One year after the expedition to find the source of the kaiju goes missing, Keith becomes a paladin in the hopes of finding out the truth of what happened to Shiro... and finds a lot more than that.
"Dude," Hunk says, as Lance pulls him into line. "You've been to like, seven of these things already."

"Twelve," Lance corrects. "A few times each."

"Dude."

Lance grins up at his friend. "I'm getting better though. And they don't care so long as it's a different person at the desk every time. They don't know how many times I've been."

"They take your name down," Hunk points out.

"Yeah, but like, they don't check it or anything. They're not keeping track."

"I'm... pretty sure they are," Hunk says uncomfortably, but he falls in line behind Lance anyway.

"Gonna try it too, then?" Lance says as he cranes up over the line, trying to get a look at the tent at the head of the line—and, more importantly, the simulator next to it.

"Nope. The first three times were plenty for me, thanks."

"You don't have to stick around, you know," he says, turning back with a tiny pang of guilt.

Hunk shrugs. "Lance, you're my friend, and I support you and your life decisions, even if one of those decisions is climbing into one of those death machines for the thirtieth time."

Lance grins. "Thanks man."

"No problem."

The line moves agonizingly slowly. Lance and Hunk creep forward with it, Hunk prodding at his phone and Lance squinting at the screens half-hidden in the tent. As he gets closer he can finally see the displays; one screen on the simulator pilot, the other two on what they're seeing.

"These things are just excuses for military recruiters to send you junk mail, you know," Hunk mutters as they finally get to the front of the line.

"Dude, I don't even care," Lance mutters back. "I'm so ready to punch some aliens."

"And if they pull you aside? No one knows where those people end up, you know."

"Because it involves top-secret alien punching! Obviously!"
And then the girl ahead stumbles out of the simulator, and it's Lance's turn.

"Been in one of these before?" the assistant asks him with a chuckle when he rattles off his info and bounces on his heels, ready to go.

"Yeah," he says, trying to keep his voice even. The assistant gestures him in with a smile that makes him think it hasn't worked, but it doesn't matter—he's in. He straps himself down eagerly and waits as a computerized voice rattles off instructions, gripping the controls.

"Start!" the voice blares, and off he goes.

The simulator shakes beneath him, simulating heavy footfalls as he pilots his imaginary mecha through a deserted city. The simulations are randomized, so he doesn't know where the kaiju will come from—but he does know what to look for, and more importantly, what to listen for. So when a roar sounds behind him, he turns fast enough to face its source before it reaches him.

"Let's go!" he yells, and meets the kaiju head on.

"So, Hunk," the intern at the table in the tent says quietly, as Hunk watches his friend enthusiastically defeat CG monsters. "How many times are you gonna bring your friend around?"

"It was his idea," he says. "Believe me, I have tried to discourage him."

She chuckles. "So he's not a good candidate?"

"No, he is! I just... don't want him to get involved."

Her voice lowers to a whisper. "He's caught their attention, you know. I mean, he's on the record as trying the simulator thirty-two times. If you don't want him to join up, I can pretend I didn't notice, let him slip by this time..."

Hunk swallows, and shakes his head. "He really wants this. I'm not gonna stand in his way."

"Alright." She smiles, and starts gathering up the proper forms, and something heavy settles in Hunk's stomach as he wonders if he's made the right decision.

By the time the SIMULATION OVER screen displays, Lance has defeated four kaiju, only to be defeated by the fifth—a new record for him. He slips out of the machine proudly, to a smattering of applause; the line claps for everyone, it's just what you do for these things, but it still feels good.

"Hunk!" he exclaims. "Did you see that! That right hook I pulled, the one that knocked the thing back—"

"I saw," Hunk interrupts, then nods to the girl at the desk as the other assistant briefs the next person in line.

"Lance, is it?" she says with a smile. "Why don't you come with me?" She stands with a handful of papers in her hands, and Lance freezes. It's happening? It's really happening?

"Dude, go," Hunk whispers in his ear, giving him a little push, and Lance realizes he's been staring.

"Right!" he says, and follows the girl into the back of the tent.
The Garrison

Chapter Summary

Two Years Later...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Keith looks up at the building’s facade and swallows. It’s plain concrete except for the graffiti—which hides how well-maintained it is to the casual observer. Though, hidden here, on the abandoned waterfront, it probably doesn’t have many observers at all.

He checks his phone for the dozenth time—yes, it’s the correct address. Maybe he should call one of his instructors back at the Academy just to double check... then again, everyone still pretends like the mecha program is secret, so it makes sense that the building would be unassuming. And dammit, he's supposed to be a paladin now, isn't he? Nervous hovering is unbecoming. He pushes the door open and walks in.

The first floor is empty office space just like he'd been told. The stairs are next to the open elevator shaft; he takes them two at a time, up three stories, where the floor opens into inhabited space. An impressively mustachioed man at the front desk—or, at least, a desk positioned in view of the stairs, there aren't any walls to close it off from the rest—looks up at him and grins.

"Kogane, isn't it? Keith Kogane? Welcome to the Garrison!"

The receptionist—Coran—chatters away as he leads Keith on a brief tour of the facility. Keith takes it in silently. It isn't much different from the Academy, he thinks—less classrooms, more offices. Everyone is in uniform and looks busy. And he can see nearly the entire floor—some of the corners and edges are walled off, but the rest of the space is all but undivided.

"The cafeteria is on this floor, and the infirmary, the offices, the gym, the lab, and so on," Coran is saying. "Well, the real lab's back in the city, they just sort of... dissect things, here. Upstairs are the living quarters—you'll have your own room now, lucky you! Except it's more of a cubicle. But hey, it's your own space, isn't it?"

"Mm." Keith finally gets a grunt in edgewise.

"I have to get back to work, but one of the paladins can show you around more thoroughly, I'm sure," Coran continues undaunted. "Pidge! Hey, Pidge!" He hollers across the floor.

"I'm here," Pidge says from right behind them. "'Sup."

Coran jumps. Keith merely turns.

"Er, yes. Pidge, this is Keith," Coran says quickly. Pidge squints up at him with a boyish face, but a familiar one, and Keith has a nagging feeling he is a she.

"Right. Give him the tour, right?"
"Yes, please," Coran says, and flees. Pidge sticks her hand out to shake.

"Katie Holt, but most people call me Pidge," she says, confirming both Keith's suspicion that she's female and that they've met before. He takes her hand and shakes it.

"Keith Kogane," he says.

"You were friends with Shiro." It isn't a question.

"You're Matt's sister," he responds evenly. She nods, and a wicked grin slowly spreads across her face.

"I think we're going to get along," she says, and Keith responds with the tiniest smirk of his own. Yes—he thinks they'll get along, too.

"There're already rumors about you," Pidge warns as she finishes the tour at the cafeteria. "Nothing bad, and nothing about Shiro as far as I know, but I'd keep that under wraps for now. Undercover. Whatever."

"Right," he says.

"But yeah, rumors. So if people come up and start interrogating you, that's half the reason why. The other half is that you're new, of course, and you're Darrel's replacement, so there'll be a few people who'll resent you for that, and," she pauses for breath, "they probably won't send you out, like, soon, but you're here so you're theoretically ready to actually get out there and fight the things, but they'll probably send you out with someone with actual experience first, because newbies tend to panic, though, uh. You don't seem the type."

He rewards the end of her ramble with a smirk. "So the kaiju are real after all, huh?"

She grins. "You can't fool me. Everyone knows they are, they just don't wanna admit it. Outside of this place, anyway." She gestures at the counters ahead as they step into line. "The food here's pretty good, by the way, but if you ever have a craving for something, ask Hunk. He's probably around, I'll introduce you."

Keith nods. Despite himself, he's finding the Garrison a little overwhelming—Pidge's enthusiastic commentary helps, at least. And maybe he's a bit of a loner but having a friend here would probably be... a good idea.

"Speak of the devil," Pidge says, and immediately follows it by hollering, "HUNK!"

So shouting is the main form of communication here, Keith notes.

"Yo!" Hunk yells back, and winds through the tables towards them carrying his tray, trailed by someone familiar, someone Keith has seen in photos back at the Academy: Lance. The second-most legendary paladin since the kaiju began their attacks.

Keith's stomach flips as the pair approach with grins on their faces, fielding greetings and smiles from those they pass, and suddenly he feels like the protagonist of a high school coming-of-age novel; he's managed to stumble into the Popular Friend Group, and here he is, the New Kid. He shoves the thought away quickly—he's here on merit, not chance. And there are only twenty or so paladins; he was bound to run into Lance sooner or later.

"Pidge! My dude!" Lance exclaims as they come closer. "My man! My guy!"
"I'm none of those things."

"Did you see the latest rankings? You moved up!"

"I don't care?"

"Dude, that's—hey, who's your shadow?" Lance finally notices Keith standing there and squints at him.

"This is Keith. He's new." Pidge gestures dramatically at Keith, who merely shrugs.

"Hi," he says.

"Hey, Keith! Welcome to the Garrison!" Hunk says kindly. Lance is still squinting.

"Ah," he says. "Mr. Ten-Kaiju-First-Try, is it."

"Dude," Hunk says quietly, but Keith stands his ground.

"Seven, actually," he says.

"Oho, humble, are we? Well, listen here, Keith," Lance says, leaning in and prodding Keith's chest. "I'm the top paladin in this place, and if you think you can oust me, you've got another think coming."

"Uh."

"Have you ever noticed that idiom is, like, really weird?" Hunk says, raising his hands. "'Got another think coming'? Like, what does that even mean?"

"Well?" Lance says, finger still on Keith's chest.

"Nice try, Hunk," Pidge murmurs.

"I don't care about rankings," Keith says, brow furrows. "How am I supposed to catch up, anyway? Haven't you been at this more than a year already?" Lance's eyebrows raise—it clearly wasn't what he'd expected to hear.

"...I'm glad you see reason," he says, quickly recovering and seemingly mollified. He straightens. "That's good. Take it from me, I'm a veteran." Pidge snorts.

"We're all on the same side, anyway," Hunk adds.

"Hey, a little competition never hurt anyone—"

Pidge clears her throat. "So that thing with Bonnie..."

"Was an accident, thank you, Pidge."

Keith breathes an inner sigh of relief. He seems to be in the clear now—and Lance is smiling again, so he probably doesn't hate him. They'll probably have to work together eventually; it'd be inconvenient if there's animosity between them.

"Okay, how about you guys get your food and we can sit and eat and talk," Hunk says finally, "because I'm kind of starving here."
"Yeah, go eat, losers. We'll catch up," Pidge says.

Pidge, Hunk, and Lance turn out to be a cheerful group—and noisy. Keith feels more than a little out of place sitting with them as he silently picks at his lunch (though Pidge was right, it is pretty good). Pidge and Hunk at least attempt to include him in the conversation, and he indulges them, somewhat; Lance pretty much ignores him. Which is better than bickering, at least.

"They'll probably send you down to the Castle tomorrow," Pidge tells Keith afterwards. "Someone from team Red will give you a tour; did anyone mention you're on the Red team?"

"No, actually," Keith says.

"Well, you probably are, since you're Darrel's replacement," she says. "There's only five mechas and twenty-two of us and Red's down to three members at the moment, so. I don't know how much you picked up at the Academy..."

"Some."

"Well, each mecha has different capabilities, so they try to keep paladins on just one of them. They're all named and painted different colors, and they're kept down in the Castle. Hunk's on the Yellow team, Lance is Blue, I'm on Green—yes cross-team friendship is common, like I said, there's only twenty-two of us. It's also important because we have to work together, bu-ut you should probably get to know the other Red paladins too, since they, y'know. Pilot the same mecha." Pidge pauses. "Try to get to know everyone, actually. You don't have to be friends, but you never know who you'll be working with."

Keith nods.

"Anyway the Castle isn't far, but it's not close, so there's always a paladin from each team down there in shifts. You won't be on the roster until someone on your team takes you out into battle. Protocol, you know."

"Yeah."

"And," Pidge says, leaning in subtly, voice lowered, "if you want to compare notes on the Kerberos mission, meet me at 2 am on the second floor. Try not to be seen."

He nods, trying to hide the way his breath hitches in case someone is watching. She leans away again.

"We're due for an attack within the next few days, so it won't be long before you see some action," she continues as if she hadn't just said something borderline insubordinate. "Oh, and your cubicle upstairs is labeled, and they'll have already taken your stuff up there for you. You should probably get to know the place and talk to people but if you're tired of socializing there's always unpacking." She rocks back on her heels. "I think that's it."

"Thanks, Pidge," he says.

"No problem. If you have any questions you can ask me or, well, anybody, probably. Maybe not Lance." She grins, and he grins back.

"Got it," he says, and they part ways.
Chapter End Notes

i should mention this isn't beta'd or anything so if you notice anything from typos to plot holes, please tell me!!
sorry for all the worldbuilding, we'll get to fun stuff soon enough :)
The Garrison doesn't have a curfew like the Academy did, but there is definitely a point at which the vast majority of the inhabitants go to bed—or leave, Keith supposes, since he doubts the entire staff lives upstairs too. He thinks he ought to turn in early given it's his first day, but habit brings him to the gym, or, rather, the collection of exercise equipment arrayed on the side of the elevator shaft opposite the stairs—colloquially referred to as the south part of the room, despite that Keith figures it's probably somewhat northeast.

"Coran is north. We work from there," Pidge had told him jokingly.

So despite the steady flow of paladins and others upstairs, Keith hops on a treadmill and starts running.

"First day and you're already working overtime?"

"Hello, Lance," Keith says evenly. He’s kind of hoping Lance will leave it at that; he doesn’t like his workouts interrupted.

"Do you think that'll get you somewhere?"

"I'm pretty stationary, actually." He gestures down at the treadmill, still running, and is gratified to see the smirk fall from Lance's face. He doesn’t want Lance to dislike him, sure, but come on.

"You know what I meant."

"If you're threatened by me working out, that's your problem." Yeah, this conversation is going well.

"I'm not threatened by you."

"Sure."

"So you do intend to oust me, huh? Well, I'm not gonna make it easy for you. It's on, man."

"Uhh." Keith looks at Lance, baffled at the leap in logic. Lance lifts two fingers to his eyes then points them at Keith.

"I'm watching you, newbie," he says, and backs out of the "gym", tripping on the edge of a weight machine on the way. Keith snorts and shifts his focus back to running. If Lance wants to compete with him, fine; as long as kaiju get killed it doesn't matter. As long as Keith has access to the Garrison it doesn't matter.

Back at the Academy the gym was its own room, and so long as Keith got in before the doors
locked, he could stay as long as he wanted. Here in the Garrison the open layout makes him feel like he's on display, and more so as the floor empties. Eventually the awkwardness wins out, and he hops off the treadmill earlier than he would have otherwise and heads up.

The showers and bathrooms are communal—big surprise—but he's missed the bedtime rush. They aren't empty, but they aren't crowded, at least. He nods silently to whomever looks at him and showers quickly, and makes his way through the winding hallways to his "room".

Pidge and Coran were right to refer to it as a cubicle; the dividing walls don't make it all the way to the ceiling, though they are at least too tall to look over. Besides that, it's small—just a simple cot, a tiny dresser, and a flimsy desk with a crate for a chair. He figures the funding for the program probably isn't prioritized to living arrangements.

It's his own space, at least, and it's not like he has many belongings anyway. His new uniforms were provided and already stowed away in the dressers. He unpacks only one item—an ornamental dagger, a gift from Shiro—and sets it on the desk, before getting into bed. He can hear one of his neighbors snoring; it reminds him of the shared rooms of the Academy, and with that taste of familiarity, he drifts off to sleep.

Keith's phone buzzes silently under his pillow, waking him—the room is pitch dark and he panics for half a second before the sounds of sleepers around him ground him. He checks his phone—a few minutes before 2 am. Time to meet Pidge.

He slips out of bed and gently pulls his door open. Glow-in-the-dark tape runs along the edges of the hallway; he follows it to the stairs, alert for anyone else that might be creeping about in the dark.

The stairs are lit by red emergency lights only, and he tries not to look into the dark spaces beyond the light as he creeps down two floors, silent in socked feet. He has to when he reaches the second floor, though, so he steps tentatively out into the darkness, peering for any sign of life.

"Pidge?" he whispers loudly.

"Over here," she whispers back, and he makes his way around the building's core—giving the open elevator shaft a wide berth—until he can see a faint glow illuminating her where she sits in the middle of the floor, hunched over a screen.

He comes and sits cross-legged in front of her, and only then does she glance up.

"What do you know?" she asks. "Tell me everything."

Keith takes a deep breath. "The Kerberos mission included Shiro, Matt, and your father. They took the prototype mecha out to the ocean to look for the source of the kaiju, but they disappeared."

"Anyone who's heard of the Kerberos mission knows that. What else?"

"They never found the full wreck. Nor any bodies. Even though they know the exact location they disappeared. Officially, it was..." He pauses, swallows. "Officially, it was Shiro's fault. They said he must have gone off course, or fallen into some undersea cleft, or... something. They won't say where the mission disappeared or why, or what they found there, or release the transcripts of the final transmissions..."

Pidge nods. "And?"

"I know the location," he says, and Pidge finally holds eye contact.
"Where?" she asks.

"Shiro sent me a text, right before he disappeared. He wasn't supposed to, and they deleted it somehow, even off my phone. But I took a screenshot, and it had GPS information." He flips through the photos on his phone before he comes across the right one and hands the phone to Pidge, barely even looking at the screen himself. The image is already imprinted permanently on his memory.

*I don't think I'm making it back from this. Sorry, Keith.*

"Coordinates..." Pidge mutters, and taps one-handed on her keyboard before handing Keith's phone back. "It's in the middle of the ocean."

"No, shit?"

Pidge shoots him a glare. "I mean, actually in the middle of the ocean. It's a ways off from where they predicted the source to be; it was supposed to be further southeast. By a lot." She sits back. "I don't see how they'd have gotten out that far in the time they had... that text was sent at what, 1 pm? 1:30?"

"1:27."

"So either my source on the predicted location was really wrong, or... they were forced there somehow."

Both are silent. Keith shifts.

"Okay, your turn," he says. "Tell me what you know."

"Besides the place where the origin was supposed to be," she begins, pursing her lips, "I... have a recording of their final transmissions. Everything after they raised an alarm." She hunches inwards. "I-I haven't listened to it yet. I couldn't bring myself to. You know."

Keith hesitates—giving comfort is not his forte at all. Still, he scoots around until he's sitting next to her, and tentatively puts a hand on her shoulder.

"I could listen to it," he offers quietly, "and tell you if... and tell you what happened, instead."

Her lips thin to a hard line, but she nods, and taps at her keyboard. She hands him a pair of headphones and he puts them on silently, then nods. She hits play.

"Sam! " Shiro's voice hits Keith like a punch to the gut, knocking the breath out of him, and he knows all at once he isn't ready to listen to this, he has to stop now and steady himself. But the recording continues, and he listens with morbid curiosity, unable to breathe.

"Shiro, the thrusters—"

"Matt, help your father, I've got it." A pause, a thump; in the background, alarms and the unnerving sound of rushing water. "Is this thing on? Does anyone copy?!"

Static.

"Damn it. If anyone gets this, I can't get our coordinates, the GPS is out, radar, everything. We're taking on water fast, both legs are out of commission; the right arm's not quite responding right—Matt!"
There's an agonizing minute when only distant grunts and cries can be heard in the distance, muffled by the water. Then coughing, right next to the mic.

"If you're there," Shiro croaks. "Do not attempt extraction. I repeat, do not attempt extraction. There's too many—it was like they knew we were coming, they just all attacked at once—we're being dragged north, northwest. I think they're taking us—damn!"

"Shiro, help!"

"I know!"

The voices become distant as the group moves away from the mic, but still clear enough to make out. Then the sound of screeching metal is added to the cacophony, and the voices fall silent. Keith is getting dizzy.

"They know we're in here." A quiet, raspy voice: Pidge's father. "They're going to break in..."

"Dad, shhh."

"If we split up... perhaps one of us can escape..."

"We're staying together. I'm not leaving you or your son."

"There's nowhere to escape to anyway. We're stuck here. We're... we're going to die here."

"Matt..."

"Don't deny it, Shiro."

More quiet, as the metal sounds continue. Several alarms cut off suddenly.

"It's been an honor," Shiro says. Static, and then nothing.

Keith draws in a deep, shuddering breath, chasing away the black at the edges of his vision—he'd hardly breathed at all during the duration of the recording. He takes off the headphones and drops his head into his hands. Pidge has a hand on his back, rubbing slowly; he hadn't noticed until now.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"Yeah," Keith lies. He straightens finally, trying to shake the despair that clings to him in the darkness. "There... wasn't much new."

Pidge slumps. Keith takes a deep breath.

"But... I think you were right they were forced north. Sh-Shiro said they were being dragged. Like the kaiju were taking them somewhere. And..." He stops, but Pidge is watching him with wide, watery eyes. "Your father thought they knew they were inside. It sounded like they were trying to break in."

"Oh. Then. They really are..."

Keith nods, unable to say it aloud either. He'd thought having closure would help, would fill some part of the hole inside him; instead, it seems to have ripped it wider. He and Pidge sit there in the dark for a while, hands on each others' backs, until Pidge finally leans forward and shuts her laptop.

"I think that's enough for tonight," she says in a watery voice, and he murmurs his assent. They walk
back up to the cubicles together in silence.

Keith almost manages to get back to sleep, but not quite.

Pidge looks terrible the next morning at breakfast, but Keith figures he probably does too. Hunk waves him over and he sits quietly with the two; Lance, thankfully, is nowhere to be found.

Neither Keith nor Pidge are being particularly talkative; fortunately, Hunk seems willing to pick up the slack. When he leaves to get more breakfast they lapse back into silence.

"Did you sleep?" Pidge asks eventually, twirling her fork over and over on her plate.

"No."

"Me neither."

"Well..." a voice drawls, and Keith stiffens. "It seems my best girl hasn't managed to lose her shadow."

"Get used to it," Pidge mumbles.

"Wow, you guys look like shit," Lance continues as though he hadn't heard, slipping onto the bench next to Pidge. "Up all night, were you?" He waggles his eyebrows, then raises them. "Wait, were you? Oh my god, Pidge."

"Shove off, Lance, you know I'm gay."

"Yes, I do," he says, with a sigh that said he finds this to be a great tragedy. "Fine, keep your secrets. Whatever. I don't care."

Yeah, right, Keith thinks.

Sure enough, Lance continues on almost immediately. "You weren't up coding again all night, were you? Pidge, you need to sleep. I mean, I don't care what the newbie does—don't tell me you were on that treadmill all night." Keith glares at him. "Unless you were together. Oh no, don't tell me the conspiracy club is meeting again."

Keith and Pidge meet each other's eyes.

"Don't call it that," Pidge says.

"Oh my god, it was. You found another conspiracy theorist. Oh man." Lance grins. "So what was it? Faked moon landings? Area 51? Alien abduction?"

Keith stands up abruptly. "I'm leaving."

"So soon? Guess my new rival just can't take the heat."

"Did you just scare Keith off, Lance?" Hunk asks behind him. "Keith!" He doesn't turn, though, just leaves his half-empty plate at the dish station and heads towards Coran's desk.

"Mr. Kogane! Good morning!" Coran greets him.

"Uh, yeah, morning," he says. "Pidge mentioned I'd be getting a tour of the Castle today?"
"Right you are. Come along, then," Coran says, and he leads the way down the stairs, Keith following closely behind.

Chapter End Notes

well, shiros dead i guess ;)

talk to me!!! here or on tumblr @maternalcube. id love to hear what you think :)}
Coran doesn't lead Keith out of the building; rather, they continue down into the basement, which bears an eerie resemblance to an abandoned subway station. Or perhaps not so abandoned, since an elderly man sits reading a newspaper in a folding chair by the tracks, next to a well-used but brightly lit subway car.

"Bruce!" Coran says, and the man looks up. "Take this fellow down to the Castle, would you?"

"A'ight," says Bruce, and gestures to Keith. They step onto the car, and Bruce shuts the doors as Keith perches on the edge of a plastic seat near the front.

"Ya new, then?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah. Stay alive, kid," Bruce grunts.

"I'll try," Keith says quietly.

It's no more than five minutes before they pull into the next and only other stop on the line. Another subway car rings its bell and leaves as they arrive.

"Here ya are," Bruce says, and Keith thanks him and hops off. He makes his way up the stairs tentatively.

Unlike the Garrison, the Castle has no wasted floors—the moment he turns the corner of the stairwell he can see the bustle above. Way too many people, he thinks—fortunately, one is waiting for him with a kind smile at the top of the stairs.

"Keith, right?" she says. "Welcome to the Castle. I am Allura, the administrator here."

"Do they call you queen, then?" Keith asks, still dazed from the rush of people. If the Garrison was busy, the Castle is triply so.

Allura chuckles. "No, but some call me princess—my father used to be in charge. You can call me Allura, though."

Despite her words, as she leads him through the bustle, those who call out to her call her "ma'am". He makes a note of it as he rushes to keep up; she weaves through the crowds like they're hardly there at all.

The area he'd entered, as it turned out, is a crossroads; hallways stretch out like the spokes of half a wheel with its center along the wall opposite the stairs. She leads him to the elevators there and hits the down button.
"I'll show you to the hangar," she tells him. "There ought to be someone from the Red team there to show you around." He nods.

The elevator dings, and opens, and empties, and then Keith steps in and the far wall is glass and... there they are.

The five mechas are enormous, arrayed out through the other half of the wheel-like building. Blue, Red, Black, Green, Yellow. Keith all but presses his nose against the glass, craning to see as much of them as possible as the elevator slowly carries them down towards the hangar floor and Allura chuckles behind him.

"Magnificent, aren't they," she says, and he nods. His fingers twitch at the thought of the controls of one of these massive machines beneath them. All at once he realizes he's excited.

"One thing, before we arrive," Allura says seriously, and he reluctantly tears his eyes away from the mechas.

"Yes?"

"I understand you had some... discipline issues at the Academy," she says, and he forces himself to swallow back the rising heat in his chest. "Know that that will not be tolerated here. You may have individual talent, but here at the Castle, we are the first and only line of defense for humanity. We work as a team. Understood?"

He's already off to a great start in that regard. "Yes, ma'am."

"Good." She nods behind him. "Here we are."

The elevator shudders to a halt, and the glass slides open, and Keith steps onto the hangar floor.

The mechas, already enormous, seem bigger from below. Keith nearly gets a crick in his neck stretching to see the top of Blue as they pass her on the way to Red. There's a vaguely familiar man leaning against Red's foot, and he straightens as they approach.

"Yo, Kogane," he says, and tosses something. Keith catches it and finds it's a red jacket. "Welcome to team Red."

"Uh, thanks," Keith says, and shrugs it on. It looks like leather but is way too flexible to be—he could fight in this thing without restriction, he thinks.

"Show him the ropes, Rex," Allura says, and Keith remembers—he's met this guy at the Academy before. He thinks they were sparring partners occasionally.

"Sure," says Rex, and he turns and gestures over his shoulder for Keith to follow, so he does.

Rex leads them to a small elevator on the scaffolding around Red and closes the gate behind them. He waits until they're moving to speak again.

"Glad to see you made it here," he says.

"Yeah, thanks," says Keith. He's not really in the mood to chat today so he lets Rex talk at him instead.

"As you can see, Red's still under a bit of construction." Rex gestures upwards to where the scaffolding folds in front of Red's "face". There are a handful of people in jumpsuits there, but they
aren't close enough yet for Keith to see what they're doing. "It's pretty much just cosmetic at this point. We've been out of commission a while since we lost Darrel..." Rex frowns. "Anyway, Red's the fastest, and her agility's second only to Green. We get sent out a lot. You play any video games?"

The question startles Keith. "Uh, a bit?"

"Well, if you think about it, the mechas are a bit like a good RPG or MMO party composition," Rex says, and Keith wonders why he's here. "Black's kind of an all-around member, jack-of-all-trades but master of none, y'know? Yellow's a tank, Blue's support—like a sniper. Us and Green, we're DPS, but we're the fast sort and they're the sneaky sort. We're also strictly melee."

Keith has no idea what "DPS" means. "...Okay."

"So when they wanna deal a lot of damage, which is usually, they send one of us. They usually don't have more than two mechas out at once, and half the time Black gets sent out it's because Blue or Yellow need repairs. Which is pretty often, actually."

The elevator is agonizingly slow and they've barely made it up to Red's waist at this point.

"You probably won't spend much time on the hangar floor," Rex continues. "It's mostly for the mechanics and whatnot. The paladins' quarters and lounge are on about the same level as these guys' heads, so we don't have to suffer this elevator every time we're scrambled."

"Thank god."

"I know, right?" Rex gestures up at the workers around Red's head. "We'll wait for these guys' lunch break to get into the cockpit, I'll show you the rest of the place in the meantime."

The rest of the place isn't very exciting, as it turns out. Each team has a (color-coded, naturally) bunk and small bathroom, within ten feet of the entrance to their mecha. The bunks don't even have doors.

"We're not big on privacy here. You may have noticed," Rex comments. "But it's mostly just paladins up here anyway."

The control center is fairly interesting, but Rex doesn't know what much of anything is there. It does afford a nice view of the hangar, though.

The lounge has a ring of couches—lowered into the floor, for some reason, and currently occupied—and a small TV mounted in one corner. And an entire wall tiled with TVs. Keith maybe gapes a little.

"Don't think of trying to hook up any games or anything to this," Rex says. "Lance already did. It didn't work and Allura almost murdered him for it."

"I'll bet," Keith says, more to Lance's actions than Allura attempting murder.

"The little guy in the corner gets a decent signal, but it's not cable, just whatever's local. This wall is for live feeds when the mechas are out."

"Rex!"

Keith had almost forgotten there were others in the room—by the color of the jacket, the woman that called out is on the Yellow team. "Is this Darrel's replacement?" she asks.

Keith is getting tired of being referred to as a replacement.
"Sure is," Rex says.

"Howdy, newbie," the woman says, hopping up out of the couches and extending a hand. "I'm Tina."

"Keith."

"Welcome to the danger zone, Keith." Tina grins, but it's a friendly one, at least.

Keith meets the other paladins there too: Joey, of Green; Denise, of Blue; and Terry, of Black. All are wearing colored jackets like his own.

Keith is beginning to squirm in the face of all these strangers (or near strangers—he recognizes Terry and Denise from the Academy too) focused on him; luckily, Rex checks his watch.

"Probably lunch time," he says. "I'll take you inside Red, then get you back to the Garrison."

Red’s cockpit looks an awful lot like a simulator.

"Well, yeah," Rex says, when Keith mentions it. "They wouldn't train you in one otherwise. There's an exact copy of this room a floor down behind us, actually, so you can practice with Red specifically without actually taking her out." Rex settles easily into the pilot's chair and begins pointing things out. "You've got your typical controls, thrusters, all of that along here. Over here's the shield—it unfolds from the arm and it's not very sturdy, mostly it's for blocking acid spit and stuff. If you gotta take a hit, better you just take it on the arm or chest on front, that's where we've got the most shielding. Better yet, let someone else take the hit. Only Green's more fragile than us. There's kind of an energy force field thing too, here, but it doesn't hold out for long—use it only if you need a rescue. And here," Rex runs his hand along a lever reverently, "is the sword."

"...The sword."

"Yep. The sword."

Fairly self-explanatory, Keith supposes. He wonders if the original mecha had a sword. His sleepless night is catching up with him and right now he really just wants a nap.

"Is there anything else I should know?"

"Hm. Well, always wear your jacket when you're in the Castle—I'll show you the lockers where we keep 'em. They're padded and stuff, so that's good, but also they let everyone know to get out of your way downstairs, which is nice."

Hell yeah it is.

"Don't worry too much if you rip it or something, they've got a whole bunch in storage somewhere. Just don't grab anyone else's, because they get really sweaty and it's gross."

"Noted."

"And on the note of teams, if you ever have some down time here and you get bored of Red's sim, check out Black's. Pretty much everyone does anyway, but you'll definitely end up piloting her at some point."

"...I thought we stuck only to our teams...?"
"Generally, yeah, but like I said, there's only three of them." Rex leans in conspiratorially. "And don't tell anyone I said this, especially not Lance, because he's Lance—have you met him yet?—but they grab the best paladins for Black and Red. So every ten days or so one of us is on duty for Black, give 'em a break, y’know? Even though there’s only four of us.”

"How many on the other teams?"

"Five each. I mean, everyone here's good, of course. And they try to match up fighting style and all that, so it’s as much skill as suitability. Like, Lance isn't the top paladin here for nothing. But if you're in Red," and Rex grins, "you gotta have a special something, y’know?"

"...Right." Privately Keith wonders how much propaganda Rex has consumed and if the other teams have a superiority complex too. Maybe he’ll ask Pidge later. He wants a nap first though.

"I think that's it," says Rex. "I'll take you back down to the subway so you can head back and eat. The lockers are on the way."

The lockers are right next to the stairway, in fact. Someone has scribbled his name on a piece of tape and stuck it on one of the lockers over a previous label, which clearly reads "Darrel". It just depresses Keith further—frankly, he's too tired to face his own mortality right now.

He does note, though, that several labels are original, Lance, Hunk, and Tina's included. He wonders if any of the lockers used to be Shiro’s.

"Better to leave the jacket here so you don't lose it," Rex says. "The train's just downstairs. I gotta go, see ya around, Kogane."

"Bye, Rex," Keith says numbly, and shrugs out of the jacket. He mumbles a greeting to the conductor downstairs—not Bruce this time—and barely remembers the ride back to the Garrison. He forgoes the main floor to stumble up to his cubicle and runs into Pidge on the way.

"It's hit you, hasn't it," she says, looking as half-dead as he feels.

"Mrgh," he responds.

"Me too." She sighs and slips into her cubicle with a quick goodnight. Keith blearily checks his phone. It's 1:43 pm.

Whatever, he thinks, entering his own cubicle and collapsing onto the bed. It's naptime either way.

Chapter End Notes

hahaha that was all worldbuilding again, sorry, well get to fun stuff soon enough...
Fun Fact the roster is actually a 50 day cycle, which works fine for the five-person teams, but red and black get finagled to fit (rex just never figured it out lmao)

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Keith wakes up pissed off, hungry, and with a crick in his neck. He fumbles for his phone—it's almost dead but it tells him he's still got time for dinner, so he plugs it in and stumbles out of bed and down to the cafeteria.

He spots Hunk and Lance sitting at one side of the "room" and carefully makes his way across the opposite side, determined to stuff his face as fast as possible alone and maybe get some training in after. The plan goes swimmingly until he emerges from the dinner crowd with his tray of food and Hunk spots him.

"KEITH!" he yells, waving him over, and now he has no choice but to go. Hunk's voice is probably audible all the way down in the basement. He can't get away with pretending he hasn't heard.

"Hey," Hunk greets him when he sits. "Is Pidge still asleep?"

"I don't know?"

Lance is totally ignoring him, which is fine.

"You guys should be careful about when you meet up," he says, "and for how long. I think Pidge is on the roster for the day after tomorrow and sleep deprivation doesn't really help when you're out fighting kaiju, you know?"

"I dunno about Pidge, but I don't think I'd've slept much anyway," Keith says. "One of my neighbors snores." Which wouldn't actually keep him up at all, but Hunk doesn't know that. Hunk chuckles.

"You'll get used to it," he says. "But seriously, be careful. If they catch you..."

"I know."

"Welp, I'm bored," says Lance, and gets up and leaves. Hunk watches him go, then turns to Keith with a furrowed brow.

"...Did you piss him off?" he asks uncertainly, and Keith thinks that from anyone else it would sound like an accusation.

"Not on purpose," he says with a sigh. "He thinks I'm trying to outrank him or something."

Hunk sighs too. "Oh, that. He's been going on about his rivalry with you all day. It's a shame, I think you guys would get along great otherwise."

"How would you know? You only just met me." Keith swallows quickly. "No offense."

"None taken," Hunk says mildly. "And I know because you hit it off with Pidge and Pidge doesn't
like anybody."

That's only because they have a shared history, Keith thinks, but doesn't mention it. "Okay," he says.

"Lance is stubborn, okay? The way I see it, either he honestly feels threatened by your talent, or he thinks you're attractive and he's overcompensating so you don't find out," Hunk continues, and Keith chokes on his mashed potatoes. "It's either-or. Maybe both. Either way, he'll probably get over it in a month or two."

"Well, I hope so," says Keith. His thought the other day about being a novel protagonist returns in full force.

"Anyway, try to be well-rested tomorrow," Hunk says. "You don't wanna miss your welcome party."

Keith manages not to choke on his potatoes again but he thinks that he very much wants to miss his welcome party. "Why is there a party?" he asks, trying to express his surprise and displeasure in five small words.

"Uh, to welcome you? It's tradition."

"An entire party just for me?"

Hunk gives him a confused look. "Don't tell me no one's ever thrown you a party before?"

Keith has to think about that.

"Not even a birthday party?"

Slowly, he shakes his head.

"Oh my god, dude. That's really sad." Hunk shakes his head too. "Have you even been to a party?"

"Yeah, yeah, of course I have," Keith says, thinking of the scant handful of parties he went to during his school years—before his peers realized he kind of hated them. "I've never really liked them though."

"Well, this party will be fun, I promise." Hunk pauses. "Or at the very least, it'll be pretty chill. What's your favorite food?"

"...I like sandwiches. They're convenient."

Hunk drops his head into his hands. "Keith, Keith, Keith. What are we going to do with you?"

"What?"

"Okay, what kinds of flavors do you like? Sweet, spicy, anything?"

"Uh... spicy, I guess?"

"Textures?"

"I don't know?"

"Allergies?"
...Lactose...?

Hunk nods solemnly. "I'll figure something out. Goodnight, Keith." Then he gets up and leaves a very confused Keith to finish his dinner alone.

Keith spends the next morning in the gym; there's no shortage of sparring partners here, and it's easier for him to make friends on the mats than anywhere else. He doesn't quite get all their names—there's a Jess on the Red team, and a Ralph and a G-something that may or may not be on Yellow or Blue, and a couple others. He gets the impression they're testing him, but he gets a good workout from it so he can't complain.

Around noon, though, Pidge—looking much better than the last time he saw her—comes to drag him to the cafeteria. "The party can't start without you," she tells him.

Something smells good—he doesn't know what it is, but it makes him realize he's hungry, so he willingly follows Pidge into the crowd. Until the crowd realizes he's there.

"Welcome to the Garrison, Keith!" a chorus of voices suddenly exclaim, not even close to at once. He startles and the people nearest him laugh.

"Th-thanks?" he says, eyes darting rapidly around the crowd. Fortunately Hunk emerges, carrying a plate of... something.

"Welcome, Keith!" he says, and offers the somethings. Keith takes one and bites into it; it's good, a little spicy, kind of pastry-like. Still has no idea what it is, though.

"Thanks, Hunk," he says after he swallows. "It's good."

"Of course it's good, Hunk made it," Pidge says, and then the crowd descends, itching to have a taste too. Keith grabs another pastry thing and wriggles free, and, feeling like he shouldn't leave his own party, hovers awkwardly at the fringes of the crowd to eat.

A few people come up to him and welcome or congratulate him personally; fortunately no one really lingers, and most are too focused on Hunk's concoction anyway. So it's not the worst party he's ever been to. It gets better when Pidge comes and stands next to him, pointing out various people in the crowd to tell him their weird habits or gossip. He ends up laughing for the first time since he's arrived—the first time in a long time, really.

Pidge stops eventually though, as the crowd finally thins, and takes a deep breath. "I want you to meet me tonight," she says. "I thought of something."

"Hunk said you're at the Castle tomorrow."

"Yeah, but it'll be quick. Probably. And I can always nap there, they have bunks for a reason."

"Alright." Keith shrugs. "Same time, same place?"

"Yep."

Hunk shows up, then, with a small container of the pastries. "I saved some just in case," he says. "Better go hide them in your cubicle before anyone notices."

"Thanks, Hunk." Keith takes the container and peers inside—there's quite a few in there. He's kind of surprised, honestly, that Hunk is being this nice to him, because usually people are only nice to
him when they need something from him. Pidge is after his knowledge of the Kerberos mission, after all, but what could Hunk want?

He supposes maybe he's just trying to make friends. He likes the idea.

"Better hurry, I think I see some people eyeing us," Pidge says, and Keith blinks.

"Uh, right," he says, and scurries off upstairs. With the pastries safely tucked in the crate that passes as a desk chair, he goes downstairs again only to be intercepted by Coran.

"Keith, there you are!" he exclaims. "You ought to head down to the Castle. Red's been fixed and we're due for kaiju any day now, after all! And the sooner you see battle firsthand, the sooner you can start piloting, hm?"

"Okay." Keith shrugs and heads downstairs—it's not like he had anything better to do. Maybe he could check out Red's simulator while he was there.

Keith takes the last few steps up into the Castle and regards the ever-present bustle with dismay. He remembers to grab his jacket, at least, and the crowds do part somewhat as he shrugs it on and gets going, but he still has to do his fair share of dodging and jogging to get through.

He takes the elevators up and manages to find his way back to the lounge; to his relief, the member of the Red team on duty right now—the only one he hasn't met yet—is there. To his disappointment, the Blue team member present is Lance.

Still, he steps down into the sofa nest and offers a half-hearted wave when the paladin in red looks up. She smiles.

"Keith, right?" she says. "I'm Bonnie."

"Yeah, hi," he says, unsure what else to say. She gestures to the seat next to her and he takes it.

"Rex said he gave you a tour yesterday, so you don't really have to do anything today," she says. "Just hang out, maybe check out the sim. If the alarm goes off, get to Red. That's pretty much it."

"It gets kinda boring here," the Yellow paladin offers. "Bring a book or something if you can."

"Noted," Keith says. He looks up at the TV—someone's put some cooking channel on, and he kind of spaces out watching it, until he notices in his peripheral vision that Lance is looking at him. He ignores it like an annoying itch until finally he has to scratch, and glances over.

Lance maintains the eye contact, narrowing his eyes. Keith raises an eyebrow, which only makes Lance's lower.

"What."

"I'm watching you, newbie."

Beside him, he hears Bonnie sigh aggrievedly. The other paladins look annoyed or amused, too.

"I noticed," Keith says dryly. "Didn't realize my face was so entertaining."

"Why do you have a mullet?"

Because Shiro's the only one that he'll let cut his hair. "Why do you care?"
"It's ugly."

"I wasn't aware you were judging a fashion show. Or, for that matter, that I'm here to participate in one."

Someone snickers.

"I don't like your attitude."

"You're not really one to talk, Lance."

"He's got a point," Bonnie whispers. The Black paladin snorts.

Lance crosses his arms and finally looks away. "You wouldn't look good on the runway anyway," he says. Keith swears he's pouting.

He snorts. "Whatever you say."

Lance is determinedly looking anywhere but at Keith, mouth working like he's chewing on more words. Keith turns back to the cooking channel.

"Another thing," Lance says some fifteen or so minutes later, and half the room's occupants groan. Keith turns his head slowly to give Lance an incredulous look.

"Pidge," Lance says triumphantly, "doesn't actually like you."

"No shit, she's gay," someone mutters, and Lance whirls on the mutterer.

"I didn't mean it like that!" he says, and turns back to Keith. "She's plying you with friendship so you'll join her little conspiracy club. She only hangs out with you because you'll talk about that kind of thing."

"Hanging out to talk about common interests?" Keith is honestly amused now. "Yeah, that doesn't sound like friendship at all."

"I mean she's using you for information!"

"Is that supposed to insult me?"

"Lance," Bonnie interrupts. "You're not being very nice to Pidge."

"You know any of us could tell her, right?" the Green paladin present adds. "I'm literally gonna see her tomorrow morning."

"Meh. Pidge can handle it," Lance says. "My point stands."

"Not really," says Bonnie.

"I think it's missing a leg. Or two," Keith adds.

"Fuck you, man, it's a three-legged stool at worst."

The alarm goes off, loud and blaring, and everyone jumps.

"Oh, thank god," Bonnie says. "Keith, let's go."
HERE WE GOOO
Keith follows Bonnie at top speed down the hall, heart pounding. The alarm fades to a dull roar as Allura's voice blares over some sort of speaker system.

"I need Red and Blue out, and Black on standby!"

Keith can just hear Bonnie swear under her breath as they turn a corner and enter Red. She hits a couple of switches on her way in and Keith keeps right on her heels as a series of bulkheads slide shut behind them.

"Hold on," she says as she practically vaults into the pilot's chair. He grabs onto the back of it as Red lurches beneath them.

"Let's go!" Lance's voice reverberates around the cockpit as Red steps out of the Castle and wades into the ocean. On the displays Keith can see that Blue is just a step behind them.

"Blue, take point," Allura says.

"Roger that."

Bonnie smoothly pulls on the controls and Red slows and steps to the side to allow Blue to pass them. "Go ahead, Lance."

"Thanks, Bonnie. Allura, what's the ETA?"

"Two minutes, coming in at 12 o'clock from two miles off."

"Roger." Lance's voice is casual, but not flippant, and Keith is surprised—but he supposes that even Lance can be serious. He can't be the top paladin for nothing.

Bonnie twiddles with a dial and one of the displays zooms in, revealing a ripple in the distant water, moving too quickly and unnaturally to be a wave. Keith's pulse quickens; this is it.

"I have visual. Lance?"

"I have visual. Allura?"

"Wait for breach. Scans suggest an armored head and back."

"Ugh, I hate those." So Lance is Lance even on the job.

"Upon breach, fire at your discretion," Allura finishes.

"Roger."
Keith watches Blue shift into a firing stance, and even from here the sound of the blaster powering up is audible. He clings white-knuckled to the back of the pilot's chair as Bonnie shifts Red forward and sideways, waiting for the kaiju to emerge.

They don't have to wait long. It breaches half a mile off, and within moments Lance is firing.

The first few shots hit the kaiju squarely in the face. It rears back with a shriek. More shots hit its chest and arms when it lurches forward, pushing it back.

"Stay put," Lance says firmly.

It doesn't, though, zig-zagging back and forth to try and avoid the steady barrage. Keith counts two misses against countless hits, and despite himself, his respect for Lance rises.

"Haha, take that, you big ugly turtle!" Nevermind.

As if in response, the kaiju turns, and the blasts bounce and fizzle off its armored back. Then it hunches down and disappears beneath the waves entirely. Lance stops firing. Everything is quiet.

"Lost visual," Bonnie and Lance both say, almost at the same time. Bonnie pulls the sword lever and the weapon slides up out of Red's arm, leveled before her.

"Standby," Allura says, then, "It's fleeing. Red, pursue."

"Roger." Red shifts beneath Keith's feet and Bonnie leans forward, intent on the controls and the windshield before them. Moments later they're running. The mecha shudders heavily with every step; Keith bounces against the back of the chair, breathless.

"The underwater radars are picking it up, sending you the feed," Allura says, calm as ever.

There's a small ping, and a little radar scan pops up on one of the displays. There's a blob where the kaiju is, moving quickly out to sea—and a scribbly line not far past it.

"Don't pass the depth line," Allura warns. "Blue, follow."

"I know."

"Roger."

They speed up, and Keith makes a note to ask about the depth line later. The kaiju is visible now ahead of them, a dark shape moving rapidly beneath the surface. Bonnie huffs and pushes forward.

With another shriek, the kaiju erupts from the water just ahead of them. Bonnie does not flinch, does not stop. Red's momentum carries her forward, and her sword through the monster ahead, skewering it neatly. The impact is jarring and Keith almost loses his grip on the chair, but manages to stay upright.

With a few quick jerks of the controls, Bonnie has Red pull the sword free. The kaiju is writhing and screaming, but still standing.

"Lance, you taking the killshot?" Bonnie calls begrudgingly.

"Nah," Lance says, to Keith's surprise (and Bonnie's relief, by the slight slump of her shoulders). "You earned it."

"Good." Red lifts the sword again, and swings directly at the kaiju's neck. It cuts well into the blue
flesh there, and finally the kaiju shudders and falls.

"Whew! That's over with," Lance says cheerfully.

"And no injuries... or friendly fire," Bonnie says pointedly.

"That," Lance says firmly, "was an accident."

With Red finally still, Keith steps around the chair to get a better view out the windshield. "Wow," he breathes, watching the half sunken corpse cloud the water with its blood, far below.

"Heh." Bonnie turns to look at him, and he quickly closes his mouth and wipes the awe from his face. She grins anyway.

"Good work, paladins." Allura sounds pleased. "Come on in."

"Roger," Bonnie and Lance respond. Red and Blue turn and trudge back in towards the Castle, and Keith quickly grabs onto the chair again.

"So, Keith," Bonnie says. "Whaddya think?"

He's thinking a lot of things—the speed and skill with which they fought, the adrenaline still pumping through his veins, the incredible reality of a kaiju, there in front of him; the way he feels he's meant to be out here. But Lance is listening, so he settles for saying, "The simulators don't do it justice."

Bonnie laughs, and so does Lance.

Bonnie shoos him off to the control room the moment they leave Red. He's still so keyed up he's almost shaking, like electricity beneath his skin telling him to go, to fight, and he takes deep breaths and walks slowly in an attempt to calm down before he arrives.

It mostly works. He stands by the doorway until Allura sees him and waves him over.

"Keith! I hope you didn't get shaken up too much out there," she says.

"No ma'am, I'm fine," he says.

"Well, good. Do you have any questions?"

"What's the depth line?"

"Oh! It's the point at which the bay is too deep for the mechas to function properly." Allura purses her lips. "And on a related note, do try not to submerge Red. It won't go well for her."

"I'll keep that in mind," he says.

"Anything else?"

"How do you know which mechas to send out?"

Allura crosses her arms and looks up. "Well, in this case, I wanted to send Red out to let you get the chance to see a kaiju up close and personal. In general, though, our deep-water scanners pick up information on incoming kaiju and we develop a strategy from that. Anything else?"
"...How often are we attacked?" Which is something Keith can't believe no one's told him yet.

"Almost weekly," Allura says. "Every five to ten days. It's very rarely less or more than that. Is that it?"

Keith is still kind of reeling from that—he'd expected monthly at worst. Well, it looks like he'll be busy after all. "Uh. Yes, that's it."

"Then, welcome to the team! Officially, this time." She holds out a hand and he shakes it firmly. "You'll be on the roster starting next week. In the meantime, get to know your fellow paladins. I hear you've already befriended Lance?"

"'Befriended' is... yeah, I guess," Keith says quickly. Allura is looking at him so brightly. "Also Pidge and Hunk."

"Ah, of course. Keep up the good work, Keith. I'm sure you'll be a great asset to our team."

Yep, that's Keith: an asset. "Thanks, ma'am."

She nods and turns away, and he leaves the control room. He pokes his head into the lounge—only the Yellow and Black paladins are there, but the TV wall is all lit up with replays of the battle from various angles. There's even a screen on the interior of Red; he can see himself getting bounced around as Red chases the kaiju.

The screen on Lance shows him grinning throughout the whole thing. Or at least, all of it that Keith sees as he lingers in the doorway—he leaves again when the feed restarts from the beginning.

He runs into the Green paladin on the way back to the elevators. "You're free to go, you know," she tells him, and he just nods—he'd figured.

The lobby is less crowded than usual, maybe because the threat of kaiju is no longer so imminent. He gets through it easily and puts away his jacket and finally feels the tension receding as he heads downstairs to the subway. By the time he makes it back to the Garrison, he wants a nap. Pidge and Hunk are waiting for him, though.

"So, how was it?" Pidge asks with a wicked grin.

"We saw the feeds, it looks you got pretty shaken up, are you okay?" Hunk asks.

"I'm fine," Keith says, and gives them what he hopes is a reassuring smile. "It was... pretty exciting."

"You mean terrifying?"

"No." He shakes his head at Hunk. "Just exciting."

"Ready to get out there, huh?" Pidge is still grinning.

"Yeah. I am."

This is what he trained for, after all.

Keith finds Pidge waiting for him by the stairs on the second floor that night.

"Change of plans," she says. "We're going to hack into the Garrison office computers."
Keith did not sign up for this. "We're going to what?"

"Okay, I'm going to hack into Garrison computers. You're going to keep watch."

"Why?"

"Well, do you think you can hack in?"

"No, no." Keith grits his teeth, frustrated. "Why do you want to hack in at all?"

"Because, my good man, my family and your Shiro may not be dead." Pidge has a decidedly evil grin, and Keith is baffled.

"Explain," he says weakly.

"Well, did you actually hear them die?"

Keith sucks in a breath at Pidge's bluntness. "Yes? I mean, the recording cut out but... well, no, I guess I didn't... hear that specifically. But I don't see how they could have survived the destruction of the prototype, Pidge."

"Oh, ye of little faith. Consider: maybe the prototype wasn't actually destroyed. After all, they never did find the wreck, or the... bodies. But they said they did officially, which means they're hiding something."

Keith doesn't dare hope. Pidge does have a point, though. "So you want to find proof," he says.

"Exactly. Before I was just looking for what happened—but if they know they're still alive, there's going to be traces. Records of the prototype retrieval, maybe, or some hint as to where our people are hiding. Maybe they found something they wanted to keep hidden." Pidge is still grinning, and even in the dim red light from the stairway he can see how excited she looks.

Well, he's not going to be the one to crush her hopes. She can do that to herself.

"Alright," he says. "I'll keep watch."

"Good. Let's go."

Keith does a quick perimeter check around the fourth floor while Pidge surreptitiously edges toward the offices in the corner. He waves to her from across the room to tell her it's clear and she hurries the rest of the way.

She's already picked the office lock open by the time he gets there too. "Not very secure, is it?" he whispers. She just hushes him and ducks inside.

He casually leans against the particleboard wall as she pulls the door shut behind her with a small click. His eyes roam across the dark floor—the gym is right in front of him, and the cafeteria beyond. There are a few blinking lights from the public computers across the way that keep catching the corner of his eye, making him start, but no actual movement. He can faintly hear Pidge tapping on a keyboard a wall or two away.

"Progress?" he whispers.

"35% downloaded," she whispers back.

He taps his fingers against the wall nervously, wanders a little closer to the stairs and elevator shaft,
returns to his place by the wall.

"Pidge?"

"67%.

Footsteps echo faintly from the stairs. Keith ducks behind a weight machine, breathless. If he gets kicked out just when he's finally gotten here...

Two figures, giggling and holding hands, scurry past the opening and further down the stairs. Well, they're not a threat, then. Keith straightens and resumes leaning against the wall.

"Almost there!" Pidge whispers. "Done!" She scurries out of the offices and locks the door behind her, then turns to Keith triumphantly, holding up a flash drive. "Now we just have to plug this in and see what's on it."

"Shouldn't you, like... sleep?"

"There was an attack today, nothing's gonna happen tomorrow. I'll sleep at the Castle, come on." She grabs his wrist and pulls him to the stairs.

The enter the stairwell at the same moment someone turns the corner above. All freeze.

"Shouldn't you two be asleep?" the figure upstairs asks after a moment, and with a sinking feeling Keith realizes he recognizes the voice as an administrator.

"Yep, we were just on our way to... do that," Pidge says in an unusually high voice. The administrator sighs.

"If you get upstairs in the next thirty seconds I'll pretend I didn't see you," he says tiredly. "And try to be more responsible from now on. The future of humanity rests on your shoulders."

"Yes, sir," both squeak, and book it upstairs past him. Keith can only hope it's too dark for him to see their faces.

Pidge still has him by the wrist and when they get upstairs she yanks him down to whisper in his ear, "Two days!" Then she's gone.

Chapter End Notes

now that i've set things up... we can get to the good stuff ;}

tumblr: @maternalcube
In the morning, Keith accepts his fate and sits with Hunk and Lance for breakfast.

"Good morning!" Lance tells him cheerfully, and Keith freezes halfway to sitting, staring at him.

When he glances over at Hunk, though, he looks worried, so clearly whatever Lance is playing at isn't honest friendship.

"Good morning?" Keith says hesitantly. When Lance isn't immediately forthcoming he sits down the rest of the way and picks at his oatmeal, on edge.

"So," Lance says finally, leaning forward and gesturing with the sausage on his fork. "Now you've seen me in action."

Oh, Keith can see where this is headed. "...Yes?"

"So you can admit now that I'm clearly superior." Lance preens and Keith wants to roll his eyes into oblivion.

"You," he says, "haven't seen me in action. And I gather you managed to shoot Bonnie at some point."

Lance splutters and stands and dramatically slaps his hands against the table, causing Hunk and a number of people nearby to jump. "It was an accident!"

Oh, this is too easy. Keith grins. "Not such a good shot, then, are you?"

"I—I don't need this from you!" Lance throws his hands up in the air and stalks off—then returns moments later to grab his tray, muttering darkly all the while. Hunk watches him fondly, but the look fades when he turns back to Keith.

"I know Lance is fun to rile up, but you should... maybe not do that," he says.

"I guess not. It's just too easy." Keith only feels remorse because of the look on Hunk's face, though. "Sorry."

"I'm not mad, Keith, just disappointed." Hunk closes his eyes and tilts his head and then peeks to see if Keith gets the joke. Keith isn't sure what the joke is exactly but he gets that Hunk isn't mad and he hasn't already ruined their tender new friendship, so he smiles back.

"Seriously, though," Hunk says, resuming a normal pose. "Be nice to him? I know he seems confident but he's actually pretty sensitive."
"He's not very nice to me," Keith points out.

"Yeah, I'm working on that," Hunk says with a little frown. "Just like, try, for me and Pidge's sakes? We want you guys to be friends."

Keith sags a little. Yeah, he doesn't want to have to stop hanging out with Pidge (even if that means keeping watch in the middle of the night while she breaks into an office), and Hunk's great too, but...

"I just don't think we're... compatible."

"I think you are," Hunk says kindly. "Trust me on this."

"If you say so," Keith responds doubtfully.

Hunk leaves eventually and Keith finishes his breakfast alone and then... he's at a loss. There's nothing he has to do today, as far as he knows, and he's not on duty. Most of the people around look busy, but most of the people around aren't paladins. Back at the Academy he'd hop in a sim, but no one mentioned any here in the Garrison, only down at the Castle, and he feels like he needs a reason to go to the Castle. Certainly the two times he's been there the only paladins he saw were on duty.

Which leaves him with working out, finding out where they keep the recordings of past fights, or... socializing. Well, he can knock off one option straight out, anyway.

He goes to the gym and alternately spars and works out until the lunch rush is all but over. Then, fed and showered, he's at a loss again. So he wanders through the floor until he sees Hunk (and Lance) in the tech corner.

When Keith approaches he can see that most of the other paladins are there too, actually—they're all crowded around a TV that's playing yesterday's battle. It's kind of a distant view, aerial, from one of the medical helicopters probably.

"Boom! There I go," Lance says, as on the screen Blue starts shooting.

As the video continues others make comments too; rather more thoughtful ones, though, and Keith realizes they're analyzing the fight. Then the fight ends and restarts from a different view—centered on the inside of Red's cockpit.

"Ugh," says Bonnie, watching herself on the screen. Keith has to agree.

There are less comments this round though, probably because it's hard to tell what's happening most of the time. They can tell when Red starts running, though.

"Wow, could you have shook up the newbie any more, Bonnie?" someone comments.

"You try running across half the bay, Derek. See if you do better," she responds.

"He's just clinging on like a... like a leech," Lance says thoughtfully.

"Wow, tell me how you really feel, Lance," Keith says drily. Lance screams and falls off the sofa as the scant few paladins that had noticed Keith was there laugh. Keith is startled by Lance's reaction, though, so for a moment they meet each other's surprised eyes—then Keith bursts out laughing.

"Fuck," Lance says, with feeling, and Keith is bent over double, clinging to the back of the sofa just to stay upright. When he finally manages to look up, Hunk is chuckling as he offers Lance a hand up, and Lance looks like he's trying very hard not to smile. Hey, progress.
"Let that be a lesson to ya, Lance!" Bonnie laughs.

Finally Keith straightens and wipes a tear from his eye. A couple people scoot over to make room on the next sofa over and he squeezes between the arms and sits, finding himself next to Joey, the Green paladin he met on his first trip down to the Castle. The video has switched to Blue's cockpit.

"It's tradition to watch the feeds after a battle and tear them to shreds," Joey says in his ear. "Helps us learn what we can do better, figure out everyone's styles, y'know?"

"Got it," Keith says. He smirks at the screen as Lance's face on the feed falls in disappointment, presumably after the kaiju submerged. He has to admit, the guy is remarkably expressive—when he glances over at the real thing, he finds a glare aimed his way.

"Do you always make faces like that out there?" he asks, mouth twitching in an effort not to grin.

Lance's nose wrinkles and he looks away. "Shut up."

"He does," someone says.

"He makes faces even when he's not out there," Joey adds.

"Can confirm," says Hunk.

"Why are you all dragging me like this?" Lance pouts.

"There's nothing wrong with being expressive, Lance," Hunk says solemnly, placing a hand on his shoulder kind of awkwardly since they're crammed up against each other on an overfull sofa.

"No respect, I tell you."

Eventually things calm down and the video switches to a more useful view. The comments resume—now with extra explanations for his benefit, thankfully—and he learns a lot more than expected. Better yet, he's dragged off to dinner by Joey and Bonnie and a couple others, which saves him from facing Lance or Hunk for the rest of the evening—Lance is one thing, but Hunk's probably disappointed in him for riling Lance up again. Besides, he needs to get to know the other paladins, too.

When Pidge returns early the next morning she looks like she hasn't slept in a week—or at least, that's what Hunk tells Keith at breakfast. By the time he's up Pidge is already back in bed in her cubicle. His sleep may be fitful at best but he really has to start getting up earlier.

"Also, I'm on duty tomorrow, and Pidge is a terrible mediator, so don't kill each other while I'm gone, guys," Hunk adds. Lance doesn't acknowledge his words—he's back to ignoring Keith entirely, which is somewhat less fun than bickering, but at least it's quiet.

"I'll do my best," Keith says.

Pidge turns up shortly before noon and crashes headfirst into Keith's arm on his way from mats to treadmill. "You'd better show up tonight," she says lowly in lieu of a greeting. "I found a hell of a thing. Also, you're really sweaty and this is gross." She straightens up—she still kind of looks like death.

"You shouldn't have headbutted me while I'm working out, then," he says, with a small nod to show he heard the first bit.
"You should take a break from sweating and be social," she decides, and delicately pinches a corner of his sleeve to tug him away from the gym.

"I was social yesterday."

"Today is a brand new day."

At least she's pulling him towards food. They sit with a couple of other paladins and Keith at least makes an attempt to join in the conversation before giving up and focusing on his lunch.

He spends most of the day watching old feeds accompanied by an ever-rotating assortment of helpful paladins. It's Hunk's turn to drag him to dinner, and Lance continues to ignore him, and Keith is just... tired. He doesn't even try to sleep before meeting Pidge.

The final transmission of the Kerberos mission keeps playing in his dreams.

Pidge is sitting with her laptop open when he gets down to the second floor, which is a good sign, because he doesn't think he's up for breaking and entering tonight. When he comes and sits on front of her, though, she just turns the laptop to hand to him.

"Read this," she says. He looks at the screen.

The title says "Protocol in Case of Kerberos Return".

Pidge was right; this is a hell of a thing. He reads through it quickly, confirming that it is what it appears to be: a set of instructions to hide the evidence should any member of the Kerberos mission return. It stops just short of disposing of the returnee and Keith feels sick.

"This doesn't..." He swallows, doesn't want to say what he has to. "This doesn't mean that they are definitely alive. Or that the Garrison thinks they are."

"But it means they think they could be," Pidge says intensely. "It means they went somewhere."

"...The middle of the ocean?"

"Keith, think about it," Pidge says with a sigh. "We figured out they were dragged away from their target, right? And they were trying to find the source? What if the kaiju dragged them through whatever kind of... hell portal they spawn from?"

"You think," Keith says slowly, "that they are... wherever the kaiju come from? Now?"

Pidge grimaces. "It's not a happy thought, I know. But if they were able to escape the initial attack, they could have survived. My family is resourceful, and you know Shiro. They wouldn't... go down easy."

"No," he agrees. "They wouldn't." After a moment, though, he realizes there's something else bothering him. "If someone did return... they want to hide it."

"Yeah...?"

"Well, why? If your father or brother came back, they wouldn't even tell you or your mother. Why?"

Pidge takes the laptop back and frowns down at it.

"Because they don't want anyone to find out what happened," she decides after a while. "But if
someone returns, then they'd have found the source, which was the point of the mission... making it a
belated success. So, why..." Her voice trails off.

"So why don't they want anyone to know if it succeeded after all," Keith finishes. "It can't just be to
cover-up their cover-up, can it?"

"No, I think... I think there's something else going on here." Pidge bites her lip.

"But what?"

"I don't know!"

Both groan in frustration. Keith gets up and paces back and forth a couple times, clenching and
unclenching his hands. Pidge steeples her hands and stares intently at her screen, still chewing her
lip.

Finally Pidge shuts her laptop, leaving them in darkness. "We're not gonna get anywhere like this," she says. "I'll go back through the rest of the stuff I downloaded, maybe there's something I missed, I
don't know, but let's just... sleep on it, for now. We know as much as we can right now."

Keith sighs. "Yeah, I guess."

Chapter End Notes

surprise theres a plot

tumblr @maternalcube
First Day

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Keith and Lance manage not to kill each other while Hunk is gone. In fact, they barely interact at all—which leaves Pidge sitting between them with a sour expression on her face. It's peaceful otherwise, though, until the next week's roster is posted.

"You're on duty with me, Keith!" Pidge says, elbowing him in the side. "Day after tomorrow!"

So soon. So much for that feeling he'd had walking out of Red with Bonnie, the confidence, the drive—he's maybe, just maybe, a little bit terrified.

"Don't piss yourself, mullet man," Lance says with a snigger. Figures he'd acknowledge his existence for this.

"Worry about yourself," Keith says, and shimmies out of the crowd in front of the board. Lance and Pidge both follow him, and they end up watching recordings of some of Pidge's fights. Lance doesn't directly address him again.

The next day is quiet, probably because Lance is on duty. Hunk says it's because together Lance and Pidge are "the ultimate memelord". Keith doesn't ask. He spends most of the day training or watching recorded feeds while Pidge and Hunk randomly spew any tips they can think of.

He barely sleeps at all, and is awake long before his alarm goes off.

"Good luck on your first day!" Coran tells him cheerfully when he steps onto the fourth floor.

Keith meets Pidge and today's other paladin at the cafeteria—they get breakfast to go, and eat on the train. The other three are talkative, chatting amicably, but Keith nibbles on his granola bar silently and Pidge leans just slightly into his arm. The pressure is reassuring.

Yesterday's team is waiting for them in the lounge. Jess claps him on the shoulder and wishes him luck and Keith can practically feel the shift of responsibility from her shoulders to his. Across the room, Lance fistbumps Denise, ruffles Pidge's hair (leaving her yelling), and... stops in front of Keith.

"You've been ignoring me," he says.

Keith almost wants to laugh, but the last thing he wants right now is to deal with Lance. "You've been ignoring me."

"You've barely said a word to me!"

"Why would I when you clearly don't want me to?"

"You were talking to me before."

"...You started those conversations. I thought you hated me? Why do you even care?"

At this point, everyone else but Pidge has tuned them out. Lance is as red as Keith's jacket and sputters angrily for a minute before he can respond.
"We're rivals!" is what he comes up with, and Keith's not really sure how that's supposed to be an explanation.

"That was your idea. I literally don't care about rankings?"

"Since when!?"

"Since I got here? I'm pretty sure I said so when we met?"

Denise sighs and leaves the room. Pidge lies across the sofa, head propped on hands, watching. Terry turns on the TV.

"You expect me to believe that?"

"Believe what? That I don't care or that I said so?"

"Both!"

"He said it, I was there," Pidge offers.

"Well, I don't believe he doesn't care." Lance shoots a look over his shoulder at her, then turns back to Keith. "I know you think you're better than me, but the numbers will prove you wrong."

"Lance," Tina interrupts kindly. "If you want to catch the train, you should hurry, or you'll have to wait for the next one."

Lance huffs, but he starts backing out of the room. He points at Keith. "This isn't over!" Then he's gone and Keith slumps.

"This is shaping up to be a great day," he says, half to Pidge and half to himself.

"Tell me about it," she says, sounding bored. "Hey, you wanna check out the sims?"

"...Yes," Keith says, because god if a kaiju attacks today he wants to at least have piloted fake-Red before.

"Let's go, then." Pidge heaves herself up off the sofa and leads the way out of the lounge and down a set of stairs (the way this place is, he's almost surprised it's not a fire pole) to the floor below.

Pidge points one way down the hallway. "The sims are aligned to the actual mechas, so yours is down that way somewhere, and mine's exactly opposite yours the other way. It's labeled."

"Thanks," he says to her retreating back. He sets off down the hall.

By the time he's run a few simulations, the tension and anxiety twisting his insides has relaxed, and his confidence has returned. He feels like he belongs here again, and when he breaks for lunch he returns to the lounge actually in a good mood. Good enough that when Terry pulls out a deck of cards and asks to deal him in, he agrees.

It turns out Keith dominates at BS.

He can hold his own at Egyptian Ratscrew, too, but Mao just confuses and frustrates him (which, according to Pidge, is the whole point), so he's kind of relieved when they finally put down the cards to have dinner. They spend the evening watching made-for-TV movies on the little screen in the corner and adding their own commentary, until finally Tina announces she's going to turn in. The rest soon follow, and Keith flops onto the Red bunk feeling like he's actually had fun, for once. Sleep
still comes to him slowly but when it does, it finds him content.

An alarm rips him awake. He stumbles up and off the cot before it's quite registered, but his brain catches up soon enough: kaiju attack. There's a kaiju attacking, right now, on his first day. First night. He swears and bursts out into the hall.

"I need Red and Green out, and quickly! Blue on standby!" Allura's disembodied voice proclaims, and he swears again as he dashes across the hall into Red, hitting the switches like he saw Bonnie do. Then, "Good luck, Keith!"

"Yeah, thanks," he mutters, and settles into the pilot's chair, firing up the systems and running over checklists in his head again and again, all but praying he hasn't forgotten anything. The hangar doors open and he maneuvers out into the pitch-black waters with his floodlights and the helicopters' lights above showing the way.

"Hey, Keith, let's do this thing," Pidge says confidently, and when he glances over, Green is right beside him. He's suddenly very glad for the hours they spent going over her footage.

"Get out there fast," Allura urges them. "The kaiju is already thirty seconds out from the depth line." Keith pushes Red on, and Green keeps pace.

"I can't see a damn thing," Pidge complains, as all the lights on the water skim back and forth. Keith grits his teeth and reminds himself he's trained for this.

There's a ping as a radar feed pops up on his display. The thing is close, really close, and he takes out his sword—but he can't see the damn thing yet.

"Watch out, it's almost on top of you!" Allura says, slightly alarmed. "Do you have visual? Red?"

"No, I don't have visual," he says. "I—"

The kaiju bursts up out of the water in front of him and Keith maybe lets out an undignified yelp. He manages to lift the sword in time to block the strike from the eel-like monstrosity in front of him.

It chews on his sword. There's an enormous, rolling yellow eye directly in front of his cockpit.

"—have visual," he finishes, a little shakily. But he steels himself and shoves the thing back and down. It squeals and retracts. The shiver of adrenaline gives way to steady confidence. He can do this. It strikes again and he swats it away.

"Green, limit its movement, keep it down," Allura commands, and out of the corner of his eye, Keith sees Green lighting up. "Red, do your thing."

Specific. "Yes, ma'am," both say.

"Keith, back up," Pidge says, and the moment he does a glowing grappling hook shoots by. With a flick, it hooks around the kaiju's rearing body.

With a gut wrenching shriek, it reels away, jerking Green along with it.

"Shit." Pidge gets dragged along a little ways before she can get Green back on her feet properly. Keith pushes Red along after, trying to catch up to the kaiju without running afoul of its wildly whipping tail. The kaiju is deceptively long, and the limited light gives him little to go by.

Red trips over the kaiju's body, and for a moment Keith is jerked around in his chair—then he
recovers, making Red almost hop over the thing.

"Nice one," Pidge says as he lifts his sword.

The kaiju jerks back suddenly, and the tension in Green’s line goes slack. As Keith follows it back the grappling hook falls and the kaiju slithers free of it. Then it turns and spits something all over his windshield before he can react, and his cockpit goes dark but for what little light his displays provide.

"Uh, lost visual," he says quickly, turning Red towards what he can see by the radar feed. It's swimming away, and Pidge is swearing and giving chase.

"I can reel in my hook, I just need a moment, can you delay it," she’s saying. But part of the kaiju's body is still at Green's feet.

"Grab its tail!" he says quickly instead. "Pidge, grab its tail!" He lifts his sword by feel. At the angle the kaiju is going, and where Green is relative to Red...

"Gotcha," Pidge says quickly, and he doesn't know whether it's in acknowledgement or success. He shifts Red into a better stance and waits, eyes glued to the radar.

The tail and Green are an entangled blob behind him. Then Green starts moving backward, and the kaiju starts to straighten out, hook around to try and encircle them. He can hear its distant shrieks and an occasional grunt from Pidge. It must be fighting her grip with everything it has.

He takes a step forward, then another, and lifts the sword higher. It's coming around, now, and if it manages to surround them... He just needs to get a little closer...

He swings. There's another shriek, then silence.

"...Did I hit it?" he asks.

"Yes. Yes, you did," Pidge says breathlessly. She half-laughs, half-pants. "Cut it right in half."

"It's dead?"

"It's dead."

"Good job, you two," Allura says. She sounds a little amused, too. "And congratulations on your first win, Keith."

"...Thanks," he says. "Uh, these things don't happen to have windshield wipers, do they." He knows the answer is no.

"I'll make sure a fire helicopter gets to you momentarily," Allura says.

"I'm heading in," Pidge declares. "Keith, if you had enough visibility to hit the thing, I think you can get back in the hangar."

"I was looking at the radar and guessing, Pidge," he says, slumping down in the pilot's chair. The adrenaline's starting to fade, and he's exhausted—his watch tells him it's around 3 am. "I have zero visibility. Nothing. Not that visibility was very good out here anyway."

"Oh man, you killed a kaiju blind? Lance is gonna be pissed."

"That's Lance's problem."
He swears he hears a ghost of a chuckle from Allura, but all she says is, "Helicopter incoming. Come in when you can, Keith."

"Yes, ma'am."

Soon enough he can hear the hum of a nearby helicopter, and a great deal of water splashes against his windshield. It doesn't clean off the gunk completely but it's enough that he can see the spots of water lit by his floodlights and the kaiju corpse floating in front of him. He takes a moment to look at it—his first kill—before turning Red around and trudging back towards the Castle. He's already seen a dead kaiju now, and this isn't anything he hasn't done in simulation hundreds of times before. He's tired. Right now, this doesn't feel special.

When Red locks into place in the hangar he gratefully gets up and walks back down out of the cockpit. As the last bulkhead slides open two things happen in rapid succession: first, a camera flashes in his face, startling him, and second, something small and hard bowls into him and nearly knocks him flat.

"We did it!" Pidge squeals, and actually picks him up and spins him around, how the hell can someone so small be so powerful—then he looks askance at Allura, who’s still holding the camera.

"Sorry," she says, not looking sorry at all. "It's tradition to take a picture of every paladin when they return from their first mission."

Pidge finally lets go of Keith to peer around Allura's arm at the picture. "Aw, you barely made a face at all," she says.

Keith really, really just wants to go to bed.

Allura shows him the picture and yeah, he just looks a little startled. Mostly tired. He yawns. Terry and Denise and Tina come around the bend before he can excuse himself, though, and congratulate him and Pidge, and Pidge starts giving them a play-by-play as if they hadn't just watched the whole thing live, and Keith very pointedly yawns again in the hopes they'll stop celebrating and just let him crash already.

Terry catches on first—thank you, Terry, he thinks fervently—and suggests they continue the celebration in the morning. Allura follows up by saying they deserve a rest, and though Pidge pouts, they disperse. Keith gratefully sinks onto the Red bunk again and passes out almost immediately.

Chapter End Notes

~*~baby's first kaiju~*~

tumblr @ maternalcube
Mistakes

Chapter Notes

this chapters a lil short and a lil early bc im so far ahead rn...

a lil bit of backstory here *jazz hands*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Keith wakes up he spends at least ten minutes staring at the ceiling, heart pumping fast. The realization has hit him belatedly that he killed a kaiju, a real kaiju, with Pidge, last night. More to the point, it went terribly. He cringes thinking of all the mistakes he made—failing to get a visual before it attacked, tripping, letting it blind him, not attacking soon enough...

Given it was 3 in the morning and his first time out, he doesn't think anyone will hold it against him, but he'll hold it against himself.

He wanders out to the lounge—only Denise is already there. She looks up at him, surprised.

"You can sleep a little longer, you know," she says. "No one's due here for at least half an hour."

He shrugs and slumps onto a sofa. "I'm awake now."

"Seriously. You had a big night, after all."

He grunts.

"...Something wrong?"

"...I think I could've done better than I did," he admits.

She laughs, and Keith shoots her a startled glare.

"What's so funny?" Tina says as she enters the room.

"Keith," Denise says between chuckles, "thinks he could have done better."

Tina giggles. Keith throws his hands up in the air.

"What?" he demands. "I made a lot of mistakes! What's so funny!?"

"That was probably the best first run anyone could've hoped for," Tina says with a smile, as Denise wipes a tear from her eye. "Most people don't get kills their first times; neither Denise nor I even stayed standing our first times out, if I remember correctly."

"Yeah. Seriously, I'll show you the feed of my first time when we get back," Denise says. "Blue fell so hard I actually went unconscious."

"But... you've been in simulators before?" he says hesitantly.

"Yeah, but it's different when you're facing the real thing, isn't it?"
"I... guess," he says. Certainly there's no real danger in a simulator—but if he was always thinking about how much danger he was in, he'd never be able to fight at all.

"Don't worry about it," Tina says finally. "You'll have plenty of chances to do better."

Well, he was right they wouldn't hold it against him.

Terry and Pidge show up shortly thereafter, and it's not long before the next team arrives. Rex offers him a fist bump and a smile.

"Heard you got out there on your first day, huh?" he says. "Nice work."

"Uh, thanks."

"You should ask Hui about his first day experience, if you think you were rushed into it," he adds with a wink, then goes to sit, and Pidge tugs Keith in the other direction.

"I don't think I've met Hui," Keith mumbles as they cram into the elevator.

"He's on team Black," says Pidge. "And yeah, you should definitely ask him."

"Okay." He yawns.

Keith nearly jumps out of his skin when they get up to the Garrison and are greeted by a cheering crowd at the top of the stairs. Pidge prods him forward when he freezes.

"They're congratulating us, dude," she says. "Don't worry, it doesn't last long."

Fortunately, she's right, and he finally makes his way over to the cafeteria for breakfast a great deal more awake than he was before. Hunk shows up shortly and slaps Keith on the back, almost sending him face-first into his cereal.

"You did it!" he exclaims. "Coran told me just now. Great job, Keith."

"Thanks, Hunk."

"Newbies don't normally have to fight their first time down at the Castle. I don't think it's happened since Hui."

"Keith even got the kill," Pidge says with a grin. "With his windshield covered in spit."

"I'll be sure not to mention that to Lance." Hunk laughs. Keith stares resolutely at his cereal.

"Speak of the devil," Pidge says, and they all look up to see Lance weaving through the tables toward them. He sits next to Pidge, crosses his arms on the table, and buries his head in them wordlessly.

"Morning, sleeping beauty," she says. Lance grunts.

Keith eyes him and turns to Hunk with a questioning look.

"Lance isn't a morning person," he says quietly. "He'll be himself in half an hour or so."

Meanwhile, Pidge is prodding Lance's arm. "Dude, you gotta go eat or you're just gonna pass out again."
Keith enjoys the quiet while it lasts.

