression of water, not-quite-right. Lance tugged the blankets back up to his chest, as if he was mimicking an action he’d seen a thousand times - and Keith remembered the way the merman would stay with them in the cavern, chin resting on folded hands, elbows propped up at the edge of the rocks.

“Night guys,” came Pidge’s voice, already hoarse with the anticipation of sleep, “gonna turn this off, s’ok Keith?”

“Yeah,” said Keith, hovering as Lance his cheek against the pillow. The lamp went out with a small wheeze and pop, plunging the room into darkness. For a moment, the only thing Keith could see were Lance’s eyes, turned luminous and crystalline blue with the dark. They blinked at him twice, very slowly.

“Night,” said Lance, an echo.

“Watch my boots,” said Shiro, who was a dark lump on his bed, wings huge: the edges blending into the shadows thrown high onto the walls. “Don’t trip.”

“Yeah, yeah, night,” said Keith, and took the three steps across the room to his own bed.

He got under the covers, shifting around for a long moment in his nightly ritual of trying to tuck his wings into a comfortable position. The room was nothing but the sound of fabric and feathers, eventually evening out to breathing. The events of the day felt surreal, and the calmness of the
night deceptive. Yet there he was: Keith and everyone he had ever loved, breathing in tandem.

Despite his anxiety, exhaustion tugged heavily at Keith. He fell asleep to the soft blue glow of Lance’s eyes, which never left his face. The sound of his breathing, so close and alive, felt like a benediction.

Keith was woken by the sound of shuffling footsteps and the sensation of someone climbing into bed with him.

He instinctively went for the knife under his pillow - but relaxed when he recognised the tell-tale blue glow above him and the sensation of scales against his bare arm.

“...Lance?” he croaked, voice hoarse from slumber.

There was a hitch of breath, wet and aborted. Lance’s elbow dug the soft skin under Keith’s ribs, and Keith oofed, shifting in his bed and lifting one wing to make room on the mattress. Lance immediately tucked himself into the vacated space, pressing his legs against Keith’s, one hand palming Keith’s chest and the other looping around his waist. Lance pressed his face against Keith’s throat, breath against his pulse, hair beneath his chin - and Keith realised that he was crying, very quietly.

“...everything okay?” came Shiro’s voice, barely a whisper from the other side of the room.

The war had made light sleepers of them all.

“Yeah, yeah, go back to sleep,” said Keith, rolling onto the ball of his shoulder so that he could curve his left wing across Lance, enveloping him completely with the arch of feathers.

Lance let out a sob, and Keith could feel his tears tickling the skin on his neck, polling at his collar. Carefully, he shifted where his right arm was beneath Lance, curved so he could run his palm across the line of Lance’s spine. With a jolt, Keith realised that Lance had shed his dress-robe at some point in the night, and was naked against him.

“Hey,” he breathed, “hey, what’s wrong?”

Lance had his eyes pressed hard against Keith, as if he could not keep them shut by his own volition. Keith could feel the tremor of his breaths through the hand that was currently against his lungs, the outline of Lance’s long thin fingers warming quickly against his shirt.

“Woke up,” said Lance, words barely audible, “and - I forgot about - I thought I still had... “

He shuddered, full bodied, words choking with the force of his tears.

Keith held him tighter. He stared out over Lance’s hair, unseeing. The healing bullet wound on his wing still ached awfully, but he tried to imagine waking up without his wings at all; or waking up without his arms, or legs.

He couldn’t. And he didn’t know what to do to help Lance, either, except to hold him.

Keith could feel the collar of his shirt grow damp with tears. His arm was becoming a little numb as well, his fingers tingling with the lack of blood.

Lance petered out eventually.

He made no move to shift away, but turned his face so that his cheek was resting on Keith’s
shoulder instead. He let out a sigh, shaky but clear, and stroked the divot between Keith’s wingblades with one hand. He ran his hand in a repetitive downwards motion, as if he were stroking feathers, not skin. It made Keith’s actual feathers stand on end; he wanted to arch into it.

For his part, Keith counted the seconds between Lance’s pulse and his breathing, tried to time his own to match, willing them to slow and calm - as if he could soothe the thunder ache of their hearts if he kept them numbered and neat.

He froze for a split second when Lance shifted his legs, one ankle slipping in between Keith’s. Lance felt cool to the touch, even blanketed by wool and feathers; his scales dry and oddly soft against Keith’s bare skin.

“Sorry,” said Lance, after what felt like an hour, “panicked.”

“S’okay,” said Keith, leaning into his pillow. Then, because the dark made him brave, he said: “you can stay here, if you want.”

He felt Lance nod, just once, against his throat.

“Don’t wanna leave,” said Lance, and Keith knew he wasn’t speaking of the embrace.

“Then don’t,” said Keith.

He knew that Shiro was probably still awake, and that these words were not just for Keith, not really. But it was hard to let things go unsaid, when it felt like they were always running out of time.

“I have to, to go home,” said Lance.

“What do you mean?” said Keith, trying to look down, to catch Lance’s eyes, but Lance didn’t move. He was tracing his thumb along the edge of Keith’s left wing-blade now, pressing against bone and soft down feathers. It made Keith droop, loose and relaxed despite the shot of nerves to his heart.

“You know you can’t come with me,” said Lance, “you and Shiro. You’ll get caught again.”

“We’ll figure something out,” said Keith.

“I’ll never forgive myself.”