Eventually Lance succumbs to Pidge's prodding and stumbles off to get breakfast. He returns awake and angry, judging by the way he slams down his tray and glares at Keith.

"You fought last night," he says.

"Aaaand someone told him," Hunk says quietly.

"You got sent out on your first night! And fought!"

"Did you think I'd go out and just stand there?"

"That's not what I meant and you know it." Lance slams the handle of his fork into the table so hard it leaves a dent. "You got a kill!"

"...Yes?"

"I bet you feel real good about yourself right now." Lance's voice is cold and hard and there's murder in his eyes, and Keith is done.

"What the hell do you know?" he spits back, and Lance's eyes widen. "If I'd had a run like that in a simulator back at the Academy they'd have sent me back to basics. Do you even know how many people I beat out for this spot?"

"N-no..."

Keith leans across the table. "Three hundred. There were three hundred cadets eligible for the next opening here, but they're not here. I am. And I had to be damn near perfect just to get the opportunity. But this isn't the Academy, or a simulation, and there are actual lives at stake, and if I'd made one more mistake their deaths would've been on my hands. Or did you forget why we're here at all?" Keith takes a breath and sits back. "So no, I don't feel real good about myself right now, thank you, Lance."

Lance stares at him, open-mouthed and silent, for a long minute; then his face closes off and he gets up and takes his tray to another table. Pidge is grimacing; Hunk looks worried.

"Pidge," says Hunk, and she nods. Then he gets up and follows Lance away, and Pidge leans in across the table.

"Um, you had a point, there," she says. "But I promise you Lance hasn't forgotten why we're here."

Keith opens his mouth to retort but she holds up a finger.

"No, listen. It's not really my place to tell you, but I'll say he was still training to be a paladin during the Redwood Attack. He had family in the area."

Keith shuts his mouth.

"So, yeah. Maybe keep that in mind."

He nods. "I will."

Keith joins the other paladins (well, most of them) to watch the recording of his first fight, but his heart's not really in it. Worse, there's a rule not to criticize a paladin's first time out, so he doesn't even
get to learn anything from it. Not that he doesn't already know what he did wrong. It's interesting to see it from another angle, though, even if every spot at which he froze up makes him cringe.

He gets a lot of compliments, though, which is admittedly a little gratifying.

"I can't believe you kept your cool like that," Joey tells him. "I'd've flipped if I got spit to the face."

"If I remember correctly, you flipped anyway," Bonnie says.

"My first kaiju was that tentacle one, though, can you blame me?"

Soon enough he's digging up the footage of his first fight, and then Bonnie and Denise do too, and he's soon treated to a veritable montage of rookies making rookie mistakes. It makes him feel a little better, though his words to Lance still linger in the back of his mind. He wasn't lying—kaiju fighting is a competitive field now. Any of these fights would’ve immediately disqualified the fighters.

Also, he still has to apologize. Lance may be a dick but Keith knows he had unknowingly crossed a line.

So at dinner, he more or less ambushes Lance, and grabs his arm to keep him from escaping right off the bat.

"I'm sorry," he says quickly, and Lance stops trying to shake him off.

"...Go on," says Lance.

"I didn't know. Pidge told me, uh. A bit. Look, you act so casual about all this, you can't blame me for thinking your priorities are out of order." He backpedals when he sees Lance's face darken. "I mean! I didn't consider your reasons for being here or anything, so, I'm sorry. I wouldn't've said what I did if I'd known. At least, not all of it."

"...That's the worst apology I've ever heard."

"I tried, okay! I know it hurts to lose somebody—"

"You can't possibly know what it's like," Lance snaps back, and he shakes Keith's arm free and turns away.

"I'm an orphan, Lance."

Lance freezes, turns back halfway. "...Oh." There's a long pause. "Sorry."

"Yeah," Keith says heavily. "Me too." He leaves before either of them can ruin the apology further.

Chapter End Notes

these boys i swear

the next chapters a fun one ;)

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It's a scant couple of days before Keith is back down at the Castle again. This time Jess is with him, on duty for Black instead of Red.

"We give them a break every ten days," she tells him. "Dunno what Rex told you, but three and four-person teams don't fit evenly into a 50-day cycle. Just be glad your schedule is predictable; the five-person teams are beyond me."

His shift passes without incident, and in the morning, Pidge, Hunk, and Lance all show up for theirs. Lance's eyes flick over him once but he otherwise doesn't acknowledge Keith's presence; it's been that way since the apology. Not quite ignoring him, but not really interacting with him either... until something sets him off and they argue, and then someone (usually Hunk) intervenes and they're back to ignoring each other.

Back at the Garrison, he takes his meals with Jess and Bonnie and Joey and finally tracks down Hui to ask him about his first battle.

"The alarm went off almost the moment we entered the lounge," Hui tells him. "It was a mess, since the others were still in the middle of leaving. I looked over at Antonio—he was replaced by Sylvia more than six months ago—and he just gave me a thumbs up and left."

"And then Allura sent you out."

"Yes. I didn't even have time to finish my breakfast."

It's another few days before Keith is on duty again, putting them back in the range of likely kaiju attack. Things remain quiet, though, until a full ten days after the last attack, and Keith and Pidge lay claim to the floor in front of one of the Garrison TVs so that when the alarm sounds—it's a small bell, here—they have a front row seat. They watch as Lance and Derek pummel the kaiju from afar, ever circling to keep it at bay. It gets in close to Green and takes her down, but Hunk and Yellow soon come to the rescue, and shield her from further harm as Lance finishes the job. They get word that Derek is okay just a few minutes later.

"Does this happen often?" Keith asks Pidge. "Sending out the standby, I mean."

She shrugs. "Once a month or so? It's not uncommon."

"Last time was Darrel," Rex adds quietly behind them. Keith doesn’t know what to say to that.

He’s on duty the next day, but attacks two days in a row are unheard of, so he's relaxed when he enters the lounge in the morning. He even awkwardly finger-guns back at Jess when she makes that gesture at him on her way out. It seems like every paladin has some gesture or phrase to signify the passing of the torch, so to speak.
When he mentions it to Pidge, she assures him he's boring for just nodding at Rex every time. He turns down her offer to help him develop a secret handshake.

The next attack, a full week later, also comes the day before he's on duty, and he sits between Lance and Pidge to watch the feed. Lance just glances over at him and turns back to the TV.

Five days later, and almost a full month after his arrival at the Garrison, Keith is on duty with Lance. They ignore each other on the train down to the Castle, on the elevator up to the lounge, while Jess finger-guns at Keith and Ralph chest-bumps Lance; they ignore each other while they greet-and-goodbye Pidge and Hunk, now off duty. Then they're alone with Hui and two paladins Keith isn't sure he's even met, and Lance turns to Keith, apparently no longer able to contain himself.

"If we get attacked today," he says, "I'm getting the kill. Not you."

"That's nice," Keith responds. He's been enjoying the peace and quiet, dammit, he's not going to indulge Lance now.

"Because you're still a newbie, and I'm a veteran."

"Okay."

"I'm better than you."

"Sure."

"Are you even listening?"

"Uh-huh."

"If this is what the legendary Lance-Keith fights are always like, I'm seriously unimpressed," says the Green paladin.

"Just as well we didn't bring popcorn," adds the Yellow paladin.

"Why are you guys like this," Lance complains, turning back to the two of them. "I have a serious grievance with this man!"

"Sure," says the Green paladin.

"That's nice," says the Yellow paladin. Both are grinning. Lance groans and turns away.

"No respect, I tell you. Hui! Hui, you respect me, right?"

"Uh-huh." Hui doesn't even look up. Lance crumples to the floor dramatically.

"I hate this family," he whimpers.

He doesn't get to wallow in his misery long—the alarm goes off and everyone jumps up. Keith doesn't know what's going to happen but he's already dreading it.

"I need Red and Blue out, and Green on standby!" Allura calls, which figures, really. Lance groans loudly in the hallway behind him. He hears Lance complaining as soon as he enters Red's cockpit, too.

"Why do I have to fight with him?" he's whining.
"You're not exactly my first choice either, Lance," he grunts back as he maneuvers Red out of the hangar. Blue is close behind.

"Kaiju approaching at ten o'clock, two miles off," Allura tells them. "Red on point and Blue on support. And I need you two to cooperate."

"Yes, ma'am," they both say quickly, and Keith can only hope Lance means it. He turns to ten o'clock and peers out across the horizon—soon enough, a ripple appears.

"I have visual," he says, quickly echoed by Lance. He steps forward and readies his sword; behind him, to the side, he hears Blue's blaster powering up.

"Kaiju has passed the depth line. Red, advance," says Allura.

"Roger."

He moves forward steadily, aiming for the ripple. It breaches a hundred yards off, a hammer-headed beast with an odd spiral pattern over its chest.

It comes at him swinging, and he takes the hit on his off arm before driving the sword's hilt (insofar as it has one) at the kaiju's head. The kaiju reels back, and Keith pulls Red back too.

Now with space to swing, he lands a solid hit on the kaiju's shoulder but barely penetrates.

"Uh, this thing is armored," he says, stepping back out of the range of another punch.

"Blue, fire— carefully," Allura says in response.

Keith pulls Red around sideways a bit to give Lance a clearer shot. He's not keen on inviting friendly fire.

"Gladly," says Lance, and he starts shooting. His aim is good, fortunately, but the blasts don't do much more than Red's sword. Keith keeps swinging between bursts of fire, and they soon fall into a steady rhythm that keeps the kaiju at bay.

It doesn't last long, though, as the kaiju suddenly lunges at Red, knocking her back. Keith struggles to keep her standing, frantically pulling on levers and hissing under his breath.

When he regains balance and looks up, the kaiju is charging straight for Blue. He gives chase but even with Red's speed he can't make it in time.

"Lance, get out of there!" he shouts. Blue isn't moving.

"No way, I can take it down," Lance insists.

"Lance!" Allura shouts in warning.

The kaiju lunges for Blue's legs, and the sound of tearing metal fills the air. Lance swears and Keith goes wide.

"I'm coming!" he shouts.

"Well hurry up! " Lance responds. He manages to shoot at the thing's legs, only for it to rear up. It crashes bodily into Blue again, knocking the blaster aside, and starts chewing on Blue's head. Blue barely stays standing, her good leg angled behind her to brace herself. Lance yells.
"I got you," Keith says, and Red collides with the kaiju sword-first, knocking it sideways off Blue and down into the water. It squirms, and the sword slides into its arm—not far enough.

"...Took you long enough," Lance says.

"You're welcome," Keith says back.

The kaiju suddenly slumps, and Keith pulls back his sword. The moment he does the kaiju is up and moving again, slipping away through the water. Keith swears and gives chase.

"Don't let it escape!" Allura says unnecessarily.

He's accompanied by a few choice shots from Blue behind him; they slow it down and Red catches up quickly. He swings against its back, thrusts forward when it turns. His sword catches in the center of the spiral on its chest, and the kaiju shrieks.

"Think I found a weak point," he grunts. He pushes forward but the gap is too small, and the armor around it still resists. "Lance, how's your aim?"

"Impeccable, why?"

"My sword's too big."

"...Never say that sentence again."

"Boys," Allura says warningly.

"The center of the spiral on its chest is soft," Keith says.

"Leaving me to clean up your messes, huh?"

Keith ignores that comment. "Don't miss." He pulls back out of the way, leaving a clear shot from Blue to kaiju.

"Oh, I won't." The first few shots hit the kaiju's side, getting its attention. It turns and starts heading back towards Blue.

"Wait for it..." Lance mutters.

The kaiju is only a few bounds away when Blue finally unleashes her attack. Keith, behind it, can't see the shots connect, but he can see the result—the kaiju lurches back, squealing and shuddering. Blue keeps shooting until it falls and stops moving completely, and even from across the bay Keith can see its blood muddying the waters.

"...Nice job, you two," Allura says, sounding honestly surprised. To be fair, Keith is pretty surprised too.

"Thanks, ma'am," they both say.

"Lance, how's Blue's leg?" Keith adds.

"Don't pretend to be concerned."

He lets out an aggravated sigh. "I'm asking if I need to drag your ass back to the Castle or not."

"Nope! Nope, we're fine, get out of my face."
"Lance," Allura says sternly, "the hydraulics in Blue's left leg are offline. You won't be able to walk back on your own."

"We can make it!" he insists.

Keith shrugs. "Have fun crawling, then." He walks Red right past Blue.

There's a rumble as Blue tries to take a step forward, followed by Lance swearing and Blue tipping forward. Keith pulls Red in quickly to prop her up, and he can just see Lance through their respective cockpit windows.

"You can make it, huh?" Keith teases. He grins and waves, but Lance only hunches in on himself.

"I hate you," Lance says. "I hate you so much."

"Do you want me to leave you out here? I will."

"Ughhh." Lance doesn't respond, exactly, but he does shift Blue to lean on Red for support, and so they start making their slow way back to the Castle.

Lance is in a sour mood when he and Keith get back to the lounge, but the congratulations from the other paladins seem to revive him. Until the Green paladin comments on their "impressive" teamwork.

"I didn't think you guys would be able to pull it together!" she exclaims. "Funny, when you're not fighting each other you make a good team after all."

"Hey, I'm a professional!" Lance insists, looking hurt. "I'm not gonna let personal feelings stop me from doing my job!" And then he's sour again for the rest of the evening. Which in turn makes Keith sour, because dammit, they did make a good team, so what gives?

So when everyone disperses to bed, he stops Lance in the hallway.

"What," Lance says.

"What the hell's your problem with me?" Keith asks.

"Do you really need to ask?"

"Yes!" Keith throws out an arm in the vague direction of the hangar. "We worked well out there together! You got the kill! I saved you! So what's wrong?"

Lance crosses his arms and glares silently.

"Did I even once try to one-up you? Is this really just about rankings?"

Lance grimaces. "What's your problem with me?"

"I don't have a problem with you. Don't change the subject."

"You're yelling at me, so clearly you do."

They glare at each other for a minute, and Keith struggles to subdue his frustration.

"How the hell," he says finally, "did you get to be a legendary paladin when you're—" he gestures
"—like this?"

"Like this?" Lance spreads his arms wide. "Like this? What do you mean, like this?"

"I mean you're loud and overly competitive and you don't act like you take this seriously—even if you do," he adds when Lance opens his mouth to argue. "You're the kind of person that should be all talk, except you're not. You're the top paladin here. I don't get it."

"No shit! I worked my ass off to get here, and I work damn hard to stay here," Lance exclaims. "I wouldn't expect some naturally-talented upstart to get that. Not all of us can hop in a simulator and kill seven kaiju our first try! And you know what, talent can only get you so far, because at the end of the day? I have more experience than you. I've been in battle more times than you ever will. I'm better than you."

Keith takes a deep breath. "You're right."

"What?" Lance takes a step back, eyebrows shooting up.

"You're right. Talent only gets you so far. I have good instincts, sure, but instinct doesn't help if you don't know which button or switch does what."

Lance stares. Keith continues.

"Do you think I didn't have to study? To learn to fight properly? If I did out in Red what I did in the simulator that first time, I'd've wrecked her before I got to the third kaiju. Do you think you're the only one that worked hard to be here?"

"I..."

"I told you already I had to compete with hundreds of people, didn't I?" Keith steps in, finger prodding Lance's chest, the way Lance did to him the day they met. "Why the hell would I want to compete with you? I'm already here!" He breathes hard as Lance just stares. "You're so arrogant. You don't know me. You don't know why I'm here." And then, because he's practically spoken more in ten minutes than he has all day, and he doesn't want to hear Lance's response, he turns on his heel and heads down the hall to the Red bunk.

Chapter End Notes

gonna be honest im not totally happy w this chapter but... here we are

btw if you want to see the roster thus far (yes, there is one, im not just making it up as i go) you can go here

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Lance is subdued at shift change and all during the trolley ride back to the Garrison. He shuffles off the car after Keith, sighs, and grabs his arm, keeping him back as the other returning paladins head upstairs.

"Keith," he says. "Can I talk to you?"

His tone is, for once, serious, and Keith raises his eyebrows.

"...Alright," he says.

"I, uh." Lance drops his arm and rubs the back of his head. "I'm sorry, I guess. You were right, I did feel threatened by you. And I don't know why you came here and all that. I shouldn't have assumed you didn't work for it—I mean, I came here before the Academy existed, so I didn't really... know. Uh, what else..."

Keith waits.

"You were... pretty good out there, actually. I guess we do make a good team, huh?"

"...Did Allura put you up to this?"

Lance deflates. "Yeah. She did."

"Don't say anything you don't mean, then," Keith says, and turns to leave.

"Wait!" Lance says. "I did mean it! I mean, we have to work together to fight kaiju, and that's why we're here, right? So this rivalry thing could get in the way and put people in danger. We need to focus on what's important."

"The rivalry was your idea."

"That's why I'm apologizing!"

Keith regards him for a moment. Lance fidgets, then sticks out a hand.

"Look, do you wanna be friends, or not?" he says.

Well, the guy's trying. It's more than Keith expected. So he shrugs and shakes his hand. "Sure. As long you stop being so much of an ass."

Lance slowly grins. "No promises."

"Friendship rejected."
"Hey, hey, wait....!

Keith turns to go, and Lance anxiously falls into step beside him, stuttering. Keith looks over and gives him a very, very small grin—and Lance’s face opens in surprise for a moment, and then he grins widely back, and, yeah. Maybe they can make this work.

Doesn’t mean Keith is gonna go easy on him though. After today, anyway.

Apparently Lance isn’t willing to test his luck either, because he’s actually being quiet as they head up the stairs back to the Garrison proper. Until they step into view and the floor erupts in cheers, and he laughs when Keith freezes.

"Welcome to the spotlight, bucko," he says.

"Ugh," Keith says, with feeling, and impatiently waits for the crowd to clear out so he can get breakfast. He wonders if he’s ever gonna get used to this. Lance's laugh echoes in his ears.

They go to get food, together, and Lance starts talking—about a vacation he took once, apparently, which seems an odd topic to Keith. But he’s clearly trying not to make this awkward, so Keith tries to listen in return. They bring their trays back to a table and sit and Lance doesn’t stop talking for more than half a minute, and Keith supposes he has to kiss his peace and quiet goodbye.

"Hey, uh, Keith, are you even listening?"

Keith blinks. "Yeah?"

"Just, like, you aren't saying anything," Lance says. "If you really don't wanna be friends, just say so. I know it's kind of weird..."

"I do want to be friends," Keith says. "And you were telling me about a beach? I was listening."

"I... geez, okay." Lance looks kind of confused, but he blushes faintly, so Keith supposes he's said something right. The conversation has been pretty one-sided so far though—he's not really sure what to talk about with someone he was fighting just last night.

He starts by asking questions, and by the time Hunk and Pidge show up, they're actually chatting amicably.

"Do my eyes deceive me?" Pidge exclaims, sliding onto the bench next to Keith. "Lance and Keith, getting along?"

"We're friends now," Lance proclaims.

"What'd I say, Keith? One month," says Hunk with a grin.

"You were right," Keith confirms.

"And all it took was a life-threatening experience forcing you to work together," says Pidge.

"And intervention from Allura," Keith adds, shooting a grin at Lance.

He groans. "Not the worst talking-to I've gotten from her, but it was close."

"Amazing," says Pidge.

They all eat breakfast together as usual, but now that Lance is not only acknowledging Keith's
presence but apparently enjoying it, the atmosphere is lighter. It’s almost weird how easy it is. The downside is that when Pidge leans up to quietly tell Keith to meet her that night Lance gives them a curious look, and they have to quickly change the subject so as not to raise suspicion. Still—it's better.

Keith shows up almost twenty minutes early, but Pidge is already there, and he has to wonder if she sleeps at all. She looks over the top of her glasses at him but doesn't comment on the time.

"I haven't really been able to answer any of our questions," she begins, "but I figured having a second pair of eyes would help, because I've been staring at this stuff for weeks and haven't found anything useful."

"Did you find more than those instructions?" he asks.

"Just records of attempted retrieval missions. Mostly by helicopter—they didn't take out the next-gen mechas. I don't think all of them were even done by then anyway." Pidge sighs. "They don't say what they're trying to retrieve, though. It could be our people, but it could be just wreckage." She hands Keith a tablet so he can flip through the PDFs.

"It's just... times and crew rosters," he says, flicking through them slowly. "Reports of the debris they found. No... mission goals or debriefing?" His stomach drops at every picture of wreckage—it's so impersonal like this.

"If they had any of that, it's hidden somewhere else." Pidge readjusts her glasses. "We could break into the office again."

"Can't you, like, hack the wifi or something instead?"

"I could infiltrate the network remotely, but it's more likely to raise an alarm. The offices are much less secure physically." She grins. "They don't expect an attack from the inside."

"They know you're a Holt."

"They don't know I don't buy their story."

Keith flicks through more PDFs. "You know," he says slowly, "I think it's telling that they were able to run retrieval missions at all."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, they don't seem to have been attacked. And if they could send helicopters to the area to look at wreckage, why couldn't they send them to find the source? Why send the prototype?"

Pidge blinks at him.

"And why not do that afterwards? There's like, underwater drones and stuff, right? They didn't have to send people at all, especially once they knew the area was already dangerous."

"Knew I brought you along for a reason," Pidge says. "I think the safety of the retrieval missions can be attributed to the kaiju not perceiving small craft as a threat... or these reports being fabricated completely. I mean, there's pictures, but that wreckage could be from anything."

"This piece has part of the Garrison logo." Keith holds up the tablet to show her, and she nods.
"It could've been painted on after."

"It doesn't look fresh."

"No, shit. They'd've weathered it. They do that to like, movie props and stuff, it's a thing."

Keith shoots her a look. "Okay, wise guy, so why put fake pictures on private documents?"

"Because they're set to be declassified in five years. Well, a little less than four, now."

"Oh."

"Yeah, 'oh'. As for not sending out missions after—"

"A-HA!"

They both jump at the shout. Keith drops the tablet, and Pidge slams her laptop shut. Both freeze at the sound of a familiar laugh.

"Oh man," says Lance. "That was hilarious." He approaches with a swagger as Hunk trails him timidly.

"Sorry to scare you guys!" Hunk says.

"I'm not sorry," Lance says, plunking himself down in front of the two. "If my friends are holding secret meetings in the basement, I want in."

"This is the second floor," Keith says. Pidge has her head in her hands and is breathing slowly and deeply.

"We live on the fourth and fifth. It's practically the basement. So." Lance prods at the fallen tablet and Keith snatches it out of his reach. "What's the conspiracy club up to tonight?"

"Nothing," Pidge grunts, as Hunk tentatively sits down too.

"Uh-huh. So that's why you said something about missions right before we showed up?"

"We were talking," Keith says, and Pidge shoots him a glare, "about NASA."

"Ohh, the fake moon landing after all, huh? Well, mystery solved, Lance, let's go back to bed."

Hunk moves to stand but Lance grabs his arm.

"Nope. Don't believe it." He shakes his head emphatically. "I could believe it of Keith, but our dear Pidgey could never be so misguided."

"Hey," Keith and Pidge say in unison.

"So be honest. What are you meeting about?"

They exchange looks.

"Nope," she says. "You can't keep a secret to save your life."

"It's not your business anyway," he adds.

"I very much resent both of those things," Lance says. "I can too keep a secret, and you guys are my business, so."
"For the record, I tried to talk him out of this," Hunk says. "But you know how Lance is."

"Boy, do I," says Pidge. She looks at Keith, who shrugs. Worst comes to worst, he supposes he can throw Pidge under the bus and get out of serious trouble—he'd rather not have to do that, though.

Pidge takes a deep breath. "We were talking," she says, "about Kerberos."

"Welp, I'm out," Hunk says, and tries to leave again. Lance pulls him back down.

"Are you out of your minds?" Lance asks under his breath. "You could get, like, killed!"

"You don't even know what we've been talking about."

"I know you, and you would never settle for the official story, which means you definitely know things you're not supposed to know." Lance crosses his arms. "Am I wrong?"

Well, he isn't. Pidge's mouth twists but she says nothing, so Keith doesn't either.

"So I'm right," Lance says.

They still say nothing.

Lance turns to Keith. "Okay, I know why Pidge is into this, but why are you involved?"

Keith huffs. "Shiro was my... friend."

"... Boyfriend?"

"Does it matter?" Keith glares at Lance, who raises his hands and relents.

"No, I guess not, but only because what the fuck, you guys, the Garrison's gonna kill you."

"I shouldn't have come along," Hunk moans.

"Aaaand this is why we didn't want to tell you," Pidge says. "So, now that you know, go back upstairs and pretend you don't."

"Um, no?" Lance frowns. "Now that I know, I'm gonna help. No way am I letting you guys do this alone."

Pidge sighs. "No. You have no personal stake in this, Lance, you have no reason to get involved."

"Actually, we kinda do," Hunk says, to Keith's surprise (and Pidge's, by the look on her face). "Shiro was on the team before even I was, and I helped build the prototype. He pretty much taught us both everything we know about piloting. So I kinda... wanna be involved, too. You know. If that's okay."

"What," says Keith. "You built the prototype?"

"Helped build! I was an intern on the original program, along with Lance and Tina and... a few others. I was an engineer, though; Lance was a paladin before me."

"We weren't even called paladins back then," Lance says nostalgically. "Just pilots. But seriously, Hunk's right. Shiro's, like, my hero. And my friend. No way you're leaving us out of getting revenge."
Pidge rubs her forehead. "Our goal isn't exactly revenge, it's information. For now."

"So?" Lance opens his hands, gestures widely. "What do you know?"

"...You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"Absolutely not."

"I want to help, too," Hunk adds.

"Ugh, fine." Pidge takes a deep breath. "We know multiple kaiju dragged the prototype to a set of coordinates northwest of the predicted location of the source shortly before they disappeared. We also found instructions detailing what to do if someone returns from the mission, including hiding the evidence, so we have reason to suspect that, one, the prototype may not have been totally destroyed —"

"Oh, good, I worked hard on that thing," Hunk mutters.

"—and two, the Garrison thinks the crew may have survived. Despite the multiple kaiju, they were able to send retrieval missions safely—or, they fabricated the reports of those missions entirely. That's it."

It's not much when she lists it out like that, and she's left out all the questions they can't answer. Keith sags.

"That's not much," Lance says, echoing Keith's thoughts.

"We have more questions than answers," Pidge admits.

"I think that's quite a bit, actually," says Hunk thoughtfully. "I mean, you know the Garrison is lying. That's huge."

"Yes, but it doesn't tell us what we need to know, namely, what happened to my family and Shiro."

Pidge hefts her laptop into her lap. "As for what we were talking about before we were interrupted, Keith, a lack of follow-up missions could be because it's too dangerous, assuming they fabricated the reports. If they didn't, then it's because they already know where the source is, I guess."

"So, again, if it's dangerous, why not an unmanned drone? And if they know where the source is, why haven't they done anything about it?" Keith throws his hands up. "What's the endgame? Or are we going to be out here fighting kaiju forever?"

His words are greeted with silence.

Chapter End Notes

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"You know," Hunk says slowly. "I could probably build a drone." He looks over at Pidge, at the rest of the group.

Pidge frowns thoughtfully. "It'd have to be amphibious," she points out. "Aerial and aquatic, with remote data collection, because there's no guarantee we'd get it back."

"I know a place down the bay a ways where we could totally test it," Lance adds. "It's not visible from the Garrison or the Castle, I don't think anyone knows about it."

"Wait," Keith says. "Are we really doing this? We don't even know what to look for. We barely even know where to look, and that's miles offshore. How would we even get a drone out that far?"

"Hijack a helicopter."

"Pidge no," says Lance.

"Pidge yes. But seriously, no, we don't know what to look for exactly, but if we find the source ourselves we can be sure the Garrison knows it's there. If we find the prototype, we can figure out what happened from that. And endgame... well, we can come up with something once we find something."

"And if we don't find anything?"

"Then at least we looked." Pidge's lips are pressed thin. "As for getting out there... that's something we'll have to consider, but it can't hurt to start building it in the meantime."

"The problem is parts," Hunk says. "And also, like, hiding it? I dunno that a drone is suspicious in and of itself but I'd rather not take that chance, you know?"

"We're in an abandoned city, Hunk, I don't think hiding it will be a problem," says Lance.

"I can get parts," Keith says, leaning back on his hands. "I used to work at a junkyard not too far away. There might be stuff around here that hasn't been looted yet, too."

Lance grins. "Trashman."

Keith groans. "Lance..."


"Our friendship hasn't lasted long enough that I'm not willing to end it right now."

"Ugh, fine. Spoilsport."

"Okay, if you guys are done with your... weird flirting, or whatever," Hunk says, making Keith and Lance both yelp in protest, "can we all go to bed now? Seriously? It's late and we have a lot to think about, and Keith is definitely on duty with me in like a day? So..."

"Okay, Mom," Lance huffs, but he gets up, and so does Hunk. Pidge gathers her things and,
reluctantly, Keith stands up too. Hunk goes up the stairs first and the rest follow.

Almost back up to the top floor, Pidge hangs back a bit and tugs on Keith’s sleeve. He leans down.

"I think this might work out," she whispers. "I trust Hunk completely. But if Lance lets something slip... I'll take the fall, so you'll have to take over, okay? We can't let them get away with this."

"Okay," he agrees. He doesn't know what he'll even be able to do without her, but he can't do nothing.

"What are you guys whispering about?" Lance whispers loudly ahead, and they both look at him.

"Not you," they tell him in unison, and high five lightly when he sighs in disappointment.

To Keith's palpable relief, Lance and Hunk act completely normally in the morning, which is to say, Hunk greets him cheerfully, and Lance falls asleep leaning on the table only to return bright-eyed and bushy-tailed from the breakfast line twenty minutes later. Neither mention last night, and Keith lets himself hope their secret might actually stay that way.

They don't get anything done that day—Keith spends most of the day being followed around by Lance, who seems determined to make up for lost friendship time by piling it all on now. It's tiring, but it's not terrible.

The next day he and Hunk are on duty, and Hunk offhandedly mentions there's a few hiding places he wants to check out.

The day after that all four of them are off, so they go out and wander the ruins. Lance climbs every bit of rubble he can find until he challenges Keith to a climb-off and Pidge and Hunk put a stop to it.

They have a picnic courtesy of Hunk, and settle on a spot far enough from the Garrison that it's not too obvious if they frequent it.

"I can start setting up tomorrow," Hunk offers. "This place needs a serious cleaning."

"Okay. Just remember we can't come here too often, it'll be suspicious," Pidge says. "Keith, you can start getting parts tomorrow. Take Lance."

"Why can't you go?" Lance pouts. "I don't know what we need any more than he does."

"One, I'm on duty tomorrow, and two, use your imagination. We don't need anything specific yet so you can't fuck up too badly."

"Way to jinx it, Pidge," says Hunk.

"They'll be fine. The birds have to leave the nest eventually."

"Does that make you our parents?" Lance asks with a grin.

Immediately Pidge cups her hands around her mouth and breathes loudly. "Lance," she says in the deepest voice she can manage, "I am your father."

"NOOOOOOO!" Lance falls dramatically to the dirty floor. Keith and Hunk exchange looks.

"Please tell me you get the reference," Lance says to Keith from the floor.
"Star Wars."

"Oh thank god."

Lance whines about the dirt in his hair the whole way back to the Garrison. No one is sympathetic.

The next morning Lance sidles up to the couch Keith is reading on and casually leans on the back of it.

"Psst. Keith."

"What, Lance?"

"Shh!" Lance holds a finger to his lips. "Do you want everyone to hear?"

This corner of the floor is empty but for the two of them and Joey, who’s napping on another couch. Keith gives him a look and closes his book. "What do you want?"

"Oh, well, you know, I was thinking you and me should hit the town. Chat up some babes. You know."

Keith knows the only "town" nearby is a collection of desperate suburbs cut off from the ruins of the city that used to be here. The next city proper, where the Academy is, is miles off. He frowns.

"Say what you mean, Lance," he says.

Lance pouts and slumps onto the sofa next to him. "Pidge wanted us to go look for parts today," he says lowly. "I wanted to remind you."

"You could've just said that." Keith picks up his book and gets up off the couch. "Grab a jacket and gloves and your ID and meet me on the first floor in ten."

"What, we're going now?"

"Is heading into 'town' suspicious?"

"No, people do it all the time. Hunk goes like once a week for ingredients."

"Then yes, now." Keith bops Lance gently on the head with his book. "Picking through a junkyard in the dark is kind of hell. Besides, you're on duty tomorrow."

Lance shrugs and gets up. "Ok, then. Whatever you say, trash boy."

"Don't call me that," Keith says, and leaves before Lance can respond.

By the time he's put his book away and dug up his jacket and a couple of bandanas, Lance is downstairs waiting for him.

"That was twelve minutes," he says. Keith just shrugs.

He leads them out of the building and down the street, and then around a corner and into the ruin where he hid his bike. He uncovers it and rolls it out, inspecting it carefully to make sure it's still in good condition, has gas, nothing missing. He checks it once a week but, better safe than sorry.

"That's yours?" Lance asks.
"Yeah?"

"But..."

"How did you think I got here? Uber?" Keith snorts and hands Lance a bandana and the extra helmet. "Put these on."

"I, wow, okay." Lance does as he's told, for once. Keith ties his own bandana on quickly and mounts the bike, and looks back to where Lance is standing hesitantly.

"Come on," he says, nodding to the back of the bike.

"Uh, right." Lance perches on the back, then squeaks and slides forward to wrap his arms around Keith's chest when the bike roars to life beneath them.

Keith laughs. "Never ridden a motorcycle before?" he shouts.

"No!" Lance yells in his ear, and Keith grins and sets off. Lance yelps. Keith is never gonna let him live this down.

The cloud of dust they kick up could probably be seen from the Castle, but it's not like a motorcycle is surreptitious anyway. The guards at the fence already have the gate open for them by the time they get there, and Keith slows and waves but doesn't stop. They wave him through with no trouble.

Lance is unusually quiet as they speed down the only well-maintained road in the area, and if he weren't pressed firmly against Keith's back and nearly squeezing the air out of his lungs, he could've almost forgotten he was there. Keith revs the engine just to hear Lance squeak again, and the arms around him tighten. He shakes with laughter and Lance yells in his ear.

He has to slow down when they reach inhabited land, and Lance relaxes, which is less fun but at least Keith can breathe now. The junkyard comes into view soon enough, and Keith slows and stops outside it and kills the engine.

"We're here," he says.

"Yeah," Lance says. He's still breathless, and Keith grins beneath his bandana.

"So you can let go now."

"O-oh, right." Lance pulls back quickly, tries to get off the bike without falling, and fails. Keith dismounts smoothly and pulls off his helmet, then pulls down his bandana so Lance can see his grin.

"Have fun?" he asks.

Lance tugs off his helmet with shaking hands and scrabbles at his bandana. "Oh my god," is all he says. Keith puts the helmets away and by the time he's done Lance is still on the ground.

"Come on." Keith offers a hand, and Lance takes it. He pulls him up easily.

"Oh my god," Lance says again, softly. He tries in vain to brush the dust off.

"That'll be a lost cause. Just shower when we get back," Keith says. There's a stripe of dust across Lance's face between where his helmet and bandana had been. He turns away and gestures for Lance to follow.

After a moment, he hears footsteps behind him, and Lance catches up quickly. They enter the
junkyard and Keith approaches the little wooden shack and the graying man in the folding chair outside it.

"Jim!" he calls.

"Kogane!" Jim calls back. "Good ta see ya! What're ya after?"

Keith gestures out at the yard. "Junk."

Jim gestures to it. "Yer welcome to it. Just show me what yer takin'."

"Thanks, Jim." And he leads the way into the yard.

Chapter End Notes

im str8 for motorcycle keith

this chapter has art!!! well, a doodle.

roster

Tumblr
"That was... easy," Lance says, apparently having recovered from the ride in. Shame.

"Jim's my friend."

"You have weird friends."

"Are you including yourself in that?"

"I am not weird."

"Uh-huh." Keith stops and nudges the edge of a pile. "There's scrap here, electronics under the tent over there." He points. "Remember we can only carry what'll fit on my bike."

"What, you're just gonna... send me off into the unknown? Keeeith..."

"If you get lost, just yell. This place isn't that big." Keith points towards the electronics again. Lance pouts and goes.

Keith can hear Lance muttering to himself as he drags his feet to the electronics tent, but once he's out of earshot it's quiet, and Keith begins his search. Most of the scrap is obviously too big or too heavy, and he can easily skip over most of it on his way up the pile. Near the top he grabs a lucky find—some kind of plastic rotor, still protected in a sturdy case. There's some plastic bits he thinks will work for casing, too. He grabs a few small aluminum bars for good measure—tosses them down the pile where he can grab them later, actually, because his arms are full. Either he's going to have to take two trips or get Lance to help.

He's loathe to put down the rotor lest someone else show up and grab it, but the rest he leaves in a small pile and goes to check on Lance.

Keith sits in the dirt—to Lance's vocal disgust—and tries the motors one by one. Lance goes back under the tent for more.

"I just got here," says Keith. "What've you found?"

"Uh, I just grabbed anything that looks like it'd be easy to take apart," Lance says, and Keith privately has to admit that that's a good tactic. "Also a bunch of motors. Does that thing already have one?"

Keith looks down at the rotor. "Nope."

"Well, maybe one of these will fit." Lance nudges his pile. "There's more here if they don't."

Keith sits in the dirt—to Lance's vocal disgust—and tries the motors one by one. Lance goes back under the tent for more.
Within twenty minutes they find one that kind of fits, and declare it good enough. Then they scoop up Lance's pile and bring it to Keith's pile, and then with some creative stacking and tucking things inside of other things, they manage to get the whole lot over to the gate.

"Hm," Jim says, inspecting their bulging armfuls. "Aight, go ahead."

"Thanks, Jim!" says Keith, and they step outside to confront the problem of taking everything back. The rotor turns out to be too wide to fit in the bike's saddlebags, but they manage to cram the rest in. Keith hands the rotor, now wrapped in a tarp, to Lance.

"Hold this between us on the way back. Don't drop it," he says.

"I won't," Lance insists, then fumbles with the helmet one-handed when Keith hands that to him too. Keith laughs. "You're the worst," Lance pouts, but soon enough they're settled and ready to go.

They make a brief detour for gas, and the ride back isn't as nice as the one in, with hard plastic and canvas pressed against Keith's back instead of Lance. The sun is getting low in the sky.

They have to stop at the gate to pull down their bandanas and show their IDs, but the guards let them in without questioning the tarp-covered bundle, and they're waved through shortly.

Hunk is long gone when they reach the hiding place, but it's noticeably cleaner than before, and they leave their finds in a heap on the floor. Keith stretches and shakes off some of the dust and turns to Lance as they head back out to the bike.

"You can walk from here, you know," he says. "If you want."

"Nope! Nope, you're giving me a ride," Lance says, and when they get on the bike he presses right up against Keith's back without hesitation. The sun is setting. Keith is pretty sure he's been on dates that ended like this.

It takes a very short two minutes to get to the place he hides his bike; he turns it off and they both linger for a moment.

"Well, that was fun," Lance says in his ear, slightly muffled by their helmets. He lets go slowly and dismounts. Keith can only do the same and wheel the bike back inside; Lance is waiting for him outside, and they head back to the Garrison together.

"Ugh, I'm gonna need, like, five showers after this," Lance says after a moment, trying in vain to brush off the dust on his jacket. Finally he takes it off and shakes it away from them, only to find the dust got up inside his jacket too, not to mention that the rest of him is still covered in it. He sighs and gives up.

"There's laundry," Keith says.

"You gonna put your leather jacket through the laundry? Heathen."

"Of course not." He takes it off to shake it out too, brushes off the dust that isn't firmly ingrained in it already. It used to be red but has since become a sort of grayish rust color. "I think your jacket can handle it, though."

"But can the laundry handle my jacket." Lance grins.

"That doesn't even make sense."
"Uh, yes it does. Have you ever even done laundry before? Oh my god, Keith, you *are* a dirty heathen."

"What, no!"

They keep bickering into the Garrison building and up the stairs, until they reach the fourth floor and Coran jumps up from his desk with a loud "Halt!"

Keith and Lance freeze. Coran comes around the desk to them, wielding a feather duster.

"Look what you've done to your uniforms!" he exclaims. "I can't let you in like this! It's a disgrace!" And the two paladins have no choice but to stand there awkwardly while Coran thoroughly harasses them via duster. By the time he's done nearly everyone within sight of the stairs is watching.

So much for not attracting attention.

"Next time, we're finding a shower out in the ruins or something before we get back," Lance mutters once Coran finally gets them acceptably dust-free.

"There won't be running water—"

"Whatever, just, this is *not* happening again."

"...Agreed."

They're under far more scrutiny than Keith is comfortable with (an easy line to cross, granted) as they head to get dinner and pick out Hunk from the crowd. He waves them over and Keith is ready to finally, finally sit and relax a while.

"Hey guys!" Hunk calls cheerfully. "How was your date?"

Keith freezes. Lance screeches.

"It wasn't a date!" Lance exclaims, probably more loudly than necessary. Not that it matters, since everyone in the vicinity is listening intently anyway.

"...I was joking, Lance, but you know, if it really *was* a date..."

"It wasn't!"

"Sure," Hunk says agreeably but not really believably. Keith throws his head back and groans, before reluctantly putting down his tray and sitting opposite Hunk. Lance makes a point of going around the table instead of sitting next to him.

"Hunk, I've had to deal with Lance *all day*," Keith says. "Please give me a break."

"Alright, alright. I'll ask about it later," Hunk says, and Keith hopes all he means by "it" is the result of their junkyard run. "You guys missed an attack, you know."

"What, really? Who went out?" Lance finally sits down next to Hunk.

"Bonnie and Tina."

"Ah, sword and shield, huh? Classic."

"Yup." Hunk starts describing the battle and Keith digs into his dinner gratefully as the not-so-subtle
eyes on him and Lance finally look away.

Pidge is still on duty that night, but Keith heads downstairs anyway at the usual time in case Hunk is there to tell him about the trip to the junkyard. The floor is empty when he gets there, but he hears footsteps, and Hunk shows up a minute later.

"Hey, I was hoping you'd be here," Hunk whispers. "What'd you guys find?"

Keith opens his mouth to tell him, but there are more footsteps approaching. Quickly he pulls Hunk away from the stairs, just in case.

"Guys?" Lance's whisper carries easily across the empty floor. "You didn't start without me, did you?"

"Lance?" Keith goes back around the stairwell. "What are you doing here?"

"Huh? Same as you?" In the dim red light of the stairwell, Lance looks confused.

"Aren't you on duty tomorrow?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So you should be sleeping." Keith crosses his arms.

"What are you, my mom? I'll be fine, there's not gonna be an attack today."

"You still have to like... wake up," Hunk offers, peering around the corner. "Keith's right, you should go back to bed."

Lance makes an affronted noise. "I'm part of this team too!"

"And if you're unusually tired in the morning, someone might notice," Keith says. "I'm just gonna tell Hunk what we found today, it's nothing you don't already know."

"We can go over the stuff together later," Hunk offers. "I'm gonna have to tell you what else to get anyway."

"But..."

"Bed." Keith points.

Lance's eyes narrow. "Have I told you you're the worst?"

"Yep."

Lance gives him a final glare, and turns and heads back upstairs. Hunk steps forward and puts a hand on Keith's shoulder.

"That," he says, "was really cute."

"...I don't know where you're going with that, but I think you shouldn't."

"Fine, fine." Hunk removes his hand and Keith turns. "So, what'd you find?"

Keith lists the items as best he can, given that he doesn't know what most of the electronics are. Hunk seems satisfied, though.
"It's enough to get started," he says. "The problem will be some sort of power supply... we'll need a battery of some sort for sure, maybe augmented by solar..." His voice trails off.

"The junkyard doesn't do battery disposal, so we'll have to look elsewhere for that," Keith says.

"Oh, I can work something out," Hunk says. "Thanks for the stuff. It might be suspicious to head down tomorrow, and we're on duty the next day, but, maybe after that I can check it out."

"Okay." Keith shrugs. "Just lemme know if you need a trip to the junkyard."

"Will do. Oh, and one last thing?"

"Yeah?"

“Dating Lance would be a perfect excuse for going out to the junkyard all the time,” Hunk says earnestly. “No one would question it then. I mean, they might question why you’re dating Lance…”

“I’d rather not date him,” Keith says firmly. “Or fake-date him. We’re still barely even friends...?”

Hunk starts backing towards the stairs. “I’m just saying. Don’t discourage the rumors too much, it’ll throw them off our trail. Goodnight, Keith.”

“...Goodnight, Hunk,” he says when Hunk is already halfway up the stairs. With a frown, Keith follows.

Chapter End Notes

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Dream Team

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Keith and Hunk fill Pidge in the next day on the junkyard run, and she agrees that they need to space out their trips even out to the hiding place in case anyone gets suspicious. It's going to make progress painfully slow but... Keith supposes they don't have a particular reason to hurry. They just don't have enough information.

So he keeps doing his job and keeping his head down, and so do the rest of them.

His first time on duty for Black instead of Red happens to fall on a day when Lance, Pidge, and Hunk are all also on duty. Rex is on for Red and Keith feels kind of sorry for him as Pidge and Lance crow about the "dream team". It is nice, though, knowing that if he gets sent out (and they are due for an attack) he'll be fighting with a friend.

The alarm goes off in the middle of dinner. There's a clatter of forks as everyone jumps up and heads out into the hall, and Keith is chanting Black, Black to himself to remind himself not to aim for Red.

"I need Blue and Yellow out, and Black on standby!" Allura announces. The kaiju must be a heavy hitter. Keith slows but does not stop.

He's been in Black's simulator before so the cockpit isn't totally unfamiliar to him, but it's bigger than Red's and somehow uncomfortable. Still, he enters and sits in the pilot's chair, and watches the feed on his display, just in case.

Lance and Hunk get out of the Castle quickly, and have a couple of minutes to prepare before the kaiju is in range; it's big and slow, not the sort Red would be sent against. Yellow wades forward, ready to keep it at bay while Blue takes it down from afar.

Shortly, the kaiju emerges and begins to pummel Yellow. She takes it easily, and pummels back at every opportunity, while Blue circles around keeping steady fire on the kaiju's chest and head. All the while Lance and Hunk barely even speak; they're so in sync it's unbelievable, until Keith remembers they've been at this for years.

"I'm starting to get a little damaged here," Hunk says nervously.


"Couple a' minutes?"

"Black, standby," Allura says. Keith is about as prepared as he can be already.

Blue keeps shooting. Yellow takes a hit that makes Keith wince. She stumbles back.

"Thirty seconds!" Hunk squeaks.

"Black, go!" Allura calls.

"Roger." Keith grabs the controls and pushes Black out of the hangar. She's slower than Red and he curses lowly as ahead the kaiju continues to hammer away at Yellow. She takes a hit on her arm to the sound of bending metal, and Hunk squeaks.
"I'm here," Keith says quickly, and when the kaiju rears back for another hit he pushes Black in to take it. The kaiju roars and turns to face him, and Yellow backs away as quickly as can manage.

"Thanks, Keith!" Hunk says gratefully, and turns Yellow around. "Heading in."

"Roger," Lance says. "Hey Keith."

"Hi, Lance." Keith grunts as a hit rattles the cockpit. The kaiju's eyes—all three of them—are focused directly on him, and it's unnerving.

"Almost done," Lance says. The kaiju shudders with every blast and its blows are weaker than at the start—but Black is not as heavily armored as Yellow. Keith watches blood cascading down the kaiju's skin and twists to take a hit at a better angle.

There's an opening, and Blue's blaster fire pauses for a moment to recharge, and Keith yanks on the controls. Black throws a heavy punch into the kaiju's face and finally, finally, it falls.

"Yes!" Lance shouts. "Kill it!"

"Who, me?" Keith asks wryly. "You're not gonna grab the kill for yourself?"

"Wha—Hey, I said I'd drop the rivalry thing, didn't I? You didn't believe me?"

"Not really, no."

"Boys," Allura says warningly.

"Right, sorry." Keith brings both of Black's fists heavily down on the kaiju's slumped head. It collapses completely, and he uses Black's wrist blade just to be sure.

"You're very stabby, aren't you," Lance comments.

"...Red's primary weapon is a sword."

"You're in Black."

"I'm in melee range." Keith pulls Black around to head back toward the hangar and Blue follows.

"You were just punching it before."

"I wanted to be sure. A blade's more certain than blunt force."

"Again—stabby."

Allura sighs. "Do you two ever stop bickering?"

"Not really, no." Hunk is apparently still on the line. "I'm pretty sure they don't hate each other anymore, though."

"I never hated him, he's just a dick." Keith walks Black back into the hangar and begins shifting into docking position.

"Was a dick, thanks."

"Nah, you're still a dick."

"Rude."
"...Hunk..." Allura says.

"That's just how they express affection?" Hunk offers. "You've got the feeds. Do either of them actually look angry?"

Keith drops his grin and shoots a look at the camera before getting up. As he leaves, he hears Allura sigh.

"Not before you said that, no."

That night, Keith is intercepted on his way to the Red bunk by Allura. "I'd like you to stick around after shift change tomorrow," she says.

"Is... something wrong?" he asks, wondering if he's somehow gotten himself in trouble.

"Oh, no. We've simply developed an upgrade to the simulators and I'd like you to help test them," she says quickly. "Come to the control room when Terry relieves you."

"Yes, ma'am," he says, relieved. She leaves with a goodnight.

In the morning Keith nods to Terry and heads down the hall towards the control room. Pidge, Hunk, and Rex stop at the elevators.

"You guys go ahead," says Lance. "I'm testing a simulator for Allura today." He looks insufferably pleased about this.

"You too, huh," Keith says, just to pop his bubble. Lance's face falls instantly.

"She asked you, too!?"


"I asked both of you," Allura says behind them, "because it's a two person simulator. Of sorts."

"Okay, um, no offense, Allura," Lance begins, "but why us?"

"Both of you act similarly in simulation as compared to in the real mechas, and this is a bit of a control run," she says. "Besides, you're already here. It was convenient." She gestures for them to follow, and they get in an elevator.

Allura leads them through halls Keith hasn't been in before, in the half of the building opposite the hangar. Where the rest of the place feels industrial, this place is clinical; the halls are white and clean and brightly lit, and punctuated with closed doors. She stops in front of one labeled "LAB B".

"Here," she says, and ushers them in. On both sides of the entrance there are mock cockpits, open at the back to the rest of the room; ahead is a small control station manned by a young woman with a hijab and a friendly smile. The smile falters a little in surprise when she sees them, though.

"Shay!" Lance exclaims. "You're back! Hunk didn't tell me."

"Oh! Lance! Um, Hunk does not know," she says. "I have been so busy here, and it has been so long, I thought it would be better if I—"

"Dude, no, he'd be so happy to see you again!" Lance walks right up to her and takes her hands.
"I'm happy to see you again. You never even called! Come on, Shay."

"My phone was erased when I left, it is standard protocol—"

"Ahem." Allura gives them a pointed look as they both guiltily look to her, and she turns to Keith. "Keith, this is Shay. She will be managing the testing today. Shay, this is Keith. He's our newest paladin."

"Nice to meet you!" Shay says, quickly brushing past a disgruntled Lance to shake Keith's hand. She's almost a foot taller than he is and even with her friendly demeanor she's kind of intimidating.

He straightens up a bit and nods. "Nice to meet you, too."

"Shay was one of the original interns with me and Hunk," Lance adds, placing emphasis on "Hunk". Shay frowns and pinkens.

"Lance, behave," Allura warns, and leaves.

"Okay!" Shay says quickly, before Lance can speak. "You two can go ahead and get in the simulators. It does not matter which, they are not calibrated to a specific mecha yet. Also, we have not implemented the comm yet, so you will just have to yell for now. We left them open for that purpose."

"Why would we need to communicate at all?" Keith asks, brow furrowed.

"Oh, did Allura not tell you? This is a two-person simulation!" Shay exclaims, even as she shoo's them out of the center of the room. "After all, we always send out the mechas in pairs, yes? But until now the simulators have not allowed you to train for pair work."

"Always wondered why that was," Lance mutters.

Shay returns to the control station. "Well, the simulators are already very complex! Making them talk to each other, so to speak, has been more difficult than you might think." As the two settle into the simulator seats, the displays flicker on. "You will find that some of the graphics are not yet up to par."

"I'll say," Lance snorts. "Keith's, like, pink."

Keith turns his "mecha" and finds Lance's on his screen. It's a neon pink silhouette of a mecha, with no apparent shading or texture to even distinguish between body and limbs. He can tell it's waving, though; he waves back.

"Eyyy," says Lance.

"Texture mapping has not been a high priority," Shay says. "For the moment, just make sure the controls are working as expected, okay? And be glad I am not making you go through the whole checklist today."

"Today?" Lance sounds worried.

"Today," Shay confirms, and doesn't say more than that. Keith plays with the sim controls a bit; they're a little heavier than Red's, a little smoother than Black's, a lot cleaner than any sim he's ever been in. It even has a smell vaguely reminiscent of a new car. As he pulls on every lever and presses every switch, he can see the pink blob of Lance's virtual mecha moving around out of the corner of his eye.
"Seems to be working fine," he says. "Hard to say without a kaiju to fight."

"Can you try interacting with each other's mechas? We need to test collisions as well."

"You want me to go punch Keith? Sure," Lance says, and Keith can hear the wicked grin in his voice.

"Lance, no—" Keith pulls his mecha back as Lance's charges in. A short chase ensues, until Lance manages to wallop Keith's mecha across the back of the head. The simulator lurches violently. "Lance!" he shouts, and Lance laughs.

"Sorry!" he says, then yelps when Keith turns and wallops him back. "Ow! These simulators don't fuck around with physics, do they."

"So there."

"Language!" Shay says, sound affronted. "And, please stop hitting each other. You are not supposed to fight."

"You said interact," Lance says petulantly.

She sighs. "Is your physical interaction with friends limited only to punches, Lance? I am certain I have experience to the contrary."

"Well, what do you want me to do? Shake his hand? I can't even see his hand, it blends in with the rest of him."

Keith lifts his mecha's arm and nudges it gently against where he thinks Lance's mecha's shoulder is. His own mecha's arm is also neon pink so it's hard to tell. There's a bit of a shudder when he makes contact, though.

"You could stick to more gentle touches—yes, like that, Keith," Shay says. "Did you both feel that?"

"Yep," says Keith.

"...Yeah," says Lance. He tries it too, and Keith's sim shifts just slightly beneath him.

"Good." Shay does something over at the control panel, and the displays reset. "We can do more rigorous collision testing later, but for now, how about a kaiju?"

"Hell yeah," says Lance.

"Sure," says Keith.

Chapter End Notes

its got that new sim smell
roster
Tumblr
"Kaiju incoming at three o'clock."

"Roger," Keith says, feeling a little weird about it as he obediently turns his sim in the right direction. Or what he thinks is the right direction; there's no coastline so it's kind of hard to tell.

"Shay-Shay, what're you giving us?" Lance asks.

"You will see!" she says sweetly, and Keith is instantly nervous. "Also, do not call me that."

"Come on, we usually have *something* to go on—I've got visual. Keith?"

"I've got visual," he confirms. "Uh, how are we doing this?"

"I dunno. Do these sims have blasters?"

"They do not," Shay says.

"Any kind of projectile? At all?"

"You have four rockets. Use them wisely."

"Okay," Keith says. "I found a knife? I can go in and attack and you can try not to blow me up."

"Sure, let's go with tha-aaaahh, what is *that*." Lance's voice grows high as the kaiju breaches. Keith swallows. It's enormous, bigger than anything they usually fight... and covered in tentacles.

"I call her 'The Kraken'," Shay says fondly. "Good luck!"

"*Fuck*, Shay!"

"Language!"

"I don't want to melee this thing," Keith says. "I really, really don't want to."

"Stick to the plan, Keith!" Lance exclaims, without a trace of humor—he actually still sounds kind of freaked. The kaiju is still approaching, and he launches one of his rockets. It hits one of the waving tentacles and kind of bounces before it explodes. The kaiju makes a very realistic shriek but is visually unharmed. Keith hopes that's just a graphical error.

"You have three rockets left. Use them wisely!" Shay crows.

"Are you having fun, Shay? "
"Yes! Yes, I am."

Lance fires off a second rocket, then a third. Both are exactly as effective as the first. Lance huffs.

"One rocket left! Use it—"

"Wisely, I know."

"I'm... going in, I guess," Keith says reluctantly. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck," Lance says solemnly. "I'll bring flowers to your funeral."

"Thanks, I think." He goes in.

The kaiju turns on him, and Keith lifts his neon-pink knife in preparation. His sim shudders as one tentacle, then another, wraps around his virtual mecha. Then five. He stabs downward and is rewarded by a spurt of blood and a retracting tentacle... until three more take its place.

"Uh," he says. Shay is giggling off to his side.

"What's happening, you're pink and there's too many tentacles," Lance says.

"I'm..." Keith tries to stab again and finds his arm trapped. "Stuck?" He tries to shift his other arm and finds that held securely in place by tentacles as well. "Uh." He looks up just in time to see the kaiju's squid-like maw rapidly approaching his windshield. "Shit, Lance, get me out of here!"

"What's happening?" Lance fires his last rocket. It hits the tentacles, and the only result is that Keith's sim shudders at the explosion.

"You are out of rockets!" Shay exclaims cheerfully.

"Forget the rockets! Lance, get over here!"

"I'm coming, what's happening!?"

"I can't move, oh my god, it's chewing on me!" Keith yells as he's treated to a lovingly-rendered depiction of the inside of a kaiju's throat in full 3D.

"I'm trying—there's too many tentacles!" Lance squeaks and Keith hears the motors of the sim behind him activating. Shay is outright laughing.

"Lance!??"

"SHAAAAAY!"

Shay keeps laughing. "Oh, I am sorry, but this is the most fun I have had in years."

"Shay, you're the worst," Lance says. "Okay, new plan, Keith self-destructs and I run like hell. Good?"

"Not good!" yells Keith, who is still being chewed on. His display tells him his right arm is out of commission and he starts hitting switches at random.

"Okay, jeez, then I'll back up and—uh, scratch that, it's got me too. So much for the flowers, huh, Keith?"
Keith takes a deep breath. "We can still win this."

"...How?"

"I don't know, but it hasn't gotten into my cockpit yet, so we still have time." His view hasn't changed much. "Uh, my right arm is offline, not that I could've moved it anyway. Where do the rockets launch from?"

"Chest-area?"

"Yes," Shay confirms, still a hint of a laugh in her voice.

"I guess face-rockets would be too much to hope for."

"Oh, I get it," says Lance. "Hold up, I might be able to push its head-thing down. If I can just... climb..."

Lance doesn't elaborate, but he hears motors and grunts and a kaiju screech, and the kaiju throat slides down out of view to be replaced with writhing tentacles.

"This is hard without visual cues," Lance says. "Okay... uh... now! I think."

"Roger?" Keith hits the launch button. He doesn't see the rocket, but seconds later his windshield lights up and the sim jerks him back hard against his seat. He automatically pushes on the controls to keep his mecha upright and is about 70% sure he's successful.

"Did it work?" he and Lance ask almost simultaneously.

"Hmm... yes, it did," Shay says, clearly disappointed. "You managed to kill it, and you were not completely destroyed in the process. Good work."

"Nice! Fist bump," says Lance.

"I can't tell your fist from the rest of you," says Keith.

"It's my right arm, just guess."

He guesses and clips the side of Lance's mecha's fist.

"Close enough."

The sims reset and shut off, and Keith unbuckles and climbs out. Lance does too, and Keith returns his real fist bump as Shay comes to join them in the center of the room again, clipboard in hand.

"Well!" She seems to have recovered from her disappointment, by the bright smile on her face. "Given that this was, technically, for research purposes—tell me what you thought of your experience today?"

"I think you've spent way too much time with Allura," says Lance.

"It sucked," says Keith.

"Also that," says Lance.

"That is not constructive."
"Well, okay. Not being able to distinguish, like, one part of our mechas from the others turned out to be a big problem," Lance says seriously. "So I guess it's kind of hard to give feedback on an experience that's obviously not done."

"I couldn't tell if the kaiju wasn't getting injured or if it was also just graphics," Keith adds.

"Yes, the simulators are... still under construction." Shay sighs. "Other than that, though—being able to fight in a pair. How did that experience compare to your real fights?"

"Frustrating," says Keith.

"Yeah, normally we can base our strategy off what mechas are being sent out," Lance says. "Like yesterday, we had the 'bruiser' thing going. Black and Blue. It's hard to plan around two totally unknown, identical mechas. And... it's been a really long time since I piloted anything but Blue, so my melee is rusty." He scratches his neck. "Maybe I should take a turn in some other simulators more often."

This seems stunningly self-aware for Lance, Keith thinks, and he just admitted to a weakness. He looks at Shay and wonders how it is he's able to do that in front of her. Or in front of him, for that matter.

"Keith? What did you think?" Shay asks.

"Uh. That kaiju wasn't exactly typical," he says. "I mean, I've only fought a few yet..."

"No, you're right, it wasn't typical," Lance says.

"So it wasn't an accurate simulation of an actual battle," Keith finishes.

Shay pouts. "I knew The Kraken would be underappreciated," she says. "Almost final question: did you have fun?"

Keith and Lance exchange looks.

"Not as much as you did," Lance says.

"Maybe in retrospect?" says Keith.

"It'll make a good story. Are we allowed to talk about this?"

"Yes, you are," says Shay. "Final question: do you think you would have done better paired with someone else?"

They exchange glances again. "You're gonna ask us that in front of each other?" Lance asks.

"Do you think you cannot be honest in front of him?" Shay asks him sharply.

"Well, no, because I don't think it would've gone any better with anyone else," Lance says quickly. "But, like, if that wasn't true, it'd be weird to say in front of him, wouldn't it?"

"You've never had a problem insulting me to my face before, Lance."

"I mean, yeah, but this is science."

Shay just shrugs. "I was instructed to ask with both testers present. Keith, what about you?"
"Oh, uh. I don't know," he says honestly. "I've only fought three times and two of those times were with Lance."

"Who else have you fought with?"

"Pidge."

"Do you think this would have gone better with Pidge instead of Lance?"

He shrugs helplessly. "Probably not?" He thinks it would've gone terribly with anyone, frankly.

"Okay," Shay scribbles something down on her clipboard. "That is all for today! Allura will probably ask the two of you to return in a few days."

"I don't think we're on duty at the same time anytime soon," Lance says, brow furrowed.

"We would not bring you down here while you are on duty," Shay says, but waves her hands at them when Lance opens his mouth to protest. "Go on! I have to write a report on this and you should get back to the Garrison and eat! Go!"

"Okay, okay. But I'm telling Hunk you're here, Shay!"

"Fine!"

"Fine!"

They both grin. Keith shifts awkwardly.

"Okay, bye, Shay!" Lance says, and turns to go, finally.

"Goodbye, Lance! Goodbye, Keith!"

"Bye," Keith says quickly, and follows Lance out. They follow the hallway back to the elevators easily enough.

"Man, I hope they put those new sims up in the Garrison," Lance says as they enter the elevator, stretching idly. "I hate waiting till I'm on duty to practice."

"Same," says Keith, and the doors slide shut.

Despite their belated return, Keith and Lance are still greeted by a few scattered cheers when they enter the Garrison. Coran gives them a salute and a wink as they make a beeline for the cafeteria.

"Next time they keep us late, they should feed us," Lance grumbles as they get in the start of the lunch line. Keith agrees.

They start arguing about pineapple on pizza, of all things, over lunch (Lance is for it, Keith is very much against), and the topic changes a few times but they're still talking when Lance follows Keith to the gym. He doesn't even pretend to work out.

"If you're going to be here, make yourself useful," Keith says finally as he steps off an elliptical. Lance, walking backwards on a treadmill nearby, looks up.

"What?"
Keith nods to the matted floor nearby. "Let's spar."

Lance grins. "Oh, you're going down." He hops off the treadmill and swaggers over to the mats.

"We'll see. Weapons?"

"Nah."

"Okay." Keith stretches and shakes himself out, then lowers himself into a ready position. Lance mirrors him, and they start circling each other.

"I won't go easy on you," Lance warns.

"Likewise."

Keith waits. Lance, predictably, makes the first move, lunging in with a hit that Keith dodges easily—right into Lance's other fist. It connects solidly with his diaphragm.

"Heh, you thought I'd suck at this, didn't you?" Lance grins and bounces back as Keith wheezes. He's right, but Keith's not going to let him know that. Instead he steps in with his elbow and Lance blocks, still grinning. His grin slips when Keith follows up with a few rapid-fire hits that Lance mostly dodges, and the fight starts in earnest.

It doesn't take long for Keith to realize Lance prefers blocking over dodging, and he uses this to his advantage, chasing blocked punches with low blows to unprotected areas. Lance pulls a few more feints that trick Keith into dodging into a follow-up. They are, to Keith's disgruntlement, pretty evenly matched.

Finally, though, Lance tires and stumbles, and with one swift move Keith has him on his stomach on the mats, limbs pinned. Lance struggles to move but Keith doesn't let him.

"Hey Lance, guess what I am," he pants.

"Uh, really heavy?"

Keith leans way down, right by Lance's ear. "The Kraken," he whispers, making sure to breathe on his ear as much as possible.

Lance squeals and bucks Keith off, who rolls away laughing. He's still laughing when Lance lunges and pins him down, too busy gasping for breath to resist.

"You're gonna pay for that!" Lance says, but his voice is still high and his face is bright red. It's not very threatening. Keith laughs harder.

"I'm sure... I will," he manages to gasp.

"You'd better watch your ass."

Someone whistles. Keith and Lance both start and look up—they've gained an audience. A handful of other paladins are gathered at the edge of the mats. Keith feels heat rise in his face and when he meets Lance's eyes he finds Lance's face has grown yet redder.

They're frozen for a moment; then Lance scrambles away quickly and Keith sits up.

"Aww, don't stop because of us," Jess says.
"It was an impressive demonstration," Hui adds with a grin.

"Fuck all of you," Lance says, but he turns and offers Keith a hand up. Keith takes it.

Chapter End Notes

seriously if you have any martial art experience pls tell me where i fucked that up, thanks <3
also i comic'd a bit of this chapter, find it here

roster
tumblr

btw my life is gonna be a huge mess the next few days so the next chapter MIGHT be a day or two late. but its coming, i promise!!
well the bad news is this is a day late like i warned it might be, but the good news is i
dont live in a hotel anymore!!! so pls forgive me for not updating while moving back
into a construction zone, ty <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

If there weren't rumors before, there certainly are now.

Keith and Lance leave the gym, shower (and there's nothing for it but to go at the same time, so that
doesn't help), and meet up with Pidge and Hunk for dinner, where they very deliberately sit diagonal
from each other. The other two exchange a knowing look.

"So," says Pidge with a wicked grin. "Something you two wanna tell us?"


"Keith, you remember what I said the other night, right?" Hunk asks.

He grimaces. "Yeah."

"What? What did you say?" Lance asks, and Hunk leans over to whisper in his ear. Pidge turns to
Keith.

"I know you're not actually together," she says lowly. "But, it's like Hunk told you..." She nods over
to Hunk and a frowning Lance.

"Yeah." Privately, though... he shouldn't discourage the rumors, but that doesn't mean he’s going to
encourage them.

They watch as Lance's face shifts from disgust to acceptance, and then suddenly his eyebrows shoot
up and he slaps his palms across the table.

"Speaking of dating!" he announces. "Hunk, guess who's back in town?"

"The boys?" Pidge whispers, and Keith elbows her.

Hunk blinks. "Uh, who?"

"Shay!"

Keith watches with fascination as Hunk blooms a brilliant red. "She is?" he squeaks, pressing his
hands to his face. "But she didn't call me!

"She lost your number or something. She said she's been too busy to come up and visit, but she said
it was okay to tell you, so she's not avoiding you—"

"Where is she? At the Castle?" Hunk stands and Lance pulls him back down.
"Yeah, dude. She's running the tests for the new sims. You still have her number, right? You can call her yourself."

"I do. Oh man, I'll call her right now." Hunk gets up again and this time Lance doesn't stop him. "See you later, guys!" He walks away, fumbling in his pocket for his phone.

"Masterful change of subject, there, Lance," Pidge says, leaning forward to place her elbows on the table. "I wanna hear about this new sim, though."

Lance looks at Keith with a grin. "Should we tell her about The Kraken?"

He grins back. "Let's not spoil the surprise."

"The Kraken? What?" Pidge tugs on Keith's sleeve. "Come on, you can't just say something like that and not explain."

"It's something better experienced yourself," Lance says. "We can tell you about the sims, though." And they do.

All four of them have the next day off, so they discreetly make their way down to the hiding place to work on the drone. Keith and Lance are set to sorting their junk haul under Pidge's supervision while Hunk begins dismantling the tech.

"There's not much here that's usable," he says, "but it's a start."

"Are you insulting our junk-hunting skills?" Lance asks indignantly.

"Just yours," says Keith.

"Junk-hunting," says Pidge.

"Not my best turn of phrase, I'll admit, but that is not the point," says Lance.

"Don't worry, I wasn't expecting any better," Hunk says. He ends up sending Keith back to the junkyard, this time with Pidge, armed with a list of vital parts.

Pidge is giggling against Keith's back almost the entire ride in. She gets off the bike much more smoothly than Lance had, grinning.

"That was fun," she said, "and now Lance's gibberish texts make sense. Let's go."

"Uh?" Keith says, but he has no choice but to follow her into the junkyard. He greets Jim and sets Pidge loose on the electronics pile.

In about ten minutes he's got an armful of promising tech—by Pidge's standard, to him it looks like any other pile of junk—and is watching her scramble up a pile of discarded office appliances like its nothing.

"So, Keith," she says, perched atop half a copier to dig through the pile. "Cover-up excuses aside... do you find Lance attractive?"

Keith should've fled when he had the chance, but now he's pinned down by the junk in his arms. "...What?"

"A simple yes or no would suffice."
"Why?"

"Science." Pidge has this one grin she makes when she's making a joke, and it makes him shudder. She glances down the pile to turn that grin on him now, and he frowns.

"...I'm not attracted to Lance."

"That," she says, still grinning, "is not what I asked."

"I... objectively, yes, I guess."

She finally turns back to the electronics and away from his definitely bright red face. "Methinks the paladin doth protest too much."

"Isn't that Shakespeare? I thought you only read science fiction."

"Don't change the subject."

Keith would throw his hands up in the air in frustration if they weren't full. "I already said yes!"

"Okay, okay. I just want you to know you're way too good for him."

He actually kind of doubts that, but more importantly, he doesn't know how to respond to it. "...Thanks? Are you sure."

"I'm just saying. He's kind of an ass." Pidge picks up something, inspects it, tosses it aside. "Like, we're friends and all, but he's like, incapable of honesty on any level. He's buried himself under layers of bravado—"

"Pidge," Keith interrupts. "You don't need to convince me. Also, I know."

"Do you."

"Hunk told me practically the day I got here."

She turns to gesture at him. "But do you like, know."

Keith sighs. "I've seen enough to convince me he's not as shallow as he seems, but, contrary to popular belief, I don't devote a lot of time to thinking about Lance. What's under his 'layers' is not my concern." Besides, he's pretty sure he has seen honesty from Lance, so Pidge clearly doesn't know what she's talking about.

Pidge snorts. "Fine, fine. But I'm pretty sure there are people betting on your relationship already."

"That's fucked up, can we stop talking about this please."

"Yeah, okay. Catch." Pidge tosses something down towards him, sort of. His arms are full and her aim's off by a good five feet. They both watch it hit the ground and crack open, revealing wires and a circuit board inside.

Keith looks up at Pidge and shrugs.

"Well," says Pidge, "that's one way to open things." She turns back to the pile.

---

Keith is on duty the next day, and the morning after when Rex shows up to replace him, Allura stops
him in the hall again.

"Come back tomorrow morning," she tells him. "Half an hour or so after shift change should be
good enough."

"For sim testing?" he asks, and she nods.

It's kind of a pain to get up early three days in a row but at least he's got time to get an actual
breakfast before he heads down to the Castle. Some intern in a lab coat leads him back down through
the halls to Lab B and shows him in.

Lance and Hunk are in the simulators right now, intent on their battle, and don't notice him enter.
Shay holds a finger to her lips and waves him over to the control center.

"I can't see anything!" Hunk yelps as Keith passes. "It's got me in a headlock!"

"Where's its face!?" Lance yells back. Keith reaches Shay and now he can see on the screens that
they're fighting The Kraken. The aerial view and status indicators have them in bad shape.

"Hunk, dear, your mecha is about to be ripped apart!" Shay calls sweetly.

"First time I see you in ages and this is what you do to me."

"Classic Shay." Lance is faring better than Hunk but not by much. "I've still got a rocket but I can't
get a good angle, can you hold out for like, thirty seconds?"

"Ahhhh... no," Hunk says as his screens go dark. "I'm out."

"Shay, is this thing chewing on his head? When are you gonna add textures!??" Lance yells. "Why
did this go so much better last time!?"

"I'm not Keith!" Hunk yells back. He climbs out of the sim, and looks wide-eyed at Keith, who
holds a finger to his lips like Shay had.

"That shouldn't matter! We're... ah, shoot."

Keith looks back at the aerial display. It seems The Kraken has moved on from playing with Hunk's
broken mecha and has turned its full attention to Lance, still caught in its tentacles.

"This is the end," Lance declares. "I'm done for. Tell Keith he's not allowed to wear his mullet to my
funeral."

Keith and Hunk exchange grins.

"Don't give up yet!" Hunk says. "You can do this!" He comes up to the control panel to watch the
display, putting a hand on Shay's shoulder. "You're the best paladin around!"

"Not while I'm caught in The Kraken's watery embrace, I'm not." Lance is still struggling, but he's
not making any headway, and his mecha's integrity is steadily declining. "Here I am only human."

"I'll be sure to tell Keith you loved him, then," Hunk says, winking at Keith, who frowns. Shay
giggles.

"And leave him with the knowledge of what could have been? Don't be cruel," Lance says, and
Keith lifts his hands to his face to smother a snort. "Just say the thing about the mullet. That'll be
enough."
Keith glances over at Hunk and Shay. They're grinning, and Shay nods.

"I'll put it up in a ponytail just for you, Lance," he calls. Lance screams, and Hunk and Shay collapse into laughter. Keith can barely keep his composure either.

"How long have you been here!?" Lance screeches.

"Like five minutes."

"Oh my god." Lance's sim finally goes dark, and he scrambles out of it, panting and red-faced. "Oh my god. Shay, this is your fault."

"For the record," she says, still smiling, "he was supposed to arrive after you were done. But someone—" she glances at an abashed Hunk "—could not bear to delay our reunion even for science."

"It's been a year and a half! I missed you," Hunk whines, and she pats his hand on her shoulder reassuringly.

"Do not worry, he did not hear anything truly embarrassing," Shay adds to Lance. He still looks on the verge of combustion.

"Well—fine, fine, whatever." Lance takes a deep breath and straightens up, unable to look Keith in the eye. Fascinating. "Who's he supposed to test with, anyway? One of us?"

"You," Shay confirms. "We are comparing these fights to real ones, and Pidge is on duty today, so you are the only option. Though," she adds, "we may not get to any kaiju today."

"Can I stay and watch?" Hunk asks.

"If you want, but it will likely be pretty boring."

"No Kraken?"

"No Kraken. I do still have to ask you some questions, though."

Hunk shrugs. "I'll stick around, then," he says, smiling down at Shay.

"Gross," says Lance.

"If I have to listen to you—"

"Do not finish that sentence."

Hunk shrugs. Lance crosses his arms.

"So," he says to Shay, "what are we doing today?"

Chapter End Notes

movin right along...

roster
i love kaiju and im not sorry

for full effect, play this when hunk starts humming. or play it now. put it on repeat. i wont judge.
(and if godzillas roar isnt permanently seared into your brain like it is mine, refer to the first one here.)

(EDIT: since i posted this chapter the video has been deleted, try this one instead. also includes the classic roar!)
OK GO READ <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It turns out they're going through the checklist Shay threatened today, which means painstakingly trying every combination of lever, button, and switch the sims provide, and reporting the results. At first Keith can hear Hunk and Shay talking quietly between her instructions, but eventually, Hunk falls silent, and then soft snoring fills the silence. Lance isn't saying much besides the test results, either.

It's pretty boring.

At least when they get to collisions they have to interact, which livens things up a little. It's still pretty tedious—lift this or that arm, aim for this or that spot on the other mecha, hope you hit and the sim responds appropriately.

Finally, Lance groans aloud. "Shay, this is so boring," he calls. "Can't we get another kaiju or something? Hell, I'll take The Kraken again. 'Heck', sorry."

"Nope!" she says. "I am afraid this has to be done."

"But why us?"

"You have the time."

"So do you, apparently," he grumbles. "Besides, there's definitely better stuff we could be doing. Right, Keith?"

"What? I wasn’t paying attention," Keith says. He'd been only half-listening. He yawns.

"See, Shay? You're putting Keith to sleep. I can hear Hunk snoring, too."

"As I said: this has to be done. Repeat with left hand, Keith."

Keith numbly does as told.

"I will let you fight something after this," Shay promises.
"Hit," Keith says when his sim shudders a little, and yawns again.

When Shay declares them finished with the collision testing, Lance yelps, "Finally!" and Keith sighs in relief. He gets up and stretches, ready to head back to the Garrison and read or watch a movie or something more stimulating than this.

"Not so fast!" Shay says. "You've still got a kaiju to fight!"

"Mnnrgh, Shay, I'm so tired," Lance says while Keith groans.

"This will wake you up!" she exclaims. "Speaking of: Hunk, rise and shine!"

"Please don't call me that in front of people," Hunk whines sleepily after a moment.

"You will want to see this," she tells him as the sims reset. "Lance, Keith, are you ready?"

"I guess," says Lance. Keith settles back into his chair.

"Yeah," he says.

Within moments, an unnervingly familiar roar sounds. Hunk starts laughing.

"Why does that sound familiar," Lance says nervously.

"Godzilla," says Keith. "It's Godzilla."

"I have visual. Shay, are we literally gonna fight Godzilla?"

"I have visual..."

Shay giggles.

"Are you ever gonna give us a normal kaiju?" Lance yells.

"Have some respect, Lance. Godzilla is the reason we call them kaiju at all," Hunk says mildly.

"I'd argue the likes of Gamera and Rodan had an impact—oh, there he is," Keith says quickly when the kaiju breaches.

Yep, it's Godzilla.

"Why does he look like a cat? And how do we take out freaking Godzilla?"

"It's the original, heathen," Keith says teasingly. "And there's about thirty Godzilla films, so—"

"Fuckin' nerd. How do we take out this one?"

Godzilla is approaching slowly. Keith realizes they're just kind of staring at him, so he starts shifting sideways.

"Oxygen Destroyer?" he offers.

"What the fuck is an oxygen destroyer?"

"Language!" Shay calls. "And do remember to fight him eventually...?"

"Hunk, I think we need to organize a movie night!" Keith calls.
"Dude, yeah, I can't believe Lance doesn't know kaiju history? This is important stuff."

"Can we kill Godzilla already please."

"Okay, okay," says Keith, "but this is gonna be weird. How are we gonna do this?"

"Well, you're the Godzilla expert."

"Forget it's Godzilla," Keith says quickly, even as the classic roar reverberates through the lab. He's almost upon them. "Just... use your rockets or something, I don't know."

"'Cause that worked so well last time."

"Are you going to stand there and get trampled or are we doing this."

"Okay, rocket barrage and hope for the best," Lance says, and launches two rockets, one after the other. They hit—like last time, there's no visible damage, but Godzilla roars again.

"Shay, tell me that did something."

"It did something."

"Great. Keith, let's blow him up."

"Sure."

He fires two of his own rockets. They hit, and Godzilla screeches and turns to him. His spines start lighting up.

"Fuck." Keith starts running.

"Language!"

"Heh. You probably should have seen that one coming, Keith," says Hunk.

"Is that, like, a heat ray or something? Breathing fire?" Lance asks as Keith narrowly avoids getting melted by the kaiju's breath.

"You know Godzilla was originally an allegory for the atomic bomb, right?" Keith checks behind him—he's still got Godzilla's focus, so he launches a rocket and keeps going. Hunk starts humming the main theme.

"Do I give a sh—a crap? No. I don't."

"...It's more or less heat breath, yes."

He hears Lance launch his other two rockets and turns back again to see if it takes Godzilla down. It doesn't. He launches his last rocket. Unsurprisingly, that doesn't work either.

"You both are out of rockets," Shay announces.

"I can't believe that didn't work," Lance says sarcastically. "Any more brilliant ideas, nerd?"

"Don't get melted," says Keith. He's still moving, trying to flank the kaiju and avoid his breath simultaneously.

"Yo, are the spines, like, dangerous?"
"...Not especially?"

"Then I'm gonna try and stab him from behind. Keep him occupied."

"Watch out for his tail."

"Ugh, roger that."

Keith starts turning in, trying to get closer while still avoiding Godzilla's periodic blasts.

"Please wrestle Godzilla," says Hunk.

"I do not recommend that," says Shay.

Keith's mecha is clipped by Godzilla's breath and a dozen warnings pop up on his display instantly. "I think I've had nightmares like this," he mutters.

"What was that?" Lance calls.

"I'm hit! Are you gonna stab him or what?"

"I'm watching out for his tail like you said!"

Keith grits his teeth and pushes onward. When Godzilla roars, he turns and starts heading in. Sure enough, Lance's mecha—still bright pink—is there, now under attack. Keith draws his knife and goes in.

"Keith!" Lance calls as Godzilla's spines light up. Keith stabs the kaiju in the neck and the glow is aborted, but Godzilla swipes at him with his tail. He stumbles, and Lance goes back to stabbing, drawing Godzilla's attention away again.

They go back and forth a while (Hunk, in the background, alternates between laughing and cheering), until a tail swipe knocks Lance down and he can't get up in time to distract Godzilla from melting Keith's face. There's about three seconds between the alarms starting and Keith's sim going black.

"I'm dead!" he calls.

"I'll avenge you!" Lance calls back. With the displays dark Keith can't see what's happening, so he gets up to look into Lance's sim instead. He gets there in time to see Lance shove his knife down Godzilla's glowing throat; his displays go dark moments later.

"Did I take him out with me?" Lance calls.

"Almost!" Shay calls back.

"Damn."

"That was awesome," says Hunk.

The sims reset, and Lance climbs out to join Keith, clapping him on the shoulder.

"We got close, anyway," he says with that lopsided grin.

"Yeah," says Keith, grinning back. Weirdly, he doesn't feel too bad about what has to be his first sim loss in... well, since he started out, really.
Probably because it was Godzilla. Yeah.

"So!" Shay exclaims, coming to join them too, trailed by Hunk. "What did you think? All three of you."

"It's still hard to compare to real life when you're pitting us against unrealistic kaiju," Keith says.

"What Keith said," says Lance.

"What Lance said," says Hunk.

"I dunno what you're trying to learn from these sessions anyway," Lance adds. "Like, the mechanics work, even if the textures and stuff aren't in yet? So what are you even testing?"

Shay blinks. "...It is mostly stress testing," she says. "We are simply putting the simulators through their paces to make sure they can hold up to a simulated battle—"

"But, like, all the sims already can? Are these really that much different?"

Shay straightens up to her full height. "I know more than you," she says firmly. Lance doesn't cower but he looks like he wants to.

"I just... jeez, okay, okay," he says. "Just kinda feels like I'm the one being tested, and like, I can't figure out why."

She sighs. "I'm only following instructions," she says. "Do you have any other thoughts on the simulators themselves?"

"It was nice to be able to fight with someone?" Hunk offers. "The sims are usually a one-person deal. I guess that's the point of this though."

"It is," she agrees.

"I don't really have anything different to say than last time," Keith says. "It was pretty much the same." Lance nods stiffly.

"Did you all have fun?"

"Nope," says Hunk.

"Not really," says Lance.

"A bit," Keith says. "But only because it was Godzilla."

Shay looks a little disappointed. "And, finally: would it have gone better if you were paired with someone else?"

"Well, Keith and I managed to defeat the Kraken but me and Hunk couldn't," Lance says.

"How did you manage to speak properly for the first half of that sentence and throw grammar out the window for the second? Honestly, Lance."

He shrugs.

"We couldn't defeat Godzilla," Keith reminds him.
"Yeah, but he's Godzilla."

"I think I'd have done better, just, you know, personally, no offense, Lance," says Hunk, "if I'd been paired with someone that didn't insist he knew what he was doing only to run straight into a mass of tentacles?"

"It worked last time," Lance pouts.

"Let me reiterate: I am not Keith."

Keith makes a face.

"Okay, okay," Shay says quickly. "That is all! You may or may not be called back here again."

"Not that beating up fake kaiju with my friends isn't, like, super fun or whatever," Lance says, "but I kinda hope not."

"Believe it or not you have given us more useful information than anyone else we have brought down here," Shay says. "So I would not get your hopes up."

"Ugh."

"If it helps," Keith says, and shrugs.

"Hey, uh, why don't you two go ahead back?" Hunk says after a moment. "I'll catch up."

Lance grins. "Sure thing, loverboy," he says, winks at Shay, and turns to go. "Later!"

"Bye, Lance, Keith!" Shay says as Hunk sputters, and Keith follows Lance out. They walk in silence for a minute before Lance sighs.

"I still think there's something weird about this sim testing thing," he says.

"Why?" says Keith. "It's not like the simulators are fake."

"No, there's just... more to it. What do they need us to test them for? And why did they call you specifically, you weren't here already so it's not like it was convenient like last time."

"I think you're reading too much into this."

Lance gives him a sideways look. "You're into conspiracies and stuff and I know you don't trust the Garrison," he says. "So why aren't you suspicious about this?"

"Because I have no reason to think it's not what it seems on the surface?" Keith says. "Isn't Shay your friend, anyway?"

"Yeah, but she's already said she's just following instructions. Like she doesn't know the whole story—or she does but can't tell us." He crosses his arms as they walk. "The sims work. We haven't fought anything resembling a real battle yet—I mean, kind of, but—The Kraken and Godzilla? You see what I'm saying? So what are they testing?"

"How we'd react in extreme situations?" Keith suggests, then realizes what he's said. "Wait."

"See?" Lance turns and grabs Keith's shoulders. "They're testing us."

"Okay," Keith says. "Why? I could understand if they wanted to make sure I was up to this—"
"But why me," Lance finishes. "I've been here forever, what do they need to know about me?"

"Maybe it's a ploy to make us get along."

"We haven't seriously fought in like, a couple weeks now, though," Lance says. "We do get along now." He kind of shakes Keith—he still has him by the shoulders—and Keith reaches up to stop him. "So, why?"

"I don't know!" Keith says. "Ask Pidge to hack into the Castle computers or something and find out? Maybe they don't know we're friends now. I don't know."

"Allura asked us to test the sims after she found out we're friends. Like, literally that night."

"Shit."

"Uh, guys?" Hunk says, coming around the corner, and Keith realizes that they're inches apart and clinging to each other's arms in the hallway in front of the elevators.

"We're having a moment, do you mind," Lance says, still with that intense look. Keith lets go and leans away a bit.

"Uh, wow, sorry," Hunk says, mouth twitching like he's trying to hide a grin. He winks at Keith and makes a beeline for the stairwell instead.

"Not that kind of moment!" Keith calls after him, and Lance finally lets go too.

"What are we gonna do?" he asks after a moment, and Keith takes a deep breath.

"I don't know," he says. "Should we tell anyone?"

"Maybe... Maybe not yet," Lance says. "I dunno if anyone else has come down multiple times yet. Or been called down when they're not already here."

"It could be just us." Keith frowns. "This couldn't be related to... you haven't told anyone about the meetings, have you?"

"Of course not!" Lance says as they enter the elevator. "And Pidge hasn't even been down yet. Why would they focus on me instead of her?"

"But if it's not related, then what are they singling us out for?"

Lance mutters something.

"What?"

"Nothing." He's blushing, which is weird but frankly Keith has other things to think about right now. "I don't know. Maybe they aren't and we're just first. Can you ask people if they've tried out the new sims? Like, subtly?"

"Subtlety is not my strong suit."
"Well, try. Probably no one else is suspicious about this."

The elevator dings and opens, and they step out onto the floor and head downstairs to the subway.

"Just don't mention it to anyone yet," Lance finishes lowly, and Keith nods.

"The project isn't ready yet."

Allura nods. "I know."

"But you're sure about these candidates?"

"No," she says. "But one is already suspicious. I worry that if we don't bring them in quickly we'll be exposed."

"...Are they compatible, at least?"

"They seem to be. They balance each other out well in terms of temperament and skill, though they do tend to... bicker. I am assured by their acquaintances that that's just how they express affection."

"You have doubts."

"I have no doubt they are the most eligible of all we have tested so far," she says firmly.

"Then they'll have to do. I'll notify you when the project is ready, of course."

Allura nods. "In the meantime," she says steadily, "I'll ensure their silence."

Chapter End Notes

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Drone progress is slow. Another day with the four of them off-duty finds them in the hiding place, and Hunk and Pidge have plenty to do, but Keith feels useless and Lance is complaining constantly of boredom. There's nothing the engineers need at the moment, so the other two are reduced to sitting on the floor and watching them work.

"We could just leave," Lance says at some point.

"We might need you to like, hold something," Hunk says. "Besides, it'd be way too quiet here without you."

"Aww, thanks bro."

"I bet you two can come up with some way to entertain yourselves," Pidge says with a crooked grin. Keith, who was more or less content doing nothing, frowns.

"Keith," Lance says. "Keith, let's go for a ride."

"Where?"

"I dunno, anywhere. Besides," he continues lowly, "we can talk about you-know-what."

Pidge and Hunk exchange a look, having almost certainly heard that. For once, though, Keith actually knows what Lance is referring to, and he sighs.

"And I thought I sucked at subtlety," he mutters. He leans back on his elbows and continues, louder, "I'd rather we talk about what we're going to do with this drone—or, better yet, no offense to the drone: get back to actually figuring out what happened? I don't like the way we're... what's the phrase. Focusing on this one thing."

"Putting all our eggs in one basket?"

"Yes, that, thank you, Lance."

"You know we can't do more without more information," Pidge says seriously.

"Yeah, but is this really the only way we can get it?" Keith shrugs. "I just think we should be considering other options."

"So what are your ideas then?"

"I don't know! You're the mastermind, Pidge."

Pidge smiles but it's thin. "You gotta pull your weight somehow, dude."
Keith sits up. "Do you think I haven't been?"

"I don't see you over here helping us."

"Where do you think you got all those parts, huh?" He gestures at the table. "When it was just the two of us—"

"But it isn't, anymore, is it?" She puts her hands on her hips and actually glares at him. "Theorizing isn't going to save my family, Keith! At least I'm doing something—"

"Your family," he says, jumping to his feet, "is dead. They're dead, Pidge. You know that."

She's shaking, in rage or sadness he doesn't know. He turns on his heel and walks out of the building.

He's not really surprised when he hears footsteps behind him.

"Keith," says Lance.

"I don't want to hear it," Keith says. Lance falls silent but his footsteps don't. Keith leads them at random through the streets, until he comes to the chain-link fence around the Garrison's boundary and stops. He leans his forehead uncomfortably against the fence and sighs, eyes closed.

The rattle of the fence and the way it shudders against his face tells him Lance is leaning against the fence too.

"Can I say something," Lance says eventually.

"...Fine."

"You've definitely contributed to the cause, but... that was pretty harsh, man."

He grunts. "I moved on," he says. "Why can't she?"

"It's her family, dude. That's on another level."

"I loved Shiro."

There's a long silence. Keith's head is pounding and the thin pieces of cool metal on his skin aren't helping much.

"So you were dating him," Lance says finally, without a hint of smugness.

"Yeah."

Lance shifts against the fence. "He used to talk about you."

That makes Keith finally open his eyes. He turns his head to look at Lance, who's leaning against the fence, looking back out into the ruined city.

"A lot," Lance adds. "Like, all the time. I dunno if I'm surprised it's really you or not." He glances over at Keith. "Either you changed a lot, or he was lying the whole time."

"Of course I changed," Keith says quietly, closing his eyes again. "My boyfriend died."

It's been a long time since he called Shiro that.
"How long had you been together?"

"Three years."

Lance is quiet for a while again, until he pushes himself up from the fence, making it bounce unpleasantly against Keith's cheek.

"We should head back." His voice is completely neutral. "Hunk has probably talked Pidge into apologizing by now. You probably should too."

"Yeah," Keith says. He doesn't really feel mad anymore, nor particularly regretful—just tired. It's getting late in the afternoon.

Hunk and Pidge are still there when they get back to the hiding place. She apologizes, and so does Keith.

They can't unsay what's been said, though.

He's on duty the next day with Terry, Ralph, Joey, and Mo, who are completely neutral parties and uninvolved in any of the drama in Keith's life right now (how did that happen? He should have stayed friendless), and it's kind of a relief. He relaxes.

The next day kind of sucks. Pidge chats with him as usual but there's an edge to their interactions. Neither of them bring up the drone or the Kerberos mission, and Hunk is unusually quiet, apparently feeling the tension. To top it off, Lance is on duty, which means there's no noisy, cheerful buffer between them.

Weird that Lance would be the mediator now.

He tries not to make things more awkward but Keith's method of avoiding awkwardness is mostly to avoid saying anything. He gets accused no less than five times that day of moping, and it's definitely because of this weird post-fight atmosphere. Yep.

No one tries to tease him about Lance, which is a nice change but somehow makes everything feel even more awkward.

The next day is better because Pidge is on duty with Hunk, and Lance comes back, and again Keith kind of has to question his sanity because when did hanging out alone with Lance become a good thing? But they eat breakfast together and bicker about nothing and it's... right.

Until they both get a text from Allura (or, in Keith's case, an unknown number that turns out to be Allura). They exchange a look across the table, making Jess snicker and shoot a meaningful look at a grinning Hui—but they both get up and make their way downstairs to the subway.

"We need to talk to Allura," Lance mutters on the train. "Get her to tell us what's up."

"She called us back again. Just us."

"Yeah, and no one else's been down more than once."

There's an intern to lead them down the hall again, but it's not Lab B that he takes them to; instead, he gestures to a small conference room, where Allura is waiting.

"Boys," she says, and gestures to the table. Both sit; Lance looks at Keith. Keith shrugs. Lance turns to Allura and opens his mouth to speak.
"Before you say anything," she says. "No, you're not in trouble. And I owe you an explanation."

Well, that wasn't what Keith had been expecting.

"O...kay?" says Lance.

She sighs. "As I know you already suspect, there is more to our simulation testing than appears on the surface."
"Both Keith and Lance open their mouths to respond to that but she holds up a hand. "However. It is absolutely vital that you do not speak of this to anyone. I can only hope you haven't already."

"We haven't," Keith says quickly.

"So what is happening?" Lance asks almost as fast.

"I can't tell you almost anything yet," she says with a frown. "This project is not ready for launch, but I'm afraid you forced our hand. We had anticipated a rather... longer timeframe for finding participants."

Keith looks over at Lance nervously. Lance gives him a reassuring nod and turns back to Allura.

"Is that all you can tell us?" he asks.

She takes a deep breath. "More or less. I can say we had you both flagged as suitable candidates—even before you came here, Keith," she adds, giving him a look. "It's part of the reason you were sent here at all. But beyond that, we had to be sure that not only were you suitable individually, but as a team."

"You were testing us," says Lance.

"Who's 'we'?" Keith asks.

"We as in the team involved in... this project," Allura says. "Yes, we were testing you. Every run in the new simulators was designed to give us feedback on your teamwork specifically."

"Called it," Lance says. Allura gives him a look and he shuts his mouth.

"So you're saying," Keith says slowly, "we've been chosen for... something, partially because we make a good team but partially because Lance got paranoid?"

"You're the paranoid one, buddy."

"You were suspicious first."

"You're literally a conspiracy theorist!"

Allura looks like she's going to have an aneurysm. "Boys," she says sharply, and they shut up.

"Regrettably, yes, you were chosen because you..." she gives them a pointed look "...work well together. Lance's 'suspicion' only hastened the process."

Keith sits back and crosses his arms as Lance leans forward across the table. "So when are we going to find out what we've been chosen for?" Lance asks.

"When the project is ready," she says. "I will call you back then, and no sooner."

"Aww. No more fighting ridiculous kaiju?" Lance pouts. Allura actually smiles.
"You may fight as many 'ridiculous kaiju' as you want once we put the new simulators into commission," she says. "Until then," she adds, her smile turning dark, "not a word of this to anyone, or there will be consequences. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," both say quickly.

"You are dismissed."

Keith stands and gets out of the room in a heartbeat, Lance on his heels. They don't speak until they've reached the elevators.

"So, you were right," Keith says quietly. "But we still don't know what they want with us."

"No, but... I think I trust Allura. She'll tell us eventually."

There are others in the elevator, so they fall silent again, and remain so until they get on the subway. The alarm goes off above them the moment the train pulls out of the station.

"We're going to miss everything," Keith says, thinking of the time it'll take them to get back to the Garrison and up the stairs, and to wrestle out a place in front of one of the TVs...

Lance's face lights up. "I have an idea. You up for some running?"

"Uh, sure?"

"Great. Hey, Bruce!" Lance makes his way up the car. "Can you let us off at the midway access ladder?"

Keith can see Bruce's disgruntled face in the mirror above the conductor's station, but soon the train slows.

"Don't get yerselves trampled, now," Bruce says, and the train pulls to a stop, making Lance stumble as he returns to Keith. The doors open.

"Thanks!" Lance calls. "This way." He jumps down off the train to the gravel below and clambers onto a tiny service platform. The doors close once Keith climbs up next to him.

"Stand back," he warns, and they press back against the concrete walls, shoulders overlapping, as the train gets going again in a rush of hot, smelly air. Once it's passed, Lance shifts across the platform to a series of iron bars set into the wall. "Up here," he says, and starts climbing. Keith follows.

"Now what?" he asks as Lance pushes some kind of manhole cover aside. Lance crawls out, then reaches back to help Keith up.

"Now," he says, shifting the cover back into place, "we run." And he grabs Keith's hand and pulls him at top speed out of the alley and down a ruined street.

Keith struggles to keep up as Lance leads them without hesitation through the city; he's not that much shorter but he could swear Lance is like, 70% leg. His hand is captured in a death grip and he can't slow down, despite the growing anxiety in his gut when he hears a kaiju screech in the distance—and they seem to be running towards it.

"Lance!?!" he asks, voice cracking. Lance just shoots him a grin. Oh, god.

They finally slow when Keith is gasping for breath and the ocean breeze is strong on their faces. Lance pulls him into the shadow of a building and peers around the corner. The sounds of sloshing
water and the dull, heavy impacts of metal against kaiju echo around the otherwise silent ruins, punctuated by the cries and shrieks of the kaiju itself.

"Now... for the tricky part," Lance pants. "We gotta get... over there... without being seen."

"By what?"

"Helicopters."

Keith looks up, around the corner. There are still buildings in the way of the ocean but he can see the helicopters hovering above, watching and ready.

"They don't really look this way but people get caught out here sometimes anyway," Lance whispers. "Let's go."

Hand in hand they creep out across the front of the building, sticking to the shadows. Lance pulls him through a small alley, then in a mad dash across a street to the back of another building. He pulls the door open and they slip inside.

It's dark, and the sounds outside are barely muffled, but Lance leads them unerringly through the building—some kind of store, once, maybe a bakery—to the front, where the large glass windows have long since been shattered. The building across the street has been leveled entirely.

Which means there's nothing but empty air between them and the kaiju in the bay.

Keith instinctively tightens his grip on Lance's hand and creeps forward toward the window as far as he dares. Inside the mechas, with their high vantage point, the kaiju are huge. From the ground, they're beyond enormous, godly, even, so high from the ground he can barely even comprehend it. From where he stands he can't quite see the top of this one—it's taller than average, with a lot of kind of spindly limbs, moving quickly. Red is grappling with it, sword out, while beyond Green tugs on the line wrapped around the kaiju's middle.

"Slice 'n' dice," Lance whispers, and Keith starts; he'd almost forgotten he was there. He glances over—Lance is grinning at him—and down to their joined hands. Lance's is very red, and Keith loosens his grip but doesn't let go as he turns back to the fight. It's grounding him, honestly; he can't quite believe this is real.

Red slices off one of the kaiju's arms. It falls to the water with an enormous splash, and Keith could swear he can feel the spray.

Lance gently tugs him sideways and down, and he sits on a piece of rubble by feel without looking away from the kaiju.

The fight doesn't last much longer. Green reels the kaiju in and goes to town on it with a short blade, and Red follows with her sword, and the kaiju slows as it loses limbs. It falls, finally, and the swell of water from the impact rolls across the bay and crashes all the way up to the ruins across the street.

Green and Red turn to head back to the Castle; Keith finally realizes he's been watching in slack-jawed awe and is still clinging to Lance's hand. He lets go and shuts his mouth.

"That, uh." He looks over at Lance, who's got an eyebrow raised and a tiny smirk on, watching him. His voice is a little hoarse. "That was something."

The smirk breaks into a wide grin. "Pretty cool, huh?"
"Yeah." He looks back out at the bay, where the water is still in turmoil from the passing of the mechas and the kaiju corpse floating in it. A fleet of tugboats are puffing out into the bay, ready to drag the corpse elsewhere. "It was."

Chapter End Notes

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EDIT: this chapter has art ;) go see it here!!!
Lance lowkey thinks he's dying. Just shriveling up inside, because emotions. Dying in a good way but like, painfully.

He didn't even see any of the kaiju fight. He was watching Keith the whole time.

It's just, Keith was totally engrossed, he was literally sitting there with his mouth open, staring, and his purple eyes—purple! eyes!—were so wide, and he let Lance hold his hand the entire time. What gives this guy the right to be so fucking adorable.

He's gonna spend all night screaming to Hunk and Pidge over text, probably.

But in the meantime, he's still here with Keith. And it's getting kind of late in the afternoon and they should probably be getting back to the Garrison. Also, his hand still kind of hurts from Keith crushing it earlier. Dude's got a hell of a grip, which is somehow pretty hot, but, like, ow.

Eh, worth it.

"We should head back," he says, and tries not to make it obvious how reluctant he is.

"Yeah," says Keith. He stands and looks around like he hadn't even noticed he'd been sitting—which wouldn't even be surprising, honestly. The guy's focus is something else.

The counter of the old bakery was destroyed at some point and it's too far back for good viewing anyway; there's some bench-sized rubble Lance and the other interns pulled in here ages ago, though, back when the lure was first set and the Castle's location chosen. Of course they'd been forbidden from using the place immediately, like Lance was actually gonna follow a rule like that. Keep the top paladin from his front-row seats? Not a chance.

(This was the first chance he'd had to come out here in months, but that's besides the point.)

"Come on," he says, and starts heading towards the back of the bakery. Keith follows.

They don't need to be as careful now that the fight is over, but Lance keeps an eye on the skies anyway, just in case, until they've gotten far enough away. He relaxes and looks over at Keith, who's doing that pensive little pout again. Thinking about something, probably.

"So?" Lance says.

"About earlier," Keith says.
Oh god, is it about the hand-holding? He doesn't look mad. Did he like it? Does he wanna do it again? Lance wants to do it again.

"Yeah?" says Lance.

"The project Allura mentioned," Keith clarifies, and Lance's heart drops to his toes for like, five seconds. "I'm just trying to figure out what it could be."

Figures. "Well, it's something to do with teamwork."

Keith snorts. "Obviously. The question is, what?"

Lance has a lot of ideas but he's well aware most of them are pretty stupid. "Experimental new mechas, probably. That's usually what it is," he adds, just in case Keith has forgotten he was here first. He may be cute but Lance is going to Win.

"But why the teamwork thing?"

Lance shrugs. "So we don't fuck up their results by fighting against each other instead of with?" Or they wanna do some kind of psychic bond anime-type stuff, but like, as cool as that'd be it's improbable at best. Also better kept to the imagination, because letting Keith into his head would be... pretty awkward, at this point.

Keith frowns. "I guess," he says, but he doesn't sound like he believes it.

"Yeah, I dunno," Lance agrees. "It's weird."

Keith breathes in sharply and grabs Lance's wrist suddenly, and Lance tries really, really hard not to get excited about that. "Lance," he says, "Lance, what if it's a follow-up to Kerberos?"

This man has a one-track mind, good lord.

"It..." Actually, Lance can't think of a reason why it couldn't be. Given the Garrison's track record, keeping the mission secret would be par for the course. "...Could be? I mean, neither of us are scientists, but..."

"What would they need scientists for?"

Lance shrugs. "Dr. Holt was. Matt kinda was too. He started as an intern and got moved to piloting, like Hunk."

"I guess, to study the source..." Keith lets go of Lance's wrist, sadly. "But they've got remote sensors and stuff probably. And they... lost the first mission, so they probably wouldn't make the same... mistake..." His voice trails off, until he looks back up at Lance, eyes practically crackling with fire —"They're gonna send us on a suicide mission."

"No," Lance says, almost before the words have registered. "No, they're definitely not planning for a suicide mission. They wouldn’t send us."

"You don't know that."

"They wouldn't throw away their top paladin," he says firmly. He's sure of it. "And you're... uh, pretty good too. Don't tell anyone I said that."

Keith snorts. "Right. Have you considered that they're trying to get rid of us?"
"No? Why would they?"

"Because we know about Kerberos."

"Keith. Buddy." Lance slings an arm around his shoulders, casually pulling him closer as they walk. "They'd send Pidge with you, not me."

"Pidge could've covered her tracks, they might not know—"

"They're not idiots." And there's no way they want him dead, nope. "Everybody knows the four of us are friends, right? And they know Pidge is a Holt. If they know either of us know anything, it's obvious Pidge is the source, therefore, they don't know we know." Simple logic. Also, he's spent a lot of time panicking about this, but that's neither here nor there. Convincing Keith can't be too much harder than convincing himself.

"Well. It could still be a follow-up mission." Keith is pouting again. Lance figures it's been long enough and removes his arm, but gives Keith's shoulder a friendly shake.

"Could be, but they're sending us because they want it to succeed." He gives Keith his biggest grin and a wink, and Keith snorts. Score one for Lance.

"I hope so," Keith says, and his face falls again. Oops, right, Shiro.

"I, uh, didn't mean to imply..." Lance begins, but Keith waves him off.

"I know, it's fine," he says quietly. Clearly not fine, but Lance isn't gonna press it, and they've just about reached the Garrison anyway. Maybe Pidge will have some ideas about it, being the resident Kerberos expert. Except they've been sworn to secrecy...

"Should we tell the others?" he asks lowly as they approach the front of the Garrison.

Keith thinks about it, stopping in front of the entrance. "Not yet," he says finally. "Not until we know for sure."

Not what Lance was expecting, but sure. If Keith wants it secret it'll be secret. "Alright." They head upstairs.

They get scolded a bit by Coran for being out during an attack, but Lance manages to play it off with "we weren't out that long" and "we didn't know there was an attack until too late" and Keith nods at all the right moments, so Coran lets it slide. And again, the commotion draws attention to them being out together, so that's cool. More fuel for the "lowkey pretending to be secretly dating" fire. Which is almost as good as actually pretending to be secretly dating. Which is almost as good as actually secretly dating.

Haha, no it isn't. Did Lance mention he's dying?

They get dinner together but Keith is still looking pretty sour, so when he gets up Lance offers a quick "sorry again about earlier" and lets Keith go to the gym alone to brood. Keith gives him a kind of surprised nod. Hey, Lance can be considerate, dammit. Maybe not tactful. But Keith isn't that good at tact either, so there.

Anyway Keith goes to brood and Lance also goes to brood, up in his cubicle, except his brooding is actually rapid texting. Phones aren't really allowed outside the bunks over in the Castle but Hunk and Pidge have gotta hear this.
Lance: guys
Lance: you gotta hear this

No response. Big surprise.

Lance: come onnnn go to bed already. pick up ur phones!!
Lance: also, great job pidge
Lance: omg will someone answer already
Pidge: thanks?? dude chill
Lance: FINALLY okay youll never guess what happened today
Pidge: did keith smile at you again
Hunk: OMG did you ride his motorcycle again??
Lance: guysss no
Lance: i didnt even say it had to do w keith
Lance: come on
Pidge: but it does doesn't it
Lance: .........................
Lance: yeah it does
Hunk: Nice.
Lance: BUT I RESENT IT ANYWAY
Lance: anyway
Lance: HE LET ME HOLD HIS HAND
Lance: IM STILL SCREAMING

Lance rolls over on his bed, grinning at his phone, and waits for the inevitable explosion.

Hunk: Context?
Pidge: ok but like why
Pidge: yeah what hunk said
That wasn't the reaction he was hoping for.

**Lance:** omfg u guys are no fun

**Lance:** i took him to the bakery

**Hunk:** Aww! Second date!

**Lance:** and yeah i grabbed his hand under the pretext of leading the way but HE LET ME is the point

**Lance:** it wasn't a date hunk!! i mean, i wish

**Lance:** and i resent the implication that the junkyard was our first

**Lance:** like come on. what kind of first date is that

**Pidge:** a pretty damn good one, if i remember your reaction correctly

**Pidge:** do you want the #receipts

**Pidge:** i can paste the transcript

**Lance:** ok, one, no

**Lance:** two, OUR FIRST DATE WILL NOT BE TO THE J U N K Y A R D

**Pidge:** will

**Hunk:** will

**Lance:** u guys have no faith in me

**Lance:** ANYWAY

**Lance:** its not like he didnt notice too. he DID. he also kidna crushed my hand but w/e he stopped w/o letting go can you BELIEVE

**Lance:** **KINDA**

**Pidge:** kidna

**Hunk:** kidna

**Lance:** omfg let me live

**Lance:** WE HELD HANDS THE WHOLE FIGHT IS MY POINT

**Pidge:** wow, a solid five minutes

**Pidge:** good job lance

**Lance:** im going to pretend that wasnt sarcastic and say, thank you, pidge
Hunk: Well, I'm glad you enjoyed yourself!
Lance: thanks for giving a shit hunk <3
Hunk: You're welcome, dude!! <3
Pidge: ughhh gross
Lance: hush gremlin
Lance: anyway i think im making #progress
Hunk: Maybe you are!!
Pidge: i kinda doubt it
Pidge: hunk don't encourage him
Pidge: he doesn't even wanna pretend. you said that
Lance: :[
Hunk: Yeah, but you already said he thinks Lance is hot, so.
Hunk: I think Lance can win him over.
Hunk: You're just being a pessimist.
Lance: :D
Pidge: say that to my face not online see what happens
Hunk: Do you really want me to walk down the hall and say it? I will.
Pidge: *palpatine voice* dew it
Lance bites his lip and waits as they fall silent. He mentally counts the steps between bunks.

Lance: well????
Pidge: #HeDidThat
Hunk: Yeah, I went and said it.
Hunk: I didn't die.
Pidge: still think you're lying for lance's sake but w/e
Lance: why u gotta be so ruuuude
Lance: dontcha know im human toooo
Pidge: i mean like, go for it. i just don't think you're his type
Lance: what did he say something

Hunk: Oh, Lance.

Pidge: dude you're hopeless

Pidge: no he didn't

Lance: so how do you knowwww

Pidge: i mean first of all he could still be straight

Pidge: i’m 99.9% sure he’s not, but

Lance: no way hes straight. nope

Hunk: Can we not speculate on other people's sexualities please???

Pidge: yeah i know i'm just saying

Pidge: second of all, do you even have anything in common?

That gives Lance pause. Do they? He talks to the guy all the time and he can't think of anything offhand.

Hunk: Pidge has a point, actually.

Lance: um, kaiju?

Hunk: I think we've already established you're not into kaiju, Lance.

Lance: i mean like, killing kaiju

Lance: were both paladins thats something

Pidge: we're all paladins

Lance: look opposites attract okay

Hunk: What do you guys even talk about all the time?

Lance: just bc we disagree doesnt mean weve got nothign to talk about!!! omg

Pidge: nothign

Lance: ***NOTHING

Hunk: nothign

Lance: okay i hate u guys

Pidge: if you hate us so much go talk to your not-boyfriend
Lance: ehh i would
Lance: i think i kinda pissed him off tonight tho
Lance: not permanently. hell get over it
Hunk: Okay, one: you guys are always pissing each other off??
Hunk: And two: how?
Pidge: what hunk said
Lance: i uh
Lance: MAY have brought up shiro
Lance: you know
Lance: his dead boyfriend
Pidge: ... 
Lance: or not dead!!! he might be alive
Lance: buuuut hes missing either way 
Pidge: his "dead" boyfriend that he's definitely moved on from huh
Pidge: along with my "dead" family
Lance: hey look
Lance: i know he said that
Lance: but i am pretty much almost definitely sure he is not over shiro
Lance: and like neither am i frankly?? i miss him too you know. and matt
Lance: pidge you know i miss matt
Lance: i just dont wanna get my hopes up because well
Lance: as much as i want to believe theyre alive, what if they arent??
Lance: what if we find out they really are dead??
Lance: i dont wanna lose them all over again
Lance: so
Lance: i think he thinks hes moved on but he hasnt actually
Lance: and he doesnt wanna get his hopes up either
Lance: i mean i cant like, apologize for him, just

Lance: idk think about that, i guess?

Lance: sorry

There's a couple minutes when no one says anything. Lance rolls back over and holds his phone above his face, waiting.

Hunk: ...I agree with Lance.

Hunk: I want them to be alive, but I'd rather be pleasantly surprised if they are than devastated if they're not.

Hunk: You know?

Another couple of minutes go by.

Pidge: ......yeah, i get it

Pidge: but i'm not going to give up hope

Pidge: they're alive out there. i just. know it

Pidge: and i'm not gonna rest until i find them

Lance: were with you pidge

Hunk: All the way.

Lance: and i know keith is too

Pidge: yeah

Pidge: i know

Pidge: thanks, guys

Lance: anytime bro

Hunk: Always!!

Chapter End Notes

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i was ALL SET to update this morning and then i ran down to the basement to grab something and found a lot of water that shouldn't've been there and, well. what can ya do. life, amirite??

gonna be picking up the pace after this (story-wise, not update-wise, probably) bc i rlly wanna get this thing done before nanowrimo. so if it starts to feel rushed... its bc im rushing. ᵏ( ᵍ ⁄ ) UserDefaults

anyway, back to keith. :)

In the morning Keith heads down to the Castle, on duty for what's certain to be an uneventful day. Hunk greets him warmly, and Bonnie gives him a wave, and Pidge tugs on his sleeve and nods to the hall outside the rec room, so he follows. They wait until the rest of yesterday's crew is out of earshot.

"Okay," she says lowly, "I know you've... moved on."

So this is about their argument the other day. He nods stiffly, feeling that particular void in his chest again that comes when he thinks of Shiro.

"I just need you to understand I'm not giving up yet," she says. "If you think they're dead, fine, but I don't. If you don't want to look anymore, I understand."

"Pidge," he says, quick and low, cutting off her rant before she raises her voice. "I'm sorry, really. I shouldn't have said that and I still want to help."

She looks a little doubtful. He misses when they could talk about the mission clinically, like it hadn't happened to the people they loved. Now the truth is all tangled up with feelings.

"Seriously," he adds. "I still want to know what happened. And if you're right..." He shrugs. "It'll have been worth it, right?"

"Yeah," she says slowly. "Thanks, Keith."

He blinks, surprised at that. "Uh, anytime."

And then she grins. "Glad to hear you enjoyed your second date with Lance," she says, and runs off down the hall while he chokes.

Well, at least things are back to normal.

He wonders, too, if telling her that he and Lance might be going on a follow-up to the Kerberos mission would've made things better or worse. It's not like it could get her hopes up much more than they are already. Still, there's no point in saying anything until they're sure.
He makes a mental note to mention to Lance that a second Kerberos mission would be an opportunity to launch the drone—if a rather moot one, given they’d be out there themselves.

It does turn out to be an uneventful day, otherwise—and an uneventful week and a half. They work on the drone. Another kaiju is defeated. Keith goes back to the junkyard, alone this time. Lance keeps touching him—on the shoulder or arm or back, the way he does with everyone else, apparently encouraged by the hand-holding incident. Keith lets it happen.

Approximately two months after Keith's arrival at the Garrison—and he can't believe it's only been two—there's another attack, the tenth since his arrival. He and the rest gather around the Garrison TVs as usual. They watch as Blue and Yellow trudge out into the bay.

The kaiju breaches. Yellow steps forward as Blue starts shooting.

They don't get the audio feed live, but it's not a particularly complicated battle. It starts out much like Keith's last fight; Yellow plays tank, and Blue shoots from afar, wearing the kaiju down.

He doesn't realize something is wrong until Lance's breath catches beside him, and Joey mutters an "oh no" behind them. He sees it moments later; Yellow is off-balance, and the kaiju's blows start pushing her back. Black emerges from the hangar and starts making her way out, but Yellow is being pushed out to sea...

A bout of blaster fire pulls the kaiju's attention from Yellow to Blue. Blue retreats quickly, but now the kaiju is following her. Black is going as fast as she can.

"Who's in Blue?" someone mutters nervously.

"Natasha," comes the answer.

The kaiju isn't fast, but neither is Blue, not least because she's still firing and walking backwards. Black is almost there, but not quite. Lance's hand squeezes Keith's.

“Hurry up, Bonnie,” someone whispers.

It happens so fast Keith almost misses it. The kaiju catches up to Blue; Blue fires directly into its face; the kaiju smashes its fist into Blue's face in retaliation; Black crashes bodily into the kaiju and shoves it away.

Keith lets out a breath; for a moment, it looks like Black made it in time. But Lance's hand clenches around his own and Blue is frozen, not moving at all...

"It hit her cockpit," Hui whispers, and no one breathes.

Black pushes the kaiju away, beating it down, finishing it off. Yellow is coming in as fast as she can. Helicopters buzz around Blue like flies.

A single helicopter veers off toward the Castle at top speed. Black takes the kaiju down.

The helicopters scatter. Black and Yellow start dragging Blue back towards the hangar.

Lance's phone buzzes in his pocket, so close Keith can feel it, and Lance finally lets go of his hand to pull it out. Keith looks over, watches Lance's eyes intent on the screen.

"Alive," he says after a moment, and everyone breathes again. "But in critical condition."

"Do they... will she...?" Denise whispers. Lance frowns at his phone for a minute, and Keith sees
message after message pop up, though he can't read them from his angle.

"If... if she pulls through," he says quietly, "she'll be unable to return. She's unconscious right now..." He bites his lip as the messages scroll on. "They think she can make it. Uncertain unless she survives the night..."

His words are greeted with silence. Keith isn't sure what to feel; he knows being a paladin is dangerous. He didn't know Natasha very well. Empathy isn't his strong suit.

But if it'd been Lance in Blue... the thought is sickening.

Lance is still staring down at his phone, though the incoming messages have stopped and the screen gone dark. The TV has gone dark, too, and the audience is silently shuffling away. Keith hesitantly puts a hand on Lance's back and wishes, not for the first time, he could better offer comfort to his friends.

Lance doesn't look any less nervous, but he offers Keith a little, half-hearted smile, a reassurance. He's breathing steadily and the motion beneath Keith's hand makes him feel a little better, too. Hunk slides down from the couch to sit on the floor on Lance's other side and his hand joins Keith's on Lance's back.

"She'll make it, Lance," he says reassuringly. "She's almost as stubborn as you."

Lance lets out a sort of breathy snort at that, but he nods. "She'll make it," he agrees.

Early morning is quiet. Keith is on duty, and so are Lance, Pidge, and Hunk; they head down to the subway in silence with Terry. There's no mention of the "dream team" this time.

Lance heads down to the Castle's hospital almost immediately, and the rest wait in the rec room. Nobody speaks.

The tension breaks when Lance returns some twenty minutes later, grinning widely. "She's stable!" he exclaims, and Hunk lets out a little cheer in response. Pidge and Terry immediately pull out their phones to text people back at the Garrison, and Lance slumps onto the sofa next to Keith and lets out a long, deep breath.

"I hate when we lose people," he says, voice casual, but even Keith can tell it means more to him than he's letting on. Hunk is nodding in agreement.

They've been here from the beginning, Keith realizes, so they've seen every loss—and he remembers the many taped-over labels on the lockers downstairs...

Eventually Pidge and Terry and Lance go put their phones in their bunks where they're supposed to be (Keith and Hunk left theirs at the Garrison), and Hunk turns on the TV, and the mood steadily lightens.

"Blue's gonna be out of commission for a few weeks," Lance announces after a trip down to the hangar. "So, nobody get in trouble without me, okay?"

"If we get in trouble it'll have to be without you," Pidge points out.

"So I'm saying, don't." He flops onto the sofa sideways and drops a foot in Keith's lap, who shoves it away. "Maybe they'll let me take a crack at Black for a bit."
"Wouldn't you do better in Green? Last I checked you like to keep your distance," Keith points out. He shoves Lance's foot out of his lap again.

"Yyyeah, except Green has a full team right now, and Black only has the three." Lance gives up using Keith as a footrest and lets his leg hang off the sofa. "Next time you're on for Black you should swap with me."

"By the time I'm on for Black, Blue will probably be fixed."

"Assuming no further disruptions and that the newest Blue member's arrival is on schedule," Pidge says, adjusting her glasses, "when Keith's next on for Black, you'll be on for Blue. Also, Keith, how would you even know Lance's preferences."

"The new sims."

"Yeah, those." Lance nudges Keith's shin with his foot. "And for the record, I did just fine without projectiles."

Keith snorts. "Did you? I seem to remember you suggesting I self-destruct so you could flee, the first time."

"We still won!"

"We didn't," Hunk points out.

"Shh!"

"Nrrgh. When am I gonna get to try out the new sims!" Pidge throws her hands up. "Terry! Have you tried them?"

"...Yes," Terry admits. "With Bonnie."

"See? When's it my turn?" Pidge exclaims. And then she turns to Lance with an expression of horror. "Don't—"

"When's it my turn," Lance begins to sing, grinning widely. His voice isn't bad, actually, but Keith has his suspicions about what he's singing.

"Don't sing—"

"Wouldn't I love—"

"This is a Disney-free zone—"

"Love to explore that shore up above!"

"LANCE."

"Out of the sea!" Lance winks at Keith. "Wish I could be! Part of that world!"

"If you're going to sing, at least start from the beginning," Hunk says calmly, but he's clearly biting back a smile, and Pidge splutters. Lance gasps delightedly and sits up. Terry sighs and turns up the TV volume.

Keith decides it's a good time to get in some sim practice and books it; he laughs only once he's out of earshot.
a bit of a short chapter, and the next one will be too, but they really kinda had to be split up. youll see why soon enough ;)

**OH ALMOST FORGOT** i drew a scene from a couple chapters ago, check it out

roster
tumblr

thanks for 1k hits!!! love u all <3
time to buckle in and suspend ur disbelief, kiddos~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The couple of weeks after are quiet. They're approaching completion on the drone—mostly waiting on a few parts Hunk tracked down somehow, at this point. They get frequent updates on Natasha's recovery, too; she'll live, but her injuries will prevent her from piloting ever again. Speculation on her replacement begins.

Meanwhile, Keith is suffering.

It starts when Pidge points out he's been spending a lot of time with Lance.

"Voluntarily," she adds, when he opens his mouth to argue. Then her face twists from smirk to mild concern when he furrows his brows in confusion. "You hang out with him a lot on purpose." She squints. "Did you... not notice?"

And, okay, he's not terribly self-aware, and he's been told as much enough times to believe it. So, no, he hadn't noticed; but now that's she's pointed it out he keeps thinking about it. And so what if he and Lance are always sitting to eat, or heading off to the gym to spar, or arguing over which movie to watch, together?

Lance is just so bright. He can't help that he's drawn to him like a moth to flame.

The kicker comes when he attempts to articulate this feeling to Hunk, and gets the same sort of vaguely concerned expression that Pidge had had in response.

"I... that's a crush, Keith. You have a crush on Lance," Hunk says, and Keith shakes his head.

"That can't be it," he says, and yeah it's been a pretty long time since he had a crush but he's pretty sure it was never like this, and he's pretty sure he'd recognized it for what it was.

It has been a solid four-and-then-some years since he had to think about his feelings, though. And he's already trying to avoid thinking about Shiro, so he doesn't want to examine those feelings too closely.

So he's suffering, until one morning lying in bed he decides it's definitely not a crush. It's just friendship. It could become a crush, and he can see it, like a cliff he's been walking along the edge of—but he can pull back, step away from the cliff.

And then he goes downstairs to breakfast, and he's a little later than usual so Lance is already there and awake. And he looks up at him with a grin and a wave, and Keith is stony-faced, concentrating on staying on the... friendship plateau thing.

And Lance seems amused at his expression when he sits, and cheerily he says, "Good morning, sunshine." And Keith looks up at that bright smile and trips and falls off the damn cliff.
"Morning," he mumbles, burying his face in his arms and begging any deity that might be listening, why?

"Rough night?"

"Mrgh." Can't Lance leave him alone for, like, two minutes, Keith is in crisis here.

Pidge comes to the rescue, fortunately, followed by Hunk, and Keith can't quite look Lance in the eye again yet but he just needs a little time and it'll be fine, he can get over this.

So it figures they both get a text from Allura around midmorning: "We are ready for you."

"It's happening!" Lance squeaks in Keith's ear as he tugs him towards the stairs with a half-assed excuse to Pidge and Hunk, but all Keith can think is, why now?

And it doesn’t help Lance has his wrist in his grasp, all the way down to the basement and onto the subway. He doesn’t let go until Keith slumps onto a seat at random, and Lance sits down the row to lean against the wall and put his feet up across the next three seats. Keith’s wrist tingles with the loss and he tries to rub it surreptitiously.

“D’you think this is it?” Lance asks.

“...Yeah?” Keith says, raising an eyebrow. “She kind of said so?” And here’s a welcome distraction: arguing.

“Yeah, but like, it doesn’t necessarily mean anything’s gonna happen today. Maybe she just wants us to sign a bunch of waivers.”

“Waivers mean something’s gonna happen.”

“Would it kill you to speculate, a little bit, Keith,” Lance says with a frown, nudging him with his foot. “You’re killing my vibes.”

“...Killing your vibes?”

He shrugs.

“You’re being kind of pessimistic,” Keith points out. “Anything that happens today will at least give us a hint.”

Lance huffs. “We know the Garrison’s hiding things, so don’t blame me for worrying,” he says lowly, in case the conductor is listening. “Anything could happen.”

Keith shrugs. “I trust my instincts, and my instincts say this isn’t that big a deal.”

“Your instincts also said they were just testing those new simulators.”

“Well, they were testing the simulators. They were just testing us too.”

Lance nudges him with his foot again. “You’re so stubborn.”

Keith grabs his foot. “Lance, whatever’s gonna happen is gonna happen. We can sit here and worry about it but that’s not gonna change anything.” And he lets go of Lance’s foot and wipes his hand on his uniform.

“You just like to improvise. I like to have a plan, okay?”
“Okay. Our plan is we walk in, talk to Allura, sign your waivers or whatever, and find out what’s going on.” The subway slows. “How’s that?”

“Insufficient contingencies,” Lance mutters, but he sits up as they pull into the Castle.

“The con-whatevers are on you,” Keith says, and heads upstairs.

As usual, there’s an intern waiting to lead them, this time back to the conference room. Allura is already there.

"I've already asked you to stay quiet about this," she says after greeting them, "but this project is highly classified, and I still can't tell you anything until you've signed half a dozen papers and practically sworn in blood not to tell a soul about it."

"Okay, now I'm worried," says Lance.

"You weren't before?"

"Shut up, Keith."

Allura sighs. "Remember that you were chosen for this because you work well together. I am operating under the assumption that you do not actually dislike each other—if you do, now is the time to say so."

"Oh, no, no," Lance says, slinging an arm around Keith's shoulders. He tenses at the contact. "We're best friends! Right, Keith?"

"Uh, yeah." Well, dislike certainly isn't the problem.

Allura looks doubtful. "...Right. Well, get signing, and then we can get started." She gestures to the table, where two stacks of paper and two pens are waiting. Then she leaves. Keith and Lance exchange a look.

“Waivers. What’d I tell you,” Lance says, and Keith heaves a sigh and shrugs him off to go sit and start reading.

Sometime later, Lance huffs, sounding affronted. "No liability in case of brain damage or loss of brain functions, including but not limited to," he says, and takes a breath, "memory, language and speech centers, muscle control, unconscious functions, and ability to dream?" He puts his pen down and looks over at Keith. "What the hell are they gonna do to us?"

Keith shrugs. "I'm pretty sure all of that is covered on the stuff we had to sign to be here."

"Yeah, but like, are we undergoing brain surgery or what?"

"I kind of doubt it."

"Everything in here is...." Lance taps the forms. "It's all head stuff."

Keith flips back through the forms he's barely read. "Guess so, yeah."

"Why aren't you more worried about this?" Lance’s voice cracks.

"What am I supposed to do about it now? We're already here and we won't find out what this is about unless we play along." He shrugs. "Besides, if something happens to us, we are replaceable. The world's not gonna end if we're braindead."
And he’s kind of excited about actually being involved in something that’s “highly classified”, but Lance doesn’t need to know that.

"You, sir," Lance says, picking up his pen and pointing it at Keith, "are already messed up in the head." But he resumes reading the forms, and so does Keith.

Allura returns shortly and flips through their completed forms. Her face is guarded as she nods. "Alright, boys," she says, "follow me."

She leads them down the hall to Lab A, and Keith and Lance exchange glances again. This lab is drastically different from the one next door. It's full of people in white coats, white equipment, two white chairs in the center of the room—nearly everything is white, actually, except for two black helmet-shaped bundles of wires dangling above the chairs.

Lance's hand latches onto Keith's wrist. "Oh my god, Keith, they're going to suck our brains out," he says. Keith just gives him a look, but a tight coil of worry is finally twisting inside him.

"Not exactly," Allura says, which isn't very reassuring. "I'll leave Dr. Arus to explain it to you."

At that, a man steps forward, a little short and portly but with a stern face. He gestures to the chairs, and Keith and Lance step forward; Lance's hand leaves Keith's wrist reluctantly.

"Welcome, gentlemen," says Dr. Arus, "to the Voltron Initiative."

Chapter End Notes

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roster
tumblr
"Voltron," Lance says. "That sounds like something out of an 80's cartoon." He's kind of hovering in front of his chair, eyeing the helmet thing suspiciously. Keith, frankly, isn't too interested in sitting down either.

"Please, sit, and I will explain," says Dr. Arus. "We won't begin until you are ready."

Keith perches on the edge of the seat, shooting surreptitious glances upwards. The wires above don't move. Lance copies him, frowning.

"Ok, sitting, what's up."

"Well. The Voltron Initiative is a foray into the deepest capabilities of the human brain," Dr. Arus begins, and that's about all he says that Keith registers as actual words. It's mostly scientific jargon; he catches phrases like "faster reaction times in battle" and "improved teamwork" and "semi-telepathic results" and he's... pretty sure they're not undergoing brain surgery, at least. He kind of mostly watches Lance and hopes he can translate, because he at least looks like he's following along.

"So," Lance says slowly when Dr. Arus finishes. "You want to turn us into psychics?"

"...Not exactly."

"Keith, that's what you got out of that, right? Psychics?"

"Uh." Thanks a lot, Lance. "I guess? Most of that didn't even sound like English to me, honestly."

Allura sighs. Dr. Arus frowns.

"In simpler terms," he says sternly, "you can better kill kaiju if you know what your partner will do before he does it."

"Then what's all this for?" Keith says, gesturing upwards. "Because Lance is pretty predictable already."

"Hey!"

"That's a compliment."

"Didn't sound like one."

"Well, it was one."

Dr. Arus looks askance at Allura. She shrugs.

"This will make both of you more predictable to each other," he says.

"Are we gonna be in each other's heads, though?" Lance asks nervously, and Keith's heart is stuck in his throat suddenly.

"You are likely to experience limited telepathy."
Keith glances over at Lance and meets his eyes. Why did this have to happen now? After this morning? Lance looks back to Dr. Arus and gives what to Keith is obviously a falsely confident chuckle.

"Well!" he says. "I'm down if Keith is. I guess."

Keith does not appreciate this decision being dumped on him.

But if Lance is willing, he can't just back out. He'd never hear the end of it. "Yeah, okay?"

As long as it's limited. He can probably handle that.

"Then we can begin," Dr. Arus says, and Keith already kind of regrets this. Too late now. He slides back onto his chair fully and kind of eyes the wiry helmet thing above; it starts to lower, and he jumps. A glance over at Lance shows he looks just as apprehensive.

A technician puts the helmet on his head, and it kind of prickles against his scalp, and "apprehensive" may be an understatement.

"Hey, Keith, if this kills us or something," Lance begins.

"Lance, we're not—"

"It's been an honor."

Keith looks over. Lance is watching him earnestly. The wires around his head make him look ridiculous but it makes Keith feel better somehow.

"You too," he says simply, and looks back to Dr. Arus.

"Are you ready?" the doctor asks. Allura, beside him, looks a little nervous.

"Yeah," says Lance.

"Yep," says Keith.

Dr. Arus nods to one side of the room, where a woman in a white coat is standing next to a massive lever on the wall, like something out of a horror movie—oh god—she pulls the lever—

Keith can't see, can't hear, can't feel, can't move. He's hit by something, like a sudden wall of water, the breaking of a dam, and he's tossed along with the flood before he realizes what it is.

It's Lance.

His mind is overflowing with thoughts and feelings and memories not his own. Everything Lance is—he can see it, feel it, know it.

He begins to struggle against the flow, gathering himself, clawing his way to the surface.

Lance's mind is cold—no, cool, pleasant like a dip in the ocean on a hot summer day. Keith basks in it as he pulls the scattered parts of himself back together, regains some of his lucidity. It's pretty obvious, actually, what comes from himself and what doesn't, he and Lance are so different, like fire and water—he wonders idly if Lance feels like he's caught in a forest fire but lets the thought get swept away in the tide.
He starts to become aware of Lance as a presence, too, a prickle in the back of his mind. He can feel Lance separating himself as well, pulling away—but they're still together, completely open to each other, and Lance's feelings and memories are flickering by him. Scenes, thoughts; high school prom, a deep and lingering loss, a childhood tire swing. Bits and pieces of a life not his own.

Limited his ass, this is far beyond “semi-telepathic”.

He's a little startled to see himself—it takes him a moment to realize it’s Lance’s memory of the kaiju fight they saw from the ruins, because it seems Lance didn't watch any of it. Was he really staring at him the whole time? And the feeling with it, it's...

...Pining?

Well you are too, as of this morning!

Keith's eyes snap open and he barely even registers the embarrassment as he turns his head to look at Lance—because he was sure he heard Lance's voice, but it didn't seem like it was aloud.

Lance looks back at him, startled. He looks startled, but he feels it too.

I didn't say it. Lance's voice is clear as day but his lips definitely aren't moving. I thought it...

"Shit. Fuck," Keith says aloud, while Lance jerks up from his chair and screams, "TELEPATHY!"

The scientists are bustling around, mostly ignoring them, though several startle at the noise—but Dr. Arus has his eyebrows raised, and Allura is grinning.

"Amazing!" she exclaims. "Think of the applications this could have beyond this project!"

"The connection shouldn't last once they have removed the caps," Dr. Arus says. "But yes, we may be able to find other ways to use this...."

Thank god he won't have to be in Lance's head all the time. He can feel every reaction Lance is having to their words—mostly alarm, which he can relate to, frankly. It's easier to handle with his eyes open, his external senses working, at least.

"Hey, my head is a great place to be," Lance says aloud.

Keith sighs.

"And for the record, yes, it did feel like a forest fire. I'm gonna have mental burn scars from this."

"You almost drowned me," Keith retorts.

"Whatever." And... yeah, I'm scared too. I'm glad you're here with me, though.

Keith can't help but be a little touched by that. Both are too distracted to tease the other for it right now, though, because it's all still a lot to handle and Allura is approaching.

"Forest fire?" she questions. Dr. Arus is scribbling rapidly on a clipboard.

"Yeah, like when the connection was made or whatever." Lance waves a hand at the wires on his head—Keith has turned away and can't see it, but he can feel it, which is bizarre. His arm twitches sympathetically.

"Felt like a flood to me," Keith says. Because you're so cold, Lance.
Well, you're hot. Wait.

Keith smirks, and Lance groans.

"Are you, at this time, conversing telepathically?" Dr. Arus asks.

"It's kind of hard not to," Keith says. "We just keep reacting to each other's thoughts."

Oh man, I can totally text you memes without even texting you now.

Keith's head snaps around. "Don't you dare."

Welcome to my twisted mind. Lance sends the phrase directly into Keith's head with just enough lingering traces of context for Keith to get the joke. Now it's his turn to groan, while Lance snickers.

"I'd appreciate it if you two would take this seriously," Allura says sternly, and both sober, suitably reprimanded.

"Sorry ma'am," Lance says quickly. "This is just... really distracting."

Finally, something they agree on.

"I'm sure we'll get used to it, with time," Keith says.

"At least, I hope so," he adds, at the same time as Lance says, "Let's hope so." The ends of their sentences match up perfectly, and then Keith is scowling and Lance is laughing and Allura looks like she regrets her entire existence. Dr. Arus keeps scribbling at top speed.

“I have some questions for you two,” he says after a moment, glancing up from his clipboard, and Allura excuses herself.

He starts with the sort of things you ask someone that might be concussed (between reminding them to pay attention). Keith is amused at Lance’s familiarity with the process.

You should consider yourself lucky you haven’t been concussed yet! I’ve been here way longer than you, you know.

Yes, Keith knows.

The questions shortly become tests when Dr. Arus shows Keith a playing card.

“Lance,” he says. “What card is it?”

Seven of hearts, thinks Keith.

“Seven of hearts,” says Lance.

He repeats the process with Lance and the two of clubs. Keith can practically see the card through Lance’s eyes; it’s an easy test to pass. So are the next ones, as Dr. Arus gives them phrases and sentences to pass between them, like a game of telepathic telephone.

Apparently satisfied—and he should be, Keith thinks, given they’ve passed every test with ease—Dr. Arus gives Lance a blind maze and Keith the solution. Then Keith a ring puzzle and Lance the solution. They walk each other through them easily.

I kinda think they had low expectations for this, Lance notes. Keith agrees.
"That's all for now," Dr. Arus says, finally, and a technician returns the lever to its original position. Keith's mind is suddenly very quiet and... spacious, and the relief is almost overwhelming. He looks over and Lance gives him an exhausted grin as technicians tug the wires off their heads.

"You may go. And remember, tell no one," the doctor adds, as Keith gets up from his chair. His limbs are oddly shaky, and painful, like he's been running for miles—he feels as tired as if he had. He stumbles toward the door and Lance follows, and then once they're out they both kind of collapse against the wall and against each other. Lance gives a breathless little giggle against Keith's shoulder.

"That... happened," he says.

Keith feels sort of bubbly, in a happy way but kind of also in a drank-too-much-champagne way. He's not really sure what he's so pleased about.

"Yeah," he mumbles.

Lance stiffens and the bubbliness becomes alarm. Keith realizes a moment later that Lance hadn't said that out loud, those emotions weren't his, they're still connected. He and Lance stagger apart and just... stare.

Keith can still hear the rush of Lance's thoughts, but it's muted now, like a distant river—he's only getting hints of things. Until Lance very deliberately thinks at him, we need to go back and tell Dr. Arus, maybe he can fix this.

Keith's aversion to the idea of fixing this is abrupt and surprising to them both. He frowns and tries to figure out why, but he’s still dazed and Lance's confusion isn't helping. He closes his eyes, tries to focus.

There's a lot of thoughts spinning through his mind but foremost is a kaiju's fist smashing into Blue's cockpit, on a little screen in the Garrison.

Lance seems to get it before Keith does, because he mutters a soft "oh, shit," and steps back in and wraps his arms around Keith's shoulders. Feelings wash over him—reassurance, understanding, affection.

We don't have to tell him, Lance thinks, and Keith is still kind of confused but he loops his arms around Lance's waist and thinks back, thank you.

His face is kind of squished against Lance's shoulder, so after a moment he pulls back just a bit and looks up, leaving his arms where they are. Lance is looking down the hallway, eyes focused on something distant, but Keith can see the shadows of painful memories passing through his mind.

"You're not gonna lose me," Lance whispers, and oh. Keith gets it.

Eventually it occurs to him they should probably stop standing here in the hallway and head back to the Garrison, and Lance lets go and agrees reluctantly. They start down towards the elevators without saying anything.

They don't need to.

Chapter End Notes
ive been sitting on this for a month whew

casual reminder that... yeah this isnt strictly a pacrim au! its the drift but its also not the
drift ya see

i hope? it isnt too confusing when theyre "talking" in their heads?? if youre confused
about any of it lemme know i can find another way to show it or something

thanks for the comments on the previous chapter the screaming was v gratifying lol

roster
tumblr
On the subway, Keith thinks of that morning, of the fight spent at the bakery, and wonders if there's something they ought to talk about.

Lance's immediate reaction is surprise, excitement—but it quickly becomes dread, and Keith looks over at Lance, confused and... a little hurt, actually. Lance shakes his head.

*No, let's just... not talk about that now,* he thinks.

Which is weird because now Keith *knows* Lance has been pining for him for *months*, and now it's *mutual*, dammit, so what gives?

*We're not talking about it.*

Keith gives Lance a look. Lance is annoyed.

Didn't you *want* this?

*Yes. No. We are NOT talking about this!*

And, okay, yes, Keith should probably let it go at this point. But he's confused because it just seems so... straightforward.

*Well, there's a lot you don't understand.* But now Lance feels as guilty as he does angry, and Keith regrets pressing him.

Sorry.

*Whatever. It's fine.*

It's obvious to them both that it's not. But Keith figures they'll have enough trouble maintaining the status quo as it is without arguing constantly in their heads, so he lets it go. That thought gets a flicker of amusement from Lance, at least.

*Thanks.*

Keith spends the rest of the time staring out the window trying not to think about anything. He catches echoes of Lance pondering what to have for lunch, but Lance isn't thinking *at* him so it doesn't really come across as words—more a vague impression of indecision coupled with hunger.

Bruce gives them an odd look when they finally step off the train at the Garrison, probably because they'd been unusually quiet. Keith gets a twinge of nervousness thinking of trying to act normally around their friends, and Lance picks up on it and gets nervous too; that in turn makes Keith *more* nervous, which makes Lance *more* nervous, and it rebounds between them until Keith has to stop partway up the stairs to lean against the wall and remind himself to breathe.

"This was a terrible idea," he manages to gasp aloud. The sound of his own voice grounds him a little.

"No, no, we can do this," Lance says, and a trickle of determination breaks through the fear. "We
just have to... be distracted from each other. Block each other out.”

Easier said than done, Keith thinks.

"Say it out loud," Lance chides.

"Easier said than done," Keith says.

"Well, neither of us is the sort to back down from a challenge," Lance says, forcing a grin—which cheers Keith up, making him snort, which makes Lance grin naturally. At least this feelings-amplification-thing goes both ways.

"We can do this," Lance says again, more confidently, and starts back up the stairs. Keith follows.

Keith has never been one for crowds, but it's definitely easier to distract himself from Lance when there are a lot of people around. It takes a lot of concentration, though, to ignore the foreign thoughts and feelings seeping into his mind without ignoring the body next to him—to ignore Lance without actually ignoring Lance.

*We can do this*, Lance thinks at him, which kind of helps but also doesn't help at all.

It's well past the lunchtime peak as they grab food, self-consciously chatting aloud. The conversation sounds disjointed even to Keith but neither think they're under particular scrutiny right now.

Until Pidge and Hunk find them.

"You guys look like death," Pidge says, plopping onto the bench next to Keith. He starts. Lance starts in turn.

"What did they do to you down at the Castle?" Hunk asks, actually looking concerned, unlike Pidge, who's grinning. "Did Shay make you fight a new monster?"

"Oh, yeah," Lance says, totally unconvincingly.

If Hunk is unconvinced he plays along, though. "What was it this time? Mothra? King Ghidorah? Something original?"

Lance manages a grin. "I don't want to spoil the surprise."

Nice one.

*Thanks.*

"So it was a difficult one, huh?" Pidge leans across the table, pouting. "And I still haven't been."

"I'm sure they'll call you down soon!" Hunk says. Keith doubts it. Lance kicks him under the table.

They had candidates picked out before I got here, Keith thinks. If they haven't called her down yet, they were never planning to.

*Don't ruin her dreams!*

I didn't say anything!

"Guys?" Hunk says, and Keith realizes he's been staring blankly at his lunch. He fumbles with his
fork and shoves some food into his mouth to excuse himself from saying anything.

"What?" Lance says innocently.

"Man, you guys are super out of it," says Pidge. "Go take a nap or something, seriously. We don't have to do anything today; I mean, you guys don't. Hunk and I can handle it."

She's talking about the drone. Probably just as well they're kind of useless on that front.

"We're not useless!" Lance blurts, then immediately covers his mouth and thinks, oops. Keith closes his eyes and waits for death.

"I mean, for the drone you kind of are, now that we have almost everything we need," Pidge says slowly. "But not in general, no?"

"Sorry, I'm tired," Lance says, but it's mostly towards Keith.

"It's fine!" says Hunk. "Seriously, you guys can just rest for now. We'll text if we need anything."

"Okay," says Keith, and turns his focus back to lunch.

"A nap sounds good, actually," Lance says, and proceeds to waggle his eyebrows at Keith, despite that he isn't looking. He knows, though, and frowns when Lance suggests, we could cuddle!

Keith silently reminds him of the conversation they had on the train. Lance goes quiet, and gets up and leaves the table without a word.

You can't walk away from a telepathic conversation, Lance.

Lance doesn't respond.

"Lance?" Hunk calls after him. Lance waves a hand and keeps walking, until he disappears into the stairwell.

"Okay, what's the deal?" Pidge asks, nudging Keith. "What happened? What's up with him?"

"How should I know?" Keith says. "I'm not in his head."

Har, har.

"Yeah, but you guys were together all morning. Something must've happened to make him pissy. What about a nap would set him off? Seriously."

"He's probably just tired? You guys know him better than me," he points out.

Not anymore, but.

Stop thinking so much, it's loud and I actually wanna sleep.

"He's probably just tired," Keith repeats lamely. Pidge still looks skeptical, but Hunk nods, and now Keith is done with his lunch and can make his own escape. "I think I'm gonna nap too. See you guys later."

He leaves before they can stop him, not that he thinks they would. Lance is still awake and tense when Keith gets up to his own cubicle and lies down.
This is gonna suck if we both have to be asleep to like, sleep.

That's your problem, Keith thinks, and closes his eyes. Despite Lance's vague complaints and annoyance, he's asleep within minutes.

Lance is still asleep when Keith wakes up an hour later, groggy and disoriented. He's a little disappointed that he can tell; he'd half-thought the whole thing had been a weird dream.

He can feel Lance waking up, too, and wonders if his "loud thoughts" woke him up. Well, that's gonna suck for Lance.

Lance manages to send him a thought that's just a wordless grumble, still half asleep. Heh.

Keith sits up, finally. He doesn't really feel any better and his body still aches more than it should, but at least he can regroup and focus on ignoring Lance now that the initial shock has worn off. Or maybe it hasn't, because by all rights he should be freaking out about this telepathy thing.

Already did that, Lance sleepily reminds him.

It is a little alarming, though, that the results of the project so far have clearly been more... intense than Dr. Arus and Allura had anticipated. Either that, or they lied about their predictions so they'd agree to participate. Keith isn't sure which is more likely.

Dunno, Lance offers.

Very helpful, thank you, Lance.

You're welcome.

They definitely have to figure out how to handle this, though, and fast. Lance is on duty tomorrow and Keith the day after, and he's not sure either of them are up for fighting just now.

There was an attack yesterday so we've got some time, Lance points out. I have every intention of lying in my bunk doing fuck all tomorrow.

As good a plan as any, Keith supposes. Maybe their connection is affected by distance.

Guess we'll find out. Not much of a distance, though.

Further than we've been so far, anyway.

Yeah, so we'll find out.

Keith finally, reluctantly gets out of bed. He can't hide from the rest of the Garrison forever, after all; Lance declares he's going to hide for a little longer.

Everything is... weirdly normal downstairs. There's no reason it shouldn't be, of course, but Keith kind of feels like his whole world's been flipped upside down. Like everything should be different.

...Or maybe he's just still groggy from his nap. Lance is amused at that but Keith does his best to ignore him, to focus on what's outside of his head. It's easier when Lance isn't physically there.

He kind of wants to go to the gym but Hunk intercepts him to watch the feeds from yesterday's fight, and he doesn't really have to be able to speak coherently for that, so he goes along willingly. Lance becomes background noise. Even when he actually comes and joins them in the flesh, with
something to focus on it's not too hard to stay out of his head.

I think we can do this, he thinks to Lance as the fight ends and restarts from a different view.

Yeah dude, Lance responds, neither looking at the other. We got this.

Chapter End Notes

what, did you think this would be easy? :D

again, if their mental conversations are confusing at all, please let me know!!

roster

Tumblr
Hearing each other's thoughts turns out to be the easy part of telepathy. Lance, already an empathetic person, struggles to determine which feelings are his and which aren't; Keith on the other hand, isn't used to feeling as much or as strongly, constantly, as Lance does. Emotions from one are variously trampled or amplified by the other, and both are prone to outbursts at first; Keith snaps at Hunk over something inconsequential one day, and Lance bursts into frustrated tears at lunch the next.

*It's like going through puberty all over again,* Lance complains, and Keith sullenly agrees.

To top it all off, Keith keeps catching Lance thinking about him (and vice-versa), but Lance still refuses to talk about it. It frustrates them both.

Both of their shifts pass without serious incident, at least, in part because both make themselves scarce for the day.

The day after Keith's shift they're called down to Lab A again. With the caps on, their connection is far more intense; both agree that in comparison the milder telepathy they've been experiencing the past few days is a relief. Dr. Arus asks them more questions and gives them more puzzles, but they still aren't sent to the new sims.

*They probably want us to get used to this first,* Lance decides. Keith nods while Dr. Arus scribbles; the upshot of being covered in wires is that they don't have to pretend they're not in each other's heads.

They're both relieved to walk out of the lab again, though, just as exhausted as the first time. Lance goes straight up to his cubicle for a nap and Keith passes out on a sofa. They're still connected.

Not quite a week after the Voltron Initiative began, the final parts for the drone arrive, and the group gathers in the abandoned building.

"I think we can have it finished in a week or two," Hunk says. "Mostly because we can't just waltz in here whenever, I mean, I could probably finish it in a couple days if hiding it wasn't a problem. But it is, so..."

"So we gotta go as slow as molasses uphill in January," Pidge mutters, chin resting on her hand as she leans across the table. "It's too bad you guys can't build the thing, since you've got the perfect excuse to go out all the time."

Keith, focusing so hard on not focusing on Lance's thoughts, almost doesn't notice she's talking to him and Lance. "Huh?" he says intelligently. Lance starts. Pidge sighs.

"Okay, and I mean this in the nicest way possible," she says, "but you two are even more useless than usual."

*Gee, I wonder why,* Lance thinks sourly.

Say something before she gets suspicious!

"Oh, yeah, uh, neither of us slept very well last night," Lance says.
There's a long pause. Keith drops his head into his hands.

 Seriously?

 "Um," says Hunk.

 *Oops.* "I didn't mean it like that!" Lance adds quickly, but the damage is done.

 Great job, Lance.

 *I didn't see you helping, ass.*

 "I dunno what's up with *Lance,*" Keith says, "but I'm just out of it today."

 *You know perfectly well what's up with me.*

 Not the time!

 "You've been out of it for several days now," Pidge says. "Both of you." She straightens up and crosses her arms. "I think, as your friends, we have a right to know what's going on?" Hunk nods.

 How can they act normal after this? Keith wonders if maybe they *should* have talked to Dr. Arus, gotten this fixed somehow, except...

 *We could tell them that we can't tell them?*

 But this is Pidge we're talking about. Do you really think she'll accept that?

 *We wouldn't be lying, at least.*

 And then we'd have to explain why we can't explain, without letting anything slip.

 *Ugh, yeah, I guess you're right.*

 "Um, guys?" Hunk says. "That was a question. Are you gonna... answer...? Maybe?"

 Keith and Lance both start guiltily. The other two are watching them suspiciously.

 "No," Lance blurts. "We're... not. Sorry." And then he flees, leaving Keith to deal with the fallout, thanks a lot. Hunk and Pidge turn to look at him.

 "I... don't want to talk about it?" he offers.

 Pidge narrows her eyes, but Hunk nods understandingly.

 "Did you guys have some kind of fight?" he asks.

 Well, there's a plausible excuse, and it's not even entirely inaccurate. "Uh... something like that."

 *If you tell them, I swear...*

 I won't! Geez.

 "Well, keep your personal drama out of your professional life," Pidge says.

 "We're... off duty? Hiding from the Garrison in an abandoned building while secretly building a drone?"
"He's got a point," says Hunk.

"But if you can't get your shit together here," Pidge says pointedly, "how do you expect to when you're on duty together tomorrow? And what if there's an attack and you have to fight together?"

“She’s got a point.”

...They are due.

Shit, Lance thinks.

"It won't get in the way," Keith says, and he's actually reasonably sure that's true. "Besides, I'm on for Black, so we probably won't get sent out together anyway." At least, from the memories he's seen in Lance's head, Black usually doesn't accompany Blue except as backup for Yellow. So they should be fine.

_Wouldn't put it past Allura to send us out, though. All things considered._

She doesn't know we're telepathic outside the lab.

Still.

"And if you do?" Pidge asks, and Keith has to take half a second just to remember what he said.

"We'll do fine," he says. "We were able to fight together even back when he hated me. It won't be a problem."

Hunk and Pidge exchange a look.

"I hope so," Hunk says.

_They know perfectly well I didn't actually hate you, you know._

I've seen your text rant sessions in your memories. I know.

At least Lance has the sense to be a little embarrassed at that. He stops eavesdropping, anyway.

"It'll be fine," Keith repeats, and tugs a box of parts towards him to start unpacking it. Pidge and Hunk seem to accept that the conversation is over—except he keep catches them watching him.

Back at the Garrison, Lance gets absorbed in a movie, and their connection is about as peaceful as it has been since it began.

---

When the alarm goes off the next day, shortly after breakfast down at the Castle, Keith can't help but groan.

"Tired of this already?" Rex jokes as they stream out of the lounge. Keith just grunts in response.

"I need Blue and..." Allura's voice hesitates over the speaker. "Black, with Green on standby."

_I TOLD YOU._

Ugh.

Keith picks up the pace; Black is furthest from the lounge, if closest to the hangar doors. He can sort of distantly mentally hear Lance demanding over Blue's comm why Allura picked them.
"Just changing things up a bit!" she replies. Oh, she's definitely testing them.

*Totally. Also, if Green's on standby, she probably wants you to keep the kaiju pinned down,* Lance thinks as Keith barrels into Black and drops with a huff into the pilot's chair. *You're not there so much to just take hits, so you'd better give as good as you get!*

I have fought kaiju before, Lance, he thinks back without any real heat. He's focused on following Blue out of the hangar.

"Kaiju approaching at twelve o'clock," Allura tells them, and wow, Keith kind of feels like he's actually missed fighting real kaiju.

*Tell me about it.*

He scans the horizon, waiting for the telltale ripple. Lance is focused, too. Like this, when both are in sync, concentrating on the same thing—their connection is easiest to handle.

"ETA one minute," says Allura. "Black, try to keep your distance as much as possible. Keep it pinned down. Blue, fire upon breach."

"Roger," they say in perfect unison.

*Told you,* Lance adds.

Yes, you did, congrats.

"I have visual," Lance says, and Keith echoes it moments later. They automatically shift positions, giving each other room to fight. Keith doesn't need to look to know where Lance is, a ways behind him and to the side.

The kaiju breaches, and Blue fires. Black shifts forward. She's got nothing truly long range, just a mild sort of taser that doesn't extend very far; she's meant for melee.

Lance wordlessly suggests a strategy. Keith irritatedly responds that he knows, and readies Black's knife.

"Going in," he says aloud for Allura's benefit, a little belatedly, and sidesteps Blue's blaster fire to jump in. He gets in a few slashes and backs off quickly. The kaiju half turns to him but is quickly distracted by Blue again.

He ducks in again, stabs, uses his taser to keep the roaring kaiju off him as he backs off. Blue keeps firing.

"You two are quiet today," Allura comments, and a small jolt of alarm runs through them both.

*Oops,* Lance thinks.

"Too much time in the new sims together?" Keith offers.

"I've done this like, a million times," Lance adds.

"You don't need excuses," Allura says, bemused. "I certainly don't miss your bickering."

*Well, we fucked that up.* "Uh, okay."

"Lance, watch where you're shooting," Keith says, as a couple shots go wide, almost hitting him. He
goes in again.

*Shit, sorry. "You watch where you're stabbing!"

It's fine, just pay attention. "I can't exactly stab you from here."

*Hey let's keep this up, get her off our backs. "I wouldn't put it past you to manage!"

...Good plan. "It's basic physics, Lance!" He ducks out again, shifting around to chase the weakening kaiju back into position. It screeches.

Why, thank you. *"You're basic physics, Keith!"

Allura sighs heavily.

*Victory. Lance's thoughts are smug.

"Sorry, ma'am," Keith mumbles. He's all but laughing internally.

The kaiju falls shortly. After Godzilla and The Kraken, the real thing almost seems too easy. Lance has a vague thought about rankings—one he quickly suppresses—but Keith pulls Black back a bit to give him a clear shot.

Go ahead, he thinks.

*Uh, thanks. Blue fires, and the kaiju dies.

"Good work," Allura says, and they thank her in unison. Idly, Keith wonders why Lance still cares about rankings at all—but now that he's been in his head, he has an inkling.

Yeah, can we put off discussing my self-esteem issues till later? Thanks.

Sorry.

Keith turns his focus back to bringing Black in.

"I'll need you two to stick around tomorrow, by the way," Allura adds as they dock. Keith feels Lance sigh internally.

"Yes, ma'am," they both say, again in unison. Still in sync, apparently.

*We're attached at the brain, buddy. Duh.

They are, and yet there's so many things they can't talk about.

They don't discuss Lance's self-esteem issues later.

Chapter End Notes

:\)

  *roster
  *tumblr
(btw DID YALL KNOW one of my tags made it onto the ao3tagoftheday tumblr, can u believe)
Dr. Arus doesn't ask them anything new. Still trying to get them used to telepathy, Keith thinks, and Lance agrees. They're already kinda used to it, though; even the intensity of it when they're in the lab is becoming familiar.

Natasha's replacement is due to arrive the next day, and the event is greeted with a lot of excitement among the paladins; Lance assures him that yes, it was like this when Keith arrived, too. Natasha herself is still in the hospital, has been for three weeks—Lance goes down to visit her after they get out of the lab, and though Keith makes an effort not to eavesdrop, he's not surprised to note that all the doctors and nurses know Lance already. Natasha is doing well.

*By the way, Coran will ask you to show the newbie around tomorrow*, Lance tells him on his way back to the Garrison. *So don't make yourself scarce.*

That it's because he's the previous newbie goes unsaid. Another exchange of responsibility, he thinks, just like shift change at the Castle.

*A rite of passage*, Lance offers. *Pidge was the newbie before you, you know.*

He didn't know, somehow.

I know now, he thinks.

It's early afternoon when the replacement arrives. She's tall and definitely a bottle-blonde, and Keith is lounging at a table in the cafeteria, just waiting for Coran to call for him. Lance is over in the tech corner, very obviously trying to watch her through Keith's eyes instead of the movie playing in front of him.