“We’ll figure something out in the morning. It’s going to be okay.”

Keith startled when Lance kissed him in the hollow of his throat, a soft press of an open mouth. Keith gasped into Lance’s hair, breath catching in surprise. Lance just kissed him again, on his jaw, at the corner of his mouth, as if finding his way back. Keith palmed the curve of Lance’s spine, pressing each notch like rosaries for a prayer, though Keith had never been a man of faith. They kissed each other like that for a long time, silent and careful, hidden beneath the fold of Keith’s wing.

Keith couldn’t stop himself, even though he knew that this was Lance apologising for not believing.

“It’s going to be okay,” Keith said again.

Some cold rational part of him turned in his belly, a heavy stone. It said, in a voice much like his
own: look at yourself; love has made a liar of you.

Lance looked as if he could hear that voice too, but instead of drawing away, pressed closer.

“We’ll get you home,” said Keith.

“Maybe there’s no point,” said Lance into the dark, a confession: “I think it’s too late.”

He looked at Keith, and his eyes were wet with exhaustion and fear and something very close to resignation - and it scared Keith to see it so soon, it was frightening and hollow.

“It’s...a guppy story,” Lance continued, “a story to scare children. We have lots of those.”

“What kind of story?” asked Keith, although he thought he already knew (beware when flying close to sea; there are those waiting just for thee; they’ll rip your wings from beneath a wave; and sing you gently to your grave).

“Fairy tale,” said Lance, closing his eyes, “just ...what happens if you stray from the water for too long. The story goes that if you went too far on land...or stayed too long, you’d lose your tail and never be able to swim home. That was punishment, for going where you’re not suppose to.”

Keith squeezed his eyes shut.

“Sometimes it’s how many times you go up...sometimes it’s how long. There’s one where you’re forbidden to eat the fruit from the land...or to kiss a human. And...well.”

Lance looked at him, mouth crooked.

“I guess you’re not human, but maybe it counted anyway.”

“Lance, it’s not - it’s not your fault.”

“I’ve never heard a version of the legend where the tail grew back,” Lance went on, so quietly Keith wondered if he was imagining it, “I think that’s the whole...moral of the... that it doesn’t. Otherwise what’s the point of the story?”

Lance’s voice broke on the last word, and he turned his face into Keith’s collar. It must have been hurting his nose, but Lance was clutching Keith as if he was going to dissolve into the very air. His breath was hitching hard in his throat, and Lance had begun to cry again, tears and nothing else, his breathing shallow but even. He sounded exhausted.

“What would be the point of the story?” said Lance.

Shiro would be dead, thought Keith, if it wasn’t for you. And I would have kept searching until I drowned.

Keith pressed his cheek against the crown of Lance’s hair. The sound of their breathing filled the quiet beneath his wing, sanded rough around the edges. And the truth of it was, Keith would have been alone for a very long time - and for the first time, the vision of it made his eyes sting with dread.

Threatened loss made honest hearts; and mercy tended to wipe clean any doubt.

“That you’re brave, and kind,” Keith said, without hesitation, “and I love you.”

Lance made a wet noise at the back of his throat, a soft clicking-murmur in another language;
meant for another time;
belonging someplace else.

Chapter End Notes

Firstly I'm so sorry for the huge wait; thank you so much for staying with this story despite the long silence. I've been struggling a lot (the unfortunate events keep coming and the baseline is. i'm not doing so good, but this is the one thing that I still enjoy and i'm. I really hope you enjoyed this chapter - it is less "plotty" than the others but it was really difficult to write characterisation and emotional wise - any feedback or thoughts are really appreciated if you have time!! did it feel anticlimactic / flat or a bit too choppy?! I put in a lot of gratuitous klance but it ended up being more honest and intimate - i hope i pulled it off to give you some emotions.

There will be another big chapter after this, plus an epilogue to arc 1. The update will come much sooner than my past updates I promise! But I wanted to give Lance, Keith (and Shiro and Pidge) room to breathe and let the emotional build up finally pay off. I think it's been a long time coming, and they've gone through so much and grown so much. (there's still intrigue brewing - 3 guesses who Axca is referring to when she says "sister" hehe and who is pulling all those strings).

The fic soundtrack has been updated heaps: I recommend listening to 'Words Fail' (Keith, when he realises they were too late to save Lance from losing what he lost), 'On our Own' for Lance waiting in the water (and keith waiting on the shore), and 'You matter to me' for the last scene. I have a HC that Keith can't sing for shit in public, his voice breaks and he gets stage fright. But in private / when he thinks there's no one around, he has a lovely soft sand-rough voice *sobs*.

I can't believe we're nearing the end. I have so much more but it's. Arc 1 at least is coming to a close and I feel so nostalgic. I have a lot of outtakes / future fics ready to go as a reprieve (inc one where Izra meets keith a year later). I guess I just want to say thank you for staying with me on this journey. Please bookmark / subscribe to the series if you want to keep up with these sequels / outtakes.

If you want to support me / request outtakes and prompts, please visit my tumblr or twitter -- i would love to write any watercast timestamps and requests. PS: I also am tentatively planning to work on / actually share an original story of mine (chapter by chapter / in serial form)...it's sort of an urban / modern magic AU, but futuristic and with a lot of science behind that magic (watercast style). Would anyone be interested in reading original work?! saldfjk. I want to maybe share the original version of watercast one day, but I need a small breather from merms after I finish this haha.

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