Just introduce yourself after the tour, Keith thinks at him, annoyed. She'll already know who you are.

*You can't just walk up to someone like that! Look at her, she's practically a supermodel!*

He doesn't have a great view from here right now, but he supposes. It's kind of lost on him though.

She's a fellow paladin, *and* she's on your team. You're going to have to interact with her sooner or later.

*I just don't want to fuck it up.*

Keith thinks back to *his* introduction to Lance and snorts.

*Our situation is entirely different, thank you very much, Keith.*

"Keith!" Coran calls, and he jumps up, attention diverted from responding. Lance quiets instantly.
"Right here," Keith says, stepping out behind them.

"There we are!" Coran exclaims, turning quickly. "Give her the tour, would you?"

"Sure." Keith jams his hands in his pockets and looks up at the new girl—she's significantly taller than he is, maybe even as tall as Shay. "Hey. I'm Keith."

"Nyma. It's so nice to meet you!" she says sweetly, extending a hand to shake.

He reluctantly pulls his own out of his pocket to do so. There's a flicker of something from Lance—admiration? Interest? Ew.

"Oh, such a firm grip!" Nyma says, and he lets go quickly. "To be expected of a legendary paladin, I suppose!"

Keith frowns. "Legendary?"

"Yes! Everyone knows you're a natural, the best Paladin to come out of the Academy. The instructors talk about you all the time." She leans down, smiling widely. "It is such a pleasure to meet you!"

"...Thanks?" Keith is so out of his depth here. "Uh, let's... do the tour..." He gestures awkwardly.

Lance is simultaneously amused and jealous. Keith tells him to shut up.

"Have fun!" Coran says, and returns to his desk while Keith silently begs him not to leave. Unfortunately, the only one who can hear his thoughts is Lance.

*The Legendary Paladin, Keith, laid low by a pretty girl. Incredible.*

You know perfectly well her "prettiness" is wasted on me, Lance.

*I know, it's hilarious.*

He turns back to Nyma and nods for her to follow. She *slips a hand around his arm* as he walks away, and smiles brightly when he shoots her a confused look.

"Uh, this is the cafeteria..."

He tries to keep the tour brief, and tries to dislodge her hand without being rude about it, and fails on both accounts. She asks him a lot of questions and frequently makes him repeat his answers, and all the while her hand has a firm grip on his elbow. He's getting desperate by the time he leads her to the tech corner—where Lance is sitting, now physically watching them and actually shaking with suppressed laughter.

Lance, *help me*, he thinks, looking Lance straight in the eye. Nyma is marveling in his ear about the (seriously dismal) array of televisions and computers.

*Aw, does the damsel in distress need a rescue from his Prince Charming?*

*Yes, dammit, I am in distress. Help me, Prince Charming.*

Lance's eyes widen and he barely contains a giggle. *Oh, I'm going to remember you called me that,* he thinks gleefully. But he stands and approaches the pair, grinning widely.

"Why, hello! You must be our newest paladin," he says smoothly, taking Nyma's hand and actually kissing it. Keith feels kind of nauseous.
She giggles. "And you must be Lance?"

He mock gasps. "The lady knows my name! Might I have the pleasure of knowing yours?"

Keith thinks he's taking the "Prince Charming" thing a little far. Lance ignores him.

"Nyma," she says, and finally lets go of Keith's arm. "It's such an honor to meet you. They talk about you at the Academy almost as much as Keith!"

Lance's smile doesn't waver, but his mood drops instantly, and Keith is awash with dread.

Lance...

"Well, I never did go to the Academy," Lance says quickly. "I came here before it even existed."

"Oh, yes, I've heard!" Nyma is as cheerful as before, completely unaware of the tense atmosphere surrounding the two boys. "You're legendary as well, of course. I suppose most of the instructors just haven't met you firsthand." She leans in. "I look forward to seeing you in action."

And just like that Lance's mood jumps again, leaving Keith the only one worrying. "Well, we aren't due for an attack for a few days," he says, "but maybe I can give you a private show, eh?"

He waggles his eyebrows. Nyma giggles. Keith is overcome with a sudden desperate desire to get the hell out of there, so he edges away until he's clearly out of the conversation. Neither notices. Good, great. Fine.

He slumps onto the couch next to Hunk and kind of tries to hide behind his bulk. Lance is fully distracted by Nyma but Keith can still feel him chatting with her, flirting with her. Hunk looks kind of disappointed.

"I can't believe you just abandoned him like that," he whispers.

"I doubt he minds."

"Yeah, but..." Hunk glances over at the two of them. "I kind of thought... well, that you guys like each other?"

And just like that, any shred of good mood Keith had left is gone. He looks away.

"He's made it very clear he's not interested," he mutters. Which he knows, but is completely contradictory to what Hunk knows. Hunk is quiet for a moment—probably trying to reconcile Keith's words with all of Lance's. Lance had a lot of words.

"Maybe you misinterpreted?" he offers tentatively. Keith snorts.

"No, I definitely didn't." He slouches further down into the couch and stares at the TV like he's just that interested in the cooking channel. "You can ask him about it, in fact." That'll be a fun conversation to eavesdrop on. Bound to piss Lance off, though.

Lance doesn't hear or respond to that thought. He's thoroughly distracted with talking to Nyma.

"You know what?" Hunk says, putting a comforting hand on Keith's shoulder. "I will. Because I don't think I'm wrong about this."

"Good luck," Keith mumbles. And he stares at the TV and resolutely ignores Lance.
By dinnertime he's got a headache and three half-memorized recipes for quiche, and Lance is still talking to Nyma. He drags himself to dinner after Hunk, kind of grunts at Pidge when she asks him what's wrong, and picks at his food.

Lance shows up when he's halfway done eating with Nyma in tow and introduces her to the other two. Keith doesn't realize his fists are clenched until Hunk starts surreptitiously rubbing his back—and oh, he knows why this is bothering him so much, and he hates that he's being so petty about it but it's burning in his chest anyway.

He has no right to jealousy, Lance was never his.

Keith keeps the thought to himself but it's not like Lance is listening anyway.

He excuses himself shortly, muttering some excuse about being tired and being on duty tomorrow, and Lance does look at him and wonder but Keith pushes the thought away, doesn't respond. Lance is hurt. Keith thinks, good.

He mopes in the lounge for a while the next day until he gets tired of Hui shooting him sympathetic looks—and only he's obvious about it, Keith figures, because they've actually talked to each other. The Yellow and Green paladins on duty today are chatting quietly, but it's awkward somehow, like they know.

Well, it's true there were rumors about him and Lance, and Lance wasn't exactly surreptitious about flirting with Nyma last night.

Nyma's in the Castle right now, too, somewhere, getting a tour from today's Blue paladin. Keith gets himself down to the Red sim before he can run into her, and kills kaiju after kaiju after kaiju.

Lance is quiet. If he has any idea why Keith is ignoring him, blocking him out, he doesn't try to bring it up, just kind of tentatively prods at him every once in a while. Keith never responds.

In the morning Pidge grins at him but falters when he walks right by Lance without acknowledging him at all. Keith gets back to the Garrison just in time for Nyma's welcome party; he turns around and goes right back down the stairs, and spends the rest of the day walking through the ruined city.

Seriously, what's up? Lance thinks at him, once, exasperated. Keith doesn't answer.

Maybe he should. He thinks it ought to be obvious, though.

The next day Pidge insists he head out to work on the drone with her. As they head downstairs he gets a flicker of a thought from Lance—Hunk pulling him aside, asking to talk. Keith doesn't eavesdrop, but later he can feel when Lance's confusion becomes a mess of emotion—anger, guilt, fear, some kind of familiar pain that he can't put a name to right now.

He works quietly, does whatever Pidge asks. She watches him for a while until finally she sighs.

"Look, I know Hunk is talking to Lance right now," she says, "but I want to hear what happened from you."

"...Nothing happened," he says.

She gives him a look, and he relents.

"Nothing happened, and that's the problem," he says.
"Okay. And what did you want to happen?"

He frowns at the parts in his hands and doesn't answer.

"Keith, it's obvious you're attracted to each other." She puts her hands on her hips and looks at him sternly, kind of intimidating despite that she's a head shorter than he. "So if I had to guess... you guys found out it was mutual, but one of you—Lance, judging by the way you're brooding—decided he didn't want to be more than friends. Am I right?"

Why do his friends have to be so smart? Ugh.

"Yeah," he says after a moment.

"Okay, so, why? Why'd he turn you down?"

"He wouldn't say."

"Ah." The way Pidge says it, it's like she suddenly understands the whole situation. Keith wishes he could say the same. "Well, that was dumb, but I'm sure Hunk is talking sense into him right now." (Actually Lance is kind of panicking right now, so Keith kind of figures that's already happened.) "So at least you'll know and maybe we can get over all this weirdness?"

"Maybe." But judging by the way he was flirting with Nyma, probably not.

She squints at him. "He's not serious about Nyma, by the way. Probably."

What the hell, can Pidge see his thoughts too? "That's not very reassuring."

"Well, he flirts with all the newbies. It's his thing, apparently. Sooner or later they tell him to stop and he does, or so says Hunk."

"...I take it you were sooner."

"Within the first hour." She grins.

Keith considers it. "I'm pretty sure he didn't flirt with me," he points out.

"Eh, you were a special case. He was determined to hate you. Kind of ironic, actually."

Ironic, huh. But he's feeling somewhat calmer now, so when he feels Lance kind of mentally prodding at him again, he lets him in.

Can we talk? Lance asks, nervous and contrite. Mostly nervous.

Not now, Keith thinks. But soon.

Thanks.

Chapter End Notes

that went well

roster
tumblr (btw i use #tvi when i talk about the fic and i track #the voltron initiative)

(ps. i voted today GO VOTE KIDS)
Apart

Chapter Notes

how am i the lucky one, i do not deserve
to wait around forever when you were there first

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keith wakes up in the middle of the night for no good reason, or so he thinks until he realizes Lance
is awake and fretting. He's considering going back to sleep but Lance notices before he can.

Can we talk now? He's so anxious it's making Keith squirm.

Does it have to be now?

Please, I just want to... resolve this.

Keith gives an inward sigh. In person or like this?

Like this is fine.

Keith has the sense Lance doesn't want to face him, but he keeps the thought to himself.

Okay. Fine. Let's talk.

Naturally, both are silent for a while. Lance is the first to break it.

So... you're mad at me.

Is he? Keith thinks that's overstating it a little. He's annoyed, frustrated.

What did I do?

...Nyma?

I didn't do Nyma! Lance thinks with the mental equivalent of a splutter.

That's not what I meant!

Well what the hell did you mean?

This is going well. Keith muffles a groan into his pillow.

You were flirting with her right in front of me, he thinks, simultaneously ashamed and angry. Lance
reacts with confusion.

Why is that a problem? Keith, please, I'm trying here.

God, are you really going to make me say it?

Yes! You're blocking me out, buddy, I literally can't read your mind right now.
Keith takes a deep breath. You know exactly how I feel about you, he thinks.

There's a long pause. Lance is in turmoil.

...Yes, but... I still don't understand?

Keith's exasperation overflows, and Lance picks up on it, growing angry himself.

Seriously, I don't get why flirting is a problem! We're not together or anything! You have no right to be jealous about this!

You don't think that maybe, just maybe, flirting with someone in front of me was a little insensitive?

It's not like I was serious about her, geez.

There was every sign that you were, ass. You were spying on her through me through the whole tour!

You encouraged me to talk to her!

She's a paladin and you were being stupid. And then she kept flirting with me.

So you did notice.

I'm not that dense, Lance.

There's a moment of tense silence. Keith is lying facedown in his bed, breathing harshly into his pillow, eyes clenched shut.

Okay, it might be kind of presumptuous of me to say this, Lance thinks finally, significantly calmer, though there's still an edge to his thoughts, but I think I know you pretty well, and I kinda don't think Nyma is the real problem here?

Well I thought I knew you pretty well, but last I checked we're still just friends. If that.

You know how I feel about us, Keith.

No! I don't! Because you didn't want to talk about it!

And has it occurred to you that maybe there's a reason for that!?

No shit you have a reason! But how the hell am I supposed to understand without it!?

Oh my god, why can't you just accept that I don't want to date you?

Because I know you did want to date me, right up until I found out about it. Why can't you accept that that's bullshit?

You're seriously calling my feelings bullshit!?

Well, they are!

They're both pissed now, but Lance is having other feelings too—shame, sadness, fear. Keith is tired.

Next time we go down to the lab, he thinks, I want Dr. Arus to reverse this.

Suddenly Lance is alarmed. What? Why!?
Why do you think!?

*But you... we...* Lance struggles to gather his thoughts. *Keith, I know you kind of hate me right now and I'm still mad at you but if something ever happens... now that we've been connected, I don't think I could stand to not know if you're okay? Keith, please. I don't want to lose you.*

He's distraught. Keith stops smothering himself with his pillow and takes a deep breath, rolls onto his side, curls into a ball beneath his sheets.

I've already lost *you*, he thinks, and closes his mind to Lance again. He gets only faint echoes of panic, sadness, distress. Pain.

There's a light knock on his cubicle door shortly thereafter, but it's locked and he has no intention of letting Lance in.

"I know you're awake in there," Lance whispers. "Keith, please."

Keith doesn't answer. He doesn't fall asleep for a long time.

---

Apparently, someone finding Lance passed out in the hallway outside Keith's cubicle in the morning causes a huge scandal. Keith isn't really in on the gossip circles but even he notices when most of the Garrison's inhabitants are shooting him dirty looks.

It seems everyone is on *Lance's* side, though what the hell they know of the story is beyond him. Definitely not nearly all of it.

He pretty much avoids everyone for the day, especially Lance—physically and mentally. Until lunchtime, when Coran calls him over as he's walking by the front desk.

"Keith, my boy! I have a question for you," he says.

This can't be good. "...What is it?"

Coran gestures him forward, so Keith hesitantly leans over the desk. Coran tugs his moustache and glances around before leaning in too.

"I've been asked to keep an eye out for *suspicious activity*, you see," he says lowly. "Now, I'm sure whatever it is you and your friends are doing going out all the time is perfectly innocent and within the Garrison's rules! But you might want to tone it down a bit, lest your superiors get the wrong impression, hm?"

Keith can hardly breathe. "Did... did you tell anyone?" he manages to gasp.

"No, no! As I said, I hardly think your actions are suspicious. Just thought I'd give you a warning!" Coran winks.

"Well, thanks," Keith says. He feels cold. "I'll be sure to, uh. Tone it down."

"Certainly," says Coran, and Keith stumbles away to slump onto a couch. He gets a hint of concern from Lance and, for the moment, stops blocking him out.

*What is it? What's wrong? Did something happen?*

The Garrison might be onto us. Coran was asked to watch for suspicious activity.
A wave of shock washes over him and he can almost hear Lance dropping his fork in the cafeteria some ways behind him.

*Holy shit. Oh my god. We're fucked.*

Calm down, Keith thinks; he's almost caught his breath now and the urgency of telling the others is overtaking the shock.

Are you with Hunk and Pidge? Is there any staff around you? There's no telling who else is watching...

*Pidge is here but Hunk's on duty today. I can't check without being too obvious about it but I don't see any staff within hearing distance as long as we're quiet. He pauses. Are you coming over? Willing to be seen with me again?*

Keith stands stiffly. I'm still mad, he thinks, and you're still mad, but I'm calling a truce, okay?

*A truce for extenuating circumstances. Fine. Get over here and tell us before I freakin’ explode, okay?*

Fine. Keith makes his way over to the cafeteria and slips onto the bench next to Pidge; she gives him a disapproving look.

"Keith..." she begins.

"Yeah, I know, I'm an ass and I'm sorry," he interrupts lowly. "Look, the Garrison might be onto us."

She freezes. "What?"

"Coran just told me he's been told to watch out for suspicious activity," he says. "He warned me about it because he's noticed the four of us going out all the time."

Pidge clings white-knuckled to the edge of the table. Lance is doing a decent impression of being shocked, too, in part because he still is.

"Did he tell them?" he asks.

"No," says Keith. "At least, he said he didn't. I don't think he would've done that if he actually suspected us, but..."

"But someone's suspicious," Pidge finishes, voice barely above a whisper. "They know something's going on but they don't know it's *us*."

"Which begs the question; what *do* they know?" Lance says.

"Maybe... maybe they found out someone accessed their files." Keith glances at Pidge.

She shakes her head. "I covered my tracks, thanks. And the two of us would definitely be under suspicion, because one of the admins saw us on the stairs that night."

"You broke into an office!?"

"Shh!" Pidge waves a hand at Lance. "I don't see how they could know anything without knowing it's *us*, but if they're looking than we need to be careful anyway."
"We need to tell Hunk."

"I will tomorrow, when you two are on duty." She pauses. "You're not going to, like... murder each other in the lounge tomorrow, right?"

Keith and Lance exchange a look.

Well, are we? Lance asks silently, stiffly.

"We'll... sort this out," Keith says, looking down at his hands on the table. "Somehow."

I seriously hope so. I hate this.

You can say that aloud, you know.

"Let's hope so," Lance mumbles. He's also staring at the table.

Pidge sighs. "Not to imply that I have no faith in your abilities to solve whatever problem you're having," she says, "but am I gonna have to ask Terry to mediate?"

"No!" both say in unison.

"We can definitely do this on our own," Lance adds.

"If you say so," she says doubtfully. "Just, for me and Hunk's sake? Actually try." And she gets up and leaves them there alone. Keith determinedly looks anywhere but at Lance.

We really should try, Lance thinks.

I know. But that means talking about things you don't want to talk about.

That goes both ways.

I have no secrets from you, Lance.

Keith looks up and meets his eyes, tries to mentally impress this on him.

Not a single one.

Lance's eyes widen, then he looks away. His emotions are a mess and Keith doesn't really want to sort through them right now, so he gets up to head out of the cafeteria, focus on something else for a while.

Think about that, and we'll talk later.

There's an attack that day, and Blue is sent out, which means Nyma will be on the roster soon. It also means she won't be hanging out at the Castle while Keith and Lance are on duty tomorrow, which he counts as a blessing.

They don't discuss anything that day, because Lance claims he needs to "psych himself up" for it. They don't totally block each other out, though, so all day Keith can feel a low current of tension from Lance. Him "psyching himself up", presumably.

Keith himself is growing a little nervous, too. Last time they tried to talk it out they ended up fighting again, after all. And it's easy to just avoid Lance but it's not much fun.
We need to be rational about this, he thinks.

*That's on you too, Keith.*

The morning trip down to the Castle is awkward, to say the least. Keith and Lance try to keep their distance but no one particularly wants to get between them, leaving them sitting several seats apart on one side of the train while the rest crowd across the aisle. Lance is antsy. Keith is anxious.

Breakfast is quiet. As soon as it's done, though, he gets a hint of *intent* from Lance, who comes and stands in front of him, hands in pockets. Keith looks up.

"Now?"

Lance nods stiffly. As if on cue, the other paladins up and leave—Terry with a whispered "good luck!" and a thumbs up at Keith, at least someone's on his side—and the two are left in the lounge alone.

Chapter End Notes

* turns out telepathy can't solve deep-seated communication issues :)

*roster*

*tumblr*
Together

Chapter Notes

uhh so i wanted to finish this thing before nanowrimo and, well... that didnt happen. so im gonna be putting this fic on SEMI-HIATUS for november. ill still update once a week or so!!

(btw, terry uses they/them)

happy halloween!!

Lance sits carefully on the sofa, a respectable distance away. His face is unreadable but he's not any less nervous than before; there's a strong thread of determination though, and Keith actually begins to hope they might be able to resolve this.

"I guess I'll start," Lance says aloud, stretching out his long legs and frowning at his feet. "I still think you were overreacting about Nyma, and I'm hurt that you've been totally ignoring me for like, days."

"What, are we airing grievances?"

Lance shoots him an annoyed look. "We're talking about our feelings. It's your turn."

Keith sighs. "Fine. I'm hurt because you won't tell me why you don't want to date me. Nyma was just... rubbing salt in the wound."

Lance winces at the imagery—and the small surge of pain at the memory from Keith. "So that's why you were avoiding me? Because that's kind of petty."

"You didn't even understand why it bothered me!"

"You were overreacting!"

"Nyma's not even the real problem!"

Lance takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. "Okay, we're getting nowhere here. Breathe and start over."

"Fine," Keith says tightly, but he does force himself to take a breath before continuing, "Can you at least tell me why you won't tell me your reason? So maybe I can understand at least a little bit?"

Lance looks away. "It's... stupid, though."

"What is? The reason, or your reason for not telling me the reason?"

"...Both?"

Keith can feel Lance flinch from his exasperation. "Just tell me. We won't get anywhere otherwise."

Lance fidgets for a moment, bringing his knees up and propping his heels on the edge of the sofa.
His mind is closed off, mostly, but Keith can still tell he's fighting with himself.

"You'd think less of me," he finally whispers, and Keith is... confused.

"For... for your reason?"

Lance nods.

"That's..." Keith runs a hand through his hair and tries to find words. "...No?"

_Stunningly eloquent_, Lance thinks wryly. His face is buried in his knees.

"No, I mean... well, first of all, my opinion of you is at an all time low already," Keith says flatly, making Lance shoot up with a glare—but he holds up a hand before Lance can speak. "No, let me finish. I just... respect you? I don't like that you're keeping something from me that I really think I have the right to know, but otherwise... I don't think there's any plausible reason you could give that _would_ make me think less of you."

"Because you already think poorly of me."

Keith gives him a look. "Because I think _highly_ of you, idiot."

Lance looks away again. He doesn't believe it. Keith sighs.

"Are you still the top-ranking paladin, Lance?"

...Yes?

"And why do you think that is?"

"Because people always give me the kills because I'm the only one that cares about rankings."

"Do you _actually_ always get the kills, though?"

"...No..."

"And we both know it's more than kills that go into rankings."

"Where are you going with this?"

"So why are you top-ranking, Lance?"

A shiver of annoyance runs through them both. "Stop asking me questions!"

"So answer it! Why are you the top paladin here?"

"Because I've worked really fucking hard to be!"

"Okay! And why were you the first one to know that Natasha was okay!?"

Now Lance is staring at him, bewildered. "Because one of my friends at the hospital texted me?"

"And all those times you've had a good idea—" Keith mentally sends him a brief series of memories, little things, moments when Lance surprised him, when Lance understood what he was saying before he finished saying it "—why was that?"

"I have no idea!? Keith!?"
"Because you're clever," he says, "and you work hard, and you're good at what you do, and you can befriend fucking anyone. Tell me what part of that I'm not supposed to respect?"

Lance gapes at Keith for a solid minute.

"I-I... I..." he stutters. "I'm... annoying?"

"Again—if you were really annoying, you wouldn't be friends with literally everyone. Try again."

"I'm stubborn."

"Determined."

"Reckless."

"Brave."

"Fake. I'm fake. I... it's all an act, I'm just... I'm not even real."

I've been in your head, Lance. "You seem pretty real to me."

"This is... We've gotten off topic," Lance mumbles into his knees. His face is red and not out of view enough to hide it, but Keith can tell he's embarrassed either way.

"If you absolutely refuse to tell me why, fine," Keith says after a moment. "I'll live. You already knows it bothers me, and at this point I don't think I can make it any clearer that I like you." He pauses. "Unless this is also a self-esteem thing? Because I can tell you right now no one will think less of you for dating someone."

From the surge of guilt and doubt that floods his mind, he can tell he was right on the money.

"Seriously. You and I both know our feelings have never gotten in the way of being paladins. No one will be able to say it's a distraction, at least."

Lance buries his head further into his knees and doesn't respond.

"And if someone has an issue because we're both guys, they can go fuck themselves," Keith continues. "And if it's because it's me, again, they can go fuck themselves, and it'd be me they'd have the problem with anyway. And if someone gives you shit for any of it, I'll fight them," he says firmly.

Lance actually snorts at that, though he doesn't look up yet. He feels much calmer now, at least.

"So, in conclusion, I'm sorry," Keith finishes lamely.

Lance still doesn't look up, but his hand stretches out and pats around the sofa toward Keith until he takes it.

"Me too," Lance whispers.

They stay put for a while, just relaxing in each other's presence, enjoying their mutual connection now that they're no longer blocking each other out (well, now that Keith is no longer blocking Lance out). Silently Lance tells Keith he needs a little time, that it's not a no, just a probable future yes.

Keith tells him to take all the time he needs. He'll wait.
Terry pokes their head into the lounge a little while later to find them watching TV, and Keith gives them a thumbs up. They smile and return the gesture, and soon the rest of the paladins return, and they all hang out and joke around like the awkwardness that morning hadn't happened.

Keith catches the Yellow and Green paladins giving him looks out of the corner of his eye a couple times, but otherwise things are back to normal.

The next day they're called down to the lab again and are finally redirected to Lab B. Dr. Arus and Allura are both there—Shay is nowhere to be found. The middle of the room is taken up by a large rig, from which the familiar wiry caps hang.

"It's been about a week since we called you down last," Allura says. "I hope that it hasn't been so long that you can't adjust to being mentally linked again. It couldn't be helped, due to..." she waves her hand at the rig "...logistics."

"We'll be fine," Lance says with his signature smirk. Allura actually seems heartened by this.

"Then go ahead and get in the sims. We'll run a few baseline tests before we begin," she says, and goes over to the control panel. Keith slips into the familiar sim chair on one side, feeling Lance do the same on the other.

Finally, Lance thinks.

Technicians bring the caps over, set them up, turn them on. Keith braces himself against the incoming tide.

It's good we resolved everything yesterday, because this would've been really awkward, he thinks.

Or, it would've solved everything all at once.

Awkwardly.

Yeah.

"How are you two feeling?" Allura calls.

"Good," they respond in unison.

"Ready to kick some kaiju ass," Lance adds.

"We'll need to do the baseline first," Dr. Arus says.

The baseline tests are the usual: puzzles, questions, checking in on their mood (unusually high, apparently—Lance tells Dr. Arus they're just really excited to kill some kaiju and Allura chuckles). They do some tests with the sims on, too, mostly asking them to do different tasks simultaneously. It's a little harder than their last battle given their closer connection but operating a sim is basically muscle memory for them both at this point. At least the virtual mechas are finally no longer neon pink.

"You've both done excellently so far," Allura says finally, and Keith feels Lance practically glow at the praise. "I think it's time we pit you against a kaiju."

"Yesssss," Lance hisses. Keith can't help but grin—his enthusiasm is infectious, and triply so now that they're in each other's heads.

"Doctor?"
"Yes, we're all set," says Dr. Arus, and the sims reset.

"Kaiju coming in at 2 o'clock," Allura says, more lighthearted than she would be during a real fight—as far as Lance can tell, anyway, because Keith isn't sure he'd have noticed otherwise. But they turn their mechas in the right direction and keep an eye on the horizon.

"So are we getting any hints as to what we're facing?" Lance asks, thinking of Shay.

"Now, where would be the fun in that?" Allura says smoothly, and Lance groans, and Keith laughs. What did you expect?

_That maybe she'd take pity on us? I dunno man._

Allura? Take pity?

_Okay, fair point._

"I have visual," Keith announces after a moment, when the telltale ripple appears. Lance echoes him almost before he's done speaking.

_How do we wanna do this?_

Wait for breach? I dunno. The rockets have never done us much good.

_Third time's the charm?_

Might as well, then.

Keith pushes his mecha forward to intercept the speeding ripple. Lance backs up and goes wide.

"In an actual battle situation, you _would_ need to tell me what you're doing," Allura says.

"In an actual battle situation, you'd be telling us what to do," Lance calls back.

_"...Touché."_

Should probably tell her, though.

"We're doing like we always do," Lance adds. "Keith is gonna go punch the thing, and I'm gonna hide behind him."

No one responds, because the kaiju breaches, it and its couple dozen or so heads on long, thin necks. Keith balks only for a moment.

_Kill the spider for me, babe?_

In what fucking universe is this a _spider._

He approaches, shifting sideways quickly as Lance fires a rocket.

_Well, I'm not a kaiju nerd like you and Hunk!_

The rocket hits the kaiju, which squeals—and the graphics apparently have been updated, because a couple of its heads fall off, and twice as many take their place. Of course.

Lance, this is _obviously_ a hydra. No more rockets!
Why not?

Keith grits his teeth as he circles the kaiju, trying to avoid its many heads. It's a difficult task already.

Because it's a hydra? Cut one head off, two take its place?

*Okay smartass, how do you defeat it then?*

I don't remember! Keith grunts as a couple of the hydra's heads wrap their teeth around his mecha's arm. He punches it back.

*Well, search your memory!*

*You* search my memory!

There's a pause, as Keith continues to dance with the kaiju.

*Can I actually?*

Uh... you can try?

*Um, cool, okay.*

The feeling of Lance searching through his mind is a bizarre one, and Keith struggles to focus on fighting the hydra—it's all he can do to dodge the bites coming at him from every direction, let alone fight back. He's aware of what Lance is seeing but not paying much attention to it.

Allura clears her throat. "Penny for your thoughts, boys?"

Lance finds what he's looking for. "Uh, did these things have flamethrowers?"

Allura doesn't respond for a moment. One of the technicians snorts.

"No," she says finally. "No, I don't believe they do. But you do have rockets."

"That won't cauterize, apparently," says Keith. "Unless..."

*Unless we have super good timing.*

If we weren't connected—

*But we are.*

So we can. Ready?

"Ready," Lance says. Keith pulls out his mecha's knife.

"For what?" Allura asks.

"This," says Keith, and Lance launches a rocket. In one smooth motion Keith slices off several of the hydra's heads and jumps aside, just in time for the rocket to pass by and explode against the neck stumps before they regenerate. The kaiju squeals loudly.

Unfortunately, the blast takes off a couple of heads itself, too. They grow back twice again, though at least the stumps stay stumps.

Okay... we probably should have seen that coming, Keith thinks.
If we're careful about aim—

Yeah, but we'll run out of rockets—

We've got six left between us, can you cut off more heads at once?

Keith dodges around the flailing hydra. Its necks are thin but his knife is small.

Okay, new strategy—one rocket right after the other. Knock 'em and burn 'em.

I'll keep slicing too.

Lance launches his last two rockets, one after the other. Keith slices through every neck he can reach in one swipe and books it. The first rocket hits, cauterizing the stumps Keith left while its shrapnel severs more screeching heads; the second cauterizes the first's remains. Several heads regenerate but it's certainly less than it started with.

Meanwhile, Keith is hustling backwards as Lance rushes forwards, aiming to switch positions while the kaiju is distracted.

"I didn't think I'd ever have to ask the two of you to talk more," says Allura stiffly.


"It's so much faster to talk in our heads," Lance adds. And we don't look so much like we're winging it like this.

That's true.

Lance draws his knife as Keith sheathes his. I think if we keep up a constant barrage—

If we're not careful—

I know. Try three?

Three it is. Keith starts firing his rockets—one, two, three. Ahead of him Lance slices through a clump of heads and gets out of the way.

The volume of the kaiju's screeching decreases significantly. By the time the explosions and regrowth are over, it's left with four heads, writhing madly.

Think you can get four heads at once?

Of course I can. Lance is preemptively smug but Keith just grins and fires his last rocket. Lance slices through the hydra's last four necks, and the rocket explodes against them.

The kaiju's headless body shudders and falls into a literal sea of gore, and Keith stumbles against the wave of pride from Lance, grinning.

We did it!

Of course we did.

"That was certainly the quietest kaiju battle I've ever been privy to," Allura comments. "We'll have to work on that."
"Otherwise, the results were excellent," Dr. Arus says, as the sims reset and technicians come down to free them from the caps. "A few more rounds should get us some remarkable data..."

"But in the meantime? Rest, you two," Allura says, as they climb out of the sims to find her smiling. "You've earned it."

Chapter End Notes

(the battle from alluras perspective: here)

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IIIITS MONDAY hello all, i hope you didn't miss me too much :)
anyway, sorry, nyma. sorry, pidge. sorry, shiRO...

That evening Nyma meanders up to their table and asks, sweetly, "Can I sit with you guys?"
Everyone looks at each other. Nobody looks at Nyma. There's an awkward pause.
"Uh, you can sit wherever you want?" Hunk offers diplomatically.
Nyma smiles. "Okay!" And she slides onto the bench next to Keith, far too close. He grits his teeth and stares down his dinner. Pidge is snickering. Lance feels a little sour, a little uncertain, but mostly amused.
"I saw some of your recordings," she says into his ear. He cringes at the feel of her breath. "I was very impressed."
"Uh, thanks," he mutters, and stuffs a forkful of carrots into his mouth before he has to say anything else. He tries to surreptitiously scoot away from her and bumps elbows with Lance.
"Ooh, modest, are we?"

_Can I please tell her, oh my god._ Lance is practically bouncing in his seat.

Be my guest, Keith thinks.

_Yessss._ "Nyma, dear," Lance drawls aloud, "you're barking up the wrong tree."

Keith shoots him a look. _Just trust me_, Lance responds.

She blinks at him. "Pardon?"

And Lance drapes himself over Keith's shoulder to smirk at Nyma around his back. "He's gay."

Keith is biting back a grin, still staring at his dinner, but he can see through Lance that she's shocked. She recovers quickly, though.

"So you'd rather I flirt with you, hm?" she asks smoothly. Lance grins wider.

"Now that I know I'm your second choice? Not really," he says.

Through Lance's eyes, Keith can see Nyma's eyes widen in shock. She seems at a loss for a moment; then she frowns and gets up stiffly.

"Then I'll find someone who _does_ appreciate my company," she huffs, and leaves, taking her tray with her.
The group is silent for a moment. Then Hunk lets out a long breath, like he'd been holding it, and Pidge starts cackling. Keith bends over, Lance giggling in his ear, and shakes with silent laughter, nose inches from his dinner.

Thank you, he thinks, feeling that same sort of bubbly joy as when they first left Lab A, tired but closer than ever.

*She wasn't nearly as interesting as you, anyway.*

They fall back into routine over the next few days, and as word gets around that Lance and Keith have made up, people stop giving Keith dirty looks. Pidge tells them that at least half the Garrison is certain they’re dating now but he can't find it in him to be bothered by that anymore.

They wait a while before they head out to the hiding place again. Keith glances at Coran as they leave, who gives him a thumbs up and a wink.

*Coran's a good guy, he's got our backs,* Lance thinks at him.

Yes, but we should still be careful, Keith thinks back.

Fortunately, it's within a couple hours that day that Hunk declares the drone complete.

"We should test it in the actual ocean," he says, lifting it out of a plastic bin full of water, "but it's waterproof, and it's got a camera and a couple of sensors hooked up to the controls here. So now the problem is..."

"...Getting it out there," Pidge finishes. Everyone stares at the thing in Hunk's hands.

We're back at square one, Keith thinks.

*We're back at square one with a drone, though.*

"We can bring it down to that place I know, for now," Lance offers aloud. "Dunk it in the ocean, see what happens."

"You two go," Pidge says, nodding to Hunk. "Keith and I will brainstorm, I guess."

"Alright," Hunk says. "We can regroup later?"

"Tell us how it goes!" Lance says, winking at Keith. *Like I'm not gonna be eavesdropping the whole time, lol.*

He actually pronounces "lol" mentally. Keith tells him to get going already, nerd.

"Yeah, we will," says Pidge. "Go on, git." She waits until Lance and Hunk have left, then turns to Keith and sighs.

"I'll admit, I pretty much thought one of us would've had an idea by now," she says. "Unless you have and haven't mentioned?"

"Nope," he says. "I've got nothing." And the secret project turned out *not* to be a follow-up to Kerberos, so they've *really* got nothing.

*It still could be, just not anytime soon.*
"Unless we really do steal a helicopter, but... I'm not sure that's a good idea," he adds.

_Ya think!?_

"It's kind of moot anyway," Pidge says seriously, shrugging. "I don't think any of us can fly a helicopter, and unless we can somehow find a sympathetic pilot without blowing our cover, we'd have to kidnap someone and that's kind of crossing a line."

"...But stealing a helicopter is fine?"

_Seconded!?_

"Comparatively!" she says defensively. "And like I said, it's moot."

"I could probably fly a helicopter, actually," Keith says. "Maybe. I've been in sims."

She gapes at him. _When?_

"When Shiro was in the Air Force?"

"...You flew a helicopter sim _years_ ago, and you think that qualifies you to fly one for real?"

_I'm gonna have to side with Pidge, here, buddy._

Pay attention to your own damn task, Lance. "I was just bringing it up. I could do it in a pinch."

Pidge sighs and adjusts her glasses. "Let's maybe look into acquiring a boat instead. Depending on our options... well, hopefully the results will outweigh the consequences."

"Bare minimum, we all get kicked out," Keith says. There's a flicker of alarm from Lance, but it's quickly followed by determination.

"I doubt that'd be it. I think we need to have a plan to get the truth out, though," she says. "So they can't just... shut us up. And so people won't trust the Garrison unconditionally."

"They aren't going to 'shut us up' if I have anything to say about it," he says firmly. Lance, still half-listening, has a thought, and Keith sighs and adds, "Also, not to play devil's advocate here, but... we kind of need people to trust the Garrison, don't we? We're all that's standing between them and the kaiju. If they stop funding or something..."

She grimaces. "To a point. But they need to be held accountable anyway."

Lance and Hunk arrive at the hidden beach, then, and Keith is momentarily distracted by the view Lance sends him. Pidge apparently takes his silence as agreement, because she sits on the floor and pulls out her laptop, and pats the concrete next to her.

"Let's go over what we know," she says, "just like old times. I have some ideas for disseminating this stuff but we need to write up some kind of report or something so the public actually knows what it all means."

"Uh, right," Keith says, returning his focus to her. He sits and she hands him the tablet. If it weren't for the sunlight streaming in the broken windows and the tools and piles of discarded electronics and casing by the table, it really would be just like the meetings they'd held almost two months ago now.

_I still can't believe you guys seriously had a conspiracy club._
You're in the conspiracy club, Lance.

...Oh. Right.

Keith sighs inwardly and flips through the pdfs on the tablet. He comes across the "Protocol in Case of Kerberos Return" again and kind of glares at it for a moment; he's read over the thing half a dozen times by now, and what is there to say about it? Instructions to hide the evidence—it's pretty self-explanatory, and certainly damning, but it's not doing them any good now, none of this is.

"Any thoughts?" Pidge asks, eyeing him.

"Not really. Just reviewing."

He skims over the thing anyway, not really reading it anymore, just letting his eyes roam over the page—he already knows what it says. So he goes to swipe to the next PDF, but... something catches his eye, and he swipes back quickly, stares at one little spot on the screen. Reads it several times over.

This changes everything.

"Pidge," he says abruptly, shoving the tablet at her as the breath freezes in his lungs. "Pidge. Look at the date."

"The date? Why?" She takes the tablet from him. Her eyes widen.

"It's..."

"...before... before the mission," Pidge finishes in a whisper. "This was released to Garrison officials before the mission." She puts the tablet down.

"They were planning for the mission to be lost," Keith says hoarsely.

Pidge snatches her glasses off her face and flings them angrily against the ground, and Keith jumps. One of the lenses pops free and rolls a little ways away.

"Fuck," she hisses. "This is... I just thought... They knew! They knew and they sent them anyway!" She pushes her laptop roughly off her lap and stands, and kicks the table, dislodging a couple screwdrivers and making a pile of scraps cascade to the floor. The sound of it echoes hollowly through the dusty room.

"Pidge—"

"They sent my family to die on purpose."

Oh my god.

Keith starts. He'd been so focused he'd actually forgotten Lance might be listening. He quickly begs him not to distract him now, not when Pidge is on the verge of breakdown, and Lance agrees and goes quiet. Pidge is kicking at the table again and again, and Keith stands quickly, afraid she'll hurt herself; there's a heavy drill working its way to the edge of the table, dangerously close to her feet.

"How could they? How could they!?" she's repeating. She's sobbing.

"Pidge..." He tries to pull her away from the table, gently at first, then with more force when she resists. "Pidge. Katie. Come on."
She slumps, finally, and he pulls her close and tucks her under his chin and just... holds her. She sob against his chest.

"They'll pay for it," he tells her, quietly but firmly. A flicker of a thought from Lance starts him stroking her hair. "We'll make sure of it."

She stays there, quiet, for a while. Lance, meanwhile, is freaking out.

*How do I keep this quiet until we get back? Oh my god, what do we do? I'm gonna try and cut this short—Hunk's gotta know but I can't just tell him—they literally sent them on a suicide mission? Shiro, and Matt... oh my god.*

Lance...

*Not only did they know they'd die, but in case they didn't, they were gonna hide it? What the fuck? They literally sacrificed them?*

Lance, we're going to discuss this when you get back, don't jump to conclusions yet.

*How are you so calm about this!?*

Keith looks down at Pidge, who's still sniffling into his chest. He can feel the dampness through his shirt.

Well, someone has to be.

He's not as good at projecting his emotions as Lance, but he sends him calmness anyway, and Lance quiets a little and returns his focus to the drone and Hunk. His shock is still a quiet murmur in the back of Keith's head as Pidge finally pulls away with a final sniffle.

"You smell funny," she says lowly.

"Thanks," he responds flatly. "Do you know if Lance or Hunk brought their phones? Did you? We should call them back."

She shakes her head. "Let them finish with the drone first. No one's going to want to do that later."

"Okay." Keith is trying very hard not to think.

"Let's just..." Pidge sits shakily and pulls her laptop back into her lap, begins to check for damage. "Let's just keep... going over everything, for now. There might be... something else we missed."

"Right." He sits too, picks up the tablet, flips through the PDFs again. It's hard to focus on what's in front of his eyes when his mind is churning, though.

The Garrison sent Shiro away and didn't want him to return.

Keith puts down the tablet and drops his head into his hands, breathing deeply and trying not to break down. Pidge puts a hand on his knee.

There's a vague impression of *oh, there it is* from Lance, but what he sends is solidarity, affection.

*You can do this. We'll avenge them. Shiro, Matt, Dr. Holt. We'll get to the bottom of this.*

We will, Keith thinks. The Garrison will pay. One way or another.
"Thanks," he whispers aloud, as much to Lance as to Pidge. She pats his knee, and he looks up.

"We'll get through this," she whispers.

"I just... can’t think why they’d...?" he says. "They can't have been after information if they didn't want them to return, so why? Why send them at all?" He shakes his head, and her face hardens.

"I know how we can find out; we need to go right to the top," she says. "We need to break into Commander Sendak's office."

Chapter End Notes

see ya next week~!! ;)

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tumblr
"Holy shit," Hunk whispers, and that in itself is enough indication of how serious the secret they've stumbled upon is. Lance just stares at the PDF, brow furrowed, squinting like the numbers might change if he looks at them hard enough.

_I can't believe this_, he's thinking.

"We've been looking through the rest of the stuff while you guys were gone," Pidge says, sitting on the worktable with glasses intact once more. "But we haven't found anything else we missed, or... why."

"This might actually... I won't say it's *good* news," Keith says, as a thought occurs to him, "but they were planning for a situation in which they *did* survive..."

"So there's hope," Lance says, voice flat. He's not hopeful at all.

"I don't know about you but I can't be hopeful about this," Hunk says, gesturing at the tablet. "If they didn't want the mission to return, why send them at all? What was the point? They sure as heck weren't looking for the source!"

"That's the information we're missing," Pidge says grimly. "But I suspect the Garrison already knew where the source was—which makes all our time spent building the drone..."

She doesn't finish but everyone is quiet, understanding.

_We wasted our time..._

"Anyway," Pidge says after a moment, "we need to find out why, and for that we need to dig a little deeper than we have been."

"You're going to break into another office?" Lance asks—already knowing the answer, having heard it through Keith.

"Commander Sendak's," she confirms. "But not tonight or tomorrow night, because I can't do it alone and all three of you are on duty tomorrow. And not the night after because I'll be on duty. But after that..."

"Dude! You could get in serious trouble if you get caught!" Hunk squeaks. "Like, charged-with-treason kind of trouble!"

"Which is why I need you guys to keep lookout," she says patiently.

"You can't just, like... hack in remotely?"
"That'd be traceable, so no."

"Okay, well, it's gonna be dangerous. Just putting that out there."

"Yeah, but if we're going to get to the bottom of this then we need to know," Keith says, "and I don't know about you but I can't just go on like normal knowing the Garrison sent Shiro to die. Not without at least knowing why."

"I agree with Keith," says Lance ("Shocking," Pidge mutters). "Shiro was the best paladin we ever had, and Dr. Holt and Matt were doing research into the kaiju themselves—they'd have had a breakthrough by now, I bet. Why would the Garrison get rid of their best assets?"

You'd admit that Shiro was a better paladin than you?

Yes, Lance thinks, completely serious. He was my hero, dude.

Pidge's eyes narrow. "Did they continue Dad's research after... the mission?"

"Nope," says Hunk. "No one was qualified to do it." He pauses. "Well, that was the official excuse. They said they were searching for someone that could."

"What if..." Pidge frowns. "What if they sent them out—g-got rid of them—because they were their 'best assets'?"

"Why would they do that?"

"Self-sabotage?" says Lance. "That would put them on the kaiju's side, Pidge."

"I know, but why else would they purposefully send the best they had and not want them to return!" She gestures widely, knocking over a pile of discarded parts.

"Because anyone would expect them to send their best on what was, on the surface, an important mission? Everyone who knew about it knew it'd be dangerous."

Pidge sighs and lowers her arms. "I guess. They are very concerned with appearances."

"Pidge has a point, though," says Keith. "It's weird. I mean, there were other people they could've sent, right? They could've just said they didn't want to risk Shiro and the Holts out there."

"Lance and I were pretty new at the time but there were plenty of other good paladins," Hunk agrees. "It didn't have to be Shiro. And—no offense, Pidge—they didn't have to send both Holts? I mean, Matt would've been capable enough to take over for his dad, or do whatever needed doing on the mission. No one would've blinked an eye at that."

"I guess," says Lance. His thoughts are troubled.

I know you've been here almost since the beginning, Lance, Keith thinks.

But that doesn't mean they can't have had ulterior motives or whatever, I know. I just... don't want to believe this was completely malicious. The Garrison's been my home for years.

"Either way," Pidge is saying, "we need more information. We should meet at the usual place three nights from now, usual time, and plan our attack."

"Usual place meaning the basement," says Lance.
"Second floor," says Keith.

"Whatever."

"I... guess I'm in," Hunk says reluctantly.

"Yes, you are. We're gonna get to the bottom of this," Lance says.

Keith nods. "We will."

Hunk is antsy the next day at the Castle, but Keith and Lance mostly manage to act as normal—at least, Terry and Derek don’t seem to notice anything amiss. All day, though, Keith's mind is on the Garrison, and Kerberos, and Shiro; Lance is carried along on his train of thought with him, commenting now and again but mostly trying to be calming and supportive. Keith appreciates it.

The alarm goes off late in the evening, well past sunset. Keith groans inwardly and hopes Allura isn't interested in testing them again, because keeping a up verbal commentary on top of a mental one is exhausting and he's already tired, dammit.

"I need Green and Blue out, and Red on standby!"

Well, that's something.

_Gonna almost be weird fighting without you_, Lance thinks as Keith slows his pace.

Gonna be weird watching you fight without me, Keith counters. He slips into Red and settles into the chair as Lance makes his way out of the hangar.

_Ugh, I hate fighting in the dark_, Lance thinks. _Time to light it up, I guess_.

Well, aren't you a ray of sunshine.

_No, I'm your Prince Charming_.

He can feel Lance grinning. Keith has some regrets.

Was kind of hoping you'd forgotten about that.

_Not a chance, babe_.

Keith turns on his display for the show of it, but turns his focus inward. He'll be less of a distraction if he focuses entirely on Lance; besides, Lance's view, naturally, is much better.

"I have visual!" Derek calls, his voice weirdly doubled since Keith hears it through Lance's ears and his own.

Lance squints at the dark horizon. "I have visual," he echoes, as a floodlight sweeps across and incoming disturbance in the water.

"Green, pin it down," Allura calls. "Blue, wait for Green before firing."

"Roger," says Derek.

"Roger," says Lance, with a pout.

The kaiju breaches shortly. It bears a striking resemblance to a centipede, and Lance shudders. _Ew_.

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He shifts around as Green runs forward, glowing grappling hook at the ready.

"Firing," says Derek, and the hook shoots around the kaiju, hooking on and tangling in its many legs. The kaiju screeches. "Got it!"

"Blue!" Allura shouts.

"On it!" Lance responds, and starts firing. The kaiju writhes and pulls against Green's line, running back and forth at the end of its radius. Blue's blaster follows it easily, lighting up the bay.

Like shooting fish in a barrel, Lance thinks.

The kaiju tries a new tactic, trying to dive below the surface of the water again—Green braces herself and pulls back. The kaiju turns towards her instead, and the line goes slack.

"Woops," says Derek.

"I gotcha," says Lance, shooting quickly at the retreating monster. It slows, but struggles on.

"Green, get your blade out," Allura calls.

"Roger," Derek says, but there's an edge to his voice.

This'll be interesting, Derek hates melee.

Lance keeps shooting as the kaiju stumble over the grappling hook's line—Green draws her knife.

Fortunately for Derek, the kaiju doesn't quite make it there. It shudders and falls in front of Green, and goes still.

"Better make sure it's dead," Lance calls.

Green leans over and pokes it with her knife. "Oh, it's dead," Derek calls back, and starts untangling the line from the kaiju's many legs while a flock of helicopters helpfully aim their lights at it. Blue turns and starts heading back in, and Keith slowly comes back to himself.

"Didn't need you after all, Keith!" Lance calls teasingly.

"That kaiju was pretty pathetic," Keith says back in the same tone.

Nice job, he thinks.

Thanks. "Hey, now, it only looked it because we're good at our jobs, thanks."

"Oh really—"

"Will you two stop pretending you hate each other?" Allura interrupts with a sharper tone than Keith has ever heard from her. "The Voltron Initiative is being declassified next week."

Keith freezes halfway up from his seat. Blue stops halfway through the hangar door. A ripple of shock rebounds between them.

"What?" Lance asks finally, strangled. "Why?"

Allura sighs. "Come up to the control room once you get in and I'll tell you."

Keith slowly straightens up. Blue resumes entering the hangar.
“And remember what you two represent,” Allura adds, before her comm clicks off.

*What the hell does she mean by that.*

The future of mechas, I guess?

*Innovation 'n' shit, woo.*

“What’s the Voltron Initiative?” Derek asks after a moment.

“You'll find out next week,” Keith and Lance say simultaneously, heavily. Keith meanders out of Red, mind definitely elsewhere.

“Oh...” he faintly hears Derek say through the comm behind him.

God, why the hell did she choose *us* for this?

*Hey, we're poster boys. Gotta have a pretty face. Faces.*

And then the moment we open our mouths the illusion is ruined.

*Speak for yourself, hon.*

Speaking for myself is exactly the problem.

*You know what I meant.*

Keith pauses outside Blue's terminal to wait as Lance docks. It occurs to him that if they declassify the Initiative... they're probably going to start doing this to other paladins.

*And then others will know about the telepathy thing.*

That won't go over well—but it's more than that.

*What'll happen to the other pairs, I know.*

Lance emerges from Blue and stops in front of Keith. He looks haunted.

*It was hard enough for us to adjust,* he thinks.

And if they pair up others that don't get along as well as we do...

Neither want to finish the thought. Instead, Lance looks up the hallway toward the control room, where Allura is undoubtedly waiting.

*We need to tell Allura.*

We need to tell Allura.

The moment they enter the control room Allura is shooing them back out and into the elevators. She shakes her head, lips pursed, at every attempt at conversation, until she's led them all the way down to the familiar conference room in the basement.

"Have a seat,” she says, slumping into a chair herself. She looks exhausted, and Keith and Lance exchange a worried look.
"Um," Lance says tentatively. "There's something we need to tell you."

"It's related," Keith adds when Allura raises an eyebrow.

"Fine, but make it quick," she says.

"Well, we're, uh..." Lance waves his hands vaguely.

"Telepathic," Keith interrupts. "Ever since the first time. It never went away."

"It's less intense, though!" Lance adds. Allura's eyes have grown wide. "We can block each other out and stuff, like this. But we're still..."

"...in each other's heads," Keith finishes.

Allura's brows lower. "And why on Earth did you not mention this sooner?"

They exchange a panicked look.

*Shit, how can we possibly explain?*

Uh... "Personal... reasons?"

*That's a terrible reason.*

It's the truth, though!

She sighs and rubs her forehead. "You should get in trouble for that, this could seriously skew the data—but I have other things to worry about right now and... perhaps it's for the best. Any other secrets you've kept from me?"

"No, no," Lance says quickly. "We only brought it up because we thought that if any more paladins join the Initiative—"

"—if they don't get along like we do—"

"—it could, like, seriously mess them up? I mean it's one thing to see everything in someone's head every few days—"

"—and another for it to be constant."

She stares at them for a long moment, then closes her eyes and shakes her head. "The more I think about it, the more I think I should have suspected... Well, I appreciate your concern for your fellow paladins, but I'm afraid it's moot. There won't be any after you."

Keith lets out a breath. "Okay."

"But why?" asks Lance.

"I was getting to that," Allura says. "The project isn't just being declassified, it's being discontinued."

"...And... why?"

She sighs. "Because the Garrison found out."

Confusion bounces between them. Keith grips the edge of the table, leaning forward, a sick feeling churning in his gut that spreads quickly to Lance.
"What," says Keith.

"Isn't the Castle part of the Garrison?" asks Lance.

"Not exactly," she says. "It was my father's private project initially. But he was unable to fund it indefinitely, so we were forced to turn to the government for help. The Garrison and the Academy are a military branch."

They both need a moment to process that. A thought occurs to Keith, and Lance picks it up.

"Why was the Initiative private from the Garrison to begin with?"

Allura sighs again. "How can I begin to explain? They hate progress, simply." She clenches her fists against the table and Keith and Lance exchange a look of surprise. "We have pitched a number of projects to them, not to mention further missions to find the source—but they have rejected every one out of hand. As if they don't want us to be free of the kaiju at all! This threat is a drain on the world's resources, you understand." She sits down heavily. "So we started it without notifying them, using my own personal funds and donations from within the research team."

...Should we tell her?

Not yet.

"Everyone involved was sworn to secrecy. We found the mole but he's being protected by the Garrison so there's nothing we can do—and now that we're under intense scrutiny, we can't simply continue without their knowing." She slumps a little. "So, that's it. Our only hope of a breakthrough is gone."

Lance gets up and goes and puts a hand on Allura's shoulder. He's feeling a little more sympathetic than worried right now—Keith, on the other hand, is kind of withering in his seat, thoughts churning. If the Garrison knows...

"Are you in trouble for it?" Lance is asking.

"No, but only because they badly need me here," she says quietly.

"Are we?"

"No. You didn't know the project wasn't affiliated with the Garrison." She takes a breath. "But—they did offer us a deal that I suspect was meant to punish you two as well."

"What was it?"

"We'd be allowed to finish an aspect of the project you were not yet privy to—if, once it was done, we were to send you on a follow-up to the Kerberos mission."

Chapter End Notes

roster
tumblr
Kerberos. Kerberos. Keith's blood runs cold; Lance freezes, one hand still on Allura's shoulder.

We need to tell her now, Keith thinks.

In a sec. "You weren't planning to send us already?"

"No. Even if it weren't for the fact that only the Garrison has the resources to organize such a mission—it'd be nearly impossible to hide."

We need to tell her!

Okay, okay!

"Allura," Lance says quietly. "Can they hear anything we say here?"

"No." She takes a deep, shuddering breath. "I'm sure of that."

"Then, you should know, the Garrison is..." Lance searches for words.

Keith finds them. "A bunch of liars and fakes. They fabricated or hid almost everything you know about the Kerberos mission—they didn't even send it for the reasons they claim."

"We aren't completely sure why yet—"

"—But it's possibly they were actively trying to get rid of Shiro and the Holts," Keith says. "We found a document with instructions to keep it secret if any of the members of the mission returned."

"It was dated before they even left. So they intended right from the start for them not to return, as far as we can tell."

Allura gapes.

"This is... but why?" she says eventually. "What else did you find?"

"We don't know why yet," Keith says, voice low, "but we're going to find out."

"We don't know much else—we had theories but once we found out about that document most of them were kind of irrelevant," Lance says. "Their cover-up was really extensive."

"If what you're saying is true," Allura says slowly, "then by offering that deal, by sending you on a second Kerberos mission—they were trying to get rid of both of you." She stands and starts pacing across the front of the room. "I feared when we first joined with the Garrison that they would take advantage of us and keep secrets from us but I... would never have anticipated something like this." She stops and looks at them sharply. "We must devise a plan to keep you safe."

She's right, Keith thinks, we might be in danger.

Shit. "Did you agree to the deal?" Lance asks in alarm.
"No; I said I would consult with you first."

Lance opens his mouth, about to reject the idea—but Keith quickly interrupts a mental jab.

If they really want to get rid of us, he thinks, then they'll find another way. Agreeing to the deal could buy us time—and we'd see it coming.

*And when the time comes to actually go on the mission!?*

Run away? Refuse? I don't know. Maybe if we expose them beforehand it'll cancel the whole thing.

*Pidge does want to release those documents to the public. That was already planned... so...*

So we just need to delay the mission as long as possible.

*Alright. I hope you're right about this.*

Me too.

Keith turns to Allura, who despite her silence has been waiting with a frown and a tapping foot. "If you agree to the deal, it'll buy us time to expose them—and without the excuse of the mission, if they want to get rid of us, they could just find another way."

"Maybe tell them we're thinking about it, for like, a week or two at least," Lance adds. "And then delay completion of the project as much as possible."

She takes a deep breath. "I can do that," she says. "In the meantime, may I see these documents you mentioned?"

"Pidge has them," says Keith. "Texting or calling isn't safe but, maybe if one of us goes back early we could ask her to bring them tomorrow..."

Allura nods. "I can call over and ask Rex or Denise to relieve you early due to sickness. It's a plausible excuse."

"Send Keith, Pidge is way less likely to punch *him* for waking her up than me," says Lance.

Has she really done that?

*Twice.*

"Then I'll call Rex in the morning. Keith, be up by four am."

"That's... early."

"Ideally, you'll look awful," she says, "and considering you're feigning sickness, that's exactly what we want. We also *don't* want eavesdroppers when you're passing the news on to Pidge."

Keith sighs. "I'll be up by four, then."

Lance sighs too. "Then I'll be waking up at four too, I guess."

Allura raises an eyebrow. "Because of the telepathy?"

"That, and I'm a light sleeper." He shrugs.

"Then you can come by at four as well and let me know if the request has been successfully passed
"Can your connection do that? Is it affected by distance?"

"It works the same throughout the whole city, but we haven't been further apart than that lately..."

"Fascinating," Allura says distantly, as if to herself; then she nods. "Is there anyone else aware of the Garrison's secrets?"

"Hunk. He and Pidge don't know about the telepathy, though," Keith says. "I guess we'll have to tell them soon."

"It may come in handy," she agrees, "given that we need to keep our suspicions quiet. Do keep me updated?"

"We'll let you know as soon as we find anything else," Lance says. "Er... somehow. When one of us is on duty next, I guess."

She nods. "Go, now, before someone gets suspicious."

"Yes, ma'am," they say automatically, and leave her standing against the wall in the conference room.

The alarm Keith set the night before (on Lance's phone, since he didn't bring his own and the bunk's is too loud and might wake up someone else) goes off at 3:50 am and he groans aloud and regrets his entire existence. He drags himself up out of bed before he can fall back asleep and stands, swaying, for a moment, before stumbling into the bathroom. Lance is starting to stir.

He doesn't need to fake being out of it as he makes his way through the dim hall; Lance stumbles out of the Blue bunk as he passes. His thoughts aren't quite coherent words yet but he's got a memory of multiple night-shift staff in the control room and the idea of making an excuse for his presence.

You're gonna need to talk for that to work, Keith thinks, handing him back his phone.

Mmrgh.

He shakes himself out, though, and wakes up a little more (aided by Keith's elbow in his side—he gives him an affronted look but Keith only responds that it worked, didn't it). So Keith lets him take his hand and drag him the rest of the way to the control room.

Allura and a few staff are there when they enter. They're engaged in a staring contest for a moment, until Lance lifts Keith's hand and shakes it.

"Keith's sick!" he blurs. Brilliant.

"Is it serious?" Allura asks, pulling something out of a drawer and approaching.

"P-probably just a cold," Keith mutters. She hands him a medical mask.

"I'll call Rex so you can head back early," she says with a wink, before turning. "I need the Red bunk cleaned!"

Someone hops up in response and hurries out of the room. Keith reluctantly puts the mask on, and Lance reclaims his hand as soon as he's done. Allura steps back over to her desk and makes the call; it's over quickly, and then she turns back to the boys.

"You can go wait together in the lounge," she says. "He'll be here shortly."
"Thanks, Allura," says Lance, and he tugs Keith out of the room. Keith catches up quickly, not wanting to be lead around again, but he doesn't let go either. He tugs at the mask with his free hand.

*Leave it on, someone might see.*

I know, but it's all humid and gross inside.

*You signed up for this.*

You signed me up for this.

...*Right.*

They sit down in the lounge to wait. The lights come on automatically but it's eerily quiet without the TV, the daily noises of the Castle.

You can go back to sleep, Keith thinks, as Lance drops his head to his shoulder.

*Can't, you're awake. Besides, I've gotta keep Allura updated.*

It'll be a while, you might as well try.

*I guess.* He closes his eyes, and Keith rests his cheek against the top of Lance's head and stares at nothing.

"Keith?"

He starts awake—he hadn't even realized he'd fallen asleep again—to find Rex standing hesitantly in front of him. He blinks, and nudges Lance awake too.

"Hey, uh, sorry about this," Keith says groggily.

"Don't worry about it, it happens," Rex says. "Just lettin' you know you can head back now."

"Thanks."

Rex nods and leaves the room, probably to pass out in the Red bunk; Lance sits up and stretches and yawns.

"Go ahead," he mumbles—shit, his sleepy voice is *adorable.* "I'll wait for Allura—heh, is it?" *You're cute too.*

Dammit. Keith needs to guard his thoughts better. He mumbles something that isn't real words and makes his escape out to the elevators.

*You can't walk away from a telepathic conversation, Keith,* Lance thinks teasingly.

---

It's still a while before sunrise when Keith returns to the Garrison, so the building is as dark and quiet as when they'd held "conspiracy club" meetings. He doesn't worry too much about being stealthy until he gets up to the top floor and pulls down his mask; he hunts around as silently as he can for Pidge's cubicle.

Finding it, he taps on the door. "Pidge," he whispers as loudly as he dares. "Pidge!" He tries the door: locked.
Back in the Castle, he can hear Lance telling Allura, *He's trying to wake her up now.*

He keeps knocking. Finally, the door opens, revealing a disheveled and frowning Pidge.

"What," she hisses, and then her eyes narrow as she looks him up and down. "Back early... you're sick?"

"Shh!" He shoos her back into her cubicle and closes the door behind them, for all the good that'll do when the walls don't reach the ceiling. He keeps his voice as quiet as he can, barely audible above the air circulation system. "Long story, not sick, just an excuse—Allura knows everything. She's on our side."

Pidge gapes.

"She wants to see the documents. We've got plans—Lance will fill you in at shift change."

*Oh, will I? Some of this stuff is still classified!*

Does Allura mind, though?

Lance asks Allura while Pidge continues to stare. He distinctly hears Allura say, "It's going to be declassified anyway."

*Okay, we're good, I guess."

"Keith, Allura's with the Garrison," Pidge whispers finally.

"No, the Castle's private—just funded by the Garrison," he whispers back. "She doesn't trust them at all. There was a secret project, it's being declassified because they found out about it—listen, Lance will tell you more."

She narrows her eyes and folds her arms, but she says, "Okay, if you say so."

"So you'll bring the documents?"

"...Some of them."

"Okay," he says. "Thank you, Pidge. Sorry for waking you up."

She just shrugs and waves him away, so he slips out of her cubicle and goes back to his. He sinks onto his bed gratefully, removing the mask but not bothering to change.

*Okay, Allura's satisfied. I'm going back to bed too. Goodnight, Keith.*

Goodnight, Lance.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter is a lot of fun :}

roster
tumblr
(ive got a twitter too btw: @arete_nike)
regular update schedule will resume dec 1st!! or 2nd, idk im gonna be busy. but it'll be one of those days.

i was cackling the whole time i was writing this lol. enjoy~~

Keith wakes up to Lance being interrogated by Hunk—"I can't believe you guys were involved in some top-secret project and didn't tell me?" he's asking.


"You weren't already?"

"Ow, harsh. I won her back over after the TV incident, thanks."

Keith chuckles inwardly at that, and Lance notices he's awake. I haven't told him about Allura yet, he thinks. I will once we get back.

Okay.

You might as well sleep in today. Everyone's gonna know you're "sick" within the hour anyway.

I think I will.

Keith concentrates for a moment, trying to figure out where Lance is and if shift change has happened yet. Remember to talk to Pidge, he adds.

Yeah, yeah, I will. Goodnight already.

It's morning.

Whatever.

Keith falls back asleep.

In what feels like no time at all, he's woken up again—this time by Lance in person.

"Rise and shine!" Lance crows, and Keith starts upwards. He's still processing the situation when Lance drops a tray in his lap.

"...Uh..."

"Breakfast in bed!" Lance says, grinning widely and insufferably proud of himself. "You know, since you're 'sick'."

Keith looks down at the tray, then back up at Lance suspiciously. Is this some kind of trick?
What, I can't do something nice for you?

Keith shrugs. It's waffles, he's not gonna argue. "Thanks," he says, and digs in. Lance pulls up his desk "chair" and sits.

I didn’t have time to tell Pidge basically anything. Not about the telepathy anyway, in or out of the Initiative. All I told Hunk is that Allura’s involved, too, and he's kind of freaking out, as usual.

D’you think Pidge will convince him?

If Allura can convince her, sure. I mean, he's gonna be timid about it regardless, but having Allura on our side is huge.

She might have access to more files...

Ehh, if she knew anything useful I think she would've told us. I get the sense that communication between the Castle and the Garrison isn’t great.

Okay. Then maybe she can get us a helicopter or something.

Lance snorts. You and your helicopters!

It was Pidge's idea originally.

Whatever. I think the best we can hope for is a boat, but the whole drone thing is kind of moot now anyway, isn’t it?

Keith frowns, mouth full of waffle. It might be, but frankly he's not sure what their goal is at this point.

He's distracted, though, by Lance's amusement at the face he's making.

"That’s attractive," Lance says with a smirk.

Keith rolls his eyes. There's no accounting for taste. Lance chuckles.

My taste is impeccable, thanks.

As I was saying, Keith thinks sharply, what are we even trying to do? Once we find out why they sent the Kerberos mission, if we can at all, what then?

I thought you were happy to improvise.

Not if I don't even have a goal!

Okay, well, our goal is pretty much revenge, isn't it? By exposing the Garrison's lies to the public?

That's... not much of a revenge.

Well, we can't exactly murder the Garrison command staff.

They murdered Shiro.

Lance gives Keith a look, alarmed and kind of angry. Keith glares right back over a forkful of waffle.

You disagree?
We can't just kill people! Look, they've made some pretty bad mistakes but they're still the ones protecting everyone from the kaiju—

How can you even begin to call the Kerberos mission a mistake!?

No, no, I didn't—that's not what—

They literally sent them on purpose! That's what this whole thing is about!

Aughh, Keith, I don't want to fight you again! I'm sorry! I didn't mean it!

You thought it.

It was a slip of—of the mind. All I'm saying is that it's thanks to them we can go out in the mechas and fight, and if we kill them all—besides the obvious repercussions of fucking murder—the Castle won't last long. It takes a shitload of money to power and repair the mechas, you know. We need to hold them accountable, sure, and hopefully get them replaced with people that won't go sending us on a suicide mission—but just killing them is unnecessary and won't fix this.

Keith takes a deep breath and forces himself to calm down. Logically, he knows Lance is probably right—but he's still angry over Shiro, has been for a very long time. Lance tentatively reaches over to put a hand on his arm.

"I know it's hard to lose someone you love," he says quietly. "We can't change what happened. We just have to accept it, even though it hurts."

Keith looks away. Anger feels like the better option.

"Anger won't let you move on."

He knows.

Lance sighs. Well, the point stands that we can't really do anything until we have more information, so we'll just have to wait and see.

Keith sets down his fork. "Thanks for breakfast," he says quietly.

"Noooo problem." Lance whisks away the tray and puts it on Keith's desk. "Be right back."

He's hiding his intentions, but he returns momentarily with a laptop and waves a hand at Keith, who's still sitting in bed.

"Scoot."

Keith scoots, raising an eyebrow.

"You're supposed to be sick, and all we ever do is, like, fight kaiju and hang out with friends." And discuss government conspiracies and partake in illegal activities... "So now we're gonna hang out, just the two of us, and watch a movie or something. Your choice." He shimmies onto the narrow bed and plops the laptop in Keith's lap.

"That... sounds good, actually," Keith admits, and opens the laptop. Lance wiggles against his side and grins.

It's an anxious couple of days, first waiting for Pidge to come back from the Castle, then waiting for
the cover of night to carry out their plans. Through surreptitious conversations, at least, they all manage to get on the same page regarding Allura. By the time they finally meet up on the second floor in the middle of the night Keith is itching to get going.

"Here's the plan," Pidge says lowly. "I'll break in and get the stuff. Hunk will be outside the offices, to relay info and give me a hand if I need it. Lance and Keith will be the lookouts, in the stairwell, because you'll have an excuse to be there. Make out, pretend you're on your way downstairs, I don't care, just make some noise if someone's coming."

"Why do all our plans end up like this," Keith asks. Not that he's really complaining...

"People will happily attribute a lot of weirdness to young people being in love," Hunk says sagely. Everyone looks at him.

He relents. "Okay, but actually, it's probably just a coincidence that it's a good excuse for like, every situation we've had to cover up."

"I'm just taking advantage of you guys here," says Pidge. "Besides, are you opposed to making out in the stairwell?"

"Nope!" Lance says, a little too quickly.

Keith looks away. "No..."

"I thought not." Pidge gives them a smug grin. "So, we good?"

The group gives their affirmatives.

"Then let's go," she says, and they head upstairs.

Loitering in the dim, red-light stairwell turns out to be kind of awkward. They can't talk aloud, lest they attract attention—or give Hunk a false alarm, bringing the operation to a halt. And, in the interest of listening for approaching footsteps, they can't talk much in their heads either.

Lance shifts nervously against the opposite wall, looking up the stairs. They both agreed to the plan but it's not just their vulnerable position as lookouts that he's worried about.

Literally calm down?

Oh, yeah, thanks. If you hadn't said that I'd never have calmed down, what would I do without you.

...I won't take that personally.

...Yeah, sorry.

They fall silent again. In a couple minutes, they hear a faint call from Hunk.

"She's in!"

Great, now we just gotta stand here for twenty minutes while she steals government secrets from the office of our commanding officer. No big.

You're enjoying this, Keith points out.

Not entirely! Lance's face screws up. We're, like, accessories to treason! This is dangerous!
It's an adventure.

*Stop using my feelings against me!*  

Keith grins. Lance pouts. It's adorable.

Lance shoots him a look, wide-eyed. *You can't just think things like that at a time like this!*  

Can't help it, Keith thinks a bit smugly. *This light suits you.*

*You just like the color red!* Lance is pouting again—the light hides his blush, but his mind doesn't. *It suits you better, anyway.*

Does it.

*You've got this like, goth vampire vibe going on.*

Keith has to clap a hand over his mouth to smother a snort. That's a good thing!?  

*It's hot.*

He's not sure whether to be flattered or alarmed at that. He settles for shooting a glare and returning to keeping watch upstairs, while Lance smothers a laugh against his arm.

They're quiet for another few minutes, and then Lance starts fidgeting again. *Maybe we should've practiced,* he thinks.

When?

*I dunno. Before we came up here.*

...In front of Pidge and Hunk?

*No... nevermind.*

Another few minutes of silence. "Twenty percent!" Hunk whispers.

Are you really that worried about it? It's just kissing. I know you've done it before.

*Not with you.*

...It doesn't have to count for anything. Exten-whatever circumstances, right?

... *Extenuating? Yeah...*  

Footsteps. Both start—Lance lurches forward.

"*Keith,*" he whispers, very nearly terrified. So Keith steps forward and pushes him back against the wall with a muffled thump—hopefully loud enough to alert Hunk—and leans up to find Lance's lips with his own.

Lance's mind goes blank with shock for a moment, but then he responds enthusiastically. His hands snake around Keith's waist while Keith clings to his shoulders, pressing him against the wall—

Someone sniggers upstairs and they snap apart.

"Oh, don't mind us," Tina whispers, covering her mouth with her hand—her smile is obvious
anyway. She slips past them while they're still frozen, followed by a grinning Denise, who winks at them and hurries after Tina.

Keith takes a deep breath and returns to his spot against the far wall. False alarm.

Lance is a little bit in disbelief. *That's all you have to say?* Then, after a moment, *I really wanna do that again. Can we please do that again.*

Keith bites his lip and forces himself to look away. Don't tempt me, he thinks, we still have to keep lookout.

Lance is disappointed but he doesn't argue; instead, he leans out around the doorway and waves to Hunk. "False alarm!" he whispers.

"Don't get excited!" Hunk whispers back. Lance flips him off. "Thirty five percent, by the way!"

Another few minutes.

"Fifty percent!"

A few more.

"Sixty five!"

*I'm so bored, can we please kiss more.*

No.

"Seventy five!" Hunk whispers shortly, and Keith is beginning to think they might be in the clear.

*You're gonna jinx it.*

That's not a thing.

It's barely another thirty seconds, though, before they hear footsteps above again.

*My turn!* Lance thinks, and practically launches himself across the stairwell. Now Keith finds himself pressed between Lance and the wall, one of Lance's hands next to his head and the other on the small of his back, tugging at the hem of his shirt. Damn, he could get used to this.

Lance gives a breathy laugh that brushes across Keith's lips before leaning in again. The footsteps are approaching but neither are paying much attention. Probably just more paladins. Keith pulls Lance even closer.

The footsteps stop. A man clears his throat.

Lance jumps back with a yelp, and quickly covers his mouth. Keith turns and stares, dumbfounded. It's not a paladin, this time; the guy is tall, enormous even, impressively muscled even beneath a button-up shirt—and he's got an eyepatch, and a prosthetic arm, and a very very deep scowl.

He's never met this man before, but Lance knows *exactly* who he is.

"This," Commander Sendak says lowly, "is not appropriate behavior for two paladins of the Garrison."

"S-sorry sir!" Lance stammers, lifting his hands as if to placate. "I, uh, we... uh..."
The commander walks the rest of the way down the stairs in silence. He stands in front of them and frowns down at them for a solid minute while they cower against the wall.

*Shit, shit, shit, shit shit shit.*

We're dead. We're fucking dead.

*So fucking dead.*

"Our top pilot," he says slowly. "And our most promising. I expect better."

Lance opens his mouth to say something but thinks better of it.

"You are not only two of our best assets..." Sendak says, drawing out the words, "but the very face of our program. Do you understand?"

They nod quickly.

"We find recruits by telling your stories. Our students at the Academy watch your battles. They are expected to learn from your example. Is this what you want them to emulate?" Sendak gestures heavily at them, and both flinch from his reach. "Two horny teenagers humping each other in a hallway like dogs?"

"No, sir," Keith whispers. All the blood has drained from his face, and he can feel Lance shaking next to him.

"Then why did you do it."

Sendak crosses his arms and glares down at them, waiting for a response. Neither are brave enough to point out it's almost 3 am.

"A momentary lapse in judgement, sir," Lance squeaks. "Won't happen again!"

"It had better not. You two are already walking on thin ice," Sendak growls. "If I were you..." He steps closer, looming over them both. "...I'd be very careful about my behavior."

"We will!" Keith says, voice cracking.

"We promise!" Lance adds.

He stares down at them until both boys break eye contact, cowering under his gaze. He takes a step back.

"I will be watching you," he says. "Now, go."

He points up, and they book it.

Upstairs, Keith ducks into the bathroom, pulling Lance with him, and they both stand and pant for a minute. Belatedly Lance remembers they left Pidge and Hunk behind.

We gave them plenty of warning, Keith thinks nervously. They probably made it out okay?

*But what if they didn't? What if he catches them? Oh god.*

We can't exactly go down and check.
Lance takes a deep breath. *Okay. Let's... hide out in your cubicle and hope that when they make it up here they'll think to look there. They probably heard most of that...*

...Yeah.

They slip out of the bathroom and down the hall, and they sit on Keith's bed, and they wait.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter has art (° ());//  
roster  
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It's an agonizing five minutes before a gentle knock on the door precedes Pidge bursting in without waiting for an answer, followed by Hunk. "Are you okay?" she hisses, as Hunk quietly closes the door behind them. The relief that washes over Keith and Lance both quickly fades to exhaustion.

Keith nods. "We're fine."

"You guys made it out okay?" Lance whispers.

"Yeah, but only because he spent so long chewing you guys out," Hunk whispers. "And like... dang. That was something."

"I can't believe he called you dogs," Pidge whispers. "Normally I'd tease you or something but holy shit, I thought you guys were dead meat."

Lance shudders. "We thought so too."

"Did you get what we were looking for?" Keith asks.

Pidge's face screws up. "I think so. And... some other stuff we need to look into. But I think we'd better all go to bed before someone hears us. We can discuss it tomorrow."

"Agreed," Hunk says quickly, already reaching for the door. Pidge mutters a goodnight and follows him out. Lance sighs and stands reluctantly—then leans down for a kiss that ends far too soon.

"Goodnight," he whispers.

"Goodnight," Keith responds, and then Lance drags himself out and Keith is left to try and sleep after all of that, somehow.

If it makes you feel any better, I'm not gonna have any less trouble.

It takes them a while, but both do, finally, fall asleep.

Keith is not at all happy to wake up in the morning, but he's on duty tomorrow and if he sleeps in again waking up for that will be hell. So he groans and reluctantly drags himself out of bed. Lance is barely even stirring yet and Keith blocks himself off as much as he can to hopefully let him sleep a little longer.

When he gets down to breakfast, only Hunk is there yet. No one else has shown up by the time he makes it through the breakfast line, but Pidge makes it down shortly thereafter. They say very little—especially Pidge, who looks particularly tired. She gives him a twisted little smile as a greeting.
though.

Lance finally wakes up when Keith is more than halfway done eating; he comes down soon after and forgoes the breakfast line to instead sit sideways on the bench and drape himself over Keith's side, eyes closed.

This isn't subtle, Keith thinks.

Lance isn't quite coherent yet but he points out that Tina and Denise saw them last night, and Keith gets the gist of it. The whole Garrison will know by the end of the day anyway.

"If you're going to fall asleep, just go back to bed," Keith says aloud. Pidge is snickering.

"Mmrgh," Lance responds.

"Have fun last night?" Pidge asks with a devilish grin.

Keith gives her a look.

"Mmf," says Lance.

Keith glances down at him; he's definitely dozing off, judging by the peaceful expression on his face and the softness of his thoughts. It's cute, Keith thinks, and fortunately Lance isn't awake enough to catch that.

"So, then... are you guys, like... official?" Hunk asks. Keith shrugs with the shoulder Lance isn't sleeping on.

"You made out and didn't discuss it at all," Pidge says flatly. Keith shrugs again. "You guys are terrible. You could've done this ages ago, you know."

"Had Lance fall asleep on me at breakfast? Yeah, I dunno what I was waiting for."

"Don't even try to pretend you're not enjoying it."

"He's drooling on me," Keith says, even as he slips an arm around Lance's back to keep him from sliding off.

"M not," Lance grumbles sleepily. He yawns and turns his face further into Keith's neck, settling in a position that honestly doesn't look comfortable at all, and again Keith can't help but think how adorable it is. He gets a pang of amusement as a response—Lance had heard that time.

"Aww," Pidge says, and Keith looks up in time to see she's taking pictures with her phone. So is Hunk.

"I'd expect this from Pidge, but, et tu, Hunk?" Keith asks. Hunk shrugs sheepishly.

"He's gonna put it in your wedding slideshow," says Pidge, snickering again.

Keith's response is cut off when Lance lazily lifts his arms to drape them around Keith's neck and across his other shoulder. Pidge lifts her phone again.

You're warm.

You should eat.
But you're warm...

Keith sighs and prods Lance in the side, and he yelps and sits up finally.

"Eat," Keith says, pointing to the breakfast line. Lance frowns and gives him a look of complete and utter betrayal, but he gets up and gets in line.

Can't fool me, Lance.

Bleh.

Keith turns back to Hunk and Pidge with a small smile. Hunk sighs and grins at him. "Man, you've got it bad."

"...Shut up."

Me too, thinks Lance. I do too.

"By the way, if you get any worse than that with PDA, we're going to have words," Pidge says, and finally returns to her breakfast. Without Lance's presence, the three of them grow quiet again, though.

Lance is nearly actually awake when he returns, and picks up on the mood quickly, not least because he can feel it from Keith. He sets down his tray and sits, eyeing Pidge.

"So did you look over anything?" he asks quietly.

She nods. "Can't tell you here. Tonight."

"I'm on duty tomorrow," Keith says.

"It can't wait, and we're not due yet anyway."

He sighs and resigns himself to another sleepless night. Ugh, tell me about it, Lance thinks.

Eventually Pidge announces she's going back to bed, and Lance decides to catch up on the news, and Keith is tempted to go back to bed as well but Hunk ropes him into a conversation with Hui and Bonnie and Derek. He spends the first few minutes trying to watch the news through Lance but quickly gets absorbed in the conversation instead.

It's not long, though, before he feels a bolt of alarm from Lance, who almost immediately starts making his way over to the group. Rather than stop to share, though, Lance simply grabs his arm and pulls him away from the conversation without a word.

"Lance!" Keith stumbles after him, leaving the group's conversation stuttering to a halt as they watch them go.

A kaiju showed up in the Atlantic, Lance thinks, and Keith would freeze except he's still being pulled along. Which means everything is gonna change, and it's all a mess already anyway, and dammit, I wanna go on a date with you before our lives completely implode.

Hell, Keith is still reeling from the first sentence, but something blooms in his chest anyway. He gets his feet under him, slips his arm through Lance's grasp until they're holding hands, and tries to bring him down from the urgency that's pounding through their heads.

"Where do you want to go?" he asks softly.
"Anywhere," Lance says. "Anywhere, it doesn't matter as long as you're there with me."

They get on Keith's bike and just go.

The guards at the gate let them out no problem, and they drive straight through the town, stopping only for gas. They get on an empty highway and head south.

They find a rest stop shortly before noon; there's actually a few people there, and they buy lunch and eat in silence. Lance watches the news on a TV above the seating area while Keith flips through the local brochures.

"It made the real news," Lance says hollowly. "They couldn't even hide it. I wonder if they'll still try to deny it happened."

Keith looks up. The images of the kaiju on the TV are overlaid in Lance's mind with older footage.

"We're not going to think about that today," Keith decides. "We're going to go inland and see if this Six Flags is still open," he waves the pamphlet, "and we're going to ride the rollercoasters until we can't even walk anymore, and eat shitty fairground food, and we're gonna get back so late Coran yells at us, and—we're not going to think about any of that until tomorrow. Or tonight, maybe, but not now."

Because what they both really need is a *distraction*.

Lance feels like he's about to cry from gratefulness, but he doesn't. "Okay," he says. *Thank you.*

They leave the rest stop and its TV behind. The Six Flags is indeed open, though not especially busy, being a chilly gray day and a now-sparingly populated area, and Keith buys both their tickets despite Lance's complaints.

Lance comes grinning off the first coaster, feeling lighter, and Keith grins right back.

They hold hands as they walk through the park and hardly have to wait in line for anything. They scream at the top of their lungs on every ride and ignore the curious looks people give their uniforms. They eat too much fried dough and don't drink enough water and Lance wins Keith a cheap stuffed lion toy at a shooting game. They don't leave until the sun is setting.

"I'm definitely counting this as our first date," Lance announces, once the lion has been safely stowed in the bike's saddlebags and they're climbing on themselves. "Not the bakery, and *definitely* not the junkyard."

"What's wrong with the bakery?" Keith asks. "I enjoyed it." He starts the engine.

*You didn't even like me yet,* Lance responds silently, wrapping his arms tightly around Keith's stomach. *It was nice but it doesn't count.* The motorcycle roars beneath them, and off they go.

I liked you. I just hadn't realized it yet.

*Really?*

I let you hold my hand, didn't I?

*Mm. You did.* Lance is quiet for a moment. Then, *I had fun today. We should do this again.*

So I've earned a second date, huh?
Oh, totally. So long as I can call you my boyfriend now...?

Definitely.

Lance is content. Warm and affectionate. Keith is happy.

They don't get back until well after dinner. Coran glances down at the lion toy under Keith's arm and doesn't yell at them.

"Wish I could get away from it all now and then," he says wistfully. "I hope you two had fun while you can. There's trouble ahead, I can feel it."

"That's why we went," Lance says, and Keith squeezes his hand, does his best to be reassuring.

"Where the hell were you guys?" Pidge asks when they find her (after putting the lion toy away), crowded along with all the other paladins in the tech corner. Hunk and the others on the couch scoot to make some room.

"Six Flags," says Lance, wriggling into the space between Hunk and Pidge.

"At a time like this?"

"I had the feeling we won't get another chance to go out for a very long time," he says, a little darkly. There's a sort of affirmative murmur from the other paladins—who, of course, are all watching the exchange. (In the back, Nyma looks vaguely offended.)

Lance looks at Keith and pats his lap. *Come sit?*

It's affectionate, but also a little desperate, a little uncomfortable. Keith sits. Lance wraps his arms around him and buries his face between Keith's shoulders, blocking his view of the TV; it's showing the same footage as the one they left in the rest stop.

"You might be right on about that," Hunk says after a moment. "There's a rumor they're gonna send a few of us to help set up a Garrison over on the east coast somewhere. They're already shipping the backup mechas over there."

"There's plenty of capable pilots at the Academy," Keith says, confused.

*That haven't been in battle,* Lance points out.

"They're inexperienced," Hunk says. "They haven't actually fought kaiju before, so some of us have to go help them out. And... well, Lance and I helped set up *this* Garrison..."

Keith and Lance realize what he's saying simultaneously, dread hitting them sharply.

"They could send Keith too," Lance says, muffled.

"Nope," says Pidge. "The Red and Black teams are already smaller. They probably won't send any of them."

Lance groans into Keith's back. Keith frowns at the TV. The video shows fighter jets bombing the kaiju, even as it wades into a coastal town.

"Maybe it’s just a rumor," Keith says eventually, and fights down the cold feeling in his stomach, trying to stifle it before Lance can notice.
"So... you guys are officially together?" Bonnie asks. Keith turns to find everyone still watching them.

*Don't answer, I know some of these fuckers have bets on us.*

"That's what you're worried about?" Keith asks her, and gestures at the TV. "At a time like this?"

Pretty smooth, he thinks, considering he's still sitting in Lance's lap. Bonnie does look a little ashamed of herself at that.

*Definitely smooth,* Lance confirms.

"That's rich for a guy that just took his boyfriend to Six Flags," Pidge mutters, ruining everything.

Keith closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. Lance lifts a hand to flip Pidge off. Someone demands ten bucks from someone else.

The TV, already at low volume, is now inaudible over the commotion. Keith returns to glaring at it anyway.

How the fuck did a kaiju get *there,* is what he wants to know.

*Either it went all the way around the country without being seen, Lance thinks, or there's another source.*

Maybe the source moved.

*I doubt we'll be that lucky. Besides, it's only been three days since the last attack.*

So we're dealing with two sources now. Two points of attack.

*If you think about it, this is weirdly convenient for the Garrison,* Lance realizes. *It's the perfect excuse to send a second Kerberos mission.*

They can't possibly have planned this.

*They might have known about it beforehand. We should bring it up tonight.*

Oh yeah, the meeting to discuss Pidge's findings. Keith glances down at her and finds her scrunched up in an angry ball, fists clenched and brows lowered.

"Are you okay? Pidge?" he asks quietly.

"I can't believe you guys," she mutters. "Off riding roller coasters while people are dying."

Keith stops to think about how to respond. He picks his words carefully, with input from Lance.

"People... cope in different ways, Pidge," he says finally, so quiet only the three of them can hear. "Some people can face things head on. Some people need a distraction, sometimes." He nods back to Lance, still hiding his face from the TV.

She chews on that for a minute. "Are you guys still coming tonight," she asks.

*We need to tell her everything, and Hunk too.*

"Yes," he says. "There's a lot of stuff we need to tell you."
"Fine," she says, and unfolds a little. "There's a lot we need to talk about, anyway."

Chapter End Notes

roster
tumblr
twitter
Keith shows up second only to Pidge, and sits in front of her, the way they used to. She eyes him for a moment.

"Hey," she says. "How's Lance doing?"

Lance is half-awake and making his way downstairs. He's a little touched at Pidge's concern, and so is Keith, frankly, considering her earlier anger. Keith wonders if maybe she understands.

"Uh. Better, I think," he says.

"Good," she says. "It's weird when he's not all... Lance-y, you know?"

Wow, thanks, Pidge. But it's affectionate, on both ends, Keith thinks.

"Yeah."

Lance joins them moments later. "Hunk's on his way, found him in the bathroom," he says.

"Was the Six Flags any good?" Pidge asks.

He plops down onto the floor next to Keith. "Uh... yeah?"

"Then maybe I'll make your boyfriend take me there while you're gone."

"Oh really," says Keith, who had been trying not to think about Lance being gone.

Lance makes an indignant noise. "It's not even official that I'm leaving!"

"But it's likely."


It's not like we're really apart when, you know, telepathy, he thinks. (Which is honestly the only thing keeping him from freaking out at the possibility, but Lance doesn't need to know that.)

Yeah, but it's not the same...

Hunk shows up moments later, and when he sits Pidge leans forward.

"So," she says, "this is fucked up. I found records from way back, before Sendak was in charge." She pushes the tablet forward; Keith picks it up and Lance leans against his shoulder to read it—it's a collection of emails. "As far as I can tell, he threatened his way in—like, there are actual threats in there. And he wasn't previously part of the Garrison, or the military, or like... anywhere, as far as I can tell. Before he became commander, it's like he didn't exist at all."

"What does that have to do with Kerberos?" Lance asks.

"I'm getting to that. It was his idea, and he bullied everyone else into going along with it. The threats are kinda vague, though... like they all knew something we don't. Something big." She takes the
tablet back, swipes over a few times, and hands it back. Hunk scoots over to see too. "Only the higher ups had to be coerced, seems like most people involved weren't in on it, whatever it is. And as for what 'it' is... I have some theories."

"So... what are they?" Hunk asks.

Pidge pushes her glasses up on her nose. "Either there's a much larger government conspiracy going on here," she says, "or Sendak is actually allied with the kaiju."

Keith squints at the tablet. It seems to be some kind of communication log, though none of it is readable. "Explain," he says.

"The transmissions there are between the Garrison and a set of coordinates very close to our last known location of the Kerberos mission. The most recent was last week."

*What... does that mean...?*

"He's talking to someone... at the source?" Keith says.

"Yep. So either the transmissions are coming from the source itself, or there's something else out there we don't know about."

"Is this in some kind of code? I don't recognize it," Hunk says, poking at the tablet in Keith's hands.

"I can't find any kind of pattern. I think it's actually another language, but I've been searching and I can't figure out what it is."

"What's the earliest date?" Lance asks, reaching over to scroll through the transmissions.

"Shortly after he arrived at the Garrison, well before Kerberos."

"He definitely knows where the source is, then," says Keith.

"But why did Sendak want to send them there?" Hunk asks. "Especially considering he already knew it was there?"

"I think the answer to that is probably in those transmissions," says Pidge, "but I haven't been able to translate them."

Keith frowns at the tablet. All the answers here in front of him, but he can't *read* them.

*I bet if they knew there was a second source, it's in there too, Lance thinks. Or maybe he made it happen.*

What, because of us?

...*Shit, yeah, I guess.*

So they could send us on a second Kerberos mission.

"Ugh," says Lance.

"Had a thought?" Pidge asks. "Because honestly, I'm out of ideas."

*Time to tell them, I guess.*

"It might not be relevant," Lance says.

"But it probably is," Keith adds.

Lance looks at him. "We don't know for sure without knowing what these say—"

"—The timing is way too convenient, Lance. It probably is."

"Um, I'm sure you guys know what you're talking about, but we kinda... don't," Hunk says. "So if you could get us on your wavelength before you start arguing, that'd be cool."

"Oh, Hunk, you really don't want to be on our wavelength," Lance says with a grin.

"Three's a crowd," Keith agrees. "But yeah, uh, it's about the Voltron Initiative."

"You mean the secret project that you didn't tell us about," Pidge says flatly. "Go on."

"Hey, I trust Allura, okay? Besides, we were gonna tell you if it was relevant, and now it might be," Lance says. "So..." He hesitates.

You say it. You're better at being blunt.

Wow, thanks.

"Well?" Pidge taps her fingers against her knee.

"Telepathy," Keith says. "The Initiative was to create a telepathic bond between paladins."

"To make us better at our jobs or something."

"Faster, at least."

Pidge and Hunk stare.

"You've been in each others' heads?" Hunk hisses.

"Yep," says Lance. "Constantly. For like..."

"Almost a month," Keith finishes.

"Oh my god," says Pidge. "You. Oh my god. You can read minds?"

"Only his," Lance says, bumping Keith's shoulder with his own.

"Likewise," Keith says, nodding towards Lance.

"Right now?"

"Yep," they tell her in unison. Pidge takes off her glasses and sets them on her keyboard and just stares at them. Hunk has his hands half-covering his face, his mouth still open in a little "o".

There's a moment of silence.

"I bet we can use that," Pidge says.
"We already have been, a bit," says Keith.

"Wait, so," says Hunk, "you guys were telepathically linked during that whole Nyma thing? And you still took days to resolve it?"

Lance looks away sheepishly. Keith opens his mouth to say something and closes it again. 

_He just had to bring that up, didn’t he?_

"Unbelievable." Pidge snickers.

"Anyway," says Lance, "there's more."

"I told you before that the Garrison found out about the Initiative and hadn't been involved with it," says Keith.

"Yes?"

"Well, they told Allura she could continue part of the project, under one condition," Lance says.

"That, once it's done, she send us on a follow-up to the Kerberos mission," Keith finishes.

Hunk's hands fall to his lap. Pidge blinks.

"We kinda worked out a plan with Allura," Lance continues. "She's gonna tell them we're still thinking about it for as long as she can before accepting the offer."

"We figured that if the Garrison really is trying to get rid of us—"

"Which seems likely."

"—then they could always find another way, and it's better if we know it's coming."

"We just have to get the word out there and expose them before we actually have to go."

Pidge slowly puts her glasses back on. "I can't believe you guys didn't tell us this sooner."

"We didn't really have the opportunity, lately," says Keith.

Lance nods. "And we wanted to find out more before making assumptions—"

"Not that that usually stops you," Keith mutters.

"—shut up, so we kinda planned to tell you tonight. Oh, and the second source was a factor."

"We figured if they already knew about it, then it would be a good excuse for them to plan a second Kerberos mission."

"Oh! If Sendak's actually in league with the kaiju, he might have told them to open a second source just to send you there!" Hunk offers.

"As insane as that sounds, I guess we really can't rule it out," Pidge sighs. "I'll see if I can't dig up some algorithms to try to make sense of this language, but without any words to start from it's gonna be difficult."

"If anyone can do it, it's you," Hunk says.
"Thanks." She seems pleased.

"What do we do in the meantime?" Lance asks. Pidge shrugs.

"Dunno. Think of places we can post all this stuff online, maybe? We'll need to get it out there as fast as possible and as many places as possible so that people can see it before it gets taken down."

"Sounds like a plan," Hunk says, and yawns. After a moment he adds, "This is a lot to process, so unless anyone else has any Earth-shattering revelations to share..."

"We've got nothing," Lance says, and Keith nods.

"Nope, just this stuff," Pidge says as she takes her tablet back. She packs up quickly as the rest meander towards the stairs; they all whisper their goodnights and go their separate ways, but not before Keith tugs Lance down for a short kiss. They part reluctantly.

Goodnight, he thinks.

Goodnight, Keith!

The next two days are quiet, but a tense kind of quiet. Down at the Castle everyone lingers in the lounge but chatter is infrequent; Keith pays more attention to Lance, anyway, and his conversation with Pidge and Hunk back at the Garrison. Now that they know they're telepathically connected he's actually able to participate, even if Lance feels the need to reword all Keith's comments (they disagree on whether that's for the better).

And it's more or less the same when he's alone at the Garrison the next day and the other three are at the Castle, though they have to be more subtle about their connection and he ends up roped into an in-person conversation with Bonnie and Jess anyway, before an attack comes and he spaces out in front of the TV to watch the Castle's display through Lance's eyes.

The day after, the Voltron Initiative is declassified. It's not announced in any way, but news travels fast—and, naturally, the other paladins are boggled at the implications.

"If the new sim tests were actually testing us, then I might have ended up in Rex's head," Hui comments with a shudder. "I can't even imagine."

"Rude," says Rex.

"I can't believe you guys didn't straight up murder each other?" Joey adds. "I mean, everyone knows you used to hate each other. And then you had to see each other's thoughts? Yikes."

"Well, they don't hate each other now," says Hui.

"Oh my god," says Lance.

"We're leaving," says Keith, and pulls Lance away from the other paladins, towards the stairs. Lance follows willingly. Someone whistles.

They end up just wandering the ruins, though even Keith knows the former city by heart by now. They check on the drone, still sitting there in the hiding spot, and say almost nothing aloud.

By the time they return, the news has had a little time to sink in. It doesn't stop anyone from asking them questions over dinner, though—Keith lets Lance answer nearly all of them, only interrupting when Lance is blatantly lying ("Oh yeah, he was super impressed with the insides of my head, you
know—" Almost the first thing you did was think memes at me, so no."). But he smiles, and Lance grins back, and Pidge threatens to throw her apple at them if they don't stop "being gross over dinner".

It feels like the calm before the storm.

Chapter End Notes

this was gonna be half of a longer chapter originally but i had to split it up sooo here we are. see ya in a couple days!! :)

roster
 tumblr
 twitter
The next day, Lance, Hunk, and Joey are officially taken off the roster.

"They'll be sent across the country for three weeks to get the new Garrison there up to speed!" Coran chirps, and Lance groans into Keith's shoulder.

*Three whole weeks!*

But he’s almost as excited as he is disappointed, so Keith makes an effort to suppress his dread—but he can’t, not completely.

*What’s wrong?* Lance asks.

And it’s not something Keith wants to get into now, wants to think about at all, so he just responds *later* and buries his feelings. He feels like he’s kicking dirt back into a reopened grave.

Hold it in, he tells himself.

Lance obviously gets some hint of the feeling, because he’s uneasy, but he feigns confidence as Coran finishes his announcement ("The roster schedules may be a little tighter than you’re used to, but if the Red and Black teams can do it, so can you!") and straightens up to clap Hunk on the shoulder.

"Just like old times, eh?" he says quietly.

"I kind of really hope not," Hunk says, and Lance laugh.

"We’ll have to do a Skype double date or something. Me and Keith, and you and Shay."

"I mean, assuming we can find a time when we’re somehow all free…"

Keith stops paying attention to their conversation as Pidge steps up beside him. "You’re freaking out, right?" she mutters.

It should really not surprise him anymore that she *gets* it. “Trying not to.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

They stand in silent solidarity for all of thirty seconds before Lance drags them back into the conversation. "Pidge!" he exclaims, leaning to look around Keith. "Take care of Keith for me while I'm gone, okay? He's fragile."

"Hey!"

"Oh, don't worry," Pidge says, grinning widely. "We'll have fun without you."
Keith privately wishes that were true.

“Just… not too much fun,” Lance adds. “No throwing any parties, ‘kay?”

“Are pity parties okay?” Pidge asks drily.

“Only if they’re because you miss me so much.”

“Sure, whatever,” says Pidge.

The sad thing is, Keith thinks rather pathetically, is that that isn’t even unlikely.

Aww, babe.

I’m not sure that’s something to be aww-ing at, Lance.

Lance recoils at the sharpness in Keith’s thoughts. We need to talk, dude.

Keith sighs. Yeah.

Hold it in, hold it in.

It’s Monday, and Lance is leaving Thursday.

Keith holds it in that evening, holds it in the next morning, holds it in until Lance is up in his cubicle packing and Keith is sitting on Lance’s bed keeping him company. And then he can’t quite hold it in anymore.

“Do you really want to go?” he blurts.

Lance looks up, pausing in the middle of tossing something into a duffel bag. “Uh, yeah?” he says, and Keith is honestly surprised at that, more than he can hide. “I mean, it’s not like I won’t miss the heck out of you, but like… yeah. Why are you so surprised? I like my job? I like helping people and fighting kaiju? Don’t you?”

“…I guess?” He’d really only joined up to find out what happened to Shiro… He shoves that thought down quickly too. If Lance wants to go he is not going to get in the way or let him know how terrified he is.

He’s not going to be a burden. Keith can take care of himself.

“Just be careful over there,” he says, trying to make it sound final, like the conversation is over. But Lance folds his arms and gives him a look.

“Nope. We’re not stopping there,” he says. “Something’s up.” And you’ve been blocking me out all day.

“It’s nothing,” Keith says.

“Bullshit,” says Lance. “Do you not want me to go or something? Talk to me, babe.”

He’s kind of hurt, honestly, and Keith feels a twinge of regret at that—but more than that, he doesn’t want Lance to know how terrified he is. And, yeah, he really should tell him, but...

“No,” he says. “Yes. Maybe. I don’t know.”
Lance snorts and tosses another shirt into his bag. “Get your shit together, dude.” He glances over at Keith. “And then tell me about it. We both know we’re shit at communication but this is really not the time for that.”

“It’ll be fine. It’s really nothing.” Keith looks away.

Lance huffs, losing patience. “Keith, come on! You gotta tell me what’s up. I can’t—I can’t read your mind.” You’re still blocking me out! You know that, right?

Keith knows.

“Do you think being vague is gonna convince me not to go? Dude?”

“I’m not trying to stop you from going!” he says quickly. “I just… have a bad feeling about this. Considering everything. But I’m not—”

“Don’t quote Star Wars at me. The Force isn’t real. Besides,” Lance says, “you’re not the sort—okay, no, you are definitely the sort to base your decisions on random feelings.”

Keith shoots him a glare.

“But you’re also smart enough to figure out where the fuck those feelings are coming from? And I know you’re hiding something from me? So?”

“It’s nothing!”

“It’s not nothing! It’s obviously not nothing!”

“Just forget it, okay?!” He hops off the bed and goes for the door, but Lance grabs his arm and stops him.

“Nope! Nuh-uh! Something’s wrong and you’re gonna tell me what before I go, because if we’re like this when I’m gone it’s gonna suck.”

Keith huffs. Funny that Pidge gets it so easily but his own boyfriend can’t. Even if it’s his fault for keeping it from him.

Is it about the conspiracy club stuff? You know that until Pidge can get that translation done there’s nothing we can do.

It’s not that.

Then what is it?!

Keith takes a deep breath. Fuck it. He grabs Lance’s shoulders. “The last time the Garrison sent my boyfriend somewhere he died,” he says. "He died, Lance."

Lance freezes. Waves of shock and understanding crush over him, and Keith loosens his grip and drops his head to rest against Lance’s collarbone, breathing hard. Well, he said it. And in retrospect, this whole conversation really should’ve been mental, because they’re in a room without even full walls and anyone could be listening. He sure fucked this up.


Well, the secret’s out now. “Shiro left and he didn’t come back,” Keith says lowly. “If you leave and you don’t come back…”
“Shit. I’ll come back, Keith. I promise.”

“Why leave at all.”

“Because last time I couldn’t do anything,” Lance says quietly. “And this time I can.”

And Keith remembers sitting in that rest stop a few days ago while Lance watched the footage on the TV and realizes that it goes both ways; for all they’ve been through together they still don’t quite understand each other, not fully. Not yet.

We have a long way to go, Lance admits. But we can get there. He pulls Keith into a proper hug, and Keith’s hands leave his shoulders and travel around his back.

You remember what Sendak called us, he thinks after a moment.

What, dogs?

The top paladin and the most promising. The Garrison’s best assets. And we thought that might be why they sent Shiro and the Holts away…

We already know they want to get rid of us…?

And we haven’t agreed to the second Kerberos mission yet, so why wait? They send you across the country, you and two other veterans, and…

They can’t possibly plan to kill all of us. They have a front to maintain, and that means actually training people to fight kaiju.

So, not right away, and just you. And then me, while I’m here alone.

The mission would be better PR for them even if it fails than a couple of paladins up and dying, Lance points out. But they could definitely be trying to separate us...

PR doesn’t mean shit when they try and keep the public in the dark anyway.

Sendak also called us role models, you know. I don’t think they’re going to try to kill us yet.

Lance feels like he’s trying to convince himself of that too.

They can’t afford to show mistrust of the Garrison now, so Lance still has to go, and Keith still has to stay.

He’s on duty the day Lance and the other two are leaving, so they say their goodbyes early in the morning—such as they are. It rings a little hollow when they can talk in their heads at any time, but Lance still holds him as tightly as he can, and Keith turns his face into Lance’s neck and doesn’t say anything for a while. The other paladins give them space (including Nyma, who more or less ignores them).

"Stay safe," Lance whispers, and finally lets go.

"You too," says Keith, and Lance goes to where Hunk and Joey are waiting for him at a table, and Keith goes downstairs to the subway. Terry claps him on the back as they get on the train, and Pidge sits next to him, shoulder to shoulder.

"Thought you were supposed to be on duty yesterday," he says to her, quietly.
"Derek was sick, so we traded," she responds.

*I think it was probably her idea.*

Keith is kind of grateful she's there either way. And he's pretty sure she doesn't want to be alone, either.

And he's right; when he retreats to the Red bunk shortly after shift change, she follows, and plops onto the floor by his feet when he lies down on the bunk. Neither speak; Pidge is on her phone, and Keith stares at the ceiling without really seeing it, focusing on Lance.

Naturally, given his tendency to complain, Lance gets talkative once he arrives at his gate.

*I hate this airport. It always has this weird smell?*

I haven't been there in ages but I know what you mean.

*Like cat pee, right? Or something rotting.*

Reminds me of durian.

*What the fuck's a durian?*

Google it.

Lance googles it. He's a little baffled at what he finds, which is kind of endearing.

*How can a fruit smell bad? And more importantly, why do people eat it if it does?*

It tastes better than it smells.

*If it smells like this, it'd better.*

Keith chuckles and closes his eyes, and gets a little more comfortable on the bunk. He doesn't respond. There's a rustling as Pidge shifts nearby but she still doesn't say anything.

*Don't leave me,* Lance says, but it's half hearted, because they're both exhausted.

I'm still here. Besides, you're boarding soon, so you have to pay attention for that.

*But afterwards!*

Take a nap too.

Lance grumbles and concedes. Keith falls asleep quickly.

He wakes up again to find Pidge gone, and Lance asleep and not quite two hours into a six and a half hour flight. He feels Lance stir almost as soon as he's fully conscious—he apologizes for waking him but Lance groggily responds that he doesn't mind. He turns his attention to the in-flight movie while Keith gets up and wanders out to the lounge.

"Hey," says Pidge.

"Hey," says Keith, and he slumps onto the sofa. The TV is set to the cooking channel again (as always), so he closes his eyes and watches Lance's movie through his eyes instead. Lance's presence envelops him like an affectionate blanket.
All too soon, the alarm sounds, ripping Keith away and back to himself. He feels Lance's focus immediately shift to him as he leaves the lounge with the other paladins and runs down the hall to Red.

"I need Black and Red out, with Green on standby," Allura calls over the announcement system, and Keith hears Nyma slow behind him; he keeps going and skids into Red.

He's the first one out of the hangar, but not by much—Terry, in Black, is trudging along just behind him soon enough, as they wade out into the bay. Red and Black means a melee-heavy fight—he takes out Red's sword and shifts sideways away from Black, ready to flank whenever the kaiju attacks.

"I have visual," he calls shortly, and Terry echoes him. Lance silently cheers him on.

Soon enough the telltale ripple of waves breaks upward into a massive scaly head, and Black wades forward. "Going in," says Terry.

"Red, flank," calls Allura.

"Roger."

Ahead, Black engages the kaiju. Red circles around quickly; Keith waits until he's nearly completely behind the kaiju before charging in, sword aimed forward.

A pair of eyes opens on the back of the kaiju's head. Red stutters to a halt as the kaiju writhes around to face her, and lunges.

Chapter End Notes
Lance starts half out of his seat, only the buckle keeping him in place. Joey and Hunk, on either side of him, give him curious looks, but he barely notices.

Keith is gone.

Lance had been sitting calmly in his seat, eyes closed, focused entirely on him. The airplane is quiet and he'd been dozing before; there was no need to be surreptitious about spending time in his boyfriend’s head. He'd watched as Keith took Red out, as the kaiju approached; he'd watched, felt Red circle around as if he were piloting her herself, felt Keith push her forward, into battle—and then the kaiju opened its eyes and lunged and—nothing.

Their connection was gone in an instant, and Lance is left to face the impossible again.

"No," he whimpers loud, and fumbles for his phone before he remembers he's on an airplane and there's still a kaiju out there and—he's not supposed to know what's happening back at the Castle, the only ones that could know he knows are Allura and Pidge and—Keith. And Allura and Pidge are busy and Keith is...

"Hey, buddy?" Hunk says quietly. "Are you okay?"

"Uh... uh, yeah, I'm fine," Lance responds. "Um. Bad dream. Sorry."

"...You wanna talk about it?"

"I really don't." He really does, though.

He rubs his forehead and sighs. Keith is too good of a pilot, he's too good, there's no way...

Hunk glances at Joey, who has returned to watching the in-flight movie. "Was it... Keith?" he asks, very quietly.

Lance bites his lip and tries to find a way to say what happened without actually saying it. The whole plane doesn't need to know he can read his boyfriend's mind.

...Could read his boyfriend’s mind.

He settles for, "...Kind of."

Hunk's eyes widen.

"W-well, I'm sure if anything happened, Allura or someone will contact us," he says quickly. "When we land. In... four hours."

"...Yeah."
This is going to be the longest four hours of his life.

He sits back and closes his eyes again, brow furrowed, trying to get a taste of that missing connection, of *something* other than his own shock and fear.

Nothing. He's alone in his own head. How the hell did he live like this before? How did he live without that constant presence in the back of his mind—even when Keith was blocking him out, he was still *there*. How is he going to go on without it?

He grits his teeth and clenches his hands around the armrests. A gentle hand lands on his arm.

"Try to get back to sleep," Hunk suggests quietly. "The flight will go faster that way."

"I don't think I can."

In response Hunk pushes the little armrest between them up out of the way, and wraps his arm around Lance's shoulder. "Try," he says, and Lance nods and leans into his side. God bless Hunk, where would Lance be without him? Nowhere good, that's for sure. Hunk rubs his shoulder and Lance gratefully closes his eyes. After a minute, he opens them again to plug his earbuds back in, and finds one of those crackly classical radio stations airplanes always seem to have, just for the noise. He curls back up in his seat and breathes deeply.

There's no way Keith isn't okay. There's gotta be some other reason he can't feel him anymore. Interference, or distance, or something.

The kaiju lunging had to be just a coincidence. Keith can't possibly have been hurt. He's way too good for that.

He's *fine*.

Out in the ocean, far away from land or mecha or humanity, a vessel bubbles up to the surface of the ocean. It's very small, not meant for long distance travel, or really anything but getting out of whatever situation it started in, equipped for survival but not for living—an escape pod. Its design is like nothing found on Earth, before now.

Its sole inhabitant tensely punches coordinates into the pod's limited navigation system, and sits back as the pod lurches and bumps away across the surface of the water, still half submerged.

Lance never does fall asleep. He feigns sleep so Hunk doesn't have to worry about him, but internally he himself worries, and worries, and worries. Hunk manages to fall asleep, at least, but by the time the announcement comes that they're preparing for landing Lance is still wide awake.

Maybe not fully conscious, though. He kind of feels like he's been concussed, or drugged or something—everything seems bright and wrong. He doesn't know, he *doesn't know*, he suspects but he can't accept—he's dazed. Shut down.

He doesn't really remember the process of landing but at some point while taxiing he kind of comes back to himself, in part because Hunk wakes up and starts moving and Lance has to sit up too. Joey says something and Hunk responds, and they start chatting across him as Lance stares at the blank TV a few rows ahead. The plane stops; the other passengers start to get up and fill the aisles with bodies and bags.

"Hey," Joey says, nudging him. "You gonna call your boyfriend or what?" He gives him a friendly
smirk and claims his place in the aisle to retrieve their carry-ons.

Oh yeah. They've landed. He can use his phone now.

He fumbles the thing out of his pocket and stares at its dark screen. It's off. He turned it off before they took off.

As long as it's off, as long as he doesn't call, Keith could still be...

"Lance?" Joey asks.

"He's on the roster today. I probably shouldn't," Lance mutters. He turns it on and shoves it back in the pocket of his sweats so he can stand and pass Hunk's bag over to him, and take his own. He takes a deep breath and wiggles out into the aisle.

"I don't have any messages," Hunk offers quietly in his ear as they shuffle slowly off the plane. "So... it's probably okay?"

"...Can your phone get messages while it's off?"

"Oh. I... don't know."

Great.

"But I'm sure it's okay! They probably know we've landed now, and they'd definitely contact us if something happened." Hunk pats him on the back, but Lance doesn't feel particularly reassured.

After all, Hunk's not the one dating Keith. Nor is he the one with friends all throughout the Castle that keep him updated if something's happened. And if something happened, they might all be busy anyway, or waiting for Allura to break the news gently...

Deep breaths, Lance.

They get out of the gate and down to baggage claim, and Lance watches the conveyor belt go round and round and tries very hard not to think or feel anything. His phone is burning a hole in his pocket.

Out in arrivals they're greeted by a couple of people in officer uniforms, holding a sign with their names. They're ushered into a black SUV with tinted windows, and Lance stares out silently through the dark glass the entire ride. If he can just pull his phone out of his pocket, unlock it, he'll know—one way or another. He'll know.

He's afraid to know.

The East Coast Garrison is only half-built, in the ruins of some warehouse, apparently, so the officers drive them to a hotel. They check them in, too, and someone hands Lance a keycard and instructs him to leave his luggage in his room and come back down for dinner.

The new Garrison may not have sleeping quarters yet, but it does have a mess hall—in its own room, fancy that. They're taken there to eat and meet the cadets they'll be mentoring for the next three weeks—Lance hears a lot of names and sees a lot of fresh, nervous faces, and normally he prides himself on learning names quickly but he's stressed, dammit, and not a single one sticks.

All he has to do is reach in his pocket, check his phone. Just a few seconds and he'll know. He can't do it.

Besides, if... something did happen, he won't be able to do anything for a while, and right now he
has to talk to these newbies. He has to show a strong face. If he breaks down in front of them, what are they gonna take from that? They're the future, they can't lose hope.

They can't be reminded that death is a reality now.

So he pretends to be cheerful and charming, and graciously accepts all the compliments thrown his way. There are a lot—Nyma and Keith weren't lying when they said he was legendary. Everyone here knows who he is, which would be a lot more gratifying if he wasn't stressed as all hell.

Hunk and even Joey keep shooting him looks throughout the evening; both know him well enough to know he's not on his game. Hunk even asks if he's okay a couple of times, and if he knows if anything happened—yes he's okay, no he hasn't checked, please, Hunk.

The evening drags on.

It's approaching 11pm on the east coast when they're finally driven back to their hotel, and Lance is exhausted even though it's only 8pm back west. He goes up to his hotel room—his own, because it's tiny, with a tiny bed, but it's got full walls and its own bathroom so it might as well be the lap of luxury—and flops down on the bed to finally pull out his phone and... stare at it again. He's had it on silent, not even on vibrate, so if it rang at all since they landed he doesn't know—and there's a little blinking light telling him he's got notifications, but that could be anything.

There's a knock on the door. He gets up with dread and answers; it's Hunk. He takes one look into the room, sees Lance's phone still sitting on the bed, and sighs.

"You haven't checked yet, have you? What happened?"

Lance huffs and goes to sit on the bed again. He starts spinning his phone around on the comforter, and Hunk closes the door and sits on the edge of the bed too.

"I can't feel him anymore," Lance says eventually. "He's not in my head. Our connection broke."

"On the airplane?" Hunk asks. Lance nods. "Then maybe it's because you're too far away? We're on the other side of the country, Lance."

"That's not all of it."

A pause. "Was there an attack?"

"Yeah," he whispers, and curls up on the covers, still staring at his blinking phone. "He went out. The last thing I saw was the kaiju lunging at him."

Hunk sucks in a breath. "And he... you don't know what happened?"

Lance shakes his head.

Hunk takes a deep breath and plucks Lance's phone out of his grasp, despite his noise of protest. He wakes it up but doesn't unlock it.

"You have 37 missed calls," he says, and hands the phone back. "I don't know who they're from, but ignoring them isn't going to get you anywhere."

"But what if he's hurt, Hunk? What if he's dead?" Lance sits up, clutching the phone to his chest. "What if something really did happen?"

"Then it's better to know than to be stressing about it in the dark," Hunk says. "I could just call him
myself. If you don’t I will, because Keith is my friend too and I want to know if he’s okay. But, you know,” he adds, “I haven’t gotten any calls myself, just a text from Allura to ask if we landed okay. And I think she’d tell me if... you know. So.”

That... does actually help. "Okay," Lance says, and he takes a deep breath, and he unlocks his phone and opens the call log.

Chapter End Notes

roster
tumblr
twitter
The kaiju lunges.

Keith lunges into the controls, too, ready to pull Red out of the way—then a pressure in his mind is lifted, and he freezes, suddenly feeling like he's floating. Lance's presence has vanished.

The kaiju crashes bodily into Red, knocking both over backwards, and countless alarms start blaring as Red is submerged. Keith swears and fights to free her from the claws holding her down—he feels like he's suddenly lost half his brain, and his mind is foggy and unsettled without Lance, but he can't think about it now. Water is already dripping steadily into the cockpit, getting in his eyes and making the controls slippery. The gyroscope keeping the cockpit upright has broken somehow and he's all but on his back in the pilot chair.

"Keith!" Terry yells.

"Could use a little help here," he grunts in response. He can't see anything but flashing red on his dashboard and a writhing darkness beyond.

"I'm trying!"

"Green, get out there!" he hears Allura yell, but it's staticky. An ominous crack resounds through the cockpit.

"Keith! What was that?" Terry's voice is staticky too. Keith catches a glimpse of sunlight through the water, Black's glowing windshield far above, then it grows dark again.

He can hear Shiro's voice in his head, a vivid memory: We're taking on water fast—

"Keith!"

—both legs are out of commission—

"Keith!?"

—I'm not leaving you—

"Keith! I'm coming!" This time it's Pidge. He snaps out of it at the sound of her voice.

"Shit," he mutters. He's not sure where the mecha's arms are, or if the sword is still intact, or where the kaiju even is—it's on top of him, he's pretty sure. He can't move; the limbs that are responding at all are meeting resistance as he fights with the controls. When he glances sideways he can see the water in the cockpit is rising almost to his chair, coming up from behind him.

It might just be moot, though, because there's another loud crack, and this time Keith can see the
source, lit brightly red across his windshield. Water drips down onto him even faster. Frantic, he hits the switch for the force field, hoping for a reprieve, but nothing happens.

"Come on," he says, flipping the switch back and forth. "Come on, come on, come on!"

"Keith!?" Terry is frantic.

"Shit, get me out of here!" he screams, as the windshield's frame groans inwards.

He rolls out of the chair, splashing into the rising water in the cockpit—

He takes a deep breath and dives down, numb fingers scrabbling against the wall until a panel clicks open and he fumbles the oxygen mask there onto his face, filling it with air and expelling the water—

He turns as the windshield shatters, and the last thing he sees is something thin and glowing shooting by overhead.

Everything hurts.

It's the first thing Keith is aware of when he regains consciousness. Then there's noise, too loud, and light, too bright even through his eyelids. Then there's the unfamiliar emptiness in his head where Lance should be. He groans.

"Keith!?" Pidge yells in his ear, and he flinches. "Sorry. You're awake. Oh my god."

Keith tries to fling an arm across his eyes but his arms feel too heavy to move, so he settles for screwing up his face and groaning again.

"Keith," Pidge says again, softer now. "We thought you were gonna die. We thought you were dead. Oh my god."

"Wh..." is all he can manage to say, and even that takes him a few tries. Hands touch him, pulling him up.

"Can you sit up? I've got some water for you," an unfamiliar voice says.

"Too bright," he rasps in return, or tries. But he seems to get the point across, because someone's calling to turn off the lights, and the glaring red of his eyelids fades. Cautiously, he opens them. Pidge is there, and Terry, and a nurse. He lets the nurse hold water to his lips and drinks gratefully, as he gathers his thoughts.

"Lance," he grates.

Pidge smiles, but she looks more tired and drawn than he's ever seen her. "His plane landed about three hours ago. Allura's been trying to reach him but he probably forgot to turn his phone back on yet, the idiot."

Then... he's probably okay, Keith decides. If the plane landed, he has to be fine, right? So then, why can't he feel him?

"What... what happened?"

"The kaiju saw you coming somehow and just... knocked you over," Terry says. "I was trying to get it off you but it was too big. Pidge got there with her grappling hook and finally pulled it off, and I pulled Red up right away, but your cockpit had collapsed. We thought..."
No one says anything. He remembers what Pidge had said. *We thought you were dead...*

"I'm..." He looks down at himself.

"You were brought in by helicopter," the nurse says. "It's good you put on that oxygen mask; it probably kept you from falling out of the cockpit, and they were able to resuscitate you when they picked you up. You've got a few cracked ribs, a broken arm, and lacerations across most of your body, but nothing penetrated deeply enough to cause serious injury. In all, you're extremely lucky."

He doesn't *feel* lucky.

"How long... until..."

"You should stay put for the next couple weeks, at least. You shouldn't be piloting for at least six."

Six weeks. That's a long time. Lance should be back by then... He nods, and the nurse leaves.

"Glad you're okay, Keith," Terry says, and leaves too.

"The nurse didn't say you're mostly bruise right now," says Pidge. "Seriously, everything that isn't bandaged is bruised." She lifts his arm for him to show him—the left one, his right is broken, and he's never been so glad to be ambidextrous—and sure enough between the bandages around it his skin is mottled purple.

"Ew," he says.

"You should see your *face,*" she says, and sets his arm back down gently. She sits. "But... you're alive now. That's the important thing."

Her face falls again. It hurts to move but he reaches out to her anyway, and she takes his hand with both of hers and offers him a small smile.

"I bet Lance is freaking out," she says.

"I don't know," he says. "Something broke our connection. That's why I froze up out there."

She raises her eyebrows. "Distance?"

"Must be."

"Hm." She looks down at his bruised hand. "Do you need anything?" she asks after a moment.

"Phone," he says.

"On it." She pats his hand and puts it back, and leaves Keith alone in what must be one of the Castle's hospital rooms. He closes his eyes and prods at the empty space in his head.

Lance? Lance, where are you?

There's no response.

Pidge returns with his phone and an apology; she can't stay, she's still technically on duty. Instead he passes almost an hour listening to Lance's phone go to voicemail again and again, ignoring the dinner a nurse brings him. He feels too sick to eat it.

If Lance is gone... but no, he has to be okay. If the plane landed fine, he must be fine.
He finally puts the phone down to eat, though he still feels sick, and is startled when it buzzes ten minutes later. He picks it up: Lance's name is on the screen. He takes a breath and answers.

"Lance—"

"KEITH ARE YOU ALIVE?"

He pauses, relief washing over him. "Yes?"

"Oh thank god. Oh my god. Keith."

"Are you okay?"

"Am I okay? You were the one out fighting!"

"I couldn't... uh, you know. I was worried," he admits. "And you weren't answering."

"Sorry! I'm fine except that I've been freaking out!" Lance exclaims. "Oh my god, Keith, I thought you were dead."

"I'm fine," Keith says, for once glad that Lance can't tell he's lying. "We took the kaiju down, no harm done."

There's a pause.

"Okay," says Lance, "I might not be in your head right now, babe, but I can tell you're lying anyway. What happened?"

Woops.

"Uh... Okay, I'm in the Castle hospital right now," he admits, and Lance sucks in a breath. "What."

"I... Something happened right as the kaiju lunged, and I kind of... froze up," Keith says. "It tackled Red. Pidge came out and rescued me, I was out for a few hours but I'm honestly fine, Lance. None of my injuries were serious."

Nevermind that he'd had to be resuscitated… but there’s no way he’s telling Lance that.

"Are you sure," Lance says.

"Yep. I'll be out of here before you come back. I just won't be able to pilot for a while because, uh, my arm's broken."

"...If I get back and find out it's worse than you're telling me..."

"Then you'll forgive me anyway because you can't hold a grudge to save your life."

"Um, not true, I hated you for at least a month."

"Exactly one month. And now we're dating."

There's a long pause.

"I hate when you're right," Lance says finally, and Keith laughs, though it makes his chest hurt.
"I'm always right."

"Yeah, yeah. Look, take care of yourself, okay? I'm gonna be worrying about you constantly so the least you can do is get better while I'm gone."

"I will," Keith says. "I'll call every night."

"You'd better. Remember I'm three hours ahead of you though. It's getting on towards midnight here."

"Okay."

"Also, Hunk says hi."

"He's with you?"

"Yeah. He—hey!"

There are some muffled noises, and then a new voice picks up the phone. "Hey, Keith," says Hunk.

"Hi?"

"Lance was so scared you were hurt that he wouldn't check his phone," Hunk says, despite Lance's yelping in the background. "I had to talk sense into him, as usual. You're doing okay? I gathered you were hurt..."

"Yeah, I'm in the hospital but it's nothing I won't recover from."

"Wow, okay. Feel better soon! I'm gonna give the phone back to Lance before he tries to murder me, take care!"

There's more muffled noises, and then Lance sighs loudly into the phone. "Okay, I kicked him out," he says. "You're seriously okay?"

"I'm seriously okay," Keith says, and he can't help but smile, even though Lance can't see. "What were you doing while ignoring my calls?"

"I wasn't—okay, I kinda was," Lance says. "Well..."

He tells him about the new Garrison, and meeting the cadets—what he remembers, anyway, since apparently he was "totally out of it". They chat until a nurse comes in and tells Keith he should rest.

"Tell me when you're free tomorrow," Keith says. "I'm not gonna be doing anything all day but you're gonna be busy, right?"

"Yeah, probably. I'll text you when I know. Sleep in, yeah?"

"Definitely. Night, Lance."

"Sweet dreams, babe."

Keith does sleep in, sort of, but mostly because he kept waking up in the middle of the night with his chest or his arm or something throbbing in pain. He gets a dose of painkillers with breakfast and ends up falling back asleep, not waking until almost noon.
Someone had thoughtfully brought him a phone charger and plugged in his phone for him. When he picks it up, there's a text from Lance: "good morning!!! ur probs still asleep tho lol".

He texts back, "no shit i was asleep, it was 5 am", follows it with a "good morning to you too" even though if it's noon for him it's well into the afternoon for Lance, and, for lack of anything better to do, plays games on his phone until someone comes by with lunch. Rex stops by to say hello and see how he's doing, but he can't stay long, and when he leaves, Keith... plays games on his phone again.

Being confined to a hospital bed is desperately boring. The room doesn't even have a TV. But he needs to distract himself, because now that he's (mostly—barely) not worried about Lance anymore, he keeps thinking about the attack, and Shiro’s final transmission...

Lance does send him a few texts but doesn't have time for an actual conversation—he promises to call later, though, and he finally does shortly after dinner arrives.

"Keith, I'm so fucking exhausted," he says. "I've been on like three tours here, and they've barely even built the place, it's only been here a week—I've had to tutor people—tutor them!—in the sims, because it's like now that they're all out here they've forgotten freaking everything—"

"Lance..."

"—And they haven't even gotten to try out the mechas here yet. Of course, they might just be trying to spend time with me, I am legendary after all, but I'm also taken, thanks."

Keith laughs.

"What, do you disagree?" Lance sounds mock-offended.

"No, no, it's just," Keith says, "they probably just look up to you."

"Aww, babe, you think so?"

"I know so," he replies seriously. "I did too."

There's a pause. "Wait, seriously?"

"Yeah?"

"Wait. You did, meaning you don't anymore? Wow, Keith."

"Well, you're a little less impressive in person..."

"Keith!"


"You're just saying that."

"I'm not! When have I ever lied to you?"

“Uh, when you said there was nothing wrong before I left? And when you said everything went fine last attack even though you’re in the hospital?”

“Well, it was obvious, wasn’t it?”

"...Okay," Lance says after a moment. "But we both still know I'm not Shiro."
Without telepathy, Keith is left floundering. "What does Shiro have to do with this?"

"Uh..."

"Lance..." Keith says waringly.

"No, I... I've been in your head so I know you don't think of me that way, but..."

"What way?"

"Well... as a replacement."

A... replacement? A replacement for Shiro? Lance?

"That's ridiculous," says Keith. "You're nothing alike."

"I know! But, I mean. Shiro was incredible. I'm just, like, second place."

"No!" Keith shouts, indignant, shooting up in bed—and winces in pain. "Ow! Fuck."

"Keith!?"

"I'm okay." He hisses quietly as he slowly lies back down, and takes short, shallow breaths until the pain in his chest subsides a little.

"What the fuck did you do!?"

"Ah... cracked ribs. Sat up. Ow."

"Don't—don't hurt yourself, oh my god."

"Don't hurt yourself," he retorts. "You're not second place, Lance. You're you, that's why I like you."

There's a long pause. "That's..." Lance starts, then stops. "Well, I like you too. But—"

"No buts. Nope."

"But—!"

"Nope. Don't compare yourself to Shiro. Not allowed."

"I'm gonna fight you, Keith."

"You'd fight a wounded man? I'm shocked, Lance."

"I'll fight you with my mouth. Battle for tongue dominance."

"...Never say that again."

Lance laughs, and Keith forgets the pain in his ribs for a while.
sorry for killing keith~ :)
Bonnie and Hui both show up for a visit the next day, and Jess and Terry the day after. Terry is still with him—just leaving, actually—when the alarm goes off, distantly, elsewhere in the Castle.

Terry freezes. Keith stares.

It's been only two days since the last attack. It's way too soon.

"False alarm?" Keith suggests. It's still going off.

"I'd better go up and make sure," Terry says, and takes off.

The alarm stops shortly, but the tension doesn't. The door to his room is open and he can hear the nurses fretting outside. Impatiently, he hits the call button, and a nurse pops in shortly.

"What's happening? Is there a kaiju?" he asks.

The nurse glances around. "Yes. There are paladins out fighting it now."

"Who?" Keith tries to push himself up, but the nurse flaps a hand at him.

"No, no, stay put, you need to rest!" she says.

"What's happening?"

She huffs. "I'll make sure a recording gets to you once it's over, just don't worry about it for now."

Don't worry about it. Right. It's unprecedented for an attack to come so soon after the previous and he has no way of knowing how it's going or who's been sent out. Frustrated, he watches people hurry by his door while he's stuck in bed.

If Lance were here he'd be able to watch the fight, one way or another. But Lance is on the other side of the country. It does give him an idea, though; he grabs his phone and calls Pidge.

"Keith?" she answers. "What's up?"

"...Yeah?"

"There's an attack going on right now. Didn't the alarm go off?"

"WHAT?" Keith has to hold the phone away from his ear for a second.

"There's an attack! Right now! A kaiju!" he says. "They aren't showing it there?"

"No one's turned on the TV—they're doing maintenance on the alarm, I think. It's way too soon? There can't be an attack..."

"Well, turn on the TV and tell me what's going on, because I can't watch it from here."
"Shit. Okay," she says, and he hears her puffing a little as she jogs to the tech corner and turns on the TV. "Oh my god, you're right. It's—it's Blue and Green out, so, Ralph and Derek. It's a kaiju. It's not even, like, an unusual one? Hang on." There's a rustle as she covers the phone with her hand, and then he can hear her, slightly muffled, yell, "Hey everyone! There's an attack!"

"Is it going okay?"

"Hm? Yeah, they're doing fine," she says, uncovering the phone. He can hear voices in the background now. "Almost done, looks like. How'd you even know?"

"The alarm went off? It's quieter down here but you can still hear it. Terry had to book it back upstairs."

"I bet. There's no reason to think there'd be an attack today..." Her voice trails off a little.

"Pidge?"

"Yeah, I'm here. Ralph just took the kaiju down, he's just shooting to make sure it's dead." She huffs. "But why the hell is it here at all?"

Someone says something in the background and she makes a little hum of agreement.

"Yeah, but it's not like this one could've come from there," she adds.

"What?" asks Keith.

"The second source. Hang on, I'm putting you on speaker."

"Hi Keith!" Bonnie calls.

"Uh, hey," he says.

"Keith! How are you today?" Hui asks.

"...Exactly the same as yesterday?"

"Okay, okay, let's not get sidetracked," Pidge says. "Keith, we're speculating why there's another kaiju so soon."

"I kinda figured," he says.

"As I was saying," Denise says, "there are kaiju in the Atlantic now, so..."

"And I said, this one couldn't have come from there," Pidge says.

"There wasn't a lure over there though, yet," someone points out. "The second sighting was over in, like, Morocco."

"I doubt it could've gotten all the way over here without being seen or attacking," Keith says. "It's got to be from this side."

"Maybe it got lost," says Bonnie.

"There's a lure, they don't just get lost," says Rex.

"Maybe the lure stopped working?" another voice chimes in.
"Seems to be working now."

"If it'd stopped working for a little while and the kaiju went in a different direction..."

"There'd still be an abnormally small amount of time between attacks unless this happened during a nine day gap," says Pidge, "but the last time that happened was back when Keith was first added to the roster. It's been months."

"Three day gaps have happened before, a couple of times. When was the last eight-day?"

"A month ago. There was a seven day gap a couple weeks ago..."

"Then it'd be two three-days right in a row..."

"So no matter what, this is abnormal," says Keith.

"Well, the Atlantic sightings are already abnormal," says Hui. "Perhaps the entire pattern is shifting."

A pause. "So they're not just increasing in location, but in number?" someone asks.

"Possibly."

"Shit."

Keith is inclined to agree.

"We'll have to wait and see, I guess," Pidge says reluctantly. "This could just be a fluke."

"Keith?"

He looks up, moving his phone away from his ear slightly. Allura is in the doorway to his hospital room.

"Uh, hey. We're discussing the attack..."

"With who?"

"The paladins at the Garrison."

"Keith? Who's there?" Pidge asks.

"Allura."

There's a clamor in response, and he holds the phone away from his ear.

"I think they want to know what you think," he tells her wryly.

"Hm." She closes the door behind her and comes and sits by his bed, and he holds the phone up to her. "I think," she says, "that this could simply be a one-time event—but I have the feeling it isn't."

More clamoring as Keith takes the phone back. He raises an eyebrow at her.

"May I talk to you?" she asks quietly. He nods and brings the phone back up to his face.

"Pidge! I'm hanging up," he says loudly.

"Okay, bye! I'll come by later," she says, and he hangs up.
"So," Allura says. "How are you?"

"Still breathing."

"That's a good sign." She shifts in her seat. "I'm sorry I haven't come by sooner. Is Lance listening in right now?"

"Oh. No, we, uh... the connection broke during the last attack. That's kinda why I got tackled."

"The break hurt you?"

"No, just surprised. So I froze up at the exact wrong time." He shrugs. "I'm pretty sure it's just the distance but we can't really discuss it."

"I see," she says. "Does he know about today's attack yet?"

Keith shrugs again. "Probably, but not from me."

"...Right, you wouldn't know." She sighs. "Okay, I suppose he'll have to be filled in when he gets back. I don't trust the Garrison not to listen to anyone's calls, particularly not ours."

He nods.

"So, As I said, I don't believe this is a one-time event. What with everything else going on—I don't believe it's simply a coincidence."

"You think it has something to do with the Garrison?"

"Well," she pauses. "I don't know how it could. But there are the kaiju appearing across the continent..."

Oh, right, they haven't filled her in yet on their findings. "We actually, uh... we found transmissions between Commander Sendak and what seems to be the location of the source. They're in another language or something and Pidge hasn't been able to translate them yet."

Allura freezes. "Tell me you didn't break into his office."

"...I didn't."

"You know you could get in serious trouble even for just being involved?"

"Are you going to turn us in?" Keith asks drily.

"Of course not." Allura straightens up, frowning. "Subjecting you to the mercies of the Garrison is the last thing I want. I'm only worried you might have gotten caught."

"Well, we didn't," he says. Granted, it was a close thing, but he's not going to mention that. "Pidge knows what she's doing."

Allura raises her eyebrows. "Does she? Would she know anything about surveillance systems?"

"...Probably?"

"Hm. When she comes by to visit you, tell her to come see me," she says. "In the meantime, have you learned anything else?"
"Not really. But we figured that if Sendak is talking to the source, there's either something there that we don't know about, or he's on the kaiju's side. We were trying to figure out why he sent the Kerberos mission to begin with, and we think the answer is probably in those transmissions, along with his plans for me and Lance."

Allura contemplates that for a moment. "You're saying," she says slowly, "that there's a possibility your superior officer wants you dead because he is a kaiju."

"I don't know how he could be a kaiju. He's too small."

"And that's your problem with what I just said."

He shrugs. "The evidence says he’s probably on their side."

Allura sighs and sits back in her chair. "I didn't anticipate this," she says. "I'd be shocked if you had."

"Do you four have any plans now?"

"Uh. Pidge is trying to translate the transmissions. Otherwise, we just need to get everything to the public somehow before the second Kerberos mission. Pidge knows more about that. And it’s not like the public doesn’t know about the kaiju now, so it might actually be easier than we thought..."

She nods. "Speaking of the mission, I did have to tell them you two accepted it."

"Oh."

"...but Lance's current absence, and your injury especially, does help delay things. We are also trying to move slowly with the project, but it's almost done as it is." She looks at him seriously. "I expect a minimum of six weeks before the mission. It could be longer but I wouldn't count on it."

"...Shit." Six weeks is not very long at all, and Lance will be gone for half of it.

"I'll tell Pidge to hurry it up, I suppose," Allura says, standing. "I ought to go. Do remember to tell her to see me."

"I will," he says, and she leaves.

Pidge does show up later in the day, and he fills her in on what Allura told him and passes her request along. She promises to come back to tell him if anything new comes up—and she doesn't come back, so he assumes nothing new came up.

He calls Lance at dinnertime.

"Keith! I heard there was an attack!" Lance exclaims first thing. "Everyone's okay, right? You're okay?"

"As okay as I was before the attack," Keith says. "Yes, nothing went wrong, as far as I know."

"Okay, good, good."

And since the line isn't secure, they can't really discuss it any more than that.

"Keith!"
The sound of his name almost rouses him from sleep, but not completely. He mumbles something and scrunches up beneath the blanket—until someone shakes him roughly.

"Keith!" It's Allura, speaking in a loud whisper. "Keith!"

"Mf? Wha?" He groggily turns over, opens one eye. The lamp at his bedside is on. It's clearly the middle of the night. He frowns at Allura, confused.

"Keith, we have a huge problem. Shiro's back."

Chapter End Notes

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Keith sits bolt upright, now wide awake. "What!?"

"Shh! Shiro came back—he had some kind of escape pod, it's like nothing I've ever seen—but the Garrison already knows."

Her eyes are wide, desperate, and his heart settles low in his stomach as he realizes her meaning.

"He's really here," he says, not quite a question. This should be a happy thing, Shiro's return, but all he feels is terror.

"Yes."

"Allura, you—we have to hide him, get him out of here. A boat, or something, get him as far away from them as possible."

"We are under constant surveillance, Keith," she whispers. "I have been testing the boundaries for weeks now and we are completely surrounded, even on the ocean—they even have seismic sensors to stop us from digging. There's no way, Keith. We're trapped."

"Pidge could—"

"I had Pidge look into it today. She cannot disable enough sensors to hide anything without it being obvious."

"So make it obvious," he hisses. "Fight them. He can't fall into their hands now."

Not after everything they've been through. Not after everything they've done to find the truth. Not when Shiro has returned.

"And then they will come for us with the entire army behind them," she hisses back. "I am the only thing standing between them and the mechas. If the Garrison is truly as compromised as you say—if Commander Sendak is in league with the kaiju—would you hand our only weapon over to the enemy?"

The silence rings around them. Keith doesn't want to admit she's right.

"We need to go to the source," he whispers finally. "We need to cut them off at the head, and we need to do it fast, before they can bring the army against us."

She sits back. "Keith, that is one hell of a suggestion."

"I think it's clear the Garrison is not on our side, Allura," he tells her quietly, but fiercely. "Do you want to live under the threat of kaiju forever? If we want this to end, we have to end it ourselves."
She's quiet for a moment. Her face smooths out as she thinks.

"For this... coup d'état, of sorts, to work," she says, "we would need to take into account that there are two sources. A blow to whatever command structure, if any, that Sendak has been contacting could paralyze them long enough to allow us access to both, but we would have to be quick, and we would have to know how to close them. If we time it in accordance with the release of the information you and the others have gathered, then our own military shouldn't interfere as well." She takes a deep breath. "It would be very risky, and we would need to be very, very lucky. And we cannot do it before Lance returns."

Keith swallows. "No, he's... he's on the other side of the country. He's safe. And we'll need someone at the other source anyway."

"Do you think that you, Pidge, and I can pull this off ourselves?" she asks sharply. "We will be pressed as it is. Besides, he is surrounded by Garrison officials, he is most certainly not safe. And if you are here fighting with me—and you shouldn't even be out of bed yet—they will use him against you. They will hold him hostage. Hunk, as well."

He grows cold at that. He pulls the blanket up a little higher and shakes his head. "Then, when they come back," he says. "But can you delay the Garrison from getting Shiro?"

"I can try," she says quietly. "But it's more than two weeks until our envoy returns. I can hold him here in the hospital for a while, but..."

"Where is he now?"

"In... in one of the labs. They are evaluating him right now—one of his arms was replaced with some kind of alien technology and we want to be sure he won't be... controlled by it. I've hardly even talked to him—I came as soon as we were sure it was him."

Keith struggles to breathe for a moment. "Oh. Can I... see him? Now?"

"...I will see if I can steal him away for a few minutes, but it will have to be brief," she says. "The scientists there are on our side but I don't trust that someone won't come down to check on him."

"Okay," he says, voice small, and she stands.

"I will be right back," she says, and leaves him alone in the dark.

Shit. Shiro's back.

Which means that whatever happened on that mission, he survived it—and has been beyond the source for over a year.

And now they're out of time.

Up until he hears footsteps outside his door, up until he sits up as Allura opens the door and gently pushes another figure through, up until the moment the lamplight shines on a face that's weathered and scarred but undeniably Shiro, up until Shiro whispers "Keith" in a voice that breaks Keith's heart, he half thought he was dreaming.

But Shiro is here, and it's real.

"Shiro," Keith whispers back.
Neither speak for a long time. Then Keith says, "It's good to have you back," and Shiro lets out a long breath.

"It's good to be back," he says, and he comes and sits in the chair Allura left. Keith reaches out to him and Shiro takes his hand, warm and real and here, he's really here.

"What happened out there?" Keith asks.

"I don't know how I can even begin to tell you," Shiro says. His eyes glaze over as he stares towards the far wall. "There was... so much." He falls silent. His other hand is slowly clenching and unclenching—it's metallic, foreign.

"The Kerberos mission..."

"I don't want to talk about that," he says, abrupt but not unkind. He focuses back on Keith again. "You... became a paladin?"

"A few months ago."

"And you've been injured."

"I'll be fine."

Shiro goes quiet again. He rubs his thumb over Keith's hand where it isn't covered by the cast. "I didn't want this for you," he says eventually.


Shiro blinks. "Katie's here too?"

"Yeah. Back at the Garrison."

He sighs. "We never wanted to leave you two like that."

"I know."

Another silence.

"Keith," Shiro says quietly. "I... they told me it's been more than a year." There's a slight wrinkle in his forehead and it makes him look so much older than Keith remembers.

"Yeah."

"I... I'm not..." He takes a breath. "Have you... moved on?"

Oh. Right.

They were still dating when Shiro disappeared.

Keith bites his lip and looks away. He may be with Lance now but the loss of Shiro is still a healing wound—reopened by his return, if not by every revelation along the way. The four years they spent together weren't nothing; he buried Shiro a year ago but he didn't move on, not completely.

But he can't go back, either.
“Kind of,” he says quietly. “Partly. I missed you a lot, but I… uh, have a new boyfriend…”

Shiro lets out a breath. Keith lifts his free hand quickly, looking everywhere around the room but at Shiro.

“I mean, this is really recent, it’s not like I moved on just like that. And I came here just to find out what happened to you, so—”

“Keith.” Shiro squeezes his hand. “I’m glad, really.” When Keith finally looks back at him, he’s smiling—he actually looks relieved. “I wouldn’t be able to go back to the way things were. Too much has happened and... I’m not the same person I used to be.”

“Neither am I,” Keith says, and smiles back, small and tentative.

The door opens and Allura pokes her head in. "Two minutes!” she whispers, and closes the door again. Keith's throat feels tight—they have so little time left, and there's so much he wants to say.

"Keith, there's a lot you need to know," Shiro says quickly. "About the kaiju, and the source. I'll tell Allura, so make sure she tells you, okay?"

"Did Allura tell you about the Garrison?"

"Only that I shouldn't trust them."

"Then, you make sure she tells you more."

"Okay," he whispers.

This silence is tense and brief.

"So much has happened without you," Keith says. "There's a lot I want to tell you."

"Tell me something positive, for now. Tell me about your boyfriend?"

"Oh, uh, you know him, actually. It’s Lance."

"Lance?" Shiro's eyebrows shoot up. "He's a good kid. I wouldn't have thought you'd get along, though."

"We didn't at first."

"Heh. Of course. Is Hunk still around? They used to be inseparable."

"They still are, yeah."

"And Joey? Terry? Tina?"

"Still here."

"And, Keith—are you happy?"

That gives him pause. Is he? How can he be, knowing what he knows?

"Not yet," he says carefully. "Maybe once we've... cleaned up this mess. The Garrison and the kaiju and everything." He waves his free hand vaguely upwards. "We've hardly had a chance to breathe lately."
"Allura told me there was an attack two days ago, and another today. That may have been my fault for escaping..."

"Don't worry about that. It might've happened anyway, the way things are going. Allura can tell you more."

Shiro nods. The door opens.

"Time to go! Quickly!" Allura says, and Shiro nods again and stands.

"I'll see you again soon, Keith," he says.

"I hope so," Keith says.

"I promise." Shiro squeezes his hand once more and lets go, and walks back out the door to where Allura is waiting. Then the door closes, and Keith strains to hear their receding footsteps until he can't anymore.

Allura doesn't come back that night, and Keith doesn't fall back asleep until after he hears the night crew out in the hospital replaced by the morning shift at dawn.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Notes

this is all fluff(?) today #GiveKeithABreak

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The nurses wake Keith at noon, fearing his "oversleeping" is a sign of brain damage or something—so he spends much of his afternoon subjected to a barrage of tests, despite telling them he just had trouble sleeping last night.

They finally conclude he was just tired… as he'd said hours before. At least it passed the time—and distracted him from worrying over Shiro. He kind of thought Shiro’s return would stop the twisting in his gut at the thought of him, but instead he thinks of the attack that put him here and Shiro’s arm and the scar on his face and feels sick.

Rex is the only paladin to visit him that day; he'd arrived as the nurses were about to start another test and they begrudgingly allowed the visit, so long as it was brief. Allura comes down before dinner just to tell him she's going to wait for Pidge to come by tomorrow before revealing what Shiro has told her so far.

"Some of it is vital to our plan," she says, "and much of it could be of use too. I'd rather say it only once, though. And—Shiro is doing fine. We are holding him under the pretense of concern over the state of his mental health." She sighs. "I wish I could say it was entirely pretense. It's incredible he survived at all... But don't worry!" she adds quickly, as Keith gets increasingly worried. "Shiro is strong. It's nothing he can't handle, and he's already improving."

"...How long are you going to be able to keep him?"

"I don't know. We're taking it day by day."

Yeah, he still worries.

By the time he calls Lance, Keith feels like he's burning inside—there's so much still that he doesn't know, and so much he can't say, and Shiro is somewhere nearby but he can't visit him because he’s not supposed to know he’s there.

"Hey, babe. How was your day?" Lance asks him cheerfully, and Keith aches.

"Fine," is what he says. "Pretty boring. I slept in and worried all the nurses."

Lance laughs. "Ah, I wish I could sleep in. Did Pidge stop by?"

"No, but Rex and Allura did."

"Wow, a visit from Allura herself. Did she tell you we had our first attack over here today?"

"Nope. How'd it go?"
"Eh, it was a bit of a mess. They've only got three mechas over here but they wanted to give the kids as much experience as possible, so they sent all three out. I mean, it was me and Hunk and Joey piloting, but we all had shadows and there really didn't need to be three of us out there."

"But no one was hurt?"

"Aside from Hunk's kid letting go of the chair for some reason and falling—no. Just a few bruises. It was over fast."

"Are they gonna send you guys out next time too?"

"Eh, probably." Lance sighs. "They're expecting two or three more attacks while we're here, and there's only like, nine kids so far, but they want them all to learn from us veterans, you know?"

"You keep calling them kids," Keith says, laughing a little. "Some of them could be older than you."

"Highly unlikely. What person older than, like, twenty three, is gonna sign up for this kind of danger?" Lance pauses. "But yeah, they're not really kids. I think the youngest of them is nineteen. They've just got this innocence, you know? All bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, excited to be here. Less so after today, though."

"All fun and games until you face your first kaiju."

"You don't have to tell me." Lance takes a deep breath and lets it out. "To be honest, I was kind of hoping these guys would all turn out to be prodigies and they'd send us home early, but I guess that's not happening. I feel like I've been here forever but it's only been a week."

"Five days, actually."

"Babe, don't ruin my delusions. They're all I've got to cling to without you."

Keith snorts. "I miss you too, Lance."

"I dunno, man, I'm not really feeling the love tonight." There's an intake of breath.

"...Don't—"

"Can, you feel, the loooove, tonight..." Lance breaks into song, and Keith laughs, but his heart isn't in it.

"I don't mean to be distant or anything," he says when Lance finishes, thinking that if he's joking about it, he's probably actually worrying about it. "I've just had Shiro on my mind a lot lately."

"...Oh."

"Don't jump to conclusions, Lance."

"I wasn't!"

"You were. I know you were."

Lance huffs. "Okay, so, explain?"

And Keith can't tell the whole truth over the phone—but he can tell some of it. And if the Garrison is listening in, well, it doesn't matter that Keith knows Shiro is back because frankly he'd be thinking of him anyway.
"Because of the attack," he says after a moment. "The one I was hurt in. I keep thinking—was it like that for him?"

There's a soft intake of breath on the other end of the line.

“And…” He swallows. “I’m still afraid you won’t come back, either.”

Shiro did come back, but god, that doesn’t help.

“Then I’ll tell you again: I’m coming back, Keith, I promise,” Lance says. "Come hell or high water or, fuck, hordes of kaiju, I don't know. I'm coming back, and not a damn thing is gonna stop me. Okay?"

"Lance..."

"I'm serious. I'll take down a kaiju with my bare hands if I have to."

It’s silly, but Keith feels a little better anyway. "...I can't imagine a scenario in which fleeing wouldn't be the better option—"

"Keith! I'm trying to be romantic here," Lance protests.

"There's nothing romantic about getting stepped on."

"Well, some people are into that, but—"

"By a kaiju? I hope not—"

"No! Ugh. I’m not explaining this over the phone." He pauses. "But seriously. You're not getting rid of me that easily."

"At the risk of you yelling at me for taking you literally again—getting rid of you is the exact opposite of the problem here, Lance."

"Yell at you? No, that was actually really sweet."

"...It was?"

"Keith, Keith, Keith. Do I need to spell it out for you?"

"...Yes?"

Lance sighs. "It makes me happy when you, like, show affection for me, dude. Like, a lot. I never expect it."

Keith's not sure how that explains anything. "I've told you I like you? A few times? We're literally dating?"

"I know! And I appreciate your bluntness. Seriously. But every time I'm still like, whoa, you know? Because I like you too."

Whoa. Something warm curls in Keith's chest and that, at least, he understands.

"Okay, I get it," he says.

Lance lets out a long breath. "Okay, good! Because we've gotten off topic, and the point is, I'm not
leaving you. Clear?"
"Yeah."

"You're supposed to say 'I'm not leaving you either, Lance.'" He lowers his voice in a mockery of Keith's.

"I'm not leaving you either, Lance," Keith parrots, rolling his eyes.

"There! Good boy."

Keith snorts.

There's a brief, companionable silence. Then Lance yawns.

"What time is it over there?" Keith asks.

"Uh... a little past eleven. Don't tell me to go to bed, I'm literally in bed already."

"You should sleep, though."

"I guess."

"Tell Hunk and Joey I said hi."

"I'll do that. You can call Hunk yourself, you know."

"I don't know when you guys are busy during the day. Are you still doing tours and stuff?"

"No, but I guess we are still running the kids through simulations and everything. Showing them recordings. All that jazz. You can try around noon here, probably, or just send a text."

"Yeah, I will. Goodnight, Lance."

"Aww, come on, it's not that late."

"And we both know you'll be miserable tomorrow if you don't get enough sleep. Aren't you waking up at, like, seven?"


"Goodnight."

"You already said goodnight."

"Stop stalling. I'll hang up on you."

Lance laughs. "Okay! Bye, babe."

"Bye, Lance."

Keith is smiling when he hangs up. It's funny how even just the sound of Lance’s voice makes him feel so much better.

He does text Hunk the next day shortly after breakfast, a little before 9 am. When Hunk responds with the okay, he calls.
"Hey, Keith!" Hunk says when he picks up. "How are you?"

"Alright," he says. "Better than I have been. You?"

"Dude, I'm exhausted. But the recruits are great, I'm really proud of them."

They chat a while, and Hunk puts him on speaker for a while so some of the recruits (and Lance) can say hi. Like Nyma, they all seem to know who he is, which is still a little weird—he thanks them for their well-wishes anyway.

Hui and Bonnie both stop by in the morning, too, very briefly—it's hard to tell how everyone's feeling when Keith is cooped up downstairs in the hospital, but the two paladins do seem tense. And with this apparent change in kaiju attack patterns, it's no wonder.

He's glad they visit, though, because he hates to be alone with his thoughts. It didn't used to be that way; he used to prefer being in his own company. He’d told Shiro he wasn’t the person he used to be, but he hadn’t really noticed before just how much coming here and meeting Lance and all his friends had changed him.

It’s for the better, he decides, as he waves goodbye to Bonnie. He’d really be miserable on his own.

Chapter End Notes

i was asked about ages the other day... lance, keith, and hunk are all ~22, pidge is 20, and shiro is ~25. and allura is 28. in case you too were wondering!!

anyway, back to your regularly scheduled drama next time :)
Pidge and Allura finally show up after lunch; the latter claims the chair, and Pidge just flops down over the foot of Keith's bed.

"We're so fucked," she complains. "Kaiju everywhere and I still can't translate those transmissions."

"Would this help?" Allura asks, slipping a folded piece of paper out of her pocket and handing it over. Pidge unfolds it—Keith can't see what's on it from this angle, but he can see Pidge's eyes widen.

"Yes? Where'd you get this?"

Allura glances over at Keith, then back to Pidge. "Shiro has returned, Pidge," she says.

Pidge stares.

"He arrived the night before last. The Garrison already knows, so I don't know how long we'll be able to keep him—"

Pidge sits straight up. "Where's my family?"

"Alive." Allura holds up a hand. "He wasn't able to take them with him—"

"Why not!?"

"A multitude of reasons, which I will be happy to detail for you later, if you would let me finish," Allura says sharply. "He returned here with the intent of rousing a rescue effort, unaware of the Garrison's treachery. Keith and I have the outline of a plan already, and rescuing your family will be part of it. The information that Shiro has given me grants us a good chance of pulling this off—I hope."

Pidge crosses her arms and frowns. "Okay. What's the plan?"

"We will need to pass through the source," she says, and Pidge's mouth falls open. "It's a sort of portal to another world, apparently—and on the other side are the creatures that command the kaiju. While the information you have gathered on the Garrison is disseminated, hopefully confusing the military long enough to keep them from interfering, we must destroy the leadership of those creatures beyond the source. There, we can rescue your family and close both sources—both portals—and end this."

"So much for not going on a second Kerberos mission," says Keith.

"The difference is they won't be expecting it," says Allura. "Based on what we know of Sendak, and
now, what's beyond the source... I would say it is almost certain he is working with them. I shudder to think how that could have come to pass, or why—but we already know we cannot trust the Garrison anyway."

"Pidge, you said it was like Sendak didn't exist before he came here, right?" Keith asks. "So maybe he really is a kaiju."

"Not a kaiju," Allura says. "A 'galra', or so Shiro says. They created the kaiju as a sort of bioweapon to send against us. And—I don't see how he could be. They aren't human, and Sendak is."

"It doesn't really matter either way," says Pidge. "He's not on our side."

"So these 'galra' are, what, aliens?" Keith says. "We've been fighting an alien invasion?"

"Strictly speaking, they are not from this world—so, yes, I suppose," Allura says, and sighs. "An alien invasion. It's absurd."

"Yeah, well, it's our life now, apparently," says Pidge. "So let's get on with it. These words are from Shiro?" She waves the paper Allura gave her earlier.

"Yes," Allura says. "He picked up some of their language while... in captivity."

So that's what's on the paper.

"Then when I get back, I can hopefully start translation." Pidge tucks the paper in her pocket.

"What's the time frame for all this?"

"Ideally? As soon as Lance and Hunk have returned and been caught up on the plan," Allura says.

"That's barely more than two weeks. It's not very long," Pidge says.

"No, but we already had a limited time frame, thanks to the planned Kerberos follow-up mission—and now even less due to Shiro's return. The fact of the matter is, we won't be able to keep him out of the Garrison's hands much longer, and the sooner we can get him back out, the better."

"They're not going to just let us take him," Keith says.

"No. I suspect we'll be getting our hands dirty," Allura says wryly.

"...You mean fight? Are we going to have to literally fight the Garrison?" Pidge asks, voice cracking and eyes wide.

"I hope not," Allura says. "But if it comes to that... We must prepare for every eventuality. I suspect most involved can be turned to our side, particularly those Sendak has threatened, if we can prove we can stop him from carrying those threats out. Some may be loyal to him—the Garrison may have been infiltrated more deeply than we know now."

That thought doesn't bother Keith much, though he thinks maybe it should—he knows it would bother Lance to no end, though.

"Did Shiro tell you what's on the other side of the source?" he asks. "In detail, I mean. Or are we going to go through blind?"

"No, we are working on mapping out what's beyond, based from his memory," Allura says. "It's far from perfect but his directions to where the prisoners are held, at least, are fairly specific—so we will be able to find your family, Pidge—and he has some idea of where the command center is as well."
"Are we going in on foot, though?" he asks. "I can fight, but if we're up against trained soldiers I don't know how effective a handful of us are going to be."

"I can fight too. I mean, they trained us at the Academy," Pidge says, "but, yeah, I've never really had to use it, so..."

"I hope you won't have to," Allura says. "If you can stay in the mechas and fight from there, that would be ideal."

"You have no idea how this is going to go down, do you," says Keith.

Allura sighs. "Not a clue. But what choice do we have?"

No one answers. She stands.

"Pidge, we ought to go back upstairs," she says. "Keith, I'll check back with you soon."

"Yeah," says Pidge. "Tell Lance I said hi?"

"I will," he says, and Allura and Pidge leave again.

The alarm goes off again the next day, and this time it's Jess that has to hustle back upstairs from the hospital. Keith calls Pidge as soon as he can unlock his phone.

"I was just about to call you," she says. "The alarm did go off here. It's... Blue and Yellow out, this time."

"Then Black's probably on standby."

"Probably. Oop, it breached. Heh, this one kinda looks like a shark with legs."

There are some muffled laughs in the background.

"And there they go," she says. "Okay, Yellow's about to engage. Aaaand bam, she has... The kaiju's trying to bite her, oh my god, it really is like a shark. Blue's all 'pchew, pchew'. Oop, she hit its eye, now it's pissed... Okay, Yellow got its attention back, we're good. Keith, you still there?"

"Yep," he says, trying very hard not to laugh.

"Good. Blue's circling... Yellow just took a hit, but she's—ah, oh my god, it's got her arm, come on Blue...! Phew, okay, it let go. Yellow doesn't look too hurt, she's still punching it... Oh, it stumbled. It's almost down. Almost there... Haha, Yellow just punched its other eye. Get rekt. And... down it goes. Blue's still shooting... Okay, it's dead." She finally pauses for breath. "That wasn't too bad. Keith, whaddya think?"

"Well, it was definitely entertaining."

She mock gasps. "Are you insulting my commentary?"

"I'm complimenting your commentary."

"You'd better be. Okay, the mechas are heading in, I'm gonna put you on speaker."

"Sure."
Suddenly he can hear muffled talking in the background. There's a rustling, and then Pidge speaks again. "So," she announces. "Another two-day gap between attacks, and here we are."

"I hope this is not a new pattern," Hui says.

"An attack every three days sounds exhausting," says Tina.

"It could still be a fluke," someone offers. "If the last attack hadn't happened, this one would still be on schedule, right?"

"Yeah," says Pidge, "so if the last one was just... extra..."

"Then this one is normal, and we'll be back to usual next week," Keith finishes. "So we have to wait and see."

"But I wanna know now," Bonnie mutters. There's a noise of agreement.

"We could find out in as little as three days," Terry points out, and Bonnie groans. There's a few half-hearted chuckles at the sound but it gets quiet again quickly. Terry is right; all they can do is just wait and see.

The next week is the longest of Keith's life.

First, the Garrison takes Shiro away. It's not unexpected, but it's still devastating, and when Allura tells him he just curls up under his sheets and stares at the wall for a long time.

He's already lost Shiro once. He doesn't want it to happen again.

Pidge figures out Shiro is being kept in one of the walled off corners of the Garrison, in the labs there, but the place is locked up tighter than the offices. She promises to find a way in to check on him, but they can't get him out, not yet—not before Lance returns.

Another attack comes on the third day after the last one and Pidge comes down afterwards just to sit with him. Neither say anything.

He calls Lance every night but he can only ever tell him half of what's bothering him, and it makes him even more restless. He's still afraid Lance won't come back, too.

Two awful days of nothing, just nothing, and then another attack, the fourth to come far too soon. There's no denying it at this point, and when Allura comes to visit she muses about changing the roster for the Black and Red teams—both of which are down to three members. Hui has been on duty for the past two attacks and Rex for three, and both will be again for the next, assuming it follows the same pattern.

"Red still is not yet ready for battle again," she says, "and I don't send Black out every time, but the point of the roster is that any one paladin is unlikely to be on duty for two attacks in a row. It happens, of course, but..."

"When I'm back on the roster, the Red team rotation should be fine," Keith points out. “But in theory we should have ended this by then.”

“Yes—but it’s still a problem now.” She sighs. "We may have to bring in new paladins. I hate to do so when the other coast is under duress as well, but three of our veterans are there..."

"There's a lot of qualified cadets at the Academy just sitting around waiting for your call," he says.
"More people get through training than there are spots for them. I was done months before I came here."

"It's more than that," she says. "Knowing now what the Garrison is capable of, I hardly want to bring more people into their hands. But this new attack pattern could stretch us too thin."

"That's probably what they want," he says sourly. "It's like a war of... what's the word?"

"Attrition?"

"Yeah, that."

Allura frowns. "You may be right. But I hope you're not."

The day before the next attack is expected, Keith is finally released from the hospital under strict instruction to rest as much as possible. He'll have to keep in touch with Allura through Pidge now, but at least he can get up and walk around without a dozen nurses yelling at him.

The atmosphere back at the Garrison is subdued when Keith gets to the top of the stairs, until Coran all but knocks over his chair as he stands and shouts, "KEITH!" and comes around the desk to give him a very tight and unexpected hug. He takes him by the shoulders as Keith winces at the pain in his ribs; his arm, at least, is protected by a cast.

"Sorry!" Coran exclaims. "Didn't mean to hurt you, lad! Just glad to see you're back, y'know?"

"Uh, yeah, thanks," Keith says. The receptionist is still holding his shoulders and, as usual, his antics have gained the attention of much of the rest of the inhabitants of the Garrison.

"Keith!" shouts Bonnie, and Keith loses all hope of a quiet return as every paladin within shouting distance—which is to say, every paladin at the Garrison right now—comes to greet him.

Even so—it's nice to be back.

Chapter End Notes

i bet yall thought there wouldnt be any galra in this lol

roster
tumblr
twitter
The next attack comes the next day, predictably, and this time it's Keith narrating the attack over the phone—to Lance, who called a minute or so in, wanting details.

"It figures this would happen while I'm gone," Lance says when the attack is over. "This whole... new attack pattern thing."

"It does," Keith says, and wonders, not for the first time, if that's actually true. He wouldn't put it past Sendak to call for extra attacks while some of the top paladins are gone.

But, as always, they can't talk about it over the phone.

The next morning Lance texts him, "r u free??"

He responds, "yes?"

"then the double date is ON," Lance sends, and Keith is confused until a couple minutes later Shay approaches him in the tech corner, with Pidge and her laptop in tow.

"Good morning, Keith!" Shay calls, and comes and plops onto the couch next to him. "How are you?"

"Alright," Keith says, gesturing with his broken arm. "Could be better, I guess."

"So I see. How much longer will you be in the cast?"

"Three weeks."

"I am sorry to hear that," she says. "But it could be worse, right?"

"It could," Keith agrees, absently watching Pidge set up the laptop in front of them. "How have you been? Are you still working on the Initiative?"

He glances over in time to see her make a face. "Yes," she says, "and even with the—" she glances around "—delays, I have been so busy lately."

"With what?"

"Allura has not told you?"

"She hasn't told me, either," Pidge offers, straightening up. "Not that anyone tells me a damn thing about your 'Initiative' anyway. You're all set, by the way, just waiting for Hunk to make the call."

"Thank you, Pidge," Shay says. "And I do not see why I cannot tell you that we have been finishing a new mecha."

"A new mecha? " Pidge asks. But before Shay can respond, Skype dings, and she accepts the call. Lance and Hunk appear, smushed together to fit into the small window, and they both light up when the laptop's camera shows them Keith and Shay.
Keith realizes a moment later, embarrassingly enough, that he's also grinning widely and can't stop.

"KEITH I MISSED YOUR FACE," Lance hollers, while Hunk exclaims, "Shay!" Keith covers his face with his hands and sighs as Shay laughs.

"Well, have fun, guys. Don't destroy my backup laptop," Pidge drawls, and leaves.

"Oh my god!" Lance is yelling, as Hunk tries to shush him. "I'm dying here, I need to go home now—Hi, Shay—Keith, stop covering your face, I want to look at you!"

Keith surfaces, mostly—his cheeks are hot against his fingers, oh god, he's probably as red as Red. Lance is grinning—probably at him, but he's not looking at the camera, so their eyes don't quite meet.

"While they stare at each other," Hunk says, "are you guys at the Garrison?"

"Yes, I did not have the time to go any farther," Shay says. "I am forfeiting my lunch break for this."

"What? Your lunch break? Shay..."

"I will still eat, Hunk."

"Keith, your arm," Lance finally interjects.

"I did tell you it was broken." Keith pauses, finally lowering his hands. "Didn't I?"

"Yeah, but..." Lance makes a face.

"I'm fine."

"You will be happy to hear that Red will be fully functional within the week, by the way," Shay offers.

"That reminds me, you never did say what would happen with those new sims," Hunk says.

Shay glances around. "The Garrison cancelled them. They are still in the lab, almost complete, but we cannot move them somewhere more convenient."

"Shame," says Keith.

"Can't we just... go down there and use them?"

She shakes her head. "The simulations are run externally. You would need a supervisor with experience with the system, and Allura and I both are busy, usually."

"Okay, that sucks and all, but can we not talk about how the Garrison ruins everything, for once?" Lance whines. "Like, I just wanna hang out. Enjoy myself. Can't we do that?"

A pause.

"I agree," says Keith.

"Yeah," says Hunk.

"Certainly," says Shay. "Though I am not sure what you mean by 'everything'..."

"Ask Keith later," Hunk suggests.
"In the meantime," Lance says, "can we talk about how yesterday one of the newbies called Hunk 'dad'? Because I'm still losing my shit over it."

Hunk covers his face with his hand as Shay and Keith laugh.

When the 'date' is over, Pidge takes her laptop back, and Keith walks Shay back down to the subway. She stops him on the first floor, though.

"What did Lance mean by 'the Garrison ruins everything'?" she asks. "The short version, if you can, because I really do need to go."

"Commander Sendak is on the kaiju's side and probably wants me and Lance dead, the way he wanted Shiro and the Holts dead," says Keith. "Which explains the Kerberos mission and its follow-up."

"...Oh."

He shrugs. "That's the short version. We're, uh, working on it."

She straightens up. "How can I help?"

"...Are you sure you—"

"Yes," she says firmly. "I believe you, and I am not going to stand by and watch if there is something I can do."

And with that statement Keith's mood lifts just a little—it's heartening to have a new member on the team, another person on their side. "Talk to Allura," Keith says. "Pidge is in on it too, if you run into her. And don't talk about it over the phone, because the Garrison could be listening in."

"Okay," she says, and smiles. "Thank you, Keith. I will see you around, I hope." And she heads down the stairs towards the subway.

"Bye," he calls belatedly, and slogs back upstairs to drop onto a bench in the cafeteria, across from Pidge.

"She's in on it now," he tells her quietly.

"Are you sure we can trust her?" Pidge asks. "I know she's Hunk's girlfriend or whatever, but..."

"She was part of the Initiative," he says. "Allura trusted her enough for that. And she wasn't the snitch, so, yes. I think so."

Pidge sighs. "The more people know, the weaker the secret," she says. "But I guess she could be useful."

"We need people on our side. A lot of people."

"Not yet, though."

Keith leans forward across the table—no one is in earshot right now and the room is noisy, but it's vital no one hears. "We're doing this in a week, Pidge."

She blinks. "Shit. Already?"
"Are you ready?"

"As I can be, aside from the translation. I don't know if Allura is, or if Hunk and Lance will be when they come back..."

"Any news from Allura?"

"She's upgrading some of the mechas when she can, just in case. I haven't had the chance to talk to her longer than, like, a few seconds, though."

Keith sits back and sighs. "So all we can do is hope now."

"Pretty much."

Inaction is... not Keith's forte. He gets up from the table and makes a couple of indecisive laps around the Garrison before heading for the stairs.

He only half intends to go to the old hiding spot where they'd built the drone, but that's definitely where he ends up. The drone is still there, dusty and untouched, along with a pile of discarded bits and pieces of electronics and casing, and plenty of tools. He stands in the almost empty room and regards their old workspace for a while, thoughtful.

If all goes well, they won't have to fight the Garrison, or any aliens while on foot—but things don't always go well. There's plenty to work with here. Besides, if nothing else, he's got an extra can of gas with his bike and the ruins are bound to be full of empty bottles and scraps of fabric...

He can't make sure everything goes as planned, but he can be prepared. He gets to work.

Keith is awoken in the middle of the night, a couple nights later, by a light tapping at his door and a whispered, "Keith!"

He takes a half-awake moment to reflect with disappointment that late night wake up calls are apparently just part of his life now before rolling out of bed and padding over to the door. Unsurprisingly, Pidge is on the other side.

"I can get us in to see Shiro," she whispers without preamble, barely audible. "But we have to hurry."

That's not something he can turn down, not at all. "Alright," he whispers back, and steps out into the hall barefoot and closes the door behind him.

She stops him on the stairs, though, just out of sight of the fourth floor landing.

"Wait," she breathes. He does, all but holding his breath.

An agonizing almost-minute later, footsteps approach the stairs. They enter the stairwell and Keith tenses—but the sound grows quieter as they head downstairs instead. Pidge holds a finger to her lips and gestures forwards, and they creep the rest of the way to the landing, and across the silent Garrison main floor—he's been here so many times in the night it's starting to feel normal like this, the way an empty place usually full of people shouldn't. The only movement is the two of them and the blinking lights in the tech corner.

Pidge steps right up to the lab entrance and opens the door; it's unlocked.

"Smoke break," she explains. "We've got seven minutes. No more."
Keith glances around one last time, and slips into the lab hallway. "Alright," he whispers back. "Where is he?"

"Should be at the end of the hall."

He heads straight down as she closes the door behind them, down to the last door off the hallway, and reaches for the handle.

It's unlocked. Inside are a lot of boxes and pieces of equipment—piled kind of haphazardly, actually, like this room was only ever supposed to be used for storage. There's a pretty rough-looking office chair, too, currently vacant. And on the cleared side of the room is a wall of bars, and behind it, Shiro.

He's asleep—unsurprisingly, given it's the middle of the night—on what seems to be an air mattress. He's got blankets, but the only other contents of the cell are a couple of books and a bucket. Keith's fists clench unwittingly.

How dare they keep him like this.

Pidge darts forward to the bars while he's frozen in anger and tries to reach through. Her hand doesn't quite make it all the way to the mattress.

"Shiro!" she whispers, about as loud as a whisper can be. "Shiro! Wake up!"

Keith shakes himself out—no time for anger, only action—and comes to join her at the bars.

"Shiro!" he says, tapping his fingers against the metal, and finally Shiro stirs. He blinks up at them for a few moments before his eyes focus and he sits up.

"Keith? ...Katie?" he mumbles.

"Yes, it's us." Pidge reaches through the bars to him again, and he takes her hand, staring at it like he's not quite sure what it is.

"Are you okay?" Keith asks. "What have they done to you?"

"Ah... nothing, really." He shakes his head, blinks a few times. "Threats, but I haven't given them reason to follow through... What are you doing here?"

"Checking on you," Keith says. "We can't get you out without the Garrison finding out..."

"But we will," Pidge whispers fiercely. "We just need you to hold out for another five days or so. Can you do that?"

He focuses on her. "Yeah. Yeah, I can. Katie... your family... I'm sorry."

"Allura told me."

"I wanted to help them, I didn't know about the Garrison—"

"I know." She shakes his hand a little and smiles, and he smiles back, tentatively.

"They are alive," he adds. "I know they are."

"I know," she says again. "We're going to rescue them, with your help. Allura told us everything."
"I will help," he confirms. "I'll come with you."

"Shiro—" Keith says.

"I've been across the source. You need me," Shiro says. "I know where to go, and I know what'll be waiting for us."

"You only just got back," Keith whispers. Shiro reaches out to him with his free hand, the metal one, and Keith takes it. It's cold, smooth, foreign.

"I have to do this," he says. "Don't try to keep me out of it; I'm not leaving them behind again." He offers Keith a smile. "But this time, you'll be with me, right?"

"Yeah," Keith says. "Yeah, of course."

"I'm not leaving anyone behind this time," Shiro says, looking between them. "I'm going to protect everyone."

"We'll protect you, too," Pidge says, and Keith nods. Something beeps.

"Time to go," she says, and lets go of Shiro's hand.

"I'll see you again soon," Keith says.

"I know you will." Shiro squeezes his hand. "Stay safe, Keith, Katie."

"We will." Keith lets go reluctantly, and follows Pidge back out of the lab. They hide behind a sofa as the guard saunters back through the Garrison and into the lab; as soon as he closes the door behind him, they head back upstairs in silence.

Less than a week, Keith tells himself. Less than a week from now, they'll get him out.

Chapter End Notes

heads up there is a (small) chance i wont update for the rest of the week... the holidays r coming but also ive got a wake and a funeral to go to so... uh ill try but, it might not happen :o

geroster
tumbr
twitter
Keith is perched on the edge of a bench in the cafeteria in the morning, leg bouncing as he scratches along the edge of his cast. It's been an anxious few days—Pidge has everything set up and ready to go, except for the translation, which is still too incomplete to get much of anything from, and Red has been repaired but Keith is still grounded because of his arm.

But Lance is supposed to fly back today—he's already in the air, and has been for a few hours now. Keith can't wait.

Movement catches his eye, and he looks up to see Sendak emerge from the offices. He looks around, and makes eye contact with Keith, and holds it for a moment; then he crosses the room to Coran's desk, and hands him a paper, and says something that Keith can't hear. Coran nods and Sendak returns to his office—but not before looking at Keith again, almost smirking.

That can't be good.

Keith gets up and approaches Coran, but before he gets there Coran stands and rings the little bell that signals an announcement. He's still the first to arrive, though, and Coran looks down at him with an expression that Keith has never seen on him before. Sorrow? Fear? He's not sure what it is.

"Sorry, lad," Coran says quietly, and Keith's heart gets stuck in his throat.

If it's something to do with Lance...

Coran, as usual, waits until at least most of the paladins (and a great deal of curious staff) have gathered around his desk, before clearing his throat and holding up the paper.

"The Garrison has officially declared an urgent mission to investigate the source of the kaiju..." Coran clears his throat again, and Keith's blood runs cold. "Codename: Charon. It will begin this afternoon..."

Keith takes a step back. Charon, the ferryman of the dead.

"In approximately five hours..."

"Keith?" Pidge whispers.

"Following the return of the paladins currently en route from the newly established Garrison across the country..."

He steps back again, out the back of the crowd. Faces in his peripheral vision are turned towards him but his eyes are fixed on Coran.

"As one of them will be co-piloting the mission. The paladins chosen for the mission are..."

"Lance Diaz and Keith Koga—"

He takes off running.

"Keith!" Pidge yells, and follows him down the stairs. "Wait!"

There are murmurs and a few confused shouts that quickly fade out of hearing as he pounds downstairs. Fuck, it's happening so soon, why is it happening so soon? And Lance will land totally clueless, unless the telepathy comes back on its own, but he won't be in range for another hour at least...

He skids to a stop on the first floor, because he can hear voices coming up the stairs—voices of Garrison officers.

"Keith—"

"Outside," he hisses, and pulls Pidge towards the door. She wrenches her arm out of his grip.

"Wait," she says. "We can't start yet, I don't have my things! We need to plan this out, I know it's sooner than—"

"We don't have time! You go back up, but I can't, they're not going to let—"

"Hey!"

Keith's head snaps around—at the stairwell are two Garrison officers, looking right at them. He starts walking backwards toward the door.

"Hey!" one of the officers shouts again. "You shouldn't be down here—get back here!"

"Pidge, go!" Keith sprints for the door. A glance back as he passes through the door shows him the officers are following—as is Pidge.

"They saw me with you," she puffs, as they burst out of the Garrison and into the dusty streets and bright morning sun. "Too late."

"Shit." He steers them down an alley, around a corner, through a ruin. They duck into an abandoned building and crouch in the shadows. Footsteps approach.

"Dammit," one of the officers says, just on the other side of the wall. "Jay, I lost them."

"Keep looking, they can't have gone far," a voice crackles over some sort of radio. Keith holds his breath.

"Roger that." The footsteps approach the wall; a hand taps on the window right above their heads. Pidge squeezes Keith's arm.

Then the footsteps move away and trot down the street, and Keith breathes again.

"How are we going to get into the Castle?" Pidge whispers. "It'll probably be guarded by now..."

"There's a maintenance shaft or something, down into the subway," he whispers back, cautiously straightening up and peering out the window; the street is clear. "We can follow the tracks and come up from there."
"So we can get run over by the train? Great. You know they're probably gonna send people down to look for us."

"Do you have a better idea?" Keith cautiously leaves the building, and jogs down the street, alert, with Pidge hot on his heels.

"I still need to get back to the Garrison somehow. Ugh, what are we even doing?"

"Uh." He stops for a second. "...Rebelling?"

"Yeah, but..." Pidge gestures toward the Castle. "We aren't ready for this at all? What are we doing?"

Keith takes a deep breath and continues walking. "We need to get you back into the Garrison somehow. Then when Lance gets back, we need to go to the source—fuck, but the kaiju are gonna be expecting us. So we'll have to hold off, I guess? And Lance is going to land right into their hands, we'll need to rescue him—and Hunk—and Shiro—ugh." He groans and runs his free hand through his hair. "This is all happening too soon."

"We should talk to Allura," she decides. "Maybe she'll know what to do?"

"Maybe," he agrees, not really hopeful, and steers them cautiously around another corner and down a street, towards the maintenance shaft Lance showed him once.

Climbing down the ladder is a pain with the cast on his arm, but he manages, and Pidge quickly follows. They check both ways along the almost pitch dark tracks. It's silent.

"We're gonna hop down, cross over, and then we're gonna run like hell," says Keith.

"Yessir," says Pidge.

They hop down, cross over, and they run like hell.

It's not a very long way, not even on foot, but Keith keeps checking back over his shoulder, making sure Pidge is still with him—not that he can see her, really, in the darkness. But he can hear her breathing and the crunch of the gravel beneath their feet.

The lights of the Castle's station come into view, and a rumbling starts behind them.

"Shit," Pidge puffs. They pick up the pace.

The light from the train is already casting their faint shadows on the tracks ahead of them as they sprint into the station. Keith grabs onto the lip of the platform with his hands, then his arms, and swings himself up, rolling onto the concrete and breathing hard.

"Keith!" Pidge yells. Her hand, barely visible above the edge of the platform, waves frantically as the lights down the tunnel grow brighter.

He scrambles to the edge and reaches down with his good arm, locking his hand around her wrist and pulling hard. She grabs at the edge of the platform with her other hand and pushes herself up, leaning over the concrete, and he grabs the back of her uniform and pulls.

She rolls onto the platform, and the train enters the station seconds later.

There's no time to breathe, though, because Keith catches a glimpse of an officer's uniform on the
train as it slows, and he's pulling Pidge to her feet and towards the stairs moments later.

"Saw someone," he gasps. "Dunno who."

"Looking for us?"

"Dunno."

They forego the lockers and dart through the crowd in the lobby toward the elevators. There's no particular commotion at their passage, or in general—news from the Garrison must not have reached the Castle yet. So much for it being guarded, but they're here now either way.

The elevator ride up is tense and slow but Keith is still breathing hard from the run down the tracks and frankly is glad for the opportunity to rest. Pidge doesn't complain either, but as soon as they reach their floor they burst across the hall and into the control room anyway.

The staff turn to look. Allura also looks up at their entrance, and half-stands, alarmed.

"What are you doing here?" she asks.

"It's happening," Keith puffs. "Today."

"What?"

"They announced the mission," Pidge says, adjusting her glasses. "For as soon as Lance gets back."

The room is completely silent. The elevator dings. Allura gestures frantically, and before Keith can process it Pidge is tugging him down behind someone's desk. They huddle there as shoes click into the room.

"Ms. Altea," a smooth voice says. "I'm here to inform you that your cooperation is required in the search for two of our paladins."

"...Oh?" says Allura.

"Keith Kogane is missing. It seems he kidnapped a fellow paladin: Katie Holt."

Keith almost jumps upwards, but Pidge holds him down by the arm and pins him there with a glare.

"Why on earth would he do that?" Allura splutters.

"We don't know. All I can say is it followed the announcement of the Charon Mission, of which you are already aware."

"Kerberos part two, I assume," she mutters. "I was never given a date for it. I gather there is one, now?"

"Today. This afternoon." A pause. "Will you cooperate with the search?"

"...Yes, of course, though I don't know what you expect me to do. The Garrison has the resources for such a task, not us," she adds pointedly.

"We suspect Mr. Kogane may try to steal a mecha; you need only let us know if either of them enter the Castle. We will take care of the rest." The voice darkens, and then the shoes click again. "Good day, Ms. Altea."
Keith doesn't dare breathe until the elevator dings and the doors slide shut.

"You can come out now," Allura calls wearily. "As for the rest of you—under no circumstances are you to speak of this to anyone." Her voice also grows dark, and noises of affirmation quickly fill the room.

Keith stands slowly, and Pidge hurries over to join Allura. He follows, as Allura looks over them both.

"What the *hell* happened?" she asks.

"Sendak had Coran announce the mission and we ran."

"Well, he ran. I chased after him."

"I need more details, kids." She sighs and looks at Keith. "Why do they think you kidnapped her?"

"I have no idea. I think it was pretty obvious I didn't."

"They're probably trying to make him look bad," Pidge says. "Y'know, turn people against him so they'll turn him in."

"That seems likely. Ugh." Allura puts a hand to her forehead. "This is happening far sooner than I anticipated. Keith is still injured—Lance hasn't even returned yet."

"What if they found out?" Keith asks lowly. "What if they found out what we were planning?"

Pidge freezes. Allura frowns.

"And decided to force our hand? I... sincerely hope that is not the case," she says. "But we cannot rule it out."

"Wait, shit," Pidge says suddenly, almost interrupting Allura. "Keith, turn off your phone, quick. They could track it."

"I... left it at the Garrison."

"Oh. Well, that's okay then." Pidge deftly turns hers off and removes the battery, and tucks them into separate pockets.

"Well, it doesn't matter *why* they did it," Keith continues. "We have to do what we have to do either way. Which means we need to go back and get Pidge's stuff."

"Can you wait for Lance to return to bring them? Since calling or texting is obviously out," Allura asks quietly.

"Somehow I don't think they'll let him get that far," Keith says lowly. "The mission's pretty moot, so why wait?"

"Then you'll have to rescue him from the airport."

"If Keith can't just warn him once he's closer," Pidge adds. "But we've got a few hours to plan for that still. In the meantime, I still need my stuff."

"Can you sneak back in?"
"Maybe?"

"I could cause a distraction," Keith offers. "If they're accusing me of kidnapping it's not like my job's at stake anymore, and we were gonna mutiny anyway." He grins. "I've been wanting to give them hell for a very long time."

"Just don't hurt anyone," Allura says. "Most staff there can't possibly know the full story. They're innocent."

"They still went along with it," he says, but holds up a hand when she opens her mouth to argue. "But fine. I won't hurt anyone unnecessarily."

Allura takes a deep breath. "Then... good luck, you two. And come back safely." She turns back toward her staff. "As for the rest of you: as of this moment, we no longer answer to the Garrison."

A murmur runs through the group. Some look nervous, but most look excited.

"You are not to communicate or cooperate with the Garrison in any way," Allura continues. "And if you suspect anyone disagrees with that order—" she straightens up, eyes flashing "—you are to isolate them, and report immediately to me. Am I clear?"

"Yes, ma'am!" comes a chorus of responses. Looking pleased, she turns back to the two paladins.

"Go now," she says. "We can still make this work."

Chapter End Notes

here we goooo

(heres a doodle)

roster
tumblr
twitter
Forty five minutes later finds Keith standing in an alley behind the Garrison, a lighter in one hand and a Molotov cocktail in the other.

Pidge is hiding nearby, on the other side of the building by the entrance, waiting for his distraction. It took some time to plan, to grab his prior preparations—to Pidge's initial shock, but subsequent delight—and to get into position. But now they're here, and they're ready, and all Keith has to do is make a scene.

He grins.

He knows the ruins by heart by now—he knows that anyone coming out of the Garrison is going to come from one end of this alley, and he knows at least three escape routes out the other end. He knows that one of those routes will take him by the old hiding spot, where he can grab the drone on his way back. He knows that Pidge will also have multiple escape routes, assuming he can keep the Garrison occupied back here—and that she can get in and out without getting caught.

He knows that any second now the fuses of the smoke bombs he set up across the ruins will burn down and start them smoking, ideally further splitting up the Garrison crowd.

He also knows that the top of this building is visible from the side of the Garrison where the offices are. He lights the Molotov, reels back with his good arm, and throws.

The bottle doesn't cleanly clear the top of the building, but it catches on the trim and explodes on the edge of the flat roof. Keith ducks back quickly from the burning shrapnel that rains down into the alley. The fire throws up a cloud of smoke, blocking what little he can see of the Garrison from here—in the distance, another plume of smoke rises.

He picks up two more Molotovs and waits, lighter ready.

It's less than ten minutes before he hears shouts and footsteps, coming closer from the direction of the Garrison, as predicted; he lights the bottles and gets ready. The alley is long and thin, and there are no easy ways around, not with the destruction in this part of the ruins.

Two officers come around the corner and spot him—the moment they do, he tosses the Molotovs ahead of him. The officers halt as a wall of flame erupts between them and him.

He picks up his last bottle, just in case, and approaches, but not too close; the officers put their hands to their guns but don't draw them. There's a good thirty feet between them.

"Found him, but we've got a problem," one says into a mic.

"Stand down, Keith!" the other calls. "We aren't here to hurt you!"

"Somehow I doubt that!" Keith calls back.

"Where's Katie?"

"Safe!" Keith throws his arms up, and the officers flinch. "Why would I hurt my best friend!?"
"You kidnapped her!"

"You know I didn't!"

He desperately hopes she's made it in by now. He can only stall for so long—but she doesn't need more than a few minutes...

"We don't," says an officer, as several more come around the corner and stop at the sight of the flames. They're starting to burn low, and he hefts the Molotov in his hand, in case the officers decide to try to get across. "Just tell us where she is, Keith. It'll make this easier for all of us."

"I didn't kidnap her! She followed me on her own!"

The officers exchange looks. "Where is she!?"

"Safe!" he repeats. Which is almost certainly not true; she's got to be up to her cubicle by now, at least.

The officers move closer. Keith flicks the lighter open, holding it up next to the Molotov where they can see.

"Stay back!" he calls.

"Don't make this difficult, Keith!"

"I'm not going back!"

"We can still solve this peacefully!"

Keith lights the Molotov. The officers back up quickly as he leans back, ready to toss.

"Keith, stand down!"

He tosses, and dodges back. It lands right amidst the lingering flames of the previous two, and shatters, hiding the officers for a moment behind flame and smoke. Broken glass scatters almost to his feet.

"IF YOU WANT ME," Keith screams, "COME AND GET ME!"

It is then that his connection with Lance is restored.

Lance's delight is slowly overtaken by shock, as he realizes that Keith is standing, panting, amidst burning debris and smoke, while Garrison officials hover uncertainly beyond the flames.

We had to start without you, Keith thinks.

Start what? Keith!?

He watches a couple of the less hesitant officers creep closer, trying to get around the flame. Sendak emerges from the alley behind them, arms crossed.

They announced the follow-up mission, Keith thinks. Codename: Charon. It's supposed to happen today.

"Mr. Kogane," Sendak says, as Lance is stunned into silence. "Just what is the meaning of this?"
"I think," Keith says steadily, though the smoke burns his throat, "you already know that." He meets Sendak's eye through the wavering air above the flames.

"This is cause enough for a dishonorable discharge."

"Fine."

"Furthermore... you are putting the lives of these brave men and women in danger." He gestures around at the officers still hovering nearby. "If one of them felt threatened, say, and were to use their firearm... well, it would be self-defense, wouldn't it?"

Haha, oh yeah, Sendak wants them gone.

"You're not even subtle that you want me dead, Sendak," Keith spits, even as he steps back, away. "Me and Lance. That's what the Charon mission was for, wasn't it?"

"Boy." Sendak's eye flashes warningly, almost glowing yellow in the light.

"That's what Kerberos was for, wasn't it!" he screams over the sound of the flames, and he turns and runs. He hears a growl and a yelp, and something whizzes by his ear, but he's already turning a corner and sprinting back toward the Castle. He can only hope Pidge has finished by now, and gotten out—the officers will probably waste some time searching for him, but her time is definitely up.

I think Sendak just tried to shoot you? What the fuck!?

Oh yeah, Lance is back.

Tell Hunk to be prepared for a fight, Keith tells him. Now that we've gone and done this, they might not even try to bring you back to the Garrison.

A shiver of fear runs through Lance's mind. How the hell did this happen?

I told you, they announced the mission. Pidge and I fled, but she had to get back in to get her stuff so she could send out all those documents.

Why now!?

I don't know!

Keith darts around a corner and almost bowls over some Garrison official, out searching. Both shout in shocked unison.

"Kogane!" The officer reaches for him.

Without a moment of hesitation Keith grabs him, knees him in the crotch, and throws him down. The moment the guy hits the ground Keith is off running again. He's going the wrong direction for the drone, but that's fine, they probably won't need it anyway.

Jesus christ.

Nope, just me.

How can you be so calm about this!?

We've been planning this almost since you left. I just couldn't tell you over the phone.
Shiro came back. The Garrison has him locked up in the labs. Also the sources are portals to another world, and we'll have to go through one to rescue the Holts, and close them.

...What the fuck.

I'll try to fill you in better when I'm not running for my life, okay?

Keith takes a turn and the sea breeze hits—he's almost there. Lance falls silent for the moment, but he's still there, in the back of Keith's mind, tense.

Keith has never been so glad for his presence.

He reaches the Castle shortly. The people Allura posted outside as lookouts wave him in, but he hesitates.

"Has Pidge come back yet?" he asks.

"Not yet," one tells him. He turns and looks back toward the Garrison.

What is Pidge doing again?

Getting her stuff back out of the Garrison.

And you left her to do this alone.

I was causing a distraction!

"Are you... coming in?" one of the lookouts asks.

"Not yet," he says. "I'm waiting for Pidge."

"If someone sees you, there's not much we can do."

Keith tears his eyes away from the ruins for a moment. The lookouts are frowning and fidgeting, looking between him and the city.

"It'll be fine," he says. "She should be here soon."

Hopefully.

She'd better.

If she's not back in five minutes I'm going to look for her.

You'd better.

I will.

He paces, eyes flicking from street to street. There's a thick band of empty space around the Castle where the ruins were taken down, presumably to enable the Castle's construction—it grants him a good view of all the likely routes Pidge might come from.

The streets remain empty.
Keith waits as long as he can stand, pacing anxiously, before he makes his decision.

"I'm going after her," he says without turning, loud enough for the lookouts to hear.

**Good.**

"No, you absolutely are not."

He spins—Allura is standing in the doorway, arms folded.

He mirrors her. "Pidge isn't back yet. They might have captured her," he says, as Lance reacts with outrage.

"They might have," Allura says, "but she did send out the documents already—she copied me on the email. It's also very possible the Garrison does not yet know she's involved, especially if most officers are under the impression you kidnapped her. And you're still the one they want dead."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying we cannot risk you on a rescue mission when you're in more danger than she is."

"She's my friend, I can't just leave her."

Allura gives him a pointed look. "You still have Lance to rescue—not to mention Shiro."

...Shit.

*Why do I need rescuing? I can handle myself.*

How are you gonna get yourself back from the airport?

...*I can figure something out?*

"Lance knows what's coming," Keith says, a little tentatively. "He's, uh, back." He gestures at his head.

Allura raises her eyebrows. "Well, that's good news. But Shiro still needs help, and there's no guarantee they will even let Lance off the plane, let alone bring him back from the airport."

*Oh, that's encouraging.*

"So I go back, and get Shiro and Pidge."

"Not until Lance and Hunk have returned."

"You think I can't do it alone?"

"If you are captured, they'll have no chance at all." She frowns. "I can't do this alone."

*She has a point...*

"What about the paladins already here? Who's on duty?"

"Jess, Hui, Derek, Tina, and Ralph. None are yet aware of the situation—nor can I be sure they will be on our side."

*I hate to admit it, but she's right, Keith. Pidge can hold out for a couple hours. She's tough.*
Keith huffs and looks back out towards the ruins.

"She may not even have been captured, Keith," Allura says, more gently. "If they don't suspect her, she may just be waiting for a chance to slip away."

_You still need to tell me what's up, y'know. It's gonna suck to wait, I know, but you've got me again._

He sighs. "Okay," he says, and finally turns back to the Castle.

Chapter End Notes

hey lance, long time no see

da doodle

tumblr

twitter
Pidge doesn't return by the time Lance tells Keith the pilot has announced their imminent landing.

"I'm going," Keith tells Allura, standing up from the desk chair he claimed in the control room. Most of the room's usual staff are elsewhere, surreptitiously bringing the news of their mutiny throughout the Castle.

"Where?"

"To get Lance. He's landing soon."

She nods. "No detours. You have a motorcycle, correct?"

"Yeah. I'm gonna need a way in and out of the perimeter, though."

She gestures him over. "We've got a secret opening in the fence nearby—we haven't been able to use it in some time due to the Garrison's sensors." She scribbles out a little map on the back of something. "If you use it on the way out, you won't be able to get back in the same way, probably."

"I'll figure something out." He takes the map, looks at it, and tucks it into a pocket.

Gonna bust out the gate and sneak back in?

Probably. Keep me updated, I'm not gonna be paying attention.

Yep, yep. Still in the air for now.

"Be careful," Allura adds.

"I will." He heads out.

He's about to step out the doorway to the ruins when a familiar noise stops him in his tracks—it's so unexpected it takes him a moment to realize what it is.

An attack!?

He turns and runs back into the building, foregoing the elevators to take the stairs two at a time. He hears the announcement—"I need Yellow and Green out, and Black on standby!"—as he runs.

Wasn't the last attack yesterday?

Yes!

Keith sprints into the control room. He's not alone—several staff members are returning too, caught by surprise elsewhere in the Castle. He gets out of their way and trots over to Allura as soon as there's an opening. She glances over at him.

"What are you doing still here? Go!"

"But—there's really an attack? Today?"
"Yes." She gestures at the screens in front of her; half are video feeds from the helicopters, but several are technical readouts, sensors, radar. "Now go do your job, and let me do mine."

"R-right," he says, and heads back out again.

You pissed her off.

Shut up.

I guess the attack is because of the mutiny?

Can't be. It takes more than a day for the kaiju just to get here, Keith thinks as he steps into the elevator. They'd have to have known about the mutiny beforehand, and they would've stopped it earlier than this if they had.

They did announce the mission. We're landing now, by the way, so hurry up.

Keith rocks back on his heels in the elevator, watching the numbers slowly get smaller.

I'm going as fast as I can, Lance.

A pause, and Lance thinks of the officers out searching the ruins, of Sendak firing at Keith. Be careful, babe.

I will. I promise.

The elevator opens, and he starts running.

Getting to his motorcycle is the easy part. He's on high alert running through the streets but they're empty—the not-so-distant sounds of a kaiju attack may have something to do with it.

Once he gets to his bike, though, he's got a problem: leaving.

Just touched down! He gets a sense of inertia as Lance's plane hits the ground and brakes hard. He tears his focus away before the feeling makes him dizzy.

Okay.

If he can walk the bike almost to the gate, he can quietly find out if it's open—and if it is, maybe he can surprise them and get out before they close it.

If it's closed... well, he'll figure something out when he gets there.

We're taxiing now. Don't die.

I'll do my best.

He rolls his bike out of the ruin he hid it in, and starts toward the gate. He stays off the main road, instead taking side streets and alleys—difficult with a vehicle to maneuver, but he still makes good time.

I, too, am approaching a gate. Just FYI.

Got it.

He stops short of the gate and peers around a corner into the main road, trying to get a sense of what
he's up against. The gate, at least, is open—but there's a lot of people in Garrison uniforms nearby. Too many.

Can you get around them?

I might be able to just charge through them, but...

A distraction?

Yeah.

Keith tucks his bike behind a shed and rummages through his pockets. He's still got a smoke bomb or two left over—if he sets them off he might be able to lure some of the officers away, then charge the gate. He jogs down a ways from the gate, and crosses the main path out of view.

Smoke bomb lit and dropped in the middle of a street not too far away, he trots back to his bike, pulls it out into the alley, and mounts up. Now he just has to wait for it to go off...

I hope you don't have to wait too long, because we just arrived at the gate and we'll be disembarking real soon. I know it doesn't take long to get here, but...

You're probably going to have to rescue yourself.

Well, yeah, but you gotta pick me up after. I can't run all the way back.

Keith takes a deep breath. I will, just don't let them get you, he thinks, as smoke begins rising over the buildings across the way.

I'll be there soon.

Shouts from the gate, and Keith reaches for the ignition. He hears people running, fading out of view, and then a yell, "Close the gate!"

"Shit," he mutters, and starts his bike.

Go, go, go!

He pulls out around the corner and roars down the street. The officers hear him coming but he's already too close—

"Run!" someone yells, and they scatter from his path. The gate hits his arm as he slips through the opening but it's not enough to dislodge him, and he's out. The shouts behind him fade quickly as he speeds away.

I'm out.

Yes! Also, I'm getting off the plane. I told Hunk to be prepared but I couldn't exactly give him all the details. You have no idea what's gonna be waiting for us, huh?

I haven't been at the Garrison lately. Just... hang in there.

Keith leans down and speeds up on the empty road. It should only take him fifteen minutes or so to reach the airport—but a lot can happen in fifteen minutes.

I'll delay as much as I can. I don't see any Garrison people yet, but I'm still in the bridge tunnel thingy.
Stay safe.

You too.

Keith tries to focus on driving. He has to slow down to pass through the village, and Lance chides him for going dangerously fast on the highway where there are other vehicles to consider—but Lance is already passing through security now, then down to baggage claim, all the while keeping an eye out for Garrison officials.

_I just had Hunk look out the door to arrivals_, he thinks. _There's three of them there waiting for us. All really big, beefy guys._

One for each of you.

_**One to drive Hunk and Joey back, and two to murder me and hide the body, probably.**_

I'm not going to let that happen.

_How!? You're not even here yet._

I'm _almost_ there!

Keith takes his exit and reluctantly stops at the light at the end of the ramp. He taps his foot against the pavement impatiently—just a couple more minutes and he'll be there. Just a couple more...

_I'm still stalling but almost everyone else has got their bags and left already. Joey's heading through the door. Hunk's getting antsy._

Just a little longer.

_Yeah, no, I don't wanna die._ A pause. _You don't think they're really here to kill me, do you?_

They might intend to hold you as a hostage.

Lance hums nervously. The light turns, and Keith goes.

You used to give them the benefit of the doubt, he thinks. What gives?

_Uh, Sendak literally shot at you? There's no way around that, he actually tried to kill you._

I did almost set him on fire, to be fair.

_He still tried to kill you! Keith!_

Keith is so anxious he's practically vibrating but he tries to send Lance _calm_. Lance turns it right back at him.

_No, you need to calm down. I've got this. You're going to scare yourself off your bike if you keep this up._

I'm worried about you!

_Oh believe me, I can tell. But, Keith, you remember back when we were still barely friends and we fought the Kraken in those new sims, and then we got back and sparred in the gym?_

...Yeah?
We were pretty evenly matched, right?

...Yeah.

So. I can do this, and you know it. I'm just waiting for the getaway car. Er, bike.

You're still scared.

Yeah, well. So are you.

Keith takes a deep breath. A plane roars by above him; the airport is in sight ahead.

Okay, he thinks. You can do this. I'm almost there.

Damn straight, Lance responds, and finally leaves the baggage claim.

"What took you so long?" Joey asks—Keith can hear it faintly through Lance as he turns onto the road between the parking lot and the airport.

"Trying to reach Keith to tell him we landed," Lance says, waving his phone. "He's not picking up, though."

"You're gonna see him in like fifteen minutes," Joey points out, but Lance notices the Garrison officers look uncomfortable. Keith pulls into the pickup area and stops; across the way, in the parking lot, he can see a black van with the Garrison logo on it. It looks empty, but it's hard to say for sure.

"Mr. Diaz, I'm afraid there's something we need to discuss with you," one officer says. "You two can go ahead." He nods to Hunk and Joey, and another officer gestures for them to follow.

Here we go...

All you need to do is get out here, Lance, Keith thinks as he unpacks the spare helmet. I'll take care of the rest.

"I'll take your bag," Hunk offers. He sounds as cheerful as ever but when Lance hands it to him, his hands are shaking. His smile shakes too.

Keith can relate. He's staying alert in case the Garrison notices he's here but it's hard when he's so focused on what's happening inside.

Lance pats Hunk's arm and gives him the biggest grin he can muster.

"Thanks, bud. Go ahead, I'll catch up soon."

"Alright."

Hunk and Joey follow one officer out. Keith keeps his helmet on and watches surreptitiously as they emerge from a door further down the street. Inside, the other two wait for them to leave before turning their attention to Lance.

"I'll cut right to the chase, Mr. Diaz," one says, folding his arms behind his back. "Keith Kogane is missing. We need your assistance in locating him."

So that's how they're playing it.

"Not right now."

"You can't just say something like that and not explain it!"

"We shouldn't discuss it here." One of the officers reaches for him. "Not in public."

Don't go with them!

No shit!

Lance shakes the officer off. "Tell me what happened!"

"Don't make a scene, Mr. Diaz."

"I'll make as big a scene as I want! Tell me what happened!"

"Mr. Diaz." The officers move in—one grabs him, and something sharp presses subtly against his side. "Don't make this more difficult than it has to be."

Shit.

Keith almost falls off his bike as he dismounts, ready to run in and interfere at a moment's notice. Get out of there now, he thinks.

Wait. I can do this, Lance thinks, as much to himself as to Keith.

He pulls away as much as he can, sucking in a breath and stomping on the knife-wielder's foot—he digs his fingers into the man's wrist, forcing him to drop the knife. Quickly he tips him over into the other officer, knocking them both down. And then he's off running, down towards the door nearest Keith.

Keith gets back on his bike, clutching the extra helmet and lifting the kickstand. His heart leaps when the door bursts open and Lance, finally, bursts through.

My knight awaits me on his magnificent steed, huh? Missed you, too.

Just get on the bike, princess.

Keith tosses him the helmet and Lance catches it with barely a hitch in his stride. He shoves it on his head and all but jumps onto the back of the bike.

Keith could almost cry for the familiar feeling of Lance's arms around his chest—but there's no time. The moment Lance feels secure enough perched behind him he goes.

The officers run shouting out of the airport, and the black Garrison van honks, but the bike is already roaring down the street and out into the city. Lance wiggles forward on the seat, pressing himself closer against Keith's back, and squeezes a little tighter than strictly necessary, but Keith doesn't mind at all.

Fuck, I missed you so much.

Me, too.
now lance is back for real this time :D

tumblr
twitter
I wish this was a happier reunion.

Speeding down the highway back to the Garrison ruins, Keith is inclined to agree.

We were never going to have more than a day or two to relax before rebelling, but—

—that's more than nothing at all. Lance's sigh is lost in the wind, but Keith can sense it anyway. *Nothing's going according to plan.*

Two things have. One, Pidge did get the documents out; two, you're here and not in the Garrison's hands.

*But they have Pidge and Shiro and Hunk. Though they probably don't suspect Hunk... but they've got everyone else too. They've probably turned them all against you by now.*

Keith grimaces. Maybe, he thinks. I don't think the rest of the Red team would believe them, but I'm not friends with everyone like you are.

*Maybe I could convince them.*

Not if it puts you in danger.

*You're such a worrywart.*

You know why.

Another sigh. *Yeah.*

Both fall quiet, and Keith loses himself to the roar of his bike and the wind in his face as they approach the exit to the village. It's still early in the afternoon but it feels like it should be dusk at least—he's exhausted and there's still so much more to do.

*One step at a time.*

Yeah.

Once through the village, he veers off the usual route, looping around to approach the fence further toward the shore. They're far enough down from the Garrison that the wind and the distance should hide the sound of his bike, enough—he's not going to wait around to find out, though. They'll undoubtedly know they've returned anyway.

Allura's secret entrance is subtle and miraculously still unguarded. He pulls to a stop and Lance hops off, pushing at the fence and bending it back to let them through. Keith pushes the bike along with his foot, still astride it, until he's through—then Lance closes the fence behind them and gets back on, and away they go.

Back in enemy territory.

*At least something went smoothly. Next step?*
Keith winds the bike through the ruins, slowing as he reaches a juncture that leads down towards the shore.

Shiro’s next. Get off and get down to the Castle, he thinks. Keep Allura updated. I’m going to rescue him, and Pidge.

_Nope, no no no, I'm rescuing them_, Lance retorts, tightening his arms around Keith's middle. _Your arm's broken, remember? And everyone's on high alert for your return because they think you kidnapped Pidge?_

The Garrison wants you dead as much as me! Besides, they _have_ Pidge now, and they have to already know I rescued you. I can fight—

_I can fight too!_

I don't want you to get hurt—

_We just went over this! I can handle this, Keith, and you need to rest anyway. You were thinking about how exhausted you were like, five minutes ago._

Keith doesn't respond, but he sighs and brakes. Lance slips off the seat almost before it's stopped completely, and quickly stows the extra helmet away. Keith pulls off his.

"Be careful," he says.

"I will." Lance leans down for a kiss, and then he's off running. Keith puts his helmet back on and turns toward the Castle.

"Where's Lance?" is the first thing Allura says when he gets back up to the control room and slumps into an empty chair.

"Rescuing Shiro and Pidge," he says.

"Alone!?"

"I thought you'd want to know what's going on, and they probably aren't looking for him like they are for me. Besides," he adds, waving his arm, "my arm's broken. He insisted."

Her mouth presses into a thin line. "...Fine. Where is he now?"

"Almost to the Garrison."

"You've caught him up on everything?"

"Yes."

"How were things at the airport?"

"Two officers pulled him aside and one threatened him with a knife, but he wasn't hurt." _Tell her I didn't need your help._

"He got out himself, I didn't need to interfere."

She glances around. "Can you find out what he's doing without distracting him?" she asks quietly, to
his surprise.

"...Yes? Is it not secret anymore...?"

"I need to know what's going on, and I need to be available. I trust everyone here."

He shrugs. "Alright. I'll give you the play-by-play," he says, and closes his eyes.

Back at the Garrison, Lance slips in the door and sprints up the stairs, only to stop just short of the fourth floor. He creeps up, and, as soon as Coran notices him, gestures frantically for quiet.

Coran nods seriously, looks around, and gestures for Lance to approach. He does.

("He just made it in," Keith says, eyes closed.)

"Coran, Sendak wants me dead," Lance whispers.

Are you sure we can trust him? Keith thinks.

Too late now. But yes.

"I'd just about figured that out, lad," Coran says. "You ought to leave while you can."

Lance shakes his head. "I need to get Shiro out first, and find Pidge."

"Shiro?" Coran's eyebrows shoot up. "Shiro is dead, Lance."

"No, he came back—from the source, not from the dead—but the Garrison doesn't want anyone to know so they locked him up in the labs because Sendak is on the kaiju's side—look, it's a long story. Do you know where Sendak is? And whoever's loyal to him?"

Coran blinks. "I believe Sendak is still out searching for your boyfriend," he says. "He was accused of kidnapping Pidge—now, I'm sure he didn't, and she's back now—"

"Where is she?"

("He's getting information from Coran," says Keith.)

"She was led by by a couple of officers. I didn't see where she went—you know, Keith may be in great danger, Lance—"

"I know about all that," Lance says impatiently.

"Well! I'm sure there's someone still around that would report to Sendak, if that's what you're worried about. I'd hurry, if I were you."

("Coran doesn't know where Pidge is, but it sounds like she was captured.")

"Lance?" He spins; it's Bonnie, the surprise on her face quickly scrunching down into concern. "You're back. Listen, I think they just discharged Keith—something's up."

"I know," Lance says, a little more forcefully than he means, and Bonnie frowns. "No, sorry, it's just—hey, I can trust you, right? You want the kaiju dead and gone, right?"

"...Yeah?"

"Then—"
Lance cuts himself off as footsteps approach on the stairs. He ducks around the stairwell quickly, out of sight, tugging Bonnie with him. Coran's eyes widen as he looks down the stairs, and then he glances over to Lance, jerking his head subtly sideways—*go*.

("What's happening?" Allura asks.

"Not sure. I think Bonnie's with us now?" says Keith.")

"Commander Sendak!" Coran exclaims, jumping to his feet. Lance takes off, running across the Garrison toward the labs. Bonnie makes a confused noise and follows.

("Sendak.")

"Hunk! Joey! Good to have you back, boys!" Coran continues.

("He has him?"")

"Shiiiiit," Lance hisses. Rex jogs over to intercept them.

"Lance! Did Bonnie tell you—"

("No, he's back at the Garrison with Hunk..."")

"*Yes, quiet.*" He ducks into the lab entrance—a doorway in a plywood wall, really—and peers back out. Bonnie and Rex kind of hover. There's a crowd of people at the front desk, but he can make out Hunk and Joey through the bodies—and Sendak.

("Lance is hiding in the labs now.")

"What's going *on*?" Rex asks, sounding genuinely distressed. "First Keith gets accused of kidnapping and kicked out, now you're hiding from the others?"

"Long story short? Sendak wants me and Keith dead," Lance says quietly, eyes fixed on the crowd still at the stairwell. "He's on the kaiju’s side, no I don't know why, and Shiro—Bonnie, you remember Shiro, right?—he's back there somewhere, alive." He nods back down the hall.

"I met him once or twice, yeah, but didn't he die on the Kerberos mission?" Bonnie edges nervously into the lab too.

"That's what they want you to believe." He ducks behind the doorway fully again, and finally looks at them both. "Listen. I need your guys' help."

"Are you *sure* he wants you guys dead?" Rex asks.

"It's that, or in the hands of the kaiju like Shiro was." Lance huffs. "Look, will you help me or not?"

Bonnie straightens up. "Yes," she says.

"What do you need?" asks Rex.

Lance grins in relief. "I need to find Pidge, and I need to get Shiro out of here, along with me and Hunk. Can you guys rally the other paladins? Distract Sendak, and clear us a path. And..." He pauses. "Come down to the Castle if you can. We're going to need every person we can get."

"You're... you're starting a *mutiny,*" says Rex.
"Rex, we know perfectly well Keith didn't kidnap Pidge," Bonnie says, turning to him. "And then they wanted to send him and Lance back out to the source today? I dunno about Sendak being on the kaiju's side or whatever but something is obviously up, and I'm gonna trust Lance."

Rex smirks. "I never said I wasn't down. For the Red team?"

He holds out a fist, and she bumps it with a grin. "For the Red team," she echoes.

("Keith."

"Bonnie and Rex are with us," Keith says, blindly swatting away the hand that's prodding him. "They're going to rally everyone while Lance rescues Shiro and Pidge.")

"Yay Red team, please hurry," says Lance.

"Roger that." Bonnie smirks at him, and then she and Rex are stepping out of the labs and over towards the rest of the paladins. Lance turns and heads in, quickly.

It's the last door, Keith tells him.

Got it.

("He's in the labs, almost there.")

The door is unlocked. Lance opens it.

"Oh thank god," says Pidge.

It takes Lance a moment to comprehend the scene: on one side of the room, Pidge, sitting behind a wall of bars; on the other, a pile of boxes and lab equipment, and a startled guard in a swivel chair.

Get the key! Keith thinks, and Lance jumps into action. He tackles the guard before he can more than rise halfway from his chair, and throws his gun away before he can reach for it. He pins the man facedown on the ground and pulls the key from his pocket, and tosses it to Pidge.

Nice job, Lance.

Told you I could do it.

"You won't—hrgh—get away with this!" the guard grunts. "Sendak will—"

"Sendak can kiss my ass. Pidge, what the hell are you doing here?"

"What do you think I'm doing here? I got caught, asshole." He glances at her; she's got the key and is awkwardly pushing it into the lock from inside the bars. "They found out I took my phone apart so I couldn't be tracked and I couldn't talk my way out of it."

"Did they hurt you?"

"My pride's pretty wounded, but I'm good." The lock clicks open, and she darts out—and goes for the discarded gun. "Okay, upsy-daisy."

"Uh." Lance scrambles out of the way. The guard rolls over and freezes at the sight of the gun pointed at him.
"You wouldn't," he says.

"Shoot you in the face? No, probably not. Maybe the kneecap, make sure you never walk again. Get in the cage, now."

Her face is hard, dangerous. Lance is kind of terrified.

("Holy shit," says Keith.

"What?"

"Uh... Shiro isn't there. Pidge is, though.")

"Let's be reasonable..."

"You fucking scum tried to kill my family. Get in the damn cage."

The guard scrambles through the door in the bars, and Lance rushes to lock it. He pockets the key, and Pidge lowers the gun.

"Holy shit, Pidge."

She shrugs. "Come on." And she leads the way out of the room.

"A-are you keeping the gun? Pidge!?!" Lance scrambles to follow.

("Pidge is out. They're still in the labs.")

"Chill. The safety's still on." She tucks it in her back pocket, casually. "I hope you have a plan for getting out."

"Uh, yeah... Where's Shiro, though?"

"Not here, obviously," she says. "That's where he was, but it was empty when they threw me in. But I can tell you one thing for sure." She stops before the lab entrance; it's noisy outside but Lance doesn't pay it much mind. "He's still in the ruins somewhere."

"How do you know?"

"I tapped into the Garrison sensors ages ago. They can't have taken him beyond the fence, or I'd know." She peers out the doorway. "Wh... whoa, okay. Did you do this?"

"Huh?" He peers out too. The rest of the paladins are all gathered near the stairs, shouting and pressing against each other, against—a handful of officers, Sendak among them. He towers angrily above the group, a head taller than most, but the relentless crush of bodies is nevertheless pushing him back.

"It's... kinda my fault, yeah," Lance says. "Let's go."

Chapter End Notes

putting the gun in gunderson
tumblr
twitter
Regroup

Chapter Notes

sry i didnt update yesterday. i have no excuse. \_(ツ)_/\nTHAT S2 TRAILER THO???

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The moment the crowd of paladins clears the stairwell, Lance and Pidge run for it. Keith is leaning forward, gripping the edge of his chair—his eyes are still shut tight.

"They're running for the stairs," he says. "All the other paladins have ganged up on Sendak and his followers."

"Violently?"

"I don't think so."

He clenches his teeth. Lance and Pidge dart through the gym; they're almost to Coran's desk when Sendak spots them.

"THERE!" he roars. "Get them!"

"Like hell!" Bonnie screams, somewhere amidst the crowd; the rest cheer in agreement. Hunk emerges from the press as they reach the stairs.

"Pidge? What are you doing here? I thought—"

"No time, come on!" She grabs at his arm on her way to the stairs. He follows.

"Guys?"

"Just run!" Lance responds.

("They're on the stairs, Hunk's with them," says Keith.)

They get down one flight, and Lance glances back at the continued sound of footsteps on the stairs; Bonnie, Rex, and Joey have followed them.

"The rest'll keep 'em occupied a while," Rex pants. "They'll come when they can."

"We want to help," Bonnie adds.

"Me too. Heard you on the plane," Joey admits.

"The more the merrier!" Lance says.

("Bonnie, Rex, and Joey are with them too."

"Keep moving," Pidge insists, and they continue down the stairs.
"We still need to find Shiro," Lance says as they pass the second floor.

"I've got a plan for that. Hunk, take these three and go grab the drone." Pidge nods over her shoulder. "We're gonna put it to use."

"All three?"

"Two to carry the the thing, two to fend off the Garrison if they find you." They reach the first floor.

"Roger that, I guess," Hunk says, and trots towards the door. "C'mon, guys."

"A drone, huh?" Rex asks as he and the other two follow him. Lance pauses, though, making Pidge huff at him.

"Hold up, Pidge." Keith, is the subway clear, do you know?"

Keith opens his eyes and blinks, a little disoriented. "Uh, Allura, is the subway clear?"

"We shut it down. The trains aren't running," she says. "Whether it's clear of the Garrison's people, I don't know."

He nods and shuts his eyes again. Heard that? he thinks.

Yep. Lance heads towards the first floor door, too. "Trains aren't running, we gotta walk."

"Ugh," Pidge says, with feeling, close on his heels. "Wait, did you ask Keith? Is he okay? You're reconnected?"

"Yes, yes, and yes."

"Oh, good. They said they'd caught him but I was pretty sure they were bluffing." They slip out the door and out into the street.

Yeah, they were, I wasn't caught.

"He says, yeah they were. They didn't catch him."

"I'm surprised he didn't come after me."

"Me and Allura talked him out of it."

"Heh."

Pay attention! There might still be officers out there.

Right. "Stay alert, they might still have people looking for us—well, him, anyway."

"Yeah, one last question for Keith," Pidge says quietly, as they duck down an alley and jog towards the shore. "Is he with Allura? She can get us a thermal camera, right?"

"That was two questions."

"Whatever."

Heard that?

Yep. "Allura, can you get us a thermal camera?"
"...Why?"

"For Pidge's plan to find Shiro, I assume." Keith shrugs, eyes still shut. "I think I know what she's thinking of."

_Care to enlighten me?_

"Well, yes, I can. I can do that right now," Allura says. Keith opens an eye to see her gesture to someone out of view. "Though searching the whole area with a single camera seems tedious at best. Surely there's a better way?"

"I think she's gonna put it on our drone," he says. "Also, she said he's probably still in the ruins somewhere. She hacked into their sensors or something."

_Oh._ Lance passes the information on to Pidge, while Keith waits for Allura's response.

She raises her eyebrows. "Ah. That might work. Where are they now?"

"On their way here. Still a few minutes out."

"Above ground?"

"Yep."

"Let me know if they run into any trouble."

"Yep." Keith leans back and closes his eyes again.

They don't run into any trouble; Lance and Pidge reach the Castle soon enough, and Keith stops lounging in the desk chair and heads down to meet them. Hunk and the others show up almost the same time he reaches the lobby.

"Keith!" Hunk waves to him from across the room. Bonnie and Rex wave too, as Lance runs to meet him.

"No, nope, me first, we didn't get a proper reunion yet so back off!" he shouts, and nearly tackles Keith in the middle of the (still very busy) lobby.

Yeah, yeah, I'm happy to see you too, Keith thinks, grinning face too smothered by Lance's shoulder to speak aloud.

"Don't make fun of me, I've been worrying about you for three weeks." Lance leans back so he can look at Keith. "And I know you were worried about me. I still can't believe you almost died, god."

"I'm fine now," Keith says, but Lance hesitates—and Keith realizes, too late, he's looking into his memories. Lance frowns, and opens his mouth to speak, but Hunk thankfully interrupts.

"Okay, you've hogged your boyfriend long enough. Let me hug him," he says, nudging Lance out of the way to crush Keith in a big bear hug. Lance stands aside, expression now blank—he's blocking him out. Shit.

Hunk recoils quickly, though. "Dude, you smell like smoke? What happened?"

"Ah." Keith manages a dazed laugh and a smile. "I, uh, had to distract the Garrison."

"What did you set on fire!?"
“Nothing in particular...”

“Just, like, an entire street in the ruins,” Lance interjects. "That's when we reconnected." He's back to grinning like nothing is wrong—but he's still blocking Keith out, dammit.

“Wow.”

“So that's what the smoke was from?” Bonnie joins them, followed closely by Rex and Joey, still carrying the drone, and Pidge.

“Well, it worked," says Keith.

“What do you mean by 'reconnected' anyway?” Joey asks. "You said that on the plane, too."

Lance and Keith glance at each other.

"Uh," they say in unison.

"Oh, they're telepathic," Pidge says. "That Voltron Initiative thing was permanent or something. No offense, but can we get to work, here? We've still got Shiro to rescue, and literal aliens or whatever to defeat."

"Telepathic!?” Bonnie exclaims.

"Aliens!? " Rex says almost at the same time.

"Shiro!? " Joey adds.

A shout comes from behind them, and they all turn—from the stairs are emerging the rest of the paladins, led by Terry and Denise.

"We barricaded the subway!" Terry shouts with a wave and a grin. Pidge sighs heavily.

"Okay," she says, plucking the heavy drone right out of Rex's arms and hefting it against her chest. "Hunk, fill everyone in, you can shout the loudest. Keith, Lance, go upstairs and update Allura, then you can go be gay on your own time. I'm going to find a lab." And she heads off towards the elevators.

“What's her deal?” Lance says.

"Impatience? Part of the plan is to rescue her family," says Keith.

“Oh.”

"I don't even know the whole plan?” Hunk says nervously.

"Most of it's been ruined anyway," says Keith, backing towards the elevators. "Just tell them what you know."

"We're gonna destroy the kaiju!” Lance adds, and follows. The moment he turns away his face falls again, though.

“You have some explaining to do,” he mutters, only loud enough for Keith to hear.

"...Right,” Keith says nervously.
They step into an elevator alone, and the doors slide shut.

"So," Lance says after a moment, as the elevator hums upwards. "Are we going to talk about the fact that you actually did die, you were literally dead, and you didn't tell me?"

"I didn't keep it from you to be—to be mean, or something," Keith says. "You were already freaking out. I didn't want to make it worse."

A pang of hurt from Lance. "Didn't you think I'd want to know?"

"Of course you'd want to know. I'd want to know. But you were on the other side of the country." He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "Don't tell me you wouldn't've freaked out."

"I would've! But I still wish you'd told me!"

The elevator dings, and the door opens. They step out. Lance isn't blocking him out anymore.

I wasn’t in the best state of mind, Lance, Keith thinks.

Lance’s face falls. I… know that, but...

You’re probably right, though. I still should’ve told you. "And, I'm sorry," Keith adds aloud. "But I'm okay now." He brings his hands up to Lance's face. "I'm alive, and I'm fine. And we're both going to get through this. Together."

Lance looks at him for a long time, searching, upset. Eventually he wraps his fingers around Keith's wrists and closes his eyes, leaning down to bump their foreheads together.

"Yeah," he whispers. We will.

Keith takes a breath and just... rests.

But soon enough he remembers they're standing right outside the control room, and inside is Allura, and they need to catch her up on what's happened.

Don't remind me, Lance thinks, but he opens his eyes and takes a step back anyway. They walk into the control room hand in hand.

"Having a moment, were we," Allura says, smirking slightly.

"Have mercy," Lance says, "it's been three weeks and the Garrison's trying to kill us."

"Fair enough. I'm glad to see you made it here safely. I heard you found Pidge?"

"Yeah, they had her locked up where Shiro used to be, I guess. She said she was gonna find a lab to upgrade the drone or something. Oh, and all the paladins are here."

"All of them?"

"Well, I didn't count them."

"Most of them, at least," Keith adds. "Bonnie, Rex, and Joey, like I said, and I saw Terry and Denise too for sure. There was a crowd."

"That's a surprise."
"Not really," Lance says. "We're all here to kill kaiju, aren't we? Well, most of us." He nudges Keith with a grin. Allura raises an eyebrow.

"Pidge and I both joined to find out what happened on the Kerberos mission," Keith explains.

"I see. Well, I suppose I'll have to bring our new allies up to speed. Are they still in the lobby?"

"Should be."

"Hunk is giving them some background," Lance adds, "but I didn't get the chance to pass on all the plan stuff Keith told me about."

"That's fine." Allura stands. "You two should find Pidge, and give her this." She holds out a box, and Keith takes it. "Come find me when the drone is ready."

Chapter End Notes

updates may continue to be spotty... im kinda burning out here ahaha. but its almost over... i swear...

tumblr
twitter
hey if you can accept mechas are a thing you can accept thermal cameras working like this right? ok cool

"North quadrant empty," Shay reports. "Head west."

"Heading west." Hunk tweaks the controls, and the drone turns and goes west, closer towards the Castle.

Keith turns from Shay's map to Hunk's video feed. They're on the roof of the Castle, huddled against the air conditioning systems from the wind. The drone is visible only as a black speck in the sky, out in the distance over the ruins. Somewhere below them, Lance is with Allura this time, telling her their progress while she organizes the rest of the paladins.

"Still nothing," Hunk says. "It's all cold. You don't think they could've predicted we'd do this, do you?"

"What, search the ruins with a drone-mounted thermal camera? No, I really don't."

"We have only finished a fourth of the Garrison-owned area, Hunk," Shay adds. "There are plenty of places Shiro might still be hidden."

"Hey!" Hunk sits up straight. "There's a yellow spot! What's due west of the drone's location?"

"Us."

"Oh."

Shay continues to direct Hunk through the ruins with her map and the drone's GPS. The area around the Castle is, unsurprisingly, fruitless.

Allura says, "They weren't going to put him where I might notice." We don't think he'd be too close to the Garrison, either, Lance relays.

"South is probably our best bet," says Keith.

"Headin' south, then," Hunk sighs. "What's, uh, south southwest of here? I mean, of the drone."

"...Ruins?"

Hunk looks over at Shay. "No buildings or anything? Nothing that we know has people?"

Keith sits up. "You found something?"

"I mean, it's faint." Hunk fiddles with the drone controls as Keith looks on. "There's something that might be something, right here." He points to the screen. "It could be another bird though."
"Well, check it out."

"Obviously."

He steers the drone closer. The warm spot grows more evident as it approaches, though the distance (and the walls in the way) keep it from resolving into any shape in particular—Keith reaches out and grabs Hunk's arm at an urgent thought from Lance.

"Stop," he says quickly, and Hunk startles, and the drone stops. "Allura says we don't want to get too close—if there's a guard we don't want them to notice the drone."

"So we can take them by surprise?" Shay grins.

"Yep."

"Okay, well, there's something here, and it's bigger than a bird," Hunk says. "Shay-shay, can you tell where it is on the map?"

"Hmm." She looks at the GPS, then to the thermal camera feed, then back to the map. "It should be this building, here," she says, pointing on the map. "Four or so floors up."

Roger that, Lance thinks, and passes it on to Allura. Keith stands.

"I'm heading down," he says. "Allura says maintain surveillance."


"I'm going," Keith insists minutes later.

"You absolutely are not," Allura says, hands on her hips as she surveys the paladins gathered before her in the control room. "You are in more danger than anyone here but Lance, and if I didn't need to know the progress of the mission, I would keep him here too."

"Pidge is in danger too! They know she's involved."

"Yeah, but I'm the only one that can pick locks." Pidge looks smug.

She's got a point.

Keith glares at Lance. "Don't you start. You know what this means to me."

You don't need to rescue him to make up for Kerberos. You know there was nothing you could do, and so does he. "And you're still injured, anyway."

I want to help.

You can help without coming with us.

"Are they arguing in their heads? How do you get used to this?" Bonnie whispers.

"You don't," Pidge whispers back.

Fine, Keith thinks finally. He folds his arms and looks away. Lance nods to Allura.

"Are we settled, then?" she asks.
"Yeah," Lance says. Keith grits his teeth but nods.

"Then get started. We don't have much time."

"Yes, ma'am!" Bonnie says. The rest give less formal affirmatives, and Keith plops into a chair and swivels sullenly as Lance, Pidge, and Bonnie leave the control room. Joey sits nearby with a radio to his ear, waiting in case of an update from Hunk and Shay above them.

Don't sulk too much.

I'm not sulking.

If you say so.

Just be careful.

Careful is my middle name, babe. I will.

"Hunk says he can see our team," Joey says, not too much later. "The area is still clear, and the target hasn't moved much."

Is it still on the same floor, though? How much has it moved?

"It's still in the same spot, right?" Keith asks.

"Hunk, the target's in the same spot as before, right?" Joey asks. There's a pause. "He says yeah, still the northeast corner of the fourth floor, it's just changed shape a bit. There might be a couple of people there."

Roger that. This is the weirdest fucking game of telephone I've ever played.

"Roger," is all Keith says aloud. Same, he thinks.

We're approaching the base of the building, by the way. Looking for the entrance.

"They've reached the building," Joey says before Keith can.

"They're looking for the entrance," he adds, a little disgruntled. What was the point of keeping him here to give updates if Hunk could do it too?

They can't exactly fly the drone into the building. We're in, by the way.

Okay, but still. "They're in."

"Hunk says they can't see them anymore," Joey reports.

"Tell him to bring the drone around the building, and check the streets nearby. Look for any officers that might still be patrolling," Allura says.

Keith maybe feels a little smug about that, as Joey passes the orders on.

The meme you're looking for is "my city now".

I hate that I understand that. Get out of my head.

Haha, no.
Keith sighs and closes his eyes. Jokes aside, he really has to pay attention now. Through Lance's eyes he can see Pidge and Bonnie ahead with flashlights, going for the staircase while Lance brings up the rear. The inside of the building is dark, and the stairs darker.

"They're heading upstairs," Keith says.

"West side of the building clear," Joey says.

*If he says anything I need to know, tell me, because I'm tuning you out now.*

Yep.

The three paladins hurry up the stairs. At the fourth floor they stop, and Pidge peers out the doorway. She tentatively shines her light out into the hall.

"What direction are we facing?" she whispers.

"South, I'm pretty sure," Bonnie whispers back.

"South side of the building clear. The team's visible to the drone again, by the way," Joey says.

"Has the target changed at all?" Keith asks.

Joey repeats the question. "Nope," he says a moment later. "Nothing else on the floor, either."

All clear, he thinks.

*Roger that. The floor is clear except for our goal,* Lance whispers.

"Bonnie, take point," Pidge says.

"K." Bonnie steps forward, and leads the way out of the stairwell and down the dusty hall; it's marked periodically by doors and little else, like it was once a hotel or an apartment building. There's evidence of recent passage in the dust, footprints and scuff marks; the dust is so thick it casts sharp shadows in the light from Bonnie's flashlight.

They reach a T-shaped intersection quickly.

"Northeast corner," Lance whispers.

"Right." Bonnie turns left.

"They're almost there," Keith says. "They're on the east side of the building, heading north."

"East side *not* clear," Joey suddenly exclaims. "There's something approaching the building—a truck. There's a truck coming in from the east."

"Intended to take him from the ruins, I'm sure," Allura says. "Keith, tell them they need to hurry."

"Yeah." Hurry up, there's a truck coming from the east.

*A what now? Why?*

A truck! Why do you think? They weren't going to keep Shiro in the ruins forever.

*Point taken. We need to hurry, there's a truck on the way to pick him up,* Lance finally whispers. Bonnie waves a hand at him, signals for quiet, and points to a door ahead. The footprints lead there,
and the doorknob is clean of dust.

Pidge pulls the gun from her back pocket and hands it to Bonnie. Bonnie gives her a look, and hands it back, shaking her head. She points to her eyes, then at the door.

What's she saying?

*We should see what's there first, probably.*

Pidge gives a thumbs up, and so does Lance; Bonnie nods, clicks off her light, and opens the door. She gestures for them to follow in the dim light, and they creep through; there's a short hall beyond that opens into a living room (or at least, what used to be a living room) and a kitchen. The space is lit orange by the sun coming through the windows, long since stripped of curtains.

The sound of pacing footsteps is muffled behind a door opposite the hall.

"They're in the corner apartment," Keith says, belately remembering he's supposed to be giving updates. "There's someone behind a door..."

The three paladins approach quietly. Lance and Pidge press against the dusty wall to either side of the door—Bonnie, between them, reaches for the handle.

A phone rings, and everyone jumps, including Keith.

"What?" Allura demands.

"Phone—uh, on the other side of the door. Someone's phone is ringing."

In the apartment, the paladins are frozen, as the ringing is cut off and a female voice says sharply, "Hello?"

Lance doesn't dare breathe. He glances over to Bonnie, who makes a face but otherwise doesn't move, hand still hovering above the doorknob.

"A what?" the voice says. "Where?" The footsteps move sideways. "No, I can't see it from here. You sure it's a drone?"

"Shit," Keith says. "Whoever's in the truck must've seen the drone."

"Joey, get the drone out of there," Allura says quickly.

"Where do you think it's from?" the voice in the apartment says.

"Hunk, get the drone out of there," Joey says. "The truck saw it."

"No, I haven't heard anything," the voice continues. "I'll take a look around. No, stay on the line, just in case."

Bonnie mouths a curse and takes a quick step back as the door opens. Lance gets a glimpse of a face, surprised and—purple?—before the door slams shut again and the woman yells; he looks up to see Pidge with arms outstretched.

"Did I get her?" she whispers. Bonnie lunges for the door and opens it again; the woman is on the floor, clutching her face, and her hands are *definitely* purple and clawed.

"What the fuck," Keith mutters, as Lance exclaims, "That's not a person!"
"What?" Allura asks. A noise comes from the phone now lying on the dusty floor; Pidge stomps on it, hard, while Bonnie kicks at the woman.

"What are you?"

A clawed hand lashes out, and Bonnie screams. Lance yells and jumps back, and Pidge belatedly shouts, "Look out!"

"Fuck," Keith says again, breathless. Bonnie falls, leg bloodied, while Lance and Pidge dodge around the purple woman, trying to stay out of reach of her claws.

"What," Allura says again.

"The drone is down!" Joey shouts. "They shot it!"

A new, booted foot aims a kick at the purple woman's head, and connects. She lets out an unearthly screech and scrambles back, and Lance looks up—Shiro is there, bound and gagged but on his feet. Pidge reaches up and pulls the gag down.

"GO," Shiro says, and crowds Pidge and Lance bodily out of the room. "Block the door, quickly!"

Keith finally breathes once they're through the doorway. "It's... the guard wasn't human," he says. "They found Shiro, he's tied up but on his feet, they're trying to barricade the— the alien in the room. Bonnie's injured."

"Shit," he faintly hears Allura mutter, a sentiment quickly echoed by Joey. "Badly?"

"Her leg's bleeding," Keith says. "It's... probably not life-threatening?"

"So long as we get her down to the hospital quickly, I'm sure," Allura mutters. "Damn it."

Meanwhile, Shiro is leaning against the door, holding it closed, while Lance and Pidge shove a cabinet towards it. He steps out of the way as they move it into place, and Pidge gets to work on his bonds while Lance starts shifting the remains of a sofa. Bonnie is sitting on the floor, wrapping her jacket tightly around her leg.

"Good to see you again, Bonnie," Shiro says, "Lance. All things considered."

"Yeah, you look good for being dead for a year and a half," Bonnie puffs. He doesn't quite laugh.

Pidge joins Lance at pushing the sofa while the alien thumps on the door. "You won't get away!" she screams, muffled by the barricade.

"You wish," Pidge mutters. Sofa in place, Lance looks up; Shiro has Bonnie's arm over his shoulders now, helping her limp out of the apartment.

"Quickly!" he calls, and Lance runs to Bonnie's other side, grabbing her fallen flashlight on the way. Pidge darts ahead, peering out into the hallway.

"Lance, ask if the building's still clear!" she says.

They shot the drone down, Keith thinks quickly before he can.


"Allura?"
Keith opens an eye; Shay and Hunk have entered the control room, equipment in their arms. Shay tentatively waves to get Allura's attention.

"Shay." Allura frowns. "Go check on Voltron and report back to me. We'll need it, and soon. Hunk, inform the hospital to get ready for—what kind of wound, Keith?"

"Uh, claws," he says, and closes his eye again. So there's something actually called Voltron. He puts that thought away for later, though; right now he needs to focus.

"Y-yes, ma'am," says Shay.

"Jesus," Hunk mutters under his breath. "Who got hurt?"

"Bonnie. Go, quickly."

"Right, yeah, going."

Footsteps, and the sound of the elevator. Keith turns his attention back to Lance.

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr
Twitter
Across the ruins, the rescue party leaves the apartment and makes their way back down the hall painfully slowly, while Pidge scouts ahead. Shiro's metal hand is glowing somehow, helping light the way.

_I saw his hand in your memory but I had no idea it could do that._

Me neither.

A pause. _I don't know how we're going to get past that truck, not with Bonnie like this._

Cause a distraction?

_Is that your only tactic? God, Keith._

It was just a suggestion!

Lance sighs. _Yeah, I know. I just have this feeling we're gonna have to fight our way out of this._

Probably. Just be careful.

_I will. Does Allura have any ideas?_

Keith opens his eyes again and looks at her. "They're out of the apartment," he says, "and heading back to the stairs. But... they're probably trapped."

She looks grim. "I could send more paladins out to help, but I don't know what they could do, other than give whoever's in that truck more targets. We have no weapons."

"Nothing at all?"

"Crowbars and fire axes, perhaps. For all the good that would do against a gun."

"Pidge still has a gun she took from an officer back at the Garrison."

"Then she can use it with my blessing, if that's what it takes." She straightens. "I want everyone to come out of this alive."

Keith nods, and closes his eyes. There's no backup coming, he thinks, tense, and Lance groans aloud.

"What?" Bonnie huffs. She's pale but still conscious, and limping along as best she can.

"The cavalry isn't coming," he says. "We have to rescue ourselves."

"...Fantastic."

Allura's okay with Pidge using that gun, though.

_Really?_
"Pidge," Lance calls. "You still have that gun, right?"

"Yeah," comes her voice from around the corner.

"Allura says to use it."

"Sweet." She doesn't sound enthusiastic. "It's getting dark out, by the way."

"That happens at night."

"I mean we might be able to sneak out under cover of darkness." Pidge reappears in Lance's line of view. "I looked out the window and there's a couple of people out by the truck. I think they're just gonna wait for us to leave instead of coming in to find us. At least, I hope so."

"We can't wait too long," Shiro says, nodding to Bonnie.

"I'm okay. It's not too deep."

"You've left a trail of blood."

"Could be worse." She winces, though, as they navigate down the stairs.

"Are the people outside human or not?" Lance interjects. Pidge shrugs.

"Can't say. It's too dark."

"We need a plan."

"Is there only one exit to this building?" Shiro asks. "If it used to be an apartment building, there should be plenty."

"Well, the street to the south is all rubble. Any exits there would be blocked," Pidge says. "They're on the east side, but at the corner within view of the north side, and we have to go north."

"So we leave west and circle around."

"If they don't have anyone posted at the exits there. I don't know how many were in the truck. And anyway half the west is blocked by rubble, too, which I bet is why they picked this place to keep you—it's harder to escape."

Keith tunes out for a moment to look up at Allura again. She's standing with her arms behind her back, staring through the blank displays at her desk, as though they'll light up with information like they do during kaiju battles. But they remain dark.

"Is there any way to at least get surveillance on the area? At all?" he asks.

"We run the risk of our communications being overheard," she says, "but I suppose we ought to try." She looks up. "Joey, go find Hunk, and tell him to grab a couple paladins and head out there. I'll be relaying orders through you again."

"Roger that," he says, and leaves. Keith watches him go with a twist in his gut; this danger isn't predictable like the kaiju, and they're so in the dark here.

*Literally.*
Pay attention, Lance.

You left! But there's nothing happening right now anyway. We're still going down the stairs.

How's Bonnie doing?

She's definitely in pain. Still walking, though.

Allura's sending out some paladins to do surveillance, by the way. I don't think they'll interfere, but it's something.

I heard. It's better than nothing, I guess.

Allura sighs. "Shay should have been back by now. I guess it's not urgent, though. How are they, Keith?"

"Still moving, slowly," he says. "They're on the stairs."

"They haven't run into anyone yet?"

"Pidge saw two people from the truck still outside."

"Human?"

"She couldn't tell."

"Hm."

She says nothing further, so he closes his eyes again. The team back at the apartment building has finally reached the first floor; they're resting on the stairs while Pidge has a look around.

"Two by the truck outside the lobby," she reports upon her return, "and one to the west, between the exits there. One of the guys by the truck is human but the other two aren't."

"Galra," Shiro says. "They're called galra." His face is in shadow but his voice is... empty. Keith's heart clenches at the sound, strong enough that Lance feels it.

"Are you... okay?" he asks.

"I'll be fine." Shiro looks up and gives Lance an obviously forced smile. "I just thought back here on Earth I'd be free of them. But I understand Allura has a plan?"

"Yeah. Yeah, she does. We do," Lance pauses. "But, like, really. Are you okay?"

Bonnie, sitting next to Shiro on the steps, puts a hand on his shoulder. Pidge is hovering somewhere behind Lance, silent. Shiro sighs.

"If I stop to think? Probably not," he admits. "But you have other things to worry about right now. I can handle it. And—don't tell Keith."

That asshole, Keith thinks.

"Um, about that," says Lance.

I can't—he always does this! He always tries to hide his problems and take care of everyone else instead! Dammit. Lance, tell him he's a fucking idiot.
"We're, uh, telepathically connected? Keith and me? So he... definitely just heard that."

Shiro stares.

"Also, he says... that you don't have to put on a brave face for us, because we're your friends and we want to help you."

His eyebrows shoot up. "He... said that?"

That is not what I said.

"...I'm paraphrasing."

"...Right." Shiro looks down at his hands. "Tell him not to worry—"

"Oh, he's a little beyond worrying, right now."

Seething, in fact.

Shiro sighs. "Where is he?"

"Back at the Castle."

"And that's where we're going?"

"Yeah."

"Then tell him when we get there, we'll talk."

...Fine.

"He says, 'Fine.'"

"Keith?" Allura's voice brings him back to himself, and he realizes he's been gripping the arms of the desk chair so tightly his knuckles are white. "Did something happen?"

"Not really," Keith grits. "They're waiting for it to get dark, I think. The exits are guarded by two gilra and a human."

"Alright. Do let me know when they're ready," she adds, giving him a quizzical look. He ignores it and closes his eyes again as Joey returns.

"Hunk and a couple of others have headed out," Joey says. "Also, someone told me to tell you that Shay says Voltron is ready to go, she just had to go take care of something."

"Thank you, Joey," Allura says, and Keith tunes back in across the ruins.

"So," Shiro says after a moment—Keith has the feeling it's been quiet there a while. "Telepathy?"

"Yeah. It's a long story," says Lance.

"He didn't mention it before."

"Well, we haven't been in the habit of telling people until recently. And the last couple times you saw him we weren't connected anyway, because I was way over on the other side of the country."

"He told you about that?"
"I saw it in his memories when I got back."

Bonnie snorts. Shiro shakes his head.

"I can't imagine what that's like," he says.

"It probably helps that they're dating," Pidge says. "It's almost dark, by the way. What's the surveillance team gonna help, anyway?"

"Maybe Allura gave them night vision goggles," Bonnie mutters.

"I'm sure she wouldn't send them out if she didn't think they'd be useful," Shiro says evenly. He turns as Lance plops with a sigh onto the stairs next to him. "And, Lance," he continues quietly. "Take good care of him."

There's a small bolt of panic. *Haha, shit, I forgot he's your ex.*

It's weird to think of him like that, stop it.

"Uh, yeah," Lance says. "I will." *Hell of a pair of shoes to fill though!*

We've been over this. He literally just gave us his blessing, anyway.

Lance sighs. *Yeah."

"What?" Shiro asks.

"Ah, no, I was just talking to him." Lance grins. "He's been kind of freaking out this whole time."

You were the one just freaking out!

Lance ignores him. "He's reporting back to Allura on our progress, so he's been listening in."

"Even now?"

"Yup."

Shiro looks at him, blinks, and gives a sort of shudder and turns away. Keith snorts.

"What?" says Allura.

"Lance told Shiro about the telepathy."

"Ah."

It grows quiet. The control room is a dull hum of computers and low voices as Allura and Joey wait for the surveillance team; the apartment building is only the shifting of shoes against concrete in the dark and, somewhere outside, muffled by the walls, a conversation. Pidge paces a while before silently heading out of the stairwell again, out into the dim lobby. Bonnie shifts her leg and hisses in pain.

"Hunk and his group are almost in position," Joey finally reports. "They're splitting up to search the area now."

"Good. Tell them not to interact with the guards—they absolutely must not know there is anyone else out there," Allura says firmly. Joey passes the message on.
"Also, Hunk says to tell Lance, 'I'm coming, buddy'?” he adds uncertainly.

Hunk says he's coming, Keith thinks.

Tell him if he gets himself killed I'll kill him.

"Lance says to tell him if he gets himself killed, he'll kill him."

"Hunk, Lance says if you die, he'll kill you." A pause. "Hunk says, 'noted.'"

He says, noted.

Good.

Allura drags a hand down her face and sighs. "Just... be prepared."

Allura says be prepared. The team is almost ready.

For all the good they'll do us, Lance thinks sourly. But aloud he says, "Get ready. Where's Pidge?"

"Pidge?" Shiro asks.

"Uh, Katie."

"Oh. I don't know."

"What's the plan?" Bonnie asks, straightening out her leg with a hiss.

"I don't know," Lance says, frustrated. "Maybe we can climb out a fucking window. I don't know."

"That might be our best bet." Pidge slumps in through the doorway. "Bonnie's not gonna be able to outrun anyone, and we can't sneak by them from any of the doors. There's no way."

"I don't think I can climb out any 'fucking windows', guys," Bonnie says.

"We can lift you through?" Lance offers. "I mean, Shiro's pretty jacked. I bet he could carry you."

"Thanks, I think?" says Shiro. "But, 'jacked' or not, I can't sprint with that much extra weight. No offense, Bonnie."

"None taken." She shrugs. "Maybe you should just leave me."

"Hey!" Lance says, as Pidge's jaw drops and Shiro frowns sharply.

Don't leave her, Keith thinks indignantly.

"I'm not leaving anyone behind again," Shiro says, as Bonnie flaps a hand at them.

"Jesus, guys, no. I meant, if you all run out of here they'll follow you, and then I can just walk right out. The alien upstairs never told them how many of us there are."

"The streets in the area seems to be clear," Joey says. "Just the three outside the building." Keith barely hears.

"You can't walk," Pidge points out.

"I'll crawl if I have to. Or the surveillance team can come get me."
"There's still a galra upstairs. That barricade won't hold her forever," Shiro says.

The rest of the streets are clear, Keith thinks. And... that might be your best shot.

"I don't like the idea of leaving you here alone," Lance says slowly. "But... I don't have any better ideas."

They fall quiet.

"Me neither," Pidge says finally. "Have Keith pass it on to Allura, I guess."

On it.

"They're going to run for it," Keith says, as Lance nods. "Lance, Pidge, and Shiro. Hopefully the guards will follow them, and then someone from the surveillance team can go in and help Bonnie."

"I don't like it," Allura says. "What's to stop them from ignoring the rest and capturing Bonnie?"

"They don't know how many people are in there. Probably."

Keith's eyes are still closed but he can practically hear Allura's frown. "It's dangerous," she says. "I don't like risking anyone like that."

"I'll see what Hunk thinks?" Joey offers, and quickly outlines the plan.

There's a very pregnant pause.

"What?"

Keith opens his eyes. Joey is frowning at nothing, both hands pressing the radio to his ear.

"Hunk, what do you mean? Hunk!"

Allura walks over to him. "What's going on?"

"I don't know, I can't... Where is he? What is he doing?"

What's happening? Keith? You're freaking out and it's freaking me out.

I don't know...?

Joey finally, finally lowers the radio. "He, uh," he says slowly, "left."

Chapter End Notes

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"What do you mean," Allura says slowly, "by 'he left'?"

"I..." Joey takes a deep breath. "I told him the plan, and he said, 'Too late, I've decided.' And then he handed the radio to Denise and she said he just ran off down the street?"

_What the hell, Hunk._

"He didn't say where he was going?"

"No."

She sighs heavily. "I hate to say it, but we're running out of time; we can't afford to deal with this now. Tell Denise the plan, then; Keith, tell Lance they can go ahead when they're ready." And Allura strides back to her desk and all but falls into her chair, rubbing her forehead.

Uh... Keith thinks, leaning back in his own chair and throwing an arm over his eyes. You heard that, right?

_Yes, but, fucking hell._

Agreed.

Lance shakes himself out, and looks back up at the rest of the team; they're watching him with varying levels of confusion.

"Uh, we've got the go-ahead from Allura, I guess," he says. "And... keep an eye out for Hunk?"

"What happened?" Pidge asks.

"Hell if I know." Lance shakes his head. "Let's just... get going."

"We should split up," Shiro says. "I'm probably the biggest target here; if you two run away from me they might not follow you at all."

"Nope," Pidge says, almost before he's done. "Now that they know we know you're here, we're high priority too. And Lance already was."

"Yeah, I dunno how much Allura told you but uh... the Kerberos mission was probably an excuse to get rid of you, and they were gonna try to do the same to me and Keith? So..."

"..._What?_"

"This is _not_ the time!" Pidge says. "Let's get going already!"
"Wait—"

"I'll just... sit here, I guess?" Bonnie says. Lance turns to say something to her, but something stops him. A noise—tapping?

No one moves. The tapping continues. There's a noise with it that sounds faintly like a whisper.

"If this place is haunted I swear to god..."

"Lance, shut up." Pidge flicks his shoulder and creeps out of the stairwell, peering around the corner. Lance tentatively follows.

"It's coming from the south," she hisses, and holds up a hand to stop him. She continues on alone, down the long hallway and around another corner. Lance holds his breath, increasingly feeling like he's stumbled into a horror movie.

Breathe, Lance, Keith reminds him.

*Block me out, Keith. If I get murdered I don't want you to see.*

Keith breathes in sharply. No? Jesus, Lance, this *isn't* a horror movie.

There's a noise behind Lance, then, and he jumps and barely contains a scream—it comes out as a squeak instead. It's just Bonnie and Shiro, though, limping quickly down the hall to join him.

"Heard noises upstairs, we have to go now," Shiro says. "Where's Katie?"

"She went that way—"

"Take Bonnie, I'll run and draw them off—"

"*No* way, we came here to rescue you—"

"Will you guys stop arguing, we have to hurry—"

"It's Hunk!" Pidge comes dashing around the corner. "He cleared a path to a window! We can get Bonnie out now, he can carry her."

"Thank god," Shiro says. "Let's go."

Keith lets out a long breath as they group makes their way back down the hall. "Hunk made it to the building without being seen, somehow," he says. "He's on the south side where the entrances are blocked, so they're going to climb out a window... He can carry Bonnie. They'll all sneak out."


There are footsteps behind them.


There's still a good fifteen feet between them and the end of the hall.

"In here," Shiro whispers, and pulls them all sideways through a door. They find themselves huddled in a closet; outside, they can hear the faint footsteps on the tiled floors of the lobby.
As he lets go of Bonnie, Lance gets an idea.

No! Lance, no.

Lance, yes.

You're going to get yourself killed! Don't you dare go out there!

It's the only way to get Bonnie and Shiro out safely. I can do this, Keith.

It's dangerous, just stay put—

Lance reaches for the doorknob. He doesn't do more than rattle it before Shiro grabs his arm.

"Lance, you can't outrun them," he says.

"Wanna bet?" Lance grins, even though he knows Shiro can't see him in the pitch black. He's pretty sure Shiro wouldn't be grinning back, anyway.

"Galra are taller and stronger than humans, you physically can't outrun them," he says, low and urgent.

Bonnie clears her throat. "You just said—"

"I know what I said."

Lance's mood plummets at the realization. "You were going to sacrifice yourself." He swallows. "Shiro, we just got you back!"

"Lance—"

"How could you do that to Keith!?"

"Shh!" Shiro fumbles for his face, claps a hand over his mouth. "So you're going to do it instead? Lance, think about this."

There's a pause. Keith's heart drops to his toes as Shiro removes his hand; Lance isn't broadcasting his thought process but Keith can just see where it's going, almost more from his own knowledge of Lance than actual telepathy.

"He'll be okay," Lance whispers. "He'll have you." And he pushes the door open and slips out, narrowly evading Shiro's reaching arm.

"Lance!"

Lance, no!

Sorry, Keith. I love you.

And he blocks Keith out completely.

"LANCE!"

Keith falls out of his chair and onto his hands and knees, barely aware he's shouted aloud. Lance couldn't break the connection; there's still a tenuous thread of consciousness, a vague sense that he's alive, determined, afraid—but nothing else.
Lance! Lance!

If his thoughts are making it through, there's no response. Keith is in the dark.

"Keith?" Allura has dropped to her knees beside him, and is shaking his shoulder. "Keith!? What happened?"

"Shit. He's blocking me out," he manages to gasp. He opens his eyes reluctantly, digs his fingernails into the linoleum. His heart is screaming but he knows she needs to know. "The... the galra upstairs. It escaped."

"And?" Her hand shifts from his shoulder to his back, rubbing slowly, comforting.

"Pidge went ahead to Hunk, but Lance and Shiro were helping Bonnie... it got downstairs before they got to the window."

There's a choked off gasp somewhere nearby. Allura's hand stills for a moment, then resumes its motion.

"Go on," she says.

"Shiro pulled them into a closet to hide... Lance decided he'd go out and... and let it and the others chase him, to get them away from them..."

No one speaks.

"Shiro said he couldn't possibly outrun them. He'd only agreed to running in the first place because he thought they'd only chase him, and he'd just get captured again. But..." Keith swallows. "Lance went anyway."

There's a long pause. "And?" Allura prompts.

He shakes his head. "That's it. He blocked me out. I can't see what's happening now."

Allura takes a deep breath. "Joey," she says. "Does the surveillance team have anyone on the south side of the building?"

He asks. "Yes, but they haven't reported anything yet. They're a street or two back."

"I see." She stands, leaving Keith staring at his hands on the floor. "Tell Denise I need to know two things, right now: I need to know if Shiro and Bonnie have made it out of the building, and I need to know where Lance is."

"Y-yes, ma'am," Joey says, and relays the message quickly. "She says she'll contact the others and have a report shortly."

Allura doesn't reply verbally, but she walks away, and Keith drags himself up to kneeling. There are still some staff in the room, and he can feel them looking at him surreptitiously but he can't really bring himself to care. Slowly he pulls himself back up onto the chair, and leans forward and buries his face in his hands.

Lance is still alive. He can't tell much more than that.

"Hey, Allura? I have... a question..." Jess's voice trails off, and Keith looks up; she's standing in the doorway, looking around. "Is this a bad time?" Right, she's been on duty all day; she probably has no idea what's going on.
"Go ahead, if it's quick," Allura says.

"Oh, I just... I don't know why everyone's here, I heard something about mutiny? I was just wondering what's happening tomorrow, for the roster."

God, Keith had almost forgotten about the kaiju entirely.

"There was an attack yesterday and one today, so if there's one tomorrow..."

Allura sighs and rubs her forehead. "I don't know. I don't know where we'll be tomorrow. Thank you for your concern, Jess. I'll figure it out."

"Is there something I can do to help?"

That actually gets a smile out of her. "You can find another paladin that wasn't on duty today, and ask them to tell you what's happening. Make sure Hui, Derek, Ralph, and Tina find out, too."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Keith, are you okay?"

He takes a deep breath, a little startled to be addressed directly after spending so much time observing events through someone else's eyes. "Yeah," he says.

As long as Lance is still alive, he's okay.

Jess doesn't look convinced, but she nods. "Okay. Hang in there." And she leaves. He leans back in his chair and stares up at the ceiling.

"Still nothing?" Allura asks after a moment, sounding almost gentle. Almost.

"He's still alive," he says. "That's it."

"Joey?"

"...Denise?" Joey asks.

Keith holds his breath.

"She says whoever's south is still getting into position. She—" He pauses. "Someone saw Lance!"

Keith shoots up from his chair. "Where?!"

"He—uh, running north, followed by... two purple people? Uh... There's another purple person by the building, with a normal person, it looks like they're arguing."

"They're called galra," Allura says. Keith clenches his fists.

"But what about—"

"Hunk spotted! He's carrying Bonnie," Joey interrupts. "Pidge and another man are with them—he's got black and white hair?"

"Shiro." Allura nods.

"It's Shiro," Joey repeats into the radio. Keith grits his teeth. Lance is a vague sense of desperation mixed with a kind of smug excitement; that has to be a good sign, right?

"Lance again," Joey says. "Now heading east. He's taking weird turns—trying to shake the—"
galra, probably.”

"Is it working?" Allura asks, thankfully. Keith can't quite form the words.

"How are his pursuers doing? ...They're a block or so behind," Joey says. "Looking very frustrated, apparently."

Keith breathes.

"Hunk met back up with one of the lookouts. They've made it out, they're on their way back." Joey looks up. "Denise wants to know if they should help Lance?"

Keith looks at Allura. She presses her lips together into a thin line and looks at Joey for a moment.

"No," she says, and holds up a finger in Keith's face before he's more than opened his mouth to speak. "Not unless he is in mortal danger and they can interfere without endangering themselves."

"Allura—"

"I will not trade one life for another, Keith," she says, turning sparking eyes on him.

"They want to—"

"I know what they want to do. We are all traitors now." She turns and heads back to her desk, sitting imperiously in her chair. "He got himself into this mess; I have every faith he can get himself out."

Joey, who had been quietly passing on Allura’s instructions, looks up. "Uh... Pidge left the rescue group and headed back towards the building?"

Allura closes her eyes. "What."

"Apparently she said she was going to help Lance."

Keith collapses into his chair. "For fuck's sake."

There's a faint pang of panic from Lance, then, and he sits up again. Joey presses the radio to his ear.

"There's shouting—Lance went back by the building again. The galra and the person there are following him now, the other two... are going into the building." He takes a breath. "Pidge was spotted nearby—she's shouting?"

Allura and Keith both say nothing, hanging on Joey's every word.

"Lance is out of view—the galra and the human are... out of view. Pidge is..." He pauses. "She's out of view too. The lookouts are trying to reposition."

There's another pause. Keith is suddenly hit by a sense of... relief?


Keith sinks back into his chair, hardly daring to hope. "Pidge has a gun," he whispers.

"The human guard just ran by one of the lookouts," Joey says. "Southeast-ish. No sign yet of—"

Lance lets Keith back in.
Okay, before you say anything, I am really really sorry.

Keith doesn't say anything, not yet. Instead he marches into Lance's mind and makes sure, before anything else, that he's okay—exhausted, aching, but uninjured. He made it. He survived.

Second, he pokes through his memories, looks through his eyes—sees Pidge as Lance runs around a corner, hears her shout "DUCK!" and feels Lance drop, hears the gunshots; now she's walking next to him, and behind them a single galra lies died.

Third—third, he finds his words.

I am so beyond mad at you right now, he thinks. I am—I am pissed. I am livid.

He can feel Lance cringe. I know. I'm sorry.

I'll—I'll kill you for making me worry like that.

I'm sorry.

How many times do I have to tell you you're not second to Shiro!?

I know. I'm sorry.

Do you know? Do you really know? Because you should, because you're in my fucking head, but you still—

Keith. Lance pauses, and Keith takes a deep breath, tries to calm himself despite the lump in his throat. I know. I really do. I'd just... I'd do anything to save my friends. I'd do anything to save you, too, you know. When I said that... I know he means a lot to you, so I just thought... that he'd be able to help you move on. If it came to that. Not romantically, even, just... you know?

...Yeah. I get it.

I'm sorry for worrying you. Really. I didn't want to hurt you. It just seemed like the only way.

It might not have been.

Maybe. But I don't like gambling with my friends' lives. And I didn't want you to lose Shiro again.

I don't want to lose you either. I'm dating you, not him.

You didn't lose me. You won't. I promise.

I'm holding you to that.

He's going to say more, but an unexpected noise makes him look up. Allura pulls her ringing phone from her pocket, frowning; when she sees the screen, though, her face goes eerily blank.

"It's Sendak," she says.

Shit.

She looks up sharply. "Everyone, quiet! " she says, quickly, and accepts the call. "...Hello?"

"Good evening, Ms. Altea." Sendak's voice comes crackling from the speaker, audible to the whole room. "How has your day been?"
"Fantastic," she says flatly, thin-lipped and still. "Yours?"

Sendak chuckles, and a chill runs down Keith's spine. "I have to say, I've had better. You see, it seems all my paladins have up and disappeared. I thought, perhaps, you might know where they've gone?"

There is no doubt in Keith’s mind, or in Lance’s, that Sendak knows exactly where all the paladins have gone.

"I might," Allura says lightly. "I can tell you they're as safe as can be, all things considered."

"Oh?"

"Yes, we were quite surprised to find a kaiju in the bay today, considering we fought one just yesterday."

“Well, perhaps you ought to send some of them back, then? After all, it is my job to make sure the defenders of our world are prepared for their jobs, isn't it?"

Keith clenches his fists while Allura's face goes cold. Lance is hissing in the back of his mind.

"I am not sure," Allura says slowly, "that you are qualified for that job."

There's a long pause. "I see. Let me cut to the chase, then; it's time you cease this pointless rebellion and let us all get back to work."

"And why should we?" Allura demands.

"Because I have something you and your little accomplices care about. I believe her name is... Shay?"

Keith's stomach drops right out of his gut. Behind him, Joey is blowing air through his teeth like it's all he can do not to curse while Sendak can hear.

Oh, fuck no.

Allura takes a deep breath. "What do you want, Sendak?"

"Diaz, Kogane, Garrett, and Holt. If you value the life of this girl, of anyone in your Castle—you will send me Diaz, Kogane, Garrett, and Holt." His voice is confident, smooth, and thoroughly unpleasant. "I'm waiting, Allura. Do not delay." And the call clicks off.

Chapter End Notes

"Sorry, Keith." where has he heard that before, i wonder...

now taking bets on how many more rescue missions these kids have gotta run

tumblr
twitter

edit: I COMPLETELY FORGOT TO LINK IT but ive been working on a lil voltron game?? check it out here
"That," Allura says slowly, "was a disaster."

She paces back and forth in front of the various paladins gathered in the control room. None can quite look her in the eye.

"I'm not going to point fingers. I think each of you know what you've done; the blame, however, lies on all of us. We all could have done better."

Someone shifts, sniffles. Keith is so exhausted it's all he can do to stay standing.

"Bonnie was injured. Shay was kidnapped. We need to do better." She stops pacing and puts her hands on her hips. "What should have been a simple rescue mission was almost an utter failure. If we are going to rescue Shay—"

There's a sharp intake of breath from Hunk, and Allura fixes him with a steely look.

"—And we will rescue Shay—we need to be more cautious, and more prepared. We need to be better."

"We will," Pidge says after a moment. Allura turns on her.

"You," she says, "will not. Nor you, or you, or you." She turns her gaze to Hunk, Lance, and Keith in turn. "I will not send any of you on this mission when Sendak has asked for you by name."

"But—"

"No buts." She glares at Hunk, who shrivels back under her gaze. "I am aware that you two are close, but now that we know there are galra among the Garrison's ranks, I suspect they are as likely to kill you on sight as accept this... trade."

Don't say it.

"You'd still be able to defeat the kaiju even if they did," Keith says. "Everyone's in on it now. It doesn't matter who goes through the source, as long as someone does."

Dammit.

She glares at him, now, and he gathers his energy and forces himself to stand firm and glare (admittedly weakly) right back even as she steps right up to him.

"My goal," she says, "is not to defeat the kaiju."
He opens his mouth to speak but she presses her finger right up against it, shocking him into silence. "My goal," she says again, "is to defeat the kaiju and keep you all alive."

Don't argue. Keith, please don't argue.

"And I do need you and Lance here specifically. Do not forget that."

When she removes her finger, he keeps his mouth shut, no energy to press the point anyway. She steps back and surveys them all again.

"All of you," she says, "are going to bed. There are ten or so paladins that have done little to nothing yet; they can handle this. Go. Rest."

"I am not going to be able to sleep if Shay's in danger," says Hunk, slumping over where he stands. Allura puts a hand on his shoulder.

"Try," she says in a much kinder tone than before. "If you can't sleep, at least rest. It will help."

He nods, though he looks like he's on the verge of tears, and turns to go. Joey and Denise follow, while Pidge turns to talk to Lance; Keith doesn't move at all yet, just kind of stares at nothing. He wants to sleep, but it doesn't feel right to while Sendak's threats are still ringing in his head...

"Hey, Allura?" Shiro enters the control room. "Bonnie's doing fine."

"And you?" she asks.

"I'm also doing fine." He glances over as Keith finally looks up. "I heard Shay was kidnapped. What's the plan?"

"The plan is to let someone well-rested handle it," she says. "Which means not you, and not them." She nods over at Keith and, behind him, Lance and Pidge.

"If I can help—"

"You can rest." She looks over at Keith, who still hasn't moved. "That does go for you too, Keith."

"Uh." He kind of sways on the spot, startled to be addressed. "Right..."

She raises an eyebrow. "...Are you okay?"

Keith blinks. And then, to his surprise as well as hers, he sobs. She hurries over to him, Shiro close on her heels.

"Today," he chokes, "has been fucking awful."

A hand squeezes his shoulder, and another, large and familiar, rubs his back. He can feel Lance rushing over, too, and dammit, he can't stop crying.

I don't think I told you, Keith thinks, but I'm so glad you're okay.

You didn't have to, Lance responds, and then he's there and Keith buries his dripping face in Lance's shoulder and bawls. The other hands leave as Lance's arms wrap around his shoulders, and Keith just clings to him tightly and doesn't let go.

"You almost d-died, like, three times," he blubbers into Lance's shirt.
"But I didn't," Lance says softly. His mental presence is warm and comforting.

"Pidge, too..." Keith speaks between gasps.

"She didn't either."

"A-and Shiro..."

"He's here now."

"And now Shay..."

"We'll rescue her. She'll be fine." There's a waver in Lance's voice, but he says the words with conviction anyway. "Breathe. In... Out..."

Keith takes a deep breath, and another. Slowly, he calms down. He loosens his grip on the back of Lance's shirt and wraps his arms around him instead, tightly.

"Love you," he mumbles.

Lance lets out a long breath. Keith can feel it in so many ways; the movement of his chest, the breath in his hair, a feeling in his own chest from the telepathy.

_Love you, too._

...Still kind of mad at you, though.

_That's fair._

Something hits him from behind, then, making them stumble, and thin arms wrap around them both.

"Fuck Sendak, right?" Pidge says into Keith's shoulder blades.

There's a light chuckle, and rather thicker arms cross Lance and Pidge's backs. "Right," says Shiro.

Keith still is half-smothering himself in Lance's shoulder, but Lance looks up to see Allura still standing a few feet away, watching them with an expression that's almost fond.

"Come on, Allura. Join us?" he says, giving her his brightest grin.

"I'm fine, thank you," she says, but she smiles.

It's warm like this, and comfortable. Keith relaxes and just tries not to think about anything, not right now.

"Um, guys?" Lance says after a minute. "Not that I don't love group hugs, but I think it's time to break it up. Keith is literally falling asleep."

"'M not," he mumbles.

"Yeah, you are."

Pidge snorts, and she and Shiro step back, taking their warmth with them. Keith silently mourns the loss.

"You're being dramatic, babe. Come on."
He reluctantly opens his eyes and lets go of Lance, who takes his hand and leads him out of the room after Shiro and Pidge.

"Lab C!" Allura calls after them.

Lab C, as it turns out, doesn't contain so much as a folding cot, but the floor is strewn with air mattresses, cushions, and more blankets than Keith has seen outside of a Target. They find Hunk already snoring in a corner and settle down nearby; almost the moment he lies down, Keith is asleep.

Keith stirs, groggily, to the sound of low voices. There's a hand in his hair, stroking through it lightly.

"Go back to sleep, Keith," Lance says before he's even opened his eyes. "It's only been, like, an hour."

Keith yawns. Why aren't you asleep? he thinks.

*I'm not tired.* It's a blatant lie.

Keith opens his eyes to glare up at Lance, who's sitting cross-legged above him, so his thigh is pressed lightly against the top of Keith's head.

Okay. *Hunk woke up too and we're trying to keep him from freaking out too much over Shay.*

Ah. Keith sits up slowly and looks around; the room is dim, and there are a few other people around, sleeping or talking quietly. Shiro is lying nearby, asleep as well, but Hunk is sitting on an air mattress in front of them with Pidge curled up against his side.

"Oh, Keith," Hunk says. "Sorry to wake you."

Keith shakes his head. "You didn't," he says.

Hunk hums in response, looking down at his hands folded in his lap. Pidge looks mostly asleep, only the lit phone in her hand and the faint glimmer of that light reflected behind her eyelashes showing she's awake.

"Anyway, I trust Allura," Lance says after a moment, like he's reiterating a point. "She'll handle it better than we would."

"I just feel like a bad person for not getting involved! She's my *girlfriend*, I can't just *sit* here."

"Believe me, I don't want to 'just sit here' either, but Shay's not gonna hold it against you."

"I know, but like... Keith busted out of the Garrison to go get you from the airport? What have I done? Nothing!"

"This is nothing like that," Keith mumbles, while at the same time Pidge says, "You came to save us."

"Yeah, man, you disobeyed orders from Allura. You haven't done nothing."

"I'm still peeved you weren't *there,*" Hunk says with a look at Lance. "But that didn't help Shay, anyway."

Pidge sighs. "Maybe if you look pitiful enough Allura will let you sit in the control room and watch."
"Pidge!" Hunk whines. Keith loses focus; there's someone approaching them from across the room. He watches suspiciously as they—she—comes closer, until she's close enough that even in the dim light he can see it's... Nyma?

What?

Lance looks up too, and Hunk pauses whatever he was saying. "What?" he asks.

"Um... hey," says Nyma, giving a kind of awkward wave. Hunk and Pidge both crane around to see.

"What's... up?" Lance asks.

"Oh, I.. heard your friend was kidnapped?"

Hunk and Lance exchange glances. "...Yes?" says the latter.

"I want to help," Nyma says, straightening from her tentative pose. "I want to help you rescue her."

There's a moment of confused silence.

"Well, tell Allura then," Lance says, a little bitterly. "We're not gonna be involved."

"You're not?" Nyma blinks. "But I thought she was kidnapped because of you guys? You're not going to help at all?"

Hunk stiffens, but Keith frowns.

There’s something weird about this, he thinks.

She... does have a point, though, Lance responds.

"What are we supposed to do?" Pidge challenges. "Sneak out in the middle of the night and try to rescue her ourselves?"

"You know that's what I want to do," says Hunk.

"We don't even know where she is," Keith points out. "If she's at the Garrison, we'd just end up giving ourselves up to Sendak."

"And we don't have any way to find her if she isn't, 'cause they shot down the drone," says Pidge.

"Shouldn't we try, though? I think we owe her that much," Lance says slowly. Keith shoots him a look that he ignores.

"I happen," says Nyma, "to know she is in the Garrison." She waves her phone at them. "I've got a friend there. He texted me that he saw her."

Keith is immediately suspicious, and so is Pidge, by her deep frown; Lance is tentatively hopeful, though. Hunk's eyes widen.

"Then she's gotta be in the labs! Right?" He looks over at Lance.

"...Yeah. And we've gotten in there before. Most of us."

Keith can feel Lance coming around to the idea, and dread grows inside him.

Lance, wait, he thinks. Don't you think there's something off about this? We can't trust her.
She's a fellow paladin, of course we can trust her.

"It'd be harder than last time," Pidge says doubtfully. "The whole place has gotta be guarded, and we wouldn't have the rest of the paladins as a distraction."

Nyma waves her phone again. "Except my friend is on guard duty tonight and can let us in! So long as you let me come, of course."

This sounds like a trap.

Shh.

"Does this 'friend' know how many guards there are, then? 'Cause I doubt it's just one."

"It is just one, at the door," Nyma says excitedly. "He said they're expecting a rescue to come up from the subway."

Pidge looks over at the other three. "There'll still be at least one guard in the lab."

"We can handle that," Hunk says firmly, fist to palm. Keith's dread only grows deeper.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," he says.

"Yeah, yeah. Come on, Han Solo." Lance stands and stretches and grins. "Let's go rescue Shay."

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr  
Twitter

and if u didnt see last time, i MADE A VOLTRON GAME?? its still a wip but you can check it out here
Against Keith and Pidge's better judgement, the four of them leave Shiro asleep and trudge out of Lab C after Nyma. Outside the Castle it's fully dark and a little bit cold in the breeze as they make their way through the ruins.

"Why did you want to help, anyway?" Keith asks at one point, since it's bothering him.

"It's the right thing to do!" Nyma says earnestly. "Besides, I have connections."

"...Right," he says. Frankly, he doesn't trust her at all.

*You're being paranoid. She's on our side.*

But how do you know?

*Because she's a paladin too!*

Keith is unconvinced.

*You didn't have to come.*

And let you out of my sight again? After everything that's happened?

...Ah.

They continue on in silence, Keith feeling on edge and Lance feeling guilty.

They creep right up to the Garrison with no trouble at all, which doesn't make Keith any feel better; Nyma walks right up to the door and pulls it open slowly.

"Rolo?" she whispers.

"Here." A man steps out of the shadows, wearing a Garrison uniform. "Better hurry, I think someone upstairs is due for a smoke break."

"Who?" Pidge asks.

"Dunno. Think there's only a couple of 'em up there, though. Good luck."

Nyma leans up and kisses him on the cheek—*friend,* huh—and says, "Thanks, baby!" She heads inside, and Hunk and Lance follow eagerly. Pidge, though, hangs back with Keith as they enter with more caution.

"Why do I feel like we're walking into a trap," she mutters as soon as they're out of hearing range of Rolo.
"Maybe we are," he mutters back.

"Be cautious."

"You don't have to tell me."

They fall silent when they reach the stairs; there's a low murmur coming from below, supporting Nyma's claim that the Garrison expects an attack from the subway. They head up as quietly as they can; at the faint sound of footsteps everyone ducks away onto the third floor, but it soon passes and they continue up. The fourth floor is empty and eerily quiet, and even Lance is starting to feel unsettled.

You see? This was a bad idea, Keith thinks.

We can't just turn around, we're already here.

Just because we haven't sprung the trap yet doesn't mean there isn't one.

"I'll keep watch!" Nyma offers in a whisper when they reach the labs. Keith and Pidge exchange glances but there's nothing for it but to head in. Lance leads the way, Hunk right on his heels.

The hallway is also empty, every door closed like always. They gather before the one at the far end; Lance counts down on his fingers, and flings it open. He and Hunk rush in.

The light is on. The guard chair is empty. The cell door is open.

Shay is standing on the other side of the bars, stricken, watching them enter; behind her, Sendak has a knife to her throat.

"Good of you to join us," he says loudly.


Pidge has already turned, grabbing Keith's wrist to pull him away too; he stumbles to follow, but the lights go on and the lab doors open and all the biggest, meanest-looking officers in the Garrison pour out. All human, Keith notes, though somehow that doesn't make him feel any better. He and Pidge stop short, and Lance backs into them; only Hunk hasn't left the room.

"Let her go!" he's shouting. "Don't hurt her!"

"That," Sendak says, "depends on your cooperation."

Fuck.

Keith shoots Lance an unimpressed look as the three of them are herded back into the room. Lance cringes.

Okay, you were right, I'm sorry, if we die it is absolutely my fault, oh my god, I'm so sorry.

"Why don't you come in?" Sendak suggests, in a tone that makes it absolutely clear it's not a suggestion. He backs up away from the cell door, pulling Shay with him.

If you get hurt because of me, I... I can't handle that, Keith. I can't.

Lance is really panicking now. Keith reaches out and grabs his hand as they shuffle into the cell; the wall of muscle blocking the door really gives them no choice.
Anything they plan to do to me probably goes for you too, he thinks.

*That is not comforting.*

They haven't done anything yet.

"What about me?" a voice calls, and Keith turns to look, angry. Nyma waves her hand above the crowd of officers. "I brought them here!"

Lance's heart sinks even lower, so Keith squeezes his hand and decides he really doesn't need to say "I told you so."

"Your loyalty will be rewarded," Sendak says offhandedly, and gestures with his knifeless hand—the prosthetic one—at the crowd. Someone at the back nods, and he walks away, apparently pulling Nyma with him.

"It'd better!" she calls as she's led away. The rest of the officers back off too, though they're still there beyond the door.

"That bitch," Pidge mutters, barely audible. As Sendak backs toward the cell door with Shay still in tow, she follows. Hunk reaches for her but she shakes him off.

"Why are you doing this?" she asks, voice cracking. "What the hell have we done!?"

Sendak fixes his one-eyed glare on her, slowly. Without looking away he lowers his knife and shoves Shay away; in the next moment he has Pidge by the arm, dragging her up almost entirely off her feet in the doorway. Keith steps forward but Lance pulls him back by their linked hands. *Don't make it worse!*

"What have you done? Do not pretend to ignorance," he scoffs, tucking the knife away. She struggles in his grasp, and he gives her a rough shake. "Do you think I didn't know of your plans? I knew. I knew of your conspiracy theories, your 2 am meetings, your break-ins—yes, I knew you broke into my office. I knew you were in league with Allura, and I knew you dragged Kogane and the rest into your little *club*. I knew that you never believed the stories that we fed you—that you came here to avenge your family." He grabs her jaw with his other hand, forcing her to face him, though even now she determinedly looks away. "Little girl, you have no secrets from me." And he tosses her back into the cell, and locks the door, and leans on it, folding his arms casually through the bars. "And do you know why I let you do what you did? Do you know why I never interfered?"

No one responds.

"Because it doesn't matter. You can tell the public all the secrets you want. Allura can have her mutiny." He smiles, slow and dark, and his eye seems to flash yellow again. "There is no stopping the kaiju."

He turns and walks out of the lab, leaving them there alone.

It's quiet for a long time.

Shay picks her hijab up the floor and drapes it back over her head. She fumbles with the pin with shaking hands, and Hunk reaches over.

"Let me help," he offers. She continues to try for another moment before sighing and handing the pin
"You should not have come," she says softly.

There's a sort of collective sigh—they all know, but now she's said it, and the tension breaks. Lance flops onto the air mattress and Pidge slumps against the barred door, pushing her arms and face through. Keith drops cross legged on the floor.

"I can't believe Nyma betrayed us," Lance says as Hunk carefully pins Shay's hijab back in place.

"I can," say Pidge and Keith simultaneously.

"I can't believe I'm in here again," she adds.

"Did they take your gun?"

"Yep. Who last had the key to this place, anyway? Lance?"

"Uh..." Lance sits up halfway and checks his pockets. "Nope, I must've taken it out or something."

"You knew we were coming here and you didn't bring it with you?"

"It's been a rough day, okay!" He flops onto his back and throws an arm across his face. "I fucked it up, I know, I should've brought the key, I shouldn't've trusted Nyma, it's my fault we failed and I'm a huge fuckup, I know." His voice starts wobbling halfway through, and Keith crawls over to him quickly; he's awash with guilt, insecurity, fear.

Lance...

"I... didn't say any of that, Lance," Pidge says, softer.

Lance sniffles in response. Keith kneels on the partially-deflated air mattress by his side, making it dip impressively. Lance rolls over half into his lap and wraps his arms around his waist and sobs.

"Nothing's gone right...! I thought... this wouldn't... this was my ho-ome!"

"We'll... we'll get out of this," Keith says around the lump in his throat, running a hand up and down Lance's back. Lance feels so hurt, so betrayed; it's almost overpowering. "Allura was already going to send a rescue mission. They'll get us out of here."

Hunk sniffles too. "I hope so. It's my fault, anyway."

"No, Hunk," Shay says quickly, "it is nobody's fault but Sendak's. You were very brave to try." That sets him off too, and Keith kind of looks around the cell awkwardly as Hunk sobs into Shay's shoulder and Lance sobs into his hip. He's feeling pretty cried out for the time being, but with Lance's emotions leaking over into his mind it's hard not to get a little choked up.

"Y-you guys are gonna set me off, at this rate," Pidge mumbles, surreptitiously wiping her eyes.

"This was my home, Lance thinks again, sniffling against Keith's thigh.

We'll find you a new one, Keith promises. One that isn't full of aliens.

He gives a watery chuckle at that. Keith keeps rubbing his back, and looks up and meets Shay's eyes. She gives him a sort of woeful smile.
It's a while before the tears subside. Lance actually manages to cry himself to sleep—fortunately after Keith has shifted into a more comfortable position against the wall, because he's still half in Keith's lap—and Hunk and Shay soon fall asleep too, curled in a blanket in the corner of the cell, slouched against the walls and each other. Keith idly runs a hand through Lance's hair and just sort of listens; it's rare for him to be awake while Lance sleeps, and his mind is so uncharacteristically quiet like this.

"What time is it?" Pidge whispers. She's slumped against the bars still, but sitting on the floor facing into the cell, and her eyes are closed. Keith checks his watch.

"Quarter past midnight."

She groans lowly. "Only midnight? Feels like... five, or something. I can't believe it."

"It's true." He yawns. He doesn't particularly want to sleep; sleeping means he'll only wake up to whatever they'll have to face tomorrow, and he's not too keen on that. He's still exhausted, though, and the hour-long nap he had earlier only helped so much.

Pidge is quiet long enough that he thinks she's fallen asleep, but eventually she stirs again, shifting position against the bars.

"Can't believe I shot someone," she murmurs.

It takes Keith a moment to remember what she's referring to. He blinks.


"A sentient being that might have had a family."

"It was trying to kill Lance. You did the right thing."

She sighs. "Yeah. Still feel weird about it, though."

He thinks about that. "We'll probably have to kill more of them, you know."

Her face screws up, eyes still shut. "If we get out of this."

"Yeah," he says, closing his eyes too. "If we get out of this."

Chapter End Notes

wow... didnt see that coming... who could possibly have predicted this would happen.
not me.

[link to tumblr]
[link to twitter]

edit: i am... very suddenly planning to take the gre?? so next update will be a day or two late probs :v
sup yall... i live... sry for droppin off the map like that lol, things came up, updates will continue to be spotty while i rush to finish my grad school app haha... thanks for being patient with me :) 

anyway raise your hand if you finished season 2 and died (-_-)/

"Up and at 'em, kiddos!"

It's not the stage whisper that wakes Keith up so much as Lance startling at the sound of it and accidentally digging his elbow into Keith's inner thigh. So he jerks awake with a loud hiss of pain, only to be quickly shushed—along with Lance's apologies—and he opens his eyes and of all people Coran is there, a couple feet away, peering into his face.

"Good, you're awake!" Coran exclaims, still in a loud whisper.

"Whhtefuck..." Pidge slurs nearby. Keith agrees.

"Come on, get up, quickly! We don't have much time." Coran moves over to where Hunk and Shay are still asleep, and starts prodding their shoulders. Lance sits up slowly; half his hair is sticking up at an odd angle, which is stupidly endearing.

"Your hair looks stupid too.

And the best first thought of the day award goes to...

Sssshut up.

It takes Keith a moment to register that the cell door is open, and Coran is in here, which means... he's rescuing them? The light is still on in the room but outside the window it's still dark. He climbs to his feet and checks the time; it's half past 4 am.

"The guards..." he says. His brain hasn't quite caught up with his mouth and his voice trails off.

"Not to worry!" Coran says, still hunched over in the corner where Hunk and Shay are finally stirring. "I may have slipped a mild sedative into their last batch of coffee. Little did they know it won't be keeping them awake today! But let's keep it down anyway, just in case." He gives a sort of nervous chuckle.

"How'd you know we were here?" Pidge asks, rubbing her eyes. "Did they tell you? I thought you were just a secretary."

"Just a secretary? " Coran asks, bristling in half-mock indignation. "Why, I practically built this place with my own two hands! There's not a secret in the Garrison I don't know about."

"Coran, I love you," says Lance.
"I love you too, Lance," Coran says, actually looking kind of touched, for a moment. "But we've no time to dally about! Come on now, let's get going!"

"Mmrgh," says Hunk, but Shay is getting to her feet already and tugging at his arm. Lance, too, rolls off the air mattress and gets to his feet, stretching.

Keith steps out of the cell, hardly believing he's not dreaming, as Shay and Lance pull a half-asleep Hunk to his feet. Pidge follows, peering out the window.

"Did Allura ask you to do this, Coran?" she asks.

"Nope, 'twas all me! Not that she could have, anyway." He tugs his mustache, stepping out of the cell too. "The folks here jammed all communication lines a few hours ago."

Pidge makes a face as she turns away from the window. "Fantastic."

"Can't be helped, they took the radio tower down completely, too. Now, let's go!" He holds a finger to his lips and opens the door. They all creep through; the sound of light snoring is coming from behind one of the other lab doors as they go.

Downstairs, a lone guard is sitting on the floor by the door, slumped and silent. They slip by him, and Lance carefully closes the door behind them; then he jogs to catch up with Keith, and takes his hand.

Allura's going to kill us, he thinks.

We probably deserve it.

Yeah, but it's gonna suck anyway.

The walk back to the Castle is nearly silent; it's dark, and everyone is tired and, if he and Lance are any indication, humbled and ashamed. The only sounds are their footsteps and Coran humming a low and aimless tune as they walk.

The sight of the Castle is a relief, but also fills him with dread. It grows as they enter the building—even now the lobby is full of people, though significantly less than during the day—and all cram into an elevator.

"Do we have to go talk to her?" Lance whines. "Can't we just go to bed and pretend Shay escaped in the morning?"

"There's no way she doesn't already know, Lance," Pidge says darkly.

"I am sure Sendak would have called to gloat," Shay adds in a similar tone. "He did after his lackeys kidnapped me."

The doors open, and Coran ushers them all out. Keith squeezes Lance's hand as they step reluctantly into the control room; Allura—does she ever sleep?—turns slowly and watches until they've stopped in front of her.

"What," she says, "the fuck were you thinking!?"

Her voice cracks so that it's almost a shriek. Hunk edges behind Pidge, as though somehow she can protect him from Allura's wrath. Shay edges away entirely, going to stand by the side with Coran. There's silence.
"We weren't," Lance says finally. Allura crosses her arms, unmollified.

"I should say so! Did nothing I said penetrate through your thick skulls?" She reaches forward and knocks on the side of Lance's head, making him wince. "Do you know what could have happened? Do you?"

"Um."

"You could have died! You could have died, did this occur to none of you!?"

"Keith and I argued against it..." Pidge says tentatively, and cringes when Allura turns on her.

"You went anyway! You went anyway and you told no one!" Allura throws her hands in the air. "DO YOU HAVE ANY SENSE OF SELF-PRESERVATION."

Lance, don't—

"It was my fault!" Lance says quickly, stepping out in front of the rest of them. "I talked them into it. Allura, it was me."

She turns back on him, eyes narrowed. "Was it."

Lance swallows. "Y-yes."

"And what, exactly, was your reasoning for putting you and your friends in danger?"

"Because Shay w-was in danger, and she's my friend too." He takes a deep breath. "And, uh, Nyma betrayed us, and I shouldn't have trusted her?"

Allura freezes. Her eyebrows slowly lift.

"Nyma... betrayed you?"

He nods quickly. "She said she could get us into the Garrison, but it was a trap. Sendak was expecting us."

She leans back to take in the whole group again. "And did it occur to any of you that this might happen?"

"Yeah," Keith chokes, while Pidge raises a hand.

"And why did you go anyway?"

"In case they needed me," Pidge says, voice small.

"And you, Keith?"

He's not sure quite how to say it. "Because... Lance keeps getting himself into trouble without me."

You died while I was gone, Keith.

That's different.

No?

Allura snorts. "So all four of you went, knowing that you're the ones Sendak is after."
There's nothing to do but nod. So they do.

"Your loyalty to each other is admirable," Allura continues, "but that's no replacement for common sense. You are extremely lucky that Coran was willing and able to rescue you—I assume that's what happened?"

Coran nods quickly. "Yes, ma'am!"

"I had been in the middle of planning a rescue operation already, but knowing Sendak, there is a very real chance it could have arrived too late. Do you all understand that?"

Everyone nods earnestly. "It won't happen again!" Lance adds.

"Because you've learned your lesson, or because there's no one else to rescue?"

Lance opens his mouth... and closes it, and looks away. Keith knows he knows he would do it again in a heartbeat. Allura sighs heavily.

"Just... go to bed. All of you," she says. "There's more to do in the morning so just, go. And... I'm glad you're alright, Shay."

"Thank you," Shay whispers. She comes back over to put her hand on Hunk's shoulder, and Allura turns away to talk to Coran, and the tension finally breaks. Lance reclaims Keith's hand as they meander towards the elevators.

...Do you think I'm stupid?

Keith looks up, startled. Lance is staring at the floor.

I mean, for always trying to... save my friends. Running into danger. It's not stupid, right? I just... care a lot.

Keith takes a moment, as they step into the elevator, to think.

It's not stupid, he decides. It's not stupid, but it scares me.

I just want everyone to be safe.

And I want you to be safe, too.

The elevator lowers slowly. Pidge, beside them, is silent; Hunk is still upstairs with Shay.

I like it about you, actually, Keith adds. That you care. How you befriend everyone you meet.

Some kind of tension bleeds out of Lance's mind, and Keith can feel the gears turning in his mind as he comes up with a response. They reach Lab C, where Shiro is miraculously still sleeping, and Lance doesn't respond until they've both laid down and he's curled right up against Keith's side, head pillowed on his shoulder.

I like your intensity, he thinks. When you commit to something, you're all in.

There's no point in doing something halfway.

Yeah, but you don't give up.

You're calling me stubborn.
Keith snorts lightly, and reaches up to hold the hand that's lying on his chest. He thinks he hears Pidge whisper nearby, "Gross." But he's already drifting off to sleep.

When Keith awakes, he's a little too warm and thoroughly entangled with a sleeping Lance. A glance around tells him Pidge, Hunk, and Shay are all also still asleep; a glance at his watch tells him it's almost 9 am, much later than he'd usually sleep, though he's sure he could sleep more if he tried. Still, he blocks off his mind to let Lance sleep longer, and begins the arduous process of freeing himself from Lance's clutches (literally).

A light chuckle make him look up, though; Shiro is awake, still reclined and half-blanketed. He's watching Keith's struggles with evident amusement.

"Need a hand?"

"I just don't wanna wake him," Keith mutters. He finally shimmies out of Lance's grip; Lance mumbles something and reaches out, and Keith panics and grabs a pillow and shoves it into his arms. Lance makes a contented noise and hugs the pillow. Keith tugs the blanket up over his shoulders and looks, red-faced, back at Shiro, who's smothering a laugh with his hand.

"Shut up," says Keith.

"He's going to be very disappointed when he wakes up," Shiro finally manages.

"He'll live!"

Shiro sits up and tries to smooth his hair down. His amusement fades. "The agenda for today is rescuing Shay, I assume."

"Uh, it happened overnight. She's right there." He points.

"Oh." Shiro looks. “I didn’t see her. I didn’t think to look.” He blinks, then turns and looks at him for a long moment, appraising.

Keith maintains eye contact, face stony.

"You went, didn’t you."

It's not a question. Keith looks away. Shiro sighs and drops his hands.

"That was dangerous, you know."

"...All's well that ends well?"

He runs a hand down his face. "Did Allura chew you out yet?"

"Yes. Thoroughly."

"Then I won't do it too." Keith breathes a sigh of relief and Shiro holds up a hand. "But know that I second everything she said."

"You don't even know what she said."

"I know Allura. I can guess, and I second it anyway."
Keith huffs. Shiro smiles.

"You still owe me a talk, by the way," Keith says, and Shiro's smile vanishes.

"Right," he says. "Shall we...?" He nods toward the door, and Keith nods and gets up. They leave their sleeping friends behind and step out of Lab C, into an empty white hallway.

"So..." Shiro says slowly. "Lance told me you're... telepathically connected. So...

"So I heard everything you said in that building, yes," Keith finishes.

Shiro looks at him. "I take it you were angrier than Lance let on."

"Yyyep." He shoves his hands in his pockets. "You know you have a habit of trying to take care of everyone but yourself."

"That wasn't the sort of situation to be breaking down in, Keith."

"No, but it's okay not to be okay, you know? You told me that once." He looks pointedly up at Shiro, who rubs his neck and looks away.

"I did," he says, "but..."

"But nothing. Me and Lance both care about you a lot. And I can't see in their heads but I know Hunk and Pidge do too. And Allura. So."

"So what Lance said you said...?"

"Was not what I said." Keith shrugs. "But more or less what I meant, I guess."

Shiro is quiet for a moment. "You know, Lance is like that, too. Putting others before himself."

"I know. You guys are gonna be the death of me."

Shiro smirks, just a little bit. "You seem to have a type."

"What? Oh." Keith claps a hand across his face as Shiro chuckles. "Shiro, I'm being serious here."

"Oh? Do you have another grievance to air?"

Keith shoots him a glare. Shiro lifts his hands in surrender.

"Alright, alright. I'm sorry. What is it?"

"You were going to sacrifice yourself."

"...Ah."

Keith takes a deep breath and folds his arms. "Do you have any idea what the Kerberos mission did to me? Shiro."

"Keith, I'm sorry. I really am."

"I don't want that to happen again."

"It... it won't. I promise."
He looks at Shiro. Shiro looks back, totally serious. Keith is struck again by how much older he looks now, and takes a deep breath.

"I guess I'm not over it, after all," he admits, and sighs. "But I think I've kinda made my point already. Just... don't die."

"I won't." Shiro takes him by the shoulders, firm. "I'll take care of myself. There's... only so much I can do, while we're in this mess, but after..."

"I'm holding you to that," Keith says, and hugs him fiercely. But he can feel Lance slowly waking, so he pulls away reluctantly. "Lance is waking up."

"Tell him I said good morning," Shiro says, and steps away fully. He gives Keith a smile and heads down the hall towards the elevators; Keith turns away and goes back into Lab C.

Chapter End Notes

tumblr
twitter
edit: art!!
Voltron

Chapter Notes

gonna try and get back on the usual schedule soon lolll these past couple of weeks have sure been something. anyway enjoy...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lance is stirring when Keith goes and sits on the edge of his air mattress; Pidge and Shay are too, though Hunk is evidently still dead to the world. Keith stops blocking Lance out and waits as he slowly wakes.

He can't help a little chuckle at the rush of disappointment when Lance opens his eyes and realizes he's hugging a pillow. He looks up at Keith with narrowed eyes.

Betrayal.

Keith snorts and smothers a full laugh with his hand. Lance shoves the pillow away and tugs on Keith's arm, so he lies down obligingly and lets Lance snuggle up to him.

"You should get up," he says.

No. Why'd you leave me, Lance whines mentally.

I was talking to Shiro. He says good morning.

There's a moment where Lance is clearly considering whether he should be jealous or not; he settles on not. Maybe that's why he suddenly showed up in my dream.

Did he? What happened?

Mm... there were snakes? I was trying to herd them. He just stood there and got in the way.

Keith can't help but laugh outright this time. A pillow lands on his face; he pushes it off to see a disgruntled Pidge glaring at him from a few feet away.

"Sorry, sorry," he says. She mumbles something and buries her face in her arms. Shay giggles nearby. Keith ignores them and looks back down at Lance.

So, how do you herd snakes, anyway?

With a torch. Like Indiana Jones.

Never saw that one.

Lance sits straight up. "You've never seen Indiana Jones!?"

Hunk starts awake with a garbled shout. Pidge groans loudly. Shay giggles again. Lance ignores them.

"You've never seen Godzilla," Keith says pointedly. "Any of them."
"You haven't seen any Indiana Jones—"

"There's way more Godzilla—"

"Can you knock it off?" Pidge lifts herself up on her elbows to glare at them more forcefully. She looks actively murderous; Keith decides he wants to live.

"Sorry," he and Lance both mutter, and then they're getting up and leaving the room quickly to the sound of Shay's laughter.

So, what were you talking to Shiro about? Lance asks as they step into the elevator.

The stuff he said during his rescue.

So you were scolding him.

...I guess so.

There's a pause. He's been through a lot, Lance thinks carefully. Are you sure he deserved it?

I told him to take care of himself. I don't think that was too harsh.

Alright.

You can just look at my memories, you know.

Nah. I trust you.

Keith gives him a small smile. The elevator doors open, and they enter the control room.

"Good, you're here," Allura says as they approach. She sounds exhausted. Shiro is at her side, looking over her shoulder at the files on her desk.

"Did you... sleep? Like, at all?" Lance asks slowly.

"Enough," she says mildly. "I appreciate your concern, though it is rather misplaced." She finishes with a glare.

Ah, yep, she's still mad.

"Are the others awake yet?" she continues.

"More or less," says Keith.

"Good. Shiro, stay here. You two, come with me."

"Okay," Shiro says. Allura starts back out towards the elevator, and Keith and Lance follow.

Either this is part of the plan, or she's literally about to murder us, Lance thinks as the elevator slowly heads down.

Probably the first one.

You never know.

Keith almost thinks they're heading back down to the labs, at first. When they get off at the lobby,
though, Allura leads them right into one of the hangar elevators instead, and they continue down. She gestures through the glass wall.

"That," she says, "is Voltron."

Keith and Lance go over to the window to look, not that they really need to; the object of Allura's gesture is placed directly in front of the elevator shaft, almost completely blocking the view of the rest of the mechas, except for Blue and Yellow.

It's a mecha. A really, really big mecha, larger even than Black or Yellow. There's an unfinished look about it, though; while the others are painted their respective colors, though the paint is scratched and worn, Voltron is mostly a smooth, unblemished gray. It's covered in scaffolding and workers but they do little to hide its size or shape.

"It's huge," Lance mutters.

"I've had our engineers start assembling it overnight. It's nearly done," Allura says. "So to speak. We were going to paint it. And integrate the telepathic caps into the cockpit, but since you two are constantly connected, it's not necessary anymore."

"Wait," says Keith.

"We're both going to pilot that?" Lance asks.

"Together?"

"Yes. This was the goal of the Voltron Initiative: a mecha to combine the strengths of multiple paladins without sacrificing the reaction speed and decision-making of a one-pilot mecha." Allura joins them at the wall as they slowly descend toward the hangar floor. "Assuming you can come to an agreement telepathically when you can't seem to verbally."

She's not pulling any punches today, is she, Keith thinks.

"Nope. "We agree where it counts. Like out in battle," says Lance.

"I hope you're right about that, because I don't think you'll have time to practice." She frowns. "We were going to run tests, but Hunk told me Sendak knew your plans from the start—I think it's safe to assume we don't have time to waste."

"...Or else what?" Lance whispers nervously, though he can guess. So can Keith.

"Or else we lose the Holts for good. Or we are overrun by kaiju. Or we are invaded by galra. Take your pick."

They reach the hangar floor, and the doors open before Voltron's massive feet. They stand there at the base of the scaffolding and look up.

"Are you sure I can pilot that thing with my arm?" Keith asks.

"I'd intended for you to pilot the left side, anyway," Allura says. "You'll see when you get up there."

"...How are we gonna get up there?"

"You'll have to climb," she says simply.

"Ma'am!" A staff member darts out of an elevator and all but skids up to them. "The kaiju we were
tracking yesterday--it's due in less than half an hour."

"Warn the floor staff," Allura says, turning back to the elevators; when the man jogs away, she looks back over her shoulder at Keith and Lance. "Gather your friends, and meet me when the battle is over." She steps into the elevator, and presses a button—there must be some kind of express setting only she has access to, because it shoots up much faster than it lowered. Keith and Lance exchange a look, and wait for the next elevator.

Keith glances back up at Voltron. There's not much to see at this angle; honestly, there’s not much to see anyway. It’s huge. It’s a mecha. Presumably the cockpit is more interesting.

It’s not quite a letdown, but it’s not exactly a surprise, either. Or maybe he’s just tired.

_Elevator’s here, Keith._

They head back to Lab C first; Pidge is still there, still half blanketed and playing some game on a phone.

"I thought your phone was confiscated," says Keith as they approach, and she starts and accidentally drops the device on her face.

"...It's Hunk's," she mumbles, and removes the phone to glare at them, albeit with far less heat than earlier. "What's up?"

"There's another kaiju on the way, so Allura told us to round everyone up and meet her afterwards," Lance says. "Speaking of Hunk, where is he?"

"Probably being gross with Shay somewhere." Pidge sits up with a groan. "When are you guys gonna take pity on my single ass and stop with the PDA in front of me, huh?"

"You had plenty of PDA when you were dating that lab assistant." Lance raises an eyebrow at her. "I was _never_ as bad as you two." She stretches. "Whatever. When are we going?"

"Soon," says Keith, and the alarm starts going off. "Probably as soon as we're ready!" he shouts over the sound. She gives him a thumbs up and gets to her feet.

_I was hoping for a chance to shower but I guess we’re doing this in yesterday’s clothes_, Lance thinks sadly, tugging at his uniform as they head out.

It'll only be a couple of days total.

_You still smell like smoke._

...Oh well?

By the time the three of them find Hunk and Shay (sitting in the staff cafeteria for breakfast), the alarm has stopped. They take the opportunity to eat too, though.

"They're probably still in the middle of battle," Lance reasons, mouth full of waffle. "We’ve got time."

For the love of god, swallow before you speak.

_Waste of time._
You just said—

Shh. Shhhh. He winks. Keith rolls his eyes.

It's still a pretty quick meal. They head up to the control room promptly, though the tension in the elevator is palpable—but no one wants to keep Allura waiting.

When they get there, though, Allura isn't there—nor is Shiro, or most of the staff. The view down into the hangar shows that Red and Blue are out, but none of the displays in the room show the battle.

"What the hell," says Pidge.

"Language," Shay says quietly, "but, agreed."

"All communications are jammed," someone offers helpfully. "If you're looking for Allura, she's in the west lounge."

Where's that? Keith wonders.

I know the way.

"Thanks!" Hunk says, and starts back out of the room; the rest follow.

"Where's the west lounge?" Pidge asks, and Keith is glad he's not the only one confused.

"It's right under the Black bunk," Lance says. "It was a pain in the a—uh, neck, to get to, though, so they just locked it up because people only went there to bang, because it was private, because it was a pain in the neck to get to."

"Amazing."

They head downstairs to the sim level, and all the way around to the end of the curved hall, past the Red sim; Hunk pulls open a door there labeled "Maintenance Only."

"Hunk?" Shay asks.

"Don't worry, they only added the sign after they closed the place off. This is the way." He leads them into a short hallway that turns sharply, heading inwards towards the hangar.

"Pain in the neck to get to is right," Pidge mutters.

"Just wait till we get to the ladder," Lance says, pointing ahead.

"Yeah, the lounge is technically behind us and to the left, right now," says Hunk.

"Jesus."

There is, indeed, a ladder at the end of the hall, and they climb up it one by one (Keith with extra care thanks to his arm). It's taller than a single floor, as far as he can tell, and leads into a narrow hall with a basement sort of feel to it, like it was never supposed to be seen. Hunk is already heading down it with Shay when Keith finishes climbing up and steps away from the ladder.

"Oh, come on," says Pidge as she joins them.

"Make way, I'm coming up," says Lance, still on the ladder. Keith sets off after Hunk.
"Are we above the hangar door?" Pidge asks.

"The left one, yep!" Hunk calls back.

There's a sharp turn outwards and a ladder back down at the end of this hall; the lounge, fortunately, is at the bottom of it. There are several staff members there, and Allura and Shiro are to one side, talking quietly in front of several massive windows that overlook the bay. Red and Blue are out there, finishing off a kaiju.

"Allura!" Lance calls. "We're here."

She glances back, and gestures for them to join her, so they do. Keith walks right up to the glass and all but presses his nose against it; the view is incredible. They're just about at mecha level, here, and directly above the water at the base of the hangar doors, about as close to the battle as can be without actually fighting.


"That's a problem," says Hunk.

"We can probably find a workaround," Pidge says. "It depends on how their—"

"No," Allura interrupts. "There's no time. I have people working on it already, but I need the four of you ready to go as soon as they come back in." She gestures out at Red and Blue, both of which are already turning back towards the Castle. "Every minute we waste gives Sendak and the galra time to prepare and puts your family, and the rest of us, in further danger. Once you're far enough away from here, you should be able to communicate with each other again."

"But..." Lance says slowly, "we won't be able to talk to you."

"I know," she says. "Which is why Shiro and I are going to establish a telepathic connection, too."

Chapter End Notes

tumblr
twitter
Telepathy

Chapter Notes

so at this point i think theres anywhere from 5 to 15 chapters left? yeah. were gettin close yall.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The group is struck silent for a good thirty seconds as they process this information.

"WHAT? " Keith and Lance finally demand, simultaneously. Shay echoes them a moment later.

"I assume you are still able to communicate with each other mentally?" Allura asks.

"Yeah, but—"

"—the consequences—"

"We know," Shiro says. "But with our time frame and their jamming tech, it's the only option."

Keith's mind is racing. Lance is panicking.

"It's permanent," he says.

"Everything you said about his condition—" Keith waves a hand at Shiro, looking at Allura.

"I know you're old friends, but this is—"

"Shiro, are you sure you can handle—"

"You said there wouldn't be anyone after us—"

"You only just got back, you shouldn't come at all—"

"BOYS," Allura says sharply, and they shut up. "I appreciate your concerns, but we have no choice."

"We can handle this," Shiro says, though Keith can tell by the way he doesn't quite meet his eye that he's not as confident as he sounds.

"Shiro," he says, stepping right up to him to force him to look him in the eyes. "Are you sure? "

"Yes. I can handle this, Keith." Shiro does look at him this time, firmly.

"Can she? " Keith grabs Shiro's metal arm, holds it up. "I don't know what you went through, but she's going to see all of it, Shiro. She's gonna see everything."

Shiro says nothing, though he holds Keith's gaze.

"Keith..." says Allura.

Keith ignores her. "Do you want to subject her to that, Shiro?" he asks softly. "Can you handle
"...I don't want her to see it, no," Shiro finally responds, equally soft. "But if I have to live with that guilt, so be it."

"Keith, I will be fine," Allura adds.

Allura is not the one he's worried about. He gives Shiro one last look—Shiro looks back steadily—and lets go of his arm, steps back, and nods.

I don't like this, Lance thinks.

Me neither, but... we have to trust them.

"If that's settled," says Allura, "we need to get going now. Pidge, Hunk, go ahead to your mechas. Shay, with us." She pauses, looking at Keith and Lance. "I suppose you two will want to be there for this?"

"Absolutely," Lance says quickly, while Keith nods. She sighs.

"Come on, then," she says, and leads the way back up the ladder and out of the lounge.

 Lab A looks exactly as Keith and Lance remember it: white walls, white chairs, white everything, except for the black wires dangling from the ceiling. There are fewer people there this time, though; it's just the five of them and Dr. Arus. Shay immediately starts flitting from station to station, as Allura and Shiro settle into the chairs.

"Welcome back," Dr. Arus says, nodding to Keith and Lance. "Allura, we will be ready in just a minute."

"Fine."

Keith steps right up to Shiro's chair and puts a hand on his arm reassuringly; Shiro is eyeing the wire cap above him much the same way Keith had, when he and Lance first came here. It feels like eons ago, though in reality it's not even been two months.

You're right. It feels like way longer. Lance looks between the two seats thoughtfully.

"It's gonna be way more intense than you expect," he says, looking first at Allura, then at Shiro. "You gotta keep track of yourself, and don't get lost."

"You'll probably forget who you are for a bit," Keith adds quickly, reading Lance's intentions. "Just wait it out, I guess?"

"Yeah, eventually you'll start to realize what is you and what isn't."

"It doesn't actually last that long."

"But you'll probably feel like you're dying."

Shiro and Allura both don't look too happy to hear this. Dr. Arus is taking rapid notes.

"Thanks...?" says Shiro.

"We just wanna make sure you know what to expect," Lance says, hiding his worry with a grin. "It's
kind of traumatic, you know?"

"I do remember you describing the experience as a forest fire," Allura says, frowning. "Or a flood."

"Well, it'll be like that, probably."

Keith turns to Dr. Arus. "It might be easier on them not to have the cap things, uh, active for so long."

"Though once you get the hang of it it doesn't make much difference," Lance adds. "But we're kind of rushed right now anyway, right?"

"Noted," says Dr. Arus, and Shay nods to him from across the room. "We're ready."

Allura grips the arms of her chair tightly, but she nods. "Proceed," she says. The caps lower, and Shay comes over to adjust them, first on Allura's head, then on Shiro's. Keith backs up out of her way, but he meets Shiro's eyes and opens his mouth to speak.

"Keith, I'm sure," Shiro says before he can. Keith closes his mouth and nods.

"He'll be fine, Keith," Lance thinks, sending him calm that he doesn't feel himself.

You're as nervous as I am, Lance.

...Yeah.

They stand together next to Dr. Arus, and watch with bated breath as Shay says, "Ready!" and hurries over to the lever on the wall. She hesitates, as Shiro and Allura exchange a glance.

"Do it," Allura says, and closes her eyes. Dr. Arus nods. Shay pulls the lever.

Immediately Shiro and Allura jerk in their seats. Lance bites back a gasp and grips Keith's wrist so tightly it hurts, and they watch the two of them twitch as their mental connection is formed. Keith doesn't move, doesn't so much as breathe, eyes fixed on Shiro's pained expression. Lance is watching Allura almost as intently.

Time seems to drag on as the two settle into stillness, slowly, but if it feels long to Keith it must seem eons to Shiro and Allura.

Then Allura gives a little gasp that's almost a sob, and Shiro's head snaps up to look at her.

"I'm sorry," he whispers. "Allura..."

She shakes her head heavily and wipes at an eye and says nothing.

"But..."

"Shiro." Allura gives him a look, and he quiets—in fact, both are quiet for a moment, looking at each other.

They're talking, Keith realizes with a start.

...You're right. Geez, it's weird from the outside, isn't it?

"Hey, Doc," Lance mutters, nodding towards the lever, where Shay still stands. Dr. Arus nods too, and Shay returns the lever to its original position. Shiro and Allura both visibly relax, and finally look
away from each other; Shiro turns and blinks at Keith like he'd forgotten he was there.

"So...?" Shay asks tentatively. "How was it?"

"Like floating in space," Allura says dazedly.

"...Crystalline," says Shiro.

They look at each other again as Shay frees them from the caps; they hardly acknowledge her, but it's clear they're conversing from the emotions that flicker across their faces.

"They seem kind of out of it," Shay whispers, coming to join the other three. "Are they going to be okay?"

"We were like that too," says Lance, nudging Keith's shoulder. His hand is still on Keith's wrist, looser now.

"It took us days to get used to it, though," Keith says. "They don't have that kind of time."

"They won't have to act like they're not mentally linked, at least."

"What did you have trouble with?" Dr. Arus asks.

"Responding out loud?" Keith shrugs.

"I think we used to get kinda distracted," Lance clarifies. "One of us would think something and the other would respond and we'd forget to pay attention to what was happening outside our heads."

"If Shiro's supposed to pilot..." Keith's voice trails off.

"It should take a little more than a day to reach the source," Shay offers. "Perhaps that time will be enough."

"It will have to be," Dr. Arus says. "Will their physical separation speed the process?"

Lance shrugs. "A little? Maybe?"

"I think Allura will be fine," Keith decides. "She'll be able to just focus on the telepathy, since all the sensors are down anyway. Besides, she could probably give orders in her sleep."

"It is easier to just piggyback on the other guy's brain." Lance grins and raps his knuckles lightly against the side of Keith's head. Keith reaches up and reclaims his hand with a brief glare.

"But," Keith continues grimly, "Shiro will have trouble. He'll have to pay attention to her, while piloting a mecha, which he hasn't done in over a year—not to mention his memories of the last time he did."

Shay and Dr. Arus frown. Lance's mood drops, from tense hope to dread; he shakes it off quickly, though.

"If we're gonna make this work, we gotta stop letting them sit there and get lost in each other's heads," he says, gesturing at them—they're still looking at each other, barely having moved. "We need to keep them present, or else they won't learn anything."

"Agreed," says Keith, already walking back over to Shiro. After a moment, Shay joins him, as Lance and Dr. Arus head to Allura.
"Shiro! How are you feeling?" Shay asks.

It takes him a moment to respond to the question; he looks at them and blinks. "...What?" he asks hoarsely.

"How are you?" Shay asks again.

"Exhausted," he says. "Lance was right. It was... intense." His eyes sort of glaze over again.

"Shiro," says Keith, "You need to focus."

Shiro hums his assent, but he still doesn't look quite alert. Keith snaps his fingers in front of his face, making him start.

"You need to learn how to function without getting lost in thought," he says. "I know it's tempting to just sit and chat but we need you here. Try—try blocking her out," he adds suddenly, struck by inspiration. "Try to keep her from hearing anything you're thinking."

*Oh, good idea.* Across the room, Lance suggests the same to Allura.

Shiro furrows his brow. "But we just established—"

"I know. But if you can keep her out completely, then you can focus on yourself without *needing* to block her out."

Shay gives a little frown, but Shiro nods. "I'll try," he says, and closes his eyes. Keith is about to tell him to open them when Lance nudges him mentally.

*Let him concentrate. Baby steps, dude.*

So Keith frowns and crosses his arms and waits.

"How do I tell if it's working?" Shiro murmurs after a moment, and Keith grimaces.

*We just kind of know?*

Sometimes I can tell because you get frustrated, but, otherwise...

...*Yeah. Hang on.*

"It's just... kind of a feeling?" Keith tries to explain. Across the room Lance is asking Allura if she can sense Shiro at all. "Can you feel anything from her?"

Shiro's face screws up. "No? I don't think so."

*Allura says she's reading him loud and clear.*

"Well, she's blocking you out," Keith says. "But she can still feel you. Try again?"

Shiro lets out a frustrated huff. "Is this really necessary?"

"We don't have time to do this the easy way."

Shiro makes a face, but he doesn't respond. His expression settles into concentration. Keith waits.

He doesn't notice at first that anything is wrong; Shiro's face kind of twitches occasionally but otherwise he's not doing much and Keith is starting to feel weird just staring at him, so he lets his
gaze wander across the room. Then he hears Allura speak.

"W-what's happening?" Her voice is high and trembling, a tone he's never heard from her; he looks over. Lance touches her shoulder hesitantly to find she's shaking.

"Shiro?" Shay asks, and Keith turns back. Shiro's face is all screwed up again, and he's breathing hard and fast.

"Shit," says Keith, and leans over the chair to put a hand on Shiro's shoulder. Shay frowns at him but he ignores her. "Shiro? Shiro, can you hear me? What's happening!??"

He doesn't respond. Keith picks up his hand and finds it clammy.

"Allura?" Lance asks.

"Something's wrong," she says. "Something's wrong, something's wrong..." She clings to his arm while Dr. Arus rushes to one of the stations against the wall.

"What's happening!?" Keith asks again, louder, desperately. He shakes Shiro's arm, puts a hand against his forehead; it's damp. "Shiro? Shiro, can you hear me!?"

There's still no response.

Chapter End Notes

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  tumblr  
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Panic

Chapter Notes

Sorry for leaving yall on that cliffhanger for so long omfg i had to get through a Wall of Math™ b4 i could update... here ya go

See the end of the chapter for more notes.


"Not that I can tell," he responds worriedly. "Everything should have gone as planned..."

Shay nods. "Then they will be fine."

Keith stares at her, hand still on Shiro's forehead.

"Are you sure!? " Lance calls.

"They are having a panic attack," she says. "Lance, do your best to be reassuring. It should pass soon." And turns back to the chair. "Shiro? Can you hear me? You are safe here, Shiro. You will be fine. Breathe: in... out... in..."

Keith lowers his hand and rubs Shiro's shaking shoulder in a way he hopes is reassuring. Across the room, Lance is saying similar things to Allura; she looks more alert than Shiro, but so afraid that it's not any less unsettling.

This was a bad idea, he thinks.

I'm guessing Shiro started it—but you know how it is. The feelings just bounce back and forth...

And keep growing. Shit. This was a terrible idea.

We couldn't have predicted this, Keith.

We could have. I should have. I knew he wasn't okay, I should've—

Keith! Babe. This isn't your fault.

He lets out a frustrated huff. I could've prevented this, he thinks.

No. You couldn't've known.

Keith's still holding Shiro's hand, the human one; it twitches, then curls around his own, and he looks down at Shiro again. His breathing is a little slower now, more even, and he finally opens his eyes again.

"S-sorry," he gasps.

Keith shakes his head. "It's fine," he says around the lump in his throat. "You're gonna be okay, Shiro. You're gonna get through this."
"If you guys can manage to block each other out, it might help!" Lance says loudly, and Shiro's breath catches.

"If you can't, it's fine!" Keith adds quickly, squeezing his hand. "Just focus on me and Shay for now. And keep breathing."

Shiro gives him a shaky smile. "I think I can do that," he whispers.

It's another few minutes before Allura climbs out of her chair and walks over, leaning on Lance for support. Shay moves out of the way so she can look at Shiro, who's still breathing very deliberately and not really looking at anything. She takes his other hand, the metal one.

"Sorry," he says again. His voice has regained an even tone, and he's no longer shaking.

"Don't be," she says.

"It was my fault," he mumbles.

"It wasn't anyone's fault."

"It came from me..."

"We should've warned you," Lance says lowly. "When one of you feels something really strongly, your connection makes it even worse. Like some kind of emotional feedback loop."

"This was a bad idea," Keith says.

"We had no choice," Allura says, but without much conviction.

"Can you run the mission like this? Do you think he can pilot like this?"

"Keith," Shiro grumbles. "I'm fine."

"Like hell you are!" His shout makes Shay jump. "You just had a panic attack! Letting Allura into your head only made things worse."

He's going to say more, but Lance interrupts him sharply with a wordless thought. Shay is looking frantically between him and Shiro, who's starting to look actually distraught. Keith lets out a long breath.

"Sorry," he mutters. Allura reaches across Shiro to put a hand on his shoulder.

"What's done is done," she says. "And I hate to say it, but we will have to delay departure somewhat. You're right; neither of us should be involved like this."

"I can—"

She fixes Shiro with a sharp glare, and he shuts up. "You don't feel any better than I do, and you can't hide that from me," she tells him. Keith is a little relieved to hear her usual strict tone. "I will not send you out there in this state. You need a nap. I..." She sighs. "I need a nap. Perhaps afterwards we can better adjust to the telepathy."

He frowns at her. She frowns back. A moment passes, and he looks away.

"Alright," he says quietly, and slowly gets up from the chair, with help from Keith. He waves him and Shay off, though, when they try to support him as he steps away; he's unsteady for a moment,
but gets his feet under him quickly. Allura, too, detaches herself from Lance, and the two of them lean on each other as they head toward the door.

"Meet us at the control room in a couple hours," Allura says over her shoulder, tiredly. "And make sure Pidge and Hunk know about the delay." Then they leave.

Guess we have time to shower after all.

Keith had been considering going to visit Bonnie. He starts to protest but Lance interrupts.

I'm not spending a week together in a small space with you smelling like you do. With all the love in my heart: you're fucking showering.

Keith snorts. Shay jumps.

"W-what was that?"

"...We were talking?" says Keith.

"Telepathically?"

"...Yeah?"

Shay frowns. "You were not even looking at each other."

"Shay-shay, we've been at this a little longer than Allura and Shiro have." Lance bumps her shoulder with his fist. "And we kept it secret for ages, I'd hope we could be subtle about it."

Most of the time.

Yeah, most of the time.

Dr. Arus shakes his head. "Unless you two have any other secrets to share, I need to go through this data. Shay?"

"Right." She heads off across the room. Keith and Lance both shrug when Dr. Arus looks at them, so he turns and follows.

Alright! Time to get clean! Lance all but skips out of the room. Race you to the staff showers!

I don't even know where that is? Lance!

Lance takes off running, laughing over his shoulder. Keith follows with a grin.

"Is everyone ready to go?"

Allura still looks exhausted; Shiro, too, but both are standing on steady feet in the control room. If Keith didn't know Shiro as well as he does, he'd think he was paying full attention.

"Yep," say Pidge and Hunk in near unison. Keith and Lance both settle for a nod.

He probably is paying attention, you know, Lance thinks.

Just not physically. I know.

There's nothing they can do now, really; Keith suppresses a sigh as Allura speaks again. "Good.
Your mechas have been stocked with enough rations for two weeks; hopefully this mission should only take one. We'll be working on regaining communications while you travel, but, Keith, Lance, Voltron should have access to the deep-sea scanners—if the source is guarded, you'll know. As it is you'll likely run into at least two kaiju on your way, possibly three."

They nod.

"I'll be relaying any orders through Shiro, so until we do fix the comms, do as he says." There's an edge to her voice, but she continues on. "Stick together. You'll need to stop to rest twice before you arrive; make sure someone keeps watch at all times. I don't know if I'll be able to reach you once you're through the source, but either way, defer to Shiro's judgement; he knows the most about what's beyond there. Are there any questions?"

"If... if someone gets hurt..." Hunk says slowly.

"Depends on the situation," she responds, stone faced. "I want you all to survive this—but the fate of the world is at stake here. Do what you have to do to close those sources. Try to get out alive."

There's silence. She waits, then nods.

"Good luck out there," she says. "Now, get going."

They trickle out the door. Keith stops by the elevators as Pidge and Hunk head down the hall, but he stops Shiro when he walks by.

"Don't say it," Shiro says before Keith can speak. "You have yourself to worry about. And Lance."

There's a warning tone in his voice, but Keith shrugs it off. "I still care about you, though."

"It's true, he does," Lance says, sidling up to them and leaning against the wall by the elevators. "He's been worrying over you constantly since I got back. Probably longer."

Shiro's brow furrows just a tiny bit; he's uncertain, suddenly, and he doesn't seem to know what to say. Lance picks up on it too, and he steps forward to clap Shiro on the shoulder.

"I'm pretty worried about you, too," he says softly. "And I don't think I got the chance to say that I missed you a lot, and I'm glad you're alive. Things weren't the same around here after you left, y'know?"

Shiro lets out a long sigh. "Thanks, Lance," he says, and there's a lot more in those words in that. But he doesn't elaborate, just nods over his shoulder at the elevators. "You two should head down," he says. "I'll see you out there." He hits the button for them, and walks off down the hall.

The elevator dings. Keith and Lance step in silently. Keith chews his lip but says nothing, until they get down to the lobby and switch elevators; he fidgets as he looks out through the glass at Voltron, now nearly free of scaffolding.

"Lance..."

_I know you love me, Keith. And I love you too._

His shoulders sag in relief. Lance patiently tugs him away from the window and slips his arms around his waist.

_It's okay that you still kinda love him_, he thinks, and means it. _You chose me. That's the important_
I did, Keith thinks, and he leans in to kiss him. It's soft, and short, but just for a moment he doesn't worry about Shiro, or their mission, or anything else. He just wraps his arms around Lance's shoulders and lives in the present.

But the elevator dings soon enough, and they break apart as the door slides open. He takes Lance's hand, and together they walk to the base of the scaffolding, and start to climb.

Voltron's cockpit is... weird. There are two seats, for one thing, and two sets of controls, except the inner half of each panel is inactive; the panels themselves are different too, a series of displays and buttons and levers that bear barely enough resemblance to other mechas for Keith to guess at their purpose. He and Lance exchange a look.

"Well, if we can get it out of the hangar, we can figure out the rest on the way," Lance says, and slips into the seat on the right. "Hey, it's got pedals!"

Keith sits nervously on the left. He scans over the controls in front of him; there's some kind of... handle, by his left arm, with four buttons on it like a trumpet's, but a normal control joystick nearby too. Outside the window, below, the last of the ground crew are wheeling the last of the scaffolding away.

"Hey," Lance says again. "We got this. Just improvise, right?"

He's putting on an act of confidence, as always, but Keith has never appreciated it more.

"Right," he says, and reaches for his controls.

It very quickly becomes obvious that they'll have to be far more in tune with each other than usual to pilot Voltron, judging by their first jerky attempts just to make it walk. Even though the motion is more or less programmed into the mechas, they're both controlling one side each, and it's a miracle they don't tip the whole thing right off the bat.

The rest of the mechas are already waiting beyond the hangar door, except for Red and Blue, still lifeless in their docks. Outside, Yellow waves at them.

"Change of plans, you control the legs and I control the arms, okay?" Lance mutters.

"Why do you get the arms?"

"Because your arm is broken? Obviously?"

I don't think this mecha works like that, Keith thinks as he squints at the controls in front of him.

*Not with that attitude.*

Keith gives him a look.

*Okay, well, do you have a better idea?*

Work together.

*We've tried that.*

"We've *tried* telling each other every time we move a leg," Keith says. "We can't fight like that."
"They didn't install those cap things. We can't go in that deep."

"We can go deeper than this."

Lance looks out the window. Yellow is still waving, and Green is practically in the doorway, watching them.

_Alright, _he thinks. _We can try._

They take a deep breath, in unison. And let it out, slowly. Keith relaxes in his seat, keeps his eyes open, reaches for Lance in his mind. It's somewhere between their normal connection, and stepping outside himself entirely; a balance where he retains his own focus but it's matched precisely with Lance's.

It takes them a minute to get there. But, precarious as it is, they finally reach for the controls, as one—and Voltron walks smoothly toward the hangar door.

Chapter End Notes

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i want yall to know i Love and Appreciate every single one of you... as some of you know i respond to every comment i get no matter what it is, bc even if its just an emoji it means a lot to me and i love you for it... so uh. yeah. you guys rock <3
"Can anyone hear me yet?"

Hunk's bored voice, crackling suddenly through the comms, startles Keith and Lance out of their tenuous connection. Voltron stumbles to a halt, and amidst the noises of surprise and delight Pidge starts laughing.

"Hunk, you almost s-scared them off their feet!" she calls between giggles.

"Sorry!" Hunk calls.

"How's everyone holding up?" Shiro asks.

"It's only been three hours since we left," Pidge says with a trailing giggle. "I'm good."

"Me too," says Hunk. There's a pause.

"Keith? Lance?" Shiro asks.

"Oh, right. We're fine," Keith says quickly.

"Just kind of out of it," Lance says.

"What about you, Shiro?"

"Better," he says, lightly. "I think Allura and I have this nearly figured out."

Keith hadn't really been referring to the telepathy, but he decides it's better not to push it.

"Be glad you don't have to figure out Voltron," Lance mutters, and Keith sighs.

"...Oh?"

"It's fun," says Lance, in a tone that makes it clear it's not fun at all.

"Do you need a break?"

"Nope," says Keith.

"Just a moment to get back in the groove," says Lance.

"...The groove."

"The groove," Pidge repeats.

"It takes concentration, okay!" Lance defends. "You try and pilot a mecha with only half your
"Tell Allura they should've put the caps in after all," says Keith. "It would've been a hell of a lot easier that way."

"But you're holding out okay?" Shiro asks.

"Yep, until something breaks our concentration." Lance shrugs, not that Shiro can see it.

"...Will you be able to fight like this?"

Keith and Lance look at each other. Well, they've done okay for the last few hours...

"Yes," they say, in unison.

"That was a long pause, guys," says Hunk.

Both take a deep breath, already slipping back into their connection. They shift Voltron forward again.

"We can do it," they say, again in unison.

"Mnrgh, do you have to do that?" Pidge groans, as the group of mechas continue on. They're all fully underwater, but not so deep that there's no light to see by.

"It's kind of a side effect."

"Of what?"

"Concentrating."

"Ugh, Pidge, stop talking to them. It's creepy," says Hunk. Keith and Lance grin as one.

"Is it, Hunk?"

Hunk lets out a muffled scream. Shiro chuckles.

They pass the time chatting, though Keith and Lance don't contribute much—it's hard to maintain concentration and speak separately, so mostly they either speak in unison or not at all. They take a break at sunset for dinner.

"We've still got a day and a half to go until we reach the source," Shiro says, to which the rest of them groan. "We can stop now, or we can keep going a little longer tonight."

"I'm good for another couple hours," Keith says, though Lance is groaning loudly to try and drown him out.

"Same," says Pidge, and Hunk reluctantly agrees.

"Lance? You still holding up okay?" Shiro asks with some amusement—Lance is still groaning.

"If I have to," he responds. "But what about you?"

There's a moment of silence as everyone quiets, waiting for his answer. It comes quickly.

"I'm doing fine," Shiro says, seriously. "I didn't think I would be, either, but I am."
"Well... good," says Lance, and Keith hums in agreement.

"So, are we all agreed?"

"Actually... are we sure about this?" Hunk asks. "Because the way I figure, if kaiju move slightly faster than we do and the kaiju is due approximately 24 hours after the last one—which of course we don't know for sure—and we left at noon so we've been traveling for about seven hours—" he pauses for breath "—then if we continue for two more hours, we can expect the next kaiju to run into us while we're sleeping at like... two in the morning. On the other hand, if we stay put, it'll take a little longer for it to reach us, meaning it'll be four in the morning. Which, you know, isn't a great time either, but it'd let us sleep a little longer."

There's a long pause.

"That sounds right," says Pidge, "except that today's kaiju showed up around ten, but the one before that was around noon. If the gap is approximately 22 hours again, then it'll reach us around 2:30 A.M. if we stop, or just past midnight if we continue, neither of which are ideal."

"How the hell are you guys doing this in your heads?" Lance whines.

"Rounding."

"For a more precise estimate we'd need, at the very least, our speed and the kaiju's," says Hunk. "And this is only for the first one."

"Either way, we'll need someone to keep watch," says Shiro. "I'd rather we continue and get it over with sooner—actually, Allura says we should avoid it entirely, if possible. Red and Blue can handle it back at the Castle and we shouldn't risk it. Keith, Lance, can you access the scanners yet?"

They look at the controls. There's a lot of buttons and switches and nothing immediately stands out as a scanner.

"Top right corner, Lance," Shiro adds, when they're silent for a little too long. Lance hits the button and a radar-like display pops up, projected directly onto the windshield. There's a blip a ways away, approaching slowly.

"Yeah, there's a kaiju on the way," Lance says. "A little less than seven hours out."

"So Pidge was right," Keith adds.

"Heh," says Pidge.

"Well, we'll probably run into the next ones in eleven-hour intervals," Hunk says, a little defensively. "Give or take a few hours. D'you suppose kaiju sleep?"

"Probably?"

"It doesn't really matter," Shiro says gently. "The scanners will tell us if an attack is imminent."

"All that work for nothing," Hunk mutters.

"Why don't we continue until 10pm or so? Then we can get enough rest and still get going at sunrise."

Everyone groans, again, but they settle in to keep walking. It's a dark and quiet couple of hours; the mechas' built-in lights don't penetrate far into the dark water, so they stick close together and rely on
their GPSes to direct them.

*There's not much in the way of sea creatures around, is there?* Lance thinks at one point, disappointed. *Fish are usually drawn to light but there's not nearly as many as I expected.*

Maybe the kaiju have eaten them all, responds Keith. Besides, they can probably hear us coming for miles.

*Fair enough.*

At Allura's insistence, via Shiro, they split up, heading to either side of the kaiju's projected path and hunkering down for the night. They shut off their lights, leaving them all in a murky and unsettlingly quiet darkness.

"Allura says the scanners will set off a small alarm when the kaiju is nearby," Shiro says. "So, Keith and Lance, you can both sleep, but when it goes off you'll have to wake the rest of us."

"No prob, Bob," says Lance. "I'm a light sleeper."

"Great. We're counting on you, Lance."

"Oh, good," Pidge says drily.

"Hey!"

Shiro sighs. "Just... try to sleep."

They all leave the comms on, just in case; a faint rustling comes from through them as everyone digs through their supplies. The mechas aren't really meant to be slept in and even the blankets they've all been given, two each, aren't really enough to soften up the metal floors.

*If we layer three of the blankets and share, it'll be almost like a really, really firm bed,* Lance thinks, eyeing the stack of blankets in Keith's arms.

Worth a shot.

It's still harder than any bed, but it's enough for Keith to drift off with Lance's head pillowed on his elbow and an arm over his waist.

Both awake with a start at the sound of beeping—more like an alarm clock than the Castle's alarm, but plenty loud for a few grumbles to sound through the comms. Keith checks his watch as Lance sits up groggily; it's just about quarter to midnight.

Lance squints at the dim display from where he's sitting. "Ten minutes out," he mumbles. "So I can sleep for another five, right?"

"No," comes Shiro's voice over the comm. "Hopefully it won't notice us, but we need you awake in case it does."

Keith drags himself up and into his seat. Reluctantly, Lance does the same.

"Don't move or turn on your lights yet," Shiro continues.

"Can you turn off the alarm, though?" Hunk asks. "Please?"

"As long as nobody falls back asleep," Shiro says, as Lance paws at the controls. The alarm shuts off, and half the team sighs in relief. Lance slumps in his chair.

Don't fall asleep.

I won't.

Your eyes are closed. I can feel you falling asleep.

I'm not!

"Lance," Keith says sharply. Lance heaves a sigh and sits up, dragging his eyelids open like it's a difficult task. He still manages to shoot a remarkably passionate glare Keith's way, though. Keith snorts.

"ETA?" Shiro asks shortly.

"Five minutes," says Lance. "I totally could've slept in a bit."

"Too late now," Pidge snickers.

"Et tu, Pidge? Is no one on my side?"

"I can't pilot this thing alone, Lance," Keith says. "...I think."

"Even my own boyfriend! This is outrageous, I'm—"

"Guys I think I saw something," Hunk interrupts. Everyone falls silent for a moment, looking out their windows—it's almost pitch-black outside, only the faint glimmer of moonlight far above giving any indication of movement.

"There's still almost four minutes to go, Hunk," Lance says finally.

"Okay, I may have imagined it," Hunk admits. "But if it does notice us how are we even gonna know? By the time we see it it'll already be chewing on us!"

"The scanners will show if it deviates from its path," says Shiro.

"Oh, so we're trusting Lance to pay attention, great."

"Hey!"

"I'm here too," Keith points out.

"Thank god," Pidge says drily.

"Hey!" Lance is making his cute pouting face now. "Why is everyone dragging me tonight? Come on, guys. And Keith, stop calling me cute, it's not helping. I know I'm cute but that's not the point."

Pidge and Hunk burst out laughing: Shiro sighs, but he sounds amused nonetheless. Keith covers his face with his hands, but underneath he's grinning.

"If it's any consolation," he says, lowering his hands once the laughter has quieted, "he was paying attention before I distracted him."
"Fair enough," says Pidge.

"Thank you, Keith," Lance says, feeling pleased with himself once more. "Also we've got like a minute left. It's still on track, though."

They all sober at that. "Get ready," says Shiro.

"What if it does see us?" Hunk asks nervously, after a moment.

"Then we fight it, Hunk," says Shiro. "It's just a kaiju."

"Oh. Right."

Outside the mechas, in the inky black water, nothing moves. There's a faint sparkle of moonlight far above, but nothing else. They wait.

"Five," Lance whispers. "Four... Three... Two... One."

Keith holds his breath. No one says a word.

Nothing happens, and it's agonizing.


"Give it a few minutes, just in case," says Shiro.

They keep waiting; the kaiju keeps going steadily away from the two huddled pairs of mechas.

"Seven minutes out," Lance reports.

"Alright," Shiro says finally. "We're probably fine. Go ahead back to sleep, everyone—Lance, you should reset the alarm."

Lance's eyes skim over the controls, and he hits a button. "Done."

Pidge yawns. "G'night," she calls, and receives a chorus of responses. Keith stands up and stretches, but Lance is still sitting forward in his chair, looking at the display.

You coming? Keith thinks.

Yeah, in a sec. I just... wanna make sure.

Keith hums and lies back down on their pile of blankets. He's not paying much attention to Lance right now, already half asleep again, but there's something lingering at the edges of his thoughts.

They didn't mean anything by it, he thinks. Pidge and Hunk, I mean.

Yeah...

Lance, you're an amazing paladin, and you're great and beautiful and all that stuff. And you're my boyfriend. I have high standards.

You're not very good with compliments when you're half asleep, Lance thinks, like he isn't touched anyway.

Come back to bed.
He snorts softly. *Who knew you were secretly a cuddler?* But he gets up and returns to the blankets anyway, and curls against Keith's side, and both are asleep in no time.

Chapter End Notes

i missed tvis anniversary... happy five months, yall

[Permalink](tumblr)
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The next day kind of sucks. True to his word, Shiro wakes them all up at the ungodly hour of approximately 5 A.M., and after a short breakfast during which no one but Shiro speaks unless it's in a grumble, they get going.

And all they do is go. Hunk starts up round after round of various road trip games (I Spy lasts all of two minutes, ending once they've exhausted "water" and "sand" and "fish" and each other's mechas) but it doesn't do much to distract from the long slog ahead. The games are interrupted not long past 8 A.M. when Allura informs them the kaiju arrived and was defeated, but it's only momentary.

Shortly before 11:30 A.M., after Hunk has suggested stopping for lunch twice already (and Lance has put in the effort to speak on his own just to agree), the scanner beeps again.

"Next kaiju is ten minutes out," they tell the others. "Less if we keep moving."

"Split up. You two, Pidge, go left. Hunk, with me." Black veers off to the right, and Yellow follows; Voltron and Green head left.

"We won't be able to get far enough away," Keith and Lance say. Lance has half an eye on the display, watching the kaiju approach; outside the mecha, the water is bright from the sun almost directly above. "We'll be able to see it any second now."

"Can you just, like, delegate one of you as the person who talks and stop doing the creepy synchronized thing? Please?" Hunk pleads. "It's been like this all day and it's driving me bonkers."

"Seconded," Pidge groans.

"It's easier like this."


Keith reaches forward and hits a switch, and Voltron's lights dim down to nothing. Nearby, Green goes dim as well, though she's still plenty visible in the daylight.

"It's almost on us."

The water is murky, but not really enough, not at the surface. Hardly a minute passes before Pidge speaks up in a whisper.

"I've got visual," she says.

And sure enough, there's a shadow moving through the water ahead, an enormous dark shape, swimming just deep enough that the light barely touches it. No one moves or speaks.

It slows.

"Has it seen us?" Hunk whispers.

The kaiju comes to a halt, almost directly between the mecha pairs. It floats there in the murky water, barely visible.
"I think it has," Pidge whispers back.

The kaiju turns, as if it's heard her, and begins swimming rapidly toward Green and Voltron. Keith and Lance mutter a curse almost in unison with Pidge, as Keith turns Voltron's lights back on.

Guess we'll find out if we can fight like this, after all. It's hard to say who the thought comes from, flickering through both their minds simultaneously.

"Hunk and I are on our way," Shiro says, "but we won't engage unless necessary. You three should be able to handle this."

"Probably," says Pidge. Green shifts sideways, getting a better angle on the approaching kaiju, and after a moment Voltron does too.

"How do you want to do this? We've got a lot of different weapons," Keith and Lance say. "Knives, rockets, you name it. I think we have a third arm, too."

"Do not say 'I think' like you're one person," Hunk whines.

"We both thought it."

"I don't know how well my grappling hook thing is gonna work underwater," Pidge says, ignoring them, "but we can try the usual paradigm."

Their connection wavers. "Which paradigm?" Lance says alone. "Fish in a barrel? Slice 'n' dice? Or are we going for a more 'bases covered' approach?"

"Lance, pay attention," Keith hisses; the kaiju is almost upon them. They slip back into sync quickly. Keith reaches for the strange handle by his seat, the one with the buttons, and pulls on it. Voltron's left hand flexes.

"Let's find out if this works, first," says Pidge, and fires. Green's line still shoots out through the water, right past the kaiju's nose, and snags when the kaiju swims into it. It writhes in pain, and dark blood clouds the water around its shoulder.

"I'm thinking slice 'n' dice," Pidge says thoughtfully.

"Got it." Voltron lunges, a knife in each hand.

The mecha is slower than Red, particularly underwater, but with Keith and Lance each controlling an arm it's easily more dextrous. The kaiju struggles against Green's line; they collide with it knife-first, and it makes a noise that reverberates through the water and makes Voltron shudder.

"Oh man, I could feel that," says Hunk.

"Status?" Shiro asks. "I can't see much from here."

"I can't either," Pidge grunts. Green's line jerks, but most of the kaiju is obscured in the clouds of blood now permeating the water.

"Well, it's bleeding a lot," is about all Keith and Lance can say, so they do.

"Thanks, geniuses."

"Maybe 'slice 'n' dice' wasn't the best option."
"Hogtied?"

"Hey, I know that one!" Hunk exclaims, and Shiro sighs. Keith comes to a sudden realization, breaking their tenuous connection, and he looks over at Lance incredulously.

"Wait, you named every mecha pair?"

"Babe. I've been using the names this whole time and you never—"

"Look out!" Pidge shouts as the kaiju lunges. Green's line goes taut, pulling it back but not far enough; as Keith and Lance rush to reconnect, Voltron topples.

Instantly Keith's vision wavers. Something moves across the windshield—a crack? He could swear he feels water dripping onto him, bruises where he was thrown against his seat. Are there alarms going off, or is he imagining it? Shouting? The shouting is real.

"—not real! Keith! Keith?"

He blinks.

"Keith, stay with me, babe, Keith, breathe, it's not real," Lance is yelling. "Keith, it's not real, you're not in Red, you're safe. Stay with me. Breathe, Keith!"

Keith gasps for breath. He hadn't realized he'd been holding it. The cockpit is intact, no red lights or cracks or water, and about as upright as the limited gyroscope will allow. The kaiju isn't visible from this angle, but it's not atop them, and there's nothing between them and the sunlight but water.

"I'm okay," he wheezes. His arm is throbbing in its cast and he relaxes his hands slowly—they'd been clenching the arms of his seat tightly. He looks over at Lance, who's still watching him closely. Waves of concern wash over him.

"I'm okay," he says again, more steadily. He's shaken but he tries to send Lance reassurance.

Lance nods slowly, accepting it, though he's still worried. "We need to get up," he says gently.

"Yes, please," Pidge grunts over the comm.

Keith takes a deep breath. "Okay," he says, and closes his eyes and mentally reaches for Lance.

Unsettled as he is, it takes rather longer than usual to connect, and once they do it feels unusually tenuous. But they do, and they carefully bring Voltron back to its feet. The kaiju is straining to reach them, held back by Green's line. Blood is still billowing out from the wounds on its neck and flank, slowly drifting away on the current and dissipating.

"With how much it's bleeding, it should weaken soon," Shiro says.

"We're going in," Keith and Lance say. Voltron steps forward, rears back, and plants a solid punch in the kaiju's face. Its cry makes the water vibrate again.

"I've got it, keep going," says Pidge, and they do. Punch after punch hit the kaiju solidly; it rakes at them with a claw but can't reach far enough to do real damage, and they keep mostly out of its range anyway. Green's hook in its neck limits its movement severely. They keep going even as it slows, stopping only once it finally collapses completely.

They finish it off with a knife, just to be sure, and Green approaches to retrieve her hook.
"It's dead," they call, and pull apart to rest. Keith runs a hand through his hair and sighs; his arm still aches, and the rest of him kind of does too.

"Keith, are you alright?" Shiro asks immediately.

"Yeah," he responds hoarsely. "Just... reminded me of when I got hurt." He swallows. "This is the first kaiju I've fought since."

"I remember seeing you in the hospital," Shiro says. "You never told me what happened. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes, I'm really okay—"


Hunk gasps. The rest fall silent.

Lance, please, Keith thinks tiredly. I'm sorry, you know I am.

I... I know. But he and Hunk deserve to know.

"Keith?" Shiro asks softly.

"I did," Keith admits. "But I'm fine now. It just surprised me. It won't happen again."

Lance is about to retort, but Keith sends him a feeling of near desperation and he shuts his mouth.

Please, Keith pleads. He's got enough to worry about.

It wasn't surprise, it was a—a flashback. I saw it all.

I know. Just please don't tell Shiro.

Fine.

"Are you alright to continue?" Shiro asks after a moment, gently. "I'd like to get away from the corpse before we have lunch."

"Yes please," says Hunk.

"Yeah," Keith says, though he's reluctant to even move. "I can keep going a little while longer."

They end up only continuing for half an hour or so before stopping to eat; by that time Keith feels totally like himself again. Which is fortunate, because they still have a long way to go.

"Happy twenty-four hours after leaving," Pidge says blandly. "Only twenty-four-ish more to go!"

"Pidge, don't even say that," Hunk says with a hitch in his voice. "I haven't seen another human being in an entire day and I am not equipped to handle this kind of isolation."

"We are all here."

"I can't see you so it doesn't count."

"Allura has gotten ahold of the Coast Guard," Shiro interrupts. "Their ships should hopefully reach the source by the time we come back through it, which means that if anyone is injured they can be
rescued."

Everyone breathes a sigh of relief at that.

"That said, the Garrison probably has a ship on the way as well," he adds. "We'll need to be careful to be rescued by the right people."

Duly warned, they continue on. They have another seven hour slog before sunset and dinner, and then they keep going for about two more hours. Keith is getting seriously antsy cooped up in the cockpit as they are, and at least he's got Lance there with him; the others are alone in their mechas with only the comms for company.

**When we rescue the Holts it'll be a little better.**

There are two Holts to rescue and three mechas with room for them. And we'll probably just hand them up to the Coast Guard anyway.

*Well... it's something?*

The next kaiju is due to reach them around 1:30 A.M., so they set up the scanner feed again and go to bed. The alarm prompts a chorus of groans just like last time; hardly anyone speaks, though, waiting huddled in their seats as the kaiju approaches, passes, and continues on its way.

"Surprising," Shiro comments, once it's definitely far enough to not be a threat. "The Garrison has to know by now that we're out here. The kaiju aren't exactly intelligent but they could have been told to look for us."

"They did jam all communication," Pidge points out. "Maybe that includes their own comms too."

"Congratulations, you played yourself," Lance mutters, drawing a weak chuckle out of Pidge and Hunk—and, Keith swears, a quiet snort from Shiro.

The next morning, though, even Shiro, an incurable morning person, is subdued. No one even complains at their early start, or the six hours or so left to go; they're due to reach the source before noon. Only Shiro has any idea what to expect after that.

Keith is tense. Lance is tenser.

"We should have a plan," Shiro says around mid-morning, and it's almost a relief to address what's coming head-on. The conversation has been lagging frequently and it hasn't helped any of them relax. Hunk has barely spoken at all, claiming nausea when Pidge points it out.

They decide that Green and Yellow will go straight for the cells and focus on rescuing the Holts, while Black and Voltron will take down the galra leadership and keep the forces distracted from the rescue effort.

"We're in mechas, so we shouldn't have too much trouble fighting them off," Shiro says. "But everyone should stay alert anyway. They are almost certainly expecting us—they just don't know when we'll arrive."

"That's not much of an advantage," Lance and Keith point out.

"We'll have to take what we can get."

It's somewhat past 11 A.M. when Black, in the lead, suddenly halts. The rest of the mechas file up
next to her, and their pilots look through the murky water to the sight ahead.

"That's it," Shiro says quietly. "That's the source."

It's set into a cleft in the ocean floor, a faintly glowing shape like a tear in a pair of jeans; the edges shimmer and waver slightly, lines like threads trailing off into the surrounding water. The center is an unfathomable black, totally empty. There's no seeing what's beyond, not from this side.

"We should eat first," Shiro continues. His voice isn't outwardly nervous, but it definitely lacks its usual confidence. "Then we should review the plan, and then... head through."

They eat, though no one has any appetite, and they review the plan, not that anyone's forgotten. And then it's time.

"I'll go first," Shiro says quietly. All four mechas are perched on the edge of the cleft, looking down into the source below. "I'll... see you on the other side."

"We're right behind you, Shiro," Lance says firmly—at least one of them can feign confidence. Keith gives him a grateful smile.

And Black steps off the edge, and sinks down into the source, and vanishes completely, and there's nothing for the rest to do but follow.

Chapter End Notes

finally

tumblr
twitter

ps. lance really has been using the names the whole time.
- fish in a barrel: green and blue
- slice n dice: green and red (i think he used this one at the bakery? idk)
- bases covered: green and black
- hogtied: green and yellow
in past chapters hes also mentioned "bruiser" (black and blue) and "sword and shield" (red and yellow). i dont remember where exactly but theyre in here somewhere...
The Source

Chapter Notes

yall... we are so close to the end that i actually finally know for sure how close. tvi will be 60 chapters plus an epilogue. we've come so far! im actually rlly emotional abt this rn but i will save the feelings for when we actually get to the end haha. thanks for sticking around!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There's no gravity beyond the source.

It's the first thing Keith notices, the sudden weightlessness, but not by much. The sight out the front window almost makes him forget the lack of gravity, for a moment.

For one, they appear to be in space—outer space, far from any planet, let alone Earth. They're floating in a sort of massive bubble that glows like a nebula, orbiting a star; even through the iridescent barrier there are more stars visible than Keith has ever seen before. There's a dozen or more kaiju of various sizes floating far below, motionless and tethered by a mass of lines and tubes to something mostly out of sight.

Ahead of them, though, is what he can only think to describe as a space station, though it's like nothing he's ever seen before. It's vast and gray and purple and shaped like some kind of bizarre gyroscope, all discs and rings and spokes. From dark spots on its surface it are tiny specks emerging, one after another—and as they get closer they resolve into ships, small fighter jets on their way to the invading mechas.

"God," Lance mutters, as they hover there, above the ships. "How the hell are we going to get past that?"

He's discouraged. Keith reaches for his hand, and squeezes it.

"We'll manage," he says.

"We have to. Strap in, everyone," Shiro says. "What do we have for ranged weapons?"

Lance takes a deep breath. "We've got some rockets," he says.

"How many?"

"Like... four?"

"I've got my hook?" says Pidge.

"I've got a prototype cannon that was never finished because it'll use up all the mecha's power and leave me defenseless," says Hunk.

Lance is floating easily above his seat as Keith wrestles his seatbelt out of its hidden pocket. Buckle up, Keith thinks, and Lance reluctantly starts digging out his own restraints.
"...I see." Shiro sighs. "We'll have to break through at melee range, then. Keith, Lance, save those rockets for the control room."

"Roger that," they say.

"Everyone stay close. I don't know what kind of boosters Allura had installed but I doubt we can go very fast, so do not get separated."

"Wait. You can't hear her anymore?"

There's a pause. "No," Shiro says with an edge to his voice. "But there's nothing to be done about it now. We need to go."

Keith and Lance exchange a look, but Shiro's right; there's nothing they can do. So they fire up the boosters, and the mechas move as one toward the station and the cloud of incoming fighters. They start firing.

"Are you sure we can do this?" Hunk asks nervously. "Like, really really sure?"

"Yes. Take point, and put your shield up, Hunk."

Hunk gives a nervous whine, but he does as told. Moments later the blasters hit, rebounding off Yellow's force field; another moment, and the fighters crash against them like a wave, dispersing just before actually colliding with the mechas to fold around and fire from the sides. Black and Voltron start swinging with their knives—it feels like swatting at mosquitos, but they still manage to cut wide swathes through the dense ships—and Green takes up the rear, launching her hook again and again.

"They're a lot faster than us," Pidge grunts, reeling in a handful of wrecked ships and reloading for the next shot.

"Slow and steady," says Shiro. "How's everyone holding up?"

Keith and Lance reflexively turn as a shot hits squarely in the center of the windshield—it leaves a scorch mark but otherwise does no damage.

"Fine," they say. "Nothing's penetrated so far."

"One of my legs is a little damaged, but we're holding together," says Pidge. The hook shoots by above Voltron again, as they turn back to their original position.

"You, or Green?" Shiro asks.

"Green, sorry."

"I dunno how much longer my field's gonna hold out," says Hunk. "We're only a third of the way there."

"Keep going. I'll switch with you when it fails," says Shiro.

"Do we have any kind of ETA?" Pidge calls.

Voltron swats away a group of fighters, and in the lull before the next wave Keith glances forward. They're tucked mostly behind Yellow's shield and the space beyond it is too blurry to make out any details, not to mention the fighters in the way.

"Ten minutes, maybe?" Hunk offers.
"How are we gonna get back out?" Pidge adds. "Wait, shit. Which one did we come through?"

"What?" Keith and Lance make to turn but the next wave hits, and they're occupied with fighting them off again.

"The one on the right," Shiro says. "But if you have to go through the other one, do it."

The sources, they realize. Both must be visible behind them.

"There won't be a rescue past the other one—"

"Don't worry about that now. I'm sure Allura has considered it." Shiro's voice is tense, and he grunts as a shot hits Black's head. "Getting to safety will be your first priority once you have Matt and Sam."

Pidge falls silent at that. So do the rest, except for the occasional grunt or shout when someone takes a direct hit. Voltron's windshield is spattered with scorch marks now, but the fighters do finally seem to be dwindling.

Soon, though, Yellow's shield flickers.

"Can't hold out much longer," Hunk calls. "Shiro?"

"Fall back a bit, I'll take your position. Voltron, Green, move to the side," Shiro responds. "Ready... now!"

Yellow's boosters cease for a moment as Black slides sideways around her, and Voltron and Green shift to get back in formation. Black's force field snaps on as Yellow's flickers, then fails.

"Good job," Shiro says. "We're still about seven minutes out. Stay sharp."

"Yessir," Pidge says wryly.

The remaining fighters seem to double their efforts as they approach, buzzing around the mechas like angry bees in smaller clumps that are harder to swat. Keith gives up on trying to see their destination, and just focuses with Lance on fending off the ships.

"Is the hangar you mentioned in sight yet? Because it wasn't when I was in front," says Hunk a few minutes later.

"Ah..." Shiro pauses. "Yes, to your left."

"That purplish rectangle over there?"

"Yes."

"Um. Should we split off, then?"

"In a minute."

Hunk sucks in a breath, audible even over the comms. "We're doing this," he says. "We're really doing this."

"Yeah," Pidge says softly. "Shiro... are you sure they'll be there?"

"They were when I left, which was only a couple weeks ago. I don't know of anywhere else they
...Okay." There's a note of determination in her voice that prompts a glimmer of something like pride in Lance; Keith has a similar feeling too, frankly.

*I'm glad we're here,* Lance thinks suddenly, which is it exactly, even as they take another hit and slice through another incoming fighter. *I'm glad we're doing this. It'd be worth it just for her sake.*

Keith wholeheartedly agrees.

"Get ready," says Shiro, and they tense again. "Voltron, with me, on my mark... Now!"

They split. Yellow and Green veer off to the left at top speed; Voltron and Black slow, lashing out at the fighters around them, and Black drops her shield in an attempt to draw their attention. It works, sort of—the brunt of the ships circle them, firing steadily, but a number peel away to follow the other two mechas anyway.

"Be careful, you've got a few on your tail," Shiro calls.

"Roger! We will," says Hunk.

Voltron takes down a handful of fighters aiming at Black, then turns to face a clump coming in from the right. "Sooner or later these blasts are going to do some damage," Keith and Lance say.

"Allura had Voltron's exterior reinforced—"

"How's Black holding up?" they ask pointedly. There's a pause.

"Fine," says Shiro. "She's fine."

Keith doesn't really believe that, but Lance insists they give him the benefit of doubt, so they say nothing.

"We're in!" Pidge calls shortly. "I'm cutting into the prison area now."

"I've got your back, please hurry," says Hunk. "They're not coming in yet but they're getting braver."

"I'm going as fast as I can—ah!"

"What!?" Hunk and Shiro shout, almost simultaneously.

"I see them." Pidge's voice wavers. "Oh god, I see them, they're really here—Hunk, cover me, I need to get low to let them in."

"I gotcha," Hunk says. As Voltron turns Keith tries to see what's happening down along the station, but about all he can make out is a blur of yellow. There's a tense silence—only a few minutes, probably, but it feels like an eternity—and then there's a faint voice that sends Lance's heart soaring.

"Katie...?"

"Yes, it's me," Pidge all but sobs, as Shiro gasps.

"Matt! Matt, is that Matt?" he shouts.

"Shiro?"
"Matt!" Lance shouts, too. He breaks apart from Keith, but it's fine, they can swat at the fighters separately.

"Matt!" Hunk shouts, too, and there's a faint noise of surprise.

"Lance? Hunk? Katie, you guys..."

"Thank you, Shiro," another voice says. "Thank you for coming back for us."

"Sam," Shiro says, and his voice cracks. "Of course. Of course."

"Close up, Pidge," Hunk says. "They're still swarming."

"Right, right," says Pidge. "Hang on, guys."

"We'll try and cover your escape," Shiro says. Voltron turns accordingly, Keith and Lance sliding back into sync, but something above them catches Keith's eye.

"There's something incoming," they say. "Something big, above us."

"Shit," Shiro says over the confused sound Matt makes. "Pidge—Katie—get out of there now."

"Who else...?" they faintly hear Matt ask.

"Keith," says Pidge, as Green climbs out of the hangar, visible through a gap in the fighters, and boosts off.

"Keith, as in, Shiro's boyfriend Keith?"

Lance flickers through a rapid series of emotions but settles on amusement as Pidge mutters, "He's Lance's now, will you hold on please, Matt, I don't want you to get hurt."

"Hey, I'm fine, Katie," Matt says softly. "We're fine now, thanks to you."

Yellow and Green are heading back to the sources far too slowly, chased and impeded by the fighters. Voltron and Black are both moving now to intercept the chasers, at least, still surrounded by their own swarm. The incoming thing is still a ways away, approaching steadily.

"You're not safe yet," says Pidge. "Not until we're through that portal."

"Pidge, how's Green holding up?" Hunk asks nervously.

"Fine, she's fine, the leg's still a little messed up but I think it'll hold. How's Yellow?"

"Running low on power. Keeping the shield up really drained her."


"Look, I have an idea. Do you think you'll be able to push me back up through the source?"

"Hunk?" Shiro says, a warning edge to his voice. "What are you planning?"

"I helped design these things, the escape pod system is mostly mechanical," Hunk says quickly. "I don't have enough power to get back to the Castle anyway, so I might as well use the rest on that cannon I mentioned and clear us a path out. The system will keep back just enough to launch the escape pod, so if Green can push us up through the source I can do that and get picked up by the
Coast Guard, right?"

Shiro takes a deep breath. "Are you sure it will work?"

"Um. 80% sure. Maybe 82%. But if Green's leg gets damaged any more she won't be able to walk back, and I don't think her pod will fit all three of them."

"It won't," Pidge confirms. "Maybe two, but not all three. I was going to send them up in it once we're out."

"Katie!" Sam says, while Matt makes an indignant noise.

"Unless you wanna try and get to Yellow in the midst of all this and go up with Hunk?"

"If the cannon works we will have a small window where that might be possible," Hunk says, despite the sarcasm in Pidge's voice.

"I'll do it," says Matt.

"Matt, no," she says.

"I'm not gonna leave you stuck in the middle of the ocean when you came here to save us!"

"It's dangerous!"

"Katie," Sam says. "We don't leave anyone behind. Ever."

There's a long, tense pause. Quickly, Lance thinks urgently, but they say nothing, focusing on keeping the fighters back and watching the mysterious thing approaching.

"Okay," Pidge sighs finally. "Okay."

Shiro sighs too. "Please be careful. You're almost close enough, so get ready."

"Yessir," Hunk says, with obviously false bravado. Pidge just hums.

"Good luck," Keith and Lance say. "We've got your back."

"Why are they doing that?" Matt mutters.

"I'll explain later," Pidge mutters back.

"Okay," Hunk says, moments later. "Okay. Pidge, are you ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

"Matt?"

"By the door already!" comes a muffled shout.

"Pidge, get behind me. Back to back, and reverse your boosters, we need to keep moving. I'm charging the cannon now."

Breathe, Keith reminds Lance. Lance sucks in a deep breath.

If something happens—
I know. Me, too.

They watch as Green slides behind Yellow, boosters firing as she turns. The fighters ahead of and around them keep attacking relentlessly; they seem to realize something's happening, because they're streaming steadily away from Voltron and Black.

"I'm in position!" Pidge calls.

"Lance, Keith," Shiro says urgently. "Turn around."

"Firing now!" Hunk shouts. Voltron turns away, reluctantly—and then they see why. The thing following them has caught up.

It resembles a mecha, if an odd, sort of disjointed one, with wings, or something like them, on its back. It's built in the same dark, spiked way as the station behind it, shaped like someone had designed it with only a vague description of what a mecha is supposed to look like. Keith can't help but wonder if that's exactly what happened—if Sendak had told his superiors about mechas and they'd built one of their own.

It's hovering now, not far away, watching as the remaining fighters scatter from the area as if on command.

Keith and Lance exchange a look, pulling apart.

"I've got a really bad feeling about this," says Keith.

"What is that?" asks Lance.

"That," says Shiro, tightly, "is Zarkon."

Chapter End Notes

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ps. im finally gonna go back to posting every other day... maybe? the next couple chapters will come soon but im thinking of saving the epilogue for the six month anniversary? but it would be like, almost two weeks to wait (mar 12th)... shrugs. let me know what you think?
"What the fuck is Zarkon?" Lance asks.

"Their leader," Shiro says, and Keith's stomach sinks.

"Their leader is a mecha?"

"In the mecha." Shiro takes a deep, shuddering breath. "We have to defeat him. We can't risk letting him through the source."

"It's just one guy in a mecha," Keith says slowly. "How much could he do?"


"I've got Matt," Hunk says uncertainly.

"We're almost there. Are you sure you don't need me?" Pidge asks.

"No, get your family to safety. We can handle this," Shiro says, firm if not totally confident. Zarkon is still hovering there, watching them.

"He's just... sitting there," says Lance. "I don't like this."

"We need to make sure we stay between him and the source. Hunk, are you through yet?"

"I'm al—" Hunk's voice cuts off.

"I'm pushing him through now," Pidge adds quickly.

"Tell us when you're about to go through yourself. Keith, Lance, you still have four rockets, right?"

"Yes," they say.

"Get ready to use them."

"You said to save them—"

"We can find a way."

"Be careful," says Sam. "Shiro. All of you."

"We will," Shiro says.

"I'm going through now," calls Pidge. "And if any of you die, I'll kill you. Okay?"
"Okay, Pidge," Keith and Lance say.

"See you soon," says Shiro.

She takes a deep breath, and then her comm cuts out too. The fighters have dispersed fully, and now it's just the four of them: Keith, Lance, Shiro... and Zarkon.

Shiro takes a deep breath too. "You two, try and get closer to the station. The control area is up top somewhere; the sources won't close right away, so you should have time to get back through. I'll hold Zarkon off."

Keith and Lance both recognize the tone in his voice, and neither like it.

"You are not sacrificing yourself," they hiss in perfect unison.

"I wasn't—"

"You were. We're not leaving you."

"The mission—"

"NO."

And then Zarkon moves, and there's no time left to argue. Voltron automatically moves to flank him as Black meets him head on. They collide with a crash and a shower of sparks, and Black strains to hold the other mecha's clawed hand back.

"Go!" Shiro grunts one last time.

"No!" Keith and Lance shout again, and Voltron swings heavily at the side of Zarkon's mecha. One of the wings shoots up to block them. They swing in with the other arm, trying to get under the wing-shield, but it snaps out to block that too.

Shiro takes advantage of the distraction to get free of Zarkon's grasp and go in with a knife—the other wing comes up and blocks him too. The wings don't even seem to be attached to the mecha, floating freely beside it but clearly under its control, because the next moment they push outward, shoving Black and Voltron both back.

"This isn't a kaiju, boys," Shiro grits. "We can't defeat him."

"Then we don't! But we're not leaving you here."

Black reels back for another hit. Zarkon's wings join up to form a full shield, and Voltron starts moving around him again.

"Allura told you to obey my orders," Shiro continues with a grunt as he lands a solid punch on the wing-shield. It has no effect.

"She also said we should all try to survive this." The shield splits as Voltron approaches and pushes them back again before they can attack. Something on the mecha's chest starts glowing.

Shiro huffs but gives up arguing, apparently. "I think it's charging some kind of blast cannon," he says instead. "Be careful."

"Roger that."
No sooner do they say it than Zarkon twists to face them. They keep trying to circle around, but they can't move very fast, and all Zarkon has to do is turn—and charge. The mecha darts towards them faster than they can get away, pushing them back and gripping Voltron's arms with the sound of groaning metal.

"Shit!" Black gives chase. The glowing circle on Zarkon's mecha is humming loudly, and only getting louder.

*Remember when we fought the Kraken?* Lance asks.

Yep.

Keith reaches for the first of four blinking buttons arrayed between them, and launches a rocket.

They shut their eyes against the light as the explosion jars the mecha violently, cracking the windshield and setting off at least two alarms; their harnesses keep them firmly in their seats, at least, and they push off from Zarkon, boosting downwards out of the cannon's path moments before it fires. It shoots by above them, almost as bright as the explosion, so that even behind shut eyes Keith is left with the afterimage.

"What did I just say!?" Shiro yells.

"We're fine!" they call back, even as they check the systems—the damage is mostly superficial, but with the cracks in the front plating and the windshield, the mecha is no longer airtight.

They won't be able to walk back to the Castle, but hey, they have escape pods for a reason.

"Look out!" Shiro shouts, and they twist away as one of Zarkon's claws rakes down towards them. It screeches against Voltron's shoulder and drags into the arm before Black collides with the wing-shield, shoving it and the mecha away. A third alarm blares, and Lance slaps his hand against the controls, silencing them if not stopping the red warning lights from flashing.

They bump against something, then—the station. Zarkon had pushed them all the way across the bubble back to the station. Gravity suddenly reasserts itself with a sickening pull backwards, and they struggle to stand against its surface as Lance skims the damage report.

"Right arm not responding!" they call.

"Use the backup!" Shiro shouts. "Redirect controls—augh!" Black goes flying past them.

Backup—shit. Keith slams his casted fist against a button on the dashboard, and a handle like the one on his left slowly emerges on his right. Lance flips a few switches and the handle retracts again.

*I got it!*

Lance tugs on his handle as Zarkon turns to face them. The second arm is unresponsive, still sliding slowly out from Voltron's side, and he wills it to move faster. Zarkon darts towards them.

Voltron sidesteps across the surface of the ship. Black's boosters finally kick in—as they turn they can see her approaching as fast as she can. They lift both working arms to block Zarkon's blow and go skidding across the station's surface again.

"Get off the station!" Shiro shouts in warning as they scramble back up to their feet. Zarkon is still hovering slightly above the surface, apparently out of range of its pull. "The artificial gravity is pinning you down—!"
Traction, Keith thinks.

Yep.

They charge. Voltron still isn't as fast as Red, but with a surface to run on and no water to drag them back, they can go faster than the boosters could push them. They launch another rocket, but it explodes harmlessly against the shield; then Zarkon's chest cannon is glowing again—Black is still coming in from behind—they're almost there...

"LOOK OUT!" Shiro screams, and at the last second they leap up off the station, boosters firing to take them up and over Zarkon, flipping around behind him as the cannon goes off again and shoots straight out across the bubble to be absorbed by its rippling far-off surface. They fire their boosters to push them down against the station again as Zarkon turns, and Black comes up next to them.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Shiro asks, angrier than Keith has ever heard him.

"We can go faster on the surface—"

"He almost hit you!"

"We can't just stay on the defensive!"

"That was reckless—"

Zarkon's cannon starts charging again and the mechas split; this time he follows Black. Voltron goes in with a knife, left handed for better leverage than the lower right arm has, but the wing-shield gets in the way again. The cannon goes off again, barely missing Black.

*Forget the Kraken. You know what kaiju this is like?*

Godzilla.

*Yep. Fucking Godzilla.*

...We didn't win against Godzilla.

*Well, now we have another chance.*

"We need to get between him and his shield," they say.

Shiro huffs. "So you can get hit by that cannon point-blank?"

"Behind him, not in front," they clarify, as said cannon starts humming again. They shift clockwise along the surface of the station while Black heads counter-clockwise, Zarkon in the middle still tracking the latter. Black heads up away from the station, forcing Zarkon to hover at an odd angle as Voltron come up behind him; the shield still blocks the way, though. There's a hum and a crackle as the cannon fires.

"I'm hit," Shiro hisses over the sound of alarms, quickly cut short, and as the light fades they can see Black's side smoking heavily. "Not too bad, though."

"It looks bad."

"I can still fight. You have the shield occupied?"

"For the moment?" They're hitting it again and again with no effect, except that now and then it...
shoves them back with a loud metallic screech as they fight to hold their position.

"I'm going to try and disable the cannon." Black lands heavily on the station and starts running. Keith and Lance exchange an alarmed look.

"How!?!"

"Dunno," Shiro grits. Zarkon's shield splits once more, but Black skids in sideways so that the wing swings around and hits her arm heavily. He grunts as the mecha shudders.

"Shiro!"

"I've got it." It doesn't look like it; the mecha is shuddering under the strain, still smoking, and the wing is slowly pushing her away. The cannon starts charging.

Black pulls back with her free arm, drawing her knife. Zarkon's claws come forward and rake across Black's chest. Voltron pummels the wing-shield with renewed vigor.

"Shiro!"

"I've got it!" Black is still standing, barely; her arm thrusts forward once, hard, and there's a crackle, and then an explosion. Zarkon's mecha shudders and falls back, landing heavily on the station too, and Voltron has to step quickly out of the way. Black falls entirely. Alarms are ringing through the comms.

"Shiro!?"

"I'm alive," Shiro coughs. "Everything's offline but the boosters—I think I can reroute some power..."

Zarkon's mecha stands and starts walking toward Black. Keith hits the second to last launch button desperately, sending another rocket. This one makes it past the shield, which is hanging lax behind him, and explodes against the back of the mecha's head. Zarkon stumbles forward a step... and turns, slowly.

"Shit," they mutter. The mecha sets off toward them at a run before leaping up and jetting along the station's surface; they get their knives ready. Shiro coughs and shuts off his alarms.

"How many rockets do you have left?" he asks.

"Just one." They take a firmer stance, as Zarkon's sparkling mecha zooms toward them, claws raised. This is it; they can't run, or else they leave Shiro behind.

Neither Keith nor Lance is willing to do that.

"I have an idea," says Shiro. "Get out of the way, let him come back to me. Quickly!"

"No!?"

"Just do it!" he shouts, desperately. Zarkon is almost upon them. Keith and Lance look at each other. Zarkon twists, ready to slash across Voltron's head. Voltron launches off the station's surface once more, and the claws gouge through their left leg instead.

"What's the plan?" they ask even as Lance shuts off yet another alarm; guess they're not walking home either. They sweep around back towards Black, so that Zarkon can face both of them at once.
"This mecha will blow if you fire your rocket at it. It might soon anyway," Shiro says heavily. "I can
eject before it does; I just need to maneuver us near the control center. We're not far."

"Incoming!" they shout, interrupting the explanation—Keith is pretty sure he gets the gist, despite
Lance's anxiety. Shiro has managed to get Black up into a kneeling position but no farther and all he
can do is lift her shuddering arms before Zarkon collides with her claws-first.

There's fire, and smoke, and sparks, and the horrible squealing of tearing metal—and a little pop, as
Black's escape pod shoots out of the smoke. Black's boosters are still firing, pushing the wreckage up
towards the top of the station as Zarkon's mecha struggles to free itself from the sudden deadweight.

Voltron reaches out and gently plucks the escape pod out of the air, and they aim their boosters to fly
back to the sources.

The two mechas below slide slowly and steadily along the station's surface.

There's a flash from the control center; it grows into a black spot, then a jagged sort of purplish
diamond, and then—a bolt of something like lightning, coming straight for them, which they realize
too late as they jolt into action, firing the boosters to move them sideways out of the way—

There's a deafening noise, and a blinding darkness, and then a horrible ringing and a pain that
drowns out all else. Keith screams soundlessly, jerking against his harness, and he can barely feel it
across his chest or the seat beneath his shaking fingers.

It fades, slowly, to an agonizing silence. He gasps for air. In his head there's only that awful ringing,
like he's standing inside a massive bell, but he can hear his own breathing just fine.

And someone else's—Lance.

He forces his eyes open, blinking against the harsh warning lights on the console—there doesn't
seem to be any new damage, or any external change at all—and looks over at Lance. He's there in
his seat, none the worse for wear, breathing hard with eyes closed like Keith had just been. Keith
reaches out with a shaking hand.

"Lance," he gasps. "Lance."

And Lance opens his eyes, and turns his head to look at him, slowly. His eyes widen.

It feels wrong. It feels so wrong. Because Lance is right here with him, almost within reach, but he
can't feel him. He can't think through the ringing to reach the boy sitting there just a few feet away.

It's almost like he's not there at all—how can he trust his senses when his mind feels so empty? But
Lance reaches out and takes his hand, and he's definitely here, and real. His eyes, his ears, his fingers
—they can't be lying.

"Keith. What the hell," Lance rasps. Keith nods. "I can't..."

"I know," Keith says. "Me neither."

Together they look back out the windshield. Their boosters are still firing, carrying them back
towards the sources; Black's escape pod is still safe in Voltron's hand; Black, and Zarkon, are almost
in position.

"We have to..." Keith swallows past his dry throat and tries again. "We have to get Shiro out."
"We can't..."

Keith looks at him. Lance looks so tired, exhausted even, staring blankly out at the station far below.

"We can't pilot," he whispers. "I can't feel you."

There's a surge of something in Keith's gut, then. A stubborn rebellion against the ringing in his head, against the look on Lance's face, the blast of whatever it was that tore their minds apart. That, and more than a little love.

He squeezes Lance's hand, until Lance looks at him.

"I know you, Lance," he says softly. "We can still do this."

Lance's eyes widen. Then his mouth thins to a determined line, and he nods.

"Let's save the world," he says.

Chapter End Notes

  tumblr
  twitter

  see you in a couple days... :)


They turn Voltron around, first. It's a simple enough maneuver, and they're already in agreement about what needs to be done.

Twisting and moving to—gently—toss Black's escape pod at the source they're hovering in front of is a little harder. Keith relies on frequent glances across the cockpit, muttered words of progress, the feel of the controls in his hands; they throw the pod and it glides smoothly enough toward the source, the rightmost one. Shiro waves at them from inside, the gesture too small to read for any emotion, but it settles the worry in Keith's chest that he hadn't made it out after all.

The pods are made to float. Once Shiro's through, he'll rise up to the surface of the ocean, hopefully to be rescued quickly.

So they turn away.

Zarkon's mecha is still struggling with Black, almost free but almost in position, bumping up against the control center. Black is fully on fire now—Shiro was right, it looks to be moments from exploding.

"We've only got one shot," says Keith, eyeing the last blinking button between them.

"Let me do it, then," says Lance. "I've got good aim."

Keith smiles around the ringing still in his mind. It's starting to give him a headache. "I know you do," he says.

Lance directs him, nudging the controls here and there with a hurried purpose. His hand hovers over the button, but he hesitates.

"What if... what if we don't hit it?" he whispers. "There's so much relying on this." He's breathing hard and sharp, and Keith gently brushes his hand with his own.

"I trust you," he says. "It'll hit."

Lance bites his lip, and pushes the button.

The rocket flies straight and true toward the flaming mecha below. They set off their boosters, taking them the last small distance toward the source, even as they watch the rocket shoot across the bubble and then—Zarkon's mecha gets free, looks up, too late—hit the remains of Black straight on. They hear the first rumble of explosion even as far away as they are, and Zarkon is engulfed.
They just glimpse the second, larger explosion, as the rocket sets off a chain reaction first in Black and then in the control center, before Voltron's head pushes up through the source.

Immediately there's a metallic groan, and water starts pushing its way through the cracked windshield. Keith almost freezes up but Lance takes his hand before he can, grounding him.

"C'mon," Lance says, with a smile so bright it's blinding. "Let's blow this joint."

They climb back through the cockpit, leaving the dripping glass and flashing lights behind, and slip into the two narrow escape pods.

"See you up there," says Keith.

"Yeah," says Lance, and the doors slide shut.

The launch is a thoroughly unpleasant sensation, thrusting Keith upward so hard he swears his stomach falls to his feet, leaving him with nausea to accompany his headache. It slows quickly though in the press of water around him, and soon he's swaying upward at a steady pace as the buoyant nature of the pod carries him to the ocean's surface. His pod is turned so he can't see Lance's, but if he cranes, sometimes he can see Voltron's head poking out through the source below —before the glowing edges of it crackle and snap together, threads pulling it shut. Voltron's head goes dark, and sinks, sparking, down into the darkness of the ocean, no longer held up by the rest of the mecha.

It's a little gruesome, even if it was only a mecha, so he shudders and looks up toward the light instead. The ringing in his head is finally growing quiet, and though he can't exactly hear Lance yet, there's a tiny trickle of consciousness again, just the faintest hint that his boyfriend is there. It calms him.

It takes a few minutes but the pod finally breaks the surface; he impatiently cracks open its door before it has properly righted itself, so that water pours in on him and soaks him instantly. He pays it no mind, instead sitting up to watch as Lance's pod opens too, bobbing in the water nearby. Lance sits up instantly, banging his head on the still-opening door and looking around quickly before he finds Keith.

"Keith!" he shouts, and before Keith can say anything Lance is rolling out of the pod and swimming over to him. He reaches down and helps Lance up into the pod; there's not really enough room, so they're sitting half in each other's laps in three inches of water, but Keith doesn't care. He just pulls Lance closer and Lance laughs in his ear and.

And.

They did it.

"Keith," Lance gasps, pulling back. "Keith, I love you."

"I lo—" Keith's response is cut off by Lance's mouth, again and again, a rapid series of wet kisses that end up all over Keith's face as Lance's aim deteriorates until they're both laughing.
When Lance finally sits back to speak again, Keith pulls him in for a longer kiss of his own.

"I love you too," he says finally.

Lance grins. "Do you hear that?"

Keith cocks his head and listens. The ringing is almost gone now, and the familiar bubbly feeling of Lance's joy is rising in his chest. There's another sound, though; a helicopter, growing louder. He grins.

"Sounds like our ride's here," he says.

When the rescue ladder drops Lance reaches out and grabs it first, pulling it closer to the bobbing pod.

"Go ahead, I'm right behind you," he says. So Keith stands, clinging to the ladder for balance, and starts up. It shudders soon as Lance follows him up.

Climbing the swaying ladder is no easy task, nor is avoiding looking down. He focuses on it rung by rung, until finally his fingers hit solid metal and a large hand grips his wrist, helping pull him up. He doesn't so much as look at his helper—not even their hand, as it lets go—instead turning to help Lance up.

It's loud and cold up here, and they're still soaking wet, and for a moment they just cling to the rising helicopter and each other, catching their breath.

"Well, well!" a familiar voice shouts, deep and angry, over the sound of the rotor above. "I should have expected it would be you two."

Sendak.
Keith jerks around, and starts back almost in the same motion. He doesn't recognize the man standing there as Sendak, because this man is galra—huge, and purple-furred, but he’s got an eyepatch and a prosthetic arm and his eye glows yellow—*his eye glows yellow*—

"You may have closed the portal," he hisses, and it's *definitely* Sendak, "but don't think you'll be—"

Keith doesn't let him finish. He reacts almost on instinct, lurching over with a kick that dislodges Sendak's grip on one of the helicopter's handles. Sendak flails for a moment, reaching, and his claws scrape against Keith's leg before Lance pulls him back—Sendak finds no purchase, and he falls. Keith wobbles and almost follows except for Lance's grip on the back of his sodden jacket, and then Keith's hands find first Lance, then the helicopter itself.

*Holy shit,* Lance thinks, and clings to him tightly.

There's a shout from the cockpit, and then the helicopter tilts suddenly, sending the boys swaying out over the ocean. Keith glances down in that dizzying moment; Sendak is dangling off the ladder that they never pulled up, now high above the water.

The helicopter rights itself, and Keith looks around frantically.

*There!* It's Lance that finds what he's looking for though, a rescue kit and in it, a knife. He lurches across the cabin and frees it from the kit, then lurches back into Lance's waiting arms.

He drops to his knees. With his casted hand wrapped firmly around a handle, and Lance's hand fisted in the back of his jacket, he starts sawing through the top of the ladder.

One side snaps free. There's more shouting from the cockpit. Sendak is halfway up the ladder. Keith starts on the other side.

"You'll... never win!" Sendak shouts, barely audible over the rotor. "I'll... take you down... with me!"
"You can fucking try," Keith mutters, sawing like his life depends on it—and it might. Lance is an encouraging if desperate presence in the back of his mind.

"Long... live..." Sendak is almost to the top now, reaching with a clawed and purple hand for Keith. "Emperor... Zarkon...!"

The ladder snaps. Sendak's fingers come within an inch of Keith's wrist before he's falling for good; Keith watches until he hits the water far below.

"You just killed the commander!" an affronted voice shouts from the cockpit.

"He's a fucking alien!" Lance shouts back. Keith tucks the knife away and stands shakily; he reaches forward and pulls himself over to the cockpit, and peers in.

"You murdered him!" A face turns toward him, angry and purple. Keith punches it.

"You can fucking join him!" he howls. The alien pilot reels back to clutch his face, and the helicopter lurches.

Keith gets halfway into the cockpit, and suddenly Lance is beside him.

_Pull!_ Lance thinks, and together they grab at the pilot and drag him out of the chair. The helicopter tilts crazily, and Keith claws at the controls, trying to right the vehicle. Behind him Lance and the pilot are yelling.

Don't fall, he thinks desperately, climbing into the pilot's chair. Lance sends him a thought, and Keith pulls on the controls with his heart in his throat, relying on faded memories and sheer luck.

The helicopter lists sharply again, and he can hear the sound of claws scraping against metal over the yelling and the wind. Lance is terrified, clinging on, feet swinging out over empty air.

A fading screech, and a touch of relief, and Keith rights the helicopter again. Lance's feet hit metal.

_He's gone!_ he thinks. _Fell into the ocean. I'm okay._

Thank god, Keith thinks. Thank god. Get up here.

He holds steady until Lance has climbed into the co-pilot's chair, and then, awkwardly, turns the helicopter around. There are a few ships on the horizon, and another couple of helicopters in the distance. Keith leaves Lance to figure out the radio, focusing on keeping them steady and getting close enough to figure out which ship is safe; he doesn't remember much from the sim he flew long ago but he remembers some, and it's enough.

Soon he can see one of the larger ships is white with the distinctive red stripe, and he sighs in relief and heads towards it. Safety is finally, finally in reach. Lance rubs his shoulder with a grin and doesn't need to say a word.

It takes a lot of circling and Lance explaining into the radio through gritted teeth that they're paladins, honestly, they just hijacked the helicopter, before the Coast Guard vessel lets Keith land the thing. He hardly breathes until he does—they bounce a little on the swaying pad but settle quickly, and he shuts off the engine and follows Lance out of the cockpit. They're still soaked through, and shivering in the sea air and the wind from the still-spinning rotors, but the moment their feet hit the helipad they're swarmed by people armed with blankets and questions.
“We did it!” Lance shouts, first thing.

Keith mumbles his way through it all, mostly letting Lance do the talking, until finally they're pointed to a bench in the upper cabin and left more or less alone. They sit; Lance slips an arm out of his blanket and into Keith's, wrapping it around his waist, and Keith leans against his shoulder and closes his eyes.

"We did it," Lance whispers into the top of his head, and Keith feels it more than hears it. He nods into Lance's shoulder.

Yeah. We did.

They have about five minutes of peace before footsteps approach and stop in front of them. Lance is dozing off pillowed against the top of his head; Keith can't be assed to open his eyes right now, and silently prays that whoever it is will leave them alone a little longer.

There's a familiar huff of a laugh, though, and his eyes shoot open of their own accord.

"Shiro!" he says—mumbles, really, because he's half asleep himself.

Shiro is indeed standing there, looking down at them fondly; there's a small bandage on his forehead and he looks more than a little ruffled, but otherwise okay.

"You two will be the death of me," he says through a smile. Lance lifts his head a little.

"Is everyone okay?" he asks groggily.

"Yes, everyone's fine." Shiro comes and sits on the bench beside them, puts a hand on Keith's blanket-covered back. "They picked up Hunk and the Holts earlier. They're on the other ship; Matt and Sam are with the medics but everyone's in one piece."

"And you're okay?"

"Yes, thanks to you."
Shiro's gaze flicks away, and he looks thoughtful for a moment, but the smile returns soon, if a little crooked. "Thank you," he adds. "I mean it. I didn't think we could all make it out alive, but... you didn't give up."

"Of course not," says Keith. He yawns. "Have I ever?"

Shiro and Lance both laugh at that, and Shiro pats him on the back, then stands back up with a groan.

"I'll leave you two to your rest. You've earned it," he says. "But, Allura wants you to know she's proud of you. And... so am I." He reaches over to ruffles Lance's hair and gets swatted at for his efforts, and chuckles again. Keith feels warm.

"Thanks," he mumbles, and gets his own hair ruffled for his trouble. He grunts.

"See you back at the Castle," says Shiro, and leaves them be.

Keith falls asleep quickly, even hunched over on an uncomfortable bench on a swaying boat, head pillowed on Lance's damp, bony shoulder.

The ship is too big to dock in the bay, so Keith, Lance, and Shiro are ushered onto a dinghy and motored in towards the Castle's docks. From there it's a bit of a walk—the docks can't get in the way of the mechas, after all—but the moment the Castle's entrance is in sight so is the crowd waiting to greet them.

"Boys!"

Allura is the first to call out to them, undoubtedly already knowing they were close thanks to Shiro, and the first to run toward them. She's trailed by Hunk, the Holt family, and a number of staff and other paladins.
"Guys!" Lance shouts, hopping up and down and waving and getting a lot of waves in response. Keith grins, and looks to Allura to greet her—he's surprised when she jogs right up to them and flings her arms around them both, squeezing them tightly. Lance squeaks.

"You did it!" she says, pulling back with a hand on each of their shoulders. "You really did it." A tear slips down her cheek and she wipes it away with a smile, and Keith doesn't really know what to say.

Lance, though, winds their fingers together and nods. "We did!" he says. "They're closed for good."

"I heard the story over the radio, but I want to hear it in person, later," she says. "There's a lot to sort through, first."

Hunk, Pidge, and the rest catch up before she can say more, and Keith finds himself squashed uncomfortably between three bodies—four, when Shiro joins in with a laugh. Somehow, though, he's happy here.

Until the rest of the paladins pile on, and the whole group sways unsettlingly to a chorus of shouts.

"Alright, alright, that's enough!" Pidge hollers, pushing and elbowing her way out of the pack. The crowd loosens until the only person pressed against him is Lance.

As it should be, Lance thinks, and Keith smirks and squeezes his hand. Then Jess is there pounding on his shoulder, and Bonnie—limping, but looking well—and Rex are yelling in his ear, and Derek high-fives him and Terry shakes his hand, and he's grinning and he can't seem to stop. Someone shouts something and the crowd cheers, and then Shiro grabs their linked hands and lifts them high so that Keith is almost on tiptoes and crowd cheers again, and Lance is laughing, and this—this joy is something Keith is so unused to but he basks in it and all the congratulations and commendations shouted at them.

Because they did it. They won, and they earned this.

"You should know, the Garrison is on lockdown," Allura says, worming her way back towards them once the fervor has died down somewhat. "The National Guard got its shit together, if you'll excuse the phrase, and they're clearing the place out as we speak. Your findings are all over the news and the CIA is on its way." She sighs. "We will have to clear out of this place too—and that will be a hell of a process, since they're going to be verifying the identity of every damn person in the building. The point is we won't be getting out of here anytime soon."

That's okay, Keith decides. They have all the time in the world, now.

"I can't even get my phone?" Lance whines, though, and Keith can't help but laugh.

When the crowd has dispersed, and they've all been checked over one last time at the Castle hospital, and they're finally all settling down in Lab C still with its pillows and blankets and blow-up mattresses all across the floor—then, and only then, does Keith realize he has no idea what happens next. He's been working toward this one goal for years and now that it's been achieved, he's... directionless. Free.

It's scary. But it's a little exciting, too.

Damn straight, Lance thinks, and rolls over to nuzzle sleepily at his cheek. We can do whatever we want now. We deserve it.

Let's take on the future together.
some of yall really thought i was gonna kill someone smh ;)

um. god, what do i even say? i started writing this thing around six months ago. it was just supposed to be a fun little thing... like... not even half the length it is now... i wonder what happened ahaha. but it was always supposed to have a happy ending and here we are. at the happy end... :')

i wanna thank you all, from the bottom of my heart, for sticking around this long, or joining whenever you did, or if youre reading this months after the fact, for that, too. i never thought my weird lil almost-pacific-rim-but-not-quite au would get as much attention as it has, and im super duper touched for every comment/scream/kudos youve all left me. this thing has literally taken over my life for half a year and its been really nice to have all yall along for the journey. <3

so! weve still got the epilogue coming, day after tomorrow. itll be illustrated too i guess? not nearly as long though. we really have reached the end with this chapter! to tide you over, ive got a tag on tumblr filled with outtakes/deleted scenes! all sorts of stuff that didnt make it into this fic, or at least not in the same way. you can check that out here!! and of course you can always hmu there or on twitter if you want.

also, the art for this chapter is here, if youre interested.

so. I HOPE YOUVE ENJOYED TVI!! i know i did. :)
"I'm HOOOME!" Lance half sings, half hollers as he bursts into the apartment, exuberant as always.

"Welcome back," Keith murmurs without looking up from his laptop.

"That's it? That's all I get?"

Keith glances up. Lance is pouting as he shuts the door.

"Trying to get the wifi working." Get over here, sunshine.

Lance grins and bounces over to the sofa, and nudges a box of DVDs aside so he can wiggle in next to Keith. Keith leans up for a kiss, and grins.

No—

Lance doesn't get to finish the thought before Keith's fingers find his sides. He shrieks and lurches away, almost knocking the DVDs off the sofa.

"How dare you!" he screeches, trying to swat away Keith's hands, before Keith clamps one over his mouth.

"Stop yelling! We only just moved in, it's too soon to make the neighbors hate us."

You tickled me! Lance thinks, outraged.

That's your fault for getting too close.

Lance makes an offended noise—a squeak, really—and Keith laughs. He pulls away finally, rescuing the laptop that's about to slip off his knees, and Lance sits back with a pout.

"We're nowhere near ready for the party," he says after a moment. "There's still boxes everywhere."

"Hide them in the bedroom," Keith suggests. "It's not really a party, anyway."

"Sure it is! A housewarming party."

"Your family's halfway across the country, so is Shay, Pidge texted to say Matt and their dad can't make it, and Shiro called to say Allura can't make it. It's just gonna be the five of us."

"You're saying," Lance says slowly, "that we'll just have to host a real party for everyone later."

Keith shrugs.

"Yesss!" Lance pumps his fist in the air, and Keith smiles. Lance can be a handful at times, but moving in together was definitely worth it.

I heard that, Lance thinks, and plants a kiss on his cheek.

"Why don't you go find the GameCube?" Keith suggests. "We don't have to pretend to be adults today, if we're gonna have a real party some other time."
"You know me so well, babe," Lance says, and gets up to do just that. Keith's laptop finally connects to the wifi with a ding, so he closes it and sets aside to start hiding all the boxes they still haven't unpacked.

It's about an hour before the phone rings; Lance picks up with a flourish.

"Diaz-Kogane residence, how may I help you?" he purrs, and Keith laughs. Through Lance he can hear laughter on the other end of the phone, too.

"Dude," Hunk says finally. "I just need you to buzz me in. 227, right?"

"Yeah, dude, let me hit the magic button. Bzzt!"

The call cuts off when the door unlocks, and it's only a couple minutes before there's a knock at the door. This time it's Keith who answers.

"Sorry I'm like, way early," Hunk says, as Keith steps back to let him in. "I brought food!"

"YES!" Lance cheers from the other room.

"Don't worry about it, we're just still tidying up," Keith says, leading Hunk to the kitchen.

"You mean hiding boxes?"

"...Maybe."

It's not too long before Shiro shows up too—also early, though not by nearly as much—with a wrapped box... and a can of air freshener with a bow on top.

"It was Allura's idea," he tells Keith, completely straight-faced. Keith almost believes it.

...Almost.

Pidge arrives last, and a little late, not that she shows any remorse about it (or that anyone minds). She shoves a paper bag containing a large, heavy box into Lance's arms.

"Matt and I thought you'd need this," she says. "Sorry we couldn't find any wrapping paper. Now, where's the party? And the wifi password?"

Keith directs her toward the kitchen—and to the dry erase board Lance brought with the wifi password written across it, specifically.

"Yesss," she says, while Lance peers inside the paper bag. It's a coffee maker. He almost cries.

Soon enough everyone makes their way to the living room, and Hunk reaches into his pocket.

"Now that we're all here, I can give you my gift," he says, pulling out a rather suspicious handful of discs. "It's time for that kaiju movie marathon we never got around to. I've got Godzilla here—the original and the English dub, in case you feel like tormenting yourself—Mothra, Rodan, and Ghidorah, just to get you started."

Lance throws up his hands. Keith laughs.

They put in Godzilla but no one really watches it, opting instead to chat. With the threat of real kaiju almost a year past, they've all gone more or less their separate ways, and though they see each other fairly frequently it's not often they're all together at once anymore.
"I can't believe how tan you've gotten, Shiro," Hunk says at one point. "Have you been sunbathing or what?"

"Oh, yeah, uh," Shiro says, a little sheepishly. "I guess we didn't really tell anyone. Allura and I just got back from vacation."

"What!?" Lance sits straight up. "Where'd you go?"

"Just inland. Saw the Grand Canyon, hiked around Yellowstone and a couple of other parks a bit." He shrugs. "My therapist thought I should get away from the ocean for a while."

"Did it help?" Pidge asks.

"Dunno." He shrugs again, looking away. "She seemed to think so." He pauses. "So does Allura, but I guess I can't really tell."

"I can," says Keith, nudging his shoulder. Shiro looks up again and smiles.

"She's been wanting to start a travel blog, anyway. Go see the world now that it's safe again," he adds.

Pidge groans a little at that. "I wish her luck. Writing about your experiences isn't as easy as it sounds."

"Oh yeah, how's the book coming?" Hunk asks.

"Yeah, Keith hardly ever even thinks about it," Lance adds, earning a Look from Keith.

"I mean, it's fine. The stuff we weren't involved in is way more interesting." She shrugs. "You guys know we pretty much guessed everything right eventually, you've seen those translations by now. But!" She smirks. "There's so much we didn't even touch that's only coming to light now. Did you know the reason only Blue had a working blaster is because it was built from quote-unquote 'salvage' that was basically just space junk shipped in by Sendak?"

Lance snorts. "I did not." It must be a new discovery, because Keith (as, technically, a co-writer) hadn't heard it either.

"Allura had her suspicions," Shiro says.

"We found the records. The engineers at the Castle didn't really know what to do with it; they managed to get the blaster to work somehow but they couldn't recreate it for Yellow. Blue basically ran on space magic."

"Still does, technically," Keith points out.

"I mean, it's a stretch to say she's running when she just sits in a museum all day."

Lance flops back against the sofa. "Ugh. I wish I could sit in a museum all day."

"You've been offered a job as a tour guide like, three times," says Keith.

"Not as a tour guide. I want to be an exhibit. I want people to admire me for the masterpiece I am."

Shiro snorts. Hunk and Pidge laugh. Keith snorts, too, but presses a kiss to Lance's temple.

"I'm not enough for you?" he teases.
"Well, you do have behind-the-scenes access..."

"Thaat's enough," Pidge interrupts quickly, looking alarmed, making Hunk laugh again.

"Some things never change, huh?" Shiro smiles.

"Hey, hey, don't get me wrong," Pidge says, lifting her hands. "I know I gave you guys a lot of shit —still do—but... I'm glad you're happy. Really."

"Agreed," says Hunk, and Shiro nods. He gives Keith a look, though, that, for once, Keith can't quite read.

It doesn't come up again, until Godzilla has ended with hardly an eye on it, and they've eaten and broken out the GameCube, and Keith goes to the kitchen to get more drinks and Shiro follows him. He stops him in the doorway as they're about to reenter the living room.

"Keith," says Shiro. "Are you happy?"

Keith looks over to where Lance and Pidge are sitting on the floor, controllers in hand, yelling at the TV; Hunk is sitting on the couch behind them, cheering them on. Lance feels him looking and shoots him a glance, just the briefest look—but it's accompanied by a wave of affection that crashes over him and leaves him reeling for a moment.

Keith leans against the doorway and has to smile. He wonders if that feeling will ever stop, if he'll ever get used to it—he hopes he never does.

Is he happy?

"Yeah," he says. "I am."
Chapter End Notes

as always, you can find me on tumblr or twitter, and the pics can be found here!

thats all, folks!! :) 

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